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Perception of undergraduate nursing students' toward their future professional career

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Objectives: To assess the perception of undergraduate nursing students toward their future nursing careers at Jimma University, Southwest Ethiopia, 2023.

Methodology: A cross-sectional study was carried out among undergraduate nursing students at Jimma University from 1 to 30 November, 2023. Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire from 200 undergraduate nursing students. The collected data was then entered directly into SPSS version 26 for analysis. Subsequently, descriptive analysis was performed, and the findings were presented in the form of text, and tables.

Result: Out of the 207 undergraduate nursing students, 200 undergraduate nursing students responded accordingly, resulting in a 96.6% response rate. Findings show that 83.5% of nursing students view nursing as dignified and respectful, 71% perceive it as equal to other professions, and 89.5% acknowledge its role in serving humanity. Additionally, 55% believe the profession offers personal growth opportunities, and 93% perceive nursing as a caring profession with strong ethical standards. Furthermore, 88.5% of students plan to go abroad, and 80% express a desire for further educational opportunities.

Conclusion: This study showed that nursing students at Jimma University generally hold favorable views of nursing and are driven by altruistic values, concerns about the demanding nature of the profession, under appreciation, and the desire to go abroad. These findings reflect broader global trends in the nursing workforce. Addressing these challenges through supportive educational programs and improved working conditions will be critical for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the nursing profession, particularly in countries like Ethiopia, where healthcare workers are in high demand.

KEYWORDS

future professional career, nursing students, perception, Jimma, Ethiopia

1 Introduction

Positive perceptions of the nursing profession, fostered by social interactions within the learning environment are critical for nursing students. These perceptions impact not only their self-concept and self-esteem but also the quality of care they provide to patients (Bauer and Hämmig, 2014; Glerean et al., 2023). Positive perceptions are instrumental

for a successful transition to practice and a lifelong commitment to ongoing professional development (El Dahshan and Youssef, 2018).

Undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of their careers vary based on factors like the student's national background, cultural context, the educational institution they attend, and their unique personal viewpoints. Some view nursing as a dignified and esteemed profession with promising global work opportunities and securing early employment. While others find fulfillment in patient care and a positive impact on people's lives. However, some students hold a more neutral view (Ghimire et al., 2019; Glerean et al., 2019; Hadgu, 2015).

These variations in student perceptions concerning the nursing profession can be attributed to a confluence of influences, including family, friends, media portrayals, interactions with nursing professionals, and the student's own personal experiences and motivations (Glerean et al., 2019). This intricate interplay of factors shapes an individual student's understanding of the nursing profession and their anticipated career path within it (Judith and Funmilola, 2023).

Nurses are the backbone of the healthcare delivery system, playing a crucial role in direct patient care across diverse settings (Alwani, 2020). Their responsibilities encompass a wide range of activities, including comprehensive patient assessment, monitoring vital signs and health status, administering medications and treatments, educating patients and families, and collaborating effectively with interdisciplinary healthcare teams (Hassmiller and Wakefield, 2022). The expertise, compassion, and critical thinking skills of nurses significantly impact patient outcomes, safety, and overall satisfaction with healthcare services (Lee et al., 2017; Ryu and Shim, 2022).

However, a significant global shortage of nurses threatens the ability of healthcare systems to deliver high-quality, accessible, and equitable care. This deficit is further compounded by the alarmingly high rates of nursing student attrition documented worldwide. According to the European Union report in 2015 in Italy, the dropout rate is 33% (Stephanie Jones-Berry, 2018). In England, the dropout rate ranges from 25% to 40% (Canzan et al., 2022), indicating that a substantial proportion of students who enter nursing programs do not complete their education and transition into the workforce. This concerning trend extends beyond student attrition.

The latest report by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) in the United Kingdom paints a worrying picture, highlighting that for the first time, more nurses are leaving the profession than entering it (Glerean et al., 2019). Similarly, research conducted in Ethiopia suggests a low desire among nurses to remain in the profession (Haile et al., 2025). These findings resonate globally, suggesting that the nursing workforce faces significant challenges that may be driving experienced professionals away from the field. Potential factors contributing to this phenomenon might include burnout, job dissatisfaction, lack of support, or inadequate working conditions (Eric Weston, 2023).

