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SOCIO-CIVIC ORGANIZATION MEMBERSHIP AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS IN SULU: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Civic engagement among college students is vital for developing responsible citizenship, leadership, and social accountability, particularly in areas facing social and political challenges such as Sulu. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of college students who are active members of socio-civic organizations in selected higher education institutions in Sulu. The study aimed to understand their motivations, emotional experiences, role engagements, and the challenges they encountered while balancing academic and organizational responsibilities. Eight participants were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed using a validated semi-structured guide. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework, allowing the emergence of five core themes: (1) motivations and encouragements in joining organizations, (2) adjustments and belongingness, (3) role engagement and identity development, (4) challenges and coping mechanisms, and (5) student recommendations and program insights.

Findings revealed that students are motivated by family influence, peer inspiration, and a genuine desire to serve their communities. Despite challenges in time management and limited resources, they experience personal growth, improved self-confidence, and stronger civic identity. Their involvement fosters empathy, leadership, and resilience, aligning with Astin's Student Involvement Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Transformational Learning Theory. Participation also deepens their understanding of cultural inclusivity and social responsibility, positioning them as catalysts for peace and development within Sulu. The study concludes that socio-civic membership enhances both personal and communal transformation. It recommends institutional collaboration among schools, civic organizations, and government sectors to strengthen youth participation through structured programs such as Project KASALI (Kabataan sa Sulu para sa Aktibong Liderato at Inklusibong Paglilingkod).

KEYWORDS: *Socio-Civic Organization, Civic Engagement, Student Leadership, Community Participation, Phenomenology*

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Civic participation has long been recognized as essential for the functioning of democratic societies and the personal development of youth. Among college students, involvement in socio-civic organizations cultivates responsibility, leadership, and service orientation (Chittum et al., 2022). In regions like Sulu, where social and political instability persists, civic engagement becomes more than an extracurricular pursuit, it is a transformative force that empowers youth to act as agents of peace, inclusion, and development.

Globally, universities have shifted toward integrating civic learning into higher education curricula. In the United States and other developed nations, institutional support for community engagement fosters ethical reasoning and social accountability (O'Meara & Jaeger, 2023; Root, 2023). Yet, in developing contexts, barriers such as governance issues, limited resources, and cultural differences often hinder participation (Kiss et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2021). Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe (2021) also emphasize the need for localized approaches, especially in non-Western communities where civic infrastructure is still emerging.

In the Philippines, civic participation has gained renewed attention through programs like the National Service Training Program (NSTP), which institutionalizes volunteerism and community service among students. Scholars such as Ladia and Panao (2024) and Castillo (2023) stress the role of sociopolitical context in shaping youth competence, while Bastida (2023) links civic participation to active citizenship. However, in conflict-affected areas like Sulu, civic opportunities remain scarce and often fragmented. Despite national mandates, many young people still struggle to find structured avenues for meaningful participation.

Locally, the lack of empirical research on civic engagement in Sulu creates a significant gap. Most existing studies center on urban or national samples, leaving the lived realities of youth in conflict-prone, underdeveloped regions largely undocumented. The present study responds to this gap by examining the motivations, challenges, and personal transformations of college students in Sulu who participate in socio-civic organizations. Anchored on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 16 and 17, promoting peace,

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justice, and partnerships, the study aims to contribute context-based insights into youth civic engagement in marginalized communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Civic engagement has long been recognized as a basis of participatory democracy and social cohesion. Across diverse contexts, the involvement of young people in community service, volunteerism, and organizational participation shapes both individual development and national progress. The participation of college students in socio-civic organizations reflects a broader social process in which values, skills, and identities are cultivated through direct involvement in collective activities (Glover et al., 2021; Chittum et al., 2022). Studies consistently highlight that civic engagement among youth builds not only civic awareness but also empathy, leadership, and problem-solving skills essential for personal and community transformation.

Globally, there has been an increasing emphasis on integrating civic learning into higher education frameworks. In Western contexts, civic engagement programs are often institutionalized through service-learning, mentorship initiatives, and leadership courses that link theory with community action (O'Meara & Jaeger, 2023). These programs provide structured opportunities for students to apply classroom learning to real-world challenges, fostering both critical thinking and social accountability. Root (2023) emphasized the importance of digital civic spaces that enable young people to participate in advocacy and public discourse through technology-mediated platforms. However, while these digital venues expand accessibility, scholars such as Pandit et al. (2025) have cautioned that "clicktivism" or superficial online activism can dilute the transformative intent of civic participation, making engagement appear more performative than substantive.

