



SHINING BRIGHT IN A NEW ERA: STORIES OF GEN Z NURSES WHO STAYED IN THEIR JOB CARING FOR PATIENTS IN MEDICAL-SURGICAL UNIT

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences and retention factors among Generation Z nurses in selected hospitals in Kabacan, North Cotabato. Using Collaizzi (1978) phenomenological method, rigor was established through application of verification, validation, and validity. From 120 significant statements, 3 emergent themes and 17 cluster themes. The findings revealed that Gen Z nurses remain committed to their roles because they find meaning and fulfillment in patient care, aligning their values with their professional responsibilities. Despite facing heavy workloads and stress, they demonstrate strong resilience and adaptability. Positive relationships with colleagues, supportive leadership, and mentorship significantly influence their decision to stay. Furthermore, opportunities for continuing education and clear pathways for career advancement inspire them to envision long-term careers in nursing. Their digital fluency and advocacy for work-life balance contribute to innovative practices and sustainable career satisfaction. These insights highlight the unique contributions of Gen Z nurses in the medical-surgical field and underscore the importance of fostering supportive, growth-oriented, and technologically adaptive environments to enhance retention. Their stories reflect not only their resilience and ambition but also their potential to shape the future of nursing through innovation and fresh perspectives. This study offers valuable implications for nursing leadership and healthcare institutions seeking to strengthen and empower the new generation of nurses, ensuring a sustainable and effective workforce in an evolving healthcare landscape.

Keywords: *Social Science, Generation Z nurses, Phenomenological, Kabacan North Cotabato*

Introduction

Medical-surgical units were vital components of hospital care, noted for their high patient turnover, complicated cases, and emotional stress. In recent years, the emergence of Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) has introduced a new nursing profession and brought these challenges into the workforce. Retaining nurses has become a major concern as healthcare facilities strive to maintain a steady workforce capable of meeting the increasing demands of patient care. This study highlighted their perspectives, examining how they cope with difficulties, find meaning in their roles, and redefine resilience in the post-pandemic context. By gaining insight into their experiences, healthcare organizations could formulate strategies to retain this vital generation, essential for the future of nursing.

Nursing retention in medical-surgical units presented a worldwide challenge. Nearly 50% of new nurses exited bedside care within three years due to burnout, insufficient mentorship, and emotional fatigue (Dyrbye et al., 2019). Gen Z, known for valuing mental health, work-life balance, and social contributions, faced a significant inconsistency between their ideals and the realities of medical-surgical nursing. Hospitals found it increasingly difficult to keep these nurses, worsening shortages that threaten patients' safety (Aiken et al., 2021). If they had motivated measures are not implemented, healthcare systems may risk losing an entire generation of nurses, which could put a risk the quality of care and stability of institutions.

Globally, nurses' retention remained a remarkable challenge. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) estimated a shortage of 5.9 million nurses worldwide, made worsened by burnout, job dissatisfaction, and poor working conditions. Studies by Shah et al. (2021) and Labrague (2021) highlighted that Gen Z Nurses faced unique stressors, including emotional exhaustion and work-life imbalance, contributing to early career turnover. Despite these challenges, literature also pointed out that factors such as supportive leadership, opportunities for professional growth, and peer support enhanced nurse retention (Al Zamel et al., 2020). However, much of the existing global research focuses on why nurses leave rather than why they stayed, particularly among the newer Gen Z cohort.

In the Philippines setting, nurse migration and turnover have long been critical issues. According to Lorenzo et al. (2007), the country has served as a major source of nursing professionals for global markets, often leading to local shortages. Recent studies by Gaviola et al. (2021) emphasize that Filipino nurses faced challenging workloads, low pay, and limited career advancement opportunities, which affected job satisfaction and retention. By documenting their stories, the research aimed to uncover the motivation, coping mechanisms, and support networks that contribute to their job endurance. Gaining this understanding will help design better retention programs and foster healthier, more encouraging environments for young nurses, thereby reinforcing the overall strength of the healthcare workforce.

Even though attention to nurse retention has grown, a notable gap persists in the literature concerning the positive experience of Gen Z nurses who have chosen to stay, particularly within medical-surgical unit settings. Most local studies have centered on migration intentions and job dissatisfaction, but rarely highlighted resilience, motivation, and peer influence among stayers. Thus, this study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the motivations, coping strategies, and insights of Gen Z nurses in Kabacan, North Cotabato. Through this qualitative exploration, the research sought to contribute to retention strategies tailored for the next generation of nursing professionals.

