



Cops behind the lenses: Lived experiences of police officers wearing body-worn cameras during police operations

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Abstract

Crime and abuse of power are rampant nowadays; police departments globally are resorting to modern equipment, including body-worn cameras. The widespread and growing adoption regarding the effectiveness of body-worn cameras is uncertain; based on random interviews, many cases are dismissed because of improper use of body-worn cameras. This study aimed to explore the experiences of police officers wearing body-worn cameras during police operations in Bacolod City, Negros Occidental, Philippines, utilizing the qualitative approach and phenomenological research design. Eight pieces of information were gathered from Police Officers of Police Stations 1, 2, and 4 of Bacolod City through in-depth interviews and Focused Group discussions (FGD). Four themes were formulated as to the experiences and strategies of the police officers wearing body-worn cameras during police operations, namely: competence affects performance, technical problems invalidate actions and technology ensures credibility and self-familiarization, and pro-action. The difficulties encountered by police officers who wear body-worn cameras during police operations commonly arise from the implementation and operation of body-worn cameras, allowing them to develop strategies such as self-familiarization and pro-action to achieve their objectives. It is necessary to improve both the device and training to be provided for police officers, particularly those who are assigned to wear a body-worn camera during police operations, to maximize their performance output.

Keywords: *buy-bust operation, entrapment, device, intelligence, technology, surveillance*

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1. Introduction

Surveillance plays an essential role in every organization. They have proven to deliver high levels of security for everyone every day. Since crime and abuse of power are rampant nowadays, police departments globally are resorting to modern equipment, including body-worn cameras (BWC). They capture video and audio evidence when officers attend all types of incidents. The camera's position means those watching the footage see the situation from the officer's perspective, and the camera acts as an independent witness (Metropolitan Police, 2022).

According to Chapman (2018), law enforcement agencies have quickly implemented body-worn cameras with the expectation that they will enhance police behavior, accountability, and transparency, particularly concerning the use of force. Officers stated that the cameras served as an "extra set of eyes" to safeguard them and provide them with the knowledge to help them comprehend what occurs during their public contact. They also believed that the cameras thoroughly account for what happened if an incident's facts are questioned. However, Newell (2021) states that BWCs can also lead to significant invasions of individual privacy.

One of the most potent examples of the significance of police body-worn cameras played out in a Minneapolis courtroom during the trial of Derek Chauvin, the former police officer convicted of murder and manslaughter in the killing of George Floyd. The video collected from the body-worn cameras of the police officers involved in Floyd's arrest showed his death from various angles, and prosecution and defense attorneys used the video extensively as they argued the case (Corley, 2021).

The Philippine National Police (PNP) launched its body-worn camera system to serve as the "Filipinos' eyes and ears" in police operations. PNP Chief Gen. Guillermo Eleazar stated, "The procurement and eventually the use of body cameras is a tribute not only to Kian Delos Santos, who died of police abuse in Caloocan City, but also to the policemen whose ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty was tainted by extrajudicial killings, planting of evidence and other unfair allegations" (Aguilar, 2021). At a press briefing, Directorate for Logistics Director Police Major General Angelito Casimiro said the PNP Directorate for Operations is still finalizing procedures on the use of body cameras because privacy concerns could pose a problem when a captured video is presented in court (Bolledo, 2021).

Hence, despite the widespread and growing adoption, the current evidence regarding the effectiveness of body-worn cameras is uncertain (Chapman, 2018). Based on random

interviews, many cases are dismissed because of improper use of body-worn cameras. Given this, there is a shortage of scholarly studies in the Philippines that provide the lived experiences of police officers wearing body-worn cameras. Thus, the study provides deeper insight into the police officers' experiences and perspectives on body-worn cameras.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Body-Worn Cameras (BWCs) as Instruments of Accountability, Transparency, and Legal Evidence

BWCs serve as critical tools for documenting police encounters by providing first-person, factual audio and video records of incidents. According to Bellin and Pemberton (2019) and Vakhitova et al. (2023), BWC footage captures statements made by officers, suspects, victims, and witnesses that may otherwise be excluded from court proceedings due to hearsay concerns or diminished credibility arising from conflicting memories. As a result, BWCs enhance the reliability of evidence and support more accurate judicial decision-making. BWCs also promote police accountability and transparency, which are essential for restoring public trust and strengthening law enforcement legitimacy (Vakhitova et al., 2023). The New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (2025) supports this view, noting that BWCs document police-public interactions during arrests, confrontations, and serious incidents, thereby assisting in the resolution of administrative and criminal complaints and serving as a defense tool in civil liability cases.