In developing nations, civic engagement faces a different set of challenges. Kiss et al. (2022) and Walker et al. (2021) noted that lack of institutional support, political instability, and socioeconomic constraints often limit youth involvement. Yet, despite these barriers, young people continue to create spaces for engagement, often driven by informal networks, religious values, and social solidarity. Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe (2021) argued that in non-Western societies, civic learning is most effective when embedded within local cultural frameworks and traditional support systems. These studies suggest that civic engagement cannot be universally defined or standardized but must adapt to the distinct realities and values of each community.

In the Philippine setting, youth involvement in socio-civic organizations is recognized as vital for nation-building. The government institutionalized civic participation through the National Service Training Program (NSTP), designed to nurture patriotism, volunteerism, and community development. Ladia and Panao (2024) observed that civic competence among Filipino youth is shaped by political culture, access to education, and community support structures. Meanwhile, Castillo (2023) emphasized that civic engagement enables students to transition from passive learners to active citizens. Bastida (2023) further argued that participation in socio-civic organizations encourages a sense of responsibility and democratic accountability among students.

Hibanada (2024) found that NSTP participants developed stronger leadership and teamwork skills, which translated into active involvement in local development projects. These findings reinforce the notion that service-learning and volunteerism are effective pedagogical tools in cultivating civic consciousness. Similarly, Untalan et al. (2025) noted that leadership experiences within youth organizations contribute to interpersonal competence, confidence, and the ability to mobilize peers for social causes.

Despite these positive outcomes, several studies point to persistent barriers to sustained participation. Many students, especially those in marginalized regions, struggle with time management, financial constraints, and limited institutional backing. Dagohoy et al. (2024) revealed that while students express enthusiasm for civic work, logistical challenges and lack of recognition often lead to burnout or disengagement. Furthermore, socio-cultural factors, such as familial obligations and gender expectations, also influence how students engage with community service. Malik (2024) highlighted that in Muslim-majority communities like Sulu, civic engagement is often tied to religious and cultural obligations, which shape the nature and motivations of participation.

The advent of digital media has introduced new dynamics to youth participation. Yap et al. (2021) examined how social media serves as a platform for civic expression and mobilization among Filipino students. While digital activism provides new avenues for awareness, it also exposes young users to misinformation and online polarization. Root (2023) argued that the key to meaningful digital participation lies in balancing online engagement with offline community involvement, ensuring that civic action remains grounded in empathy and shared experience.

Globally, researchers like Glover et al. (2021) and O'Meara and Jaeger (2023) highlight that sustained civic participation depends on mentorship, institutional support, and reflective practice. These elements help transform civic engagement from a short-term project into a lifelong commitment. Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) supports this by positing that reflection on experience enables individuals to revise perspectives, leading to personal growth and empowerment. In the context of socio-civic participation, reflection allows students to connect their service experiences with broader social issues, thereby deepening their understanding of justice, equity, and responsibility.

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Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000) offers another important lens for interpreting civic participation. Putnam argues that networks of trust and reciprocity are essential for effective civic functioning. Students who participate in socio-civic groups gain access to supportive relationships that enhance collaboration and mutual respect. In a setting like Sulu, where trust and solidarity are critical to community survival, such networks are important in bridging cultural and institutional divides. Astin's Student Involvement Theory (1984) also supports this perspective by suggesting that learning and development occur when students actively invest physical and psychological energy into their activities. The more students engage in civic organizations, the more likely they are to gain leadership, empathy, and self-efficacy.

Empirical studies from various Philippine universities reveal that socio-civic organizations serve as spaces for experiential learning and values formation. Students learn not only administrative or leadership skills but also moral and emotional resilience. Participation in volunteer work, relief operations, and community education programs helps them appreciate social realities and inequalities. These experiences provide a strong foundation for developing what Bastida (2023) calls "citizenship competence," a blend of awareness, empathy, and action.

However, there remains a scarcity of localized studies that document the experiences of students in conflict-prone and economically disadvantaged regions like Sulu. Most Philippine research on civic participation focuses on urban centers such as Manila, Cebu, or Davao, where institutional support and resources are readily available. As a result, the unique socio-cultural realities of Muslim students in Sulu, who navigate faith-based obligations, family expectations, and limited institutional opportunities, remain understudied.

This knowledge gap emphasizes the need for contextualized research that captures the voices and perspectives of Sulu's youth. Their narratives can reveal how cultural identity, social environment, and educational access influence civic participation. By exploring their experiences, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how civic engagement operates under conditions of marginalization and diversity. It also aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) and Goal 17 (partnerships for the goals), emphasizing the link between youth participation and sustainable community development.

