



Navigating masculinity in nursing: Unpacking the 'critical care only' career aspirations of male undergraduate nursing students

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This qualitative study explores the motivations and perceptions underlying the demonstrable preference for critical care careers among a cohort of male undergraduate nursing students.

Background: Despite increasing numbers of men entering nursing, gendered expectations and stereotypes persist. Previous research has explored the experiences of male nurses in the workforce, highlighting the challenges they face in navigating a female-dominated profession. However, there remains a gap in understanding the origins of these gendered career aspirations during the formative undergraduate years.

Design: A phenomenological approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews.

Methods: Final-year male undergraduate nursing students were recruited from a metropolitan Australian university. Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret key themes related to their career aspirations.

Results: Four overarching themes emerged: 1) Beyond the Bedside: The Allure of 'Masculine' Nursing, 2) Mirrors and Mentors: The Influence of Male Role Models in Critical Care, 3) Media Mythmaking: The Heroism of Critical Care and 4) Fast Track to the Top: Ambition and the Glass Escalator.

Conclusion: This study underscores the complex interplay of societal expectations, role modeling, media influence and perceived opportunities for career advancement in shaping the preferences of male nursing students towards critical care. The findings highlight the necessity of transcending simplistic definitions of "masculine" and "feminine" roles. Furthermore, responsible representation in the media is crucial for minimizing disillusionment. By deepening our understanding of these multifaceted motivations, nursing education programs and healthcare institutions can more effectively support male students, promote diversity across all specialties and cultivate a more inclusive and equitable nursing workforce.

1. Introduction

The nursing profession, frequently depicted as a discipline predominantly influenced by women's accomplishments, has historically marginalized the noteworthy contributions of men since its inception (Mackintosh, 1997). The failure to acknowledge this male presence has left generations of male nurses disconnected from their professional heritage and historical place in the field. This erasure gained momentum in the mid-nineteenth century when Florence Nightingale, while revolutionizing nursing, solidified its image as a women's domain, perpetuating the notion that nursing was an instinctive extension of women's domestic roles rather than a skilled profession requiring formal education (Nightingale, 2010; Palmer, 1983). This perception, deeply rooted

in societal norms, not only marginalized male nurses but also contributed to the undervaluing of nursing as a whole, positioning it as subordinate to male-dominated fields like medicine (Teresa-Morales et al., 2022). Men who entered this "feminized" profession risked facing diminished respect and social status, challenging their perceived masculinity in a patriarchal culture (Ramjan et al., 2024)

Societal expectations and entrenched gender norms continue to paint nursing as incongruous with traditional notions of masculinity, making the path to nursing for men a challenging one fraught with stereotypes and biases (Azadi et al., 2017; Sasa, 2019). However, contemporary research indicates a gradual yet perceptible shift amidst these persistent barriers. A growing chorus of voices, including those of men themselves, are advocating for greater male representation in nursing, driving a

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campaign for increased recruitment and challenging outdated perceptions (Martsolf et al., 2023; Mohulatsi et al., 2024). While men still constitute a minority in the profession, representing approximately 12.01 % of nurses in Australia (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, 2024) and 13.2 % in the United States (US) (United States Department of Labor, 2024), studies indicate a steady increase in their numbers, suggesting a potential turning point in the gender landscape of nursing (Shim and Park, 2023; Woo et al., 2022).

Paradoxically, this underrepresentation has, in some instances, conferred a unique advantage on men in nursing. Research has highlighted a "glass escalator effect," whereby men experience faster career advancement and greater access to leadership roles in the profession (Brandford and Brandford-Stevenson, 2021; McMurry, 2011). This phenomenon, along with other factors, appears to influence the professional choices of male nurses, with a notable trend towards specialties perceived as more aligned with masculine ideals, such as critical care, where technical skills and decision-making are paramount (Romem and Rozani, 2024). The media's portrayal of critical care workers as heroic figures during the COVID-19 pandemic has further contributed to this trend, spotlighting these specialties' high-stakes, demanding nature (Mohammed et al., 2021).

This trend, however, raises concerns about potential segregation in the profession. The segregation in nursing, once rooted in the overt exclusion of men from "nurturing" roles, has evolved into a subtler yet equally impactful division. While the overt barriers may have crumbled, the echoes of historical segregation reverberate in the current landscape, where men are more likely to gravitate towards specialized, technical areas of practice (Romem and Rozani, 2024; Woo et al., 2022), leaving other essential areas of nursing—often associated with caregiving and emotional support—predominantly staffed by women (Bordelon et al., 2023). This self-selection into niche areas, while seemingly empowering for individual male nurses, could perpetuate an unspoken hierarchy in the profession, subtly devaluing the "feminine" aspects of nursing and potentially hindering efforts to achieve true gender parity.

