

# Perceptions of Mental Health Nursing as a Career Path: A Descriptive-Correlational Study among Taif University Nursing Students

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions of nursing students at Taif University toward mental health nursing as a career path. Anchored on Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior, the study sought to describe students' perceptions in terms of professional image, perceived competence and preparedness, career opportunities and advancement, emotional demands and workplace safety, and personal interest and willingness to specialize. It also determined the relationship and differences in students' perceptions when grouped according to selected demographic and academic variables. A quantitative descriptive-correlational research design was used. The respondents were 286 undergraduate nursing students from different academic levels at Taif University. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, t-test, ANOVA, and multiple regression analysis. Findings revealed that the respondents generally had a positive perception of mental health nursing as a career path, with an overall mean of 3.48. Among the perception domains, professional image obtained the highest mean, while emotional demands and workplace safety received the lowest rating. Previous exposure to mental health clinical settings, academic level, and overall intention were significantly related to students' perceptions. Students with previous mental health clinical exposure had significantly more positive perceptions than those without exposure. Regression analysis further showed that professional image, perceived competence and preparedness, career opportunities, emotional demands and workplace safety, previous exposure, and academic level significantly predicted students' intention to pursue mental health nursing, while gender was not a significant predictor. Based on the findings, the study recommends the development of a mental health nursing career enhancement program focusing on early exposure, simulation-based learning, mentorship, reflective activities, and career orientation. The study concludes that strengthening students' confidence, clinical readiness, and awareness of career opportunities may improve their willingness to consider mental health nursing as a future specialization.

**Keywords:** *mental health nursing, nursing students, career path, perceptions, Taif University, Theory of Planned Behavior, clinical exposure.*

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The health of individuals within any societal framework represents a pivotal element that exerts a direct influence on the advancement and influence of that society. The World Health Organization (WHO) articulates health as a condition of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, transcending the mere absence of illness or disability. This all-encompassing definition accentuates the significance of mental health, which continues to pose a considerable challenge for numerous societies across the globe. Data from the World Health Organization reveals that mental disorders impact over one billion individuals worldwide (WHO, 2022), thereby illuminating the pervasive ramifications of mental health concerns.

Healthcare in any society has a profound impact on the overall health of its population, particularly in mental health. Mental health care is a crucial aspect of healthcare systems worldwide and requires qualified, well-trained, and dedicated healthcare professionals to care for individuals with mental health challenges. Nursing plays a pivotal role in the healthcare system; the World Health Organization affirmed in 2020 that

nursing forms the backbone of healthcare systems in all countries. Nurses are at the forefront of patient care, and their role is extensive. Mental health nursing is one of the most important areas within mental health care.

However, despite its importance, mental health nursing often faces a lack of interest and negative attitudes among nurses. A recent study by Mahsoon et al. (2024) indicates that nursing professionals in Saudi Arabia exhibit negative attitudes toward mental health care and patients with mental illnesses. This reluctance is reflected in the attitudes of nursing students, who are often hesitant to specialize in mental health nursing after graduation. This issue poses a serious challenge to the future of mental health care in Saudi Arabia, as it threatens to undermine the local workforce needed to meet the mental health needs of the population.

Despite the growing global and regional literature addressing attitudes toward mental health nursing, limited research has specifically examined nursing students' perceptions within the Saudi academic context, particularly at Taif University. Furthermore, few studies have explored the combined influence of demographic factors, educational exposure, and perceived stigma using a correlational approach.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 prioritizes mental health within its "Quality of Life" programs, recognizing its crucial role in national development. In line with these objectives, this study aims to contribute to achieving Vision 2030 goals by exploring nursing students' perceptions of mental health nursing as a career path. This descriptive correlational study will focus specifically on nursing students at Taif University, Saudi Arabia, to identify and understand the factors influencing their perceptions and attitudes toward mental health nursing.

## Background of the Study

Mental health disorders continue to represent a growing global health concern. The rising prevalence of depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, and stress-related conditions has intensified the demand for competent mental health professionals worldwide. In Saudi Arabia, in alignment with Vision 2030 reforms, mental health services are undergoing expansion and modernization. Despite these developments, the shortage of mental health nurses remains evident, creating a workforce gap that may affect service accessibility and quality of care.

Within nursing education, mental health nursing is recognized as a core specialty that requires therapeutic communication skills, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and clinical competence. However, it is often perceived differently compared to other clinical areas such as critical care, emergency nursing, or medical-surgical nursing. Informal observations within academic and clinical settings suggest that many nursing students tend to prioritize more technologically driven or procedure-oriented specialties when considering future career paths.

The researchers have observed, through classroom discussions and clinical supervision, that some students initially approach psychiatric clinical rotations with hesitation. Expressions of uncertainty, discomfort, or preconceived fears about patient behavior are occasionally verbalized. At the same time, reflective debriefings after clinical exposure reveal that several students recognize a shift in understanding once they engage directly with patients in therapeutic settings. These contrasting reactions indicate that perceptions of mental health nursing may be influenced by prior beliefs, cultural attitudes toward mental illness, personal experiences, and the quality of clinical mentorship.

Although theoretical instruction and clinical exposure are integrated into the nursing curriculum at Taif University, variations in students' expressed career preferences remain noticeable. Some students demonstrate strong empathy and communication competence yet still express limited intention to pursue mental health nursing professionally. Others report increased appreciation for the specialty following meaningful clinical encounters. This inconsistency highlights a potential gap between educational preparation and long-term career inclination.

International literature has documented nursing students' attitudes toward mental illness and psychiatric nursing. However, there is limited empirical evidence focusing specifically on Saudi nursing students, particularly within the context of Taif University. Cultural perceptions of mental health, societal stigma, and

professional image may uniquely shape students' career considerations in this setting. Without institution-specific data, curriculum development and workforce planning may rely on generalized assumptions rather than localized evidence.

Moreover, many previous studies have primarily described attitudes without sufficiently examining the relationships between students' demographic characteristics, academic level, clinical exposure, and their perception of mental health nursing as a career option. Understanding these associations is critical for identifying modifiable educational factors that may influence career decisions.