Currently, the number of male nursing students is increasing (Prosen, 2022). Nursing students perceive that their profession

has a positive influences their personal developments and enhance their economic status in the future (Paudel and Koirala, 2019). Nursing students' academic grades from their initial years to graduation significantly influence their diverse perspectives on their profession, and the majority of undergraduate nursing students are single (Judith and Funmilola, 2023; Salim, 2020).

Understanding the varying perceptions that undergraduate nursing students hold regarding their future careers is crucial in addressing these concerning trends. These perceptions are likely influenced by a multitude of factors, including exposure to the realities of nursing practice during clinical placements, awareness of career opportunities and advancement pathways, and sense of preparedness for the demands of the profession (Ghimire et al., 2019; Glerean et al., 2019; Hadgu, 2015).

However, there is a paucity of information especially in Ethiopia on how undergraduate nursing students perceive their future profession and how their perceptions shape their future career. Therefore, this study aims to describe and identify the perception of undergraduate nursing students toward their future nursing careers.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Study design

A cross-sectional study was conducted among undergraduate nursing students in Jimma University from 1 to 30 November, 2023.

2.2 Participant

The School of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Institute of Health, Jimma University has a total of 207 undergraduate nursing students. Among them 147 are male and 60 are female. There are 65 undergraduate first-year nursing students (46 male and 19 female) 46 undergraduate second-year nursing students (29 male and 17 female), 56 undergraduate third-year nursing students (47 male and 9 female), and 40 undergraduate fourth-year nursing students (25 male and 15 female). All of them are full-time undergraduate nursing students. All undergraduate nursing students at School of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Institute of Health, Jimma University are source population. All undergraduate nursing students who were attending class during the time of data collection were eligible to participate in the study.

2.2.1 Data collection

This study obtained ethical approval from Jimma University, Institute of Health, and utilized a self-administered questionnaire for data collection. A total of 200 out of 207 undergraduate nursing students participated, with the questionnaires distributed in paper-based data format. Each questionnaire was administered directly to them and students were given the option to decline participation if they were not interested. Ultimately, 200 questionnaires were completed appropriately. Before actual data collection students are informed about the purpose of the study

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; EC, Ethiopian calendar; FCHS, Fatima College of health Science; NMC, Nursing and Midwifery Council; UAE, United Arab Emirates; WHO, World Health Organization.

and are informed to review the informed consent document thoroughly. The questionnaire, adapted from a Nigerian study (Judith and Funmilola, 2023), was designed to encompass various aspects such as their demographic background, motivations for choosing nursing, and overall perception of the profession. After thoroughly reviewing the questionnaires, the motivation for choosing the nursing profession was modified. Grades was included as a factor since, in our country, many students choose nursing based on academic performance. Also family advice was added to this section, as individuals with family members who are nurses are often encouraged to choose the nursing profession. Additionally, the item to earn blessings was changed to the desire to help others. In the section on the Perception of Nursing Students toward the Nursing Profession, a women's profession and an extremely hard profession that doesn't receive enough appreciation were added because nursing is often viewed as a women's profession and they do not get appreciation for their hard work. A total of 29 items were used for data collection; five items related to sociodemographics, five items addressed the motivation for choosing the nursing profession, seven items assessed the perception of nursing students toward the nursing profession, seven items concerned the future intention of undergraduate nursing students and five items regarding their reasons for wanting to travel abroad. The permission to use the questionnaire was obtained from Esievo Njideka Judith at the email address jnesievo@delsu.edu.ng. Also, the questionnaire was translated to a local language by a language expert. Two weeks before actual data collection, the instrument underwent a pre-test on 5% of the total sample size to ensure clarity. The above modification of the items was done after the pre-test to prevent confusion during data collection. However, the result of the pre-test was not included in the final result.

2.3 Data analysis

First, the data was checked for completeness. Then the data were entered into Epidata version 4.6, then exported to SPSS® version 26 software (IBM SPSS 26.0 by PirateCity.NET) for analysis. Then data was checked for normal distribution using histogram for age and boxplot is used to identify if there was an outlier. Then descriptive analysis was then conducted, and the results were presented in the form of text and tables.