In summary, literature shows that while civic engagement universally fosters leadership and social responsibility, its expression and impact vary according to social, cultural, and institutional contexts. The case of Sulu presents a particularly rich site for inquiry because it involves youth who balance educational pursuits with community obligations amid limited resources and complex social structures. The present study thus aims to fill this gap by examining the lived experiences of socio-civic student members in Sulu, offering insights into how engagement transforms not only individuals but also the communities they serve.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study integrates three interrelated theories.

Astin's Student Involvement Theory explains that student development correlates with the level of effort invested in both academic and extracurricular activities. Active involvement in civic organizations enhances self-concept and interpersonal competence.

Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000) highlights how social networks and trust enable individuals to access resources and collaborate effectively. Within civic groups, social capital is built through shared goals and collective action.

Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) stresses how reflection on experience leads to changes in worldview, identity, and values. Civic engagement often becomes a site of such transformation, allowing youth to develop empathy and moral reasoning.

These frameworks collectively illustrate that socio-civic participation is both a social and personal process, rooted in relationships, reflection, and responsibility.

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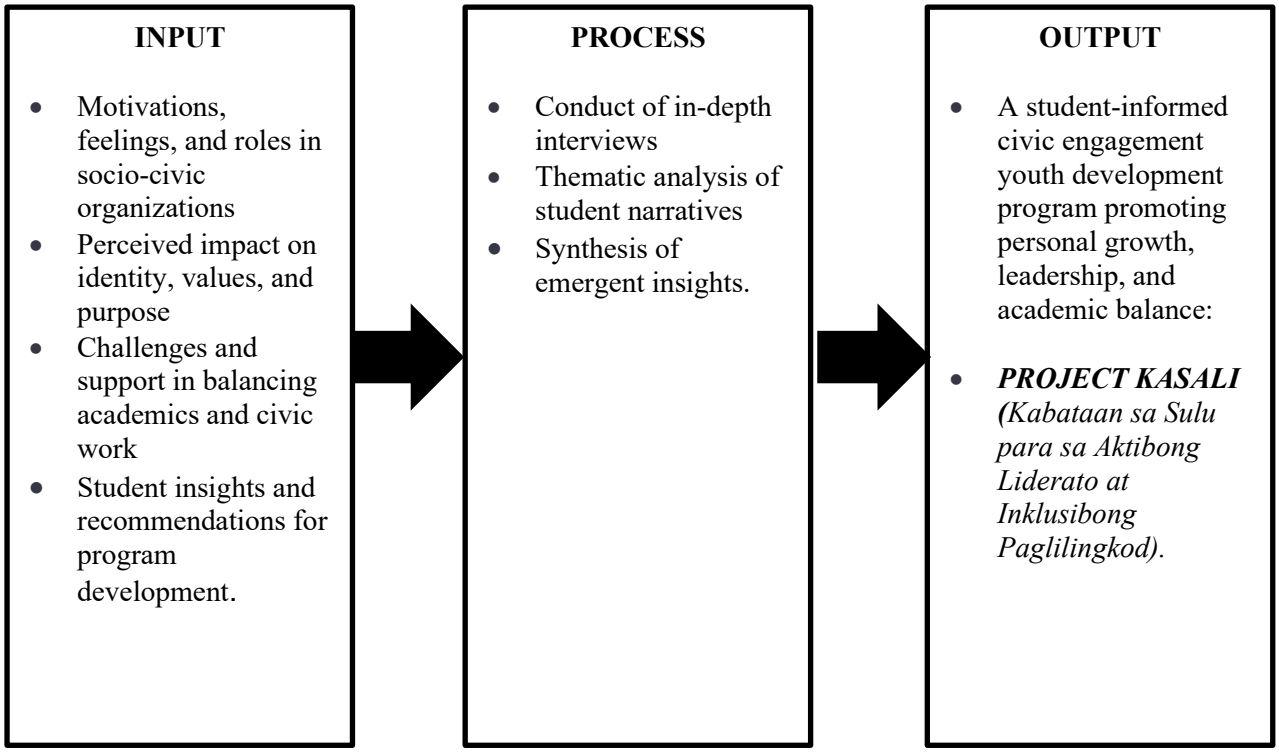


***Figure 1*. Research Paradigm**

Significance of the Study

This study is vital because it foregrounds the experiences of college students in a conflict-affected area often excluded from mainstream research. It provides practical insights for educators, NSTP coordinators, and policymakers in developing inclusive programs that balance civic engagement with academic growth. Institutions such as Notre Dame of Jolo College, Mindanao State University–Sulu, and Sulu State University may benefit from the findings in improving student affairs and leadership initiatives. Policymakers and local governments can also use the study to design youth programs aligned with the Philippine Youth Development Plan (2023–2028). Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader understanding of civic participation in marginalized Philippine contexts.