Therefore, this study aims to describe the perceptions of Taif University nursing students regarding mental health nursing as a career path and to examine the relationship between selected demographic and academic variables and these perceptions. By generating institution-based evidence, the study seeks to contribute to curriculum enhancement, mentorship strategies, and informed workforce planning within the College of Nursing.

Understanding students' perceptions is not merely an academic exercise; it is an essential step toward ensuring that future mental health services are supported by a prepared and motivated nursing workforce.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Mental health disorders are increasing, creating a greater need for qualified mental health professionals in Saudi Arabia. Although Vision 2030 supports the strengthening of mental health services, there remains a shortage of specialized mental health nurses. Despite psychiatric nursing being part of the undergraduate curriculum, few nursing students appear interested in choosing it as a long-term career. Since students' career intentions are influenced by their perceptions, demographic background, academic level, clinical exposure, cultural beliefs, and personal experiences, there is a need to examine how Taif University nursing students perceive mental health nursing as a career path and what factors influence these perceptions. Thus, this study aims to describe the perceptions of Taif University nursing students toward mental health nursing as a career path and to examine the relationships between selected demographic and academic variables and these perceptions. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of:
  - 1.1. Age
  - 1.2. Gender
  - 1.3. Academic level
  - 1.4. Previous exposure to mental health clinical settings
2. What are the perceptions of Taif University nursing students toward mental health nursing as a career path in terms of:
  - 2.1. Professional image
  - 2.2. Perceived competence and preparedness
  - 2.3. Career opportunities and advancement
  - 2.4. Emotional demands and workplace safety
  - 2.5. Personal interest and willingness to specialize?
3. Is there a statistically significant relationship between selected demographic and academic variables and students' perceptions of mental health nursing as a career path?

4. Is there a statistically significant difference in students' perceptions of mental health nursing as a career path when grouped according to demographic profile?
5. Based on the results of the study, what program can be developed?

### Conceptual Framework

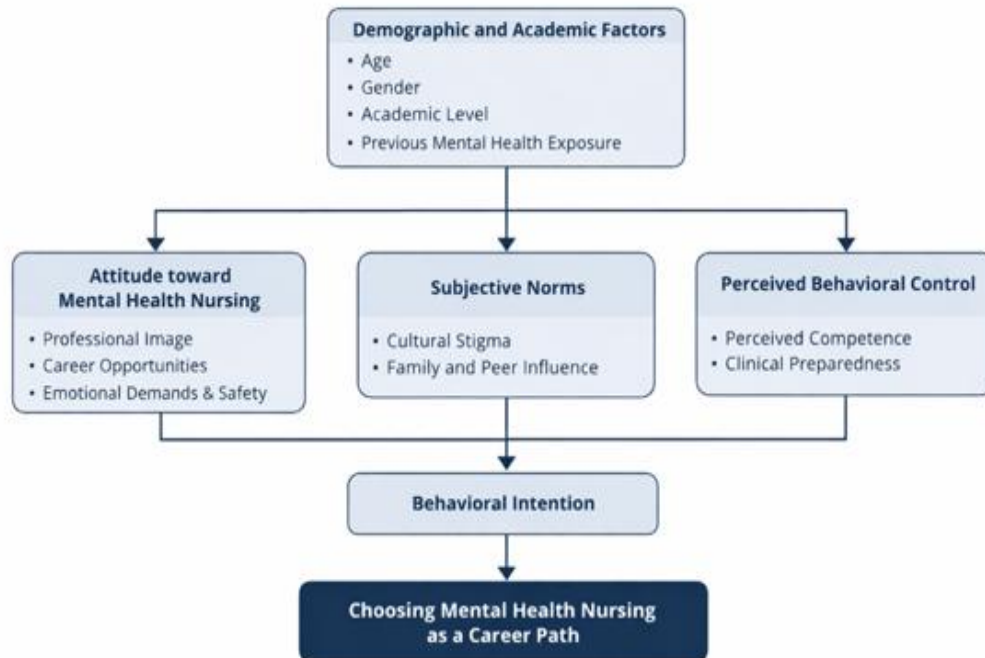


Figure 1: Self-developed Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior and illustrates how nursing students' perceptions of mental health nursing as a career path are formed and how these perceptions may influence their professional intentions. At the foundation of the framework are the demographic and academic factors, which include age, gender, academic level, and previous exposure to mental health clinical settings. These characteristics represent the background variables that may shape how students interpret their educational experiences and career possibilities. For instance, students in higher academic levels may have had more clinical exposure, which could influence their confidence and familiarity with psychiatric care. Similarly, prior meaningful encounters in mental health settings may reduce uncertainty and reshape preconceived beliefs.

These background factors are proposed to influence three major cognitive components derived from the Theory of Planned Behavior: attitude toward mental health nursing, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

The first component, attitude toward mental health nursing, reflects the student's overall evaluation of the specialty. In this framework, attitude is represented through perceptions of professional image, career opportunities, emotional demands, and workplace safety. Students who perceive mental health nursing as professionally rewarding, impactful, and respected may develop a favorable attitude toward it. Conversely, if the specialty is viewed as emotionally exhausting or socially undervalued, attitudes may become less positive. These evaluations are shaped not only by classroom instruction but also by clinical exposure and personal reflection.

The second component, subjective norms, refers to the perceived social influences surrounding the student. In the context of Taif University and the broader Saudi cultural setting, this may include cultural stigma toward mental illness, family expectations, peer opinions, and societal perceptions of professional prestige. Students may consciously or unconsciously consider how others view mental health nursing when thinking about

their future careers. If influential figures—such as faculty mentors or clinical preceptors—demonstrate respect and enthusiasm for psychiatric nursing, these social cues may positively influence students' perceptions.

The third component, perceived behavioral control, represents the student's belief in their ability to perform effectively in mental health settings. This includes perceived competence in therapeutic communication, emotional resilience, and preparedness to manage challenging clinical situations. Even when attitudes are positive and social influences are supportive, a lack of confidence in one's clinical skills may reduce the intention to pursue the specialty. On the other hand, strong clinical mentoring and constructive feedback may enhance students' sense of preparedness and strengthen their willingness to consider mental health nursing as a viable option.

