

Luyo Sa Pagpakigbisog: Challenges, Impacts and Coping Strategies of Red-Tagged Student Activists in Cebu

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ABSTRACT

Red-tagging has become a persistent issue in the Philippine sociopolitical landscape, particularly affecting activists and social movements. Among those most vulnerable are student activists, whose involvement in political and social causes exposes them to labeling, harassment, and threats that extend beyond their personal lives. Although existing literature discusses red-tagging as a form of political repression, limited studies explore how student activists experience and interpret these incidents in their everyday lives. This study explores the lived experiences of red-tagged student activists in Cebu, focusing on the challenges they encounter, the impacts of these experiences, and the coping strategies they employ.

Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the study gathered first-person accounts from five student activists across universities in Cebu who have directly experienced red-tagging. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in advocacy work and their experiences of being labeled by state authorities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify patterns and shared meanings across participants' narratives. Findings reveal that red-tagging presents multidimensional challenges threatening both identity and safety. Participants reported experiencing digital doxxing, surveillance, online harassment, and institutional scrutiny, which reshaped their daily routines, relationships, and sense of security. These pressures produced attitudinal and social impacts, including persistent fear, disrupted daily functioning, and strained family dynamics. However, the study also found that political resolve was strengthened due to these experiences. Moreover, the study found that coping strategies emerged through both personal adaptation and collective support within activist communities.

Overall, the findings highlight that red-tagging operates not only as a political label but as a lived experience that influences identity, security, and resilience. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the realities faced by student activists and emphasizes the need for broader conversations on civic participation and student activists' well-being.

Keywords: red-tagging, activism, student activist, lived experiences, interpretative phenomenological analysis

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary era is defined by a critical juncture where pressing national challenges intersect with unprecedented opportunities for transformative change. In this shifting landscape, the expressions and endeavors of youth activists have assumed an unparalleled level of importance, reshaping social norms and redirecting communities (Shah & Khan, 2023). This activism goes beyond protests, it's a sustained struggle for the rights of marginalized (Sales, 2022), rooted in the Philippines history from the fight against colonial power to the People Power Revolution, and endures as proof of collective action's power. As a hallmark of a healthy democracy, it reflects the ability of young people to engage meaningfully with societal issues and contribute to national progress (Akbar, 2016). More than an act of defiance, activism serves as a "declaration of hope" —a proof that

change is always within reach (Lorenzana, 2021). Yet, beneath the headlines, Filipino activists wage a silent war — one fought behind the placards that tests the limits of their conviction and resilience.

Despite its democratic function, activism in the Philippines is increasingly met with hostility, particularly through red-tagging—the labeling of individuals or groups as linked to insurgent movements, often without clear evidence, exposing them to harassment, threats, and even legal repercussions (University of the Philippines, 2021). A nation with a long-running communist insurgency, red-tagging has become a tool to suppress dissent, specifically targeting human rights defenders, labor leaders, public interest lawyers, journalists and other activists by branding them as “terrorists” and/or “communists” without substantial proof of any unlawful conduct (International Federation of Journalists, 2020; Tan, 2022).

Red-tagging intensified, after the breakdown of peace talks between the Philippine government and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in 2017, triggering heightened security measures and an aggressive campaign against perceived insurgents (Amnesty International, 2024). Activists are red-tagged for being with human rights groups and vulnerable communities through street tarpaulins, social media and propaganda posters in schools putting them at risk for extrajudicial killings (Lorenzana, 2021; Magallona, 2019). Recent data of red-tagging in the Philippines from the Ateneo Human Rights Center (2024), 456 red-tagging incidents were recorded with 17.2% directed at the youth, with the remaining incidents affecting other groups. As red-tagging escalates, this climate of repression extends beyond mere accusations, not only silencing voices but also inflicting profound challenges on activists.

Studies on activism highlight exposure to harassment and cyberattacks which lead to increased cases of burnout, stress, anxiety and depression among activists (Conner et.al., 2021; Velasco, 2024; Ni et.al. 2020). The consequence of red-tagging intensifies these challenges with reports of surveillance, harassment, and intimidation deterring many from engaging in activism (Human Rights Watch, 2024). These underscores the heightened risks specifically red-tagged activists face not only through physical dangers but also via the insidious toll on their mental health (Conner et.al, 2021). In Cebu, student activists in particular have reported increased red-tagging and online harassment following their protest against institutional and national grievances (Flores, 2025; Fuentes, 2025) compounded by severe academic retaliation subjecting them to intimidation and expulsion for their activism (Villa, 2025). This confluence of digital, physical, and institutional attacks creates a uniquely vulnerable position for student activists, distinguishing their experience from other activist groups.

Despite these challenges, activists persist through utilizing various coping strategies. Strong support networks and advocacy work play a crucial role in providing emotional support and means of resilience (Pineda, 2022; Lorenzana, 2021). Additionally, Conner et al. (2021) identified four key factors which helped offset stress and emotion including social capital, a sense of purpose, effecting change, and self-care practices. These coping strategies enable activists to sustain their engagement while managing the challenges linked to activism.

Given the scarcity of local studies on this specific subject, this research aims to address critical knowledge, population and contextual gaps, delivering valuable insights to the broader research community. Unlike general activist experience, red-tagging subjects individuals to heightened risks, including harassment, surveillance, and even death threats from both state and non-state actors (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Additionally, previous report has documented cases of red-tagging on student activists particularly in Cebu, yet student experiences remain critically understudied (Flores, 2025). This oversight is especially concerning given that they are among the most vulnerable to state-led vilification and persecution (Catarata, 2024). As both youth and academics, they face compounded risks that demand urgent examination.

Hence, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of red-tagged student activists in Cebu, examining the challenges they face, the impacts of these adversities and the coping strategies they employ. Using a phenomenological approach, the research can provide insights for student activists, mental health professionals, advocacy groups and policymakers. Ultimately, the study aims to both enrich psychological literature and inform the development of targeted support systems that safeguard activist well-being amid civic engagement.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design to thoroughly investigate the lived experiences of red-tagged student activists. 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). This approach will enable the examination of the three key dimensions of the study: the specific challenges stemming from red-tagging, its resulting impacts and the diverse coping strategies developed in response. By focusing on first-person accounts, the research design will facilitate a thorough understanding of how participants construct meaning from their experiences while preserving the complexity of their realities. Through systematic analysis of these experiential accounts, the study will generate comprehensive insights that honor the participants' authentic perspectives (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, cited in Meyers, 2019) while contributing valuable knowledge to academic discourse and the development of support services for this vulnerable population.

Research Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to select five student activists who have experienced red-tagging by state authorities. Purposive sampling was chosen for its suitability in identifying individuals who are knowledgeable and directly immersed in the phenomenon of interest, allowing researchers to access rich, nuanced accounts of lived experiences (Guest & Fleming, 2015). Participants were recruited through direct outreach to known student activists and through referrals from individuals within activist networks who were familiar with peers meeting the study's criteria. This approach ensured that potential participants were credible, informed, and willing to discuss their experiences.

To qualify for the study, participants needed to meet three inclusion criteria: (1) currently enrolled in a higher education institution in Cebu, regardless of their regional background; (2) self-identify as student activists; and (3) have at least two years of engagement in advocacy work, including direct experiences of being red-tagged. Centering Cebu-based participants ensured geographical consistency while capturing diverse activist perspectives within the region.

Originally, participants were asked to provide evidence of red-tagging—such as documents, or records—related to their experiences of being red-tagged. However, the researchers were unable to collect concrete evidence due to the inherent difficulty and risks involved. Materials related to red-tagging are not publicly accessible and often circulate only within police or state-linked networks, making them unsafe to request or obtain. Participants learned of their inclusion in watchlists or accusations only through personal contacts who had access to such information. Attempting to acquire or store these sensitive documents would have posed significant security risks to both participants and researchers, thereby violating ethical principles of confidentiality and non-maleficence. Given these constraints, participant accounts served as the primary source of data, offering direct insights into the realities of being red-tagged as lived and understood by student activists.

Research Setting

The research took place in Cebu, particularly in Cebu City, a highly urbanized province in the Central Visayas region of the Philippines that represents a significant context for student activism. Cebu has historically been crucial for youth-led movements, playing pivotal roles in advocacy for social justice and resistance during periods of political repression - most notably during the martial law era when Cebu is an active region in joining years of protest leading to the imposition of martial law substantiating the way their youthful activism proved to be formative in their subsequent involvement in organizing armed struggle against politicians in rule (Karlo, 2024). Today, this conviction continues as student activists in Cebu coming from various universities remain at the forefront of national discourse, actively mobilizing around contemporary issues through protests despite the risk of red-tagging (Fuentes, 2025).

Figure 1: Map of Cebu



Given the sensitive nature of red-tagging, all data collection took place in secure, private locations to ensure participant confidentiality and safety. This setting is intended to foster an environment where respondents can freely express their perspectives and minimize potential risks associated with discussing this phenomenon of red-tagging, particularly with those who have personally experienced it.

Research Instrument

The primary data collection instrument for this study was the researcher-made semi-structured interview guide to obtain comprehensive, first-hand accounts of red-tagged student activists' lived experiences. This allowed the researchers to acquire in-depth information from interviewees while allowing for a structured yet flexible conversation (Mashuri et al. 2022). This approach enabled deep exploration of the three critical dimensions which the study aims to uncover: (1) the different challenges encountered by red-tagged student activists, (2) its impacts, and (3) the coping strategies developed in response. This is particularly suited for capturing nuanced personal narratives while maintaining methodological rigor, as it allows participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms while ensuring all research objectives are addressed.

Data Collection

The data collection process was carried out in three phases: pre-collection, collection, and post-collection. During the pre-collection phase, the researchers prepared the semi-structured interview guide to explore the lived experiences of student activists in Cebu who had experienced red-tagging. Before the conduct of the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as participants, including voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were also assured.

