ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Nursing profession during the pandemic: Perceptions, changes, and the role of media

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Abstract

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically highlighted the critical role of nursing in healthcare, transforming the traditional image of nurses from "sisters" or "white angels" to a more esteemed and academic profession. This study aims to evaluate nurses' perspectives on how the media influences the perception of the nursing profession during the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on their professional image. The study seeks to assess nurses' views on the media's role in shaping public perception of nursing during the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for professional identity. A total of 208 nurses employed in a hospital setting between January 2022 – March 2022 participated in this research, with institutional approval. Data were collected using a researcher-designed questionnaire and the Nursing Profession Image Scale. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 22.0, employing descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and Student's t-tests, with a significance level set at p<0.05. The average age of the nurses was 35.02±7.80 years, with 81.7% being female. Only 7.3% were affiliated with a professional association. A notable 26.0% believed there were positive shifts in the nursing profession's image during the pandemic, while 80.3% observed increased discourse around nursing due to the pandemic. Moreover, 41.8% felt the media adequately portrayed nurses and their professional challenges. The mean score on the Nurses' Image Scale was 112.00±9.67. According to gender, affiliation with a professional organization, and perceptions of media coverage, the perception of the nursing profession's image has varied. However, no significant correlations were found between age, education, professional experience, and perception of the nursing profession. Nurses' perceptions of their professional image are moderately positive. Efforts to enhance the profession's public perception, particularly through media representation, are deemed imperative.

Keywords: COVID-19, nurse, professional image

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted global health systems, presenting significant challenges, particularly for healthcare professionals such as nurses. Nurses have undertaken a critical role in combating the pandemic, facing intense workloads and coping with physical and emotional challenges. This challenging period has significantly influenced the public perception of the nursing profession, emphasizing once again the value of their profession [1-3]. Nurses have undertaken a critical role in combating the pandemic, facing intense workloads and coping with physical and emotional challenges. This challenging period has significantly influenced the public perception of the nursing profession, emphasizing once again the value of their profession [4,5]. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the rapidly increasing number of cases has exerted significant pressure on nurses working in the healthcare sector. Nurses, swiftly adapting to the treatment and care of COVID-19, have provided both physical and psychological support to patients. [6].

However, during this process, the overwhelming number of patients exceeding intensive care and hospital capacities compelled nurses to endure long and intense working hours. Nurses faced not only physical challenges but also psychological difficulties, such as the fear of transmitting the virus to their families [7,8]. Nurses who witnessed the pandemic experienced concerns such as burnout, fatigue, and the fear of transmitting the virus to their families due to increased workload and working hours. However, they continued their profession with great dedication to contribute to public health [9].

While highlighting the challenges caused by COVID-19, the current nursing workforce's unfavorable working conditions and the difficulties they face have also become evident [10]. Appreciation, gratitude, and love for nurses spread to a wide audience through social media. The missions of finding solutions to health problems, improving public health, and directly saving human lives were emphasized for nurses [7].

The majority of society perceives the nursing profession as an assistant to doctors, unquestionably implementing the doctor's instructions, and distributing medication. Representations in the media, especially in newspaper articles, advertisements, TV series, and films, significantly influence the image of nursing. However, these media representations often do not realistically reflect the image of nursing [11-15]. There is a direct relationship between public perception and the quality of nursing care. When nurses are subjected to the negative critical views of society, when they do not receive respect for their work, and when they face negative behaviors from patients, it has been reported that it affects their ability to focus on their job, lowers their motivation, leads to more mistakes, and results in less patient-oriented and respectful attitudes [14]. Therefore, understanding how the image of nursing and nurses' perceptions of professional image are shaped is a crucial factor that can impact nurses' professional performance and the quality of patient care.

Professional image perception is shaped by the combination of nurses' perceptions, views, and attitudes towards their profession, impacting job satisfaction, performance, and retention rates. Understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the perception and image of the nursing profession is a fundamental factor in shaping nurses' perceptions of their roles and futures [4,5,7]. Enhancing these factors positively can contribute to increasing the benefits that nurses provide to society. However, the negative effects of professional image perceptions of nurses during the pandemic can lead to professional alienation, decreased job satisfaction, and a decline in the quality of care. In this context, the effects of the pandemic on the nursing profession should be thoroughly examined [4,7].

