

Experiences of Gen Zs in movement competency training course: basis for contextualizing the Philippine PATH-Fit

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of Generation Z (Gen Z) students from rural communities in the PATH-Fit 1 course (movement competency training) to identify ways to improve the Philippine Physical Activity Toward Health and Fitness (PATH-Fit) program. A qualitative-descriptive approach was used, with 20 students carefully selected for interviews. Open-ended questions, validated by experts, were used to gather detailed insights into the students' thoughts and experiences. The findings revealed that students enjoyed the engaging activities, the focus on overall well-being, and the supportive nature of their teachers in PATH-Fit 1. However, they also found the course physically exhausting and too demanding, which led to frustration. Additionally, students expressed concerns about teacher absenteeism and the ineffectiveness of online classes, which negatively impacted their learning experience. These issues highlighted areas where the program could be improved to better meet the needs of rural Gen Z students. By addressing these concerns, the PATH-Fit program can be more effectively tailored to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes, ultimately providing a more positive and fulfilling educational experience for Gen Z learners in rural communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world faces a significant inactivity crisis, with 81% of youth and 27% of adults failing to meet the World Health Organization's physical activity targets [1]. Individuals should engage in 150-300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity, 75-150 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity, or a combination of both, weekly. Alarming, the Philippines ranks second globally, with 92% of its youth being inactive, posing a severe threat to public health [2].

Physical education (PE) is proactive in combatting this global crisis by conveying to students the necessary knowledge and skills to adopt and advocate for a physically active lifestyle [3]. Through structured curriculum and practical experiences, PE serves as a vital instrument in fostering lifelong habits of physical activity among youths, thereby mitigating the adverse effects of inactivity and contributing to improved public health outcomes [4].

The advent of Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 1995 and the early 2010s, marks a paradigm shift in societal norms, cultural landscapes, and educational frameworks [5]. Gen Z, often called Gen Z, is the first generation born in the twenty-first century to navigate a world shaped by technological advancements, globalization, and extraordinary access to information. Researchers outlined that understanding this group's values and characteristics is essential for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to tailor education programs to this generation's unique needs and interests [6].

Scholars from the United States revealed that Gen Z has a distinct set of values that set them apart from other generations. These digital natives have grown up in a digital age characterized by the extensiveness of smartphones, social media, and instant connectivity. Their innate technological fluency has influenced their communication styles and expectations for instant access to information, interactive learning experiences, and a global perspective. Having witnessed economic uncertainties, geopolitical shifts, and a fast-changing job market, Gen Z is characterized by practicality and resilience. Their values reflect a strong belief in environmental sustainability, diversity, equity, and social activism.

Further, this generation's reliance on digital technology can decrease physical activity levels and sedentary behaviors among youth, posing challenges for traditional PE programs primarily structured around in-person, instructor-led activities [7]. In rural communities, where access to technology and internet connectivity may be limited, traditional PE approaches centered on outdoor activities, sports, and group exercises may remain prevalent [8]. However, bridging the gap between Gen Z's digital preferences and traditional PE practices in rural communities requires innovative strategies that integrate technology-enhanced learning experiences, such as gamification, mobile applications, and online resources, to promote physical activity and wellness among youth while respecting the unique cultural and environmental contexts of rural settings.

On the other hand, implementing PE at the tertiary level in numerous educational institutions in the Philippines has faced significant challenges. These difficulties include curriculum implementation issues, teacher training insufficiencies, and a lack of emphasis on the subject, with its purpose often seen as more political than cultural. This historical context suggests that tertiary PE has been influenced by factors other than pedagogical concerns. The scholarly debate surrounding these issues emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach to improvement; thus, Abbasov and Mavlyanov [9] emphasize the critical role of increased resources, such as investments in human workforce development and school facilities, in improving PE's overall quality and effectiveness. These challenges are not unique to the Philippines, as similar issues have been reported in Malaysia, where PE subjects are often devalued and underprioritized.

