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THE INNER STRENGTH OF HEALTHCARE: GAUGING OPTIMISM AS A PERSONAL RESOURCE IN NURSING

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ABSTRACT

As frontline healthcare professionals who serve as boundary spanners, nurses' attitudes and psychological orientations directly impact the quality and safety of healthcare services. This is particularly evident in public hospitals, where positive outcome expectancies and cognitive fortitude exert a significant effect on sustaining high job performance. Therefore, to unlock the inner strength necessary for delivering high-quality, sustainable healthcare services, cultivating and understanding nurses' dispositional optimism is essential. To explore this foundational inner strength, the present study examined the level of dispositional optimism among staff nurses across six cognitive and outcome expectancy indicators adapted from the standardized Life Orientation Test Revised (LOT-R). The sample comprised 455 female staff nurses across four public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that nurses demonstrated an elevated overall baseline level of dispositional optimism. Notably, the indicator reflecting self-determination and personal agency ("Where there's will, there's a way") registered the highest endorsement, whereas expectations of success when undertaking unfamiliar challenges recorded the lowest rating. These insights demonstrate that while nurses possess significant intrinsic resilience and positive future expectancies, structured administrative guidance and supportive mentorship remain vital to reinforce their situational confidence during nursing transitions.

KEYWORDS: Optimism, COR Theory, healthcare, nurses, personal resources, public hospitals.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The continuity, accessibility, and overall quality of nursing services within modern healthcare ecosystems are largely sustained by the central role of nurses, particularly in public hospital facilities that manage substantial patient influxes despite tangible physical and operational resource constraints. However, the healthcare sector is currently confronting a worsening workforce crisis on an international scale. Projections from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate an

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impending deficit of roughly 10 million healthcare workers by 2030, with clinical nursing bearing the heaviest burden (Boniol et al., 2022). Public hospital systems experience this pressure acutely, as bedside nurses must balance relentless patient throughput and dense administrative responsibilities against persistent operational constraints. As a consequence of such prolonged pressures, not only are employees' emotional stability and psychosocial well-being compromised, but the standard of patient safety may also be endangered while simultaneously escalating voluntary staff turnover rates (Ekingen et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2024). These structural vulnerabilities have become even more apparent in the wake of global health crises and recurrent ward congestion, which have accelerated physical and emotional exhaustion (burnout) among frontline staff. Given this demanding work environment, exploring the internal psychological buffers and positive cognitive orientations that sustain nurses' resilience, motivation, and professional commitment warrants profound research priority.

A growing area of focus within positive organizational behaviour research is the exploration of personal psychological resources, particularly the construct of optimism (Carver et al., 2010; Luthans et al., 2007; Park & Ha, 2025). Optimism reflects the extent to which individuals expect favourable outcomes to occur in life and perceive occupational obstacles as manageable challenges that can be overcome through personal agency (Scheier & Carver, 1985). In healthcare research, favourable personal resources and optimistic outlooks have been consistently linked to enhanced job satisfaction, superior clinical performance, and mitigated burnout and turnover intentions within demanding hospital environments (Alkorashy& Alanazi, 2023; Contreras et al., 2020; Ghazawy et al., 2021; Neuber et al., 2022). Within an arduous work context marked by chronic operational constraints, nurturing nurses' optimism is not merely a supplementary welfare benefit; it represents an essential organizational necessity for preserving care quality and workforce stability. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the level of optimism among nurses in Malaysian public hospitals to explore their internal cognitive resources in coping with daily professional challenges.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Optimism as a Personal Psychological Resource

Optimism, as conceptualized by Scheier and Carver (1985), refers to a dispositional cognitive orientation wherein an individual generally anticipates positive rather than negative outcomes in life. Within positive organizational psychology, Luthans et al. (2007) categorized optimism as one of the core dimensions of Psychological Capital (PsyCap), alongside self-efficacy, hope, and resilience. Distinct from unrealistic wishful thinking, realistic workplace optimism reflects an adaptive attribution style wherein employees attribute success to personal capability and effort, whereas setbacks are viewed as temporary, externally driven, and modifiable through revised strategies (Carver et al., 2010).