3 Results

3.1 Sample characteristics

A total of 200 participants completed the survey from a distributed pool of 207 questionnaires, yielding a high response rate of 96.6%. The sample skewed male, comprising 72% of the total sample. Nearly all participants (98%) reported being unmarried at the survey time. Regarding academic year, the largest group (31.5%) was in Year 1, and Year 4 (19.5%) the lowest. About one-third (31%) of the participants reported having family members or relatives employed in nursing (Table 1).

3.2 Motivation for choosing nursing profession

The primary motivations for enrolling in nursing school were altruism and self-directedness. About 86.5% of respondents indicated a desire to help others as a major influence in their decision to pursue nursing and 72.5% reported that self-motivation was a significant factor. Other influential factors included financial considerations (36.5%), family influence (35.0%), and academic achievement (30.0%) (Table 2).

3.3 Perception toward nursing

The result also indicates a positive overall image, with a strong majority (83.5%) of nursing student view nursing as dignified and respectful profession, a significant proportion (71%) perceived nursing as equal to other professions, and overwhelming majority (89.5%) acknowledged nursing as serving humanity. These results highlight a positive nursing student perception of the profession's value and societal contribution. Regarding personal growth opportunities within nursing, 55% of respondents indicated a belief that the profession offers personal growth opportunities. Additionally, a very high proportion (93%) perceived nursing as a caring profession with strong ethical standards. This finding underscores the public's appreciation for the ethical and compassionate nature of nurses. However, the data also revealed areas for potential improvement in nursing student perception. Only 17% of respondents associated nursing primarily with women, suggesting a positive shift away from traditional gender stereotypes. Conversely, slightly more than half (50.5%) believed that nursing is highly demanding and underappreciated (Table 3).

The result also shows that a majority of nursing students (61.5%) reported a sense of pride when discussing their chosen profession with others. This pride was evident even among first-year students. However, 14% reported feeling of shyness, potentially indicating a lack of confidence or discomfort in talking about their field. This shyness appeared more prevalent among fourth-year students, with half (50%) reporting it (Table 3).

3.4 Future intention of student nurse

The results provide insights into the career aspirations and goals of nursing students. The data indicates that a significant majority, 88.5%, plan to go abroad, potentially seeking opportunities for international experience or employment and 80% of respondents expressing a desire to pursue further educational opportunities. Additionally, 45.5% of respondents reported a willingness to consider changing their profession, potentially seeking new challenges or opportunities for growth (Table 4).

4 Discussion

The findings provided insight into Bachelor nursing students' motivations, perceptions, and career aspirations at Jimma

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics of Jimma University undergraduate nursing students 2023 academic year, Jimma, Ethiopia.

Sr. no	Variables	Items					Total frequency (n = 200)	Percent (%)
1	Age category		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4		
		20–25 years	58	36	43	28	165	82.5
		> 25 years	5	7	12	11	35	17.5
2	Gender		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4		
		Male	45	28	47	24	144	72.0
		Female	18	15	8	15	56	28.0
3	Status		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4		
		Married	1	2	0	1	4	2.0
		Single	62	41	55	38	196	98
4	Batch (class year)	Year 1					63	31.5
		Year 2					43	21.5
		Year 3					55	27.5
		Year 4					39	19.5
5	Family members/relatives in nursing		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	62	31
		Yes	21	15	13	13		
		No	42	28	42	26	138	69

TABLE 2 Jimma University undergraduate nursing Students motivation for choosing nursing profession, Jimma Ethiopia, 2023.

Sr. no	Variables	Class year				Total frequency (n = 200)	Percent (%)
		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4		
1	Self-motivation	49	37	41	18	145	72.5
2	Financial problem/availability of work	23	18	20	12	73	36.5
3	Desire to help others	61	41	49	22	173	86.5
4	Grade	7	11	15	27	60	30.0
5	Family advice	23	22	18	7	70	35.0

TABLE 3 Jimma University undergraduate B.Sc., nursing students perception toward nursing, Jimma Ethiopia.

