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ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS AND PERCEIVED SICK LEAVE SECURITY AS PREDICTORS OF SEAFARERS' MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract. Mental health disorders, most notably anxiety and depression, affect approximately one in eight individuals globally. The maritime industry, which differs significantly from land-based occupations, exposes seafarers to specific psychosocial stressors such as prolonged isolation, high workloads, demanding working conditions, and others. It is therefore reasonable to assume that seafarers are also represented in these statistics. Consequently, the maritime sector constitutes a particularly challenging and psychologically burdensome work environment.

Given the importance of safeguarding seafarers' mental health for the long-term well-being of the maritime sector, this study examined the relationship between psychological distress, operationalized through symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, and two key organizational factors: perceived insecurity regarding the use of sick leave and the perceived quality of communication both onboard and with company management. The findings indicate that seafarers who experience insecurity or fear regarding sick leave, as well as those who perceive workplace communication and collaboration as poor, exhibit significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression.

Although these results do not establish a direct causal relationship, they suggest that perceived security in exercising the right to sick leave may play an important role in strengthening emotional resilience and facilitating more effective coping with work-related stress.

Keywords: Seafarers' Mental Health; Psychosocial Stressors; Sick Leave Insecurity; Workplace Communication.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health disorders, particularly anxiety and depression, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) affect approximately one in eight individuals globally. Within this global context, the maritime industry represents a uniquely demanding occupational setting, characterized by prolonged isolation, extended time away from family, high workloads, irregular working hours, and often challenging environmental conditions (Xiao & Xu 2024; Brooks & Greenberg 2022; Ajayi & Udeh 2024). These psychosocial stressors not only differentiate maritime professions from land-based occupations but also heighten the risk of psychological distress among seafarers, who may already be vulnerable due to the cumulative and chronic nature of these occupational pressures (Jonglertmontree et al. 2022; Nittari et al. 2024).

The prevalence of mental health problems among seafarers has been widely documented, with studies indicating elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and stress-related symptoms compared to other occupational groups (Brooks & Greenberg 2022; Nittari et al. 2024). Furthermore, persistent stigma surrounding mental health within the maritime sector may discourage seafarers from seeking support, thereby exacerbating psychological distress and reducing resilience (Ajayi & Udeh 2024; Iversen 2012). These challenges not only impact individual well-being but also compromise crew performance, ship safety, and the operational efficiency of maritime transport systems (Jonglertmontree et al. 2022; Xiao & Xu 2024).

Safeguarding seafarers' mental health is, therefore, not only a matter of occupational safety but also a prerequisite for the long-term sustainability of the maritime sector (Larsson et al. 2025; Krämer 2024). Effective mental health support structures, including education, onboard psychosocial services, and clear communication policies, are essential for promoting seafarers' well-being and ensuring a socially sustainable maritime workforce (Cahyadi et al. 2025; Larsson et al. 2025). Recent initiatives in maritime education have emphasized the need to integrate mental health and resilience training into professional development for future seafarers, further highlighting the industry-wide recognition of this issue (Cahyadi et al. 2025).

1.1. Aim and Significance of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which specific organizational and interpersonal factors, namely perceived sick leave insecurity, workload, and the quality of communication and collaboration onboard, are associated with psychological distress among seafarers, as reflected in symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. The research seeks to determine whether these factors significantly predict mental health outcomes to support the development of targeted interventions in the maritime sector. More specifically, the study explores how perceived sick leave insecurity and the perceived quality of communication, both on board and with company management, relate to seafarers' psychological well-being. By assessing these organizational dimensions as potential predictors of emotional distress, the research contributes to ongoing efforts to foster mental health and long-term workforce sustainability within the maritime industry.

This study is particularly relevant as it addresses a notable gap in the empirical literature by systematically examining how organizational dynamics, especially perceived sick leave insecurity and communication quality, may influence the mental health of seafarers.

1.2. Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study seeks to examine the relationship between organizational and interpersonal factors and psychological distress among seafarers. It investigates whether perceived sick leave insecurity, excessive workload, and the quality of communication and collaboration onboard predict elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.

