

# The Process of Acquiring a Professional Identity by Male Nursing Students: A Grounded Theory Study

## Abstract

**Background:** Professional identity, encompassing nurses' perception of the meaning of nursing and their role as nurses, significantly influences their performance. This study aimed to elucidate the professional identity formation among Iranian male nursing students. **Materials and Methods:** This qualitative research employing a grounded theory approach was conducted from October 2019 to February 2021 in the Nursing School and affiliated clinical settings of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Iran. Data collection used semi-structured interviews and observations. Purposive sampling of fourth-year nursing students was initially employed, followed by theoretical sampling. Data analysis followed the adapted version of Strauss and Corbin's 1990 model. **Results:** Analysis of research data generated 700 primary codes, refined through continuous comparative analysis into 13 subcategories and further condensed into five main categories: "underlying factors before and after entering the field," "self-esteem," "self-confidence," "professional performance," and "professional commitment." The core variable, "self-esteem," emerged as the central concept underpinning professional identity. **Conclusions:** Acquiring professional identity in male nurses is a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional process. Self-esteem is identified as the central variable in this process, emphasizing the need for educational and clinical environments conducive to fostering professional identity.

**Keywords:** Grounded theory, Iran, male nurses, professional identity, self-confidence

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## Introduction

Identity is a complex concept rooted in the fundamental question "Who am I?" Nursing professional identity evolves through self-awareness and professional role comprehension in both academic and clinical settings.<sup>[1,2]</sup> Identity is a dynamic concept shaped by the context of culture and social interactions of individuals. Professional identity is a crucial aspect of social identity in nursing, which not only shapes perceptions of professional roles but also influences retention rates.<sup>[3]</sup> Professional identity is a key component of nurses' self-concept, their feelings as a nurse, and their thinking patterns.<sup>[4]</sup> The success of healthcare organizations relies on nurses who have a positive professional identity for effective care delivery.<sup>[5]</sup>

Professional identity, closely tied to professional self-concept, involves the self, the role, and the context developing throughout one's education and professional journey.<sup>[6]</sup> Recognizing the factors

influencing professional identity is essential for nursing educators to maintain a stable and content workforce.<sup>[5]</sup> Compared to other professions, nurses often exhibit a lower professional identity, with male nursing students facing a distinct identity crisis.<sup>[7]</sup> Nursing schools play a crucial role in shaping the learning experiences of male nursing students, influencing their perception of the profession and career decisions.<sup>[8]</sup> Gender stereotypes, especially those challenging the appropriateness of nursing for men, are still significant, as nursing has traditionally been a female-dominated profession.<sup>[8,9]</sup> Addressing gender stereotypes is crucial to fostering a supportive environment for male nursing students.<sup>[10]</sup>

Understanding the professional identity development of male nursing students contributes to fostering gender diversity within the field. It helps challenge stereotypes and promotes inclusivity. This study aims to explore the intricate process of professional identity formation in male

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nursing students. Given the complexity and unknown features of professionalization in this demographic understanding, their experiences and outcomes become imperative for promoting individual and professional success.

## Materials and Methods

This qualitative research employing a grounded theory approach was conducted between October 2019 and February 2021 within the classrooms of the Nursing and Midwifery School and clinical settings affiliated with Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Iran.

The initial phase of participant recruitment involved purposive sampling focusing on fourth-year nursing students who had directly encountered the phenomenon under study. These participants not only demonstrated eagerness to participate but also could articulate their experiences vividly. Essential criteria included fluency in the Persian language, clear expression, and a cooperative attitude during interviews. As the analysis progressed and main categories began to emerge, the methodology seamlessly transitioned to theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling involved recruiting participants based on emerging hypotheses and strategically examining the relationships between main categories deemed crucial for theory development.