Intending to address these significant issues, the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) mandated all higher education institutions (HEIs) to shift and offer the new tertiary PE program, Physical Activity Towards Health and Fitness (PATH-Fit), through CMO 39, series of 2021. As PATH-Fit is designed to provide a comprehensive and standardized curriculum, this initiative represents a proactive response to pressing issues such as the need for standardized teaching approaches. It provides a framework emphasizing physical fitness, essential life skills, and holistic development. Further, the program aligns with current educational needs, introducing novel approaches that can potentially improve the overall quality and effectiveness of tertiary PE [10].

The primary goal of PATH-Fit is to redefine and improve the landscape of Philippine tertiary PE by going beyond traditional frameworks. This will be made possible by offering a comprehensive program that integrates physical fitness with developing essential life skills, addressing long-standing challenges [11]. The CHED CMO 39 (s. 2021) further explained that the curriculum aims to provide students with a well-rounded educational experience emphasizing physical health, teamwork, communication, and holistic growth. PATH-Fit seeks to elevate the quality and effectiveness of tertiary PE by aligning with contemporary educational needs and introducing innovative approaches, ensuring that graduates are equipped with the knowledge and skills required for both personal well-being and active participation in society.

Numerous studies delved into the complex landscape of Gen Z, investigating their behaviors in industries and education. Bhore and Pandita [12] compared Gen Z and Gen Y, revealing that social media highly influences Gen Z's career decisions. At the same time, Ajmain [13] underscored the impact of technology on Gen Z's social communication skills, emphasizing the need for effective communication strategies. Arkhipova *et al.* [14] discovered that Gen Z students have a positive attitude toward technology in education, implying that a balanced use of technology can improve their learning performance. Giunta [15] emphasized Gen Z college students' high expectations for trust and reliance on social media, indicating the need for educators to understand and adapt to their unique characteristics and preferences.

Further, recent studies in tertiary PE in the Philippines focused on assessing the efficacy of existing curricula [16], pedagogical approaches [17], and the overall learning experience [18]. These studies investigated student engagement, teacher practices, curriculum design, and the impact of technology on PE [19]. Panganiban [20] has also emphasized the importance of program curriculum flexibility and quality

assessment, while Graciano [21] identified student activity preferences and attitudes, focusing on aligning PE with student needs. Furthermore, Lobo *et al.* [22] emphasized the significance of student interests, implying the need for novel approaches to improve the educational process.

Despite these studies and literature on Gen Z and tertiary PE, there is a significant gap in understanding the experiences of Gen Z students, particularly in rural communities in the Philippines in PATH-Fit. This study is novel in its focus on the lived experiences of these students, an area that remains largely unexplored in existing research. The primary goal of this study was to provide insights into the contextualization of tertiary PE (PATH-Fit) through their perspectives, ensuring that curriculum enhancements and pedagogical approaches are grounded in real student experiences. By examining both the benefits and challenges of PATH-Fit in rural settings, this research offers practical, evidence-based recommendations that promote a more engaging, relevant, and fulfilling educational experience. The findings of this study were used as implications to develop student-centered initiatives, personalized learning strategies, and culturally sensitive practices that address the unique needs of students while contributing to a more inclusive and responsive approach to physical education in the Philippines.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

A qualitative research design, specifically a qualitative-descriptive approach, was used in this study. Creswell and Miller [23] explained that qualitative research aims to understand human phenomena through in-depth analysis of non-numerical data. Qualitative-descriptive research is a method that focuses on providing a straightforward description of the characteristics, experiences, and perceptions of a particular group or phenomenon without delving into profound theoretical interpretations [24].

This approach is beneficial when the goal is to capture and describe the essence of the participants' experiences in their own words. It is an ideal choice for studies that seek to understand how individuals perceive and describe their realities. Qualitative-descriptive research allows for flexibility in data collection methods, such as interviews and observations, which can be adapted to best capture the participants' perspectives. This study used a qualitative-descriptive approach to explore and describe the experiences and social contexts that shape Gen Z in rural communities. This method enabled the researcher to gather detailed insights through participant interviews, providing a clear and comprehensive portrayal of the student's experiences in these settings.