These three cognitive components—attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control—converge to influence behavioral intention, which in this study refers to the student's intention to choose mental health nursing as a career path. According to the theoretical underpinning, intention is the most immediate predictor of future behavior. Thus, if students demonstrate favorable attitudes, perceive supportive social environments, and feel confident in their abilities, they are more likely to develop a strong intention to specialize in mental health nursing.

The framework therefore suggests a structured pathway: demographic and academic factors shape cognitive evaluations; these evaluations influence intention; and intention serves as the precursor to actual career choice. By examining these relationships statistically, the study seeks to determine not only how students perceive mental health nursing but also which factors significantly influence their professional direction. In essence, the conceptual framework recognizes that career decisions are not formed by a single experience. Rather, they are shaped through a dynamic interaction of personal beliefs, social influences, and perceived competence. Understanding this interplay provides valuable insight for curriculum developers and nursing educators who aim to strengthen interest in mental health nursing and address workforce needs within the Saudi healthcare system.

### **Significance of Study**

This study holds meaningful implications for various stakeholders within nursing education and practice, particularly in the context of strengthening mental health services in Saudi Arabia.

For nursing students, this study provides an opportunity for reflection. By exploring their own perceptions of mental health nursing as a career path, students may become more aware of the beliefs, assumptions, and experiences that influence their professional decisions. Understanding how attitudes, social influences, and perceived competence shape career intentions can empower students to make more informed and self-directed choices. Additionally, the findings may help students recognize the importance of mental health nursing as a vital and specialized field, potentially broadening their career horizons beyond traditionally preferred clinical areas.

For nursing educators, the results of this study may serve as valuable feedback regarding the effectiveness of current instructional strategies and clinical exposure in psychiatric nursing. If perceptions are found to be influenced by limited exposure, stigma, or perceived lack of competence, educators may consider enhancing experiential learning opportunities, strengthening mentorship programs, or integrating reflective discussions into coursework. The findings may also guide faculty in designing interventions that promote positive professional identity formation in mental health nursing. Ultimately, educators can use the evidence to foster a learning environment that supports informed and unbiased career exploration.

For practicing nurses, particularly those in mental health settings, this study highlights the importance of professional role modeling. Clinical mentors and preceptors significantly influence students' perceptions during psychiatric rotations. By demonstrating competence, compassion, and professional fulfillment, mental health nurses can positively shape students' understanding of the specialty. The findings may also encourage nursing professionals to advocate for greater recognition of psychiatric nursing within the broader healthcare system.

For academic administrators and curriculum planners, the study provides empirical data that may inform strategic decisions related to workforce development. If a gap exists between healthcare demands and students' career intentions, administrators may consider reviewing curriculum design, clinical placement structures, and career guidance programs. Evidence-based planning can support initiatives that align nursing education with national mental health priorities under Saudi Vision 2030. Furthermore, the study may assist in identifying areas where institutional support, resources, or partnerships with mental health facilities can be strengthened.

For future researchers, this study contributes baseline data specific to Taif University, which may serve as a reference point for comparative or longitudinal investigations. Subsequent studies may build upon these findings by exploring intervention-based approaches, qualitative insights into students' lived experiences, or broader multi-institutional analyses. The theoretical application of the Theory of Planned Behavior within the nursing career context may also open opportunities for further validation and model refinement in similar educational settings.

## Definition of Terms

For the purpose of clarity and consistency, the following terms are operationally defined as they are used in this study:

**Academic Level:** Refers to the year level of the nursing student enrolled at Taif University at the time of data collection (e.g., second year, third year, fourth year, internship). This variable will be self-reported by the participants.

**Attitude toward Mental Health Nursing:** Refers to the overall positive or negative evaluation of mental health nursing as a specialty area. In this study, it will be measured using selected items in the structured questionnaire assessing professional image, career opportunities, emotional demands, and workplace safety, rated on a Likert scale.

**Behavioral Intention:** Refers to the degree to which a nursing student expresses willingness or plans to pursue mental health nursing as a future career specialization. It will be measured through self-reported responses indicating likelihood of choosing the field after graduation.

**Career Path:** Refers to the professional specialization or field of practice that a nursing student intends to pursue upon completion of the nursing program. In this study, it specifically relates to the consideration of mental health nursing as a long-term professional direction.

**Demographic Characteristics:** Refer to the personal attributes of the participants, including age and gender, as self-reported in the demographic section of the questionnaire.

**Mental Health Nursing:** Refers to a specialized area of nursing practice focused on the care of individuals experiencing mental health disorders, emotional disturbances, or psychiatric conditions. In this study, it is examined as a potential career specialization option.

**Perceived Behavioral Control:** Refers to the students' perceived level of confidence, preparedness, and ability to function effectively in mental health clinical settings. This will be measured through questionnaire items assessing perceived competence and clinical readiness.

**Perceptions:** Refer to the beliefs, views, and subjective evaluations held by nursing students regarding mental health nursing as a career path. In this study, perceptions will be quantified using responses to a structured survey instrument.

**Previous Mental Health Exposure:** Refers to prior academic or clinical experience in psychiatric or mental health settings, including classroom instruction and hospital rotations. This variable will be measured as a self-reported categorical response (e.g., yes/no or duration of exposure).

**Subjective Norms:** Refer to the perceived social influences that may affect students' career decisions, including family expectations, peer opinions, and cultural attitudes toward mental health nursing. These will be measured using Likert-scale survey items assessing perceived social support or pressure.

**Taif University Nursing Students:** Refer to undergraduate students officially enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program at Taif University during the academic year in which the study is conducted.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to explore how nursing students at Taif University perceived mental health nursing as a career path. Quantitative research was appropriate in this context because it allowed the researchers to collect measurable data and analyze patterns, relationships, and trends across a group of participants in a systematic way ([5]; [15]). By using this approach, the study provided a clearer picture of how widespread certain perceptions were and how these perceptions related to specific factors.

