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Public Perception of Nurses' Professional Image: A Post-Pandemic Analysis

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Abstract

Introduction: Nursing, a cornerstone of healthcare, is often overshadowed by stereotypes and misconceptions that influence public perception. Objectives: This study delves into the evolving image of Filipino nurses in the post-COVID-19 era, a period marked by the transition to long-term management after the lifting of the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) status. Methods: This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional approach, surveying 400 permanent residents of Iloilo City. The Image Scale of the Nursing Profession (ISNP) was employed for data collection, and the analysis was carried out using descriptive and inferential statistics. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Socio-Behavioral Science Research Ethics Review Committee (SBSRERC), ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. Results: Results indicated a generally positive public perception of nurses across sociodemographic groups, with particularly favorable views in the Professional Qualifications and Status subscales. However, the Education subscale reflects a less favorable public perception. Significant differences were observed across sociodemographic factors, with positive perceptions associated with non-hospital care before the pandemic and hospital care in the past year. Conclusions: While the public in Iloilo City views nurses positively post-pandemic, there are opportunities for improvement, particularly in working conditions and addressing gender biases. Strengthening public awareness of nursing education and research competencies through targeted information campaigns is essential for improving the profession's image.

Keywords:
Post-Pandemic, Public Perception, Nurses, Nursing Image

INTRODUCTION

Public perceptions of nurses' authority and competencies significantly influence the nursing profession's reputation, impacting healthcare user experiences, nurse performance, and job satisfaction (Blau et al., 2023). Limited public understanding of nursing practices often results in misconceptions about nurses' roles, affecting the profession's image and recognition. It is crucial to enhance public awareness, as nurses are vital healthcare providers, and addressing these misunderstandings is essential to improving their image.

Nursing Professional Identity (NPI) reflects the values, knowledge, and social perceptions that shape the profession (Fagermoen, 1997; Sheng et al., 2020). Despite advances in nursing education and practice, the public often perceives nurses as physician subordinates, a stereotype that undermines professional recognition and resource allocation (Teresa-Morales et al., 2022). This perception undermines trust and hampers professional growth and adequate resource allocation in the healthcare system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored nurses' essential roles and increased their visibility in the media (Bennett et al., 2020; Foà et al., 2021). However, this recognition occurred alongside heightened pressures, prompting many Filipino nurses to seek opportunities abroad due to job dissatisfaction and burnout (Alibudbud, 2022). While they are generally viewed as trustworthy, reports of violence and discrimination against healthcare workers highlight ongoing challenges within the profession (The Philippine Star, 2020). As society adjusts to the long-term impacts of COVID-19, understanding how public perception has evolved post-pandemic is critical for addressing workforce challenges, shaping policy reforms, and reinforcing the profession's role within the Philippine healthcare system.

METHOD

1. Study Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine public perceptions of nursing.

2. Sampling and Participants

Convenience sampling with assisted snowballing was employed due to logistical constraints and the need to efficiently reach a diverse sample.

Inclusion criteria for respondents required them to be permanent residents of Iloilo City, at least 18 years old, and have lived there for a minimum of three years. Eligible participants required a valid email address, the ability to provide informed consent, and access to Google Forms to complete the survey. Additionally, they must be non-nursing students, not registered or licensed nurses, and willing to participate. Exclusion criteria encompassed individuals who did not meet residency, age, or consent requirements, nursing students, and current and former registered nurses. Those unwilling to participate and members of the research team were also excluded.

In July 2023, the population census of Iloilo City reached up to 474,467 residents. To determine the appropriate sample size for the study, the researchers employed Yamane's formula, which required a minimum of 400 respondents using a standard distribution approach at a confidence level of 95% with a 5% margin of error.

