

## Public Perceptions of Nursing and Physical Therapist in Saudi Arabia and Their Role in Shaping Professional Performance in health services and Student Motivation: Qualitative Conceptual and Cultural Analytical Study

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### Abstract

Public perceptions of health professions play a pivotal role in shaping professional identity, performance, and students' motivation to pursue specific career paths. Nursing and physical therapy, as care-oriented professions, are particularly influenced by cultural values, social recognition, and symbolic status within society. In Saudi Arabia, ongoing healthcare transformation under Vision 2030 has intensified the need to understand how societal views of these professions affect workforce sustainability and educational aspirations.

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual and cultural analytical approach to examine how public perceptions of nursing and physical therapy professions in Saudi Arabia influence professional performance and students' motivation to enter these fields. Drawing on Social Representations Theory, axiological analysis, and the sociology of professions, the study conceptualizes these professions as culturally constructed social roles whose value is negotiated through collective beliefs, media narratives, and institutional discourse.

The analysis indicates that positive social recognition is associated with stronger professional commitment, improved performance, and increased student motivation, whereas persistent stereotypes and social undervaluation may weaken professional identity and reduce interest among prospective students. The findings highlight that addressing public perceptions is a strategic necessity for healthcare workforce development, rather than a purely social concern.

The study concludes that strengthening the cultural and social value of nursing and physical therapy can contribute to enhanced professional performance and greater student engagement, supporting the long-term goals of healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia. This cultural perspective offers important insights for healthcare education, policy development, and workforce planning.

**Keywords:** Public perceptions; Nursing; Physical therapy; Professional performance; Student motivation; Saudi Arabia.

## INTRODUCTION

Healthcare professions occupy a central position within modern societies, not only as providers of care and healing but also as cultural actors whose social value and public image significantly influence professional identity, performance, and future workforce development. Among these professions, nursing and physical therapy represent essential pillars of healthcare systems, contributing directly to patient care, rehabilitation, and community well-being. However, their societal recognition and cultural valuation often differ from their actual professional responsibilities and impact.

In the context of **Saudi Arabia**, the transformation of the healthcare sector under **Vision 2030** has brought renewed attention to the role of health professions, workforce sustainability, and the need to attract and retain motivated students in critical fields such as nursing and physical therapy. Despite substantial investments in healthcare infrastructure and education, public perceptions of these professions continue to shape how they are viewed socially, how practitioners experience their professional roles, and how students evaluate them as potential career paths.

Cultural perceptions play a decisive role in constructing professional meaning. Social representations—formed through media discourse, educational narratives, and collective beliefs—can enhance or undermine professional status, directly affecting motivation, job satisfaction, and performance. In professions such as nursing and physical therapy, where care, empathy, and physical labor intersect, societal attitudes may influence not only external recognition but also internalized professional identity and commitment. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that positive social valuation strengthens professional engagement and performance, while undervaluation or stereotyping may lead to decreased motivation, burnout, and reduced interest among prospective students.

Within Saudi society, traditional cultural norms, evolving gender roles, and rapid modernization interact to shape perceptions of health professions in complex ways. While nursing and physical therapy are increasingly recognized as indispensable components of healthcare delivery, lingering misconceptions regarding professional status, career progression, and social prestige may still affect both practitioners and students. Understanding these perceptions is therefore critical for addressing workforce challenges and supporting the long-term sustainability of the Saudi healthcare system.

From an axiological and cultural perspective, professions are not merely technical occupations but carriers of social meaning and value. Examining nursing and physical therapy through this lens allows for a deeper understanding of how societal recognition—or the lack thereof—translates into professional performance and shapes students' motivation to pursue these careers. Such an approach aligns with contemporary cultural studies and responds to global calls for strengthening health workforces by addressing not only structural factors but also cultural and social dimensions.