The role of the media stands out as a crucial factor in shaping the image perceptions of nurses [16-18]. During the pandemic, the media created societal awareness by sharing nurses' efforts and challenges with a broad audience [7]. Positive and supportive media content contributed to strengthening the professional

image of nurses and increased the respect society has for them [12-17]. In this context, understanding nurses' perceptions of their professional image during the pandemic, along with crucial factors such as societal respect, motivation, and professional satisfaction, is of great importance for the future development of the nursing profession and its impact on the healthcare system [19]. In this context, a detailed examination of nurses' perceptions of their professional image during the pandemic can provide valuable insights for developing coping strategies in the healthcare sector and enhancing nurses' levels of professional satisfaction. In our country, a limited number of studies have been found examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nurses' perceptions of professional image.There is no optimal number of studies in this field [12,14,20]. Therefore, the aim of this study is to assess nurses' thoughts on the role of the media in shaping the image of the nursing profession during the COVID-19 process and their perceptions of professional image.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

The research has a cross-sectional design and was planned as a correlational study. In order to enhance scientific reporting standards and accurately convey the methods during the research process, the STROBE checklist was utilized.

The primary objective of the study is to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nurses' professional perceptions and professional image. In this context, the research focuses on the following questions:

1. What are the thoughts of nurses regarding the role of the media in the changing image of the nursing profession during the pandemic?

2. How does the COVID-19 pandemic affect the professional perception of nurses?

3. Do the descriptive characteristics of nurses affect the Nursing Profession Image Scale scores?

Study Place and Period

The study population consisted of nurses working at Osmaniye State Hospital. The data were collected from the nurses who agreed to participate in the research between January 2022- March 2022.

Study Population

Voluntary participants who have actively worked as nurses for at least one year among the 224 nurses working at Osmaniye State Hospital were included in the research. Nurses who were on leave during the pandemic or had less than one year of work experience were excluded from the study. The data of 208 nurses were included in the research (92%).

Data Collection Tools

The data of the study were collected using a descriptive characteristics form (participants' certain characteristics, nurses' thoughts on the role of the media in changing the image of the nursing profession during the pandemic) and the Nursing Profession Image Scale. After obtaining ethical approval, the forms were distributed online through Google Forms to nurses who agreed to participate in the study. Additionally, a link and explanations about the study were distributed via email or WhatsApp.

To determine nurses' professional image perceptions, a scale developed by "Dost and Bahçecik" in 2015, consisting of a 5-point Likert scale with 6 factors and 42 items, was utilized. The scale consists of professional qualifications (11 items), working conditions (10 items), gender (8 items), education (5 items), professional status (5 items) and appearance (3 items). It consists of 6 subscales: item). 15 items in the scale (8, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22,23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 31) are scored negatively. The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 42, the highest. The score is 210, 42-75 is very weak, 76-109 is weak, 110-143 indicates average, 144-177 indicates good and 178-210 indicates very good image perception. Taken from scale as the score increases, the image perception also increases positively. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the scale is α=0.82 [21] and in this study, it was found as α=0.80.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)

version 22 software. Descriptive statistical methods such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, as well as the Kolmogorov-Smirnov distribution test were used to examine the normality of distribution. The data were found to be normally distributed. Student's *t*-test was applied to determine relationships between nurses' scale scores and sociodemographic variables. The Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to evaluate the relationship between age and the scores of the nursing profession image scale. The obtained *p*-values were considered significant at the <0.05 level.

Ethical Considerations

The present study received approval from the Ethics Committee of Korkut Ata University (Date: 22/12/2021, Decision no: 2021/8/7). Written approval was obtained from the institution where the study was conducted. They continued with the survey after indicating their consent and retention of online data collection records participants were asked to indicate their willingness to volunteer in the online survey. Prior to the study, an informed consent form was obtained from participants who agreed to take part in the research. The research process adhered to the principles of the Helsinki Declaration.