The increasing number of male nursing students has not necessarily led to seamless integration into the profession across all specialties; evidence suggests existing gendered patterns within specialty choices are reinforced. While organizations actively champion the recruitment of men into nursing (Thompson et al., 2020), their emphasis on the technical and high-status aspects of the profession, often aligned with traditional masculine ideals, may inadvertently perpetuate segregation in the field (Cottingham, 2014). Furthermore, while numerous studies have explored the experiences and perspectives of registered male nurses (Lyu et al., 2022; Mao et al., 2021; Salvador and Mohammed Alanazi, 2024), there is a notable gap in research on the motivations and perceptions of male nursing students during their formative years in nursing school. This is a crucial oversight, as the seeds of specialty preferences and career aspirations are often sown during undergraduate education, potentially solidifying gendered patterns of practice on graduation.

2. Background

For this study, critical care nursing is defined as the specialized field of nursing that focuses on the care of patients with life-threatening illnesses or injuries. Critical care nurses work in a variety of settings, including intensive care units (ICUs), emergency departments (EDs), operating theater (OT) and specialized critical care units (e.g., cardiac, neurological, trauma) (Christensen and Liang, 2023; Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025). Their role involves continuous patient monitoring, advanced assessment skills, the use of sophisticated medical technology and rapid decision-making in high-pressure situations (Alshammari et al., 2023; Marsh, 2023; Younis, 2025). Understanding the specific appeal of this demanding field for male nurses is crucial for addressing gender imbalances in the nursing profession.

While men remain a minority in the nursing profession globally, a

consistent pattern emerges from the literature: a significant proportion of male nurses and nursing students express a preference for critical care and other technologically intensive or high-autonomy specialties. In the Australian context, Juliff et al. (2016) found that male nursing students were often drawn to "low-touch, technical specialty areas," particularly the emergency department, due to the inter-professional team environment. Stanley et al. (2016) reported that 21.8 % of male nurses in Western Australia worked in Critical Care and Emergency Care, a notably higher proportion than in many other specialties. This preference is further supported by recent research, which found nursing students hold the views that male nurses are well-suited to critical care nursing (Ramjan et al., 2024) and the Australian College of Nursing (2021), highlights this trend.

Similar patterns are observed in the United States. MacWilliams et al. (2013) noted that men in nursing often gravitate towards "high-tech, low-touch" areas and administration, potentially due to role stress, discrimination and stereotyping. Padgett (2025) recent work also confirmed a consistent preference for the ER or ICU among male nursing students. This trend extends beyond Western contexts. In Jordan, Saleh et al. (2020) found that male nurses preferred specialties like operating room (OR), post-anesthesia care unit (PACU) and ICU, partly due to cultural factors influencing perceptions of appropriate roles for men in healthcare. Similarly, a study in Uganda revealed a preference among male nurses for demanding tasks and roles in mental health and the emergency department, linked to beliefs about their technical skills and critical thinking abilities (Achora, 2016). In Asian contexts, male nurses are often seen as particularly well-suited for high-intensity environments like critical care and emergency rooms due to perceived physical advantages (Zhang and Tu, 2020).

More broadly, integrative reviews suggest a general preference among male nurses for technical areas, including critical care and emergency units (Teresa-Morales et al., 2022). Some studies also point to the potential for faster career progression in these specialties as a motivating factor for Iranian male nurses (Zamanzadeh et al., 2013). While critical care emerges as a prominent preference, the literature also indicates that mental health nursing attracts a significant proportion of male nurses (Ramjan et al., 2024; Stanley et al., 2016; Teresa-Morales et al., 2022; Zamanzadeh et al., 2013), sometimes attributed to perceptions of male nurses' physical strength or, in some cultures, to minimize close contact with female patients (Ramjan et al., 2024; Saleh et al., 2020).

It is important to acknowledge limitations in the existing research. Most importantly, few studies have focused explicitly on the lived experiences of male nursing students during their undergraduate education, a critical period when specialty preferences are formed. While the literature demonstrates a preference for critical care among male nurses, a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations shaping this preference during undergraduate education is needed.

3. Aim

Building on this established preference for critical care, this study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the factors that shape male nursing students' career aspirations. Specifically, this research seeks to understand the lived experiences of these students, shedding light on the complex interplay of gender identity, professional socialization, media influence and perceived career opportunities in a historically female-dominated profession. By understanding the motivations and perceptions underlying this preference, we can inform strategies to promote a more gender-balanced distribution of nurses across all specialties and foster a more inclusive and equitable nursing workforce. Therefore, the research question guiding this study is: What factors influence male undergraduate nursing students to express a preference for working in critical care settings?

4. Methods

4.1. Study design

This research employed a phenomenological approach to delve into the lived experiences and perspectives of male undergraduate nursing students regarding their career aspirations in the nursing profession. Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach is particularly well-suited to exploring the complex and subjective nature of career aspirations and gendered perceptions in the context of nursing education, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the participants' meanings and interpretations. The focus is on describing the 'what' and 'how' of the experience of choosing a nursing specialty, particularly the appeal of critical care, from the perspective of male students.