In the Philippines, the institutionalization of BWCs reflects this accountability-driven rationale. The PNP adopted BWCs to improve transparency during police operations, enhance officer behavior, and provide a training mechanism for lawful enforcement (Bollo, 2021). Legislative and judicial measures further reinforce this goal. Tulfo's Senate Bill No. 2199 or the Body-Worn Camera Act (2023) mandates the use of BWCs in law enforcement activities such as the service of warrants, anti-illegal drug operations, and other police functions. Similarly, the Supreme Court issued the Rules on the Use of Body-Worn Cameras in the Execution of Warrants (A.M. No. 21-06-08-SC), requiring officers to use recording devices during arrests and searches to safeguard citizens' rights (Patag, 2021). However, the Court clarified that failure to use BWCs does not automatically invalidate an arrest or render evidence inadmissible, as facts may still be established through testimonies (Disini Law, 2021). This

balanced approach aims to protect constitutional rights without unduly restricting police authority.

Empirical studies further demonstrate that law enforcement agencies adopt BWCs primarily to increase accountability, transparency, and evidence quality. Gaub et al. (2017) found that nearly all agencies identified accountability as a core objective of BWC programs, while a majority emphasized improved evidence gathering, supervision, and training. These findings reinforce the perception of BWCs as essential components of modern policing.

2.2. Officer Competence, Perceptions, and Operational Implications of Body-Worn Camera Use

The effective use of BWCs is closely linked to officer competence, learning, and performance. Iskamto (2022) demonstrated that competence significantly influences performance, accounting for 57.8% of performance outcomes, a finding consistent with previous studies (Hasyim & Rokhmatin, 2021; Suebudin, 2021; Susilowati et al., 2021). Bandura (1986) further explains that competence develops through continuous interaction between personal factors, behavior, and environmental conditions, with self-efficacy playing a central role in shaping performance outcomes. Implicit learning also contributes to officers' adaptation to BWC technology. According to Ericsson (2008), repeated exposure to tools and procedures allows individuals to acquire skills unconsciously, resulting in improved efficiency and familiarity over time. As officers gain experience using BWCs, they become more confident and proficient in integrating the technology into daily operations.

However, operational challenges remain. Murphy and Sargeant (2022) observed that improper BWC usage and procedural lapses increased workloads for officers and administrative staff and occasionally delayed case processing. Although most errors were unintentional, these findings highlight the need for consistent training and clear implementation guidelines. Doiron (2021) similarly reported that while BWCs improve report accuracy through footage review, they also increase administrative burdens, particularly in complex cases requiring repeated video examination. Officer perceptions of BWCs evolve with experience and training. Witt (2018) found that departments with longer BWC training periods reported more positive officer attitudes, as illustrated by the successful implementation in the Rialto Police Department. Crow and Smykla (2019) also noted that officers generally supported BWCs, particularly finding them useful during arrests, stop-and-frisk situations, and

citation issuance. Over time, officers increasingly view BWCs as tools for self-protection, accurate reporting, and evidence collection (Lum et al., 2019).

In both urban and rural contexts, BWCs enhance transparency and public access to information. Murr (2022) emphasized that understanding officers' interpretations of BWCs, particularly in rural settings, can inform policy refinement and technology optimization. In the Philippine setting, Tad-awan et al. (2023) found that officers who regularly use BWCs demonstrate greater transparency, contributing to reduced human rights violations and improved community trust. Nonetheless, practical concerns such as device visibility and ease of discharge may pose challenges during operations.

Broader surveillance technologies reinforce similar objectives. Surveillance cameras are widely used to deter crime, reduce fear, and support law enforcement activities. Studies conducted in the Philippines show that surveillance systems enhance public safety, encourage security-conscious behavior, and provide credible evidence for court proceedings (Cuevas et al., 2018; Manalo, 2015). These findings parallel the benefits and challenges observed in BWC implementation, underscoring the importance of competence, policy clarity, and ethical use.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the following theories.

Cognitive Theory of Competence. Based on Miller (2011), this theory is a psychological framework that emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in acquiring and demonstrating competence in various domains. It is based on the understanding that innate abilities or fixed traits do not solely determine competence but are influenced by cognitive factors such as knowledge, skills, strategies, and problem-solving abilities. Individuals acquire competence through active engagement in learning, constructing knowledge and skills by processing information, making connections, and applying strategies.