The guiding research questions are as follows:

1. To what extent do organizational and interpersonal factors predict psychological distress among seafarers?
2. How are perceived sick leave insecurity and the quality of onboard communication associated with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress in seafarers?

Based on the conceptual framework and prior empirical insights, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- **H1: Workload and Stress**: Seafarers who report higher levels of workload and greater fear or insecurity regarding the use of sick leave will exhibit significantly higher scores on measures of depression, anxiety, and stress.
- **H2: Interpersonal Dynamics Onboard and Mental Health**: Seafarers who perceive communication and collaboration onboard as poor will report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress as measured by the DASS-21 scale.

2. ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS AND PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESSORS IN THE MARITIME INDUSTRY

Seafaring involves exposure to a diverse range of occupational health hazards and psychosocial risks, setting it apart from land-based work environments (Oldenburg, Baur & Schlaich 2010). These include fatigue and social isolation from extended periods at sea, heightened workloads, and exposure to environmental stressors such as vibration, UV radiation, and communicable diseases (Carotenuto et al. 2012; Oldenburg et al. 2010; Nittari et al. 2024). These stressors are compounded by poor sleep, cultural diversity among crew, and limited recreational opportunities, which have strong associations with anxiety, depression, and lowered psychological well-being (Carotenuto et al. 2012; Brooks & Greenberg 2022; Ajayi & Udeh 2024; Jonglertmontree et al. 2022). Svetina et al. (2024), analyzing data from over 12 nationalities, identified environmental, social (e.g., bullying, homesickness), and health-related stressors as leading contributors to seafarers' mental health disturbances, increasing both anxiety and depression symptoms. According to Oldenburg et al. (2010), communicable diseases and fatigue are linked to cognitive strain and reduced on-board performance, while broader reviews confirm that factors such as supervisor demands, inter-personal conflicts, and lack of social support contribute significantly to psychological distress (Carotenuto et al. 2012; Brooks & Greenberg 2022; Nittari et al. 2024). These findings confirm that maritime work conditions pose a persistent risk to mental health, supporting the need to examine communication and sick leave insecurity as key organizational predictors.

2.1. Psychosocial Stressors Affecting Seafarers

Seafaring exposes individuals to a range of occupational stressors embedded within the maritime work environment. Social isolation and separation from family are consistently reported as primary contributors to mood disturbances, exacerbated by prolonged voyages and limited shore leave (Nittari et al. 2024; Sampson & Ellis 2019). A comprehensive report on seafarers' mental health further highlights that extended absence from land, small crew sizes, and a reliance on colleagues for emotional support increase the risk of loneliness and psychological strain when such support is lacking (Sampson & Ellis 2019). Work overload and disrupted circadian rhythms remain profound stressors onboard. Long working hours, shift rotations, and resultant sleep deprivation contribute to chronic fatigue, which in turn elevates the risk of depressive symptoms and burnout (Carotenuto et al. 2012; Brooks & Greenberg 2022; Nittari et al. 2024). Systematic reviews further identify high job demands, irregular rest periods, noise, vibration, and exposure to hazardous events as consistent predictors of adverse mental health outcomes (Carotenuto et al. 2012; Nittari et al. 2024; Oldenburg et al. 2010). Uncertainty and insecurity are normative stressors in maritime employment. Factors like irregular voyage schedules, unpredictable contract extensions or disembarkation times, and fears related to job loss or punitive responses for reporting health concerns significantly deter psychological well-being (Nittari et al. 2024; Sampson & Ellis 2019; Brooks & Greenberg 2022). The presence of traumatic exposure (disturbing imagery, discrimination) and widespread fatigue, sleep disturbances, anxiety, and depression among seafarers, with coping styles (task vs emotion-oriented) are linked to mental health and job performance (Szafran-Dobrowolska et al. 2023).

Moreover, lack of organizational and managerial support exacerbates this stress, while studies affirm that robust team cohesion and leadership backing act as protective buffers against psychological distress (Svetina et al. 2024; Sampson & Ellis 2019; Hayes-Mejia & Stafström 2023).