Primary data collection methods included personal in-depth and semi-structured interviews, complemented by naturalistic observations documented as field notes. Interviews commenced with open-ended questions such as "Do you recognize yourself as a nurse?"; "What characteristics do you think a nurse should have and what characteristics do you think you have?"; and "Do you introduce yourself as a nurse, especially in public or social communication situations?"; and progressively advanced to more specific questions like "In what situations do you introduce yourself as a nurse?" and "What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a male nurse?" as well as probing questions aimed at delving deeper into participants' experiences. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, resulting in a comprehensive dataset of 23 in-depth interviews, 60–90 min each. Direct observation of male nursing students' activities and interactions in clinical settings was also conducted. Notably, the researcher actively participated in the clinical education of these students. The observational approach employed was unstructured, allowing the researcher, acting as a participant observer, to keenly observe male nursing students in various clinical settings over 6 months. Detailed field notes were promptly documented in a private space following each observation, ensuring a comprehensive and timely record of the observed activities and interactions.

Simultaneously with data collection, a rigorous constant comparative analysis was used, aligning with the grounded theory procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin.<sup>[11]</sup> The

analytical process encompassed open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding entailed the extraction of meaningful sentences, the allocation of codes, and the meticulous comparison of similar data segments. Axial coding facilitated the establishment of connections between codes, the identification of properties and dimensions, and the exploration of causal conditions. Selective coding, informed by a paradigm model, intricately links categories to the core category, ultimately shaping the final narrative. The utilization of memoing, initiated from the analysis of the first interview transcript, provided continuous support throughout the research process.

The implementation of MaxQDA software (version 10; VERBI Software GmbH, Berlin, Germany) significantly contributed to the efficiency of data organization and management during the analysis phase. Ensuring the trustworthiness of the study was paramount. Four key criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were considered.

To enhance credibility, the research team engaged in prolonged engagement with participants, capturing the nuances of the interview proceedings through audio recordings and detailed field notes. Participants were interviewed until data saturation was achieved, and a member check was conducted to validate the truth and confirm the findings. Transcriptions of interviews were worded precisely, including nonverbal cues such as silences, sighs, frowns, and gestures in brackets, ensuring the authenticity of the data. The study aimed for dependability through an independent coder's involvement in conducting an inquiry audit. This audit scrutinized the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation of research study results, providing an external perspective on the study's reliability.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study can be generalized or applied to other contexts. In this study, detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and the research process were provided to enhance transferability.

Confirmability was maintained through the inclusion of nonverbal cues in the transcripts, and an ongoing process of memoing was employed. Memoing, initiated during the analysis of the first interview transcript, continued throughout the research, serving as a reflective tool to document insights, reflections, and decisions made during the coding rounds. By incorporating these strategies, the study aimed to uphold the principles of trustworthiness in qualitative research, as advocated by Guba and Lincoln.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously upheld throughout the study. Fundamental principles, including safeguarding the confidentiality of data, respecting participants' right to withdraw from the research, securing informed consent, maintaining anonymity, and accommodating the

interview schedule based on participants' preferences, were meticulously adhered to. Importantly, there was no direct and continuous teacher-student communication to mitigate any potential influence on the participants. The students actively expressed satisfaction with both the interview process and follow-up interactions. Furthermore, ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Medical Sciences, Iran (Ethics Committee Code: IR.MUI.RESEARCH.REC.1398.285).

## Results

The study involved 23 male nursing students in their final year, with 11 of them possessing one to two years of clinical experience concurrently. Following initial coding, editing, and removal of duplicate codes, a total of 700 primary codes emerged, leading to the identification of 13 subcategories during the analysis process (see Figure 1). The main categories derived from this analysis encompassed "underlying factors before and after entering the field," "self-esteem," "self-confidence," "professional performance," and "professional commitment," with a core category identified as "self-esteem." The following is a detailed description of the emerged categories and their interrelationships in addressing the research question, "How does a nursing professional identity develop among male nursing students?"

### Underlying factors before and after entering the field

Various factors were found to influence the professional identity of male nursing students both before and after entering the profession. Concerns before entering the field included the anticipation of securing suitable employment post-graduation, with one participant expressing, "*Nursing is a good major because you know you have an income to live on after you graduate.*" Additionally, participants highlighted the application of learned science in personal life, the breadth of nursing science, and the potential for continuing education while working in a clinical environment as advantages.