2.2. Research participants

This research was conducted in one of the leading state Universities in Cotabato, Philippines. The primary data source for this study was the 20 Gen Z participants chosen using a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which the researcher selects participants with the characteristics, experiences, or perspectives most relevant to the study [25].

Participants met specific criteria, such as being part of Gen Z (born between 1995-2010), currently enrolled in any PATH-Fit courses, and living in a rural community, to be eligible for inclusion in the study. In the context of studying Gen Z students in the Cotabato Province in the Philippines, this sample size was deemed sufficient to capture the diversity within this population as the focus of qualitative research is to gather a rich and detailed data collection from each participant, ensuring depth of understanding rather than breadth of representation.

2.3. Research instrument

The primary research instrument in this study was a set of open-ended guide questions designed to delve into the diverse perspectives and experiences of Gen Z students in rural communities. Open-ended questions allowed participants to freely express their thoughts, resulting in a more authentic and thorough exploration of their PATH-Fit experiences. Experts validated this set of open-ended guide questions to examine its content and appropriateness to answer every statement of purpose.

Various materials were used for data collection to supplement the interviews and observations. A camera and voice recorder helped capture verbal keys, expressions, and contextual elements that helped interpret participants' responses. These multimedia tools supplemented qualitative data by comprehensively depicting the participants' surroundings and experiences.

2.4. Data analysis

This study used the Colaizzi method [26] for data analysis and interpretation. This method involved extracting meaningful insights from participants' experiences through a rigorous data reduction, categorization, and abstraction process. The Colaizzi method consisted of several steps: transcribing interviews or data and identifying significant statements and phrases relevant to the research questions. The following steps involved

extracting meanings and themes from these statements, grouping these themes into clusters, and finally, writing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under investigation.

The Colaizzi method was especially well-suited for this study because it fitted with the exploratory nature of the research, which seeks to understand the experiences of Gen Z students in rural communities. The systematic approach thoroughly examined the collected data, allowing a more in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The method's flexibility enabled themes to emerge directly from participants' perspectives, which was essential for capturing Gen Z students' rich and diverse insights in rural settings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the summarized experiences of Gen Z students in rural communities participating in PATH-Fit 1. The data outlines both favorable and unfavorable aspects reported by students, highlighting specific elements that influenced their engagement and satisfaction with the course. This table provides insight into key themes, reflecting how aspects such as activity variety, instructional methods, and the learning environment impacted their overall experience.

Table 1. Experiences of Gen Z Students in rural communities in PATH-Fit 1 (movement competency training)

Themes	Sub-themes
Favorable experiences in PATH-Fit 1	1. Very engaging activities 2. Holistic approach to wellness 3. The teacher is friendly 4. Escape to academic stress 5. Venue for self-assessment
Unfavorable experiences in PATH-Fit 1	1. Physically exhausting 2. Feeling major 3. No class meetings 4. Online PATH-Fit is a Misfit

3.1. Favorable experiences in PATH-Fit 1 (movement competency training)

3.1.1. Very engaging activities

This theme describes the experiences of the research participants with PATH-Fit 1. Based on their responses, their experience is favorable because the course was very engaging through the activities and exercises they participated in. By engaging in activities, they retain the information. This means the students were actively involved and found the exercises exciting. Their enthusiasm and participation contributed to a deeper understanding and enjoyment of the material. This engaging approach facilitated a positive learning environment where students felt motivated and invested in their PE, leading to a more impactful and lasting educational experience. To wit:

"...in my experience, it was okay because I got engaged in physical activities. Like during the final exam, I was able to sweat..." – Bogar

"...I like it because it's engaging, and we perform exercises, which is also a crucial part of our curriculum that should be done." – Jako

This implies that when students find the activities stimulating and enjoyable, their active participation increases, leading to better retention of information and skills. This suggests that designing and implementing interactive and engaging activities in PE programs is crucial for fostering a positive and effective learning environment. Further, PE must engage students because it promotes physical health, mental well-being, and lifelong fitness habits [27]. Engaging in PE classes motivates students to participate actively, helping them develop essential motor skills, coordination, and an understanding of the importance of regular physical activity. By making PE enjoyable and varied, students are more likely to find physical activities they enjoy, reducing the likelihood of sedentary lifestyles and associated health issues.