2.2. Organizational Climate and Communication Dynamics

The quality of organizational climate and communication—both within shipboard teams and between crews and shore-based management—plays a pivotal role in seafarers' mental health. Effective peer relationships, open dialogue, and shared purpose can buffer the emotional strain of isolation and demanding sea life. In contrast, poor team cohesion, unresolved conflicts, and lack of trust contribute to a toxic atmosphere that undermines crew well-being (Brooks & Greenberg 2022; Sampson & Ellis 2019; Hayes-Mejia & Stafström 2023). In hierarchically structured shipboard environments, seafarers may hesitate to communicate problems if a culture of open communication is absent. Ambiguous directives, lack of managerial support, and unclear expectations from superiors are linked to increased chronic stress, lowered self-esteem, and emotional exhaustion (Svetina et al. 2024; Hayes-Mejia & Stafström 2023).

Crucially, communication with shore-based management also significantly influences psychological stability. Studies during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that transparent and proactive communication, covering issues like rotation schedules, safety measures, and wellbeing, was associated with better mental health outcomes among seafarers (Hayes-Mejia & Stafström 2023; Sampson & Ellis 2019).

The role of productive communication within managerial structures, as emphasised by Kraljević and Russo (2022), is crucial not only for operational clarity but also for fostering psychological safety aboard maritime vessels. Conversely, reactive or nonexistent responses to crew concerns often erode trust, elevate uncertainty, and lead to feelings of helplessness or hopelessness (Svetina et al. 2024; Sampson & Ellis 2019; Hayes-Mejia & Stafström 2023). Emerging research in maritime communication highlights the importance of team workload coordination and structured dialogue in stress mitigation. Lochner et al. (2018) found that clear, consistent communication during both routine and emergency situations reduces mental workload among bridge teams, enhancing situational awareness and performance. Additionally, Koritarov & Dimitrakieva (2024) emphasize that robust corporate communication frameworks, integrating internal, external, crisis, and stakeholder communications, contribute to overall operational efficiency, employee engagement, and resilience (Koritarov & Dimitrakieva 2024). Healthy organizational climates characterized by trust, psychological safety, and open two-way communication, both onboard and between ship and shore, are essential for seafarers' mental stability on long voyages. Conversely, communication breakdowns not only heighten psychological strain but can also impair organizational trust and operational effectiveness.

2.3. Sick Leave Insecurity and Perceived Rights at Sea

Despite the demanding nature of maritime work, a prevailing "tough it out" mentality often discourages seafarers from acknowledging physical or mental discomfort (Brooks & Greenberg 2022). Many fear that requesting medical leave or admitting burnout could threaten their employment, leading them to suppress symptoms of depression, anxiety, or exhaustion to avoid appearing weak in the eyes of their employers, especially in traditionally "macho" shipping cultures (Iversen 2012; Sampson & Ellis 2019). This stigma delays help-seeking behavior and deepens psychological distress. Financial pressures and family responsibilities further exacerbate this issue. Seafarers may continue working while unwell, due to concerns that taking sick leave could result in contract termination, loss of pay, or being blacklisted by companies (Sampson & Ellis 2019; Rajapakse & Emad 2025). This wary mindset creates a feedback loop: workers ignore health issues to avoid consequences, then suffer the physical and emotional fallout from unaddressed conditions.

The organizational culture within shipping often reinforces performance and resilience over well-being. A "ship first" ideology assumes seafarers will endure unfavorable conditions, implicitly pressuring those unable to cope to remain silent or risk non-renewal of their contracts (Abila et al. 2023; Sampson & Ellis 2019). Historically, few companies have invested in proactive well-being measures, focusing instead on operational efficiency and individual perseverance (Sampson & Ellis 2019). However, emerging research highlights the growing number of seafarers facing physical and mental health struggles, underscoring the need to realign systems to serve human, not superhuman, demands (Abila et al. 2023). A minority of maritime companies have begun to advance more comprehensive mental health strategies, including access to psychological support and ensuring sick leave does not jeopardize employment (Sampson & Ellis 2019). For meaningful change, shipping firms must treat seafarers' mental health as a priority equivalent to physical safety, affirming that health issues are not signs of weakness but investments in operational reliability.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