4.2. Recruitment of sample participants

This study was conducted in the nursing program at an urban Australian tertiary university. Data collection occurred through individual, in-depth interviews with participants by the first author (AG). Eligibility criteria included voluntary participation, male identification and enrollment in the nursing program's final year (3rd year, second semester). No specific specialty preference was required for participation. This cohort was strategically chosen due to their proximity to graduation and recent exposure to diverse clinical settings during placements, which likely informed their specialty preferences for their upcoming roles. All participants had already applied and interviewed for new graduate nursing positions, further indicating their commitment to the profession and the relevance of their career aspirations.

Recruitment involved a combination of convenience and purposive sampling techniques. Initially, flyers containing study information and a QR code for self-registration were distributed throughout the campus, enabling a degree of self-selection and aligning with convenience sampling principles. The flyer stated: "Male final-year nursing students are invited to participate in a research study exploring career aspirations in nursing. Share your experiences and perspectives!". Subsequently, purposive sampling and snowballing methods were employed by asking the participants who initially self-registered to actively seek out candidates with diverse backgrounds and experiences, ensuring maximum variability in the sample and aligning with the research goal of capturing a wide range of perspectives (Campbell et al., 2020; Rapley, 2014). Participants were encouraged to refer peers with varying specialty preferences.

4.3. Data collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, a well-established qualitative research method known for its ability to elicit rich, in-depth narratives about participants' thoughts, experiences, attitudes and beliefs (Richards and Morse, 2012). No relationship existed between the authors and participants prior to the interview. On providing informed consent, each of the 14 participants engaged in an individual interview lasting approximately 40–60 minutes. The interview protocol explored participants' specialty preferences in nursing, specifically focusing on their desired specialty of practice on graduation and their choices in applying for new graduate programs. The interview guide was designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences, motivations and perceptions related to their career choices, including any influences from role models, media portrayals, or personal experiences.

Researchers employed a multi-faceted approach to data collection to ensure data integrity and enhance the credibility of interpretations. In addition to audio-recording the interviews, researchers documented

their observations and reflections through memos and field notes. This triangulation of data sources facilitated a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives, feelings and experiences, strengthening the trustworthiness and validity of the study's findings (Ahmed, 2024). Face validity of the semi-structured interview guide was established through expert review by experienced nursing educators and researchers specializing in gender studies and qualitative methods. Content validity was ensured by grounding the interview questions in the existing literature on gender, nursing career choices and professional socialization. The sample interview question is presented in Table 1.

4.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted following a thematic analysis approach inspired by phenomenological principles, drawing on the framework outlined by Van Manen (2023) for interpreting lived experience. This methodology enabled the researchers to systematically identify, code and interpret patterns and underlying meanings in the interview transcripts, fostering a deep understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions (Neubauer et al., 2019; Van Manen, 2007).

Immediately after each interview, the first author (AG) transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. All research team members then subjected each transcribed interview to multiple readings to ensure a comprehensive grasp of the content and to establish a shared understanding. Initial coding was open and descriptive, focusing on capturing the essence of the participants' experiences related to their career aspirations and specialty preferences.

Rather than aiming for strict data saturation, which can be difficult to definitively determine in qualitative research (O'Reilly and Parker, 2013), the focus was on achieving code saturation and thematic

Table 1
Semi-structured interview questions.

Question No.	Interview Question
1	Can you describe your journey into nursing? What were your initial motivations for choosing this career path?
2	As you progress through your nursing education, how did your thoughts about different specialties evolve?
3	When did critical care become a potential area of interest for you, and what sparked that interest?
4	What is it about critical care nursing that particularly appeals to you? Can you describe specific aspects or experiences that have drawn you to this specialty?
5	How do you see the role of a critical care nurse? How does this role fit with your own sense of self and your understanding of being a nurse?
6	Have you encountered any challenges or stereotypes related to your gender while pursuing your nursing education? If so, can you share some of those experiences and how they may have shaped your thinking about your career?
7	How do you perceive the differences between critical care and other nursing specialties? What are the unique demands and rewards as you see them?
8	Have any individuals – perhaps lecturers, clinical instructors, practicing nurses, or even peers – influenced your interest in critical care? Can you describe those influences and how they've impacted your aspirations?
9	How have media portrayals of nurses, particularly those in critical care settings (for example, during the COVID–19 pandemic), affected your views of the profession and career goals?
10	Looking ahead, what are your long-term career aspirations within nursing? How do you see critical care fitting into your overall professional journey?
11	Do you feel any pressures – from yourself, others, or societal expectations – that have influenced your interest in critical care? Can you describe those pressures?
12	What does it mean to you to be a male nurse?
13	Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences as a male nursing student or your thoughts about your future career in nursing?

saturation (Rahimi and Khatooni, 2024). Code saturation was reached when no new codes emerged from the data, indicating that the full range of concepts relevant to the research question had been identified. Thematic saturation was reached when the identified themes were robust and well-supported by the data and no significantly new themes or dimensions of existing themes emerged from subsequent interviews. This iterative process involved constantly comparing new data with existing codes and themes. This occurred after interviewing 14 participants, which was deemed sufficient to provide rich and varied perspectives on the research question while acknowledging that additional participants might offer further individual nuances.