3. Data Collection and Instruments

The data collection tool administered for this study was a 2-part questionnaire consisting of a researcher-made personal information section and items adapted from the Image Scale for Nursing Profession (ISNP) in a Turkish study (Dost & Bahcecik, 2015). The first part includes eight questions to determine the respondent's sociodemographics. The second part of the questionnaire consists of the 35 adapted items that were classified according to professional qualifications (10), working conditions (8), gender (5), education (4), professional status (5), and external appearance (3). Scoring of the ISNP corresponds to 5 interpretations: Very Good (4.21-5.00), Good (3.41-4.20), Moderate (2.61-3.40), Poor (1.81-2.60), and Very Poor (1.00-1.80) public perception. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" was used, and a point value of 1 to 5 was assigned to each response. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.787, which is interpreted as High (Gottems et al., 2018).

An online survey methodology was used to gather data for this study. The data was collected via Google Forms and posted on Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, TikTok, and X, with an invitation to participate and a consent form. The respondents must indicate that they have read the consent form and agreed to participate in the study. Thereafter, the respondent would be directed to the questionnaire, which entails the instructions for answering. Data collection occurred between May 15 and July 10, 2023. Upon reaching the desired sample size, the survey link was closed.

4. Data Analysis

All statistical computations were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 21, which was set at a 0.05 significance level. Descriptive statistics were used, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. Inferential statistical tests (Mann-Whitney U Test, Kruskal-Wallis Test, and Pairwise Comparison) were utilized to examine significant differences and relationships.

5. Research Ethics

The study obtained ethical approval from the Socio-Behavioral Science Research Ethics Review Committee (SBSRERC) of West Visayas State University before its conduct. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, methods, and potential risks, and their consent was obtained. The researchers ensured the confidentiality of their data by anonymizing it and adhering to the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Data access was restricted to one research member, and all data will be deleted two years after the study's completion.

RESULT

The overall ISNP mean score was 3.64, indicating a generally positive perception of nurses. Results showed the following scores of the public perception from the subscales: 4.70 from “professional qualifications”, 4.63 from “professional status”, 3.92 from “external appearance”, 3.31 from “working conditions”, 2.73 from “gender”, and 1.73 from “education”. The highest ISNP score was in Professional Qualifications (M=4.70, SD=0.22), while Education (M=1.73, SD=0.52) had the lowest rating, indicating a significantly lower perception of nursing education ($p < 0.05$).

Table 1. Mean scores of the ISNP and its subscale

Subscales	M	SD	Description
Professional Qualifications	4.70	0.22	Very Good Image Perception
Professional Status	4.63	0.64	Very Good Image Perception
External Appearance	3.92	0.79	Good Image Perception
Working Conditions	3.31	0.38	Moderate Image Perception
Gender	2.73	0.32	Moderate Image Perception
Education	1.73	0.52	Very Poor Image Perception
Total	3.64	0.57	Good Image Perception

Scale of Means & Interpretation: 4.21-5.00, Very Good Image Perception; 3.41-4.20, Good Image Perception; 2.61-3.40, Moderate Image Perception; 1.81-2.60, Poor Image Perception; 1.00-1.80, Very Poor Image Perception

Significant differences were noted across sociodemographic characteristics in Tables 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3. For brevity, detailed pairwise comparison results are available upon request. By further analysis, there were significant differences in scores according to age in working conditions (X^2=14.189, p=0.007), gender (X^2=15.359, p=0.004), and professional status (X^2=13.452, p=0.009), with younger groups generally scoring lower. Sex differences were only noted in external appearance, where males scored higher (X^2=16,476.50, p=0.002). Occupation influenced multiple subscales, with students scoring lower in working conditions and gender, while employed individuals scored education lower but professional status and external appearance higher ($p<0.05$). Pre-pandemic nursing care experience significantly impacted working conditions (X^2=8.083, $p<0.05$) and gender (X^2=9.886, $p<0.05$), with those receiving both hospital and non-hospital care scoring lower than those who received none. According to the presence of a nurse within the social circle, those with a nurse within their social groups only scored working conditions lower than those with a nurse in their family, friends, and social groups ($p< 0.05$), and those with a nurse in their family and friends scored education higher than those without a nurse in their social groups ($p< 0.05$). Significant differences were found in the gender (X^2=16.007, $p<0.05$), professional status (X^2=17.649, $p<0.05$), and external appearance (X^2=16.190, $p<0.05$) subscales based on the type of media used for nursing information. Those who relied on both out-of-home and internet media had higher scores, while those using broadcast, print, or internet media alone tended to score lower.