However, the influence of a "*female nature*" attributed to nursing and the societal perception of nursing as a low-skilled profession, particularly when compared to medicine, emerged as challenges affecting career choice. Participants noted the impact of the prestige associated with physicians and their profession in clinical settings as well as the broader community. The participants perceived themselves to be in the shadow of medicine, shaping their identity under its influence. According to their perspectives, the image of the nursing profession in the clinical environment had the potential to adversely impact their "*sense of worthiness*," particularly when they were solely tasked with executing physicians' orders. A participant articulated this sentiment, stating, "*Observing doctors, even when not actively involved, receiving esteem solely for their title, or witnessing greater respect accorded to medical*

*students compared to us, evokes a sense of dissatisfaction.*" Despite these external factors, the satisfaction derived from patient care positively motivated participants, as expressed by one student: "*When I do something for a patient and see their happiness, it motivates me a lot.*"

### Acceptance of reality

A male nursing student may hold the belief that, as a nurse, he possesses the capacity to positively impact the prevailing conditions through his abilities. Conversely, he may be significantly influenced by negative factors both before and after entering the profession, leading him to become a passive participant. In this role, he not only refrains from actively seeking improvement within his profession but also experiences a diminished sense of self-worth and motivation. The participants' self-esteem resulted from balancing their initial expectations against the actual conditions within the discipline. Establishing this equilibrium and adapting to it were crucial for gaining self-esteem. Participants achieving self-esteem actively sought to enhance their profession's prestige through continuous improvement in knowledge and skills, as highlighted by a participant: "*I came to believe that I am a nurse, so I try to change the prestige of my profession with good care.*"

### Feeling of frustration

Increased self-confidence was identified as a catalyst for greater participation in patient care and independent nursing interventions. Conversely, a lack of balance between professional expectations and current conditions led to decreased motivation and a sense of worthlessness. Participants voiced concerns about the persistent undervaluing of nursing compared to medicine, impacting their motivation to improve and advance their skills, as stated by a student: "*Nursing status has not changed, it is not so valued compared to medicine, I am even less motivated, all these courses you pass in nursing are useless.*"

### Self-confidence

The acceptance of oneself as a nurse emerged as a pivotal factor influencing male nursing students' engagement with patient care. Lack of self-acceptance resulted in frustration and indifference, potentially affecting patient care negatively. The researcher keenly observed that a lack of commitment to the optimal performance of nursing students in the field might result in their disengagement from providing attentive care to the point where their actions become routine duties rather than dedicated efforts. On the other hand, students who exhibited higher motivation and self-confidence not only performed physical care but also invested time in establishing a meaningful connection with patients, emphasizing the importance of holistic care, as noted by a participant: "*Care is not just medication and medical records; you should spend at least a few minutes with your patients, sit by them, talk to them, and lower their stress.*" Moreover, embracing one's identity as a nurse fosters the development of professional

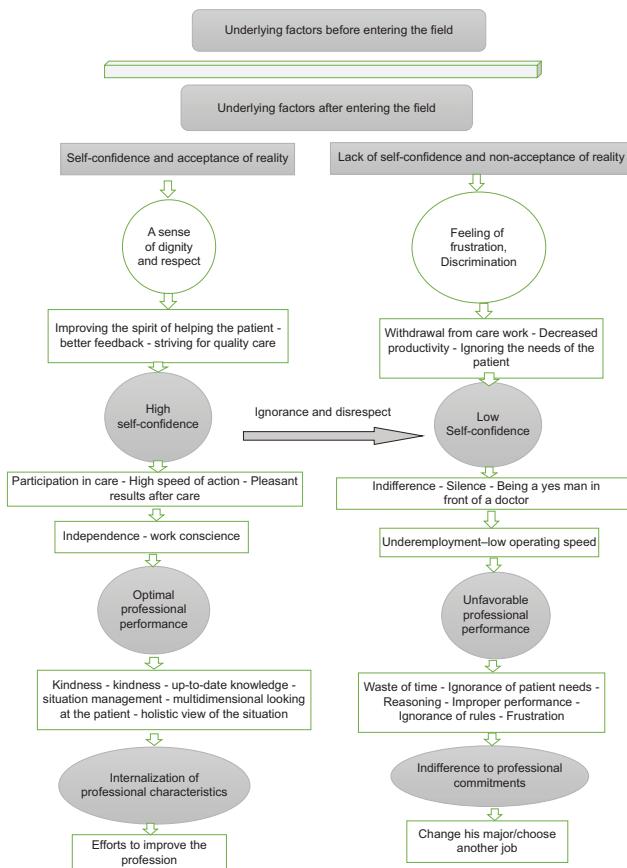


Figure 1: The process of acquiring the professional identity of male nurses

attributes in male nurses. According to their insights, effective situation management stands out as a key indicator. A student articulated this perspective: “*A noteworthy trait of a male nurse is the ability to adeptly manage the ward. I believe I possess this characteristic, enabling me to provide care to my patients while efficiently overseeing and orchestrating the operations within the ward.*”