In a collaborative effort, the first and second authors extracted and analyzed data segments on male nursing students' perceptions of their preferred nursing specialties. All identified codes and units of meaning were interpreted and compared, highlighting both similarities and differences. Through ongoing dialogue and critical reflection involving all research team members, the abstraction and classification of meaningful themes and subthemes were iteratively refined. This process involved moving back and forth between the codes, the raw data (interview transcripts) and the emerging themes to ensure that the themes were grounded in the participants' lived experiences and accurately reflected their perspectives. (Table 2). Consensus on the final themes and their interpretations was reached through repeated iterative discussions and collaborative analysis among all research team members. This collaborative approach, grounded in phenomenological principles, fostered a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex factors influencing male nursing students' career aspirations.

4.5. Rigour and trustworthiness

This study's credibility was strengthened by using multiple data sources, including in-depth interviews, field notes and reflective memos.

Table 2
Example of the content analysis process.

Meaning Unit	Code	Category	Subtheme	Theme
"I've always been drawn to the adrenaline rush of critical care." - Mark	Adrenaline rush, Action-oriented	Masculine attributes	Excitement and Challenge	Beyond the Bedside: The Allure of 'Masculine' Nursing
"Critical care is different... It's more about technology, problem-solving, and being in control." - Luke	Technology, Problem-solving, Control	Technical skills, Masculine traits	Technical Prowess and Autonomy	Beyond the Bedside: The Allure of 'Masculine' Nursing
"Critical care has a lot more male presence, and I feel comfortable [...] I am also interested in being an ICU nurse [...]"- Amir	Male presence, Comfort, Belonging, Rational decision	Gendered environment, Sense of fit	Seeking Male Camaraderie	Beyond the Bedside: The Allure of 'Masculine' Nursing
"Most of our male lecturers at university come from a critical care background... [...]"- Ben	Male lecturers, Critical care background, Embedded aspiration	Role models, Early influence	Early Exposure and Influence	Mirrors and Mentors: The Influence of Male Role Models in Critical Care
"During my placement in the ICU, I was assigned to work with a male nurse who was just incredible [...]"- Jon	Male nurse role model, Inspiration, Career aspiration	Role models, Witnessing competence	Witnessing Male Competence	Mirrors and Mentors: The Influence of Male Role Models in Critical Care
"When I started nursing, I wasn't even aware of all the different specialties [...]"- James	Exposure to critical care, Fast-paced environment, Skill requirement	Clinical experience, Specialty appeal	Pivotal Clinical Experiences	Mirrors and Mentors: The Influence of Male Role Models in Critical Care
"The COVID-19 pandemic really put critical care nurses in the spotlight... It was incredibly moving [...]"- Ollie	Pandemic spotlight, Heroism, Impact	Media influence, Sense of purpose	Media's Heroic Portrayal	Media Mythmaking: The Heroism of Critical Care
"Whenever I tell my family or friends that I'm about to graduate from nursing school [...]"- David	Societal expectations, Shared dreams, Excitement	Media influence, Social validation	Social Reinforcement	Media Mythmaking: The Heroism of Critical Care
"Social media is full of male nurses working in critical care... He's like a real-life action hero [...]"- Chen	Social media influence, Action hero, Inspiration	Media influence, Glamorization	Online Inspiration and Validation	Media Mythmaking: The Heroism of Critical Care
"Critical care is where I want to be. I want to make my family proud. They will be very happy to know if I became an ICU nurse [...]"- Ali	Family pride, Satisfaction, Cultural expectations	External validation, Filial piety	Cultural and Familial Expectations	Media Mythmaking: The Heroism of Critical Care
"I'm not afraid to say that I want to be successful in my career... Critical care offers that opportunity [...]"- Jack	Ambition, Success, Recognition	Career advancement, Professional goals	Upward Mobility & Prestige	Fast Track to the Top: Ambition and the Glass Escalator
"I've heard from male nurses who've been in the field for a while that critical care is where you get noticed [...]"- Min	Reputation building, Decision-making, Impact	Career advancement, Leadership aspirations	Career Advancement Opportunities	Fast Track to the Top: Ambition and the Glass Escalator
"I think for some guys, critical care is almost like a proving ground [...]"- Seb	Proving ground, Skill demonstration, Self-respect	Masculine validation, Internal motivation	Validation of Masculine Identity	Fast Track to the Top: Ambition and the Glass Escalator

The researchers maintained a close and iterative engagement with the data, employing a meticulous word-by-word and line-by-line analysis in the thematic analysis framework guided by phenomenological principles. Furthermore, transcribed interview transcripts were returned to all participants for review and confirmation to ensure accuracy and participant validation. All 14 participants reviewed their transcripts and provided feedback, which was incorporated into the final analysis. The study's auditability was enhanced by providing a transparent account of the decision-making processes and rationale behind the researchers' interpretations. The researchers maintained a detailed journal to document their subjective judgments and the reasoning behind their analytical choices, creating a transparent and traceable audit trail. Finally, the study's transferability was ensured by comprehensively describing the study context, participants and findings. This level of detail allows readers to critically assess the applicability of the study's insights to their own healthcare practice and educational settings, fostering a deeper understanding of the factors influencing male nursing students' career aspirations.

