Publics Perceptions Regarding the Image and Status of the Nursing Profession in Pakistan

Suleman Khan[1*]

Registered Nursing Officer/Charge Nurse Saidu Group of Teaching Hospital Saidu Sharif Swat, KP. Corresponding Author Email: sulemankhan911@gmail.com

Bakhtyar Ali Shah[2]

Assistant Professor Institute of Nursing Sciences, Khyber Medical University Peshawar, KP.

Muhammad Anwar[3]

PhD, MSN, Post RN Assistant Professor/Principal Medtec College of Nursing and AHS Dir Upper KPK Pakistan.

Abstract

Background: The image and status of the nursing profession significantly influence public perceptions, affecting recruitment, retention, and healthcare outcomes. In Pakistan, nursing is frequently viewed as a low-status profession, influenced by cultural norms, gender dynamics, and societal stereotypes.This study investigates how the public perceives nursing in Pakistan, focusing on the effect of gender dynamics and the progress made in nursing education. **Methods**: A qualitative exploratory design was utilized, employinga semi-structured interviewtopic guide for data collection. Twelve participants from Peshawar, Pakistan, were selected through purposive samplinguntil data saturation was reached. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework. Ethical approval was obtained from Khyber Medical University and Lady Reading Hospital Peshawar. **Results**: A total of 11 categories emerged from thethematic analysis of the data,leading to four main themes. These themes are (i)The Evolving Image and Status of Nursing (ii) Challenges and Opportunities in the Nursing Profession, (iii) Education, Training and Career Pathways, and (iv) Public Perceptions and Expectations. **Conclusion**: This study highlights the need to tackle ongoing challenges and misconceptions to elevate the image and status of the nursing profession in Pakistan. it suggeststhat educational reforms, policy adjustment, and public awareness initiatives are essential for improving the standing of nursing in the country.

Keywords: Image of nursing, Status of nursing, Public perceptions, Gender dynamics.

Introduction

The nursing profession is essential to healthcare delivery.However, its image and status are shaped by public perceptions that often differsignificantly from the actual role nursesplay. While nurses find their work rewarding, fulfilling and diverse, the general public frequentlyholds misconceptions about their true capabilities and

responsibilities(1).These misunderstandings arerooted in societal stereotypes and stigmas, which undermine the profession'sreal value(2). In many Middle Eastern countries, and Pakistan, nursing is considered the backbone of the healthcare system, yet it continues to be undervalued due to cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors(3)(4).

Gender stereotypes and the perceptions of nursing as a low-status profession influence public perceptions negatively(5). Nursing is frequently regarded as a female-dominated fieldwhich can deter men from pursuing careersin this area. This issue is exacerbatedby negative stereotypes associated withmale nurses,who are often labelled as eithergayor effeminate(6)(7)(8). Such biased views not only hinderthe recruitment of males into the profession but also the overall growth of the profession(9)(10).Additionally, many people underestimate the complexity of the nursing role, viewing nurses as subservient to doctors or doctor assistants rather than independent healthcare providers(11)(12)(13).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected how the public views nurses and other healthcare providers, initially leading to a surge in appreciation for these professionals, who were celebrated as heroes. However, recent studies conducted after the pandemic show mixed results; while there has been some improvement in how nursing is perceived, challenges remain in attracting new talent to the field(14)(15). In Pakistan, the situation is further complicated by cultural norms and a male-dominated healthcare system. Female nurses, especially in rural areas, often face societal stigma and are viewed as morally questionable for working outside their homes(16).
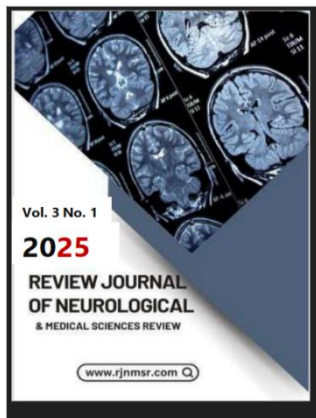
These negative perceptions, along with low pay, high-stress environments, and a lack of respect from doctors, contribute to a negative public image of nursing(17)(5).