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of college students in Sulu who are members of socio-civic organizations. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Determine the motivations, emotional experiences, and role engagements of student members.
2. Assess how membership influences personal identity, values, and purpose.
3. Identify challenges and enabling factors in balancing academic and civic duties.
4. Gather insights and recommendations to develop student-informed civic engagement programs.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of college students in Sulu who are active members of socio-civic organizations. Phenomenology was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the depth, meaning, and essence of participants' experiences as they engage in civic work. It focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and give meaning to their realities rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses. Through this approach, the study aimed to reveal how participation in socio-civic organizations influences students' motivations, emotional states, and personal development.

The phenomenological approach was especially appropriate given the nature of the topic, which centers on internal perceptions and reflections. The study did not attempt to generalize results but instead sought to provide a detailed description of shared experiences. The researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, engaging with participants through interviews and interpretative reflection to ensure authentic representation of their perspectives.

Research Method

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provided flexibility in exploring participants' narratives while ensuring that core research questions were consistently addressed. The interviews encouraged students to speak freely about

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their motivations, challenges, and meaningful experiences as members of socio-civic organizations. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a language comfortable for the participants, either English, Filipino, or Tausug, to allow authentic expression of thoughts and emotions.

The interview guide was developed based on the objectives of the study and was validated by three experts in education and research. Validation focused on ensuring that the questions were clear, unbiased, and aligned with the study's purpose. The researcher also conducted a pilot interview to test the flow and clarity of questions, after which minor revisions were made.

Population of the Study

The participants consisted of eight college students from three higher education institutions in Sulu, Notre Dame of Jolo College, Mindanao State University–Sulu, and Sulu State University. All participants were between 20 and 25 years old and had been active members of socio-civic organizations for at least one academic year. The organizations included youth groups, community service teams, and campus-based volunteer programs.

The study used purposive sampling, selecting only those students who met the inclusion criteria: (1) current enrollment in college, (2) active membership in a socio-civic organization, and (3) at least one year of continuous participation in civic activities. Excluded were students who had not participated actively or whose organizations were non-civic in nature, such as purely academic or sports clubs. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, where no new themes emerged after multiple interviews.

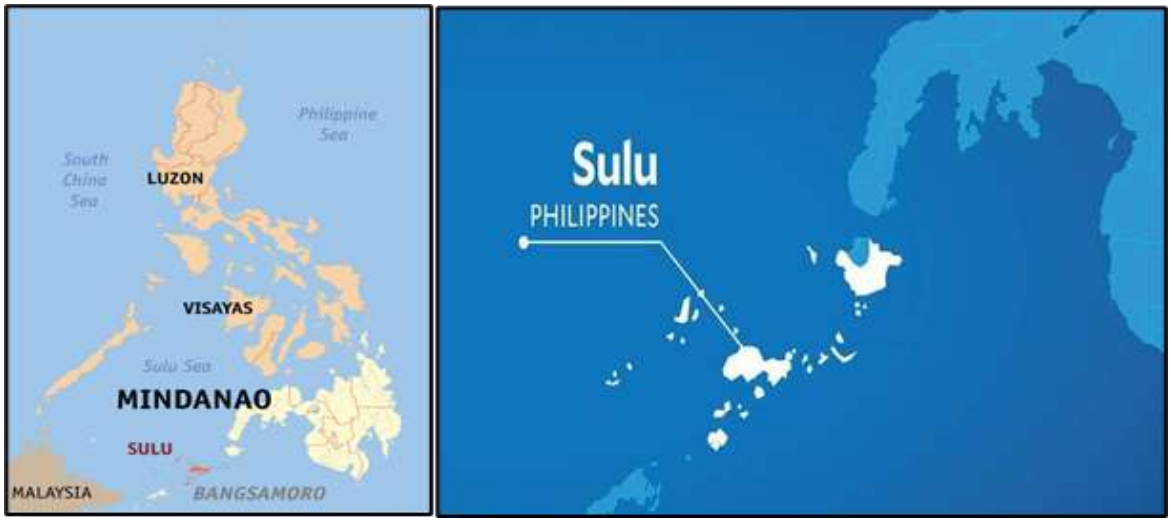


***Figure 2*. Map of Sulu, Philippines**

Data Gathering Tools

The primary tool used in data collection was a validated researcher-made interview guide composed of open-ended questions focusing on motivations, experiences, challenges, and reflections related to civic involvement. The tool's structure was informed by the theoretical frameworks used in the study, particularly Astin's Student Involvement Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Transformational Learning Theory.