This study aims to analyze **how public perceptions of nursing and physical therapy professions in Saudi Arabia influence professional performance and shape students' motivation to pursue these fields**, through a qualitative conceptual and cultural analytical approach. By exploring these professions as culturally constructed social roles, the study seeks to contribute to broader discussions on professional value, workforce development, and the future of healthcare education in Saudi society.

### Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a cultural–axiological framework that conceptualizes nursing and physical therapy not merely as technical health occupations, but as socially constructed professions shaped by collective meanings, values, and representations. The framework integrates **Social Representations Theory**, **axiological theory**, and **sociology of professions** to explain the relationship between public perceptions, professional performance, and student motivation.

According to Moscovici, social representations function as shared systems of meaning that enable societies to interpret and evaluate social objects, including professions, by transforming abstract roles into familiar cultural images (Moscovici, 1984). In healthcare, these representations influence how professions are socially ranked, morally valued, and symbolically understood. Nursing and physical therapy are particularly sensitive to such representations because they are associated with care, bodily labor, and interpersonal interaction, all of which are culturally mediated (Hall, 1997).

From an axiological perspective, professions derive their social power not only from technical competence but from the values society assigns to them. Taylor argues that modern professional identity is deeply tied to social recognition and moral frameworks that define what is considered meaningful and worthy work (Taylor, 1989). When professions receive high social valuation, practitioners tend to internalize stronger professional identities, which positively affects commitment and performance. Conversely, undervaluation can weaken motivation and professional self-concept.

Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital further explains how professions occupy different positions within the social hierarchy based on prestige, recognition, and cultural legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1986). In healthcare systems, medicine has traditionally accumulated higher symbolic capital than allied health professions, including nursing and physical therapy. This imbalance can affect workplace dynamics, professional confidence, and long-term career commitment.

Student motivation to enter specific health professions is also influenced by these cultural and symbolic factors. Career choice literature consistently shows that students are drawn not only by employment opportunities but also by perceived social status, professional image, and societal respect associated with a profession (Super, 1990; Frenk et al., 2010). In societies undergoing rapid transformation, such as Saudi Arabia, shifts in cultural narratives can significantly alter students' educational aspirations and professional pathways.

This framework therefore positions public perceptions as a central cultural force that mediates both professional performance and student motivation, providing a comprehensive lens through which nursing and physical therapy can be examined within Saudi society.

To situate the present cultural and conceptual analysis within the broader scholarly context, selected recent studies addressing public perceptions, professional performance, and student motivation in nursing and physical therapy were reviewed. Rather than providing an exhaustive systematic review, this selection highlights representative empirical and theoretical contributions that illustrate how societal perceptions influence professional identity, workforce performance, and students' career choices across different cultural settings, including Saudi Arabia.

These studies were chosen for their relevance to the cultural dimensions of healthcare professions, their methodological rigor, and their focus on perception, social value, and motivation. By summarizing these findings, the current study strengthens its conceptual

arguments and demonstrates consistency with existing international and regional research. An overview of these studies is presented in **Table 1**.

**Table 1 Recent Studies on Public Perceptions, Professional Performance, and Student Motivation in Nursing and Physical Therapy (2020–2024)**

Relevance to Current Study	Key Findings	Methodology	Study Focus	Country	Author(s) & Year
Supports link between social perception and professional performance	Positive public perception was associated with higher job satisfaction and professional commitment	Cross-sectional survey	Public image of nursing and job satisfaction	Philippines	Labrague et al. (2020)
Direct relevance to Saudi student motivation	Social image and family attitudes significantly influenced students' willingness to choose nursing	Descriptive survey	Nursing career perception among students	Saudi Arabia	Alshammari et al. (2021)
Theoretical support for cultural analysis	Public recognition strongly shaped nurses' professional identity and performance	Qualitative interviews	Professional identity and public image of nurses	Netherlands	ten Hoeve et al. (2020)
Supports cultural undervaluation of physical therapy	Limited public awareness affected utilization and professional recognition	Cross-sectional study	Awareness of physical therapy profession	Saudi Arabia	Al-Eisa et al. (2022)
Empirical support for perception–performance link	Social respect significantly predicted work engagement and performance	Structural equation modeling	Social respect and healthcare worker performance	China	Wu et al. (2021)
Strong support for axiological argument	Perceived social status influenced	Mixed methods	Health students'	Saudi Arabia	Al-Harbi et al. (2023)