Media representations of nurses significantly influence public perceptions. Negative stereotypes, like depicting nurses as subordinate to doctors or as sexualized figures, harm the profession's reputation and create a disconnect between how nurses view themselves and how society views them(18)(19)(20). These stereotypes are particularly entrenched in developing countries, hindering the acknowledgement of nursing as a legitimate scientific and professional field(15)(21)(22).

Even with these challenges, nursing continues to be a vital profession, and its importance in patient care and healthcare delivery is gaining more recognition. Personal interactions with nurses frequently enhance public views, as the accessibility and quality of care significantly impact opinions about the field(17)(23). Nevertheless, ongoing workforce shortages, elevated nurse-to-patient ratios, and the consequent burnout put additional pressure on the profession, resulting in job dissatisfaction and increased turnover(24)(25).

To address these challenges, researchers have proposed various strategies, including media advocacy, educational campaigns, and collaboration among different professions, to enhance the public's view of nursing(8)(26)(27).

In Pakistan, revising nursing curricula to incorporate courses on leadership and professional development, as well as creating supportive work environments, could elevate the profession's standing(28). Additionally, promoting the inclusion of more

men in nursing and challenging traditional gender norms might also contribute to changing public perceptions and alleviating workforce shortages(8)(27).

While previous studies have looked into how nurses view themselves and the challenges they encounter, there is a notable absence of thorough research on how the public perceives nursing in Pakistan. In particular, the effects of gender dynamics and improvements in nursing education on public perceptions have not been adequately examined. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating public perceptions of nursing in Peshawar, offering fresh insights into the profession's image and ways to enhance its status.

Aim of your Study

The goal of this study was to investigate how the public views the image and status of the nursing profession in Pakistan, focusing on these key objectives:

1. To analyse how gender dynamics affect public perceptions of nursing.
2. To assess how advancements in nursing education influence the profession's image and status.
3. To uncover ongoing misconceptions and stereotypes about nursing among the public.
4. To suggest strategies for enhancing the image and status of the nursing profession in Pakistan.
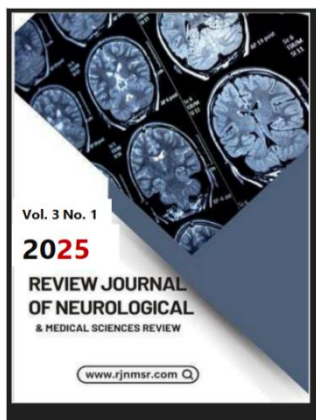
Methodology

This study employed a qualitative exploratory approach to examine how the general public in Peshawar, Pakistan, perceives the status and image of the nursing profession. The research was conducted over six months from September 2024 to February 2025. Twelve participants were selected through purposive sampling until data saturation was reached, including social workers, teachers, media representatives, patients, and patient attendants. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically. Ethical approval was obtained from both the Lady Reading Hospital's Peshawar and Khyber Medical University's Ethical Review Committee. Ethical standards were upheld through informed consent from participants, ensuring anonymity, data protection, and confidentiality. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually in the participants' local languages, Pashto and Urdu, for their convenience.

Results

A total of 12 participants were included in the study. Their age ranges from 22 to 65 years with varied educational levels and occupations. Their demographics are given in the table below.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Category	Detail	Percentage
Age Range	22-65 years	
Gender	Male = 10	83 %
	Female = 2	17 %

Marital Status	Married = 9	75 %
	Unmarried = 3	25 %
Educational Level	Higher Education = 6	50 %
	Higher Secondary= 1	8.3 %
	Secondary = 2	16.6 %
	Primary = 1	8.3 %
	None = 1	8.3 %
Occupations	Teacher, Labourer, IT Personnel, Student, Daily Wages, Office Attendant, Newspaper Editor, Overseas Employee, Social Worker	