To ensure reliability and validity, the instrument underwent expert validation and minor revisions. It was pilot-tested with one student from another school to refine the wording and sequence of questions. The tool's flexibility allowed participants to narrate freely while maintaining relevance to the research questions. Voice recorders and note-taking were used to ensure accuracy during data transcription and analysis.

Data Gathering Procedures

The researcher first sought formal approval from the academic authorities of the three participating institutions. Once permission was granted, the researcher contacted potential participants through their organization advisers and invited them to participate voluntarily. Participants were informed of the purpose, scope, and confidentiality of the study. Written consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Each interview was conducted either face-to-face or through an online platform, depending on the participant's availability and comfort. Interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times and conducted in quiet environments to avoid distractions. After each session, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were returned to participants for member checking to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of their statements. This process strengthened the credibility of the study by confirming that the researcher's interpretation reflected participants' actual meanings.

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Treatment of Data

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) five-step process: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) identification of patterns, (4) development of themes, and (5) synthesis and interpretation. The researcher manually coded all transcripts, identifying recurrent words, phrases, and ideas. Emerging themes were compared and refined until clear patterns appeared. Thematic clustering was used to group related experiences under broader conceptual categories corresponding to the study's objectives. Direct quotations were included to illustrate themes and preserve participants' authentic voices.

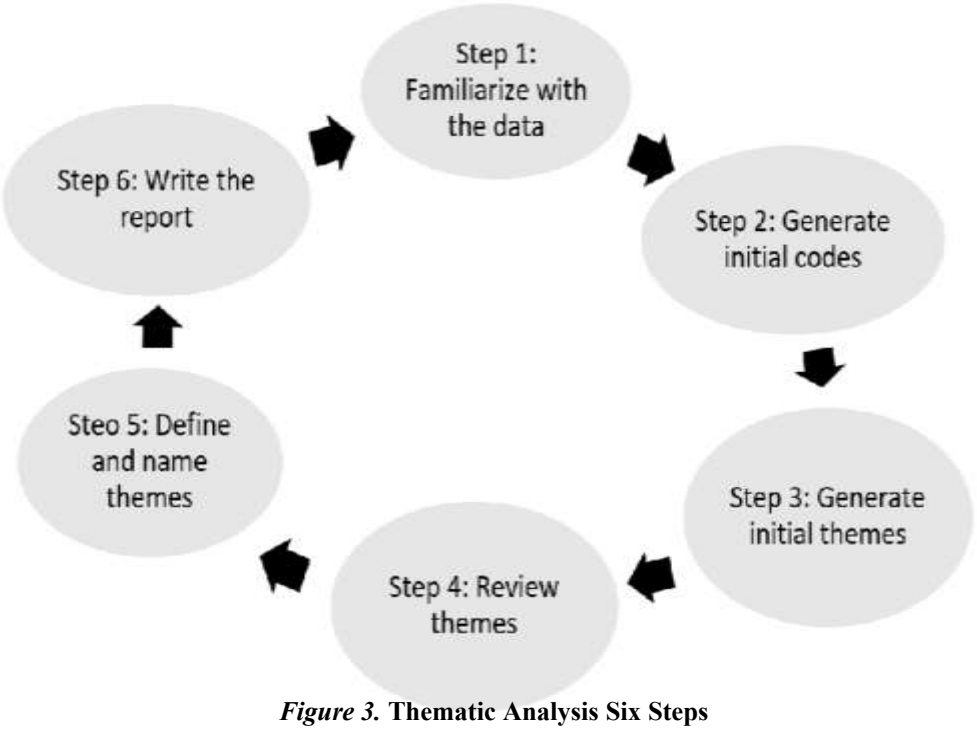


Figure 3. **Thematic Analysis Six Steps**

Note. From Le & Nguyen (2024)

Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to record personal insights and ensure transparency in interpretation. The process ensured that findings were grounded in participants' lived realities and not influenced by preconceived notions.

Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to ethical research standards. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality; pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports to protect their identities. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher.

The study also ensured cultural sensitivity by respecting local customs and communication styles during interviews, especially since participants came from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. No physical or psychological harm was inflicted on participants, and care was taken to make them feel safe and respected throughout the research process. Findings will be shared with the participating institutions to support future student engagement programs.

Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity through pseudonyms. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. Respect and dignity were maintained through gender sensitivity and cultural awareness. Guided by beneficence and maleficence, the study promoted participants' well-being while preventing harm. Assent was obtained when necessary, and member checking ensured response accuracy. No vulnerable groups were included, and all data were stored securely and reported with integrity.

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Figure 4. **Ethical Considerations**

Note. From Daudi & Mugweni (2018)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this phenomenological study are presented and discussed according to the research objectives, which sought to explore the lived experiences of college students in Sulu who are members of socio-civic organizations. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: (1) motivations and encouragements in joining organizations, (2) experiences of adjustment and belongingness, (3) role engagement and identity development, (4) challenges and coping mechanisms, and (5) recommendations and insights for strengthening civic engagement programs.

Table 1
Emerging Themes from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Core Meaning	Direct Participant Statements
Motivations and Encouragements	Participants were encouraged to join through family influence, peer motivation, and a genuine desire to help others.	"Ang nagmotivate po sa akin ay ang ate ko, kasi nakikita ko po sa kanya 'yung kasiyahan sa pagtulong. Kahit pagod na siya, masaya pa rin siya sa ginagawa niya, kaya na-inspire akong sumali." "Na-motivate ako hi Kah Gem, Kah Jobee… nakita ko kanila na in mga youth duon kanila magka-improve." "Nag-join ako kasi gusto kong makatulong at ma-experience kung ano ba talaga 'yung community service. Hindi lang siya tungkol sa project, kundi sa puso."
Experiencing Adjustments and Belongingness	Students initially felt shy and uncertain but gradually developed confidence, teamwork, and belongingness.	"At first, maluman pa ako kasi dih ku pa agun kakilahan in mga members… pero along the way, nakapag interact da isab kami." "Noong una, nahirapan akong mag-adjust kasi may mga activities din sa school. Pero habang tumatagal, natutunan kong mag-manage ng oras at magtrabaho kasama ang iba." "Yung feeling na kasama ka sa isang layunin, sobrang fulfilling. Parang may dahilan kung bakit ka nandoon."
Role Engagement and Identity Development	Civic participation enhanced leadership, empathy, and purpose. Students learned the true essence of service.	"Honestly speaking, I love doing volunteerism. I've always wanted to give service to my community and be part of something meaningful." "Through our organization, natutunan kong makinig sa iba, mag-lead, at mag-adjust. Hindi pala leadership 'yung

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		pagiging boss, kundi 'yung marunong makiramay." "Nagvolunteer ako kasi bahagi ito ng pananampalataya ko. Sa Islam, mahalaga ang pagtulong sa kapwa."
Challenges and Coping Mechanisms	Members encountered time management issues and financial constraints but showed resilience and teamwork.	"Minsan, sabay-sabay ang requirements at outreach, kaya kailangan kong pumili kung alin ang uunahin." "Wala kaming pondo minsan, kaya kailangan naming maghanap ng paraan. Minsan, ambagan lang talaga." "Mataud siya improvement… in time management ku at the same time in pakikipag engage ku ha mga other youth leaders." "Hindi naman kami naghihintay ng kapalit. Masaya na kaming nakakatulong, kahit maliit lang."
Recommendations and Insights for Program Development	Participants suggested stronger institutional support, leadership training, and partnerships for sustainability.	"Maganda sana kung may leadership training para sa mga bagong members, para mas prepared sila." "Kailangan din ng support mula sa school at local government. Minsan, hindi kami napapansin kahit may ginagawa kaming project para sa komunidad."

Motivations and Encouragements in the Organization

Participants described multiple sources of motivation for joining socio-civic organizations, often rooted in personal inspiration, peer influence, and the desire to serve their communities. Several mentioned the influence of family members who were already active in volunteer work. One participant said, "Ang nagmotivate po sa akin ay ang ate ko, kasi nakikita ko po sa kanya 'yung kasiyahan sa pagtulong. Kahit pagod na siya, masaya pa rin siya sa ginagawa niya, kaya na-inspire akong sumali." ("What motivated me was my older sister; I saw her joy in helping others. Even when she was tired, she was still happy, so I was inspired to join.")

This pattern of familial influence highlights how civic values are often transmitted through close relationships, confirming Putnam's (2000) view that social capital is built through interconnected networks of trust and shared values. Peer encouragement also served a strong role. One student noted, "Na-motivate ako hi Kah Gem, Kah Jobee… nakita ko kanila na in mga youth duon kanila magka-improve." ("I was motivated by Kah Gem and Kah Jobee; I saw how the youth there improved through the organization.")