3.1.2. Holistic approach to wellness

This theme describes that the research participants have a favorable experience in PATH-Fit 1 because the course does not only focus on the physical aspect but also holistic health. This comprehensive approach has given them a deeper understanding of how various aspects of health are interconnected. The course includes activities and lessons promoting mental well-being, emotional resilience, social interaction, and physical fitness

exercises. This holistic perspective has allowed students to appreciate the importance of balanced health and has equipped them with the knowledge and skills to maintain overall wellness in their daily lives. Based on the research participants:

“...I started to love the subject because it doesn’t just focus on physical lifestyle. Mental health was also taught to us.” – Yan

“...Although I work and do things physically and mentally, the social aspect is sometimes neglected...” – Datu Ham

This denotes that by integrating physical, mental, and emotional health components, the course fosters a well-rounded understanding of wellness among students. This holistic approach promotes physical fitness and cultivates mental clarity, emotional resilience, and social well-being. Consequently, students are better equipped to manage stress, maintain a positive mindset, and build healthy relationships, which can lead to improved academic performance and personal development. PE needs to be holistic to address students’ development, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions [28]. A holistic approach ensures students improve their physical fitness and motor skills and understand healthy lifestyle choices, stress management, and emotional resilience [29]. Gidei [30] explained that holistic PE encourages teamwork, communication, and ethical values, preparing students for a well-rounded, balanced life.

3.1.3. The teacher is friendly

This theme describes that the research participants had a favorable experience in PATH-Fit 1 because the teachers who handled them were friendly. The research participants consider their teachers friendly because they are not overly strict and treat them more like peers. This means the students feel more comfortable and less intimidated in the classroom, fostering open communication and a supportive learning atmosphere. The approachable character of the teachers encourages students to engage more actively in the course, ask questions freely, and seek guidance without hesitation, thereby enhancing their overall learning experience in PATH-Fit. According to them:

“...our teacher was very friendly, and every session was fun because they interacted with the students and weren’t too strict. It felt like they were one of our friends because they were still young.” – James

“It was also fun because the teacher was very friendly. During our first meeting, there was a punishment if we were late...” – Ela

This indicates that a supportive and approachable teacher-student relationship positively impacts the learning environment in PATH-Fit 1. When teachers are perceived as friendly and approachable by Gen Z students, it fosters a comfortable and open atmosphere conducive to learning. Moreover, scholars elaborated that friendly teachers enhance students’ experiences by creating a supportive and welcoming learning environment. Friendly teachers build positive relationships with students, fostering trust and open communication, which can increase student engagement and motivation. Akmalayah *et al.* [31] further explained that friendly teachers create a classroom atmosphere where students feel safe to express themselves, ask questions, and take risks in their learning. This positive interaction helps to reduce anxiety and stress, making the learning process more enjoyable and effective [32].

3.1.4. Escape from academic stress

This theme describes the PATH-Fit 1 course as a resort from other academic stressors. According to the research participants, in an academic environment often characterized by memorization and pressure from major subjects, PATH-Fit 1 offers a comfortable break. This means that engaging in physical activities and exercises provides students with a mental and physical release from the demands of traditional academic coursework. This escape from academic stress enables students to return to tasks with renewed energy and focus, potentially improving their academic performance and well-being. As said:

“For me, it provides an escape from the stress of other academic courses because our program focuses more on memorization. In PATH-Fit, it’s exciting because of role-playing and other physical activities. It helps reduce the strain on our brains, allows us to relax, and entertains us while interacting with our classmates...” – Snow

This suggests that participation in PATH-Fit 1 is crucial in alleviating academic stress among Gen Z students in rural communities. PE classes provide students with a much-needed opportunity to unwind and recharge by offering a break from the pressures of traditional academic subjects. This escape from academic

stressors promotes mental well-being and enhances academic performance by reducing burnout and fatigue. Additionally, PE subjects can serve as an escape from academic stresses by providing students with a physical outlet to release tension and rejuvenate their minds [33]. Physical activity helps reduce stress hormones and increase endorphin levels, promoting well-being and relaxation. This balance between mental and physical exertion contributes to overall student well-being and can enhance academic performance in the long run [34].

