

A Qualitative Descriptive Study of Factors Related to Nursing Professionalism in a Private Hospital in Ghana

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Abstract

Introduction:

Consistent and regular monitoring of nurses' professional behaviour in healthcare settings is a vital component of healthcare that significantly affects the quality of patient care and outcomes. This study investigated the multifaceted factors influencing nurses' professional behaviour in healthcare settings, emphasising the interconnectedness among organisational, individual and community elements. By understanding these factors, healthcare organisations can develop targeted interventions to enhance professional behaviour among nurses.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, using a semi-structured interview guide to collect data from fifteen (15) participant nurses through purposive sampling at the Father Thomas Alan Rooney Memorial Hospital in Asankragwa, in the Western North Region of Ghana. Participants represented various roles, including undergraduate learner nurses, professional nurses, and those in rotational or national service. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted between November 2025 and March 2026, and the data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework. Thematic analysis was utilised to identify and categorise key themes and subthemes related to enhancing nurses' professional behaviour, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors at play.

Results

The analysis revealed six main themes: organisational factors affecting professionalism; barriers to improving professionalism; individual factors influencing professionalism; impact on patient outcomes; perceptions of professionalism; and strategies for enhancing professionalism.

Recommendations:

To enhance nurses' professional behaviour, participants suggested several strategies, including continuous education, policy reform and community engagement. Community engagement initiatives were recommended to improve public understanding and appreciation of the nursing profession.

Conclusion

The study underscores the intricate interplay among organisational, individual and community factors that shape nurses' professional behaviour. By identifying key themes and barriers, healthcare

organisations can develop targeted interventions to enhance nurses' professional behaviour.

Introduction

Numerous attempts have been made to define nursing professionalism (NP). Although a clear definition may appear straightforward, a comprehensive definition has proved difficult to formulate. Descriptions of professionalism commonly emphasise specialised knowledge, responsibility, continued learning, self-governance and altruism [1, 2]. Although nursing professionalism is important in clinical practice, its conceptual boundaries remain incompletely defined [3]. Professional behaviour in nursing includes ethical conduct, clinical competence, effective communication and commitment to patient-centred care [4].

Internationally, emphasis is placed on quality nursing care, patient safety, patient outcomes, teamwork, job satisfaction and satisfaction with the work environment. Cost-effective and safe care also requires competent and highly professional nurses [5]. Nurses are expected to demonstrate professionalism in clinical practice [6], attain and apply nursing competencies [7], and remain responsive to changing care demands and evidence-based practice requirements [8]. Because nurses constitute the largest group of healthcare providers and have frequent contact with patients, their multiple and complex roles require considerable responsibility, attention and vigilance [9].

In today's rapidly changing world, nurses require up-to-date knowledge, professional performance, management skills and the ability to provide safe, legal and ethical care [10]. Achieving and maintaining professional status is therefore an important goal in nursing. High workload, inadequate staffing, limited occupational recognition and other workplace pressures can contribute to burnout, low job satisfaction and staff turnover. Lower levels of professionalism may also adversely affect patient care, productivity and staff retention [3, 11]. At the organisational level, professionalism can support institutional development and strengthen professional knowledge and practice [12]. It may also enhance nurses' autonomy, empowerment and recognition, support nursing-care standards and improve service quality [13, 14].

Existing literature highlights the need for interventions and strategies that strengthen nursing professionalism and help nurses maintain high standards of care. Educational interventions that develop communication skills can positively influence professional practice and patient care [15]. Organisational structures, adequate resources and leadership practices are also important for creating a healthy professional work environment [16]. At the same time, technological advances, changing patient demographics and increasingly complex care needs present new opportunities and challenges for nursing professionalism and education [17, 18].

In light of these considerations, it is evident that findings focused on enhancing nursing professionalism and its impact on healthcare quality is essential for informing evidence-based practice and policy development. The significance of nursing professionalism in ensuring high-quality healthcare cannot be understated. By exploring the factors that influence nursing professionalism and evaluating the

effectiveness of interventions aimed at promoting professional growth, this study seeks to investigate the factors influencing the maintenance or change of the status quo in nurses' professionalism within healthcare settings, and to identify effective strategies and interventions for enhancing nurses' professionalism to improve upon the quality of healthcare provision.