Dual-Factor Theory. This theory recognizes the complex interplay between technology and human agency. It suggests that both technology and human actions contribute to outcomes. Technological advancements provide new possibilities and tools, while human choices, intentions, and skills determine how technology is utilized and what outcomes are achieved (Marikyan & Papagiannidis, 2025).

Transparency Theory. This theory posits that increased visibility and openness lead to greater trust and accountability. BWCs promote transparency by capturing and documenting

interactions, ensuring that the actions of professionals are visible and subject to review. This transparency fosters credibility by allowing for scrutiny and evaluation of the recorded events (Tregle et al., 2025).

Structural Contingency Theory. It posits that organizations alter their structures to best adapt to their rational/technical environments and thus improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness (Donaldson, 1996). The rational/technical environment for police agencies differs from one agency to the next. Environments are usually composed of the population the agency serves including the specific demands that the population might put on the agency, such as an upper-class suburb as compared to a less affluent inner-city neighborhood, the political system that oversees that police agency, and the degree and type of crime.

Self-determination Theory (SDT). It is a theory of motivation and personality that concerns people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs. Self-determination is a person's ability to manage them using their self-consciousness to make independent and confident choices (Hui & Tsang, 2012). It puts the individual in the driver's seat, making them responsible for their decisions, behaviors, and the following results.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a descriptive phenomenological research design and adopts a qualitative research methodology. The use of qualitative methods and a descriptive research design allows the researchers to explore and understand the lived experiences of police officers who wear body-worn cameras. Qualitative research is rooted in the social sciences, including psychology, sociology, and anthropology, and enables in-depth probing and follow-up questioning based on participants' responses. Through this approach, researchers seek to understand respondents' motivations, perceptions, and emotions. Understanding how individuals make decisions also supports meaningful conclusions in research contexts (Bhat, 2020).

According to Delve and Limpaecher (2022), phenomenological research aims to comprehend and explore individuals' everyday experiences. In essence, phenomenology investigates real-life events to gain deeper insight into how people interpret and make sense of their experiences. This approach is particularly appropriate for describing the lived experiences of police officers wearing body-worn cameras, their attitudes toward the technology, and their

perceptions of self-legitimacy. The central focus of phenomenology is the exploration of consciousness or lived experience, seeking to clarify and illuminate its meaning. By emphasizing human experience within real-world contexts, this approach aligns well with the aims and expected findings of the present study.

3.2. Participants of the Study

This study aims to develop an in-depth narration of the lived experiences of police officers who wear body-worn cameras. To avoid overgeneralization, a small number of participants was deemed appropriate for the interviews. In line with the purpose of the study, a purposive homogeneous sampling method was employed to select the informants. A purposive sample is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the study and the research objectives (Crossman, 2020). In this approach, the sampling process relies heavily on the researcher's judgment and contextual knowledge.

The informants consisted of eight (8) Intelligence Police Officers assigned to different police stations: two (2) officers from Police Station 1, two (2) officers from Police Station 4, and four (4) officers from Police Station 2. Law enforcement officers were selected as respondents because they are best positioned to describe the relevance and importance of body-worn cameras in contemporary policing, particularly in promoting transparency.

3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

The researchers utilized an open-ended interview guide relevant to the topic under investigation. A self-developed interview guide was created and reviewed and approved by experts in the fields of psychology and criminology, including a PNP officer and a Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) officer. The interview guide consisted of four (4) questions focusing on the lived experiences and strategies of police officers wearing body-worn cameras.

To ensure accuracy, all interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Probing questions were used as necessary to clarify and elaborate on informants' responses, and additional questions were introduced as themes emerged during the interview process. All interviews were conducted by the researchers, and verbatim transcripts were produced for analysis.

The study was conducted in accordance with the research guidelines of STI West Negros University – College of Criminal Justice Education. Permission to conduct the study was first obtained from the College Dean, Program Head, and Research Coordinator. Upon approval, formal request letters were submitted to Bacolod City Police Stations 1, 2, and 4 to secure authorization to conduct the research. Informants were asked to provide informed consent prior to participation in in-depth interviews and a focused group discussion (FGD). Four (4) informants participated in the FGD, where they shared their experiences and challenges related to wearing body-worn cameras. All discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, and the confidentiality of all responses was strictly maintained.

3.4. Data Analysis

Colaizzi's method of data analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data and identify meaningful patterns and themes (Colaizzi, 1978). Initially, the researchers read each participant's description repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Significant statements relevant to the research questions were then extracted. These statements consisted of direct quotations to ensure accurate representation of the participants' experiences. Next, meanings were formulated from the significant statements. These formulated meanings were organized into clusters of themes, from which emergent themes were identified. This systematic process ensured a rigorous and transparent analysis of the qualitative data.