The collection phase involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interviews were both conducted face-to-face and online, as preferred by some participants to ensure their comfort and convenience. The questions focused on the participants' experiences of red-tagging, the challenges and impacts they encountered, and the coping strategies they employed. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation of their responses. Participants were also given the option to use pseudonyms to protect their identities. Throughout the interviews, the researchers remained attentive to any signs of emotional distress and ensured that the participants felt safe and comfortable while sharing their experiences.

In the post-collection phase, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the collected data. The transcripts served as the primary dataset for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Data from the interview were interpreted using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) created by Jonathan Smith, Michael Larkin, and Paul Flowers in the 1990s (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). They developed this method as a way to study the complexity of people's experiences. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and interpretation of data followed the four steps adhered by Memommolo and Willis (2023) in conducting IPA which includes; (1) reading and rereading repeatedly, (2) noting on the relevant themes, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) searching for connections across themes and looking for patterns across cases to form structure for the analysis. The researchers carefully examined the transcript, making detailed notes of what the participants were conveying, including the dynamics across their responses.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to uncover themes and meanings within the participants' narratives, enabling the researchers to understand how red-tagged student activists make sense of their experiences. IPA places emphasis on exploring lived experiences and examining how individuals interpret and assign meaning to these experiences within their personal and social contexts (Smith & Nizza, 2021).

Data Management

All collected data were handled digitally to ensure security and confidentiality. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researchers, and the digital transcripts were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. Any notes taken during the interviews were also kept in encrypted digital documents, with all identifying information removed to maintain participant anonymity.

To prevent data loss, backup copies of the transcripts and recordings were stored in a separate password-protected drive accessible only to the researchers. Throughout the research process, the data were reviewed regularly to ensure accuracy, completeness, and proper organization.

Upon completion of the study, all digital files, including interview recordings, transcripts, and backup copies, were permanently deleted in accordance with ethical data management and retention policies to ensure the continued protection of the participants' confidentiality.

Ethical Consideration

The study followed key ethical principles, including Informed Consent, Beneficence, Confidentiality, Respect for Privacy, and the Right to Withdraw (Bacus & Alda, 2022). Before the research begins, participants receive a detailed explanation of the study’s purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. They were given the opportunity to ask questions, and only those who voluntarily agreed signed a consent form. Throughout the study, the researchers prioritized participants’ well-being, ensuring that their rights and safety were protected at all times. The research was designed to minimize any risks while also aiming to contribute meaningful insights into the topic.

To maintain confidentiality, all information shared by participants was handled with strict security measures. Their identities were not disclosed, and responses were anonymized in the final research report. Personal data was securely stored and deleted after the study’s completion to prevent any misuse. Additionally, only necessary questions were asked, respecting the privacy and comfort of each participant. If at any point a participant wishes to withdraw, they are allowed to do so without pressure or consequences. By following these ethical guidelines, the study ensured that participants felt safe and respected throughout the research process.

Reflexivity

This study was conducted by a team of undergraduate psychology students with prior experience in qualitative research methods. Both lead researchers are pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and their academic backgrounds may influence how they interpret participants' narratives. To mitigate potential biases, the research team explicitly acknowledged their positionality and reflected on how their personal beliefs, expectations, and experiences might shape the data collection and interpretation processes.

Both lead researchers have no prior personal relationships with the participants, which helps to reduce influence from prior interactions. During interviews and data analysis, the researchers maintained reflexive journals to document their initial impressions, assumptions, and emotional responses. These records served as a tool for ongoing self-awareness. Additionally, the team engaged in regular debriefing sessions with their adviser and among themselves, promoting critical discussions about emerging themes, significant interpretations, and potential biases. This collaborative approach aims to ensure that multiple perspectives are considered, thereby enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings. Furthermore, the researchers actively practiced bracketing, setting aside personal judgments and preconceptions to focus solely on participants’ experiences as expressed.

Through adopting these reflexive practices, including journaling, critical discussion, and bracketing, the research team seeks to enhance the transparency, reliability, and integrity of the study. The overarching goal is to produce credible findings that genuinely reflect the lived experiences of red-tagged student activists, free from undue researcher influence.

RESULTS

Table 1: Challenges Encountered by Red Tagged Student Activists in Cebu

Master Themes	Constituent Themes
Threats to Identity	Being Labelled as an NPA Member Exposure and Digital Doxing
Threats to Safety	Pervasive Surveillance and Intimidation Online Harassment Institutional Scrutiny and Administrative Pressure

The findings show that the act of being red-tagged itself—being publicly labeled as “NPA” or affiliated with insurgent groups—constitutes the core situational challenge faced by student activists. This imposed label sets off a series of interconnected difficulties as participants are thrust into situations where their identities, movements, and activities become subject to suspicion. Red-tagging situates them in environments characterized by heightened scrutiny, exposure, and risk, where challenges unfold across public spaces, online platforms, institutional settings, and everyday interactions. The following analysis explores these challenges through

two master themes, including *Threats to Identity and Threats to Safety*, reflecting how participants navigate these layered situational challenges that emerge directly from the red-tagging label and extend into every sphere of their lived experience.

Threats to Identity

This master theme reflects the challenge of having one's identity distorted, weaponized, and reshaped by red-tagging. Participants experienced identity threats as a direct challenge to how they understood themselves and how others perceived them. These challenges emerged through mislabeling by state forces, community members, and institutional actors, as well as through forced exposure online. This theme comprises two constituent themes: *Being Labelled as an NPA Member and Exposure and Digital Doxing*.

Being Labelled as an NPA Member. This challenge captures how participants struggled with externally imposed identities that associated them with insurgency. The label was not simply inaccurate but had serious emotional, social, and political consequences. The challenge intensified because labeling came from multiple fronts — state actors, strangers, and the wider public.

A participant described the shock of learning that their full names had been gathered and circulated by intelligence units, *“After the protest, we received word that there was a list of activists monitored by the intelligence team... my full government name was used.”* (P1)

Another participant recounted being formally identified by state institutions as communist recruiters, *“In the same year that we organized a walk-out we were also included in the list of other student activists and other sectoral organizers who were red tagged and labelled as “recruiters” by the state.”* (P3)

Red-tagging also operated interpersonally. Some were confronted in public spaces by strangers who directly assumed rebel affiliation, *“There were times when someone came up to me and asked if I was with the NPA, and there were actually many times that this happened—like getting stopped on the street.”* (P1). Another participant also shared, *“I was with my friend when someone pointed at me—like they approached and indicated that I’m part of, you know, [the NPA].”* (P2)

They also recognized that sectors of the general public readily perpetuated the label. A participant shared, *“We also can’t deny that there’s a huge chunk of the public that, also strongly engages in red-tagging.”* (P5)

For others, the label reached them through family channels connected to security forces, *“I was being red-tagged because of the list of what they say are CPP-NPA (Communist Party of the Philippines - New People’s Army) members that was publicized through one of the people from our collective who had a family member connected to the PNP Region 7. And there I found out that my name was part of the list and that was the list of individuals from, even from other sectors, and including student activists.”* (P5)

These accounts highlight a direct situational challenge in which participants were forced to contend with an imposed identity that reduced their legitimate activism into a dangerous label, shaping how others treated and responded to them.

Exposure and Digital Doxing. Another identity-related challenge was the loss of control over their personal information, where names and photos were circulated online without consent. This visible exposure amplified the red-tagging threat, making participants vulnerable to misrecognition and public hostility. One described receiving a social media report from a police office listing them and their peers as monitored individuals, *“It was sent through a social media report where I was included in a list of names by a police station here in Cebu where together with my council mates we were all listed down and monitored by the intelligence team of a police office.”* (P3)

Another noted how their image was circulated widely on Facebook, *“There was a Facebook post in which our names and faces were displayed.”* (P3)

The unauthorized publication of their names and photos created a situational challenge of unwanted exposure, placing participants in circumstances where they had little control over how their identities were displayed, circulated, or interpreted online.

Threats to Safety

Participants also described a persistent challenge of safety insecurity. Red-tagging created environments where they felt endangered across physical, institutional, and digital contexts. These challenges were not isolated events but continuous, cumulative threats that shaped their daily routines and psychological states.

Pervasive Surveillance and Intimidation. This challenge came from multiple sources—state forces, the public, and even peers acting as student informants. Together, these forms of surveillance created a hostile environment where safety felt unpredictable and unstable. Participants repeatedly described being monitored, photographed, or approached by police and military actors during mobilizations and even in their homes. Participants shared,

“Really the state forces themselves. They would take photos of us during rallies, they would take videos of us.” (P1).

“A family member who is part of the PNP, and then, there were also many PNP agents who went to our house to conduct surveillance. And even during that time, since it was a fiesta, there was a lot of surveillance or Intel operations there because it was disclosed by the family.” (P2).

“Every time there was a police presence at our university premises, I would be the one to talk to them, so like, “Sir, why are you here? Could you please not stand by here because the students at [University] are getting scared” And they would say, like, “What activities do you have there?” like, “What are you people doing there?” And then I would say, “I don't know, sir, what we are doing here,” but then they would say, “Really! Because you all did something last time, right?” So, like, they themselves were really watching every movement, every step.” (P4)

Some even experienced overt intimidation, such as police entering their compound or vehicles parking outside their homes overnight. *“There are times when a police force would enter our compound...And there are also times when we were really parked on overnight by a police car.”* (P2)

A participant also described instances where surveillance intensified into direct physical harm, revealing how the threat of being watched could rapidly turn into violent confrontations during mobilizations, *“We were violently grabbed, we were really chased, some of our companions were beaten up... his head was kicked on the floor.”* (P4)

These encounters illustrate a situational challenge in which participants had to move through spaces where their actions were monitored, their presence questioned, and their safety compromised by the possibility that surveillance could escalate into intimidation or violence. Participants also described surveillance from ordinary citizens who photographed or filmed them during public demonstrations or even in casual settings.