3.1.5. Venue for self-assessment

This theme describes that the research participants appreciate PATH-Fit 1 because it serves as a platform for self-assessment. Through the activities provided, they could evaluate themselves, particularly their physical strengths and weaknesses. This self-assessment process allowed them to test their physical capabilities, monitor their progress, and identify areas for improvement. This means that PATH-Fit 1 facilitated a reflective experience where students could gain insights into their physical abilities and take ownership of their personal development in a supportive learning environment. Based on them:

“For me, it is interesting because the teacher didn’t just focus on the topic but on how we assess ourselves through exercises like cardiovascular endurance...” – Alden

“...we had a practicum where we assessed ourselves through activities with different stations. Each station had different activities, which served as assessments for us as students...” – Ela

PATH-Fit 1 significantly fosters self-awareness and personal growth among Gen Z students in rural communities. By providing a structured environment for physical activities and challenges, the program enables students to assess their physical strengths and weaknesses objectively. This self-assessment process helps students understand their current fitness levels and encourages them to set realistic goals for improvement. Also, Lund and Kirk [35] explained that PE can be an ideal venue for students to engage in self-assessments by providing opportunities to set personal goals, monitor progress, and reflect on their physical abilities and improvements. Students can gain insights into their strengths and areas needing development through various activities and fitness tests. This self-awareness encourages them to take ownership of their health and fitness, fostering a sense of responsibility and motivation for self-improvement [36].

3.2. Unfavorable experiences in PATH-Fit 1 (movement competency training)

3.2.1. Physically exhausting

This theme explains that although some students are fond of physical activities, it is undeniable that not all share this enthusiasm. At times, PATH-Fit activities can lead to physical exhaustion, causing students to experience body pain. This means that while the course aims to promote physical fitness and well-being, the intensity and nature of the exercises can sometimes be challenging for students who are less physically inclined or conditioned. The physical demands of the course can result in discomfort and soreness, which may affect their overall experience and perception of the program. Based on their responses:

“...it was fun at first, but later on, it turned out to be difficult, so I had body pain for about a week...” – Kitchee

“...then the body pain was intense because our bodies were not prepared...” – Andrew

This conveys that the demanding nature of the PATH-Fit activities can have a mixed impact on students’ experiences and perceptions of the program. While physical exhaustion can be a sign of practical and intensive exercise, it also suggests that the activities may be overly strenuous for some students, leading to discomfort and potential discouragement. This highlights the importance of tailoring PE programs to accommodate varying fitness levels and ensuring that exercises are challenging yet manageable. Consequently, Leisterer and Jekauc [37] explained that it is not beneficial for students’ learning experiences to become highly exhausted in PE because excessive fatigue can lead to physical and mental burnout, diminishing the enjoyment and benefits of physical activity. Extreme exhaustion can also increase the risk of injuries, negatively impacting students’ health and well-being [38].

3.2.2. Feeling major

This theme expresses the participants’ concern that PATH-Fit is perceived as demanding as a major subject, adding pressure on students. According to them, there are instances where urgent activities are assigned with minimal preparation time, causing stress among students. This means that while PATH-Fit aims to promote physical health and well-being, the high expectations and tight deadlines associated with certain activities can contribute to feelings of pressure and anxiety among students. To wit:

“...what I didn’t like about PE was how it acted like a major subject because sometimes we had few activities, but the pressure was intense...” – Yan

“...I hope it doesn’t feel like a major subject, and I hope the professor has the opportunity to talk to the students...” – Datu Ham

This implies that when PE courses impose tight deadlines and high expectations, students may feel overwhelmed and pressured to perform at a level comparable to their core academic subjects. This heightened pressure could potentially detract from the intended benefits of physical activity, such as stress reduction and improved well-being. If students perceive PATH-Fit as excessively demanding, it may lead to reduced motivation, increased anxiety, and decreased enjoyment of PE. Further, Gapa and Tagare [39] explained that PE subjects need to regulate giving tasks to students to prevent burnout and maintain their interest and enthusiasm for physical activity. Regularly changing activities and incorporating fun, engaging exercises can help maintain students’ interest and enjoyment. Proper task regulation also allows students to recover adequately, reducing the risk of injury and ensuring they can participate fully and benefit from each session.