### Professional performance

Experiences before and after entering the profession played a critical role in shaping self-acceptance, self-confidence, and ultimately, professional performance, patient care standards, and the dignity of the nursing profession. These experiences helped institutionalize desirable professional characteristics among male nurses.

A student expressed this professional pride, stating, “*I take pride in identifying myself as a nurse. Even as a nursing student, when attending social gatherings with friends, I proudly proclaimed my acceptance into nursing and shared my role in the hospital.*”

The internalization of key professional traits, encompassing comprehensive patient care, effective management of medical conditions, and maintaining a composed demeanor, intensifies the commitment of these individuals to reshape societal perceptions of the nursing profession. Through adept self-presentation as nurses, coupled with consistent exemplary

performance, they catalyze significant shifts in their future trajectories, leading to notable career advancement.

Another student articulated this commitment, “*To elevate the field of nursing, it is imperative to deliver exceptional patient care and pursue continuous education. I aspire to pursue doctoral studies to contribute further to the advancement of nursing.*”

Conversely, some students, influenced by negative experiences and an inability to accept prevailing conditions within the profession, may grapple with frustration and indifference. This indifference, if left unaddressed, may exacerbate the challenges faced by the nursing profession, potentially contributing to its degradation within clinical settings and society.

A student shared these sentiments: “*Nursing feels uninteresting; it becomes a source of suffering, leading to self-doubt and disappointment.*” Indifference toward professional commitments and discontent with the current state of nursing have reached a point where this group of students contemplates changing majors or pursuing alternative career paths to alleviate their current situation.

In conclusion, the study’s findings demonstrate that underlying factors preceding and following enrollment in the nursing program, self-confidence, and the acceptance or rejection of reality can drive students toward high or low self-confidence, appropriate or inappropriate professional competence, and internalization or indifference toward professional characteristics. These factors influence whether a student endeavors to enhance their nursing career or considers changing their major and pursuing an alternative profession.

### Discussion

One determinant influencing self confidence, and consequently, the internalization of professional characteristics is the availability of a fitting and meaningful role in one’s personal life. Consistent with our findings, a study highlighted job security, a favorable job market, diverse employment opportunities, positive and motivating nursing models, and a genuine desire to assist others as the predominant motivations for male students opting for nursing. Despite being a minority within their academic and career contexts, factors such as contentment with the curriculum, contentment with job selection, and robust support networks involving family, friends, classmates, and professors contributed to the steadfast commitment of male students to their chosen career path.<sup>[13,14]</sup>

The significance of positive role models in fostering a constructive professional identity was underscored in our study. Participants acknowledged that some clinical educators, harboring low expectations and misconceptions about male nursing students, perceived them as unlikely to engage in clinical settings and isolated within the nursing domain.<sup>[8,15]</sup> Consequently, the presence of supportive

family structures and positive role models emerges as a pivotal element influencing self confidence, the decision making process to pursue nursing, and the internalization of pertinent professional attributes.<sup>[16]</sup> Self confidence is a psychological construct that is forged throughout the developmental trajectory and cannot be easily altered. Establishing trust in oneself is foundational to achieving self awareness and self construction, enabling individuals to explore meaning and actively create it.<sup>[17]</sup>