Methods

Design

This study used a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Generation Z nurses who remain in medical-surgical units despite various workplace challenges. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and field notes, immersed the researcher in real-world contexts to uncover the meanings individuals attributed to their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Creswell, 2013). Guided by interpretive frameworks, the study employed sensitive data collection and thematic analysis to provide a deep understanding of subjective experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Setting

This study was conducted in selected Hospital in Kabacan, North Cotabato. These hospitals contain medical-surgical units where nurses deliver crucial care to a variety of patients with different medical and surgical needs. The setting provides a vibrant backdrop that showcases the real challenges and successes Gen Z nurses encounter in their everyday roles. By concentrating on this particular area, the study seeks to reflect the genuine experiences and perspectives of young nurses who choose to remain dedicated to their professions despite the pressure associated with working in medical-surgical units.

Participants

The study focused on Gen Z nurses working in medical-surgical units at hospital in Kabacan, North Cotabato, Philippines. Generation Z was defined for this research as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Spomiles & Grace, 2016). To be included, participants needed to be licensed registered nurses currently working in medical-

surgical units with at least one year of continuous experience in the role. This criterion ensured they had adequate familiarity with the challenges and daily routines of medical-surgical nursing, which allowed for detailed thoughtful response to the research questioned. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants who met the set criteria and could provide detailed descriptions of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample size was determined using the principle of data saturation, where interviews were conducted until no new themes or insights emerged (guest et al.,2020). based on phenomenological research standards, an estimated sample of 10 participants was targeted to ensure depth and richness in the collected narratives (Polit & Beck,2020).participants were approached through formal coordination with hospital administration and Chief nurse. They were given an explanation of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and ethical consideration, including confidentiality and anonymity. Only those who provided informed consent were includes the study.

Data Sources

The primary source of data for this study will be in-depth interviews conducted with Generation Z nurses who are currently working in medical-surgical units. These interviews will be audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and later transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the information collected. Field notes and reflective journals will also be used as supplementary sources to support the interpretation of the participants' lived experiences.

Data Collection Procedure

The actual data collection was carried out trough in - depth, face to face interviews held at convenient times and locations for the participants, prioritizing their comfort and privacy. Each interview followed open-ended questions designed to encouraged nurses to shared their personal experiences, emotions, and reflections about their roles in patient care. And each interview is expected to last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. With participants' consent, the discussion were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, and took notes to capture non-verbal cues and significant insight. The researcher aimed to create a safe and respectful environment where participants felt comfortable and valued while recounting their stories.

Data Analysis

Colaizzi's seven-step thematic analysis was applied to verbatim transcripts. This involved identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and validating findings with participants.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was ensured through triangulation (interviews and focus groups) and member checking. Audit trails and researcher reflexivity supported confirmability. Transferability was achieved via rich descriptions of the local context. Dependability was maintained through detailed documentation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participants' rights, privacy, and confidentiality were strictly protected. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw anytime, and emotional support was available if needed.

Researcher's Role and Reflexivity

The researcher's nursing background informed data collection and analysis, but was balanced by continuous self-reflection and bracketing to reduce bias. Emphasis was placed on creating a respectful and open environment to authentically capture mothers' experiences.

Emergent Theme 1: The lived experiences of Gen Z nurses in medical-surgical units

Reveal a dynamic balance between professional challenges and personal growth. They commonly face physical and emotional strain due to long shifts and high workloads, yet many remain committed through a strong sense of motivation rooted in meaning and growth—finding purpose in helping others and advancing their careers. Despite

limited resources, these nurses display resilience and resourcefulness, adapting creatively to ensure quality patient care. The importance of teamwork and support systems also stands out, as collaborative environments boost morale and ease workplace stress. Lastly, they value the opportunities for learning and skills advancement, with hands-on experience contributing to their confidence and professional development. Together, these themes highlight the complexity of their roles and the factors that sustain their passion in the healthcare field.