4.6. Ethical considerations

This project received ethics approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) with approval number 44873. Verbal consent was secured before the research interviews, supplemented by distributing the Plain Language Statement Form and a written consent form obtained before the interview.

5. Results

5.1. Participants characteristics

A total of 14 male participants, comprising both domestic and

international students on student visas, were purposefully recruited for this study. While not a formal eligibility criterion, all participants expressed a preference for working in critical care settings on graduation. The age range of participants spanned from 23 to 34 years, reflecting a diverse mix of individuals at different stages of their lives and careers. Most (n = 10) were recent high school graduates, while four held prior degrees or vocational qualifications. Notably, most participants had previous or current employment in healthcare-related roles, suggesting a pre-existing interest in the field. The diversity in age, educational background and work experience ensured a rich variety of perspectives in the context of a shared interest in critical care. The participants' sociodemographic characteristics are listed in Table 3.

5.2. Findings

The analysis of the interview data revealed four overarching themes that illuminate the lived experiences and perspectives of male nursing students who expressed a preference for critical care: 1) Beyond the Bedside: The Allure of 'Masculine' Nursing, 2) Mirrors and Mentors: The Influence of Male Role Models in Critical Care, 3) Media Mythmaking: The Heroism of Critical Care and 4) Fast Track to the Top: Ambition and the Glass Escalator.

5.2.1. Beyond the Bedside: The Allure of 'Masculine' Nursing

For many participants, critical care represented a space where they felt their professional identity, often intertwined with perceptions of masculinity, could be affirmed and valued. The participants frequently described critical care as an environment that aligned with traits traditionally associated with masculinity, such as action, rapid decision-making and technical skills. This is not to say that they rejected the caring aspects of nursing but rather that the specific context of critical care allowed them to integrate these aspects with a sense of masculine identity. This perception often contrasted with their views of other nursing specialties, which were sometimes perceived as less aligned with these traditionally masculine traits:

"I've always been drawn to the adrenaline rush of critical care. It's where the action is, where you're constantly making split-second decisions that can save lives. It feels like a place where I can really make a difference, using my skills and knowledge to the fullest." - Mark, domestic student

"I'm not sure I see myself in a traditional nursing role, I transitioned from being in a manufacturing job. Critical care is different; I was instantly drawn into this specialty. I understand the core is still "care-giving," but it has other aspects associated with it [...] technology, problem-solving and clinical skills that you only get in these settings [...] I want to learn these skills and I can see myself doing this." - Luke, domestic student

"I think a lot of guys are drawn to critical care because it's seen as more 'masculine.' In my country, nursing is regarded as a female

occupation and it is almost unheard of for any guy studying to be a nurse. Within nursing, I found critical care has a lot more male presence and I feel comfortable [...] I am also interested in being an ICU nurse. This is a rationale decision that I have made which balances being a 'nurse' but working in an environment that here I feel belong" - Amir, an international student

5.2.2. Mirrors and Mentors: The Influence of Male Role Models in Critical Care

The presence and influence of male role models emerged as a powerful factor shaping the participants' aspirations. These role models, encountered in various contexts, provided tangible examples of successful men in critical care, validating the participants' own interest in the specialty. These encounters, whether formal (lecturers, clinical instructors) or informal (preceptors, senior students), often provided the initial exposure to critical care and sparked a lasting interest. The role models not only demonstrated competence and skill but also embodied a way of being a male nurse that resonated with the participants:

"Most of our male lecturers at university come from a critical care background and they're always talking about how rewarding it is to be a critical care nurse and how they would not have chosen any other nursing field. From the very beginning of my nursing journey, it was embedded in my mind that this was the path I wanted to take too." - Ben, domestic student

"During my placement in the ICU, I was assigned to work with a male nurse who was just incredible. He was so calm and collected, even in the most stressful situations. I remember one night, we had a patient who was crashing and he just took charge, making quick decisions and coordinating the whole team. It was inspiring to see that [...] and it definitely made me think, 'That's what I want to do.'" - Jon, domestic student

"When I started nursing, I wasn't even aware of all the different specialties. But in my first year, I was paired with a final-year student who was really passionate about critical care. He took me under his wing during clinicals and that's when my whole perception of nursing changed. After experiencing the fast-paced environment and the level of skill required in the ED, I knew that's where I wanted to be and that's where I've applied for my graduate position." - James, domestic student

5.2.3. Media Mythmaking: The Heroism of Critical Care

Media representations of critical care, particularly during times of crisis, played a significant role in shaping the participants' perceptions of the specialty. These portrayals often emphasized the dramatic, life-saving aspects of critical care, contributing to a sense of heroism and importance associated with the role. This theme highlights the power of external narratives in shaping professional aspirations. The participants often internalized these media messages, connecting them to their own desire to make a meaningful impact. The media's focus on critical care also created a sense of familiarity and, for some, a pre-existing

Table 3
Participants socio-demographic characteristics.