Relevance to Current Study	Key Findings	Methodology	Study Focus	Country	Author(s) & Year
	career preference more than salary		career motivation		
Supports global relevance of the issue	Persistent stereotypes negatively affected recruitment and retention	Systematic review	Social image of nursing	Spain	Gómez-García et al. (2020)
Relevant to physical therapy identity	Cultural recognition enhanced professional confidence and performance	Qualitative study	Allied health professional identity	Australia	Munn et al. (2022)
Policy-level support	Social value is critical for workforce sustainability	Policy analysis	Health workforce perception	Global	WHO (2022)
Recent Saudi evidence	Positive societal narratives increased students' motivation	Cross-sectional survey	Students' attitudes toward health professions	Saudi Arabia	Alsubaie et al. (2024)

As summarized in Table 1, the reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that public perceptions and social valuation play a significant role in shaping both professional performance and students' motivation to pursue careers in nursing and physical therapy. Across diverse cultural contexts, positive social recognition was associated with stronger professional identity, higher job satisfaction, and improved performance, whereas negative stereotypes and limited public awareness were linked to reduced motivation and recruitment challenges.

Notably, studies conducted within Saudi Arabia reveal that societal image and cultural expectations significantly influence students' willingness to enter nursing and allied health professions, underscoring the relevance of cultural narratives in workforce development. These findings align with the theoretical frameworks employed in the present study, particularly Social Representations Theory and axiological approaches, which emphasize the role of collective meaning and social value in shaping professional behavior.

Rather than serving as standalone empirical evidence, the summarized studies function as contextual support for the cultural analysis advanced in this paper. Together, they reinforce the argument that addressing public perceptions is essential for enhancing professional performance and motivating future generations of healthcare professionals, particularly within societies undergoing rapid social and healthcare transformation such as Saudi Arabia.

## DISCUSSION: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS, PERFORMANCE, AND STUDENT MOTIVATION IN THE SAUDI CONTEXT

In Saudi Arabia, the healthcare sector has experienced rapid expansion and reform over the past decade, driven largely by national transformation initiatives and increased demand for high-quality healthcare services. The **Saudi Vision 2030** framework explicitly emphasizes human capital development, healthcare workforce sustainability, and the promotion of health professions as viable and respected career paths (Ministry of Health, 2021). Despite these structural reforms, cultural perceptions continue to play a decisive role in shaping professional experiences and career decisions.

Empirical evidence indicates that public perceptions of nursing in Saudi Arabia have historically been influenced by cultural norms related to gender roles, social expectations, and the visibility of nursing work (Almalki et al., 2011). Although societal attitudes have gradually improved, lingering stereotypes may still affect how nurses perceive their professional value and how students evaluate nursing as a career option. Similar challenges have been observed in physical therapy, where limited public awareness of professional scope and career progression can reduce social recognition and student interest (Al-Eisa et al., 2016).

Professional performance is closely linked to perceived social value. Studies have demonstrated that healthcare professionals who experience higher levels of social respect and recognition report stronger job satisfaction, professional commitment, and performance outcomes (Lu et al., 2019). Conversely, perceived marginalization or undervaluation may contribute to emotional exhaustion, reduced engagement, and workforce attrition—issues that pose serious risks to healthcare system sustainability.

Student motivation represents another critical dimension. Research in health professions education consistently shows that societal image and perceived prestige significantly influence students' willingness to pursue specific healthcare careers (Frenk et al., 2010). In Saudi Arabia, national efforts to increase enrollment in nursing and allied health programs must therefore address not only educational capacity but also cultural narratives that shape career desirability.