Cluster Themes 1.1. Physical and Emotional Strain

Physical and emotional strain in nursing is not a new phenomenon. According to Tsolakidis and Diamantidou (2022), the physical demands of bedside nursing, such as prolonged standing, lifting, and exposure to physical hazards, are significant contributors to nurse burnout. Coupled with emotional fatigue, often resulting from managing critically ill patients or high patient-to-nurse ratios, these factors create a challenging work environment. The findings align with the experiences of the participants, who emphasized the cyclical nature of physical exhaustion and emotional stress in their roles.

Cluster Themes 1.2. Motivation Through Meaning and Growth

The pursuit of professional growth and lifelong learning was particularly evident among participants, as they recognized the value of acquiring new skills and knowledge to advance their careers. According to Ibrahim and Hussein (2024), nurses who engage in continuous learning and skill enhancement report higher levels of job satisfaction and resilience. This finding is consistent with the participants' experiences, which emphasize the importance of career development and its role in sustaining motivation.

Cluster Themes 1.3. Resilience and Resourcefulness in the Face of Limitations

The theme underscores the capacity of Gen Z nurses to employ problem-solving and adaptive skills in the face of systemic challenges. This aligns with the findings of Heck et al. (2022), who noted that nurses often develop creative solutions and advocate for change when faced with resource constraints. The participants' reflections demonstrate a proactive approach, balancing immediate patient needs with long-term advocacy for institutional improvements.

Cluster Themes 1.4. Importance of Teamwork and Support Systems

The sense of teamwork provided not only a mechanism for effective patient care but also a buffer against the emotional and physical stressors of the profession. Peer respect and open communication created a supportive workplace culture where nurses felt valued and empowered to collaborate. This aligns with research by Watson et al. (2024), which emphasizes that workplace camaraderie and team dynamics are critical factors in reducing burnout and enhancing performance in nursing practice.

Cluster Themes 1.5. Opportunities for Learning and Skill Advancement

A recurring theme among Gen Z nurses in medical-surgical units is the wealth of learning opportunities that come with the diversity of cases and the hands-on nature of the job. Participants consistently emphasized how their roles provide avenues for skill development, critical thinking, and clinical competency enhancement. This theme reflects the nurses' continuous growth in both technical and interpersonal aspects of patient care, which not only strengthens their professional abilities but also builds their confidence in the field.

Emergent Theme 2 : Gen Z Nurses' Coping Strategies

The lived experiences of Gen Z nurses in medical-surgical units reveal a dynamic balance between professional challenges and personal growth. They commonly face physical and emotional strain due to long shifts, high workloads, and the fast-paced nature of their environment. Yet, many remain dedicated through motivation rooted in meaning and growth, finding purpose in helping others, pursuing lifelong learning, and fulfilling personal aspirations. In situations with limited resources, they exhibit strong resilience and resourcefulness, adapting

creatively and solving problems to ensure quality patient care. The presence of teamwork and support systems also plays a vital role, with collaboration and emotional support from peers enhancing their daily experiences. Lastly, they embrace opportunities for learning and skills advancement, with diverse cases and hands-on practice boosting their confidence and preparing them for future growth. Together, these themes shed light on how Gen Z nurses cope, thrive, and stay committed in the demanding world of healthcare.

Cluster 2.1. Self-Care and Stress Management

A recurring theme among Gen Z nurses is their strong reliance on self-care and stress management techniques as primary coping mechanisms. Faced with the demanding and often emotionally exhausting nature of their profession, these young nurses emphasize the importance of prioritizing their well-being. Their responses reflect a heightened awareness of mental health and a proactive approach to sustaining both their emotional and physical resilience. Self-care is not simply a form of leisure for Gen Z nurses—it is a deliberate and essential response to stress.

Cluster Theme 2.2. Work-Life Balance and Boundaries

A recurring theme among Gen Z nurses is the importance of maintaining work-life balance and setting clear boundaries between professional and personal life. In response to the high-stress demands of the nursing profession, many young nurses have developed coping strategies that prioritize their well-being outside of work. These strategies revolve around conscious efforts to detach from work responsibilities once their shifts end and to dedicate time for rest, family, and personal interests. For Gen Z nurses, boundary-setting is not only a form of self-care but a key to preventing emotional exhaustion and sustaining long-term career engagement.