For some, motivation stemmed from curiosity and a sense of calling to contribute to the community. A participant shared, "Nag-join ako kasi gusto kong makatulong at ma-experience kung ano ba talaga 'yung community service. Hindi lang siya tungkol sa project, kundi sa puso." ("I joined because I wanted to help and experience what community service really means. It's not just about projects, it's about the heart.")

These findings align with Chittum et al. (2022), who asserted that youth engagement often emerges from both internalized moral values and external encouragement. In Sulu, where social solidarity and kinship are strong cultural traits, civic involvement becomes an extension of family and community obligation.

Experiencing Adjustments and Belongingness

Participants reported that their initial experience upon joining socio-civic organizations was marked by feelings of hesitation, uncertainty, and social adjustment. A participant recalled, "At first, maluman pa ako kasi dih ku pa agun kakilahan in mga members… pero along the way, nakapag interact da isab kami." ("At first, I was shy because I didn't know the members, but eventually, we learned to interact.")

For others, the adjustment process required balancing time and priorities. "Noong una, nahirapan akong mag-adjust kasi may mga activities din sa school. Pero habang tumatagal, natutunan kong mag-manage ng oras at magtrabaho kasama ang iba," one student shared. ("At first, I found it hard to adjust because there were also school activities. But over time, I learned how to manage my time and work with others.")

This stage of adjustment fostered the development of social confidence and a sense of belonging. Friendships formed through shared activities, such as community outreach and fundraising, became a source of emotional support. These interactions mirror O'Meara and Jaeger's (2023) finding that sustained engagement relies on mentorship and peer collaboration.

Belongingness also emerged as a critical aspect of identity formation. Participants emphasized how acceptance within their organizations reinforced their self-worth and sense of purpose. "Yung feeling na kasama ka sa isang layunin, sobrang fulfilling. Parang may dahilan kung bakit ka nandoon," a respondent expressed. ("The feeling of being part of a purpose is very fulfilling. It gives you a reason to be there.")

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This emotional attachment to their organizations strengthened members' commitment, confirming Astin's (1984) notion that student involvement is directly related to psychological investment in an activity. As members became more engaged, their confidence and interpersonal communication improved, fostering not just individual growth but also collective cohesion within their groups.

Role Engagement and Identity Development

A significant outcome of civic involvement was the development of leadership, empathy, and a renewed sense of identity. Many participants reported that joining socio-civic organizations helped them discover their potential and refine their interpersonal skills. "Honestly speaking, I love doing volunteerism. I've always wanted to give service to my community and be part of something meaningful," shared one student.

Another participant reflected on their growth: "Through our organization, natutunan kong makinig sa iba, mag-lead, at mag-adjust. Hindi pala leadership 'yung pagiging boss, kundi 'yung marunong makiramay." ("Through our organization, I learned how to listen, lead, and adapt. Leadership isn't about being a boss, it's about empathy.")

These insights are consistent with Mezirow's (1991) Transformational Learning Theory, which posits that experiences that challenge existing assumptions can trigger self-reflection and personal transformation. As participants engaged in activities such as community outreach and disaster response, they gained a deeper awareness of social realities and the value of service.

Civic participation also became a means of strengthening cultural and spiritual identity. One respondent from a Muslim organization shared, "Nagvolunteer ako kasi bahagi ito ng pananampalataya ko. Sa Islam, mahalaga ang pagtulong sa kapwa." ("I volunteered because it's part of my faith. In Islam, helping others is important.") This reflects Malik's (2024) observation that faith-based values significantly shape civic behavior among youth in Sulu.

Through these activities, participants developed what Bastida (2023) calls "citizenship competence", a combination of empathy, social awareness, and moral responsibility.

Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

Despite the positive outcomes, participants encountered several difficulties in sustaining their civic involvement. Time management emerged as the most persistent issue. Balancing academic responsibilities with organizational activities often caused stress and fatigue. "Minsan, sabay-sabay ang requirements at outreach, kaya kailangan kong pumili kung alin ang uunahin," said one participant. ("Sometimes, school requirements and outreach activities happen at the same time, so I have to choose which to prioritize.")

Financial limitations also affected participation. Some students struggled to afford transportation or materials for outreach events. "Wala kaming pondo minsan, kaya kailangan naming maghanap ng paraan. Minsan, ambagan lang talaga," one respondent shared. ("Sometimes we don't have funds, so we have to find ways, sometimes we just contribute money ourselves.")

These challenges did not deter them; instead, students developed resilience and creative problem-solving skills. "Mataud siya improvement… in time management ku at the same time in pakikipag engage ku ha mga other youth leaders," expressed another participant. ("I've improved a lot in time management and in engaging with other youth leaders.")