More specifically, the study utilized a descriptive-correlational design. This type of design was appropriate when the purpose of the study was not to manipulate variables, but to describe existing conditions and examine relationships among variables as they naturally occurred ([6]; [10]). In this study, the researchers did not attempt to change students' perceptions but instead aimed to understand them and determine whether certain factors were associated with these perceptions.

The descriptive aspect of the design allowed the researchers to present a detailed account of the students' perceptions toward mental health nursing. This included how students viewed the field in terms of professional image, emotional demands, and career opportunities. Descriptive quantitative designs are useful in presenting the characteristics, patterns, and levels of a phenomenon among a defined group of respondents ([3]; [15]). At the same time, the correlational component focused on identifying whether there were statistically significant relationships between these perceptions and selected variables such as age, gender, year level, and exposure to mental health education.

Using this design, the study sought to answer questions such as whether students with more clinical exposure had more positive perceptions, or whether demographic characteristics influenced how mental health nursing was viewed. Correlational research was particularly useful in identifying patterns of association among variables, although it did not establish cause-and-effect relationships ([6]; [10]).

Overall, the descriptive-correlational approach was well suited for this study because it allowed the researchers to both describe the current state of students' perceptions and explore how these perceptions were related to relevant personal and academic factors. By doing so, the study provided meaningful insights that could inform future educational strategies and help improve students' interest in mental health nursing as a career.

### Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at Taif University in Saudi Arabia, specifically among students in the undergraduate nursing program. Taif University is located in the city of Taif, a mountainous city in the western region of Saudi Arabia known for its relatively cooler climate and academic institutions. The university was considered an appropriate setting because its College of Nursing provides both classroom instruction and clinical training, including exposure to mental health and psychiatric nursing.

This setting allowed the researchers to examine students' perceptions within a real academic, clinical, and cultural environment. Since the students came from different backgrounds and academic levels, the locale also helped provide a broader understanding of how personal, educational, and cultural factors may have shaped their views about mental health nursing as a possible career path.

## Population and Sampling Technique

The study involved male and female undergraduate nursing students from Taif University because they were receiving both classroom instruction and clinical exposure related to mental health nursing. Their different academic levels and experiences made them suitable respondents for understanding how perceptions of mental health nursing develop during the nursing program. Clinical learning experiences have been shown to influence nursing students' attitudes, confidence, and professional views toward mental health care ([8]; [9]).

The sample size was determined using G\*Power to ensure enough participants for statistical analysis, with an intended sample of about 200 to 250 students to allow for incomplete responses. Power analysis is commonly used to determine adequate sample size based on effect size, significance level, and statistical power ([7]; [12]). Stratified random sampling was used by grouping students according to year level and randomly selecting participants from each group. This approach helped ensure that all academic levels were fairly represented and that differences in students' exposure and experiences could be properly captured ([4]; [10]).

## Data Collection Instruments

To gather the needed data, a self-administered questionnaire specifically developed by the researchers was used as the primary instrument. The decision to design a self-made tool was guided by the need to align the instrument closely with the specific objectives of the study, particularly in capturing nursing students' perceptions of mental health nursing within the context of Taif University.

The questionnaire was structured into several sections, each corresponding to the key variables and research questions of the study. The first section focused on demographic and academic characteristics, including age, gender, year level, and prior exposure to mental health nursing. The second section measured students' perceptions of mental health nursing as a career path using a Likert-scale format. The third section explored factors influencing these perceptions, including cultural stigma, emotional challenges, and educational exposure.

## Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process was carried out in a structured yet flexible manner to ensure both participant convenience and the quality of the data gathered. Participants were recruited through announcements made during class sessions within the College of Nursing at Taif University and through the university's official online platforms.

Once students expressed their willingness to participate, they were provided with an informed consent form. Only those who voluntarily agreed and signed the consent form were included in the study. After obtaining consent, the survey was administered using a self-report questionnaire, which was made available in both online and paper-based formats. Participants were given approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The entire data collection process took place over approximately four weeks. This timeframe allowed enough opportunity for recruitment, completion of questionnaires, and follow-up with participants when needed.

## Data Analysis Methods

The data collected in this study were organized, coded, and analyzed using appropriate statistical methods to answer each of the research questions. Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage distributions were used to summarize the demographic and academic characteristics of the participants.

Means and standard deviations were used to determine the overall level of perception of nursing students toward mental health nursing as a career path. Pearson's correlation coefficient or Spearman's rank-order correlation was applied to determine the strength and direction of relationships between selected variables and students' perceptions.

For differences in perceptions when grouped according to selected variables, independent samples t-test and one-way Analysis of Variance were employed. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify predictors of students' intention to pursue mental health nursing as a career. All statistical analyses were

conducted using appropriate statistical software, with the level of significance set at  $p < 0.05$ .

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were carefully observed throughout the conduct of the study to ensure that the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants were protected. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Taif University Research Ethics Committee.

Participation in the study was strictly voluntary. All potential participants were provided with a clear and detailed informed consent form before taking part in the study. The consent form explained the purpose of the research, what participation involved, the estimated time required, and the participants' right to decline or withdraw at any time without penalty.

To protect participants' privacy, strict measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaire did not collect identifying information such as names or student numbers. All responses were treated as anonymous and were reported only in aggregated form. All collected data were handled with care and stored securely. Electronic data were kept in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers. Participants were informed that they had the right to ask questions or seek clarification about the study at any point during the process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Profile Of the Respondents

**Table 1:** Distribution of Respondents According to Gender and Academic Level

Academic Level	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Level 1	22	7.69	29	10.14	51	17.83
Level 2	25	8.74	36	12.59	61	21.33
Level 3	41	14.34	60	20.98	101	35.31
Level 4	30	10.49	43	15.03	73	25.52
Total	118	41.26	168	58.74	286	100.00

Table 1 shows the final distribution of the respondents according to gender and academic level. A total of 286 nursing students were included in the sample. Of this number, 118 or 41.26% were male, while 168 or 58.74% were female.

In terms of academic level, the largest group came from Level 3, with 101 respondents or 35.31% of the total sample. This was followed by Level 4, with 73 respondents or 25.52%; Level 2, with 61 respondents or 21.33%; and Level 1, with 51 respondents or 17.83%.