The study sought to achieve the following objectives: examine the factors that contribute to the maintenance of the status quo in nurses' professionalism within healthcare settings; explore the barriers that prevent nurses from improving upon their professionalism and providing quality healthcare; investigate the perceptions and attitudes of nurses towards professionalism and quality healthcare provision and assess the relationship between nurses' professionalism and patient outcomes in healthcare settings.

Theoretical Framework

Change Theory in Nursing and how it is Evolving in the Nursing Profession

Change theory is a viewpoint that aims to manage health care changes in its many forms so that quality patient care remains constant and is not disrupted. These changes come from many directions, including organisational practice, patient care models, care policies, and legal compliance. Using the theory allows health care leaders to govern change management in health care more deliberately, which can lead to cleaner change implementation. Modern change theory encompasses different principles that can help nurses shape their approach to change management more pragmatically. However, its origins stem from German-American psychologist, Kurt Lewin. A pioneer in the field of group dynamics so much so that he coined the term Lewin developed change theory as a means to examine how people adapt and adjust to changes within an organisation. The principles of change theory can set the framework for nurse leaders to develop strategies to implement change that cause minimal workforce.

Lewin's Force Field Analysis: Driving and Restraining Forces

Lewin also developed a sister theory that can help organizations determine whether implementing change makes any sense. This theory, known as the force field analysis, focuses on driving and restraining forces; internal and external influencers surrounding a potential need for change.

Driving forces are the productive factors that can potentially spur development, growth and progress. These factors ultimately aim to streamline an organisation's progress toward a positive goal. Common driving forces include the following: increased demand, new federal or state laws, managerial pressure, public perception and field competition. Restraining forces are the factors that can inhibit progress and innovation. These can compel an organization to maintain the status quo and keep the current pace toward goals stability. Common restraining forces include the following: company culture, employee union, comfort concern about the future and past unsuccessful change initiatives.

According to Lewin's theory, when these forces are in balance, an organisation is in equilibrium and does not need to engage in change. On the other hand, if there is instability among these forces, changes may be inevitable to restore balance. These different theories can help an organisation make more assured decisions on when it may be time to make a change. It can also equip them with the preparedness needed to brace for resistance, provide appropriate guidance, and turn a new idea into a new standard without causing much disruption.

The Wheel of Professionalism in Nursing

Barbara Kemp Miller developed the 'Wheel of Professionalism in Nursing' to identify the attributes and behaviours associated with nursing professionalism [19]. The model includes adherence to the nursing code of ethics; a community-service orientation; participation in professional organisations; autonomy and self-regulation; publication and communication; development and use of theory and research; and continuing education and competence [20]. Applying these domains may help nurses assess their level of professionalism and guide their professional growth [19]. However, evidence remains limited regarding how practising nurses continue to internalise, develop and sustain professional characteristics after initial professional socialisation [19].

Applying the Change Theory in Nursing Professionalism

The framework of Lewin's theory applies to a wide range of industries. It has a unique application in nursing because of the field's purpose. In other organisations, a slowdown in operations due to change adaptation correlates to goods and services. In nursing, it correlates to patient care. This makes it particularly important for nurse leaders to understand change theory.

A lack of understanding of change theory in nursing can leave a nurse leader unprepared for the resistance to change that may come from staff. It can also cause the implementation and permanency of changes to occur more slowly, which can cause a greater disruption to operational processes. This can reduce the efficiency of patient care and make it harder for facilities to achieve their goal of providing care that improves upon patient outcomes.

The need to engage in change management can come from many different elements. It can come from a new piece of technology that can improve upon operational efficiency, such as electronic health records (EHRs). It can come from the need to adjust specific procedural elements to comply with new federal or state regulations regarding patient care. It can also be the result of an internal philosophical switch, such as a transition to an evidence-based practice model to improve upon cost efficiency. These elements can cause different forms of change; addressing and managing these changes in a way that minimise disruption is essential.

Methods

Study Design and Setting

A qualitative descriptive design was employed. This design generates contextualised accounts of how participants understand and experience a phenomenon without the strict theoretical and bracketing requirements of formal phenomenological approaches [21, 22]. It was appropriate because the research questions focused on nurses' experiences of the factors that maintain or change professionalism and on what they believed could improve practice. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it is theoretically flexible, inductive and suitable for developing themes grounded in participants' accounts [23]. The study was informed by interpretivism, which holds that social phenomena are best understood through the meanings assigned by those who experience them [24].