“Students, as well as older men and women, would take photos and videos of us during rallies.” (P1)

“I was meeting a friend at Starbucks when suddenly something flashed in front of us.” (P2)

“I notice that I, along with my colleagues, am being surveilled by suspicious men who are following us around.” (P5)

This public monitoring created a situational challenge where participants could not easily distinguish between ordinary citizens and potential watchers, resulting in everyday settings feeling uncertain and marked by constant vigilance. Participants also reported fear of surveillance from fellow students acting as informants, *“It's really dangerous, you know, to casually mention that you're part of this or that organization when you don't know the*

affiliations of the people around you. There might be Student Intels. Student Intels are really popular now, so you never really know who is on your side and who is on the reactionary side.” (P2)

Others emphasized how these students were allegedly incentivized to report organizers and political activities, “There’s also the fear that comes from what they call “Student Intel”. These are students who are given some sort of agreement by the state, like, ‘we’ll give you capital to start a business or ‘we’ll give you a daily allowance,’ we’ll give you everything you need as long as you tell us who organizes the rallies there, who leads the mobilizations, who initiates those political events.” (P4). The possibility that peers could be student informants introduced a situational challenge of distrust within campus spaces, turning routine interactions and relationships into potentially risky encounters.

Online Harassment. A major safety-related challenge was severe online aggression, including threats of violence, sexual assault, and account breaches. Participants experienced digital spaces as extensions of the danger produced by red-tagging. One recounted how online platforms became sites of extreme hostility, where personal threats and sexualized violence were openly directed at them, “It also came with a lot of online traction. There where tons of hurtful na comments. I was receiving DM’s saying they know where I live. There’s so many comments of they wanted to rape me.” (P1)

Another participant emphasized the severity of these threats, noting how death wishes became a routine part of their online experience, “You receive many messages like, ‘Bro, I hope you die,’ and things like that.” (P2). Some also reported hacking attempts and prolonged digital harassment, “The struggle continues up to the present, especially online. You notice patterns such as attempts to hack into your Facebook account.” (P5)

Online platforms posed an ongoing situational challenge as they became additional sites of threat, exposing participants to harassment, threats, and intrusion beyond physical spaces.

Institutional Scrutiny and Administrative Pressure. Participants also faced challenges within their schools, where administrators questioned their activities or implied rebel affiliations. These interactions reinforced the sense that institutions viewed activism as suspicious. One recalled being labeled during a campus election. “Actually, the first time I ran for Council, someone posted a story of our promotional poster and tagged us as being affiliated with the NPA.” (P1)

Another described being summoned after a walk-out simply because they were a member of an activist group and is accompanied by someone from a progressive organization, “The most recent was an interaction with the administration. Our Student Disciplinary Officer called me because it was after the student-wide walkout, and coincidentally, our school council had an event. I brought a friend with me and since my friend is from [activist group member], I was included in the summons. They asked what we were doing there [blah blah blah], and it was more about [activist group where the participant is a member]. Later on, the officer said, word for word, “Maybe, in the future, you’ll be going to the mountains and then you’ll be part of the rebels.” (P5). These encounters created a situational challenge in which participants had to operate within institutions that monitored their political activities and treated their involvement as potentially subversive.

In turn, these safety threats reinforced the identity-based challenges, as continuous monitoring, online aggression, and administrative questioning signaled that the imposed label was both widespread and consequential. The interplay among these challenges created a self-reinforcing cycle: the more participants were surveilled or harassed, the more their identities felt destabilized; and the more their identities were publicly misrepresented, the more unsafe their environments became. This synthesis highlights that for student activists, red-tagging constitutes a shifting field of situational challenges, where identity misrepresentation, monitoring, and administrative pressures converge to shape how they move through and respond to the environments they inhabit.

Table 2: Impacts of the Challenges Encountered by Red Tagged Student Activists in Cebu

Master Themes	Constituent Themes
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Attitudinal Shift (Affective–Behavioral– Cognitive Changes)	Persistent Fear and Anxiety Disrupted Daily Functioning and Developing Self-Restriction Altered Sense of Safety leading to Hypervigilance and Paranoia
Social Impact	Familial Appeals to Withdraw Community Reactions
Positive Political Development	Strengthened Commitment to Activism Ideological and Identity Transformation

The impacts of red-tagging on student activists reveal multilayered consequences that reshape their inner lives, social behaviors, and political identities. From the emotional and cognitive burdens they carry to the ways they restrict their public presence and eventually transform their political commitments, the findings show that red-tagging acts as a pervasive force that penetrates every aspect of their lived experience. These experiences were clustered into three major themes: *Attitudinal Shift*, *Social Impact*, and *Positive Political Development*. In which captures the full spectrum of how red-tagging disrupts and, in some cases, deepens the activists’ sense of self and purpose. Each master theme presents a different dimension of the struggle—how fear is internalized, how relationships and visibility are restricted, and how political conviction strengthens in the midst of repression.

Attitudinal Shift

The first master theme, encapsulates the changes that red-tagged activists undergo. When individuals experience sustained political harassment, these components are disrupted, resulting in an attitudinal shift—a change in how they feel, think, and act in relation to their surroundings. These shifts occur across affective, behavioral, and cognitive domains. As defined by LJ Wolf (2020) of American Psychology Association, attitudes are relatively enduring evaluations of a person, object, or issue, typically consisting of a combination of feelings, beliefs, and behaviors—which explains the inclusion of the constituent themes. Within the definition, *attitude* comprises three interconnected components: affective (emotions), cognitive (beliefs and interpretations), and behavioral (actions or predispositions to act). They were grouped under one master theme because they all represent internalized consequences—changes that happen within the individual as they attempt to make sense of and survive a politically hostile environment. This inward shift marks the first layer of impact: how activists’ feelings, actions, and worldview are reshaped from within.

Persistent Fear and Anxiety. Persistent fear and anxiety emerged as dominant emotional responses, indicating how red-tagging becomes internalized as a pervasive threat. This constituent theme is considered an affective because it focuses specifically on the emotional component of attitude, emphasizing how red-tagging reshapes activists’ emotional predispositions toward their environment, their activism, and even their personal safety. Participants repeatedly described a heightened emotional state characterized by fear, worry and tension, demonstrating how their feelings were transformed into chronic responses rather than momentary reactions.

This emotional shift is evident in how anxiety emerges even in routine, unrelated situations. Participants repeatedly described how everyday spaces and situations trigger uneasiness. One participant reflected on how fear being persistent even crept when being in a public space, *“I just go to a public space, and then I get anxious...I’m not fully healed. The anxiety, it’s not something that changes, you see, it’s not something that you can erase... it sticks with you, the effects of being red-tagged.”* (P1). This reveals that fear becomes automatic, arising even without a sign of immediate danger or doing ordinary activities, like going to public spaces. Over time, the fear is not only about immediate danger but about the possibility of harm or surveillance, which is ever-present in their daily life.

Another participant highlighted the anticipatory fear, *“First and foremost, it is fear... but you constantly have that look, like you are always fearing that something might happen to you.”* (P4). Here, the participant emphasizes the intensity and pervasiveness of the anxiety. As the participant quoted, *“constantly gyud ka nga naga fear”*—highlights that this is not a temporary or occasional worry. This emphasizes that such emotional strain transforms fear from a situational response into a persistent psychological state.

This anxiety even extends to activism itself, as one participant described. *“There are times I get anxious during mobilizations because I might get red-tagged again.”* (P5). This illustrates how red-tagging destabilizes even

empowering political spaces. Another participant also, describes how red-tagging triggered existing clinical diagnosis. *“Since I have been diagnosed four (4) years already with mood disorder it also affects with the way that I function so in times when the fear becomes so intense it also would be a trigger for me in other episodes for the past years I’ve been trying to connect with different psychiatrist to help me battle against this disorder.”* (P3). The mention of triggers on existing clinical diagnosis emphasizes the tangible, measurable effects of red-tagging, showing that it can trigger clinical symptoms requiring treatment.

Taken together, these quotes show that the anxiety described is a central experience for participants. It invades both personal and public life, making ordinary activities, social interactions, and political engagement stressful. The anxiety is pervasive, anticipatory, and exhausting, affecting concentration, mental focus, and the ability to feel safe. This demonstrates that the fear created by red-tagging is not just a momentary emotion for them but a persistent psychological burden that shapes their daily lives.

Disrupted Daily Functioning and Developing Self-Restriction. The behavioral component of the attitudinal shift captures how red-tagging alters not only what student activists feel and think but also how they act in their daily lives. This constituent theme falls under behavioral change because it describes how fear and anxiety resulting from red-tagging translate into observable changes in daily routines, participation, decision-making, and overall functioning. Red-tagging creates an environment where students become increasingly cautious, withdrawn, and self-limiting, not because these behaviors reflect their authentic personalities, but because these actions become necessary strategies for survival. The shift is thus not simply about feeling fearful but acting differently—restraining themselves, avoiding tasks, and adjusting their functioning in ways that significantly reshape their everyday life. Participants described how disruptions in their daily functioning emerged, with fear manifesting as hesitation, exhaustion, and loss of clarity in routine activities. One participant articulated this struggle, *“Red-tagging definitely took a toll on my mental health and my functioning. I now have hesitations and at times I feel drained or unsure what to do.”* (P5)

This disruption extends to academic functioning, as the participant additionally expressed, *“It takes a psychological toll on us that weakens us, not just our functioning but also our schooling.”* (P5). These disruptions accumulate over time, affecting habits and overall well-being. One participant noticed gradual changes in their routines, *“You realize months later that your habits have changed. I don’t sleep well like before.”* (P1). Another described more severe patterns of exhaustion and collapse. *“During that time, I was sleepless—I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t eat, then I would sleep the whole day, like 24 hours.”* (P2)

Self-restriction also emerged as a critical behavioral response to fear, as participants began limiting their own interactions, movement, and participation to protect themselves from further harm. One participant noted, *“When interacting with friends, I only keep a very close circle, my environment is gated.”* (P1)

Overall, these behavioral changes reveal the depth of red-tagging’s impact: it compels activists to monitor and change their routines, interactions, and participation to navigate a hostile environment. Fear, therefore, is not merely internal, it reorganizes the very ways student activists move, behave, and function in their everyday lives.