The findings resonate with Dagohoy et al. (2024), who found that sustained engagement requires both intrinsic motivation and external institutional support. Students coped by seeking help from peers, dividing responsibilities, and using social media to coordinate tasks more efficiently. They also drew strength from the sense of community and shared mission within their organizations.

Beyond practical issues, emotional fatigue was another concern. Some participants expressed frustration when their efforts seemed unrecognized. Yet, they remained committed because they viewed civic work as part of a long-term journey. As one student shared, "Hindi naman kami naghihintay ng kapalit. Masaya na kaming nakakatulong, kahit maliit lang," ("We don't expect anything in return. We're happy just being able to help, even in small ways.")

Such remarks reflect transformational resilience, a concept supported by Mezirow (1991), where individuals interpret challenges as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles. In the context of Sulu, where community involvement often coexists with social instability, this resilience demonstrates the strength of youth commitment to collective welfare.

Recommendations and Insights for Program Development

Participants proposed a number of recommendations to improve civic engagement initiatives in Sulu. They emphasized the importance of training, organizational support, and inclusive participation. "Maganda sana kung may leadership training para sa

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mga bagong members, para mas prepared sila," suggested one participant. ("It would be good if there were leadership trainings for new members so they'd be more prepared.")

Another student added, "Kailangan din ng support mula sa school at local government. Minsan, hindi kami napapansin kahit may ginagawa kaming project para sa komunidad." ("We also need support from schools and the local government. Sometimes we're overlooked even when we're implementing community projects.")

These insights point to the necessity of institutional collaboration to sustain civic engagement. The participants recommended a unified approach between schools, civic groups, and local government units to provide resources and mentorship. They also advocated for greater inclusivity, encouraging more women and younger students to take leadership roles.

One significant output of the study is the proposed "Project KASALI" (Kabataan sa Sulu para sa Aktibong Liderato at Inklusibong Paglilingkod), a student-centered civic program aimed at promoting leadership, inclusivity, and sustainable community engagement. Project KASALI envisions capacity-building workshops, Islamic symposiums, and youth-led initiatives across campuses to address both academic and civic goals.

These suggestions align with the recommendations of Hibanada (2024) and Untalan et al. (2025), who emphasize that youth development programs must integrate experiential learning and social responsibility. By empowering students through structured support, institutions can transform civic engagement into a continuous, values-based practice rather than a temporary extracurricular activity.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings revealed that the experiences of college students in Sulu who participate in socio-civic organizations are profoundly transformative. Their involvement goes beyond fulfilling academic or organizational requirements. It becomes a personal journey of growth, reflection, and service. Students are primarily motivated by family influence, peer encouragement, faith, and a personal calling to help others. Through active engagement, they develop a deeper sense of identity, belongingness, and civic purpose. The process of volunteering allows them to see themselves not only as students but as contributors to the collective welfare of their communities.

Despite the rewards, their journey is not without challenges. Participants experienced struggles in managing their time between studies and organizational activities, as well as financial and emotional pressures that sometimes tested their endurance. Yet, these obstacles became opportunities for learning and self-discipline. Their narratives show that perseverance, teamwork, and shared purpose strengthened their commitment to civic involvement. In the end, they emerged as more resilient, empathetic, and socially aware individuals. These outcomes affirm Astin's Student Involvement Theory, which highlights the connection between engagement and personal development, as well as Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory, which suggests that reflection on meaningful experiences leads to a shift in perspective and values.

It is therefore concluded that socio-civic organization membership significantly contributes to the moral, social, and leadership development of students in Sulu. Their participation fosters compassion, strengthens community ties, and enhances their sense of purpose as young citizens. However, these benefits can only be sustained when institutions, communities, and local governments work together to provide adequate support.

Based on these insights, the study recommends that colleges and universities strengthen their support for civic engagement by embedding it into their student affairs programs and academic initiatives. Leadership and capacity-building workshops should be institutionalized to help students manage their responsibilities and sustain long-term involvement. Collaboration among schools, civic groups, and local government units must also be encouraged to ensure that projects are well-supported and inclusive. The implementation of the proposed Project Kabataan sa Sulu para sa Aktibong Liderato at Inklusibong Paglilingkod (KASALI) could serve as a comprehensive framework for these efforts.

Finally, future research is encouraged to explore the long-term impact of socio-civic participation on students' professional lives and community engagement after graduation. Strengthening youth civic participation in Sulu is more than an educational pursuit; it is a concrete step toward peacebuilding, empowerment, and sustainable development for the region.

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