Fieldwork was conducted in the Father Thomas Alan Rooney Memorial Hospital, a private health facility and was established on 3rd October, 1954 and came into existence through contribution generated to the "Mercy Fund". Father Thomas Alan Rooney Memorial Hospital is located in Asankrangwa, the municipal capital of Wassa Amenfi West Municipality. The hospital operates under the National Catholic Health Service of the Christian Health Association of Ghana. It is a hundred and five (150) capacity-bed hospital. It is worthy to note that Father Thomas Alan Rooney Memorial Hospital is a non-profit-making organisation. The hospital is run by a core management team that comprises the Hospital Administrator, the Medical Superintendent, the Nurse Manager and the Chaplain. The Hospital renders numerous services to its catchment areas such as Akromanto, Blockso, Nkwantatwam and beyond. The hospital provides services such as general out-patient department services, inpatient services, laboratory services, theatre services, ear, nose and throat (ENT) services, nutrition services, home visits and community sensitisation, mortuary services, ultrasound services and pharmaceutical services. Critical care services are delivered through the hospital's emergency unit, intensive care unit and critical care ward, all of which operate under conditions of regular understaffing, high patient volumes and limited security infrastructure. This setting was selected due to its documented exposure to nurses' professionalism challenges and because it is representative of the resource-constrained private hospital environments in which the majority of Ghanaian nurses work in the Wassa Amenfi West Municipality.

Participants and Sampling

Study participants were registered professional nurses working at the Father Thomas Alan Rooney Memorial Hospital. Nurses were selected because their work involves frequent patient contact and exposure to high workloads, emotional demands and resource constraints that can affect professional practice and wellbeing [25]. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

The study utilised an in-depth semi-structured interview guide to collect data between July and August 2026 at a location within the hospital chosen by each participant for their ease and confidentiality. The interview guide was structured around four thematic areas aligned with the study's research objectives was developed, reviewed by two academic experts and piloted with nine nurses outside the study before use. Twenty-four core questions were organised around the factors that contribute to the maintenance of the status quo in nurses' professionalism within healthcare settings, the barriers that prevent nurses from improving upon their professionalism and providing quality healthcare, the perceptions and attitudes of nurses towards professionalism and quality healthcare provision and the relationship between nurses' professionalism and patient outcomes in healthcare settings. Follow-up probes were used throughout to allow participants to expand on experiences they identified as important. All interviews were conducted in English by the researchers. Audio files were uploaded to Cockatoo.ai for automated transcription, and each transcript was then carefully reviewed line by line against the original recording to correct errors in clinical terminology, local names and contextual meaning.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were assigned participant codes PT-01 through PT-15 from the outset, replacing all identifiable information. Confirmed transcripts were imported into Quirkos 3, a visual qualitative analysis platform that uses a bubble-based coding system to help researchers organise and interrogate data across participants. The analysis followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis [23]. These involved reading and re-reading all transcripts to build familiarity with the data; systematically generating initial codes by tagging meaningful segments; sorting codes into candidate themes; reviewing those themes against both coded extracts and the full transcripts; clearly defining and naming the final themes; and writing the analytical report. The analysis was inductive, meaning that themes were developed from participants' accounts rather than determined in advance. Throughout the process, attention was given to both the explicit content of participants' statements and the underlying institutional and cultural meanings.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Quality assurance was guided by the four trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability [26]. Credibility was addressed through member checking, in which initial findings were shared with five participants who confirmed that the themes reflected their experiences. Transferability was supported through detailed contextual descriptions of the setting and participant characteristics. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail of coding decisions and analytical memos kept within Quirkos 3. Confirmability was addressed through a reflexive journal maintained from the beginning of fieldwork to the completion of analysis, documenting assumptions, unexpected findings and interpretive decisions. As Ghanaian researchers from the University of Education, Winneba, the researchers had contextual familiarity with the study setting that supported rapport and communication during interviews. The researchers were not registered nurses, had no previous employment at the Father Thomas Alan Rooney Memorial Hospital and did not know any

participants personally before recruitment. Reflexive journaling identified assumptions that required active management. For example, the researchers initially expected barriers to improving professionalism to be underreported because of professional loyalty and tended to interpret perceptions of professionalism primarily as resource constraints rather than governance failures. Regular supervisory discussions challenged these assumptions and strengthened the regulatory and governance analysis presented in the discussion. Structured reflexive journaling and supervisory review of analytical memos helped reduce the risk that familiarity with the community context would unduly shape the analysis.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Health Administration and Education, University of Education, Winneba (reference HAED/1.3/VOL1/120) and institutional permission was granted by the administration of Catholic Health Service Trust - Ghana (Father Thomas Alan Rooney Memorial Hospital) before any data collection commenced. The use of Cockatoo.ai for automated transcription was covered under the ethics approval; participants were informed during the consent process that audio recordings would be uploaded to a secure third-party transcription platform and deleted from the platform immediately after the transcript was verified. All audio files have been deleted from the platform. The researcher confirms that no participant names or identifying details appear in any transcript file uploaded to the platform.