Thematic Analysis

The main goal of the study was to investigate how the public perceives the image and status of the nursing profession in Pakistan. After a thorough analysis, four key themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. These themes were **The Evolving Image and Status of Nursing**, **Challenges and Opportunities in the Nursing Profession**, **Education, Training and Career Pathways**, and **Public Perceptions and Expectations**.
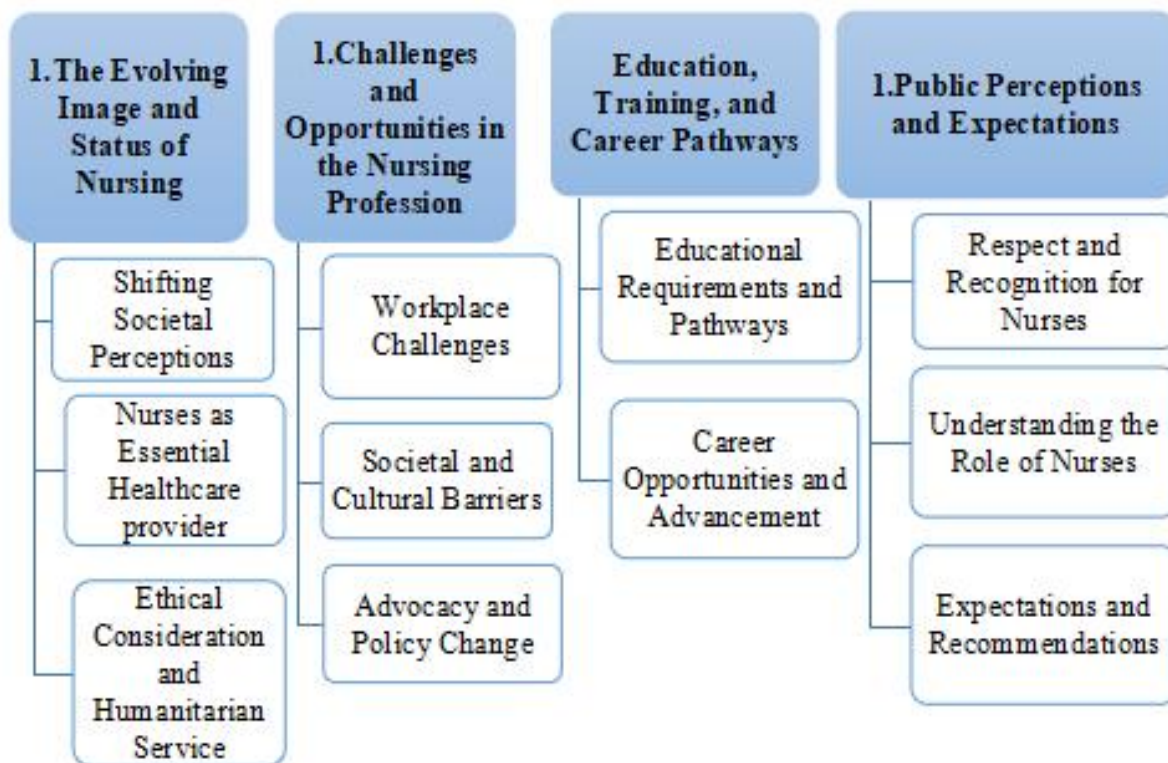

Figure 1:   Smart Art Depiction of Themes and Categories

Theme 1. The Evolving Image and Status of Nursing

The first generated theme was The Evolving Image and Status of Nursing. This theme emerged from three categories: Shifting Societal Perceptions, Nurses as Essential Healthcare Providers, and Ethical Considerations and Humanitarian Service. Participants noted a significant change in how society views nursing, with a decline in stereotypes and a growing acknowledgement of nurses as vital healthcare providers. They referred to nurses as the "pillars of the healthcare system," recognizing the importance of their roles in patient care, medication administration, and emergency management. Additionally, participants emphasized the ethical and humanitarian dimensions of nursing, highlighting the profession's commitment to selfless service. However, some misconceptions persist, particularly the perception of nursing as a female-dominated field, especially concerning male nurses.