Altered Sense of Safety leading to Hypervigilance and Paranoia. The cognitive component of the attitudinal shift captures how red-tagging changes the way activists think, interpret situations, and perceive their environment. In psychology, the cognitive aspect of attitude refers to beliefs, perceptions, and mental evaluations about objects or situations. Red-tagging targets this cognitive layer by reshaping how individuals understand safety, danger, and the intentions of others, often leading to distorted or heightened interpretations of risk. This theme is considered cognitive because it reflects a significant transformation in the activists’ thought patterns, shifting from a normal, trusting worldview to one dominated by suspicion, vigilance, and a pervasive sense of threat. The resulting hypervigilance and paranoia are not simply emotional reactions; they represent a reconstructed cognitive framework where the world is reevaluated as inherently unsafe, even in spaces previously perceived as secure. Participants consistently described this altered perception of safety.

One participant shared, *“I get anxious thinking someone might enter like devices planted by state agents. It really makes you paranoid.”* (P2). This demonstrates how the participant’s cognitive processing of ordinary stimuli

such as noises or movement has shifted into a threat-oriented interpretation. Another participant addressed how this vigilance becomes part of daily functioning, stating, *“I make sure to be mindful of my surroundings because it would ensure that there is no one tailing me... it stayed in the way I interact with people how I am careful with engagements.”* (P3)

Hypervigilance extends into public interactions. Similarly, a participant articulated the need to intensify vigilance in their daily activities stating, *“You can see that there is the common stance of anxiousness. It's like you're somewhat paranoid that maybe someone is following me.”* (P4)

Another participant also explained that even home and school no longer provide security, *“Before I used to think of my home as my safe space but right now I realize that there is really no safe space in a society that constantly tries to red-tag its members.”* (P4). Others also described a shift in worldview, *“I grew up carefree and when I became a student activist, it changed. It feels limiting... like being in a prison.”* (P2)

Lastly, another explained how their public presence required strategic caution, *“After the incident I became more cautious of my public presence. I am cautious of who I interact with because they might be intel.”* (P5)

Collectively, this constituent theme highlighted how red-tagging fundamentally changes how activists think about themselves in relation to their environment, replacing previously neutral or safe interpretations with perceptions dominated by danger, surveillance, and potential harm. This altered perception does not remain temporary; instead, it solidifies into a cognitive habit that shapes future interpretations of everyday situations. Through this shift, activists develop a worldview in which hypervigilance becomes necessary and constant, reflecting how deeply red-tagging can penetrate one's cognitive structures and reshape their sense of reality.

Social Impact

The second master theme, Social Impact, captures how red-tagging extends beyond the realm of individual psychological and attitudinal experiences and enters the broader sphere of social relationships, interactions, and community responses. While the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive impacts illustrate what happens within the individual, the social impact demonstrates what happens around them—how the people in their environment react, adjust, or distance themselves in response to the stigma and risk associated with red-tagging. This theme reveals that red-tagging is not an isolated personal event; rather, it is a social process that reshapes the activist's connection to their family, peers, and broader community. These shifts are not merely incidental but are patterned and expected outcomes in contexts where political labeling produces fear, misinformation, and social tension. Thus, the social impact shows that the consequences of red-tagging ripple outward, affecting the support systems, relational dynamics, and social safety nets that students ordinarily depend on.

This theme is essential because it highlights that red-tagging alters the activist's social functioning by changing how others perceive and engage with them. Families may respond with heightened fear or pressure to withdraw from activism, while peers, neighbors, or acquaintances may distance themselves due to perceived political risk. Such reactions create new social barriers that the activists must navigate, sometimes experiencing reduced support, strained relationships, or the burden of reassuring fearful loved ones. These social consequences exacerbate the emotional and behavioral struggles already present, forming a cycle wherein the activist not only fears state actors but also anticipates misunderstanding or judgment from the people around them. This master theme compresses two constituent themes: *Familial Appeals to Withdraw and Community Reactions*.

Familial Appeals to Withdraw. This constituent theme shows how the threat extends beyond the individual activist and permeates the household. This theme is categorized under the master theme Social Impact because it captures how families—motivated by fear, safety concerns, and future uncertainties—respond to the activist's situation. Attitudes within the family shift as political involvement becomes associated with personal risk, employment barriers, or potential surveillance. As a result, families often urge activists to withdraw from organizing work, creating emotional tension, moral dilemmas, and relational strain. What should function as the individual's primary support system becomes a site of pressure, conflict, and emotional negotiation, demonstrating how red-tagging penetrates the micro-unit of society—the home.

Families frequently respond from a place of fear, as seen when one participant shared, *“At first, I was really scared because of my job prospects, and my parents would tell me, ‘Oh, you’re not going to get any jobs after that.’ So it’s like you’re caught in a dilemma between your morals.”* (P1). This statement shows how parental concern translates into discouragement, pushing the activist to reconsider their political involvement due to fears about employability and future stability. Such discouragement creates a moral and emotional conflict, where the participant must weigh their principles against their family’s fears. This demonstrates the social nature of the impact: even if the activist personally wants to continue, the voices of loved ones introduce pressure that complicates decision-making.

Another participant revealed that even “supportive” families can still transmit fear-driven pressure, stating, *“Despite saying that my family is supportive of the work that I do, I still cannot prevent some of my family members who are really afraid to what’s happened to my brother that they’re afraid that it will happen to me as well... so when they try to convince me to stop or to even just pursue another career path, I always struggle with them that this career path is worth fighting for.”* (P3). This quote highlights how familial history, such as past harm or threats against another family member, intensifies fear and leads relatives to persuade activists to step back. The tension lies in the participant’s need to defend their conviction while trying to soothe the family’s worry, creating an ongoing internal and relational struggle. The push to withdraw is not rooted in disagreement with the activist’s goals but in fear of recurrence, showing how red-tagging alters family dynamics by introducing collective anxiety.

This pressure is further reflected in another participant’s account, *“And because of that, my parents or anyone close to me would say things like, ‘Just lie low for now,’ or ‘Just stay out of trouble, don’t get involved in those things anymore.”* (P4). Such advice, though protective in intention, communicates fear and avoidance as preferred responses to danger. It implicitly discourages activism by framing political involvement as inherently unsafe, thus reinforcing self-restriction and emotional burden on the activist. This illustrates how familial influence contributes to the shaping of attitudes in response to red-tagging.

Finally, one participant pointed out the lack of full familial support, explaining, *“Our parents aren’t really that fully supportive for us to have a safety net.”* (P5). This suggests that red-tagging creates a gap in the safety net families normally provide. Instead of offering assurance and protection, family members may distance themselves or fail to provide emotional reinforcement, leaving activists feeling unsupported at a time when they need stability the most.

Overall, this demonstrates how red-tagging disrupts the relational environment of the activist. Pressures from parents and relatives introduce emotional strain, limit autonomy, and complicate the activist’s sense of safety and belonging. The impact is not only in the discouragement itself but in how it reshapes the home into a site of negotiation between fear and conviction. As a result, the activist must navigate not only state-imposed threats but also the weight of familial concern, revealing that red-tagging is a deeply social form of harm that reverberates through intimate relationships and redefines the everyday realities of student activists.

Community Reactions. This constituent theme captures how red-tagging reshapes the activist’s social environment beyond the family and into the broader public sphere. This constituent theme falls under the master theme Social Impact because it reflects how the surrounding community—whether peers, acquaintances, online audiences, or the general public—responds to the activist once they are labeled as subversive or associated with insurgency. Community reactions form a significant layer of social consequence because they influence how activists are perceived, supported, or stigmatized, thereby altering their sense of belonging and safety within the public domain. The impact becomes evident when student activists observe distance, withdrawal, or misinformation among community members, demonstrating how public opinion is shaped by political narratives and how activism becomes socially risky in everyday settings.

Participants described how community reactions are frequently rooted in misunderstanding and lack of awareness about activism. One participant explained, *“People really do red-tag, and it’s like... well, I understand that they don’t understand why we rally. More often than not, the people who red-tagged me aren’t very aware of the causes I stand for.”* (P1). This statement shows that red-tagging thrives on misinformation, where people

who lack context or understanding readily adopt accusatory labels. Instead of engaging in dialogue or seeking clarity, the community relies on surface-level judgments shaped by dominant narratives. This contributes to a social environment where activists are misunderstood and unfairly targeted, amplifying feelings of alienation.

Community responses are often intensified by online visibility, as described by the same participant, *“It also came with a lot of online traction. So when people saw that I got a lot of traction online, they disregarded the fact that I was harassed.”* (P1). This highlights how digital platforms can magnify stigma, where attention becomes a basis for dismissing or invalidating the activist’s experience of harassment. Instead of recognizing harm, online audiences may prioritize controversy or sensationalism, further marginalizing the activist. This demonstrates how red-tagging extends into digital spaces, affecting the activist’s social image and how their experiences are interpreted by those online.

The distancing effect of red-tagging was also reflected in another account, *“Maybe you don’t always say you’re this and that, but once people find out you’re part of certain causes, that’s when people start... I don’t know, maybe they distance themselves, maybe they avoid you.”* (P2). This reveals how stigma produces subtle yet painful forms of social withdrawal, where people avoid student activists not because of personal disagreements but because of fear, stigma, or misconceptions associated with political involvement. Such distancing reinforces social isolation and heightens the activist’s awareness that the label of “red-tagged” affects not only their political work but also their everyday social interactions.

Another participant observed the confusion and skepticism within the community regarding why activists are even red-tagged, stating, *“We don’t understand why progressive individuals are red-tagged when they haven’t done anything wrong.”* (P4). This statement shows that some community members challenge the logic of red-tagging, recognizing its injustice. However, this confusion also reflects a lack of clear information, suggesting that the community is left to question narratives that do not align with observable behavior.

Meanwhile, another participant highlighted the prevalence of misinformation, *“There really is a culture in Philippine society that is misinformed, so in return there is the assumption that if someone is red-tagged, they deserved it.”* (P5). This reflects how structural misinformation normalizes violence and blame, contributing to an environment where political persecution is tolerated or justified by the public.