Table 2. Mean scores and significant differences of the subscales categorized by age, sex, highest educational attainment, and occupation

Categories	n	PQ M±SD	WC M±SD	G M±SD	E M±SD	PS M±SD	EA M±SD
Age							
20 and below	84	4.70±0.26	3.30±0.23	2.77±0.47	1.75±0.73	3.92±0.66	4.67±0.49
21 to 25	233	4.72±0.37	3.27±0.31	2.65±0.52	1.77±0.84	3.87±0.63	4.60±0.61
26 to 30	32	4.54±0.71	3.44±0.44	2.89±0.47	1.59±0.83	3.98±0.71	4.71±0.63
31 to 35	19	4.75±0.22	3.45±0.34	2.95±0.51	1.51±0.80	4.03±0.42	4.75±0.43
Above 35	32	4.70±0.34	3.43±0.33	2.86±0.58	1.62±0.52	4.24±0.59	4.71±0.40
X^2		5.082	14.189	15.359	8.733	13.452	4.456
P		0.279	0.007*	0.004*	0.068	0.009*	0.336
Sex							
Male	180	4.71±0.29	3.31±0.32	2.72±0.53	1.79±0.88	3.97±0.69	4.70±0.56
Female	220	4.69±0.44	3.32±0.32	2.73±0.51	1.67±0.71	3.89±0.59	4.58±0.57
U		19678.00	19275.00	19612.50	18170.50	17594.50	16476.50
P		0.915	0.645	0.870	0.151	0.054	0.002*
Highest Educational Attainment							
High School	69	4.71±0.28	3.35±0.31	2.81±0.49	1.64±0.86	3.86±0.59	4.73±0.41
College and above	220	4.69±0.44	3.32±0.32	2.73±0.51	1.67±0.71	3.89±0.59	4.58±0.57
U		11216.50	10588.00	9946.50	9838.00	10258.00	10203.50
P		0.814	0.337	0.089	0.066	0.181	0.131
Occupation							
Student	330	4.69±0.41	3.25±0.28	2.68±0.51	1.78±0.80	3.87±0.65	4.58±0.60
Employed	48	4.73±0.20	3.64±0.35	2.93±0.49	1.37±0.49	4.24±0.51	4.91±0.23
Unemployed	22	4.75±0.17	3.52±0.28	2.94±0.53	1.72±1.06	4.08±0.51	4.79±0.32
X^2		0.423	59.768	14.092	18.373	15.425	22.876
P		0.809	0.000*	0.001*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*

*Note: *p < 0.05 statistically significant, PQ = Professional Qualifications, WC = Working Conditions, G = Gender, E = Education, PS = Professional Status, EA = External Appearance*

Table 3. Mean scores and significant differences of the subscales categorized by nursing care experience within the past year and pre-pandemic

