“Discover the meaning of professionalism”: nursing alumni experience on professional identity: a phenomenology study

Wulan Noviani¹*, Elsye Maria Rosa²

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Professional identity is nursing education institutions’ main goal that influences self-perception on the profession’s job responsibilities, roles, and characteristics due to professional socialization. However, integrating professional identity to nursing career’s alumni of Bachelor Nursing Program Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta remains limited to explore. This study aims to explore the Bachelor nursing alumni’s lived experience integrating professional identity into their careers in Indonesia.

Methods: A phenomenological approach was used in this study, along with a maximum variation sampling technique. There are seventeen nursing alumni recruited who had been working as professionals in various nursing careers. The data was collected by a semi-structured interview between 60-90 minutes through video calls on WhatsApp. Data analysis was used Colaizzi’s methods and Nvivo 12™ Plus.

Results: Three themes emerged from data; 1) Discover the meaning of professionalism, with three sub-themes: fulfill professional qualification, having expertise, and apply theory into practice; 2) Internalization Islamic values & beliefs, with four sub-themes: caring, having Islamic spirituality, giving excellence, and responsibility; 3) Awareness worked as a professional, with four sub-themes: passionate, multitasking, independence, and apply soft skills.

Conclusion: Nursing alumni integrated nursing professionalism into their identity—incorporation of professional identity impacts personal and professional image and boosted nurses’ careers.

Keywords: nursing career, phenomenology study, professional identity.

INTRODUCTION

Professional identity is critical in recognizing a nursing career related to the job description, roles, and professional characteristics.¹,²,³ However, registered nurses face difficulty defining their professional roles in hospitals.⁴ Although nursing professionalism has improved globally, nurses continue to be viewed as a subordinate profession⁵, and nurses are portrayed as less competent by media than other health professionals.⁶,⁷ Promoting professionalism, particularly professional identity, is required by the nursing profession to achieve public recognition¹,²,⁶,⁷ and improve the retention into a nursing career.⁸

Nursing higher education has an influential role in shaping a strong professional identity for the graduates⁹, which has resulted in nursing career longevity, job satisfaction, reduced turnover, and improved patient outcomes.³,⁵,¹⁰ Having a strong professional identity empowers nurses in the workplace and functions their role effectively.³ Professional identity is a self-concept that reflects how nurses perceive the nursing profession,¹¹ and it is based on attributes, characteristics, beliefs, values, and experiences in carrying out professional roles¹² to achieve a sense of identity in a job.¹² In addition, professional identity is the result of nursing education institutions and includes decision-making elements for selecting a future career.⁷,⁸,¹³

Nursing careers are known for being busy, caring for others, hard work, and having job security. Still, they fall short of ideal carries in terms of autonomy, financial remuneration, and respect compared to other health professions.¹⁴ Furthermore, nursing education institutions can create nursing career paths that emphasize knowledge, skills, as well as a strong professional identity as a professional.¹⁵ Nursing education, clinical practice, and work all contribute to developing one’s professional identity, which continues throughout one’s career as a nurse.¹⁶ Nurses’ self-concept and professional identity can be influenced by education, experience, work values, cultural and social values, work environment, and public image.¹ There is a gap in the literature regarding the professional identity of clinical nurses in hospital¹⁷ and the other nursing career, such as nurse educators and nurse managers. Thus, the lived experienced nursing alumni related how they integrate professional identity into personal accounts in various nursing careers are vital to explore. The purpose of the phenomenology study was to discover the lived experience of nursing alumni to

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integrate professional identity into their careers in Indonesia.

**METHODS**

This was a descriptive qualitative study with a phenomenological approach.\(^{16,17}\) This study included seventeen nursing alumni with at least two years of working experience in various nursing careers, such as nurse educators, nurse managers, and clinical nurses abroad and in Indonesia. From March to June 2020, participants were chosen using a maximum variation sampling technique. Data were collected via WhatsApp video call within 60-90 minutes, corresponding to the participant's free time. Following permission from the participants, data collection began with a semi-structured interview. The interview was audio-recorded, verbatim transcribed and validated by the researchers after they listened to the recording and re-reading the transcript. The discussion begins with the main questions: "Would there be a specific experience that stands out in your mind on professional identity when working as professionals? How do you incorporate it into your accounts in your nursing career?"