Collectively, these accounts illustrate how red-tagging deeply shapes the social environment by influencing how the broader community views, interacts with, or distances itself from the activist. Misinformation fuels stigma, online platforms magnify judgment, and social withdrawal reinforces isolation. The resulting social impact is a reduction of emotional safety and community belonging, demonstrating that red-tagging is not only an assault on political identity but also a disruption of social support. Through this theme, it becomes clear that the consequences of red-tagging transcend individual experience and ripple outward, altering the perceptions, behaviors, and relationships of the community around the activist.

Political Development

The third master theme, highlights how red-tagging produces unexpected yet significant political growth. Despite the profound psychological and social burdens caused by red-tagging, participants also described transformative impacts that strengthened their political resolve and deepened their ideological identity. This master theme comprises two constituent themes: Strengthened Commitment to Activism and Ideological and Identity Transformation. These two themes were grouped together because they represent growth—an expansion of political consciousness and moral grounding—rather than harm. While Attitudinal Shift and Social Impact reveal the oppressive effects of being red-tagged, Positive Political Development reflects how repression unexpectedly fosters resilience and principled action.

Strengthened Commitment to Activism. This constituent theme reflects the student activist’s renewed motivation and commitment to continue their political engagement despite the risks posed by state harassment. The experience of being red-tagged, while intimidating and psychologically taxing, reinforces a sense of purpose and

moral responsibility. Participants shared experiences of how the challenges of red-tagging, rather than discouraging them, strengthened their commitment to activism.

Participants emphasized,

“My will to continue increased... the determination to continue the movement truly grew.” (P1). *“Rather than come into fear and lying low I think it really strengthened my resolve.”* (P3).

“I think it really helped shift my perspective that fighting for what is right really comes with the price...it made me more immersed with the work that I do.” (P3).

“After that [incident], realizing 'oh, so it's really true that they are really like that,' my desire and commitment to continue truly increased.” (P5).

This illustrates that the experience did not diminish their motivation but instead added “will” to continue and now fear, instead of paralyzing action, becomes a tool for strengthening their resolve. Each participant described a shift from fear and caution to renewed resolve, showing that adversity can function as a catalyst for deeper engagement. This demonstrates that the encounter with oppression can act as a confirmation of the importance of their cause, making the decision to continue feel not only personal but morally necessary.

Across the accounts, it reveals that red-tagging, while threatening, also functions as a catalyst for activism. The adversity transforms fear into conviction, reinforcing moral responsibility, strengthening resolve, and encouraging continued, more committed participation in movements. It highlights the contradicting effect of oppression which is increasing the activist’s determination to fight for justice, despite the risks.

Ideological & Identity Transformation. This constituent theme highlights how enduring harassment and repression led participants to reevaluate and reshape their beliefs, self-concept, and approach to activism. The experience of being targeted functioned as a crucible, molding participants into more principled, politically aware, and resilient individuals.

A participant shared, *“I can say that I'm such a different person compared to who I was... my morals would not have been this principled had I not joined stand [the student movement]. Everything I do, it's principled.”* (P1). Participants reflect on a profound personal transformation. The activism and the experience of being red-tagged instilled a stronger moral framework and guided their actions toward principle-driven decisions. Their identity as a student activist became intertwined with their ethical values, showing how adversity can strengthen personal integrity and political consciousness.

Another participant also emphasizes the practical impact of lived experiences, *“It also became a solid foundation for my beliefs since what I read about the theories learned about in discussions was now applied to real life”* (P3). Academic theories and ideological discussions gained real-world relevance through personal encounters with repression. This translation of theory into lived reality solidified their beliefs, creating a foundation for their political principles that was rooted in personal experience rather than abstract learning.

The participant further explains how prior political concepts that once felt distant or theoretical became tangible through lived experience, *“It really influence the way I view the world. It was something sort of a foreign concept but now it became more real that translates a foreign concept into reality, a concrete manifestation”* (P3). Red-tagging exposed them to oppression firsthand, allowing abstract ideas about state power, social justice, and activism to become clear, observable realities.

This transformation deepened their understanding of societal structures and their role within them while other participants highlighted the lasting impact of these experiences on personal identity, *“Looking back, you know, at those experiences, that stayed with me, molding and shaping me into a student leader and, at the same time, an activist.”* (P4). The harassment and challenges did not only test resilience but actively shaped who they are as both a student leader and activist. Their sense of self and leadership qualities were molded by adversity, integrating experiences of fear, courage, and advocacy into a coherent identity.

Together, these accounts show that red-tagging, while harmful, also functions as a transformative process. Participants described a shift from their experiences that translates abstract political ideas into lived realities, shaping both personal and ideological development. This illustrates how being red-tagged functions as a formative experience, actively shaping political identity and reinforcing principles.

Red-tagging thus transforms abstract political ideas into lived truths. These accounts reveal that Positive Political Development captures red-tagging’s paradoxical effect—it harms the activist psychologically and socially, yet simultaneously strengthens their ideological grounding and political purpose. This theme shows that repression does not merely silence; for many activists, it reinforces the necessity and legitimacy of their struggle. Taken together, the themes show that red-tagging is not a singular incident but a sustained political assault that infiltrates all aspects of the activists’ lives. Attitudinal Shift demonstrates how fear becomes internalized, producing anxiety, hypervigilance, functional decline, and a shattered sense of safety. Social Impact reveals how these internal shifts translate into altered social interactions—familial conflict, stigma-driven community reactions in both physical and digital spaces and diminished sense of belonging. Yet in profound contrast, Positive Political Development illustrates that the same experiences that weaken the activists’ sense of safety also sharpen their political identities, deepen their moral convictions, and strengthen their commitment to their movements. Red-tagging, as shown by the accounts, reshapes the individual’s emotional, social, and political worlds, revealing the complex ways that repression both injures and transforms.

In general, this data reveals that red-tagging imposes profound, dual-natured impacts on student activists, reshaping their internal and external realities. Political acts of repression such as red-tagging student activists really alter the individual's mental state and support system as shown in the data. However, in a powerful paradox, the repression yields positive impacts; the very act of being targeted validates their political analysis, transforming their fear into moral conviction, thereby strengthening their resolve in continuing movements and deepening their ideologies. Thus, the findings show that being red-tagged simultaneously breaks the individual's sense of self and safety while, for many, ultimately forging a more fiercely principled and committed activism.

Table 3: Coping Strategies Employed by Red Tagged Student Activists in Cebu

Master Themes	Constituent Themes
Personal Coping Strategies	Immediate Acts of Avoidance Reaffirming the Core Purpose of Activism Managing Mental Health
Collective and Organizational Coping Strategies	Engaging in Solidarity Networks Regrounding in Community Struggles Seeking Legal Actions

These findings present the coping strategies employed by red-tagged student activists in Cebu. This section focuses on the ways these individuals actively respond to, manage, and survive the ongoing pressures of being state-authoritatively targeted. The coping responses were grouped into two master themes: *Personal Coping Strategies* and *Collective and Organizational Coping Strategies*. Each theme reflects how student activists navigate between fear and fortitude and how they protect themselves while staying grounded in the larger social struggle.

Personal Coping Strategies

The first master theme captures the various ways red-tagged student activists navigate the challenges and impacts brought about by being associated with political threats or subversive identities. These strategies reflect how student activists attempt to regain a sense of safety, preserve their well-being, and continue engaging with their advocacies despite fear, stigma, and surveillance. Red-tagged students are often placed under intense pressure, making coping not only a personal necessity but a form of resistance that allows them to survive and remain grounded. This master theme composes the three constituent themes: *Immediate Acts of Avoidance*, *Reaffirming the Core Purpose of Activism*, and *Managing Mental Health*.

Immediate Acts of Avoidance. This constituent theme describes the strategic use of avoidance capturing how participants intentionally step back not for physical safety, but to regulate overwhelming emotions and create

psychological breathing space. To manage the intense distress of being red-tagged, activists consciously disengage by either over-immersing in specific tasks or retreating from social and digital spaces. While this provides a critical temporary respite, the participants themselves recognize these patterns as unhealthy. This awareness indicates a latent understanding that more integrated coping strategies are necessary. Participants shared how immersing themselves in work became an escape from intrusive thoughts.

“I did nothing but work, and that wasn't healthy... but being busy certainly helped with keeping all of the negative thoughts at bay.” (P1)

“I just keep myself busy with work. I feel like my stress goes away when I focus on working.” (P2)

Another participant described a need to distance themselves from movement spaces after red-tagging incidents, *“I used to self-isolate when there are instances like this. So, back then I used to not appear in the following activities in the movement.” (P3)*

Digital withdrawal also emerged as a deliberate emotional boundary, *“I avoided the whole thing like I make one statement about it and then I deleted Facebook.” (P1)*

Rather than avoidance rooted in fear, these strategies reflect an effort to manage emotional overload. Participants understood these behaviors as temporary, sometimes “unhealthy,” yet necessary to stabilize themselves before reengaging with activist work.

Reaffirming the Core Purpose of Activism. This constituent theme describes the conscious process of returning to the foundational motivations for activism as a source of strength and perspective. When faced with distress, participants engage in deliberate reflection on their personal reasons for starting their cause. This allows them to reframe immediate hardships not as isolated suffering, but as an integral and necessary part of the larger struggle. By situating their personal experience within the wider political narrative, they transform their ordeal into a meaningful, purposeful act of activism. Participants grounded themselves by remembering their reasons for joining, *“Like... remembering why I started it in the first place.” (P4)*

Others connected their motivations to love for the masses and the broader movement, *“It really takes a lot of courage and strength for people to continue persisting in the movement, and to remember why they joined the movement in the first place... the love for the masses, serve the people.” (P1)*

Another linked her persistence to the struggles of marginalized communities, *“Sometimes the fear really takes over—there are moments when it's definitely there. But I remind myself that my struggle is not just for me... it is for the sectoral communities, for people who are not privileged enough to have the same opportunities. That is what motivates me.” (P2)*

Reconnecting to purpose allowed participants to reinterpret their suffering as meaningful rather than debilitating, enabling them to face threats with a sense of clarity and conviction.