The distribution reflects the actual population structure of the nursing students. This is important because the study aims to examine students' perceptions of mental health nursing across different academic levels. Since students in higher levels may have greater theoretical and clinical exposure, their inclusion allows the study to compare how perceptions may differ as students' progress in the nursing program.

### Previous Exposure to Mental Health Clinical Settings

**Table 2:** Previous Exposure to Mental Health Clinical Settings

Academic Level	With Previous Exposure	%	Without Previous Exposure	%	Total
Level 1	6	11.76	45	88.24	51

Academic Level	With Previous Exposure	%	Without Previous Exposure	%	Total
Level 2	12	19.67	49	80.33	61
Level 3	61	60.40	40	39.60	101
Level 4	58	79.45	15	20.55	73
Total	137	47.90	149	52.10	286

Table 2 shows the respondents’ previous exposure to mental health clinical settings. Of the 286 respondents, 137 or 47.90% had previous exposure, while 149 or 52.10% had none. This indicates that slightly more than half of the respondents had not yet experienced actual mental health clinical settings, which may have influenced their understanding of psychiatric nursing, patients with mental health conditions, and the real work environment.

The results also show that exposure increased with academic level. Only 6 or 11.76% of Level 1 students had previous exposure, compared with 58 or 79.45% of Level 4 students. This pattern suggests that students in higher levels had more opportunities to encounter psychiatric nursing concepts, clinical placements, or related learning experiences. This supports the view that academic progression is closely related to clinical exposure. Sanga, Tarimo, and Ambikile (2023) noted that training and familiarity with mental illness are important factors in developing interest in mental health nursing.

These findings have important implications because clinical exposure may shape students’ perceptions of mental health nursing as a career path. Students with direct and guided exposure may develop a more realistic and positive view of the specialty, while those without exposure may be more influenced by fear, uncertainty, or stigma. Mahsoon et al. (2024) reported that Saudi nursing students’ attitudes toward mental illness and mental health facilities may affect their career choices. Likewise, Simonelli-Muñoz et al. (2023) found that mental health simulation improved confidence and reduced stigma, while Shen et al. (2023) emphasized that psychiatric placements helped students reduce stigma, improve communication, and build confidence. These results support the need for earlier, structured, and supportive mental health clinical exposure among nursing students.

### Perceptions of Nursing Students Toward Mental Health Nursing as a Career Path

*Table 3: Perceptions of Nursing Students Toward Mental Health Nursing as a Career Path*

Perception Domain	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Professional Image	3.83	0.62	Positive	1
Career Opportunities and Advancement	3.68	0.65	Positive	2
Perceived Competence and Preparedness	3.50	0.69	Positive	3
Personal Interest and Willingness to Specialize	3.27	0.75	Moderately Positive	4
Emotional Demands and Workplace Safety	3.11	0.72	Moderately Positive	5
Overall Perception	3.48	0.53	Positive	

Table 3 presents the nursing students’ perceptions of mental health nursing as a career path. The overall mean score was 3.48 with a standard deviation of 0.53, interpreted as positive, indicating that the respondents generally viewed mental health nursing favorably as a possible career. Among the five domains, professional image ranked highest, with a mean of 3.83, also interpreted as positive. This suggests that students recognized mental health nursing as a respectable, meaningful, and important field. This finding is relevant because students’ attitudes toward mental illness and mental health facilities may influence their career decisions, particularly in the Saudi context (9).

Career opportunities and advancement ranked second, with a mean of 3.68, interpreted as positive. This indicates that students viewed mental health nursing as a field with potential for professional growth and development. Sanga, Tarimo, and Ambikile (2023) similarly found that awareness of career advancement, income opportunities, and satisfaction with the psychiatric work environment were associated with students' preference for mental health nursing, although only 33.1% of participants preferred this career path.

Perceived competence and preparedness obtained a mean of 3.50, interpreted as positive. This shows that students felt generally prepared for some mental health nursing roles, although the score suggests that confidence and readiness may still need strengthening. Since mental health nursing requires communication skills, emotional control, assessment ability, and safe management of challenging behaviors, structured learning experiences remain important. Simonelli-Muñoz et al. (2023) found that high-fidelity simulation helped nursing students approach patients with mental health conditions and reduce fear and stigma.

The lowest-rated domains were personal interest and willingness to specialize and emotional demands and workplace safety, with means of 3.27 and 3.11, respectively, both interpreted as moderately positive. These results suggest that although students recognized the value of mental health nursing, their willingness to specialize remained moderate, possibly due to concerns about emotional stress, safety, unpredictable patient behavior, and the demands of psychiatric care. This reveals a gap between appreciating mental health nursing and choosing it as a career. Therefore, simulation, guided clinical exposure, reflective debriefing, and mentorship may help students develop a more realistic and confident view of the specialty. Mahsoon et al. (2024) and Sanga et al. (2023) support that attitudes, exposure, career expectations, and perceptions of the psychiatric work environment influence students' interest in mental health nursing.

### Intention to Pursue Mental Health Nursing as a Career Path

**Table 4:** Level of Intention to Pursue Mental Health Nursing as a Career Path

Indicator	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
I am willing to consider mental health nursing as a future specialization.	3.30	0.87	Moderately Positive
I can see myself working in a mental health nursing setting after graduation.	3.17	0.90	Moderately Positive
I would choose mental health nursing if given proper training and support.	3.55	0.82	Positive
I am interested in learning more about career opportunities in mental health nursing.	3.64	0.79	Positive
I would recommend mental health nursing as a possible career path to other nursing students.	3.21	0.85	Moderately Positive
<b>Overall Intention</b>	<b>3.37</b>	<b>0.68</b>	<b>Moderately Positive</b>

Table 4 presents the respondents' level of intention to pursue mental health nursing as a career path. The overall mean score was 3.37 with a standard deviation of 0.68, interpreted as moderately positive. This indicates that the respondents were somewhat open to considering mental health nursing as a future specialization, but their intention was not strongly positive. This finding is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which explains that intention is influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In this study, students' intention may depend not only on how positively they view mental health nursing, but also on whether they feel supported and capable of working in the field (1).