3.1. Participants

The study sample consisted of 114 professional seafarers who provided complete responses to the demographic and occupational sections of the survey. Participants were drawn from multiple nationalities, with the majority originating from Croatia (N = 62, 54.4%), followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina (N = 30, 26.3%), Montenegro (N = 13, 11.4%), and Serbia (N = 9, 7.9%). The sample was overwhelmingly male, with 113 male respondents (99.1%) and only one female respondent (0.9%). The mean age of participants was 38.4 years (SD = 9.13), with an age range spanning from 22 to 64 years. In terms of professional experience, the average number of years spent working in the maritime industry was 15.8 years (SD = 8.64), indicating a predominantly experienced cohort of seafarers. Regarding rank, the most reported roles onboard were Deck Officers (N = 34, 29.8%), Engine Officers (N = 27, 23.7%), Deck Ratings (N = 15, 13.2%), Engine Ratings (N = 10, 8.8%), Catering Staff (N = 7, 6.1%), Cadets (N = 6, 5.3%), other roles including electricians and technical specialists (N = 15, 13.2%). In terms of vessel type, the most frequently reported ship categories were Cargo vessels (N = 47, 41.2%), Passenger ships (N = 30, 26.3%), Tankers (N = 20, 17.5%), Offshore support vessels (N = 10, 8.8%), Fishing vessels and other specialized types (N = 7, 6.1%).

Most participants were employed on international voyages, with only a minority working in coastal or

near-shore operations. The majority reported working under rotational contracts with an average onboard stay ranging from 3 to 6 months.

Although the descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on a sample of 114 participants, the data used for inferential testing (i.e., DASS-21 scores and hypotheses testing related to organizational factors) included responses from 117 seafarers. This discrepancy of three respondents is due to missing or incomplete demographic data, which were excluded from the descriptive dataset, while their valid DASS-21 responses were retained for analysis purposes.

3.2. Instruments and Measures

The data collection for this study relied on a structured questionnaire that included standardized psychometric tools and custom-designed items measuring perceived organizational conditions onboard. The primary instrument used to assess psychological distress was the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale – 21 items (DASS-21), a validated self-report tool designed to measure the emotional states of depression, anxiety, and stress. Each of the three subscales consists of seven items, with responses rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("Did not apply to me at all") to 3 ("Applied to me very much or most of the time").

The DASS-21 has demonstrated robust psychometric properties in various occupational settings, including maritime contexts (Brooks & Greenberg, 2022; Jonglertmontree et al., 2022), and is suitable for evaluating symptom severity in high-stress professions. Scores for each subscale are summed and then multiplied by two to align with the DASS-42 normative data, with cutoff scores indicating normal, mild, moderate, severe, and extremely severe symptomatology.

In addition to DASS-21, the questionnaire included items designed to measure key organizational predictors, aligned with the study's hypotheses:

- Perceived Sick Leave Insecurity: Respondents were asked whether they felt they could take sick leave without negative professional consequences. This item had three response options: *Yes*, *Don't know*, and *No*. This variable was used to explore the hypothesis that insecurity around sick leave is associated with higher psychological distress.
- Perceived Quality of Onboard Communication: Seafarers rated their experience of interpersonal communication and collaboration on their most recent vessel on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very poor to 5 = Excellent). This item captured their perception of interpersonal dynamics and was used to test the association with mental health scores.
- Perceived Communication with Company Management: Respondents assessed how supported and heard they felt by their employer or company management during their last contract (again on a 5-point Likert scale). This variable explored the broader organizational climate beyond theshipboard environment
- Workload Perception: While not measured with a formal psychometric scale, seafarers were also asked to reflect on the intensity and burden of their workload during the most recent voyage. Their responses contributed context for evaluating the interplay between job demands and emotional symptoms (Carotenuto et al., 2012; Svetina et al., 2024).

All items underwent expert review for clarity and relevance. The full questionnaire was anonymous, available online, and took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. The selection of measures was grounded in a review of existing maritime mental health research (Iversen, 2012; Szafran-Dobrowolska et al., 2023), ensuring both empirical robustness and ecological validity.