Theme 2: Challenges and Opportunities in theNursing Profession

The second theme that emerged was the challenges and opportunities within the nursing profession. This theme was derived from three categories: workplace challenges, societal and cultural barriers, and advocacy and policy change. Nurses encounter a variety of difficulties, such as low pay, demanding work environments, and societal stigma, particularly affecting female nurses. Participants voiced their concern for nurses, referring to them as an "underprivileged segment" of the healthcare system. Despite these obstacles, there are opportunities for advocacy and policy reform, with calls for government support, better working conditions, and public awareness campaigns aimed at enhancing the profession's reputation.

Theme 3: Education, Training, and Career Pathways

The third theme that emerged was education, training, and career pathways. This theme was derived from categories such as educational requirements and pathways, as well as career opportunities and advancement. Participants highlighted the significance of obtaining a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) as the essential qualification for the profession. However, there was a lack of awareness regarding advanced education and career options, including master's and PhD programs. Career advancement was frequently associated with hard work, dedication, and opportunities abroad, with participants observing that nurses who work internationally tend to receive better compensation and respect.

Theme 4: Public Perceptions and Expectations

The fourth theme identified was public perceptions and expectations. This theme emerged from categories including Respect and Recognition for Nurses, Understanding the Role of Nurses, and Expectations and Recommendations. Overall, public perceptions of nursing were very positive, with participants describing nurses as "respectable" and "essential" to healthcare delivery. The compassionate and professional behaviour of nurses was emphasized as a crucial element in gaining public respect. Participants suggested improvements in behaviour, educational reforms, and media advocacy to further elevate the profession's image.
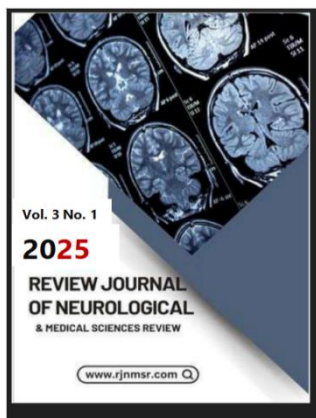
Table 2. The Process of Coming up with Codes, Categories and Themes

Theme	Category	Codes	Data Extract
The Evolving Image and Status of Nursing	Shifting Societal Perceptions	Negative stereotypes in the past,	*"Now people look at them very positively, marriage with a female nurse is not an issue nowadays. In the past our society did not allow girls to study nursing and become nurse, nowadays you can see most of the nurses are from our society and Pashtoon tribes"*. (P 04)
		Stigmas of the past	
		Positive shift	
	Nurses as essential Healthcare providers	Pillar of the Healthcare system	*"I will give you an example: Like a prayer (NAMAZ) is a pillar of our Deen (Islam), the same is true for Nurses. Nurses are the pillars of the Healthcare system. As far as I have seen, all functions are performed by nurses"* (T 01).
	Ethical Consideration and Humanitarian Service	Service to Humanity	*"They serve Humanity"*(T 02)
		Moral education essential for nurses	*"Education that is needed is, if a person is a nurse, and performs those particular duties, he should be moral, moral education is very important. And if he/she is morally responsible, he/she is a good nurse"* (T 01).
		Moral and ethical development needed	
Challenges and Opportunities in the Nursing Profession	Workplace Challenges	Disadvantage segment	*"They put in their efforts and expertise but are a poor segment of this system"* (PA 01).
		Nurses' make sacrifices	*"These female nurses stay outside their homes during the night, endure hardship, and take care of ourpatients. Even they stay in a hostel"*. (PA 02)
	Societal and Cultural Barriers	Lack of Respect from Society	*"they leave their homes and children, come to the hospital and care for the patients, however, our society does not look at them with esteem"*. (MP 01)
	Advocacy and	Government	*"The government needs to provide