Presentation of Results

Participant demographics

The study involved a diverse sample of 15 nurses from the Father Thomas Alan Rooney Memorial Hospital, representing various stages of their nursing careers. The participant pool included 5 undergraduate learner nurses completing clinical rotations, 7 professional nurses employed at the hospital, and 3 nurses undertaking their rotational or national service. This demographic reflects the typical gender distribution in nursing, with 11 female and 4 male participants, and a range of cultural and regional backgrounds. The nurses ranged in age from their mid-20s to late 50s, with an average of 10 years of experience, and held educational qualifications ranging from diploma to master's degrees in nursing. Their roles spanned from staff nurses to nurse managers, providing a comprehensive understanding of professionalism in nursing from varying perspectives. Nurses were denoted N1 - nurses one, etc. This was to ensure the anonymity of participants.

Thematic Analysis of Results

The thematic analysis revealed six main themes related to factors influencing professionalism in nursing: Organisational factors affecting professionalism, barriers to improving professionalism, individual factors influencing professionalism, impact on patient outcomes, perception and attitudes towards professionalism and strategies for enhancing professionalism. Each theme was further explored through subthemes. Table1 details this thematic analysis.

Table 1: Main Themes and Subthemes Emerged from the Thematic Analysis.

Main theme	Subtheme	Evidence
Organisational Factors Affecting Professionalism	Communication Channels	"Communication is very vital. And then role and responsibilities... should go in line so that it can also help the facility of the healthcare that we are in" - N4
	Role Clarity	"Positive cultural and fair policies. It's also about ethical leadership equity and natural environment at the workplace." - N2
	Leadership and Policies	
Barriers to Improving Professionalism	Resistance to Change	Resistance to change because change is very difficult..." - N1
	Inadequate Educational Opportunities	"To me maybe I prefer doing a lot of things and maybe being professional. But because maybe... rent issues accommodation issues... When we meet like this it's like a loss. So all these things are barriers that we are facing." - N3
	Workplace Stressors	
Individual factors influencing professionalism	Attitudes and Beliefs	Individual attitudes... we learn attitudes... it will be our individuality should be the policies of a facility or the institution" - N8
	Knowledge and Skills	"Former education is number one and through the establishment of professional standard and guidelines" - N15
#	Cultural Backgrounds	
Impact on Patient Outcomes	Patient Satisfaction	"Effective communication between patients and you the nurse... it helps them to be relieved." - N4
Perception towards Professionalism	Community Perceptions	"Perception is... let's take this for example we have traditional healthcare and we have maybe... my perception is going to be like whatever that maybe we do that is not you then I should also look to the other traditional because I believe in that one sense." - N15
	Professional Identity	
Strategies for Enhancing Professionalism	Continuous Education	"Workshops... you learn new things... it will add value will add satisfaction to the patient." - N2
	Policy Reform	"We should be having some community debar... to explain things and to cite them so that they can move from those attitudes or whatever is in their mind." - N4
	Community Engagement	

Analysis of Results

Many nurses adhere to established routines and practices due to a combination of traditional expectations, institutional policies and a lack of continuous professional development opportunities. Six major themes emerged from the study including: organisational factors affecting professionalism; barriers to improving professionalism; individual factors affecting professionalism; impact on patient outcome; perceptions towards professionalism and strategies for enhancing professionalism. These

factors influence the professionalism of nurses within healthcare settings and can create an environment that can either support or hinder nurses' professional development.

Organisational Factors Affecting Nurses' Professionalism

Communication channels

Two (2) nurses delineated that effective communication is foundational for maintaining professionalism in healthcare. As one nurse noted:

"Communication is very vital. And then role and responsibilities... should go in line so that it can also help the facility of the healthcare that we are in" - N7

This indicates the need to align staff roles and responsibilities with the healthcare facility's goals to maintain professionalism. Clear and reliable communication channels ensure that nurses are well-informed, which enhances their ability to perform their duties efficiently. This clarity minimizes misunderstandings and fosters collaboration among team members, ultimately improving patient care.