No	Nursing profession is	Class year				Total frequency (n = 200)	Percent (%)
		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4		
1	Dignified and respectful profession	55	37	50	25	167	83.5
2	Actual/equal to other profession	48	30	38	26	142	71
3	Opportunity to serve humanity	56	40	52	31	179	89.5
4	Opportunity for personal growth	34	32	29	15	110	55
5	Caring profession with ethical standards	61	40	52	33	186	93
6	A Women's profession	9	8	7	10	34	17
7	An extremely hard profession that does not receive enough appreciation	26	20	28	27	101	50.5

University. The study showed male dominance among nursing students, altruism as a primary motivator for choosing nursing as a career, and positive perceptions of nursing. Additionally, the study identified concerns about its demanding nature and lack of recognition (Table 5).

The majority of students have a positive perception of their profession. Nursing students enrolled in this field for financial reasons, availability of work, personal interest, and their preparatory year grades both before and after COVID-19. Before COVID-19, the majority of

TABLE 4 Jimma University B.Sc., nursing student's future intention, Jimma, Ethiopia, 2023.

Sr. No	Variables	Frequency	Percentage%	Mean	SD
1	Plan to go abroad	177	88.5	1.11	0.32
2	Higher education	160	80	1.20	0.40
3	Bedside nursing	76	38	1.62	0.48
4	Teaching institution	122	61	1.39	0.49
5	Nurse administration	132	66	1.34	0.47
6	Change of profession	91	45.5	1.55	0.49
7	Opportunity to specialize	157	78.5	1.21	0.41

TABLE 5 Reason for Jimma University B.Sc., nursing students to travel abroad, Jimma, Ethiopia, 2023.

Sr. no	Reason for wanting to travel abroad	Frequency (n = 200)		Percent (%)	Mean	SD
1	The monetary value of the profession in other countries	Yes	162	81	1.12	0.33
		No	38	19		
2	The profession is least valued in the country	Yes	125	62.5	1.32	0.49
		No	75	37.5		
3	The prestige/respect and admiration	Yes	119	59.5	1.36	0.48
		No	81	40.5		
4	The quest for foreign exposure	Yes	96	48	1.48	0.5
		No	104	52		
5	Future academic pursuit	Yes	150	75	1.19	0.39
		No	50	25		

study participants in the nursing profession were female (El Dahshan and Youssef, 2018; Poorchangizi et al., 2019; Poreddi et al., 2012), however, there has been an increase in the number of male students enrolling since then. Additionally, after the pandemic, more students are considering changing their profession (Neumbe et al., 2023; Salim, 2020; Tawfiq and Jarrah, 2013).

The gender distribution in this study is significant, with 72% of participants being male. This stands in contrast to the historically female-dominated nursing profession. Nursing has long been viewed as predominantly female, with men being underrepresented globally (El Dahshan and Youssef, 2018; Meadus and Twomey, 2011). However, recent studies suggest that nursing is becoming more gender-diverse, especially in developing countries such as Ethiopia, where healthcare professions are changing (Boughn, 2001). This shift is in line with the finding that only 17% of participants in this study associated nursing primarily with women, suggesting a progressive dissolution of gender stereotypes. Such findings are consistent with global trends that highlight increasing male participation in nursing (Rajacich et al., 2013). However, the finding that 61.5% of students felt pride in their profession, whereas 14% experienced shyness, particularly among fourth-year students, may reflect a tension between the societal view of nursing and the personal challenges students face as they approach graduation. This suggests there may be variations in perceptions of the nursing profession across different student cohorts. Additionally, some students may even feel defensive or choose to altogether change the topic when

discussing their profession, highlighting the potential for varying levels of comfort and perception regarding the nursing field. The literature suggests that nursing students often encounter conflicting messages about the profession's worth, with public perceptions sometimes devaluing their contributions (Takase et al., 2005). The shyness reported by 50% of fourth-year students could indicate a lack of confidence as they transition from the academic environment to clinical practice, which is also reported in nursing students' professional identity formation studies (Johnson et al., 2012).

Altruism emerged as the primary motivator for pursuing nursing, with 86.5% of respondents choosing nursing to help others. This is consistent with multiple studies identifying altruism as a core driver for individuals entering nursing (Levet-Jones et al., 2007). Similarly, self-motivation was also a significant influence (72.5%), which resonates with findings from studies that emphasize the role of intrinsic motivation in nursing career decisions (Rudman and Gustavsson, 2012). However, financial considerations (36.5%) and family influence (35%) also played notable roles, suggesting that external factors remain important in students' decision-making processes. This finding is consistent with research by Price et al. (2013), which shows that while altruism is dominant, practical considerations such as job security and family expectations also shape career choices in nursing (Price et al., 2013).