For data analysis, Nvivo 12 plus software and seven Colaizzi methods were used. The steps taken by Colaizzi were as follows: 1) data familiarization; 2) significant statement identification; 3) meanings formulation; 4) themes clusterization; 5) development of detailed description; 6) fundamental structure production; and 7) fundamental structure verification.\(^{18,19}\) To support the analysis, Nvivo 12\(^{TM}\) plus was used, and three senior qualitative researchers ensured software and oversight; they assessed narrative syntheses as well as a sample of interview transcripts and field notes.

This study supported the credibility, conformability, saturation, and transferability proposed by Carnevale's four criteria for the qualitative study.\(^{20}\) Long-term involvement with the participants in 3 times interactions, discussions with experts in qualitative (for reviewing the interview transcripts and field notes), triangulation methods, and writing reflective journals to bracket the assumptions of researchers all contributed to the study's credibility. A conformability attempt was made by distributing a copy of the transcript to each participant for member checking, follow-up interviews, and audit trails. A flexible sample size was used (17 nursing alumni recruited from various nursing careers, such as nurse educators, clinical nurses, and nurse managers, both gender). For transferability, a comprehensive and complete description of the research context was used to improve the generalization and implementation of findings in other situations with similar situations. The Ethical Committee granted ethical clearance approved ethical clearance under the number 1102/KEP-UNISA/II/2020. The participants were informed in writing and orally that participation was entirely voluntary, and confidentiality was guaranteed. The research data could only be accessed if all of the research data was available.

**RESULTS**

Most participants were female (58.82 percent; n= 10), while (41.18 percent; 7) were male nursing alumni. With nine alumni, most of the participants were between the ages of 31 and 35 years old. The working experience of the 13 alumni ranged from 6 to 10 years. The majority level of education is Bachelor of Nursing Science, with ten alumni. In this study, nine alumni have married. Most of them are clinical nurses who worked in Indonesia. The data analysis revealed three themes and eleven sub-themes. Table 1 displays themes and sub-themes of the study findings.

**Themes 1. Discover the meaning of professionalism**

Participants described the meaning of professionalism in their nursing career. There were three sub-themes identified: fulfilling professional qualification, having expertise, and applying theory into practice.

**Fulfill professional qualification**

Findings showed that participants nursing alumni had fulfilled the requirements as professionals. The following is an expression from the participants

"...being a professional nurse means that I have worked according to the existing nursing career and then suitable with my competencies as well as graduated from Bachelor nursing program. For example, I was graduated with Bachelor's degree in nursing for both programs, academic and professional. Also, I have passed the national competency examination that proved I am competent and fulfill the requirements as a general nurse in Indonesia...(P7)

"...professional nurses are competent in nursing knowledge, capable of behaving suitably with professional standards and ethics. They also could integrate the cognitive, affective and psychomotor abilities in their work..."(P3)

**Having expertise**

Findings showed that participants have the expertise to develop their professionalism in their nursing careers. The participant explained in the following statements.

"...to support my job as a professional nurse, I join in training and workshop. Then, I becoming an expert in orthopedics nursing..." (P2)

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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<td>Discover the meaning of professionalism</td>
<td>• Fulfill professional qualification</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internalization of Islamic values and beliefs</td>
<td>• Having expertise</td>
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<td>• Apply theory into practice</td>
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**Table 1. Themes and sub-themes of the study.**
"...becoming an expert in wound care. I am a lecturer in medical-surgical nursing, and I have certified in wound care specialist. This is to support my professionalism when I teach my students." (P17)

Apply theory into practice
Findings showed that participants implemented theory into practice. The participant explained in the following statements.

"It is my principle to ensure patient safety and implement nursing theory into practice. For example, follow the SPO wound care, wash my hands five moments and ensure that the tools for only one patient..."(P4)

"I teach nursing students how to treat wounds correctly according to the theory, and I share with them the latest knowledge and skills related to wound care. Furthermore, I directly to taking care of the patient with many variations of the wound. So, it can balance my job as a lecturer and independent practice as wound nurse." (P17)

Theme 2. Internalization of Islamic Values and Beliefs
According to the data, nursing alumni explained that the internalization of Islamic values and beliefs has a role in shaping a strong professional identity in the nursing career. There have been five identified sub-themes: caring, having Islamic spirituality, giving excellence, and responsibility.