Extensive empirical research indicates that optimistic employees consistently demonstrate superior performance and psychological stability compared to pessimistic peers (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). According to Bakker and Demerouti (2008), four primary mechanisms account for this advantage. First, optimistic individuals frequently experience positive affect, such

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as hope, vigor, and cognitive tranquillity. Second, optimistic workers enjoy better physical health due to more resilient biological coping mechanisms against physiological strain. Third, optimistic employees actively cultivate and preserve personal resources and social networks within their workplace (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Othman &Nasurdin, 2013). Fourth, optimism is socially transmissible; optimistic employees share their constructive outlook with colleagues, thereby cultivating a cohesive, mutually supportive workplace climate (Schaufeli, 2021). Consequently, fostering high optimism has emerged as a strategic organizational priority for driving performance, job satisfaction, and employee retention.

In the nursing profession, optimism plays a crucial role due to the intense physical demands and emotional rigor inherent in bedside care. Dispositional optimism is reflected in nurses' ability to navigate long night shifts, staffing shortages, and clinical emergencies with composure and efficiency (Hisel, 2020; Scott et al., 2022). Future-oriented confidence fosters clinical resilience, which is closely aligned with an intrinsic appreciation for their professional calling, thereby buffering emotional exhaustion and reinforcing organizational commitment (Cao et al., 2019; Mamari & Groves, 2023). Conversely, when personal optimism is eroded, nurses risk emotional disengagement from their duties, ultimately triggering intentions to leave the profession entirely (Feng et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2024).

Numerous empirical investigations have examined personal psychological resources within demanding healthcare environments, identifying dispositional optimism as a primary cognitive buffer against occupational strain (Alkorashy& Alanazi, 2023; Jenaro et al., 2010; Mamari & Groves, 2023; Othman et al., 2019; Zahrah et al., 2019). In a study of 412 nurses, Jenaro et al. (2010) demonstrated that positive personal outlooks significantly bolstered job dedication while mitigating clinical care stressors. Through qualitative inquiry among acute care nurses, Mamari and Groves (2023) observed that professional engagement remains anchored in an optimistic conviction that nursing is a purpose driven calling, sustained by forward looking hope. Similarly, Zahrah et al. (2019), surveying 364 public hospital nurses, confirmed that intense clinical workloads necessitate robust internal psychological reservoirs to sustain high service standards. Reinforcing this perspective, Othman et al. (2019) surveyed 366 nurses and revealed that core psychological capital dimensions, most notably optimism and resilience, exerted a decisive positive influence on workplace attitudes. These findings align with earlier evidence by Othman and Nasurdin (2013), verifying that nurses' optimistic coping assets and supportive work environments operate synergistically to alleviate chronic nursing exhaustion.

2.2 Theory Related to Optimism

To explicate the mechanisms governing the preservation of nurses' well-being and affective stability within demanding nursing settings, this study is grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory developed by Hobfoll (1989). Under COR theory, individuals continuously strive to secure, protect, and accumulate foundational resources encompassing social backing, cognitive energy, and structural support. When employees encounter actual resource depletion, face impending loss, or fail to recoup emotional investments after intense work exertion, strain and

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burnout predictably follow. This conceptualization directly mirrors the realities of the nursing profession, which is characterized by relentless physical demands, sustained emotional exhaustion, and acute case burdens, thereby rendering the availability of internal resources paramount.

Through the lens of COR theory, optimism is recognized as an indispensable personal resource that buffers healthcare practitioners against psychological fatigue (Hobfoll et al., 2018). An optimistic disposition establishes an enduring psychological shield, enabling nurses to withstand operational pressures without exhausting their emotional reservoirs, thereby halting detrimental loss spirals that impair occupational functioning (Demerouti et al., 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Concurrently, optimism operates as an active catalyst for resource gain spirals. Nurses with favourable outcome expectancies tend to exhibit greater initiative in fostering team synergy, seeking leadership guidance, and implementing constructive job crafting strategies tailored to their capabilities (Park &Ha, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Accordingly, COR theory underscores that organizational investments in reinforcing nurses' psychological capital extend beyond routine employee welfare; rather, they serve as a strategic prerequisite for sustaining workforce dedication and delivering exceptional standards of care.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Samples and Procedures

Following formal ethical approval from the Medical Research and Ethics Committee (MREC) of the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH), a cross-sectional survey was administered across four public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia. The target population comprised staff nurses assigned to inpatient wards and specialized clinics. With the administrative cooperation of the respective Hospital Matron Offices, 550 self-administered questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaire distribution and collection process lasted approximately one month. Of the 550 surveys distributed, 455 completed sets were returned with usable data, yielding an effective response rate of 82.7%.