Pseudonym	Age	Prior Degree	Current Employment	Previous Employment	Enrollment Status	Expressed Preference for Critical Care
Amir	23	High School Graduate	Aged Care Assistant	None	International student	Yes
David	24	High School Graduate	Hospital Assistant	Aged Care Assistant	Domestic student	Yes
Jon	25	High School Graduate	Retail Assistant	Retail Assistant	Domestic student	Yes
Mark	26	High School Graduate	Hospital Assistant	Disability Worker	Domestic student	Yes
Mason	27	High School Graduate	Aged Care Assistant	Retail	Domestic student	Yes
Chen	23	High School Graduate	Hospital Assistant	None	International student	Yes
Ali	24	High School Graduate	Hospital Assistant	None	International student	Yes
Min	25	High School Graduate	Aged Care Assistant	None	International student	Yes
Ollie	26	High School Graduate	Hospital Assistant	Retail Assistant	Domestic student	Yes
James	23	High School Graduate	Hospital Assistant	None	Domestic student	Yes
Seb	30	Bachelor's Degree	Non-Healthcare	Non-Healthcare	Domestic student	Yes
Jack	31	Bachelor's Degree	Disability Worker	Disability Worker	Domestic student	Yes
Luke	34	Vocational Study	Hospital Assistant	Manufacturing	Domestic student	Yes
Ben	27	Bachelor's Degree	Aged Care Assistant	Hospitality	Domestic student	Yes

expectation that this was the natural path for male nurses:

"The COVID-19 pandemic really put critical care nurses in the spotlight. Seeing them on the news, working tirelessly to save lives, it was like watching superheroes in action. I remember one story about a male nurse who stayed with a dying patient all night, holding their hand and offering comfort. It was incredibly moving and it made me realize the impact I could have in critical care." - Ollie, domestic student

"Whenever I tell my family or friends that I'm about to graduate from nursing school, the first question they ask is, 'So, are you going to work in ED or ICU?' It's like there's this automatic assumption that I'm heading straight for critical care. Even my close friends from university we've been talking about working in the ICU or ED since our first year. It's almost like a shared dream that's about to become reality. I'm definitely excited about it." - David, domestic student

"Social media is full of male nurses working in critical care, sharing their experiences and showcasing their skills. I follow a few of them and it's so inspiring to see them in action. There's this one guy who does daily vlogs in the ED and he's always dealing with some crazy situation – trauma cases, cardiac arrests, you name it. He's like a real-life action hero and it makes me want to be part of that world." - Chen, international student

"Being on the frontline, that's where nurses are needed most. We've seen it time and time again in the news. I also watch a lot of medical reality shows like 'Kings Cross ER' and '24 hours in A&E.' The work that those ED nurses do is just incredible. I want to be one of them, to be part of that team and make a real difference in people's lives." - Mason, domestic student

Critical care is where I want to be. I want to make my family proud. They will be very happy to know if I became an ICU nurse. All this hard work and money that we have invested into getting this degree [...] I want to make sure the career path gives me satisfaction and makes my parents proud of me- Ali, an international student

5.2.4. *Fast Track to the Top: Ambition and the Glass Escalator*

The perception of critical care as a pathway to accelerated career progression and leadership roles was a recurring theme. This aligns with the concept of the "glass escalator," where men in female-dominated professions experience disproportionate advancement. Participants viewed critical care as a domain where they could quickly gain recognition, develop specialized skills and build a professional reputation that would open doors to future opportunities. This ambition was often intertwined with a desire to demonstrate competence and challenge any preconceived notions about male nurses.

"I'm not afraid to say that I want to be successful in my career. I want to be recognized for my expertise and have the opportunity to make a real impact. This specialty seems like the place to do that. It's where you can really build a reputation and open doors to leadership roles." - Jack, domestic student

"I've heard from male nurses who've been in the field for a while that critical care is where you get noticed. It's where you can build a reputation and make connections that can lead to bigger and better things. I want to be in a position where I can make decisions and have a real impact on patient care and gaining experience as a critical care nurse seems like the best way to get there." - Min, an international student

"I think for some guys, critical care is almost like a proving ground. It's a way to demonstrate that they're not just 'nurses' but highly skilled professionals who can handle the toughest situations. It's like, 'I'm not just caring, I'm saving lives.' It's a way to earn respect, not just from others, but also from themselves." - Seb, domestic student

6. Discussion

As established in the preceding literature review, substantial evidence indicates a significant preference for critical care specialties among male nurses and nursing students across diverse geographical and cultural contexts. This study's findings offer valuable insights into

the multifaceted motivations and perceptions that underpin this documented preference, further contributing to our understanding of gender and career choice in the nursing profession.