Role clarity

Three (3) nurses believed role clarity is a vital factor that affects nurses' professionalism. One nurse emphasized:

"Role clarity is important because if roles and responsibilities should go in line, it can also help the facility of the healthcare that we are in" - N9.

Organisations can reduce conflicts and enhance overall performance by defining staff roles clearly. When nurses have a clear understanding of their roles and how they integrate into the broader healthcare system, they are more likely to execute their responsibilities with confidence and integrity. This clarity prevents overlaps in duties, which can lead to confusion and errors in discharging their duties.

Leadership and policies

Two (2) nurses were of the view that the leadership and the policies implemented within healthcare organisations also play an important role in shaping nurses' professional behaviour. One nurse highlighted:

"Positive cultural and fair policies. It's also about ethical leadership equity and natural environment at the workplace" - N13

Such leadership practices promote respect and value among nurses, which is essential for maintaining professionalism. Ethical leadership that respects and upholds the dignity of all employees fosters a positive work environment conducive to professionalism. Policies that are fair and considerate of the diverse cultural backgrounds of staff contribute to an inclusive workplace.

Barriers to Improving Professionalism

Challenges such as inadequate resources, limited access to training, and workplace pressures often hinder nurses from enhancing their professional skills and delivering high-quality care. Another significant theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was the barrier to improving professionalism with subthemes; resistance to change, inadequate educational opportunities, and workplace stressors. These barriers, according to these nurses, can significantly hinder the development of a professional environment in healthcare settings.

Resistance to change

Four (4) nurses highlighted that nurses' resistance to change is a prevalent barrier to improving their professionalism in healthcare institutions. One nurse remarked:

"Resistance to change because change is very difficult..." - N1

This highlights the inherent challenges in fostering an adaptive culture within healthcare settings, where the status quo may be maintained at the expense of professional growth. Nurses often exhibit reluctance to adopt new policies, procedures, or technologies, particularly when such changes threaten their established routines or beliefs. This resistance can impede the implementation of practices designed to enhance professionalism and improve patient care.

Inadequate educational opportunities

Three (3) nurses indicated that continuous education is essential for enhancing professionalism in nursing. However, many nurses face inadequate access to educational opportunities, such as workshops, seminars, and advanced training programs. This lack of resources limits their ability to stay updated with the latest practices and standards, ultimately stunting their professional development. A nurse noted:

"Lack of educational workshops and training programs... these are barriers that prevent us from improving our professionalism" - N3.

The absence of regular educational initiatives is a significant obstacle to the professional growth of nurses, who require ongoing learning to adapt to new challenges and improve the quality of care they provide.

Workplace stressors

Three (3) nurses also declared that workplace stressors, including high patient loads, long working hours, and insufficient resources, can severely impact a nurse's ability to maintain professionalism. One nurse expressed:

"Because of rent issues, accommodation issues... when we meet like this it's like a loss. So, all these things are barriers that we are facing" - N11.

This statement underscores how external stressors, such as financial and housing challenges, distract nurses from their professional responsibilities, reducing their efficiency and potentially compromising patient care quality. Stress often leads to burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and a decline in the quality of care provided.

Individual Factors Affecting Professionalism

Nurses generally recognize the importance of professionalism in delivering quality care, but their attitudes can vary based on their experiences, education, and the level of support they receive from their healthcare institutions. Individual factors influencing nurses' professionalism was another major theme that was identified from nurses' feedback. Subthemes under this include: attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, skills and cultural backgrounds, which significantly impact nurses' professionalism. These personal attributes they believe, shape how nurses perceive their roles, interact with colleagues and patients, and adhere to professional standards.

Attitudes and beliefs

Four (4) nurses believe a nurse's attitude towards their work and their underlying beliefs about healthcare profoundly influence their professionalism. As one participant emphasized:

"Individual attitudes... we learn attitudes... it will be our individuality should be the policies of a facility or the institution" - N8

This highlights the importance of fostering positive attitudes through training and supportive policies to enhance professionalism. Positive attitudes, such as a commitment to patient care and ethical behaviour, are crucial for maintaining professionalism. Conversely, negative attitudes or outdated beliefs can hinder professional conduct and reduce the quality of care provided.