The positive perception of nursing reported in this study aligns with previous literature. For example, 83.5% of nursing

students in the current study viewed nursing as a dignified and respectful profession. This mirrors findings from studies highlighting how nursing students see the profession as socially valuable and morally rewarding (Gordon, 2024). Also, nursing students often view nursing as a call to serve humanity, a sentiment deeply rooted in the profession's history and ethos (O'Brien et al., 2008). Furthermore, 93% of students agreed that nursing is a caring profession with ethical standards, reinforcing the profession's longstanding association with compassion and integrity (Noddings, 2013; Watson, 2024). However, the perception that nursing is highly demanding and underappreciated (50.5%) reflects a more complex and well-documented reality in the literature. Studies have consistently found that nurses face significant challenges in their work environments, including long hours, emotional exhaustion, and a lack of recognition for their contributions (McHugh et al., 2011). These challenges may contribute to the finding that 45.5% of students are considering changing professions, a concern that aligns with the literature on nurse burnout and attrition (Rudman and Gustavsson, 2012). The high level of interest in specialization (78.5%) also suggests that students may seek ways to advance their careers and find greater fulfillment in more specialized, fewer generalist roles, consistent with research on career satisfaction in nursing (Gray, 2016).

The high percentage of students (88.5%) planning to go abroad aligns with global trends in the migration of healthcare workers, mainly from low and middle-income countries to more developed nations (Kingma, 2024). Brain drain in nursing has been well documented, with nurses seeking better pay, working conditions, and career advancement opportunities abroad (Adams and Kennedy, 2006). This finding is particularly significant in the Ethiopian context, where the loss of highly trained healthcare professionals to international markets could exacerbate local healthcare shortages (Serneels et al., 2007). In terms of career paths, the relatively low interest in bedside nursing (38%) compared to teaching (61%) and nurse administration (66%) suggests that many students are looking beyond traditional patient care roles. This may reflect a desire for more leadership or academic positions, which offer better career advancement opportunities and work-life balance (Buerhaus and Staiger, 2024). The literature supports these findings, with research indicating that nursing students increasingly aspire to roles that allow for professional autonomy and leadership (Hadgu, 2015). The intense interest in higher education (80%) and specialization (78.5%) further highlights the desire for career development and advanced practice, which are critical for retaining skilled nurses (Gray, 2016).

The current study provided information on undergraduate students' perspectives on their future career paths. However, due to its design, the study does not identify the specific factors influencing students' career perceptions nor establish a causal relationship between these factors and students' perceptions of their careers.

The findings of this study may have important implications for nursing education and healthcare workforce policy. The strong altruistic motivations and generally positive perceptions of nursing suggest that the profession continues to attract individuals committed to ethical and compassionate care, which is essential

for the future of nursing. However, the significant proportion of students considering changing professions and the widespread desire to go abroad highlight challenges related to nurse retention, particularly in developing countries like Ethiopia.

To address these issues, nursing education programs should focus on strengthening professional identity and providing career development opportunities that align with students' aspirations, such as specialization and leadership roles. Furthermore, healthcare policymakers must improve working conditions for nurses, ensuring that they are adequately compensated and recognized for their contributions to patient care. Reducing the brain drain by offering competitive salaries and career advancement opportunities within the country could help retain skilled nurses and ensure a stable healthcare workforce (Kingma, 2024).

4.1 Limitation of the study

However, due to the nature of the study, it doesn't identify cause-and-effect relationships. Additionally, the study was conducted only at Jimma University, Institute of Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, School of Nursing, so these findings should not be generalized to the entire country. Therefore, future researchers are recommended to identify factors influencing undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of their future professional careers.

5 Conclusion

This study showed that nursing students at Jimma University generally hold favorable views of nursing and are driven by altruistic values, concerns about the demanding nature of the profession, under appreciation, and the desire to go abroad. These findings reflect broader global trends in the nursing workforce. Addressing these challenges through supportive educational programs and improved working conditions will be critical for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the nursing profession, particularly in countries like Ethiopia, where healthcare workers are in high demand.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in this article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the participants or participants legal guardian/next of kin was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

LH: Data curation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. BI: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. GG: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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