It is evident that while the factors drawing men into nursing are multifaceted, their presence represents a positive step towards diversifying a historically female-dominated profession. In countries like Australia and the US, where only 12.01 % and 13.2 % of nurses identify as male, the need for greater gender balance is undeniable (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, 2024; United States Department of Labor, 2024). With an impending nursing shortage looming, the influx of male nurses not only bolsters the workforce but also enhances the capacity for culturally competent and patient-centered care (Bordelon et al., 2023). The accounts of these final-year nursing students, all of whom expressed a preference for critical care, reveal a profound passion for the profession, a pride in their chosen path and an eagerness to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others. Yet, these narratives also underscore a persistent undercurrent of potential segregation in the field, with a notable tendency for men to gravitate towards perceived "male-oriented" specialties. While this phenomenon may reflect individual preferences and career aspirations, it raises crucial questions about the implications of such gendered patterns for the future of nursing. What are the potential consequences of this trend and how can we foster a more equitable and inclusive professional landscape where all nurses, regardless of gender, feel empowered to pursue their chosen path?

The allure of critical care for male nursing students is deeply intertwined with societal perceptions of masculinity, often perpetuating a gendered lens through which nursing roles are viewed. The fast-paced, high-tech environment of critical care, emphasizing technical and advanced nursing skills and quick decision-making, resonates with conventional notions of masculinity (Shen et al., 2022). This setting offers male students a space where their skills and contributions are recognized and respected (Yip et al., 2021). In contrast, traditional bedside nursing, with a focus on emotional labor and intimate caregiving, is often perceived as less aligned with these ideals, leading to a subtle devaluation of these essential aspects of nursing care (Gray and Smith, 2009). This phenomenon is rooted in a complex interplay of historical and societal factors that have shaped the evolution of nursing as a predominantly female profession (Prosen, 2022). The historical exclusion of men from nursing, coupled with the enduring influence of hegemonic masculinity, has created a cultural narrative that associates caregiving with femininity. This discourages men from embracing roles that involve emotional support (Mohulatsi et al., 2024). While patients generally view male nurses positively, subtle biases regarding their ability to provide emotional support persist, further reinforcing the perception that men are better suited for technical, "masculine" specialties (Martínez-Morato et al., 2021). This phenomenon creates a self-perpetuating cycle where male nursing students tend to gravitate towards critical care due to societal expectations and the desire for validation in a predominantly female-dominated field. Additionally, the delicate balance between societal expectations, personal ambition, family prestige and the significant investment in their education also plays a crucial role. According to Nemeček (2024), international students are more likely to prioritize career outcomes when deciding their career path, perceiving their education as a substantial investment that should result in tangible career advantages.

While the presence of male role models in critical care can inspire and empower male nursing students, offering a sense of belonging and validation, it also risks inadvertently reinforcing the idea that critical care is the most appropriate or desirable path for men in the profession. The emphasis on technical skills and the fast-paced environment highlighted by these mentors can steer male students toward critical care, often overshadowing the holistic nature of the specialty. The reality for many critical care nurses involves not only mastering life-saving procedures but also forging deep emotional connections with patients and their families (Mohammadi et al., 2024; Price, 2013). As Pal (2023)

described, "providing ultimate care, one-on-one," encompasses far more than technical proficiency; it involves empathy, advocacy and the ability to navigate the complex emotional landscape of critical illness. This disconnect between the perceived and actual nature of critical care nursing suggests a gap in the knowledge and guidance (Červený et al., 2024).

Moreover, the media's role in shaping perceptions of nursing is significant. The portrayal of critical care nurses as heroes, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, while well-intentioned, created unintended consequences for the profession's gender dynamics (Mohammed et al., 2021; Stokes-Parish et al., 2023). The image of the stoic, technically proficient nurse battling on the frontlines enhances the appeal of critical care for male students seeking validation and a sense of purpose. This was starkly evident during the "Clap for Carers" campaign, which celebrated critical care workers as 'front-line heroes' during a pandemic, further cementing their heroic image in the public consciousness (Manthorpe et al., 2022). However, this media mythmaking perpetuates an idealized and potentially unrealistic vision of nursing (Teresa-Morales et al., 2022). The emphasis on high-stakes drama and technical prowess risks overshadowing the quiet, everyday acts of care that are equally essential to the profession. This dissonance can lead to disillusionment among new graduate nurses who find the reality of their work at odds with their expectations, significantly contributing to the high attrition rates among young nurses (Akada et al., 2022; Pyhäjärvi and Söderberg, 2024).