3.5 Research Ethics

This study adhered to the ethical standards established by the University for conducting research. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. The purpose and procedures of the study were clearly explained to all participants prior to data collection. Signed informed consent forms indicated the participants' willingness to take part in the study and confirmed the absence of coercion.

The privacy of the informants and the confidentiality of the data were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Only the researchers had access to the collected data, which were securely stored and protected. No information was disclosed without the

informants' consent, and all data collection materials were properly disposed of upon completion of the study.

4. Findings and Discussion

Colaizzi's phenomenological inquiry approach was utilized to analyze the data in this study. Through this method, emergent themes were constructed to describe the lived experiences of police officers wearing body-worn cameras during police operations. This study is anchored in Jean Piaget's Cognitive Competence Theory (2021), supported by Frederick Herzberg's Dual-Factor Theory (1950s), Mark Fenster's Transparency Theory (2021), Self-Determination Theory (1970), and Structural Contingency Theory (1996). Hence, the discussion of themes and lived experiences of the informants were analyzed through the concepts of the theories.

Theme 1: Competence Affects Performance

Police officers are mandated to perform their duties while wearing body-worn cameras in compliance with Administrative Matter No. 21-06-08-SC, or the Rules on the Use of Body-Worn Cameras in the Execution of Warrants. However, police officers encounter difficulties in using body-worn cameras due to unfamiliarity with the technology. They must first familiarize themselves with the devices and comply with the rules of evidence, particularly those governing electronic evidence, when using body-worn cameras.

The Cognitive Theory of Competence is a psychological framework that emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in acquiring and demonstrating competence across various domains. This theory posits that competence is not determined solely by innate abilities or fixed traits but is significantly influenced by cognitive factors such as knowledge, skills, strategies, and problem-solving abilities. Individuals acquire competence through active engagement in learning, constructing knowledge and skills by processing information, making connections, and applying strategies (Miller, 2011).

This theory supports the findings related to the first problem of the study, which concerns the lived experiences of police officers wearing body-worn cameras during police operations, particularly regarding the theme of how competence affects performance. The findings revealed that police officers experience difficulties in using body-worn cameras because the devices were only recently issued to them. Most officers are not fully familiar with

the camera components and operational procedures, especially given the need to strictly follow the provisions of Administrative Matter No. 21-06-08-SC. According to the informants, understanding the features and functions of body-worn cameras is essential. To ensure proper use, officers must read the user manual, undergo training, or attend workshops provided by the camera manufacturer or relevant authorities.

These findings are further supported by Bandura's Cognitive Competence Theory (1986), which posits that higher levels of competence lead to increased self-efficacy, motivation, engagement, and improved performance outcomes. Competence develops through continuous interaction among personal factors (such as knowledge and skills), behavior, and the environment. By shaping individuals' beliefs in their capabilities, competence directly influences performance. In addition, Flow Theory, developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the 1970s, suggests that competence and performance are closely linked when individuals experience a state of flow. When competence aligns with the level of challenge, individuals are more likely to perform optimally. This is further supported by implicit learning theory, which states that repeated exposure leads to increased familiarity and improved performance (Banihosseini et al., 2025).

Theme 2: Technical Problems Invalidate Actions

The theme Technical Problems Invalidate Actions is explained through the Dual-Factor Theory, which recognizes the complex interaction between technology and human agency. This theory suggests that outcomes are influenced by both technological systems and human actions. While technological advancements provide new tools and opportunities, human decisions, skills, and intentions determine how technology is utilized and what results are achieved (Marikyan & Papagiannidis, 2025).

This framework explains how technical problems, such as low battery life and limited knowledge of body-worn camera operation, can invalidate police actions. Based on the data gathered, some cases were dismissed due to these technical issues. Police officers reported that wearing body-worn cameras poses risks due to strict procedural requirements, as well as challenges in concealing the devices during operations because they are bulky and difficult to hide. To address these difficulties, informants emphasized the importance of utilizing their knowledge and skills to prevent operational problems. According to Lutkevich (2023),

technical disruptions within a system can interrupt information flow, compromise data accuracy, and hinder action execution, thereby affecting the validity of outcomes.

Moreover, it is essential to ensure that body-worn cameras are properly maintained, regularly tested, and used in accordance with established protocols to minimize the impact of technical issues on reliability. In this regard, Structural Contingency Theory posits that organizations must adapt their structures to respond effectively to environmental demands. If a police agency adapts appropriately, it can achieve efficiency and effectiveness; failure to do so may result in inefficiency and ineffectiveness. Given that organizational environments are dynamic; police institutions must remain capable of continuous adaptation.