Results

The participants in the study consist of nurses, of whom 81.7% are female. In terms of educational background, 67.3% have a university degree, and 14% are members of professional associations. The average age of the participants is 35.02±7.80 years, with an age range from 21 to 53 years. The average professional experience among the nurses is 12.18±8.06 years, ranging from 1 to 34 years (**Table 1**).

Approximately 74% of the nurses believe that there have been positive changes in the image of the nursing profession during the pandemic, attributing this change significantly to the influence of the media. Furthermore, 80% noted an increased representation of the nursing profession in various media outlets during the pandemic. However, 58% expressed the opinion

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of nurses (N:208).

Features	n	%
Gender		
Female	170	81.7
Male	38	18.3
Education		
High School	17	8.2
Associate Degree	33	15.8
Bachelor's Degree	140	67.3
Master's Degree	18	8.7
Association Membership		
Yes	14	7.3
No	194	92.7
The association joined		
Turkish Nurses Association	8	57.0
Student Nurses Association	3	21.0
Turkish Midwives Association	2	15.0
Turkish Neonatology Association	1	7.0

Age: Mean±SD* 35.02±7.80 (minimum: 21, maximum: 53) years

Professional experience: Mean±SD* 12.18±8.06 (minimum: 1, maximum: 34) years

* Mean ± Standard Deviation

that, despite these increased representations, the media has not adequately highlighted the positive aspects of nurses or addressed the professional challenges they faced during the pandemic (**Table 2**).

The average score of nurses on the Nursing Profession Image Scale was found to be 112±9.67, indicating a moderate level of image perception. Sub-dimension scores were as follows: professional qualifications 20.03±1.96, working conditions 19.01±3.9, gender 22.67±4.8, education 13.97±1.67, professional status 1.18±3.09, and appearance 6.07±2.8. (**Table 3**).

Those who believe that men and those not affiliated with professional organizations or associations have not been adequately discussed in relation to the nursing profession during the pandemic, in comparison to those who believe they have been sufficiently discussed, found the image perception of the nursing profession to be high and statistically significant ($p<0.05$) (**Table 4**).

The correlation between age and professional qualifications is weak and negative (r = -0.036). This indicates a slight tendency for a decrease in professional qualifications with increasing age. However, this relationship is very weak and statistically insignificant ($p>0.05$). The weak negative correlation between age and professional qualifications suggests a limited impact of age on professional qualifications. However, this effect is not statistically significant (**Table 5**). No significant relationship was found between educational status and the subscale scores (**Table 5**) ($p>0.05$).

There is a moderate negative correlation between professional qualifications and working conditions (r=-0.534). It is observed

Table 2. Nurses' views on the role of the media in the change of the nursing profession's image during the pandemic (N=208).

Features		n	%
"I believe that there have been positive changes in the image of the nursing profession during the pandemic, and I consider the media's influence to be significant in this transformation."	Yes	54	26.0
	No	154	74.0
"With the advent of the pandemic, nursing profession has started to receive more attention in the media."	Yes	167	80.3
	No	41	19.7
"During the pandemic, nurses were not sufficiently praised in the media, and the professional challenges they face were brought to the forefront."	Yes	87	41.8
	No	121	58.2

Table 3. The scores of nurses on the 'Nursing Profession Image Scale' and its sub-dimensions (N=208).

Scale and Subdimensions	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Professional Qualifications	9	24	20.03	1.96
Working Conditions	14	46	19.01	3.9
Gender	12	32	22.67	4.8
Education	10	20	13.97	1.67
Professional Status	1	5	1.18	3.09
Appearance	3	15	6.07	2.8
Total	87	146	112	9.67

Table 4. Comparison of the total scores of the Nursing Profession Image Scale and its sub-dimensions according to the demographic characteristics of nurses (N=208).