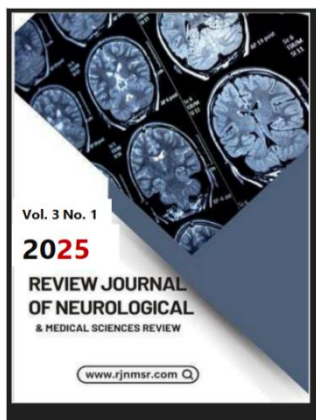|	Policy Change	support. Financial uplift	*nurses with accommodation and a good salary. Their children should befacilitated and supported as well like other government servants".* (PA 02)
		Facilities for nurses	
Education, Training, and Career Pathways	Educational Requirements and Pathways	BS Nursing	*A nurse should have a bachelor's in nursing science degree, further education like a master's and PhD in Nursing will improve their experience".* (T 01)
		Advanced education	
		MSN and PhD	
	Career Opportunities and Advancement	In comparison Well-paid in other countries	*"If you go outside Pakistan people prefer to become a nurse instead of becoming a doctor. Many facilities are available to nurses in foreign countries. They are well-paid for their job".* (PA 02).
Public Perceptions and Expectations	Respect and Recognition for Nurses	Positive perceptions of Nurses. Respectable behaviour	*"We perceive great peace while thinking about nurses. I think good about nursing not bad. When we come to the hospital we are respected and valued by nurses in everything".* (P 01)
	Understanding the Role of Nurses	Patient Monitoring	*"The nurse sees the patient from time to time, is examined, and looks after him, gives injections, and antibiotics before giving the antibiotic a test dose.... (PA 03)*
		Patient Safety	
	Public Expectations and Recommendations	Expectations from Nurse	*"In government hospitals usually, poor people come for treatment, not wealthy people, so all these poor people shall be respected, cared for, talked to them with respect and look after their patients in a good way".* (PA 03)
		Good Behaviour	

Discussion

This study examined how the public views the image and status of the nursing profession in Pakistan, uncovering important insights into societal attitudes, challenges, and opportunities within the field. The results are consistent with global literature but also emphasize distinct cultural and contextual factors that affect nursing in Pakistan.

The study revealed a significant change in how society views nurses, with participants acknowledging them as vital healthcare providers instead of just support staff for doctors. This reflects a worldwide trend where nursing is increasingly recognized as a crucial part of healthcare systems(1). Nevertheless, outdated stereotypes, especially concerning male nurses, continue to exist. These results highlight the importance of focused awareness campaigns to combat gender biases and encourage inclusivity within the profession.

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily changed how the public views healthcare professionals, with nurses celebrated as heroes. However, studies conducted after the pandemic show mixed results; while there has been some improvement in how nursing is regarded, there are still significant challenges in attracting new individuals to the field(14)(15). In Pakistan, cultural norms and patriarchal systems make these challenges even more pronounced. Female nurses, especially in rural areas, often face societal stigma and are viewed as morally questionable for working outside the home(16). These negative perceptions, along with low pay, unsafe working conditions, and a lack of respect from doctors, contribute to a negative public image of nursing(5)(17).

These findings align with research conducted in other low- and middle-income countries, where nurses frequently encounter undervaluation and challenging working conditions (2)(3). Nevertheless, the study also highlighted potential avenues for advocacy and policy reform, including government backing, better working environments, and initiatives to raise public awareness. Implementing these strategies is essential for improving the profession's reputation and tackling workforce shortages.

Media portrayals significantly influence how the public views nursing. Negative stereotypes, like showing nurses as merely subservient to doctors or as sexualized figures, harm the profession's reputation and create a disconnect between nurses' self-perceptions and societal views(5)(11)(19)(20). These stereotypes are especially prevalent in developing countries, obstructing the acknowledgement of nursing as a legitimate scientific and professional discipline (15)(21).