3.2 Instrument

Optimism was measured using six items adapted from the standardized Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R) developed by Scheier et al. (1994). These items capture dispositional cognitive expectations: “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best”, “I always look on the bright side of things”, “I'm always optimistic about my future”, “When I undertake something new, I expect to succeed”, “Where there's will, there's a way”, and “In general, things turn out alright in the end”. Respondents indicated their agreement along a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 7 ("Strongly agree"). In the present study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86.

3.3 Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistical procedures were conducted to systematically evaluate the empirical data. Participants' demographic characteristics were presented utilizing frequencies and percentages to offer a clear summary of the sample profile, including age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, and job tenure. Descriptive analytical techniques, encompassing frequency counts, percentages, means, and

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standard deviations (SD), were subsequently employed to examine the level of optimism across the six measured items. The analysis specifically sought to assess nurses' evaluations along the seven-point Likert scale. Through the implementation of these statistical measures, the study successfully identified the distribution patterns and central tendencies of the data, providing significant perspectives into the intensity and characteristics of optimism among the participating nursing workforce.

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile reveals that the surveyed sample comprised solely female registered nurses (N = 455, 100.0%). The participants spanned an age range of 24 to 58 years, with an overall mean age of 35.82 years (SD = 7.64). In terms of marital status, an overwhelming proportion of 418 respondents (91.87%) were married, whereas 37 nurses (8.13%) reported being single. Regarding ethnic composition, the vast majority identified as Malay (n = 440, 96.70%), while Chinese and Indian healthcare workers accounted for 9 individuals (1.98%) and 6 individuals (1.32%), respectively. Furthermore, the participating workforce demonstrated extensive nursing background, possessing an average job tenure of 11.95 years (SD = 6.88) in nursing practice. A comprehensive breakdown of these respondent attributes is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Demographic Factor	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	455	100
	Male	0	0
Marital Status	Married	418	91.87
	Unmarried	37	8.13
Ethnicity	Malay	440	96.70
	Chinese	9	1.98
	Indian	6	1.32
	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Age (yr.)	35.82	7.64	
Job Tenure (yr.)	11.95	6.88	

4.2 Descriptive Analysis of Optimism

This section outlines the descriptive findings regarding nurses' optimism, detailing the mean scores, standard deviations, and percentage distributions across the six items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 7 = "Strongly agree"). Table 2 presents the complete descriptive summary.

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The first item, "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best", achieved a mean score of 5.19 (SD=1.31). Examining the response distribution, 36.9% of nurses selected "Agree", followed by 28.4% selecting "Slightly agree", and 11.6% indicating "Strongly agree". This profile shows that a notable majority maintain positive outcome expectancies during uncertain clinical conditions. Furthermore, Item 2 ("I always look on the bright side of things") and Item 3 ("I'm always optimistic about my future") registered higher mean scores of 5.47 (SD=1.24) and 5.54 (SD=1.21), respectively. A substantial proportion of nurses endorsed these items across the "Agree" to "Strongly agree" spectrum, illustrating constructive affective and cognitive orientations toward life and work.

Item 5, "Where there's will, there's a way", registered the highest mean score overall at 5.76, alongside the lowest dispersion (SD=1.12). A predominant majority strongly affirmed this statement, with 41.5% selecting "Agree" and 25.9% choosing "Strongly agree". This pattern highlights significant agency and conviction that professional and environmental difficulties can be navigated through deliberate determination. Additionally, Item 6 ("In general, things turn out alright in the end") achieved a favourable mean of 5.28 (SD=1.29), with 32.1% indicating "Agree" and 26.2% selecting "Slightly agree".

Conversely, Item 4 ("When I undertake something new, I expect to succeed") recorded the lowest mean score within the measure (M=5.11, SD=1.32). This item elicited a high neutral response (14.9% selecting "Neither agree or disagree") as well as a combined disagreement rate of 11.0% across the lower scales. This distribution suggests that nurses exhibit greater caution and less automatic certainty when confronting unfamiliar procedures or changing workplace protocols.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that staff nurses maintain a high baseline level of optimism (M=5.39, SD=1.25). These results align with Othman et al. (2019), who observed substantial psychological capital, particularly dispositional optimism and resilience, among public hospital nurses. This is further reinforced by Park and Ha (2025), who found that elevated psychological capital among clinical nurses serves as a crucial internal resource for navigating daily practice demands. While nurses generally exhibit positive outlooks, the comparatively lower mean on Item 4 implies that professional accountability and nursing complexity warrant targeted support during the rollout of new tasks.