Categories	n	PQ M±SD	WC M±SD	G M±SD	E M±SD	PS M±SD	EA M±SD
Nursing care in the past year							
Yes, within a hospital	93	4.75±0.23	3.28±0.30	2.68±0.58	1.88±0.87	4.00±0.63	4.65±0.50
Yes, but not in a hospital	86	4.70±0.27	3.25±0.27	2.82±0.45	1.62±0.78	3.94±0.61	4.70±0.40
Yes, both within and outside of a hospital	80	4.69±0.32	3.32±0.26	2.57±0.46	1.66±0.62	3.93±0.63	4.54±0.65
No	141	4.70±0.38	3.38±0.38	2.78±0.52	1.73±0.79	3.92±0.66	4.65±0.64
X^2		1.661	7.178	14.095	7.685	3.692	2.902
P		0.646	0.066	0.003*	0.053	0.297	0.407
Nursing care during pre-pandemic							
Yes, within a hospital	116	4.72±0.24	3.31±0.31	2.71±0.53	1.67±0.80	3.88±0.63	4.67±0.49
Yes, but not in a hospital	77	4.67±0.49	3.22±0.24	2.65±0.47	1.75±0.78	3.87±0.54	4.61±0.53
Yes, both within and outside of a hospital	64	4.71±0.33	3.30±0.29	2.61±0.47	1.74±0.80	4.04±0.56	4.62±0.49
No	143	4.70±0.38	3.37±0.37	2.83±0.53	1.75±0.80	3.94±0.71	4.62±0.67
X^2		0.372	8.083	9.886	1.835	4.685	2.034
P		0.946	0.044*	0.227	0.023*	0.862	0.083

*Note: *p < 0.05 statistically significant, PQ = Professional Qualifications, WC = Working Conditions, G = Gender, E = Education, PS = Professional Status, EA = External Appearance*

Table 4. Mean scores and significant differences of the subscales categorized by presence of a nurse in social circle and media source for nursing information

Categories	n	PQ M±SD	WC M±SD	G M±SD	E M±SD	PS M±SD	EA M±SD
Presence of a nurse in social circle							
Yes, within family only	101	4.72±0.44	3.32±0.33	2.68±0.51	1.81±0.82	3.90±0.72	4.61±0.74
Yes, within friends only	48	4.73±0.23	3.37±0.35	2.72±0.49	1.70±0.88	4.02±0.64	4.72±0.48
Yes, within social groups only	36	4.62±0.68	3.17±0.30	2.79±0.53	1.80±0.84	3.83±0.59	4.61±0.62
Yes, within family and friends	89	4.65±0.35	3.41±0.34	2.81±0.47	1.83±0.85	3.93±0.68	4.59±0.51
Yes, within family and social groups	33	4.59±0.34	3.15±0.32	2.53±0.46	1.36±0.43	3.80±0.65	4.78±0.37
Yes, within friends and social groups	9	4.78±0.25	3.31±0.31	2.55±0.51	1.61±0.44	3.92±0.38	4.44±0.44
Yes, within family, friends, and social groups	29	4.72±0.23	3.33±0.24	2.72±0.51	1.53±0.64	3.94±0.61	4.70±0.42
No	55	4.68±0.33	3.30±0.31	2.81±0.55	1.70±0.77	3.95±0.63	4.60±0.50
X^2		8.598	14.081	9.366	16.271	3.242	12.592
P		0.283	0.050*	0.227	0.023*	0.862	0.083
Media source for nursing information							
Print, Broadcast, or Out of Home Media *only,* and *both* Print and Out of Home Media	28	4.74±0.21	3.46±0.35	3.01±0.56	1.79±1.03	4.20±0.74	4.74±0.43
Internet Media *only*	195	4.70±0.39	3.28±0.31	2.70±0.48	1.76±0.78	3.89±0.66	4.60±0.59
Both Print and Broadcast Media	16	4.73±0.22	3.34±0.35	2.58±0.46	1.56±0.35	3.91±0.47	4.75±0.39
Both Print and Internet Media	14	4.74±0.24	3.30±0.24	2.53±0.48	1.73±0.75	3.70±0.54	4.67±0.37
Both Broadcast and Out of Home Media	16	4.76±0.20	3.38±0.44	2.59±0.54	1.66±0.98	3.84±0.50	4.80±0.36
Both Broadcast and Internet Media	53	4.70±0.31	3.28±0.24	2.72±0.55	1.66±0.61	3.78±0.67	4.48±0.70
Both Out of Home and Internet Media	45	4.64±0.59	3.42±0.34	2.84±0.58	1.69±1.05	4.13±0.53	4.79±0.55
Print, Broadcast, and Out of Home Media	33	4.68±0.38	3.29±0.28	2.73±0.52	1.74±0.61	3.96±0.54	4.62±0.51
X^2		0.821	11.522	16.007	6.849	17.649	16.190
P		0.997	0.117	0.025*	0.445	0.014*	0.023*