Among the indicators, the highest mean was for the statement "I am interested in learning more about career opportunities in mental health nursing," with a mean of 3.64, interpreted as positive. This suggests that students may be more receptive to the specialty if they receive clearer information about career pathways, employment opportunities, specialization, and professional growth. The second highest item was "I would choose mental health nursing if given proper training and support," with a mean of 3.55, also interpreted as

positive. This indicates that proper preparation, guidance, and support may strengthen students’ intention. Sanga, Tarimo, and Ambikile (2023) similarly found that career preference in mental health nursing was associated with awareness of career advancement, satisfaction with the psychiatric work environment, and prior experience with people with mental illness.

The lowest mean was for the statement “I can see myself working in a mental health nursing setting after graduation,” with a mean of 3.17, interpreted as moderately positive. This suggests that although students were interested in learning more about mental health nursing, some still hesitated to picture themselves working in the field. This hesitation may be related to emotional demands, safety concerns, stigma, uncertainty about the psychiatric work environment, or lack of confidence in handling patients with mental health conditions. Mahsoon et al. (2024) emphasized that Saudi nursing students’ attitudes toward working in mental health facilities may influence their future career choices. Thus, the moderately positive intention shown in this table highlights the need for a career enhancement program that includes career orientation, guided clinical exposure, simulation-based training, mentorship, and confidence-building activities.

**Relationship Between Selected Variables and Students’ Overall Perception**

*Table 5; Relationship Between Selected Variables and Students’ Overall Perception of Mental Health Nursing*

Variable	Correlation Coefficient	p-value	Interpretation	Decision
Age	0.10	.094	Very weak positive correlation	Not Significant
Academic Level	0.30	<.001	Weak positive correlation	Significant
Previous Mental Health Exposure	0.35	<.001	Moderate positive correlation	Significant
Overall Intention	0.53	<.001	Moderate positive correlation	Significant

Table 5 presents the relationship between selected variables and students’ overall perception of mental health nursing as a career path. The results showed that academic level, previous mental health exposure, and overall intention were significantly related to students’ overall perception. The strongest relationship was found between overall intention and overall perception,  $r = 0.53$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating a moderate positive correlation. This means that students with more favorable perceptions of mental health nursing were more likely to express stronger intention to consider it as a future career. This supports Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior, which explains that intention is influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (1).

Previous mental health exposure was also significantly related to perception,  $r = 0.35$ ,  $p < .001$ , showing a moderate positive correlation. This suggests that students with prior exposure to mental health clinical settings tended to have more favorable perceptions of the specialty. Such exposure may help students develop a clearer understanding of psychiatric nursing, reduce fear and stigma, and improve confidence. Sanga, Tarimo, and Ambikile (2023) found that career preference in mental health nursing was associated with previous experience with persons with mental illness, awareness of career advancement, and satisfaction with the psychiatric work environment. Similarly, Shen et al. (2023) reported that psychiatric placement experiences helped shape students’ understanding, although these experiences should be supported by appropriate educational strategies.

Academic level was likewise significantly related to perception,  $r = 0.30$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating a weak positive correlation. This means that students in higher academic levels tended to report more favorable perceptions, possibly because of greater academic maturity, broader nursing knowledge, and more clinical exposure. In contrast, age was not significantly related to perception,  $r = 0.10$ ,  $p = .094$ , suggesting that age alone may not strongly influence students’ views. These findings indicate that educational and experiential factors may be more important than age in shaping students’ perceptions. In the Saudi context, Mahsoon et al. (2024) emphasized that nursing students’ attitudes toward mental illness and working in mental health facilities may

influence their future career choices. Therefore, the results support the need for earlier exposure, guided clinical experiences, mentorship, and activities that strengthen students’ confidence and career intention.

**Difference in Students’ Perceptions When Grouped According to Gender**

*Table 6: Difference in Overall Perception According to Gender*

Gender	n	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Decision
Male	118	3.42	0.54	-1.75	.081	Not Significant
Female	168	3.53	0.52			

Table 6 presents the difference in students’ overall perception of mental health nursing as a career path when grouped according to gender. The results show that male respondents obtained a mean score of 3.42 with a standard deviation of 0.54, while female respondents obtained a slightly higher mean score of 3.53 with a standard deviation of 0.52. Although female students appeared to have a slightly more favorable perception of mental health nursing, the difference was not statistically significant, as indicated by the computed t-value of -1.75 and p-value of .081. Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is retained. This means that male and female nursing students did not significantly differ in their overall perception of mental health nursing as a career path. The result suggests that gender alone may not be a strong determinant of how students perceive mental health nursing. Instead, their perceptions may be more strongly influenced by academic exposure, previous clinical experience, preparedness, and awareness of career opportunities.

This finding is important because mental health nursing should be viewed as a viable career path for both male and female nursing students. Although nursing is often socially perceived as a female-dominated profession, the present result suggests that gender did not significantly shape students’ overall perception of this specialty. Turan and Öztürk Çopur (2021) noted that gender perceptions in nursing may influence students’ professional experiences and views of the profession, but these perceptions do not necessarily determine students’ suitability or interest in specific nursing roles. In the context of mental health nursing, Mahsoon et al. (2024) emphasized that students’ attitudes toward working in mental health facilities are important in understanding their future career choices, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the non-significant difference by gender in this table implies that interventions to improve perceptions of mental health nursing should be designed for all students, regardless of gender, with greater emphasis on exposure, confidence-building, mentorship, and career orientation rather than gender-based assumptions.