Caring
Caring has been internalized and applied in the nursing intervention, according to the participants. It is the participants as mentioned above statements.

"I treat patients wholeheartedly, according to my profession, take care without discrimination, work suitably with Standard Operating Procedures (SPO) and be responsible. I give the opportunity for patients and their families to ask questions before the nursing intervention. Before I give injection for the patient, I provide him with the aims and procedure of nursing intervention, then I ask his consent and waiting for his readiness to do it..."(P8)

Having Islamic spirituality
The participants said that Islamic spirituality came from their education, which can strengthen their nursing careers. The following is an expression from the participants.

"Alhamdulillah, I delighted when I taught Islamic values during my education. Now, I am aware that it can raise my professionalism through having higher spirituality and optimism in my career as a professional. So, khusnuzon billah is very important because it gives strength in all conditions..." (P5)

"Alhamdulillah, I feel blessed even though nothing has been smooth in my nursing career. But it feels good, there are many difficulties, there are always many conveniences that God brings. I have high spirituality to keep learning in that way..."(P7)

Giving excellence
The participants also emphasized that giving the best services. The following is an expression from the participants.

"It is an unforgettable experience when I collaborate with the anesthesiologist to save the patient's life. We try to do our best for the patient, and it works. After being treated by us, he went home safely."(P3)

"I can control myself when teaching many students with different characteristics. I become more patient to serve them, and I provide the best service without discrimination."(P16).

Responsibility
The participants said that responsibility had been internalized in their job. The following are the statements of the participants.

"responsibility is number one, the most important is trust. If we are placed in a special place, it means that the leader believes we are capable of doing that, and I will do my best. Now, I am the chief of quality assurance in nursing school. I try to be a good role model for others" (P16)

Theme 3. Awareness worked as a professional
Nursing alumni perceived that awareness worked as a professional based on the data, with sub-themes: passionate, multitasking, independence and applying soft skills.

Passionate
The participants stated that having passionate about the nursing job. It is the following statements from participants.

"Personally, I prefer becoming a clinical nurse, because I got satisfaction when I can apply my skills to taking care my patients..."(P9)

"so becoming a lecturer is fun, I feel very blessed and more satisfied when all of my work programs are carried out..."(P7)

Multitasking
The participants said that having multiple abilities to finish their job in the workplace. The following is an expression from the participants.

"...all multitasking is much work. I am a lecturer but also I should do a job in the structure of nursing school. I must do many jobs, such as teaching and learning, conduct research, join in community services, take care of students in clinical practice, and become a chief in the quality assurance unit. There is much pressure and demand from my leader. However, there is a little empowerment so that apart from taking care of educational problems, the structural problems are endless, so sometimes it starts to be neglected because I have a much of work pressure..." (P16)

Independence
The participants also conveyed that having independence as a professional. The following is an expression from the participants.

"professional nurse has a role as frontline, so he directly deals with the patients with the various condition and assesses the patient problem independently....."(P1)

"professional nurses have the ability to approach the patient personally. If the patient showing the signs violent behavior, so nurses know how to deal with herself ..."(P4)

Apply soft skills
The participants said soft skills, such as communication skills and collaboration. The following are the statements of the participants.
...communication skills, including understanding that person’s character, is the most important, then the ability to collaborate with professional health teams. Working as a professional must be creative and innovative.” (P5)

DISCUSSION

The study sheds light on how nursing alumni’s professional identities are integrated into their nursing careers. There is a link between the learning outcomes, practice, meaning and identity. Three themes in this study were emerged “discover the meaning of professionalism,” “internalization of Islamic values & beliefs” and “awareness worked as professionals.” These three themes became important aspects of the nursing alumni’ professional identity integration into their nursing careers.

The theme discovers the meaning of professionalism in accordance the Wenger’s theory (1998). Identity is the result of interaction between local and global activities such as practice. Nurses could adjust their behavior to remain on familiar ground. It could be understood as an interpretation expressing how nurses defined their owning meaning. Nurses could control the meaning that was important for their decision to stay in a nursing career. Based on the study, it came to light that professionalism had considerably positive influences on enhancing the nursing alumni’s career. The data shows that nursing alumni should have fulfilled the minimum educational degree and competencies as general nurses in Indonesia. To advance their nursing career, they should have expertise and join professional development programs, such as training, workshops, seminars, etc. Expertise in nursing is recommended for enhancing nursing careers, not only for nurse educators but also for clinical nurses.