Characteristics		Professional Qualifications M±SD	Working Conditions M±SD	Gender M±SD	Education M±SD	Professional Status M±SD	Appearance M±SD	Total Scale Score M±SD
Gender	**Female**	20.21±1.71	18.78±3.29	22.11±4.68	13.96±1.61	15.35±5.84	5.88±2.67	111.05±9.19
	Male	19.23±2.71	20.07±5.86	25.11±4.56	14.02±1.93	15.89±6.33	6.82±3.25	116.09±10.45
Statistical Significance		**t=2.824** **p=0.004**	t=-1.862 p=0.064	**t=-3.704** **p=0.000**	t=-0.204 p=0.838	t=-0.509 p=0.612	**t=-2.078** **p=0.039**	**t=-3.392** **p=0.001**
	High School	20.09±5.88	15.33±5.88	15.08±1.83	22.04±7.54	23.24±7.78	15.42±7.75	115.09±10.42
	Associate Degree	20.11±1.88	18.33±5.68	12.08±1.33	14.05±1.13	15.49±4.33	13.42±6.75	110.07±10.12
	Bacheor's Degree	20.11±1.62	11.82±4.71	16.08±1.43	15.28 ±6.55	15.50±5.13	15.02±5.85	112.06±9.12
Education	**Master's Degree**	20.01±1.52	11.12±3.71	14.06±1.33	16.12 ±4.55	12.38±4.22	11.21±4.52	111.05±7.11
Statistical Significance**		F=1.235 p=0.249	F=0.279 p=0.785	F=0.271 p=0.879	F=0.191 p=0.879	F=0.673 p=0.667	F=0.484 p=0.759	F=0.321 p=0.864
To Become a Member of a Professional Organization or Association	**Yes**	20.41±1.72	18.62±2.48	21.82±4.75	13.27±0.95	14.31±6.04	5.58±2.39	108.72±9.32
	No	19.97±2.00	19.08±4.08	22.81±4.80	14.08±1.73	15.63±5.90	6.15±2.86	112.64±9.64
Statistical Significance*		t=1.108 p=0.269	t=-0.592 p=0.555	t=-1.028 p=0.305	**t=-2.455** **p=0.015**	t=-1.119 p=0.264	t=-1.005 p=0.316	**t=-2.040** **p=0.043**
"I believe that there have been positive changes in the image of the nursing profession during the pandemic, and I consider the influence of the media to be significant."	**Yes**	19.82±2.30	19.09±4.91	23.41±4.78	13.98±1.55	13.74±5.73	5.91±2.77	109.22±9.99
	No	20.18±1.68	18.96±3.01	22.15±4.76	13.96±1.76	16.65±5.78	6.18±2.83	113.10±9.38

Table 4. (continued) Comparison of the total scores of the Nursing Profession Image Scale and its sub-dimensions according to the demographic characteristics of nurses (N=208).

Statistical *Significance		t=-1.312 p=0.191	t=0.228 p=0.820	t=1.879 p=0.062	t=0.089 p=0.929	**t=-3.588** **p=0.000**	t=-0.661 p=0.509	t=-2.572 p=0.110
"With the onset of the pandemic, there has been an increased focus on the nursing profession."	**Yes**	20.14±2.56	19.08±3.50	22.72±4.71	13.95±1.65	16.18±5.85	6.23±2.79	109.51±9.48
	No	19.72±1.70	18.83±4.89	22.53±5.03	14.03±1.75	13.35±5.65	5.61±2.81	113.96±9.40
Statistical *Significance		t=-1.375 p=0.171	t=0.482 p=0.685	t=-0.250 p=0.803	t=0.311 p=0.756	**t=-3.088** **p=0.002**	t=1.405 p=0.161	**t=-3.356** **p=0.001**
"During the pandemic, nurses were not sufficiently praised in the media, and the professional challenges they face were brought to the forefront."	**Yes**	20.01±1.94	18.98±4.32	22.55±4.96	14.25±1.70	20.01±1.94	5.58±2.40	110.95±10.52
	No	20.05±1.99	19.04±3.58	22.76±4.70	13.77±1.63	20.5±1.99	6.42±3.02	112.90±8.98
Statistical Significance*		t=-0.167 p=0.867	t=-0.096 p=0.924	t=-0.321 p=0.749	**t=0.601** **p=0.043**	t=-0.167 p=0.867	**t=-2.134** **p=0.034**	t=-1.434 p=0.153

*Independent samples test (T-test), ** Oneway ANOVA test, M: Mean, SD: Standart Deviation

that an increase in professional qualifications is associated with a slight decrease in working conditions. This relationship is significant (*p*<0.01). The significant negative correlation between professional qualifications and working conditions indicates that nurses with higher professional qualifications generally face more challenging working conditions (**Table 5**).