**Difference in Students’ Perceptions When Grouped According to Academic Level**

*Table 7: Difference in Overall Perception According to Academic Level*

Academic Level	n	Mean	SD	F-value	p-value	Decision
Level 1	51	3.26	0.52	13.84	<.001	Significant
Level 2	61	3.36	0.51			
Level 3	101	3.54	0.50			
Level 4	73	3.68	0.49			

Table 7 presents the difference in students’ overall perception of mental health nursing as a career path when grouped according to academic level. The results show a statistically significant difference among the four academic levels,  $F = 13.84$ ,  $p < .001$ . Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that students’ overall perception of mental health nursing significantly differed according to their academic level. The mean scores show an increasing pattern, with Level 1 students obtaining the lowest mean score of 3.26, followed by Level 2 with 3.36, Level 3 with 3.54, and Level 4 with the highest mean score of 3.68. This suggests that students in higher academic levels had more favorable perceptions of mental health nursing compared with those in the lower levels. The result may be attributed to the fact that

higher-level students are more likely to have completed more nursing courses, encountered mental health-related content, and participated in clinical learning experiences. Mahsoon et al. (2024) emphasized that nursing students' attitudes toward mental illness and working in mental health facilities are important because they may influence future career choices, particularly in the Saudi context. Their study also examined students before and after exposure to psychiatry courses, highlighting the relevance of academic and course exposure in shaping students' attitudes toward mental health nursing.

The findings further imply that academic progression may contribute to a more informed and realistic understanding of mental health nursing. Students in lower levels may still have limited exposure to psychiatric nursing and may rely more on general beliefs, assumptions, or stigma surrounding mental illness. In contrast, students in higher levels may have gained more opportunities to understand the therapeutic, professional, and humanistic dimensions of mental health nursing. Shen et al. (2023) reported that psychiatric placement experiences provided undergraduate nursing students with both positive experiences and negative emotions, suggesting that exposure to psychiatric settings can influence students' understanding of the field but should be supported through appropriate educational guidance. Similarly, Arifoğlu et al. (2025) found that a psychiatric nursing and mental health course was designed to reduce stigma and improve students' beliefs and attitudes toward mental illness, further supporting the role of formal coursework in shaping students' perceptions (2). Therefore, the significant difference across academic levels suggests the need to introduce mental health nursing concepts earlier in the curriculum, supported by guided exposure, simulation, reflective learning, and mentorship so that students may develop more positive perceptions even before reaching the higher levels of the nursing program.

### Difference in Students' Perceptions According to Previous Mental Health Clinical Exposure

**Table 8:** *Difference in Overall Perception According to Previous Mental Health Clinical Exposure*

Previous Exposure	n	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Decision
With Exposure	137	3.65	0.48	5.28	<.001	Significant
Without Exposure	149	3.33	0.52			

Table 8 presents the difference in students' overall perception of mental health nursing as a career path when grouped according to previous mental health clinical exposure. The results show that students with previous exposure obtained a higher mean score of 3.65 with a standard deviation of 0.48, while students without previous exposure obtained a lower mean score of 3.33 with a standard deviation of 0.52. The computed t-value of 5.28 and p-value of < .001 indicate that the difference between the two groups is statistically significant. Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that students who had previous exposure to mental health clinical settings had significantly more positive perceptions of mental health nursing than those who had no previous exposure. This finding suggests that direct or structured exposure may help students develop a more realistic understanding of mental health nursing, including its professional role, therapeutic value, and contribution to patient recovery. It also implies that students without exposure may still hold more uncertain or cautious views, possibly because their perceptions are shaped more by limited knowledge, stigma, or assumptions about psychiatric care.

This result is supported by recent studies emphasizing the importance of clinical exposure and experience in shaping students' attitudes toward mental health nursing. Sanga, Tarimo, and Ambikile (2023) found that career preference in mental health nursing was associated with previous experience with persons with mental illness, awareness of career advancement, and satisfaction with the psychiatric working environment. Their findings suggest that direct or meaningful exposure can influence how students understand the specialty and whether they view it as a possible career path. Shen et al. (2023) similarly reported that psychiatric placement experiences helped undergraduate nursing students in destigmatizing mental illness, improving communication, and gaining confidence, although students also reported discomfort and fear during placement. This indicates that exposure is beneficial but should be accompanied by proper guidance, supervision, and reflection. Moreover, Simonelli-Muñoz et al. (2023) found that high-fidelity simulation in mental health nursing helped students

overcome fear and stigma, further supporting the value of structured learning experiences before and during actual clinical exposure. Therefore, the significant difference shown in Table 9 highlights the need to provide students with early, guided, and supportive exposure to mental health nursing so that they may develop more positive, informed, and confident perceptions of the field.

### Predictors of Students’ Intention to Pursue Mental Health Nursing as a Career Path

**Table 9:** Predictors of Students’ Intention to Pursue Mental Health Nursing as a Career Path

Predictor Variable	B	SE	Beta	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Professional Image	0.17	0.06	0.15	2.83	.005	Significant predictor
Perceived Competence and Preparedness	0.30	0.06	0.29	5.00	<.001	Significant predictor
Career Opportunities and Advancement	0.20	0.06	0.18	3.33	.001	Significant predictor
Emotional Demands and Workplace Safety	0.10	0.05	0.09	2.00	.046	Significant predictor
Previous Mental Health Exposure	0.23	0.08	0.16	2.88	.004	Significant predictor
Gender	0.05	0.07	0.03	0.71	.478	Not significant
Academic Level	0.08	0.04	0.11	2.00	.046	Significant predictor

Table 9 presents the predictors of students’ intention to pursue mental health nursing as a career path. The regression model was statistically significant,  $F = 22.32$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that the predictor variables collectively explained a significant proportion of the variance in students’ career intention. The adjusted  $R^2$  value of 0.34 means that approximately 34% of the variance in students’ intention to pursue mental health nursing was explained by the predictors included in the model. Among the predictors, perceived competence and preparedness emerged as the strongest predictor,  $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p < .001$ . This means that students who felt more competent and prepared were more likely to consider mental health nursing as a possible career path. This finding is consistent with Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior, which explains that perceived behavioral control, or one’s belief in the ability to perform a behavior, contributes to behavioral intention (1). In the context of this study, students may be more willing to pursue mental health nursing if they believe they have the communication skills, emotional readiness, and clinical competence needed to function effectively in mental health settings.