Cluster Theme 2.3. Emotional and Peer Support

A recurring theme among Gen Z nurses is the vital role of emotional and peer support systems in managing workplace stress. In the fast-paced and emotionally demanding environment of healthcare, many young nurses turn to their colleagues and mentors as a primary source of strength and reassurance. Peer support, open communication, and shared experiences foster a sense of emotional safety, helping them process difficult situations and feel less isolated in their struggles. For Gen Z nurses, having someone to talk to—someone who understands the pressures of the job—can make all the difference in maintaining emotional resilience.

Cluster Theme 2.4. Positive Mindset and Purpose

A recurring theme among Gen Z nurses is the use of a positive mindset and purpose-driven reflection as a means of coping with stress. In high-pressure clinical environments, cultivating optimism and reconnecting with one's deeper motivations for entering the nursing profession has emerged as a powerful coping tool for many young nurses. This inner resilience—rooted in passion, inspiration, and a strong sense of purpose—enables them to manage emotional challenges and maintain a calm, composed demeanor even in overwhelming situations.

Cluster Theme 2.5. Creative and Reflective Outlets

A unique theme among Gen Z nurses is their use of creative and reflective outlets to manage emotional stress and express inner experiences. While traditional coping mechanisms like rest and support systems are widely used, some nurses shared how engaging in creative practices—such as journaling, art, reading, or humor—helps them process the emotional weight of their work. These personal expressions offer not only emotional release but also a way to reframe challenges in a more manageable and even meaningful light.

Emergent theme 3: Insights to be Shared

Participant insights for peers and nursing practice reveal how Gen Z nurses actively shape their roles within the healthcare system through self-awareness, adaptability, and advocacy. Drawing from their own experiences, they emphasize the importance of self-care, mental health, and continuous learning as foundations for effective practice. They value strong teamwork, mentorship, and the use of technology to enhance both patient care and work efficiency. Despite challenges, they maintain resilience, optimism, and a deep sense of empathy, which strengthens their connection with patients and colleagues alike. Many also see themselves as agents of change—advocating for better

policies and more inclusive, supportive environments. Collectively, these insights offer valuable guidance for peers and affirm the evolving role of nurses in building a more compassionate and progressive healthcare landscape.

Cluster Theme 3.1. Self-Care and Mental Health (SCMH)

Maintaining self-care and prioritizing mental health are essential for both personal well-being and the delivery of quality care in nursing practice. This theme underscores the necessity of addressing the mental and emotional needs of healthcare professionals to ensure they can perform their roles effectively. Burnout, a significant concern in the nursing profession, highlights the importance of integrating self-care practices and seeking mental health support to foster resilience and professional growth. Nurses who prioritize their own well-being are better equipped to provide compassionate, patient-centered care.

Cluster Theme 3.2: Mentorship and Learning

The pursuit of mentorship, the commitment to lifelong learning, and the courage to ask questions are cornerstones of professional growth in nursing practice. This theme highlights the importance of cultivating a learning mindset and seeking guidance from experienced colleagues to navigate the complexities of the nursing profession. By embracing curiosity and fostering mentorship relationships, nurses enhance their knowledge and skills, enabling them to adapt to the evolving demands of healthcare.

Cluster Theme 3.3: Teamwork and Collaboration Among Co-Workers

Teamwork, collaboration, and building robust relationships with colleagues are fundamental to creating a supportive and productive work environment in nursing practice. This theme underscores the collective nature of healthcare, where the strength of the team directly impacts the quality of patient care and the overall workplace experience. A strong support system among co-workers fosters trust, enhances communication, and reduces workplace stress, contributing to a more harmonious and effective healthcare environment.

Cluster Theme 3.4: Advocacy and Policy Change

Gen Z nurses have a critical role in driving advocacy, influencing policy change, and reforming healthcare systems. This theme highlights their potential to challenge the status quo, push for better working conditions, and ensure that healthcare policies align with the needs of both professionals and patients. Equipped with fresh perspectives, technological expertise, and a strong sense of social justice, Gen Z nurses are well-positioned to lead systemic changes that improve healthcare outcomes and workplace environments.

Cluster Theme 3.5: Technological Adaptation

The integration of technology into nursing practice is transforming the healthcare landscape, enhancing efficiency, and improving patient outcomes. This theme highlights the necessity for nurses to embrace technological innovations as part of their professional development. By adapting to advancements such as digital health records, telehealth, and automated systems, nurses can streamline workflows, reduce administrative burdens, and focus on delivering high-quality patient care.