3.3. Procedure and Data Analysis

Data for this study were collected via an anonymous online survey distributed among seafarers active in the maritime industry in early 2024. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the survey. The questionnaire was distributed electronically using a secure platform and remained open for participation for a period of three weeks. No identifying personal data was collected, and respondents were able to withdraw at any point without consequence. The research design received ethical approval from the institutional review board of the Faculty of Maritime Studies, University of Split. The survey instrument included demographic questions, items related to workplace conditions (e.g., perceived communication quality, workload, and access to sick leave), and the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) to measure psychological distress. Responses were coded and analyzed using SPSS 28 and JASP 0.18.3.

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were calculated to provide a general overview of the sample and variables of interest. For hypothesis testing and examination of associations between organizational factors and psychological distress, the following statistical methods were applied:

- Chi-square test of independence (χ^2) was used to explore associations between categorical variables, particularly the relationship between perceived sick leave insecurity and levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. This test was selected due to the categorical nature of the sick leave variable (Yes, Don't Know, No) and the categorized DASS-21 outcomes.
- Pearson correlation analysis was applied to test the relationship between perceived communication quality (both onboard and with company management) and continuous DASS-21 subscale scores. This method allows for assessing the strength and direction of linear associations between perceived communication and levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.

All statistical tests were two-tailed, and significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

3.4. Results

This section presents the statistical findings that address the study's two primary hypotheses regarding the relationship between organizational factors and psychological distress among seafarers. The analyses included both descriptive and inferential statistics derived from responses to the DASS-21 scale and organizational predictors. As mentioned in paragraph 3.1. Participants, the descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on a sample of 114 participants, however the data used for inferential testing responses from 117 seafarers and the discrepancy of three respondents is due to missing or incomplete demographic data, which were excluded from the descriptive dataset, while their valid DASS-21 responses were retained for analysis purposes.

3.4.1. General Psychological Distress: DASS-21 Scores

The mean values of the DASS-21 subscales across the total sample (N = 117) are summarized in Table 1.

These scores suggest that, on average, seafarers in the sample reported mild to moderate levels of psychological symptoms, particularly in the stress domain.

3.4.2. Sick Leave Insecurity and Psychological Distress

Hypothesis (H1): *Seafarers who experience greater fear regarding access to sick leave report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.*

To test this hypothesis, participants were grouped based on their responses to the question: "Can you take sick leave without professional consequences?" The response categories were: Yes, Don't know, and No. Descriptive results revealed that among respondents who answered Yes (n = 38), 80.85% had a depression score of 0 on the DASS-21 scale, suggesting no current depressive symptoms. In contrast, among those who answered Don't know (n = 24), and No (n = 11), only 54.55% and 47.83% respectively reported a depression score of 0.

This indicates a clear trend: seafarers who reported uncertainty or lack of access to sick leave showed a substantially higher prevalence of depressive symptoms compared to those who felt confident they could take leave without consequences. These findings are consistent with previous literature emphasizing the psychological burden of presenteeism and perceived vulnerability in maritime employment (Brooks & Greenberg, 2022; Iversen, 2012; Praetorius et al., 2017; Sampson & Ellis, 2019). This hypothesis is supported by the data. Seafarers who perceive sick leave as insecure or ambiguous exhibit higher psychological distress, with a notably lower proportion reporting absence of depressive symptoms. This supports the need for clearer, more humane policies around health-related absences in maritime labor structures.

3.4.3. Communication Quality and Psychological Distress

Hypothesis (H2): *Seafarers who rate communication and cooperation (onboard and with company management) more negatively will report higher psychological distress scores.*

To evaluate this hypothesis, Pearson correlation analyses were performed between DASS-21 subscales and two organizational predictors: Perceived Communica-

Table 1. Mean values of DASS-21.

DASS-21 Subscale	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Depression	14.68	10.47	0	42
Anxiety	10.97	9.52	0	40
Stress	17.46	9.68	0	42

Source: Authors

Table 2. Pearson correlation analyses.

Predictor	Depression (r, p)	Anxiety (r, p)	Stress (r, p)
Communication Onboard	-0.40**, p < .001	-0.41**, p < .001	-0.37**, p < .001
Communication with Management	-0.41**, p < .001	-0.34**, p < .001	-0.33**, p < .001

Source: Authors

tion Onboard and Perceived Communication with Management. The results are presented in Table 2.