The results also show that career opportunities and advancement ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $p = .001$ ), previous mental health exposure ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p = .004$ ), professional image ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p = .005$ ), academic level ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $p = .046$ ), and emotional demands and workplace safety ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $p = .046$ ) significantly predicted students’ intention to pursue mental health nursing. These findings suggest that students’ career intention is shaped not only by their personal preparedness, but also by how they view the profession, the opportunities available in the field, their prior exposure, and their concerns about the working environment. Sanga, Tarimo, and Ambikile (2023) found that career preference in mental health nursing was associated with awareness of career advancement, possible income generation, experience with persons with mental illness, and satisfaction with the psychiatric working environment. In the Saudi context, Mahsoon et al. (2024) similarly emphasized that nursing students’ attitudes toward working in mental health facilities are important because these attitudes may influence their future career choices. Meanwhile, gender was not a significant predictor ( $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $p = .478$ ), indicating that students’ intention to pursue mental health nursing was better explained by preparedness, exposure, career perception, and academic progression than by gender. Overall, the findings imply that a career enhancement program should focus on competence-building, guided exposure, career orientation, mentorship, and strategies that address students’ concerns about emotional demands and workplace safety.

## Proposed Mental Health Nursing Career Enhancement Program

**Table 11:** Basis for the Proposed Mental Health Nursing Career Enhancement Program

Key Finding	Identified Need	Proposed Activity
Students' intention to pursue mental health nursing was only moderately positive.	Strengthen students' career interest in mental health nursing.	Conduct career orientation sessions with practicing mental health nurses.
Emotional demands and workplace safety obtained the lowest mean score.	Reduce fear and safety-related concerns.	Provide safety orientation, psychiatric nursing simulation, and case-based learning activities.
Perceived competence and preparedness was the strongest predictor of intention.	Improve students' confidence and readiness.	Conduct workshops on therapeutic communication, crisis management, and patient de-escalation techniques.
Students with previous exposure had more positive perceptions.	Increase meaningful exposure to mental health nursing.	Provide structured psychiatric clinical immersion with guided reflection and debriefing.
Some students remained hesitant to imagine themselves working in mental health settings.	Improve professional identity and career awareness.	Implement mentorship sessions with psychiatric nurses and faculty members.
Students in lower levels had less positive perceptions.	Introduce mental health nursing earlier in the curriculum.	Provide early exposure activities, introductory seminars, and anti-stigma discussions for lower-level students.

Based on the findings, a proposed Mental Health Nursing Career Enhancement Program may be developed to strengthen students' interest, confidence, and readiness to consider mental health nursing as a future career path. The program should focus on career awareness, competence-building, stigma reduction, structured exposure, and mentorship.

Since perceived competence and preparedness emerged as the strongest predictor of intention, the program should prioritize activities that improve students' confidence and readiness. These may include workshops on therapeutic communication, crisis management, emotional regulation, and patient de-escalation techniques.

Since emotional demands and workplace safety obtained the lowest mean score, the program should also address students' fears and concerns about the mental health nursing environment. Safety orientation, psychiatric nursing simulation, and case-based learning may help students better understand how mental health nurses manage challenging situations professionally and safely.

Finally, since students with previous exposure had more positive perceptions, structured exposure should be strengthened. This may include early orientation, guided clinical immersion, reflective debriefing, and mentorship from practicing mental health nurses. Through these activities, students may develop a more realistic and positive understanding of mental health nursing as a meaningful and viable career path.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined nursing students' perceptions of mental health nursing as a career path, their intention to pursue the field, and the factors associated with such perceptions and intentions. Using a descriptive-correlational design, the study involved 286 respondents drawn from a population of 993 nursing students through proportionate stratified sampling. The findings showed that the respondents generally had a positive perception of mental health nursing, particularly in terms of its professional image, career opportunities, and perceived professional value. However, their intention to pursue mental health nursing was only moderately

positive, suggesting that although students recognized the importance of the field, not all of them were strongly inclined to choose it as a future specialization. The lowest-rated areas were emotional demands and workplace safety, indicating that some students may still have concerns about stress, safety, and the challenges of working in mental health settings.

The results further revealed that academic level, previous mental health clinical exposure, and overall intention were significantly related to students' perceptions, while gender was not a significant factor. Students in higher academic levels and those with previous exposure to mental health settings had more favorable perceptions, suggesting that learning progression and clinical exposure played important roles in shaping students' views of the specialty. Perceived competence and preparedness also emerged as the strongest predictor of intention, indicating that students were more likely to consider mental health nursing when they felt confident, capable, and prepared to perform the role.

Based on these findings, it may be concluded that while nursing students generally valued mental health nursing as a meaningful and respectable field, their willingness to pursue it as a career remained limited by concerns about preparedness, safety, emotional demands, and limited direct exposure. This implies that positive perception alone may not be enough to develop strong career intention. Students may need more structured learning experiences, supportive clinical exposure, and confidence-building activities before they can seriously consider mental health nursing as a future specialization.

However, the study had several limitations. First, it was conducted in only one university, Taif University, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to nursing students in other institutions or regions in Saudi Arabia. Second, the study used a descriptive-correlational design; therefore, it could identify relationships among variables but could not establish cause-and-effect relationships. Third, the data were gathered through a self-administered questionnaire, which may have been affected by self-report bias, social desirability, or differences in how students interpreted the items. Fourth, although the study included students from different academic levels, it did not deeply explore their personal experiences, emotions, or reasons for hesitating to pursue mental health nursing. Lastly, the study focused on selected demographic and academic variables, while other possible influences such as family expectations, cultural beliefs, stigma, faculty influence, and actual quality of clinical placement may not have been fully examined.

In view of these findings and limitations, it is recommended that the College of Nursing strengthen early and structured exposure to mental health nursing through seminars, simulation-based activities, case discussions, guided clinical immersion, and reflective debriefing. The curriculum should also include competence-building activities focused on therapeutic communication, patient de-escalation, crisis management, emotional readiness, and safety protocols. In addition, career orientation sessions, mentorship by mental health nursing professionals, and anti-stigma activities may help students develop a more informed, confident, and realistic view of mental health nursing. Future studies may use qualitative or mixed-methods designs to explore more deeply why students hesitate to pursue mental health nursing despite having generally positive perceptions of the field. It is also recommended that similar studies be conducted in other universities or regions to compare findings and strengthen the evidence base for mental health nursing education and workforce planning.

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