Knowledge and skills

Three (3) nurses opined that professionalism in nursing is closely tied to the level of knowledge and skills that a nurse possesses. A nurse identified:

"Formal education is number one and through the establishment of professional standards and guidelines"- N2.

This perspective suggests that ongoing education is key to maintaining and enhancing professionalism in nursing, indicating the need for continuous learning and adherence to professional standards. Continuous education and skill development are essential for staying current with medical advancements and providing high-quality care. Nurses who actively seek to improve their knowledge and skills demonstrate a higher level of professionalism.

Cultural backgrounds

Three (3) nurses identified that nurses' cultural backgrounds can influence their approach to care, interactions with patients, and adherence to professional standards. As one nurse observed:

"Cultural background plays a role in how we approach our duties and interact with patients"- N11.

Cultural sensitivity and awareness are crucial for delivering care that respects patients' diverse backgrounds and needs. Nurses who understand and appreciate cultural differences are better equipped to maintain professionalism in a multicultural healthcare environment. It is important to recognise and respect cultural diversity to enhance nurse professionalism and improve patient care.

Impact on Patient Outcome

There is a strong link between the professionalism of nurses and positive patient outcomes, as higher standards of care and ethical practices lead to better patient experiences and recovery rates. Professionalism in nursing has a profound impact on patient outcomes, influencing various aspects such as patient satisfaction and the quality of care delivered. This theme explores how professionalism directly contributes to improved patient satisfaction and healthcare services.

Patient satisfaction

Three (3) nurses observed that high levels of professionalism among nurses are closely linked to increased patient satisfaction. When nurses exhibit professionalism through empathy, effective communication, and clinical competence, patients are more likely to feel valued and cared for. This positive interaction fosters a sense of trust in the healthcare system, which is crucial for treatment adherence and overall health outcomes. As one nurse noted:

"Effective communication between patients and you the nurse... it helps them to be relieved" - N6

This statement emphasizes the role of effective communication in enhancing patient satisfaction; when patients feel heard and understood, their overall experience improves significantly. Moreover, two (2) nurses recognised effective communication as a cornerstone of professionalism that significantly affects patient outcomes. One nurse stated:

"Effective communication is very important. It can either make or break the relationship with the patient and, in turn, impact their care outcomes" - N4.

This highlights that effective communication not only enhances patient satisfaction but also plays a vital role in ensuring that care is delivered accurately, thereby improving patient outcomes. Clear, compassionate, and timely communication between nurses and patients can prevent misunderstandings, reduce anxiety, and ensure that patients fully comprehend their care plans.

Perception towards Professionalism

Perceptions and attitudes towards professionalism among nurses were another major theme identified to significantly influence their behaviour and interactions within the healthcare environment. This theme explores subthemes; the impact of community perceptions and the development of professional identity on nursing professionalism.

Community perceptions

Three (3) nurses believed that the local community's perception of nurses and their role in healthcare can greatly influence how nurses perceive their professionalism. Positive community perceptions can boost nurses' confidence and encourage them to uphold professional standards. Conversely, negative perceptions may lead to demotivation and a decline in professional behaviour. As one nurse pointed out:

"Community perception plays a big role in how we, as nurses, view our work and our professional identity. If the community respects and values us, we are more likely to maintain high standards" - N3.

This statement highlights that the way the community views nurses can either reinforce or undermine their professional identity. Nurses who feel respected and valued by the community are more likely to take pride in their work and strive to maintain professionalism.

Professional identity

Also, three (3) nurses declared that professional identity is a critical aspect of nursing that encompasses how nurses see themselves within the profession. A strong professional identity is linked to a commitment to ethical standards, continuous learning, and a sense of belonging to the nursing community. Developing a positive professional identity is essential for maintaining high levels of professionalism.

One nurse emphasized:

"Professional identity is not just about wearing the uniform; it's about the values we uphold and how we see our role in the healthcare system" - N1.

This statement underscores that professional identity goes beyond external appearances, such as wearing a uniform, and is deeply rooted in the values and ethics that nurses bring to their work. This internal sense of identity is crucial for sustaining professionalism in the long term.

Strategies for Enhancing Professionalism

To foster and sustain professionalism among nurses, the nurses involved in the study suggested implementing various effective strategies and interventions. However, predominant among these were the roles of continuous education, policy reform, and community engagement in enhancing professionalism within healthcare settings.