*Note: *p < 0.05 statistically significant, PQ = Professional Qualifications, WC = Working Conditions, G = Gender, E = Education, PS = Professional Status, EA = External Appearance*

DISCUSSION

The public perception of nursing shapes the profession's identity, influencing its recognition, scope, and value within healthcare. The study found that residents of Iloilo City have a good post-pandemic public perception of the image of nurses. While the public perception of nurses in Iloilo is generally positive, there is a less favorable view of in education. These findings align with an integrative review of studies from 2016 to 2021, highlighting that nursing is widely perceived as a caring profession, yet other competencies remain less recognized (Rodríguez-Pérez, et al., 2022).

The findings indicate a very good public image perception in both the Professional Qualifications and Professional Status subscales. This suggests that nursing is widely recognized as a well-qualified, respected, and essential profession, emphasizing its scientific knowledge, skills, and dedication to healthcare. The public perceives nursing as a prestigious field, comparable to other healthcare professions, reinforcing its credibility and importance in patient care. However, within the Philippine context, the prestige of nursing may be influenced by migration aspirations. Social imagery plays a significant role in shaping Filipino nurses' career trajectories, as nursing is often perceived as a pathway to financial security and social mobility through overseas employment (Smith & Gillin, 2021).

The external appearance subscale showed a good public image perception, with nurses seen as polite, friendly, and well-groomed. Galović et al. (2023) found that both male and female nurses are expected to maintain a professional appearance, as it directly influences perceived competence. Similarly, Fitriana et al. (2021) emphasized the impact of a nurse's smile on patient trust and comfort, reinforcing a positive image of nursing.

A moderate image perception in the working conditions subscale reflects public awareness of the demanding nature of nursing, including long hours, teamwork, and technology use. However, it also highlights concerns regarding low salaries, difficult working conditions, and job insecurity. These challenges align with reports that Filipino nurses often face exploitative contracts, heavy workloads, and lack of benefits, contributing to job dissatisfaction and migration (Corpuz, 2023; Alibudbud, 2022).

Similarly, the Gender subscale received a moderate image perception, indicating that while traditional gender associations persist, rigid biases are not as strongly upheld. Historically, nursing has been female-dominated, with societal expectations reinforcing the idea that women are more suited to caregiving roles. However, recent studies suggest increasing acceptance of male nurses in the post-pandemic, as gender diversity in healthcare becomes more recognized (Averia et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, the Education subscale yielded a very poor public image perception, suggesting a significant lack of awareness regarding the academic and scientific foundations of nursing. The public often perceives nursing as a skill-based, bedside caregiving role, overshadowing its university-level educational requirements, evidence-based practice, and research contributions. There is a misconception that nurses primarily function in clinical settings, with less recognition of their roles in health promotion, disease prevention, and research application (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2022). Additionally, while Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is required for professional growth, barriers such as financial costs, inaccessible training locations, and limited providers hinder Filipino nurses' participation (Faba-an & Felipe-Dimog, 2024). This lack of public recognition of nursing's intellectual and scientific rigor reinforces outdated perceptions and limits appreciation for the profession's evolving scope.

Consistent with this, Angue et al. (2025) noted that insufficient integration between classroom knowledge and clinical practice perpetuates the theory–practice gap, which may also shape the public's underestimation of nursing as a scientific and research-driven discipline. Supporting this view, Saculingan et al. (2024) emphasized that nursing students' learning experiences extend beyond technical skills, contributing to academic readiness, professional growth, and the development of critical thinking. Their findings further highlight that a positive learning environment, adequate resources, and structured clinical exposure are crucial to bridging the gap between theory and practice. Similar challenges in aligning academic preparation with clinical realities have also been observed among international medical students in China, where cultural adaptation stress and limited resilience impede effective clinical learning (Li et al., 2025).