The emphasis on obtaining a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) as a fundamental requirement reflects the global progress in nursing education. However, there is a noticeable lack of awareness regarding advanced education and career options, which points to a gap in public understanding. This is consistent with research indicating that educational reforms and career development opportunities are crucial for professional growth and retention(28). By addressing these gaps through institutional support and policy changes, the appeal of the nursing profession can be enhanced, ensuring a skilled workforce. In Pakistan, revising nursing curricula to incorporate leadership and professional development courses, along with creating empowering work environments, could elevate the profession's status(29). Additionally, encouraging more men to enter the nursing field and challenging traditional gender norms may help change public perceptions and tackle workforce shortages(7)(27).

Public perceptions of nursing were largely favourable, with participants referring to nurses as "respectable" and "essential" to the healthcare system. This change in viewpoint aligns with trends observed after COVID-19, during which healthcare workers received increased acknowledgement for their efforts(14)(15). Nonetheless, participants stressed the necessity for improvements in behaviour, educational reforms, and media advocacy to further enhance the profession's image. These insights underscore the need to tackle misconceptions and encourage positive representations of nursing in the media.
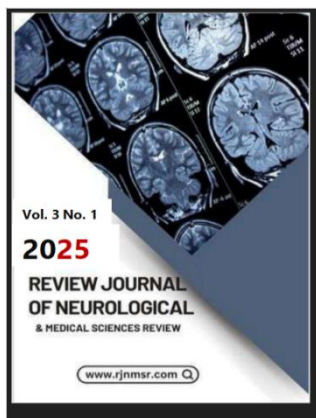
Interactions with nurses typically have a positive impact on how the public views the profession, as the availability and quality of care play a significant role in shaping these opinions (17)(23). Nevertheless, ongoing workforce shortages, elevated nurse-to-patient ratios, and the consequent burnout create additional pressure on the profession, resulting in job dissatisfaction and increased turnover(24)(25).

Conclusion

This study offers important insights into how the public views nursing in Pakistan, emphasizing both advancements and ongoing challenges. By tackling these issues with focused strategies, policymakers and healthcare leaders can improve the profession's image and standing, ultimately fostering a motivated and skilled nursing workforce for the future.

References

1. Morris-Thompson T, Shepherd J, Plata R, Marks-Maran D. Diversity, fulfilment and privilege: The image of nursing. J Nurs Manag. 2011;19(5):683–92.

2. Khatib M, Hadid S. Health Professionals' Perceptions of the Status and Image of Nursing. Nurs Prim Care. 2017;1(2):1–6.

3. Elmorshedy H, AlAmrani A, Hassan MHA, Fayed A, Albrecht SA. Contemporary public image of the nursing profession in Saudi Arabia. BMC Nurs. 2020;19(1):1–8.

4. Abbas S, Zakar R, Fischer F. Qualitative study of socio-cultural challenges in the nursing profession in Pakistan. 2020;1–7.

5. Abbas S, Fischer F, Gilani A. Challenges perceived by nursing professionals in physician-centred organizations : An exploratory qualitative study. 2022;(November 2021):384–91.

6. Meiring A, Van Wyk NC. The image of nurses and nursing as perceived by the South African public. Afr J Nurs Midwifery. 2013;15(2):3–15.

7. Rabie T, Rossouw L, Machobane BF. Exploring occupational gender-role stereotypes of male nurses: A South African study. Int J Nurs Pract. 2021;27(3):e12890.

8. Kane D, Rajacich D, Andary C. Exploring the contextual factors surrounding the recruitment and retention of men in a baccalaureate nursing program. In: Nursing Forum. Wiley Online Library; 2021. p. 24–9.

9. López-Verdugo M, Ponce-Blandón JA, López-Narbona FJ, Romero-Castillo R, Guerra-Martín MD. Social image of nursing. An integrative review about a yet unknown profession. Nurs Reports. 2021;11(2):460–74.