Continuous education

Continuous education is fundamental for enhancing professionalism in nursing. Ongoing training and professional development opportunities enable nurses to stay informed about the latest practices, technologies, and ethical standards. This commitment to learning not only refines their skills and knowledge but also leads to improved patient care and higher standards of professionalism. One nurse noted:

"Workshops... you learn new things... it will add value, will add satisfaction to the patient" - N2.

This highlights the importance of continuous education through workshops and training programs, which empower nurses to enhance their professional capabilities, ultimately benefiting patient care and job satisfaction.

Policy reforms

Reforming policies to support professional growth and ethical practices is essential for enhancing professionalism. Policies that promote fairness, equity, and transparency create a supportive work environment where nurses feel valued and motivated to maintain high professional standards. Additionally, policies should be adaptable to address the evolving needs of the healthcare workforce.

As one participant stated:

"Positive cultural and fair policies... it's also about ethical leadership equity and natural environment at the workplace" - N13

This emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive and ethical policies that foster a positive work atmosphere, encouraging nurses to uphold professionalism by providing clear guidelines and support.

Community engagement

Engaging with the community is another effective strategy for enhancing professionalism. Involving the community in healthcare initiatives and educating them about the role of nurses, can build trust and respect between nurses and the public. This engagement reinforces the professional identity of nurses and encourages adherence to high standards of practice. A nurse suggested:

"We should be having some community debates... to explain things and to cite them so that they can move from those attitudes or whatever is in their mind" - N4.

This indicates that community engagement through educational programs and discussions can help shift public attitudes and perceptions about nursing, enhancing the respect and trust that the community places in nurses, which in turn strengthens their commitment to professionalism.

Discussion

This study set out to investigate the factors influencing the maintenance of nurses' professionalism within healthcare settings and to identify effective strategies and interventions for enhancing nurses' professionalism. This discussion will focus on the key themes and their subthemes identified through thematic analysis, exploring how elements such as an organisation factor, individual factors, and perceptions of professionalism impact nursing practice. Additionally, the discussion will address the barriers that hinder the enhancement of professionalism and propose strategies for overcoming these challenges. By looking at how these factors work together, this section aims to give a full understanding of the difficulties around professionalism in nursing and provide suggestions for creating a culture of excellence in healthcare.

The findings on organisational influences identified communication channels, role clarity, leadership and organisational policies as important determinants of nurses' professional practice. Effective communication was described as foundational because it aligns staff roles and responsibilities with organisational goals. Evidence suggests that combining top-down leadership with bottom-up staff participation can strengthen communication, implementation and patient-safety initiatives [27]. Role clarity was also important; participants indicated that clearly defined responsibilities reduced conflict and supported confident practice. This is consistent with evidence that organisational and role-related factors shape nursing professionalism [9, 28]. Ethical leadership and fair policies were another central theme. Professional behaviours among nurse managers are influenced by leadership and workplace factors [29], and greater professionalism is associated with better professional quality of life [30]. Healthcare organisations should therefore strengthen communication systems, clarify role expectations and develop leadership competencies that support fairness, inclusion and professional growth.

Participants identified resistance to change, inadequate educational opportunities and workplace stressors as major barriers to improving professionalism. Resistance may occur when new policies, procedures or technologies are perceived as threats to established routines or professional identities [31]. Effective change management should therefore involve nurses in planning, explain the benefits of proposed changes and provide adequate support during implementation. Limited access to workshops, seminars and advanced training also restricts nurses' ability to remain current with evolving professional standards. Education, professional development and supportive organisational conditions are recognised influences on professionalisation [32]. Workplace stressors, including high patient loads, long working hours, financial pressures and insufficient resources, can further reduce job satisfaction and the capacity to maintain professional practice. Supportive practice environments are associated with better job satisfaction and lower stress and burnout [33]. Addressing these barriers requires structured change-management programmes, equitable access to professional development and improvements in workplace conditions.

Individual factors also shaped nurses' professionalism. Participants described attitudes and beliefs as important determinants of professional conduct and emphasised that individual values should align with institutional policies and ethical patient care. Positive professional attitudes and work engagement are associated with greater job satisfaction and better perceived quality of care [34]. Knowledge and skills

were also viewed as central to professionalism, reinforcing the need for formal education, continuing learning and adherence to professional standards. Cultural background influenced how nurses approached their duties and interacted with patients. Cultural sensitivity in nursing education and practice can help nurses work respectfully with people from diverse backgrounds [35]. Training programmes should therefore strengthen clinical competence while also addressing professional attitudes, ethical values and cultural sensitivity.