According to Wenger’s theory, an identity is a form of competence. The nurse’s competence established accountability and aided in developing important meanings in the nursing workforce. Furthermore, the nurses’ responsibility has the potential to change how an enterprise sees the world and claims that maintained interaction in practice results in the understanding, interpreting, and using the practice’s knowledge base. The current study discovered that nursing alumni put theory into practice. Nurse educators face the most difficult challenge when teaching nursing students in clinical practice: putting theory into practice. It is also supported by nurses’ impact on student nurses’ learning about values and beliefs of the nursing profession that resulted in the high intention to stay in nursing. This study adds to previous research demonstrating the influence of professional socialization on nurses’ and nursing students’ personal and professional development.

The theme “internalization of Islamic values & beliefs” reflects how alumni incorporated their Islamic values and belief into their professional identity. In the current study, the participant has internalized Islamic values and beliefs to develop their professional identity in nursing career through Islamic spirituality, caring, giving excellence, and responsibility. According to a recent study, nursing students of UMY have internalized Islamic values such as belief in God, sincerity, and caring. The basic principle of Islam is unquestioning submission to Allah’s commandments, which allows Muslims to live in harmony with the world. Caring is deeply embedded in theological Islam and is meant to be an outcome of acquiring and demonstrating devotion for Allah. Several studies have identified caring as one of the most important professional values in nursing practice for Muslim countries, such as Turkey, Kuwait, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia. This is supported by applying the Islamic-based caring model that places trust in God (Allah SWT) as the dominant dimension in caring by Indonesian nurses.

According to evidence, caring, altruism, and professionalism among Iranian nurses are grounded in religious beliefs and spirituality. Trust in God help nurses improve their qualities and advance their careers. It could also lead to the growth and demonstration of values that included faith in God and a divine worldwide. There is a strong link between faith in God and frequently applying ethical values that improve patient outcomes. Islamic religious values and beliefs significantly impact nurses’ attitudes and behavior when providing nursing care. This is supported by the ideology of Islamic care, which offers the best care for humans without being limited by race, religion, certain ethnicity of its adherents. Muslim nurses who provide care to patients will be blessed in order for it to be mutually beneficial for both them through the best expressions and actions of care. The theme “awareness worked as professionals” also reflected the influence of collective identity by the nursing profession, which manifested as their professional identity. Individual nurses are positively influenced by collective identity as they build who they are as professionals. The nurses’ identity entails negotiating their way of belonging to become a part of a broad constellation and participate in large discourses. According to one study, nurses’ professional identities are linked to their ability, willingness, legitimacy, and insight to integrate the aspect of the nursing profession into their identity. Based on the study finding, it has been provided with the information that they had awareness worked as professional nurses, such as passionate, multitasking, independence and applied soft skills. A professional nurse works in accordance with their organization in the nursing profession and is aware of the significance of achieving professional knowledge, values and attitudes. It also supported the Kanter theory of structural empowerment, which included three aspects: the structure of opportunity, power, and proportion. Nurses who believe they are empowered at work are more likely to bring about the chance and improve patient outcomes. Professional identity is determined as one’s perception of oneself in relation to one’s work. A recent study discovered professional identity plays a critical role in nursing retention and developing a sense of belonging. Previous research has established the significance of professional identity in the decision to continue in a nursing career. However, the decision to stay in a nursing career is not viewed as preferable solely based on reflection of the professional identity congruent with self-concept or self-identification with the nursing field or the sense of becoming a professional. The limitation of this
study is the study’s findings cannot be generalized to the entire population.

CONCLUSION

This paper describes how nursing alumni integrate their professional identity into nursing careers by discovering the meaning of professionalism, internalizing Islamic values and beliefs, and their awareness worked as professionals. Nursing alumni incorporated nursing professionalism into their identity, and it has impacts on personal and professional image and the career of nurses.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest, according to the authors.

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None.

ETHICS APPROVAL

This study has been approved by The Universitas Aisyiyah Yogyakarta ethics committee (ethical approval No: 1102/ KEP-UNISA/II/2020).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors contributed equally to the study, including data collection, analysis, and publication of the findings.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