Prioritizing Mental Health. This constituent theme involves intentional and sustained efforts to support emotional well-being. Unlike withdrawal, which functions as immediate regulation, this theme captures long-term strategies aimed at cultivating resilience through self-awareness, professional support, shift in focus and mindful rest. Some participants sought psychiatric support,

“Regarding that, I was diagnosed with that condition... I consulted a psychiatrist. I used to take three tablets of anti-psychotic medication before I could sleep.” (P2)

“I ensure that those symptoms are not only treated through medicine or medication but also treated with the collective care of my organization” (P3)

A participant reframed help-seeking as strength rather than weakness, *“It doesn't mean that if you seek psychological help you're weak, or that you're not strong enough. Rather, it's a scientific and objective means of addressing your internal issues.”* (P5)

Another explained her conscious shift in focus, *“When you think about the comment, when you think about the red-tagging and then you compare it to that...there are more important things to care about.”* (P1). Some also emphasized intentional rest, *“There are also times when you're not always motivated, so...I just take a rest... I allow myself to rest...if things feel heavy, then I just take a break for a while, but when you come back, it's like, you come back stronger.”* (P4)

These constituent themes mark a paradigm shift where activists reactively treat psychological well-being as a non-negotiable foundation for sustained engagement. This approach ensures their capacity for activism is maintained over the long term, safeguarding both their personal well-being and their commitment to the cause.

Collective and Organizational Coping Strategies

This second master theme reflects how student activists rely on relational, communal, and institutional networks to withstand the pressures of red-tagging. Unlike personal coping—which focuses on internal regulation—these strategies operate through connection, solidarity, and shared action. For participants, healing does not occur in isolation; rather, resilience is cultivated through the people and communities who validate their experiences, remind them of their purpose, and help transform fear into collective strength. Under this master theme were three constituent themes: *Collective Work and Support, Seeking Wisdom and Motivation, and Fostering Accountability through Seeking Legal Resolutions.*

Engaging in Solidarity Networks. This constituent theme reflects how participants derive emotional stability, reassurance, and a sense of shared meaning from the various social groups surrounding them. Solidarity functions as a powerful antidote to the isolation and fear produced by red-tagging, and this support emerges across three interconnected spheres: peers and organizations, family, and institutions. Ultimately, this reciprocal dynamic reinforces the activists' core purpose: the community that provides this crucial support is the very same collective whose welfare and rights justify the struggle, creating a reinforcing cycle of motivation and care.

Participants described solidarity as the anchor that sustained them during their most distressing episodes, *“But even if there were tons of hurtful comment, there was a lot of support also especially from students, especially from women, so it's something that I lean on to. The thought that there are also behind me, that's the only thing that keeps me moving forward.”* (P1)

Organizations also played a crucial role in offering structured emotional and practical support, helping participants regain a sense of direction and stability. One participant shared, *“I was really supported by the larger community, I was supported by my organization and other student activists like myself. So, it made me change my approaches.”* (P3)

Connecting with peers who shared similar experiences offered deep emotional relief and helped them process the weight of being red-tagged. Participants emphasized,

“It is really important to talk to people who have the same experiences as you because it genuinely helps. They won't judge you... they understand your situation—the paranoia, the breakdowns, and the fear that comes with it. That's why I also talk to a friend who has gone through similar, even more intense, experiences. It makes me feel that I'm not alone.” (P2)

“I really make sure to connect with those organizations...so that I will know how they faced their personal experiences and I will find a way to apply those in my life.” (P3)

“I was able to move forward because of my colleagues... you're reminded that you are not facing this alone.” (P4)

“I talk more with my friends and my peers in the movement, that’s important for me because it helps me humanize my experience.” (P5)

Even academic institutions, when supportive, functioned as stabilizing forces that reassured participants that they were not abandoned in moments of threat. They noted,

“And in terms of the school, they understand what I’m part of since they also know how difficult it is to juggle between academics on top of student activism. So, their support really made me push forward.” (P3)

“My initial approach was that, somehow, I felt assured that we were actually doing something about it and that it wasn’t just being ignored... since our administration at that time was also our ally... so that gave me assurance.” (P4)

Family support emerged as both unexpected and transformative—particularly as relatives shifted from fear and worry to affirmation and pride. Participants shared,

“My mom used to tell me not to rally... but later she posted my protest photo on Facebook.” (P1)

“And in terms of family, I think it really helped me the most, especially since my family, especially my mother really understands the attacks, the red-tagging, the surveillance and the many other experiences that I faced as well as my brother experienced” (P3)

Taken together, these accounts show that solidarity serves not merely as consolation but as a lifeline. By surrounding activists with understanding, empathy, and collective strength, these networks counteract the challenges and negative impacts of being red-tagged. The very communities they fight for become their sources of healing and renewed purpose.

Regrounding in Community Struggles. This constituent theme describes how activists draw strength by engaging with the wisdom and struggles of broader sectoral communities. Moving beyond their immediate circles, they connect with the resilience of those facing systemic hardship, such as laborers or farmers. This direct engagement provides profound courage and a renewed sense of purpose, grounding their activism in the lived realities of the people they serve and inspiring them to persevere. Participants described these encounters as both grounding and clarifying.

“Sometimes when I visit these communities kay I’m always reminded of my purpose and motivates me to continue with the movement” (P2)

“I also visit community so that i will be reminded of what the purpose is for because it’s easy to get clouded by this negative emotions that we forget what we’re doing so that’s why i talk to people, I visit communities and i tried to ground myself in those ways.” (P3)

“What helped me move forward was really integrating myself into various sectoral struggles — like educating myself about the struggles of our drivers, farmers, women, and youth. That’s what somehow motivated me to keep moving forward.” (P5)

This coping process demonstrates that activists do not simply rely on emotional support—they also draw political strength from the people whose lives embody the very injustices they resist. Regrounding in community struggle transforms distress into purpose and despair into clarity.

Seeking Legal Actions. This constituent theme describes the strategic shift from enduring harm to actively challenging it through formal legal channels. By transforming personal experiences into documented cases and official complaints, participants attempt to hold power structures accountable. This process functions not only as a quest for justice but also as a collective ritual, where shared action in pursuing grievances strengthens group

solidarity and reinforces their resolve. Filing complaints becomes a form of reclaiming agency and collective empowerment, even in slow systems. Some took legal steps to confront red-tagging directly.

“We visited the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), filed complaints, and prepared a fact sheet... we left it to them to handle the matter.” (P1)

“First and foremost, what we did was to file a formal complaint and demand accountability... it was documented.... we conducted debriefings with my colleagues to connect with them.” (P4)

These collective and organizational strategies highlight that coping among red-tagged student activists is fundamentally communal. Their resilience emerges from expanding their networks of care, grounding themselves in the struggles of others, and transforming harm into organized response.

Taken together, the coping strategies employed by red-tagged student activists reveal a multilayered process of survival that unfolds across both personal and collective domains. Individually, participants turn to withdrawal, grounding practices, and intentional mental health management to regain a sense of emotional stability amid fear, uncertainty, and ongoing threat. These responses demonstrate how coping becomes a negotiation between protecting oneself and preserving the capacity to remain engaged in advocacy work. Collectively, activists draw strength from solidarity networks—peers, organizations, family members, and, in some cases, supportive institutions—to counteract isolation and affirm their lived realities. These relational supports do not simply soothe distress; they actively restore meaning, reinforce purpose, and help participants reinterpret red-tagging as a shared struggle rather than a personal failure. Ultimately, these coping strategies illustrate how student activists cultivate resilience not merely to endure red-tagging, but to sustain their commitment to collective struggle, safeguard their well-being, and continue asserting their identities and advocacies despite persistent threats.

DISCUSSION

Challenges Encountered by Red-Tagged Student Activists in Cebu

The findings of this study reveal that red-tagged student activists in Cebu navigate a landscape of profound situational challenges that permeate their academic, social, digital, and personal environments. The themes identified—Threats to Identity and Threats to Safety—show how red-tagging is not a single event but an ongoing, embodied struggle embedded in participants’ lived realities. These challenges are best understood through the lens of existing scholarship on student activism, state repression, and political labeling, as well as through the study’s theoretical anchors: Labeling Theory and Social Identity Theory.

Red-tagging itself emerged as a central challenge, echoing Pimentel-Simbulan’s (2011) argument that labeling activists as “communists” or “terrorists” becomes a mechanism for silencing dissent and justifying punitive actions. Participants’ accounts of being publicly named in lists, verbally accused of insurgency, or reported through informal social channels align with Paras (2023) and Lorenzana (2021), who describe red-tagging as a contemporary tool of political repression affecting even legitimate, nonviolent activism. Consistent with Becker (1963) and Brodeur (2001), the findings demonstrate how powerful actors—including police, military personnel, and institutional authorities—construct and impose deviant labels that override participants’ identities as students and advocates. The labeling becomes a master status that reshapes how others view them and how they must navigate everyday life. However, the study shows that this identity imposition does not occur solely through state actors. Participants described accusations coming from university administrators, acquaintances, and members of the public, extending current applications of Labeling Theory by demonstrating how political labels diffuse across multiple social layers rather than remaining within formal institutions alone.

The challenge of exposure and digital doxing further reinforces the literature on contemporary forms of repression in digital spaces. Participants’ experiences of having their names and faces posted online without consent, receiving rape and death threats, and enduring repeated hacking attempts closely mirror the findings of Velasco et al. (2024), who argue that online environments have become extensions of the threat landscape for Filipino youth activists. The study supports Pineda’s (2022) contention that digital platforms, while expanding

avenues for advocacy, also heighten vulnerabilities by enabling large-scale dissemination of harmful narratives. Yet this research extends existing discussions by showing how online hostility becomes inseparable from offline danger. For the participants, digital doxing and online surveillance were not merely virtual risks—they created a persistent sense of exposure that intensified fears of physical harm, thereby illustrating how digital violence and real-world threat converge in the experience of red-tagging.