Sociodemographic factors reveal variations in perceptions, with individuals aged 21-25 showing more criticism towards working conditions and professional status. Although they recognize the profession's challenges, nursing is still viewed as having low societal status (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2022). Gender differences in perceptions appeared mainly in external appearance, where males rated nurses more favorably (Galović et al., 2023).

Significant differences emerged based on occupation. Students rated working conditions lower than those employed or unemployed, indicating a perception of nursing as demanding, brought by their limited clinical experience. Additionally, non-nursing students reported anxiety about the profession's challenges (Buhay et al., 2024). Students also scored lower on the gender subscale, indicating stereotypes about male nurses that prioritize warmth over competency (Monti, 2021). Employed individuals demonstrated a lower understanding of nursing education, indicating that non-nursing students are growing aware of the comprehensive knowledge required (Buhay et al., 2024).

Individuals who received nursing care recently reported lower gender bias perceptions than those without such experiences, suggesting that direct clinical interactions help shift preconceived gender biases. Other studies from Ghana and India (Sahu et al., 2020; Asante et al., 2023) also indicated no strong preferences for nurse gender. This is particularly relevant during the pandemic, as patients increasingly recognize that care quality does not rely on the nurse's gender.

Pre-pandemic, those receiving care outside hospitals rated working conditions lower than those in hospitals, revealing that care context impacts perceptions. To address the low perception of nursing education, targeted public awareness campaigns and curriculum-based outreach should be implemented. Individuals who had care experiences outside hospitals viewed nursing more favorably; conversely, hospital care improved perceptions of professionalism. The pandemic's challenges highlighted the unique contributions of nursing and medical teams (Blau et al., 2023).

Individuals with nurses in their social circles scored higher on working conditions and education, indicating better awareness of the profession's demands. Individuals with family members in nursing better understand the work's demands, including the stress, long hours, and emotional labor involved (He et al., 2024; Hegazy et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic helped emphasized the crucial role of nurses and medical teams (Miller et al., 2022). Those informed through traditional and social media demonstrated more favorable perceptions of nurses in terms of gender and status. Social media notably shaped public images of nurses, which helps reinforcing the importance of e-professionalism (Glasdam et al., 2022)

CONCLUSION

The study reveals a good public perception of the nursing image in the post-pandemic period, consistent across various sociodemographic groups in Iloilo City. Positive perceptions of professional qualifications, professional status, and external appearance suggest that nurses are recognized as competent, respected, and professional in their presentation, contributing to the public's trust in them. However, the moderate perception of working conditions and gender subscales indicates an awareness of challenges like long hours, underpayment, and gender biases. These concerns reflect global issues surrounding the profession and suggest that improvements can be made in these areas. The poor public perception of the education subscale signals the lack of public awareness of the academic preparation and scientific knowledge required in nursing. This highlights the need to educate society about nursing as a university-level profession with research competencies that ground evidence-based practice in improving patient care. Perceptions are also influenced by sociodemographic factors, with older respondents, employed, and those with nurses in their social circles having more positive attitudes. Frequent social interactions with nurses provide opportunities for the public to better understand the demands and significance of nursing leading to a favorable view of the profession. Experiences with pre-pandemic nursing care in non-hospital settings or recent care within hospitals have also positively influenced perceptions, likely due to improvements made in healthcare with the government focusing on the pandemic. Expanding public understanding of nursing by highlighting its academic and research rigor, addressing working conditions, and dispelling gender bias can help break the stereotypes about the profession. Through online and out-of-home media, the nursing profession can bridge gaps in knowledge, providing a clearer view of the roles of nurses and ultimately reshaping public perceptions to improve healthcare outcomes.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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