Theme 3: Technology Ensures Credibility

Technology also plays a crucial role in ensuring credibility. Transparency Theory posits that increased visibility and openness foster trust and accountability. Body-worn cameras promote transparency by recording and documenting interactions, thereby making police actions visible and subject to review. This transparency enhances credibility by enabling scrutiny and evaluation of recorded events. Transparency, as an administrative norm, is fundamental to democratic governance, as greater government visibility contributes to increased accountability and legitimacy (Fenster, 2021). Informants reported that civilians often question police actions, and body-worn cameras provide an unbiased record of events that can address such concerns. As a result, BWCs serve as valuable evidence in criminal investigations and court proceedings.

According to Armstrong (2019), equipping officers with body-worn cameras allows them to function as independent and reliable witnesses without bias or personal agenda. Recorded footage provides both parties with an accurate and impartial account of police apprehensions. Informants emphasized that the primary purpose of BWCs is to eliminate doubts regarding the legality of police operations, particularly in buy-bust operations. Since BWCs capture events in real time, the footage can be readily presented in court and is more likely to convince judicial authorities that no illegal actions occurred during operations.

Furthermore, BWCs capture critical details such as facial expressions, body language, and environmental factors that may be overlooked or forgotten in written reports. This comprehensive documentation strengthens evidentiary reliability and enhances credibility in

legal proceedings (Lum et al., 2019). Consequently, the use of BWCs helps reduce public and judicial mistrust regarding alleged unlawful police activities (Tad-awan, 2022).

Theme 3: Self-Familiarization and Pro-Action

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) further explains the theme Self-Familiarization and Pro-Action. SDT is a theory of motivation and personality that emphasizes individuals' inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs. Self-determination refers to an individual's capacity to regulate behavior through self-awareness and autonomous decision-making, thereby assuming responsibility for actions and outcomes (Hui & Tsang, (2012). Police officers reported proactively checking their body-worn cameras prior to operations in anticipation of potential issues. BWC recordings also serve as protective evidence against allegations of police brutality or harassment.

To ensure the effectiveness of BWCs, familiarization with their operation and proper utilization is essential to minimizing lapses and operational errors. The mere exposure effect, a psychological phenomenon identified by Zajonc in the 1960s, suggests that repeated exposure to a stimulus increases familiarity and positive attitudes toward it. This effect influences police officers to take initiative in familiarizing themselves with body-worn camera operations. Additionally, implicit learning enables individuals to acquire skills unconsciously through repeated exposure, leading to improved performance over time (Banihosseini et al., 2025).

These findings indicate that even competent police officers may encounter challenges or commit errors while using body-worn cameras. High-stress situations, rapid decision-making, and equipment limitations can affect performance regardless of competence level. Therefore, providing officers with continuous training, institutional support, and adequate resources is essential to maximizing the benefits of body-worn camera programs.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that competence significantly affects performance in the use of body-worn cameras among police officers. During the initial implementation of BWCs in the Philippines, officers experienced difficulties due to unfamiliarity with the operation of the devices, as well as challenges in concealing them during operations because of their bulky design. These limitations affected operational efficiency, particularly in

undercover activities. To address these challenges, officers recognized the need to enhance their knowledge and technical skills through continuous training, familiarization, and hands-on experience. Moreover, the use or acquisition of alternative recording devices was identified as a practical solution for operations requiring discretion, highlighting the importance of adaptive strategies to ensure operational success.

The study also concludes that technical reliability and proactive practices are crucial in ensuring credibility and legal validity of police actions. Technical problems such as battery failure or equipment malfunction can potentially invalidate police actions if not promptly addressed. As a result, officers emphasized strict adherence to established rules governing the use of BWCs and the importance of preventive measures, including regular equipment checks, maintenance, and timely troubleshooting. Despite these challenges, BWCs were widely regarded as credible and effective tools in promoting transparency and serving as reliable evidence in court proceedings, as they objectively document legitimate police operations. However, the findings underscore that while technology enhances accuracy and accountability, it is not infallible; therefore, human oversight, continuous training, and systematic maintenance remain essential to maximize the benefits of body-worn camera programs and mitigate potential technological limitations.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by STI West Negros University. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by STI West Negros University

Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used AI tools, such as ChaGPT for correcting sentence construction, grammar, and syntax, and Grammarly for thorough grammar checks, have been employed to ensure the accuracy and clarity of the content. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

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