3.2.3. No class meetings

This theme discusses the participants’ concern about the frequent lack of class meetings in PATH-Fit 1. According to them, the course’s effectiveness and engagement are influenced by how consistently teachers conduct classes. Some teachers merely distribute learning materials and rely on online submissions, which they feel compromises their learning experience. This means that the absence of regular face-to-face interactions with teachers can hinder students’ ability to grasp and apply the lessons taught entirely. Based on the research participants:

“...we rarely had classes, so I didn’t understand the lessons. Some important things should have been taught to us, but they weren’t...” – Namikaze

“...many events coincide with our class time, so sometimes we don’t have class...” – Kate

This denotes that when face-to-face interactions with teachers are infrequent or absent, students may face challenges in understanding and applying course content effectively. This reduced interaction can hinder opportunities for real-time clarification of concepts, discussion of practical applications, and personalized feedback on progress. Furthermore, not having class meetings in PE classes can negatively affect students’ overall experience by missing crucial communication opportunities, reflection, and goal setting. This collaborative environment fosters community, encourages mutual support, and helps students stay engaged and motivated. Without these meetings, students may feel disconnected and less involved in learning.

3.2.4. Online class in PATH-Fit is a Misfit

This theme describes the participants’ concerns regarding PATH-Fit delivery through an online modality. The research participants find the subject challenging to engage with when delivered online, emphasizing that PE is best taught in person. This means that the nature of PE, which typically involves hands-on activities, demonstrations, and real-time feedback, is compromised in an online setting. According to them:

“...the only negative side is that it’s online. I’m not very fond of it because I’m not interested in online classes since I can’t connect well...” – Christmas

“...It should be taught in-person or face-to-face because it’s challenging to understand online or if we’re left to figure things out independently.” – Gelay

This indicates that PE traditionally involves active participation, practical demonstrations, and interpersonal interactions that are difficult to replicate effectively in a virtual environment. As a result, students may miss out on hands-on learning opportunities, real-time instructor feedback, and collaborative activities integral to physical skill development and understanding. Moreover, Gumantan *et al.* [40] pointed out that online classes in PE can negatively affect students’ experience by limiting their ability to engage in physical activities effectively and interactively. The lack of in-person supervision and feedback can lead to improper technique and reduced motivation, as students may find it challenging to stay disciplined and engaged in a remote setting. Additionally, Basilaia and Kvavadze [41] explained that online PE often lacks the immediate social interactions and team-building opportunities of traditional classes, which can diminish students’ sense of community and support.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the experiences of Gen Z students in rural communities with PATH-Fit 1 reveal a diverse range of favorable and unfavorable aspects. On the positive side, students highly valued the engaging activities, which made the course enjoyable and memorable. The holistic approach to wellness was also appreciated, as it provided comprehensive education on overall health, not just physical fitness. The friendly behavior of teachers fostered a comfortable learning environment, while the course served as an effective escape from academic stress, offering a necessary break and relief. PATH-Fit 1 was a valuable venue for self-assessment, helping students understand and develop their physical strengths and weaknesses. However, this study concludes that many students found PATH-Fit 1 physically exhausting, leading to fatigue and discomfort. The demanding nature of the course often made it feel like a major subject, adding undue pressure and stress. The frequent lack of class meetings due to teacher absenteeism resulted in inconsistent learning experiences and disengagement. Further, the students deemed the shift to online classes ineffective and believed PE should be conducted in person to be genuinely beneficial.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft

E : Writing - Review & **E**ditng

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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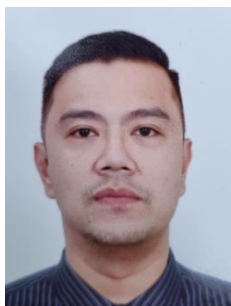
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