From a cultural standpoint, repositioning nursing and physical therapy as professions of high social value requires sustained engagement through education, media representation, and policy discourse. Enhancing public understanding of these professions' scientific, ethical, and societal contributions may strengthen professional identity, improve performance, and encourage a new generation of students to enter these fields.

This qualitative conceptual analysis highlights the central role of public perceptions in shaping professional performance and student motivation in nursing and physical therapy within Saudi Arabia. By situating these professions within a cultural and axiological framework, the study underscores the need to address societal values and representations as integral components of healthcare workforce development. Aligning cultural recognition with professional responsibility may enhance both practitioner performance and student engagement, supporting the long-term goals of Saudi healthcare transformation.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is subject to several limitations inherent to its qualitative conceptual and cultural analytical design. First, the research does not include empirical data collection such as surveys, interviews, or experimental measurements. While this limits statistical generalizability, the purpose of the study is not empirical prediction but cultural interpretation and theoretical insight, which is consistent with philosophical and axiological research traditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Second, the analysis relies on existing literature, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks, which may reflect dominant academic and institutional narratives. As with all conceptual studies, interpretations are shaped by the selected theoretical lenses, particularly Social Representations Theory and sociology of professions, which may not capture all possible cultural meanings associated with nursing and physical therapy (Moscovici, 1984). Finally, although the study focuses on the Saudi Arabian context, cultural diversity within Saudi society itself may lead to variations in perceptions that are not fully explored in a conceptual analysis. These limitations highlight the need for complementary empirical studies to further examine the relationships discussed.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future research should expand upon this conceptual foundation through empirical investigations that examine public perceptions of nursing and physical therapy across different regions and social groups within Saudi Arabia. Quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews could provide deeper insight into how cultural representations influence professional performance and student motivation in practice (Frenk et al., 2010). Comparative cross-cultural studies may also be valuable in exploring how perceptions of nursing and physical therapy differ between Saudi Arabia and other societies undergoing healthcare transformation. Such comparisons could enhance understanding of how cultural values, gender norms, and professional hierarchies shape healthcare workforce development globally (World Health Organization, 2016).

Additionally, longitudinal research examining changes in student motivation and professional identity over time would help assess the long-term impact of cultural narratives and policy interventions aimed at improving the social image of health professions. Integrating perspectives from education, media studies, and ethics could further enrich interdisciplinary scholarship in this field (Hall, 1997).

### **Ethical and Cultural Considerations**

From an ethical standpoint, professions such as nursing and physical therapy embody values of care, responsibility, and social solidarity. Cultural undervaluation of these professions raises ethical concerns related to social justice, professional dignity, and equitable recognition of healthcare labor. Ethical theory emphasizes that social respect and recognition are essential components of meaningful professional life and moral agency (Taylor, 1989).

In Saudi Arabia, ongoing social transformation necessitates culturally sensitive approaches that respect local values while promoting equitable professional recognition. Ethical discourse surrounding healthcare professions should therefore engage with cultural norms, religious values, and social expectations to foster respectful and inclusive narratives that support both practitioners and students.

### **Contribution to Cultural and Health Studies**

This study contributes to cultural and health studies by bridging philosophical analysis with healthcare workforce discourse. By conceptualizing nursing and physical therapy as culturally embedded professions, the paper extends existing discussions on professional identity beyond technical competence to include social meaning, symbolic value, and public recognition.

Within the field of cultural studies, the research demonstrates how health professions function as sites where social values, moral expectations, and cultural narratives intersect. For health systems research, the study underscores the importance of addressing cultural perceptions as a strategic component of workforce performance and sustainability. This interdisciplinary contribution aligns with contemporary calls for integrating cultural analysis into health policy and education research (Frenk et al., 2010; WHO, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative conceptual and cultural analytical study examined how public perceptions of nursing and physical therapy professions in Saudi Arabia shape professional performance and influence students' motivation to pursue these careers. By situating these professions within a cultural and axiological framework, the study moved beyond technical and clinical interpretations to highlight the social meanings, values, and representations that underpin professional identity and workforce sustainability.