Cluster Theme 3.6: Resilience and Positivity

Resilience and a positive outlook are essential traits that enable nurses to overcome the challenges inherent in their profession. This theme underscores the importance of mental and emotional strength in navigating difficult situations, adapting to change, and maintaining a commitment to providing high-quality patient care. Resilience fosters growth, while positivity helps sustain motivation and a sense of purpose, even in the face of adversity.

Cluster Theme 3.7: Empathy in Patient Care

Empathy is a cornerstone of effective and compassionate patient care, allowing nurses to connect deeply with their patients and provide support tailored to their unique needs. This theme emphasizes the role of understanding and compassion in building trust, enhancing communication, and fostering a healing environment. Empathy not only benefits patients but also enriches the nurse-patient relationship, contributing to more holistic care.

Dicussion

This chapter discusses the implications of the research findings on nursing practice, healthcare institutions, and future research concerning Generation Z nurses. The primary aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Gen Z nurses working in medical-surgical units, focusing on their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and professional growth. Through thematic analysis of their narratives, the study illuminated several critical themes, such as physical and emotional strain, resilience, the significance of teamwork, and the role of technology in their professional lives. These findings offer valuable insights for workforce management, nursing education, and policy development to support a resilient and adaptable nursing workforce.

The study highlights the need for enhanced support systems within medical-surgical units. These measures include ensuring adequate nurse-to-patient ratios, providing consistent access to essential medical supplies and equipment, offering structured mental health support programs, and establishing clear career development pathways. Strategies such as reduced shift lengths, adequate staffing, and access to mental health resources can mitigate burnout and enhance job satisfaction. Furthermore, fostering a culture that values self-care, resilience, and empathy is essential for sustaining high-quality patient care. Nurses' emphasis on teamwork and collaboration points to the need for regular team-building activities and mentorship programs to strengthen peer relationships and create a supportive work environment.

Healthcare facility must adapt to the technological adeptness of Gen Z nurses by investing in advanced tools and digital systems that streamline workflows and reduce administrative burdens. Emphasizing technology training and integration in nursing practice can improve operational efficiency and allow nurses to focus more on patient care. Institutions should also prioritize professional development opportunities, such as continuing education programs and leadership training, to nurture the growth-oriented mindset of this generation. These initiatives not only enhance the competencies of individual nurses but also contribute to the overall advancement of the healthcare workforce.

This study opens avenues for future research into the long-term impact of workplace dynamics on the career trajectories and mental health of Gen Z nurses. Further studies could explore how organizational culture and leadership styles influence job satisfaction and retention rates among young healthcare professionals. Additionally, examining the interplay between technology adoption and patient outcomes in diverse healthcare settings can provide deeper insights into optimizing nursing practices. Research that continues to center the voices and experiences of Gen Z nurses will be instrumental in shaping inclusive policies and sustainable strategies for the evolving healthcare landscape. By addressing these implications, stakeholders can create a more supportive, innovative, and empowering environment for Gen Z nurses, ensuring their continued contribution to the healthcare profession.

Recommendations For Future Researcher

Future researcher looking to expand on the study are encouraged to broaden the participant demographic by including Gen Z nurses from various hospital departments such as Emergency, ICU, or Pediatrics, as well as those from different geographical locations a richer and more varied perspective on their experiences could achieved. Conducting a longitudinal study to examine these lived experiences over time would also be advantageous, allowing for the observation of how their motivation and coping mechanism. While this research concentrate on qualitative narrative.

Future researchers can enhance the development of more effective nursing policies and workplace interventions by using a mixed- methods design, which yields evidence- based recommendations that are both statistically sound and rooted in real-life experiences. Expanding on the results of this qualitative study, it is recommended that upcoming research adopt s a mixed methods approach to attain a more thorough understanding of the experiences of Generation Z nurses in Medical-Surgical units. Integrating qualitative and quantitative methods can offer richer insights into the elements impacting nurse staying, job satisfaction and overall well being.

By focusing on these areas, future research can provide actionable insights that empower Generation Z nurses, enhance their professional experiences, and contribute to the development of resilient and future-ready healthcare systems.

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