The correlation between working conditions and gender is very weak and positive (r = 0.066). This indicates a slight increase in gender with an increase in working conditions. This relationship is significant (*p*<0.01). The significant positive correlation between working conditions and gender suggests that certain gender groups are exposed to more challenging working conditions (**Table 5**).

The correlation between gender and education is very weak and positive (r = 0.066). This indicates a slight increase in gender with an increase in education level. This relationship is significant (*p*<0.01). The negative correlation between education and professional status suggests that nurses with higher education levels tend to have lower professional status (**Table 5**).

The correlation between education and professional status is high (r = 0.897), indicating a strong positive relationship. Nurses with higher education levels generally have higher professional status.

The correlation between professional status and total score is strong and positive (r = 0.697). This indicates that an increase in professional status is associated with an increase in the total score. This relationship is highly significant (*p*<0.01). The high positive correlation between professional status and total score suggests that nurses with higher professional status generally have higher total scores. This situation indicates that professional status influences overall professional perception (**Table 5**).

Discussion

This study aims to assess nurses' perceptions of their professional image during the COVID-19 process and their thoughts on the role of the media in shaping these perceptions. The findings include nurses' opinions on whether the media has shown enough interest in the nursing profession during the pandemic.

The majority of nurses participating in this research don't believe that there have been positive changes in the image of the nursing profession during the pandemic, In the pandemic an increased focus on the nursing profession in the media [4-7]. However, this study nurses feel that these news stories do not adequately express

Table 5. Comparison of sub-dimensions and total scores of the Nursing Profession Image Scale according to age (N=208).

Scale sub-dimensions translations	Age	Professional Qualifications	Working Conditions	Gender	Education	Professional Status	Total
Professional Qualifications	-0.036**		-0.534**	0.066**	-0.137**	0.032**	-0.192**
Working Conditions	0.550**	-0.534**		-0.117**	0.219**	0.172**	0.550*
Gender	0.020**	0.066**	-0.117**		-0.129**	-0.275**	0.219**
Education	-0.019**	-0.137**	0.219**	-0.129**		0.070**	0.897*
Professional Status	0.010**	0.032**	0.172**	-0.275**	0.070**		0.697**

*Correlation significance level is 0.05

**Correlation significance level is 0.01 [Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)]

the importance of the profession. Studies indicate that the image of the nursing profession during the pandemic is shaped by the influence of the media, the efforts of nurses, and the perception of the community. Outbreaks, especially COVID-19, have highlighted nurses as heroes and angels [4-7]. Studies have concluded that the media positively affected the public image of nurses by highlighting their sacrifices and efforts during the pandemic [8-11,22]. The fact that the participants in this study thought otherwise may be due to the participants' belief that nurses are not given enough space in the Turkish media.

In this study, it was determined that the image of nursing is at a moderate level. Similarly, in the study conducted by Topuz et al. (2023), it was determined that the image perception of nurses is at a moderate level [12]. On the contrary, according to the study by Yurtsever et al., it was found that the professional image perception of nurses is at a good level [13]. In the study conducted by Karadeniz et al. (2022), it was determined that the professional image perception of nurses is at a moderate level [14]. The challenges brought by the pandemic may have negatively impacted the professional image of nurses. Additionally, studies conducted in different regions of the same country may vary due to the different working conditions in various cities and hospitals. This is because it has been emphasized that the working environment plays a significant role in the negative professional perceptions among nurses [15]. Practicing the nursing profession in Türkiye brings about some challenges. These include a hectic work pace and overtime, insufficient number of nurses, low salaries, communication difficulties, lack of equipment and resources, limited career development, and low societal prestige. These factors can impact the professional satisfaction of nurses and their perception of the professional image [16,20,23]. Understanding nurses' perceptions of the nursing profession and developing various strategies to increase their professional satisfaction are recommended. Improvements in areas such as professional education, working conditions, gender equality, and professional status can positively influence nurses' professional perceptions and, in general,

strengthen the image of the nursing profession.