Threats to safety, particularly those involving surveillance and intimidation, resonate strongly with Kelly's (2024) documentation of the "chilling effect" produced by state monitoring of dissenting individuals. The participants' accounts of being photographed during rallies, followed home, visited by police officers, and subjected to violent dispersals support Internews (2022) and Lorenzana (2021), who highlight the increasingly aggressive strategies used against activists in the Philippines. Unlike existing literature that emphasizes state surveillance alone, the current study uncovers a multilayered surveillance ecology involving state actors, members of the public, and even peers through so-called "student intels." This extends the work of Oraa (2023) and Certeza et al. (2022) by demonstrating that threats to safety are not confined to overt policing but are embedded in multiple social interactions where suspicion, misinformation, and ideological alignment play critical roles. The blurring of boundaries between state-directed surveillance and community suspicion is a unique contribution of this study, showing how fear becomes reinforced not only through institutional but also through everyday social interactions across public, digital, educational and community settings.

Institutional scrutiny and administrative pressure emerged as a situational challenge for several participants, though this experience was not uniform across all university contexts. While student activism is often framed in literature as flourishing within universities (East & Webster, 2014; Luescher-Mamashela, 2015), the participants' experiences complicate this narrative. Some participants described being summoned, questioned for associating with certain organizations, subtly warned about future involvement or even informally labeled by co-students as "NPA." These experiences reflect the concerns raised by Lorenzana (2021) and Internews (2022) about how academic institutions may, at times, reproduce state-aligned narratives that cast activism as suspicious or subversive. However, other participants noted that their universities were supportive, allowing them to organize, express political views, or participate in mobilizations without punitive scrutiny. This variation underscores that campus environments are not monolithic; while some may contribute to the broader climate of fear surrounding red-tagging, others continue to uphold spaces for democratic participation. By capturing this diversity, the study adds nuance to current understandings of how institutional contexts shape the challenges faced by student activists. This contradicts more idealized portrayals of universities as inherently democratic spaces and suggests that campus environments can serve as extensions of political repression.

Taken together, these findings reinforce existing scholarship on red-tagging as a form of identity suppression, social control, and intimidation while offering new insights into how these challenges unfold in the localized context of Cebu. Consistent with Labeling Theory, the experiences of the participants illustrate how powerful actors impose deviant labels that become master statuses, reshaping not only how activists are perceived by others but also how they must navigate their social world. The clustering of constituent themes under the two master themes—Threats to Identity and Threats to Safety—captures how the challenges of red-tagging are experienced not as isolated incidents but as interconnected pressures that constrain the participants' lives. *Being labeled as an NPA member* and *Exposure and digital doxing* both represent direct assaults on one's identity, as they distort how participants are publicly perceived and undermine their ability to safely claim their roles as students and advocates. Meanwhile, *Pervasive surveillance and intimidation*, *Online harassment*, and *Institutional scrutiny and administrative pressure* fall under Threats to Safety because they introduce persistent risks that destabilize participants' physical, emotional, and relational security. These categories reflect how the lived challenges of red-tagging simultaneously target who the participants are and how safely they can exist in their environments. Together, these findings demonstrate that red-tagging produces a multidimensional threat landscape that reshapes everyday routines, interactions, and opportunities. These situational challenges set the stage for understanding the deeper psychological, and social repercussions experienced by the participants—transitions that will be elaborated in the subsequent section on the Impacts of red-tagging.

Impacts Arising from the Experienced Challenges of Being Red-Tagged

The findings of this study reveal that red-tagging produces extensive and multi-dimensional impacts on student activists in Cebu. In addressing the research objective—to determine the resulting impacts of the challenges experienced by student activists—three overarching master themes emerged: Attitudinal Shift, Social Impact, and Political Identity Development. These themes illustrate that red-tagging does not only threaten activists externally through fear of state surveillance and harassment; it also penetrates the internal, social, and political dimensions of their lives. Consistent with Pimentel-Simbulan’s (2011) analysis of state repression in the Philippines, red-tagging functions not merely as a label but as a mechanism of psychological warfare intended to instill fear, fracture relationships, and delegitimize activism. Through these themes, it becomes clear that the effects of red-tagging are not isolated incidents but constitute a sustained and transformative experience. While existing literature heavily documents cases of red-tagging and state repression, limited literature captures how student activists specifically experience and internalize its impacts at emotional, behavioral, social, and ideological levels. This study fills that gap, offering an in-depth and empirically grounded understanding of red-tagging’s impacts on student activists in Cebu.

The first major impact identified is an *Attitudinal Shift*, which aligns with psychological models that conceptualize attitude as composed of affective, behavioral, and cognitive components. Red-tagging disrupts all three, reshaping how activists feel, act, and understand their environments. On the emotional level, participants experienced persistent fear and anxiety, consistent with studies showing that surveillance and political harassment generate chronic emotional distress (Lorenzana, 2021; Ni et al., 2020). These emotions become internalized as part of everyday life, illustrating what Becker (1963) describes in Labeling Theory: once individuals are labeled as deviant, they begin to anticipate danger and social punishment, embedding fear into their emotional state. Previous research has extensively documented red-tagging as a structural and political phenomenon, but little was known about its intimate and transformative effects on student activists navigating academic life, familial expectations, and community environments while dealing with the repercussions of red-tagging.. The present findings deepen this understanding by showing that for student activists, fear becomes a daily companion—embedded in ordinary routines, public spaces, and moments that were once neutral or even empowering. The pattern suggests that red-tagging reshapes the emotional climate of one’s life; it teaches the body and mind to anticipate danger even in silence.

The attitudinal shift also manifests behaviorally through hesitation, withdrawal, and self-restriction. Prior literature on political harassment demonstrates that activists often alter their routines, limit participation, and regulate their visibility to avoid further targeting (Conner et al., 2022; Internews, 2022). This aligns with the study’s findings, where participants reported reduced engagement in public activities, changes in daily functioning, and intentional efforts to limit social interactions as protective strategies. Prior studies (Conner et al., 2022; Internews, 2022) discuss behavioral self-censorship among activists, but this study contributes new insight by revealing how such self-restriction becomes a learned survival strategy among students who simultaneously juggle academics, family expectations, and movement work. Their behaviors reflect Becker’s (1963) Labeling Theory: once labeled as deviant, individuals anticipate surveillance and punishment, shaping how they move through their environments.

Cognitively, red-tagging reshapes perceptions of safety, trust, and risk. Activists described heightened alertness, suspicion of surveillance, and the re-evaluation of once-safe spaces such as home, school, or public areas. This aligns with Ni et al. (2020), who found that institutional betrayal leads to hypervigilance and altered cognitive schemas regarding safety. The cognitive impact of red-tagging therefore forms a triad with emotional fear and behavioral withdrawal, completing the attitudinal shift that transforms how activists navigate the world. Together, these components reveal that red-tagging generates a fundamental reorientation of the activist’s internal landscape, making caution, vigilance, and fear part of their lived reality.

The second master theme, *Social Impact*, captures how red-tagging alters the activist’s relational world and community environment. A clear pattern emerged in the study: families, motivated by fear and misinformation, often responded by urging activists to withdraw from movement work. This reflects the findings of Pineda (2022), who described how red-tagging not only harms activists psychologically but also disrupts familial support systems. These reactions create emotional tension within the household, where activists must negotiate

between personal conviction and familial concern. Labeling Theory supports this dynamic; once a person is labeled, the stigma extends to their social circles, affecting how others perceive and respond to them.

Beyond the family, community reactions further intensified the social consequences of red-tagging. Participants reported experiencing social withdrawal, distancing, and public judgment rooted in misinformation. This aligns with Paras (2023), who emphasizes that red-tagging functions as a social weapon that capitalizes on widespread misconceptions about dissent. Stigma becomes normalized, influencing how friends, peers, and even strangers engage with activists. The presence of inaccurate narratives about activism within Philippine society fosters an environment where red-tagged individuals are treated with suspicion or avoidance, thereby reinforcing social isolation. These reactions illustrate that red-tagging is not only a state-imposed threat but also a socially reinforced form of marginalization.

The third master theme, *Political Development*, reveals an unexpected yet significant impact: red-tagging contributes to the strengthening of political conviction and deepening of ideological identity. Although red-tagging causes fear and disruption, many activists reported that the experience affirmed the importance of their advocacy and sharpened their understanding of social structures. This resonates with the findings of Paras (2023), who noted that repression can paradoxically strengthen political solidarity and commitment. When activists witness firsthand the mechanisms of oppression, the experience often clarifies the systemic issues they seek to challenge, thereby reinforcing their moral and political resolve. This finding also marks a substantial contribution to literature, providing evidence on how red-tagging also shapes long-term political resolve among youth activists while also supporting assumptions about the resilience and the rationalization of the youth in coping with adversities.

Moreover, student activists also described becoming more principled, reflective, and grounded in their beliefs as a result of confronting political repression. So, this transformation also extends to ideological and identity development. This suggests that political identity is not merely learned—it is lived. The hardships activists face become part of their political consciousness, shaping not only what they believe but who they become. Social Identity Theory offers an explanation that when an identity is threatened, individuals often respond by strengthening their attachment to that identity and internalizing its values more deeply. Resilience Theory (Masten, 2015; Velasco et al., 2023) further supports this interpretation, suggesting that individuals facing adversity reconstruct meaning and purpose in ways that allow them to persist and grow. In this study, red-tagging became a catalyst that transformed political ideas into lived convictions, solidifying student activists' sense of purpose and their commitment to advocacy.

Taken together, these findings highlight that the impacts of red-tagging are multi-layered, far-reaching, and deeply transformative. The Attitudinal Shift theme demonstrates internal restructuring of emotion, behavior, and cognition; the Social Impact theme illustrates how red-tagging reverberates into family and community; and the Political Development theme reveals how oppression can inadvertently reinforce activism. The combination of these themes shows that red-tagging is both a psychological and social phenomenon: it destabilizes safety and belonging while simultaneously strengthening political consciousness. Reflectively, these findings invite a broader understanding of political repression. Its goal may be to silence, but its effects are complex and often contradictory. Red-tagging simultaneously harms, isolates, reshapes, and empowers.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that red-tagging profoundly affects student activists not only by instilling fear and limiting their participation but also by reshaping their relationships, identities, and commitments. The impacts identified in this research reveal that red-tagging is a deliberate form of social and psychological control—one that simultaneously inflicts harm and cultivates resilience.