To counteract this illusion, both educational institutions and media organizations must take responsibility for presenting a more balanced and authentic portrayal of nursing. This involves showcasing the diverse roles and responsibilities of nurses across all specialties, highlighting the core values of compassion and empathy that underpin the profession and acknowledging the challenges and complexities of nursing practice. Captivating reality shows like "24 Hours in A&E" and "King's Cross ER" can isolate the 'critical care' aspect of nursing, perpetuating the notion that it is the only meaningful or heroic path (Ramaswamy, 2018; Rigden, 2015). Similarly, recruitment campaigns that rely on slogans like "On the frontline battling against pandemic" (WHO, 2020) further fuel the idealization of critical care careers among nursing aspirants. This idealized image of nursing, fueled by media portrayals and social media influencers, can foster a sense of "otherness" for male nurses who may not see themselves reflected in these narratives. As Cooper (1996) suggests, the dominant culture's emphasis on certain aspects of nursing can create a feeling of "queerness" for those who do not conform to the expected mold. This may explain the findings of Blanc (2017), where male nursing graduates were hesitant to disclose their profession and often felt compelled to emphasize their specialization in areas perceived as more "masculine." By aligning themselves with critical care or other technical specialties, they could reclaim a sense of masculine identity in a profession still grappling with gender stereotypes.

The narratives of these male nursing students illuminate a fascinating paradox. While their desire to enter nursing signifies a positive shift towards greater gender diversity in the profession, their overwhelming preference for critical care specialties reveals the enduring influence of societal expectations and gender norms. Interestingly, financial incentives, often cited as a primary motivator in previous research (Aninanya et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2020; Millar et al., 2017), were notably absent in our study. Instead, these students were driven by aspirations for recognition, skill development, sense of purpose and belonging, seeking a space in nursing that aligns with their perceived identities and professional goals. Understanding these motivations has significant implications for nursing education, recruitment and workforce planning. By addressing the factors that contribute to this preference, the profession can work towards a more equitable distribution of talent across all specialties, ensuring that all areas of nursing benefit from the diverse skills and perspectives that both men and women bring. To envision a nursing profession where gender no longer dictates specialty choices requires a paradigm shift from both societal perceptions

and institutional practices. Establishing an inclusive and equitable professional environment is imperative for leveraging the diverse nursing workforce to meet healthcare demands.

7. Limitations and future research

This study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing male nursing students' preference for critical care specialties, but it is not without limitations. While adequate for qualitative analysis, the sample size may not fully represent all male nursing students' diverse experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, the study's focus on final-year students limits our understanding of how these preferences evolve over time.

Future research should explore the experiences of male nursing students at earlier stages of their education and those who choose to work in non-critical care settings. Longitudinal studies could track the career trajectories of male nurses, examining the factors contributing to their specialty choices and professional satisfaction. Comparative studies examining the motivations and experiences of male, female and gender-diverse nursing students across various specialties could further illuminate the complex interplay of gender, professional identity and career aspirations in the nursing profession. Moreover, further research should delve deeper into the role of educational institutions and media in shaping perceptions of nursing and influencing career choices. Specifically, examining how educational institutions present different specialties and the impact of media portrayals on students' aspirations. Additionally, it is essential to explore the potential implications of the "critical care only" phenomenon for the nursing profession as a whole. This includes examining its impact on the distribution of nursing talent, patient care outcomes and the overall culture of the profession. By addressing these research gaps, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex factors shaping the career choices of nursing students and develop strategies to foster a more inclusive and equitable nursing landscape.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

This study illuminates the factors influencing male nursing students' preference for critical care specialties. It underscores the enduring impact of societal perceptions of masculinity, the role of male nurses and educators and the influence of media portrayals in shaping career aspirations. While the "critical care only" mindset among male students reflects a desire for professional recognition and opportunities for skill development, it also perpetuates subtle segregation in nursing, potentially hindering true gender parity.

Based on these findings, we offer three key recommendations to foster a more inclusive and equitable nursing landscape:

- 1. Reframing Nursing Narratives:** Nursing programs and healthcare institutions should actively challenge gender stereotypes by showcasing nurses' diverse roles and responsibilities across all specialties. This includes highlighting the technical expertise and leadership opportunities available in non-critical care areas and the essential "caring" aspect inherent in all nursing practice.
- 2. Cultivating Diverse Role Models:** Providing male nursing students exposure to a broad range of successful male and female nurses in various specialties can expand their understanding of the profession and challenge preconceived notions about gendered career paths. Mentorship programs and opportunities for shadowing experienced nurses in different settings in the formative years of their undergraduate degree can be particularly valuable in this regard.
- 3. Promoting Media Literacy:** Empowering students to critically analyze media portrayals of nursing can facilitate more informed and self-directed career decisions. By cultivating a discerning eye towards the often glamorized or skewed representations of nursing in popular culture, students can develop a more nuanced understanding

of the profession's complexities, challenges and diverse specialties. This media literacy approach empowers students to transcend gendered stereotypes, enabling them to make career choices based on genuine interest and aptitude rather than succumbing to the allure of sensationalized narratives. Ultimately, promoting media literacy in nursing education is a crucial step towards a more gender-inclusive and diverse profession, where all specialties are recognized for their inherent value and all nurses, regardless of gender preference, feel empowered to pursue their chosen path.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ghimire Animesh: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Qiu Yunjing:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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None

Data availability

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author. However, due to privacy or ethical restrictions, the data is not publicly available.

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