Table 2: Frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation scores for optimism

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Scale						
				Strongly disagree	**Disagree**	**Slightly disagree**	**Neither agree or disagree**	**Slightly agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**
1	In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.	5.19	1.31	4 (0.9%)	20 (4.4%)	30 (6.6%)	51 (11.2%)	129 (28.4%)	168 (36.9%)	53 (11.6%)
2	I always look on the bright side of things.	5.47	1.24	6 (1.3%)	4 (0.9%)	32 (7.0%)	29 (6.4%)	124 (27.3%)	176 (38.7%)	84 (18.5%)
3	I'm always optimistic about my future.	5.54	1.21	4 (0.9%)	7 (1.5%)	19 (4.2%)	41 (9.0%)	117 (25.7%)	171 (37.6%)	96 (21.1%)
4	When I undertake something new, I expect to	5.11	1.32	9 (2.0%)	14 (3.1%)	27 (5.9%)	68 (14.9%)	139 (30.5%)	146 (32.1%)	52 (11.4%)

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	succeed.									
5	Where there's will, there's a way.	5.76	1.12	4 (0.9%)	2 (0.4%)	14 (3.1%)	29 (6.4%)	99 (21.8%)	189 (41.5%)	118 (25.9%)
6	In general, things turn out alright in the end.	5.28	1.29	5 (1.1%)	6 (1.3%)	32 (7.0%)	70 (15.4%)	119 (26.2%)	146 (32.1%)	77 (16.9%)

5.0 DISCUSSION

The descriptive findings offer valuable empirical insight into nurses' internal psychological resources across six specific indicators of dispositional optimism. Aggregate results demonstrate that the nursing workforce maintains an elevated baseline level of optimism. Specifically, the items "Where there's will, there's a way" and "I'm always optimistic about my future" achieved the highest mean ratings alongside the lowest standard deviations. A plausible explanation for this pattern lies in the substantial job tenure of the respondents (averaging 11.95 years), coupled with professional dedication and occupational pride. The intrinsic nature of clinical nursing provides continuous opportunities to facilitate patient recovery and deliver compassionate care, generating profound affective rewards. In alignment with Mamari and Groves (2023), a defining attribute of the nursing profession is the deep sense of purpose derived from clinical responsibilities, which engages practitioners across cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions.

Furthermore, favourable evaluations across indicators measuring future outlook suggest that nurses possess robust psychological preparedness to confront operational challenges within public hospital settings. Under the theoretical framework of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018), this positive expectancy constitutes an essential personal resource reservoir. These psychological assets serve as a defensive buffer against emotional exhaustion and physical depletion precipitated by chronic staffing shortages and dense clinical workloads (Demerouti et al., 2001; Feng et al., 2025). Consequently, dispositional optimism facilitates the preservation of cognitive and energetic reserves, enabling nurses to uphold procedural focus and standards of care.

Nevertheless, the comparatively lower mean score observed for Item 4 ("When I undertake something new, I expect to succeed") (M=5.11, SD=1.32), coupled with a noticeable proportion of neutral evaluations, reflects the highly structured and risk-averse nature of nursing environments. Modern healthcare delivery is governed by stringent patient safety mandates, standardized clinical protocols, and rigorous accountability frameworks. Consequently, the rollout of unfamiliar procedures, revised clinical protocols, or digital hospital systems naturally elicits calculated professional vigilance rather than uninhibited optimism. Task ambiguity, unstandardized instructions, or insufficient instructional training during workflow transitions can evoke clinical apprehension and diminish situational confidence among bedside practitioners (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Labrague et al., 2020). Therefore, while frontline nurses demonstrate considerable personal fortitude, structured managerial interventions, formal preceptorship frameworks, and systematic orientation programs remain essential to reinforce optimistic outlook when navigating operational transformations.

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6.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that nurses in Malaysian public hospitals exhibit a high level of dispositional optimism, evidenced particularly by their strong personal determination and positive future orientation. They consistently display perseverance and resolve to navigate workplace pressures. However, the comparatively moderate scores observed for success expectations in novel tasks suggest that procedural transitions induce clinical caution. To bolster confidence during operational changes, hospital leadership should reduce role ambiguity and implement comprehensive preceptorship programs. Ensuring structured mentorship and supportive leadership will preserve nurses'optimistic outlook and professional confidence, thereby sustaining superior care quality and patient safety across public healthcare settings.

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