10.   Nogueira IC, Santos D de S, Sanfelice CF de O, Silva EM, Assis AESQ. Gender debate as a challenge in nursing training. Rev Bras Enferm. 2021;74:e20201001.

11.   Valizadeh L, D P, Zamanzadeh V, D P, Fooladi MM, D P, et al. The image of nursing , as perceived by Iranian male nurses. 2014;1–7.

12.   Cottingham MD, Johnson AH, Taylor T. Heteronormative labour: Conflicting accountability structures among men in nursing. Gender, Work Organ. 2016;23(6):535–50.

13.   Kluczyńska U. Motives for choosing and resigning from nursing by men and the definition of masculinity: a qualitative study. J Adv Nurs. 2017;73(6):1366–76.

14.   Rubbi I, Lupo R, Lezzi A, Cremonini V, Carvello M, Caricato M, et al. The Social and Professional Image of the Nurse: Results of an Online Snowball Sampling Survey among the General Population in the Post-Pandemic Period. Nurs Reports. 2023;13(3):1291–303.

15.   Blau A, Sela Y, Grinberg K. Public Perceptions and Attitudes on the Image of Nursing in the Wake of COVID-19. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2023;20(6).

16.   Mahmood A, Hussan SG, Sarfraz M, Ibrahim M. Rewards Satisfaction , Perception about Social Status and Commitment of Nurses in Pakistan. 2016;5(4):1049–61.

17.   Gul R. The Image of Nursing from Nurses ' and Non-Nurses ' Perspective in Pakistan. 2003;

18.   Woods-Giscombe CL, Rowsey PJ, Kneipp S, Lackey C, Bravo L. Student perspectives on recruiting underrepresented ethnic minority students to nursing: Enhancing outreach, engaging family, and correcting misconceptions. J Prof Nurs. 2020;36(2):43–9.

19.   Grinberg K, Sela Y. Perception of the image of the nursing profession and its relationship with quality of care. BMC Nurs [Internet]. 2022;1–8. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-022-00830-4

20.   Liaw SY, Wu LT, Holroyd E, Wang W, Lopez V, Lim S, et al. Why not nursing? Factors influencing healthcare career choice among Singaporean students. Int Nurs Rev. 2016;63(4):530–8.

21.   Roshangar F. Iranian nurses ' perception of the public image of nursing and its association with their quality of working life. 2021;(February):3441–51.

22.   Liu X, Li L, Wang L, Herr K, Chen Q. International Journal of Nursing Sciences Implementation and evaluation of a pain management core competency education program for surgical nurses. 2021;8:0–6.

23.   Ali I, Bhutto RA, Muhammad S, Ahmed W, Saeed A, Saddiqui S. Nursing Profession - Public Image at Private Tertiary Care Hospital of Karachi. Med Forum Mon. 2021;32(12):34–7.

24.   Alrawili JTQ, Alanazi NMS, Alanazi AMS, MashujAlanazi FA, Alruwaili NKM, Alanazi MAT, et al. Challenges Facing Nursing Professionals in Saudi Arabia Today. J Int Cris Risk Commun Res. 2024;1329–40.

25.   Gatchel RJ. The importance of the profession of nursing in health care: Current and future issues. J Appl Biobehav Res. 2018;23(1):e12127.

26.   Abbas S, Zakar R, Fischer F. Qualitative study of socio-cultural challenges in

the nursing profession in Pakistan. BMC Nurs. 2020;19(1):1–7.

27.   Cheng M-L, Tseng Y-H, Hodges E, Chou F-H. Lived experiences of novice male nurses in Taiwan. J Transcult Nurs. 2018;29(1):46–53.

28.   Gulzar SA, Karamaliani R, Khan KS, Barolia R, Rahim S, Pasha A. Does empowerment matter? Perceptions of nursing leaders in Pakistan through qualitative approach. J Hosp Adm. 2016;5(6):28.

29.   Masih S, Gulzar L. Association of nurses ' self perception about their public image and their job satisfaction in tertiary care hospitals ,. 2018;7(1):55–61.