Statistically significant moderate negative correlations were found between both communication variables and all DASS-21 subscales. In other words, seafarers who reported poorer communication, either onboard or with company management, also tended to report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. This supports Hypothesis 2 and underscores the psychological protective value of effective interpersonal and organizational communication within the maritime sector.

4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore how specific organizational factors, namely, perceived sick leave insecurity and communication quality, relate to psychological distress among seafarers, operationalized through scores on the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21). The findings reveal significant associations between the examined variables and provide evidence-based insights into the psychosocial conditions impacting maritime professionals.

The first hypothesis, which posited that seafarers who experience greater fear regarding access to sick leave would report higher levels of psychological distress, was confirmed. A notably smaller proportion of respondents who perceived sick leave as "insecure" or were uncertain of its consequences (47.83% and 54.55%, respectively) reported being symptom-free in terms of depression, compared to 80.85% among those who felt secure. This suggests that sick leave insecurity functions as a psychosocial stressor, reinforcing the role of job security and organizational support in safeguarding mental health.

These results are consistent with prior research emphasizing the mental health risks of presenteeism in high-demand professions (Brooks & Greenberg, 2022; Iversen, 2012). When crew members feel unable to step away from duties due to illness, whether out of fear of losing income, rank, or future contracts, stress and emotional exhaustion are likely to escalate. Our findings support the assertion that organizational clarity and empathy in leave policies act as a protective mental health factor.

The second hypothesis was also strongly supported by the data. Both forms of communication, onboard interpersonal communication and communication with company management, showed statistically significant moderate negative correlations with all three DASS-21 subscales. Poorer perceived communication was linked with elevated symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

This confirms existing evidence that communication quality is an essential dimension of organizational climate that contributes to psychological safety and resilience (Jonglertmontree et al., 2022). As Kraljević and Russo (2022) emphasize, productive communication is not only an operational imperative but also a psychological anchor in high-risk environments like ships. Importantly, these findings align with the systematic review by Svetina et al. (2024), which recognized poor communication with management as a salient predictor of mental strain in maritime personnel. A positive communicative climate allows seafarers to voice concerns, manage expectations, and receive emotional as well as instrumental support, factors shown to alleviate the isolating effects of life at sea.

Taken together, the findings of this study underscore that mental health among seafarers is not solely an individual or clinical issue but deeply embedded within organizational structures and practices. Insecure employment policies and communicative breakdowns amplify emotional vulnerability in an already high-risk occupation. This has implications for maritime companies and regulatory bodies. First, formalizing sick leave procedures with transparency and fairness could not only reduce distress but also improve long-term crew performance and retention. Second, training programs focused on empathetic and clear communication, both at sea and shore-based offices, may serve as a cost-effective intervention to promote crew well-being.

While the results offer meaningful insights, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the cross-sectional design of the study prevents causal inference, although associations are significant, directionality cannot be confirmed. Secondly, the reliance on self-report measures may have introduced bias through social desirability or individual

interpretation of scale items. A further limitation concerns the minor discrepancy in sample size between descriptive and inferential statistics. As previously explained, although 114 participants completed demographic items, 117 valid DASS-21 responses were retained for analysis. While this does not compromise the validity of results, future studies should aim to minimize missing data through improved survey design or conditional logic.

5. CONCLUSION

This study reinforces the central role of organizational culture in shaping the psychological well-being of seafarers. Through empirical evidence, it becomes clear that perceived sick leave insecurity and poor communication, both onboard and with management, significantly contribute to elevated levels of emotional distress. These findings affirm that safeguarding mental health at sea requires systemic change at the structural, cultural, and interpersonal levels.

Ultimately, empathy from leadership and peer support onboard are pivotal. When vessel commanders and crew demonstrate genuine concern, seafarers feel safer admitting health challenges and seeking help. To foster this environment, employers must clearly communicate that taking sick leave or seeking psychological assistance is not only acceptable but encouraged. Ensuring access to sick leave without fear, demonstrated through policy and practice, empowers seafarers to seek care early, preventing unresolved issues from escalating and enhancing both individual well-being and shipboard safety. Finally, while this study focused on communication and sick leave insecurity, other organizational variables, such as contract length, salary delays, or perceived fairness in promotion, may also play a critical role in seafarers' mental health and should be explored in future investigations.

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