Moreover, the data highlighted that the impacts experienced by student activists are not superficial—they alter how they understand safety, how they move in the world, how they relate with loved ones, and how they define their political selves. These intertwined effects underscore the nature of red-tagging as both a personal trauma and a societal mechanism of control. Yet they also illuminate the resilience, consciousness, and strengthened commitment that emerge through struggle. Reflecting on this, the findings suggest that while red-tagging aims

to suppress, it inadvertently shapes the very qualities that sustain activism: awareness, solidarity, conviction, and courage.

Coping Strategies Employed in Response

This segment of the discussion focuses on the third research objective: to examine the coping strategies employed by red-tagged student activists in Cebu in response to the challenges and impacts they experienced. The findings reveal that coping is not a singular act of endurance but a dynamic process that evolves from self-preservation to collective empowerment. Consistent with *Resilience Theory* (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2012; Fleming & Ledogar, 2008), the activists' responses reflect adaptive systems that allow individuals to sustain well-being amid persistent threat. Their coping strategies were categorized into two master themes: Personal Coping Strategies, and Collective and Organizational Coping Strategies.

The first master theme, *Personal Coping Strategies*, encapsulates how participants initially responded to the shock of red-tagging through instinctive, protective behaviors such as avoidance, digital withdrawal. This can be considered as a defense mechanism rather than coping strategy because these are subconscious or unconscious adaptive responses, both of which aim to reduce or tolerate stress (Venner, 1988). Some described immersing themselves in work or temporarily deactivating social media accounts to escape intrusive thoughts and potential harassment. These responses, though seemingly avoidant, illustrate the early stage of resilience where immediate emotional regulation and situational control take precedence over sustained engagement believing distance equated to safety which aligns with Fleming and Ledogar's (2008) assertion that self-regulation serves as a functional adaptation during high-stress conditions. However, there is the countering of isolation through shared experience and a shift from maladaptive to collective coping such as the shift to reconnecting to core purposes and the transformation of healthier lifestyle and self-care which equates to the effective management of mental health. This openness affirms Jusfayana and Hudiyana's (2023) assertion that integrating self-care and professional support strengthens long-term resilience among activists.

The second master theme, *Collective and Organizational Coping Strategies*, highlights the vital role of solidarity in the organization and community in maintaining resilience. Participants drew strength from their family members, peers, organizations, and institutions, finding comfort in shared experiences and mutual support during times of fear and exhaustion. Their organizations offered both political backing and emotional validation, helping them realize that they were not alone in their struggle. This collective coping reflects Pineda's (2022) concept of *pakikipagkapwa*, where shared humanity nurtures emotional resilience, and aligns with Ungar's (2012) ecological model of resilience, which emphasizes that coping is sustained within networks of care and connection. Furthermore, it shows how participants transformed fear into purposeful action. They pursued accountability by filing complaints, seeking assistance from the Commission on Human Rights, and continuing advocacy work to challenge red-tagging narratives. This reactive stance supports the findings of Gesser-Edelsburg et al. (2024), who noted that turning trauma into civic engagement fosters empowerment and restores agency.

Overall, these coping strategies demonstrate that resilience among red-tagged student activists in Cebu is both personal and social (collective and organizational)—a process that begins with self-protection and evolves into organized resistance and recovery. Guided by Resilience Theory (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2012), the findings show that resilience is not an innate trait but a continuous process shaped by adaptive behaviors, social support, and purposeful reflection.

Limitations

Despite its rigor and rich qualitative insights, this study has several notable limitations that must be acknowledged:

1. **Limited Scope and Sample Size.** The study was confined to red-tagged student activists within Cebu, which restricts the generalizability of its findings. Experiences of red-tagging vary across regions, organizations, and institutional contexts. Activists from other parts of the Philippines particularly rural

areas, indigenous communities, or labor movements may face distinct forms of repression and coping shaped by local political climates.

2. **Ethical and Emotional Constraints.** Given the topic's sensitivity, probing into particularly distressing incidents was approached cautiously to avoid retraumatization. This ethical restraint, though necessary, may have limited the exploration of deeper psychological or familial dynamics surrounding fear, guilt, and identity reconstruction.
3. **Limited Psychological Instrumentation.** While rich in qualitative depth, the study relied solely on interviews. The integration of psychological assessment tools or standardized trauma scales could have quantitatively strengthened the understanding of trauma levels and coping efficacy among participants.
4. **Temporal Limitations and Lack of Longitudinal Data.** The study provides a snapshot of experiences at a specific time. Red-tagging, however, is a process that evolves. Its psychological, behavioral, and relational consequences may intensify, transform, or lessen over time. Without longitudinal follow-up, the long-term trajectory of trauma, activism, and recovery remains unexplored.
5. **Subjectivity in Qualitative Analysis.** While systematic thematic analysis was employed, the interpretive nature of qualitative research introduces an inherent element of subjectivity. The identification of themes and analysis of meanings, though carefully cross-checked, remain influenced by the researchers' perspectives and theoretical frameworks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these limitations and findings, the following recommendations are proposed for future research, policy, and practice:

1. **Expand Geographic and Sociocultural Scope.** Conduct comparative studies across various regions of the Philippines to map regional variations in red-tagging practices and coping mechanisms. While rich, the study cannot definitively claim that the "coherent and escalating pattern of repression" is identical nationwide.
2. **Incorporate Mixed-Methods Framework.** A combination of phenomenological interviews and psychometric assessments would yield a richer, multidimensional understanding of red-tagging's psychosocial impacts. Quantitative measures can capture the extent of trauma and coping, while qualitative accounts can explain how and why these psychological outcomes occur.
3. **Conduct Longitudinal Studies.** Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track the evolving nature of red-tagging experiences over time. Such studies could document how coping mechanisms adapt, how psychological impacts transform, and how activist engagement changes throughout different phases of students' academic and personal development.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand the challenges of being red-tagged, the impacts of these challenges and the coping strategies student activists in Cebu developed. And in doing so, it addressed three major gaps long present in existing literatures: the knowledge gap—where little was known about the psychological and social impacts of red-tagging; the population gap—where the experiences of student activists were largely overlooked compared to older or more publicly visible activists; and the contextual gap—where limited research examined red-tagging in provincial settings like Cebu. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Cebuano student activists, this study offers a localized, human-centered, and deeply nuanced account that has long been missing in academic and public discourse.

Through the three research objectives of this study which are to know the challenges student activists experienced resulting in an impactful effect on the student activists and knowing their coping mechanisms in fighting the impacts, this study reveals that red-tagging is not simply a political accusation but a lived condition that shapes how student activists feel, behave, think, relate, and ultimately grow. The study demonstrates that the red-tagging directed at student activists by state authorities follows a consistent pattern across participants

which mostly are through distorted public labels, forced exposure, surveillance, online harassment, and institutional scrutiny producing similar attitudinal, social, and political impacts regardless of individual background. However, the third research objective of the study—exploring coping strategies—showed that activists draw from both personal and collective sources of resilience. They regulate distress through temporary withdrawal, reflection, and intentional mental health practices, and later regain strength through solidarity networks, community integration, and legal action. These strategies reveal that resilience is not merely endurance; it is an evolving process shaped by connection, meaning, and collective struggle.

Through these interconnected layers of the study, this research provides the comprehensive understanding previously absent in past literatures. Past works often treated challenges, impacts, or coping in isolation. This study demonstrates that they are fluid and interdependent, influencing one another continuously. Guided by Labeling Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Resilience Theory, the findings affirm that red-tagging is a form of institutionalized stigma that disrupts personal, social, and political life. Yet despite these pressures, student activists reveal an ability not only to endure but to transform—turning adversity into sharper awareness, deeper commitment, and strengthened purpose.

This study also fills the knowledge gap by presenting empirical evidence of how red-tagging concretely affects psychological and social functioning. It fills the population gap by centering on student activists—a demographic particularly vulnerable due to age, academic responsibilities, and familial dependencies. And it fills the contextual gap by grounding the research in Cebu, demonstrating how red-tagging unfolds within the unique political, cultural, and community dynamics of the region. In doing so, the study ensures that discussions of red-tagging are no longer limited to generalized narratives; instead, they reflect the lived realities of the youth who continue to shape social movements across the archipelago.

Meanwhile, the implications of these findings extend beyond academic institutions. For educational institutions, they underscore the need for protective protocols, supportive policies, and safe environments where students can critically engage without fear. For mental health practitioners, they highlight the urgency of trauma-informed, culturally sensitive care that acknowledges the political dimensions of distress. For policymakers, the results call for reforms that protect democratic spaces, hold accountable those who weaponize red-tagging, and uphold the rights of citizens to question, organize, and advocate for change. Finally, for civil society, the study reinforces the need for collective action, public education, and solidarity against stigma and misinformation.

Yet beyond these technical implications lies a deeper understanding. This research shows that red-tagging does not only attempt to silence activists—it also attempts to shrink their world, to erode their courage, and to pull them away from the communities they fight for. But this study also shows something powerful, that even under pressure, student activists do not simply break. They continue to stand, reflect, adapt, and grow. Their experiences is a powerful reminder that resilience is not the absence of fear but the commitment to persist in spite of it. Their stories reveal that activism is not merely an activity but an identity shaped by struggle, community, and an unwavering belief in a more just society.

In the end, this study offers more than an academic contribution—it offers a testament to the strength of students who continue to imagine and work toward a better country despite the risks they face. Their courage, vulnerabilities, and reflections illuminate the human cost of political labeling, but also the human capacity for resilience, solidarity, and conviction. Through them, red-tagging may be seen as a wound, but it cannot fully silence a generation determined to speak. Their stories, now held within this research, affirm not only the importance of understanding red-tagging but the importance of listening—carefully, sincerely, and with the recognition that behind every label is a person still fighting to be heard.

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