The intricate relationship between self confidence and self perception is particularly salient in the context of nursing, where the perception of one's professional identity is entwined with factors such as the historically female orientation of the profession, reciprocally influencing levels of self confidence.<sup>[18]</sup> In the realm of clinical decision making, professional self confidence emerges as a pivotal variable, exerting a substantial impact on other pertinent factors. Aligning with our study's findings, participants in a related study identified professional self confidence as an internal belief in their capacity and values to assume a professional role. They further highlighted the detrimental effects of recurrent negative feedback from nurse educators, staff, and the community, fostering a sense of professional worthlessness that compromised their professional dignity.<sup>[19]</sup> Consequently, the socialization process within the nursing profession, shaped by professional standards and underlying norms, plays a crucial role in influencing an individual's perception of their professional identity.<sup>[20]</sup>

Exploring positive factors influencing self confidence, a study revealed that 77.8% of respondents attributed their positive perception of the nursing profession to enhanced job opportunities and professional stability.<sup>[21]</sup> These positive elements, echoed in this study and other related investigations, have proven instrumental in cultivating a positive professional identity within nursing, particularly among male nurses. Previous research involving 110 third year and fourth year nursing students substantiated this association, emphasizing the need for diverse career guidance programs to enhance job satisfaction and self efficacy, ultimately bolstering the professional identity of nursing students.<sup>[22]</sup>

A prevailing challenge identified among negative factors before and after entering the nursing profession is the entrenched perception of nursing as a predominantly female domain. A phenomenological study on the lived experiences of male nursing students in Carolina validated the concept of the female nature of the nursing profession, underscoring the absence of male nursing role models and limitations within the clinical environment. Building on these insights, the authors recommended strategies such as improving media portrayals of male nurses, fostering faculty initiatives to address gender biases, understanding the unique barriers and facilitators in male nursing education, and implementing counseling programs to provide male role models.<sup>[23]</sup>

Men in nursing often encounter a discouraging environment that distances them from traditional motivations, such as care and professionalism, when choosing this profession. This has significant implications for the recruitment and retention of male nurses, highlighting the crucial need for further research into the intricate relationship between nursing and gender concepts.<sup>[24]</sup> This recurring theme surfaced prominently in the narratives of students who reported societal perceptions persisting today, viewing nursing predominantly as a female centric profession, thereby influencing the perceptions of patients and fellow nurses within clinical settings.<sup>[13]</sup> A comprehensive review study highlighted prevalent topics such as "Call me a nurse," "Male nurses understand us better," and "We need more men in nursing," underscoring the imperative for role models for male nurses within the profession.<sup>[25]</sup> These findings collectively underscore the importance of targeted interventions and support mechanisms to enhance the experiences and retention of male nurses in the nursing profession.

Participants further expressed sentiments regarding respect for physicians and the significance of their profession. This includes experiences of disrespect, discrimination, a lack of appreciation, silence, powerlessness among nurses, and insufficient support. Similar reports highlight the adverse effects of discrimination and degrading behavior by some physicians on the learning experiences of nurses.<sup>[26]</sup> In a study by Chen *et al.*,<sup>[7]</sup> over half of the respondents expressed a negative perception of the nursing profession, attributing lower characteristics and professional identity to nurses. To foster and shape the professional identity of male nursing students, it is imperative to engage professors and educators who embody a positive professional identity.

Male students may encounter barriers in both academic study and clinical placements. For instance, the discomfort experienced by male nursing students when mistaken for doctors is an illustrative challenge.<sup>[8]</sup> These findings underscore the urgency of addressing systemic issues to enhance the professional environment and promote inclusivity and respect within the nursing profession. It is evident that pivotal factors influencing nurses' self esteem and professional identity include team dynamics, participatory and communicative activities, the role of clinical professors and educators, educational approaches, personal characteristics, and the pervasive influence of culture and media.<sup>[27]</sup>

The study has certain limitations inherent to its qualitative nature, common to this research approach, which restrict the generalizability of the findings. The structures identified in this study are intricately tied to the specific sociocultural context of Iran. Consequently, the transferability of the findings to different sociocultural settings may be impacted.

## Conclusion

As the development of professional identity in nursing male students is a dynamic process formed by multidimensional

factors, it is recommended to promote self-confidence in male nurses. This can be achieved by providing measures such as benefiting from appropriate role models, supportive educational and clinical structures, and providing constructive feedback in educational and clinical settings. Looking ahead, efforts to enhance the visibility and acceptance of male nurses, challenge stereotypes, and cultivate a more inclusive professional environment are essential.

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### Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare.

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