Participants linked nursing professionalism with patient satisfaction, particularly through empathy, communication and clinical competence. Patients are more likely to feel valued and trust the healthcare system when nurses communicate clearly, compassionately and promptly. Communication competence can strengthen patient-centred care by supporting the translation of compassion into effective care delivery [36]. In acute-care settings, such communication can reduce misunderstandings and anxiety, improve patients' understanding of care plans and support treatment adherence. Healthcare institutions should therefore prioritise professional-development programmes that strengthen communication skills and empathetic patient interactions.

Participants' accounts showed that community perceptions and professional identity influence how nurses understand their role and their commitment to professional standards. Respect and recognition may strengthen confidence and professional motivation, whereas negative perceptions may contribute to demotivation. Evidence linking nursing professionalism with professional quality of life further supports the importance of a strong professional identity [30]. Professional identity develops through the interaction of theoretical learning, clinical practice and workplace experience [37]. It is also reflected in professional-value domains such as self-concept, social awareness, professional responsibility and the role of nursing service [38]. Healthcare institutions and nursing organisations should promote accurate public understanding of nursing and strengthen professional identity through education, mentorship and professional development.

Participants proposed continuous education, policy reform and community engagement as key strategies for enhancing professionalism. Continuing professional education helps nurses remain current with clinical knowledge, technologies and ethical standards. Reviews indicate that continuing education can improve nurses' learning and clinical performance [39], while broader evidence suggests that continuing professional development can benefit professional performance and patient outcomes [40]. Policy reforms that promote fairness, equity and transparency may also create environments in which nurses feel valued and motivated to maintain professional standards. Professional values are associated with organisational commitment and ethical practice [41]. Community engagement may further strengthen trust in nursing and reinforce professional identity. Professional identity is influenced by the nurse, the nursing role, patient care, the workplace, the healthcare team and external perceptions of nursing [42]. Healthcare institutions should therefore integrate continuing education, ethical and adaptive policies, and community engagement into strategies for sustaining professionalism.

Strengths and Limitations of Research Design

The qualitative design enabled in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and allowed interviewers to follow up responses that required clarification or further detail. However, qualitative interpretation may be influenced by researchers' assumptions, and managing and comparing large volumes of narrative data can be challenging [43]. Although 15 participants were recruited, some planned sessions were cancelled because participants did not attend. Interviews proceeded with those who were available and willing to participate, and data collection continued until no substantively new themes were identified. The findings provide context-specific insights that may inform nursing education and practice in similar public and private healthcare settings; however, transferability to other settings should be assessed cautiously.

Conclusion

These findings highlight the many-sided nature of professionalism among nurses, influenced by organisational, individual, and community factors. Clear communication, role clarity, good leadership, and supportive policies are critical in creating a professional environment that improves nursing care quality. When these organisational factors align with ongoing education and clear communication strategies, they create a foundation that boosts nurses' performance, job satisfaction, and professional growth. However, barriers such as resistance to change, lack of educational opportunities, and workplace stress pose big challenges to developing professionalism. Addressing these barriers through comprehensive change management, more access to professional development, and better workplace conditions is essential for advancing professionalism in healthcare. On an individual level, nurses' attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and cultural understanding are key in shaping their professional conduct, requiring alignment with organisational values and ongoing improvement of clinical skills and cultural awareness. Community views and professional identity also play a vital role in reinforcing nurses' commitment to professionalism, with positive societal recognition boosting their confidence and motivation. Therefore, healthcare and nursing organisations must actively promote positive community views and build a strong professional identity. Ultimately, strategies such as ongoing education, policy reform, and community engagement are crucial for sustaining professionalism long-term, enabling healthcare organisations to create a supportive environment that enhances nurses' professional development and leads to better patient care.

Declarations

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Data Availability. Qualitative datasets generated and analysed during this study are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality, but they are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request and are subject to ethical review.

Ethics Approval and Consent. This study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki and all relevant institutional requirements. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Education, Winneba (SGS-EC-234-26). Institutional access was authorised by the administrators at Winneba Municipal Hospital. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before each interview. Participants were informed that audio recordings would be transcribed using a third-party automated platform and that all audio files would be deleted upon verification of the transcript.

Consent for Publication. Not applicable. No identifiable individual data appear in this manuscript.

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