Drawing on Social Representations Theory, the sociology of professions, and axiological analysis, the paper demonstrated that nursing and physical therapy are not merely functional roles within healthcare systems but culturally constructed professions whose social value is continuously negotiated within society. Public perceptions—formed through collective beliefs, media narratives, educational discourse, and institutional practices—emerge as a powerful force shaping how these professions are experienced by practitioners and evaluated by prospective students. Consistent with existing literature, positive social recognition was shown to be closely associated with stronger professional commitment, enhanced performance, and increased motivation among students, while undervaluation and persistent stereotypes may weaken professional identity and deter career interest.

In the Saudi context, the findings are particularly significant. As the Kingdom advances its healthcare transformation under Vision 2030, ensuring a sustainable and motivated health workforce requires attention not only to structural reforms but also to cultural dimensions. Despite substantial investments in healthcare education and infrastructure, societal perceptions continue to influence professional status and career desirability. Addressing these perceptions is therefore a strategic necessity rather than a peripheral concern.

The study underscores that improving professional performance and attracting future generations to nursing and physical therapy depend on fostering cultural narratives that recognize these professions as ethically grounded, scientifically rigorous, and socially indispensable. Enhancing public awareness, promoting respectful media representation, and integrating professional identity formation into health education curricula may contribute to reshaping societal attitudes and strengthening workforce development.

From a broader cultural perspective, this research contributes to philosophical and cultural scholarship by illustrating how healthcare professions function as sites of moral value, social recognition, and symbolic capital. By linking cultural perception to performance and motivation, the study reinforces the argument that sustainable healthcare systems are not built solely through policy and infrastructure but also through shared values and collective understanding.

Future research is encouraged to empirically investigate these relationships within diverse Saudi communities and to explore comparative perspectives across different cultural contexts. Such work would further illuminate how social meaning, professional dignity, and career aspiration interact in shaping the future of healthcare professions.

In conclusion, recognizing nursing and physical therapy as culturally valued professions is essential for enhancing professional performance, motivating students, and supporting the long-term goals of healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia. Addressing public perceptions is therefore both a cultural responsibility and a strategic imperative for health systems striving toward excellence and sustainability.

### **Cultural and Educational Recommendations**

Based on the cultural analysis presented in this study, strengthening the public image of nursing and physical therapy requires coordinated efforts that extend beyond structural reforms to address societal narratives, educational practices, and public discourse. International evidence emphasizes that workforce sustainability in healthcare is closely



linked to social recognition, professional identity, and cultural valuation of care-oriented professions (Frenk et al., 2010; World Health Organization [WHO], 2016).

At the educational level, integrating discussions of professional identity, social value, and ethical significance into nursing and physical therapy curricula may enhance students' motivation and commitment. Educational research indicates that early exposure to positive professional narratives and role models plays a critical role in shaping career aspirations and long-term engagement in health professions (Super, 1990).

From a cultural and societal perspective, media representation and public communication strategies should aim to present nursing and physical therapy as scientifically grounded, ethically significant, and socially indispensable professions. Cultural studies have shown that public narratives and representations significantly influence how professions are perceived, valued, and pursued by younger generations (Hall, 1997; Moscovici, 1984).

At the policy level, aligning workforce development strategies with initiatives that enhance public recognition and professional dignity may contribute to improved professional performance and increased student enrollment. The WHO highlights that policies addressing social status and professional recognition are essential components of effective health workforce planning, particularly in rapidly transforming societies (WHO, 2016).

Collectively, these recommendations underscore that improving professional performance and student motivation in nursing and physical therapy depends on cultural engagement as much as on educational capacity and policy reform. Addressing societal perceptions should therefore be considered a strategic priority for healthcare education and workforce development in Saudi Arabia.

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