An important finding of the study is that during the pandemic, male nurses and those not affiliated with professional organizations perceive that there is not enough discussion about the nursing profession. This result indicates that gender and organizational membership status can influence perceptions related to the nursing profession. Smilarl, in the study by Aydın Sayılan and Kulakaç, it was reported that female nurses have higher levels of positive image perception regarding the nursing profession compared to males [20]. In this context, the results of the research emphasize the necessity of a broad perspective to understand and improve the perception of the nursing profession. These data open the door to a more comprehensive discussion on how perceptions may change depending on factors such as membership status in a professional organization or gender. Considering the social image of the nursing profession and the role of the media in this regard, the public image has mainly led to misunderstandings and stereotypes, contributing to the perception of nursing as a female-dominated profession [23,24]. Male nurses were perceived as feminine or homosexual and were made invisible to society [17,18,25]. Perhaps in this study, male nurses may feel that they were overlooked both before and during the pandemic when discussing the nursing profession.

In the study, it was determined that the average scores of nurses in the "professional status" and "appearance" sub-dimensions were lower compared to other sub-dimension scores. Among nurses, 37% completely agreed with the statement "Nursing is a respected profession in society" in the "Professional status" sub-dimension. This situation might suggest that even during the pandemic, the media coverage did not sufficiently improve the professional perception in society. Unlike this study in the study by Blau et al. (2023), participants mentioned that the prestige of nursing increased in society with the pandemic, and awareness regarding the nursing profession and the role of nurses also increased [26]. Nurses, nurse managers, nurse educators, professional associations, and nursing educators

should make efforts to maintain and reinforce this positive image. These efforts should aim to increase public awareness on aspects such as the qualities, education, and working conditions of nursing, and it is believed that the media should support the nursing profession in these efforts.

In this study, participants received very low scores from the 'appearance' scale sub-dimension. When evaluating this situation, it is important to consider the challenges brought by the pandemic. The pandemic has imposed intense stress and pressure on healthcare workers, which may have led to limitations in personal care and appearance. Nurses may not have had enough time for their own care as a result of the demanding working conditions during this period. Additionally, it is essential to consider the impact of this situation on the overall health and well-being of nurses. Long and intense working hours, coupled with the uncertainty and stress brought by the pandemic, may make it challenging for nurses to focus adequately on their own health and care needs [6-9]. These findings may emphasize the need for health institutions and managers to take measures to support the health and well-being of nurses. Providing support for healthcare workers both physically and emotionally during the pandemic can be crucial for long-term health outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the image perceptions of nurses towards the nursing profession are at a moderate level in this study. This finding indicates the need for a more positive perception of the nursing profession in society. Various initiatives are required to enhance nurses' perceptions of their own profession and create a positive professional image. These initiatives should aim to increase respect for the nursing profession, correct misinformation or gaps in the public's knowledge about nursing, and emphasize the importance of the profession.

Stakeholders such as the media, educational institutions, and professional associations, especially, can shape public perception by highlighting the positive aspects of the nursing profession. The challenges, sacrifices, and expertise of nurses can be the focal point of these efforts. Additionally, effective strategies should be developed to increase public awareness of various aspects of the nursing profession, highlight the value that nurses bring, and enhance respect for their profession.

Such initiatives will not only strengthen the image of nurses' professions but will also contribute to building a healthier society by increasing public trust in healthcare services. Improving respect for and perception of the nursing profession can boost nurses' motivation and help them perform their duties more effectively.

Limitations of the Study

The methodology and sample of the study are its limitations.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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