



Factors Associated with Nurses' Professional Autonomy: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Background and purpose: Autonomy is considered an essential component of professional status. Nurses need professional agencies to create and maintain patient safety, improve the quality of patient care, reduce mortality, increase job satisfaction, and maintain jobs. The aim of this study is to provide an overview of the factors associated with nurses' professional independence.

Materials and method: This study is a narrative review conducted based on PRISMA guidelines. The Latin keywords used in this study were professional autonomy, nurses, clinical decision making, nursing staff, hospital. The search was conducted in all valid and available English databases including CINAHL, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed and Persian databases including Irandoc, Magiran and SID from 2010 to 2024.

Results: When searching databases and information sources, 901 articles were found. Finally, 18 descriptive quantitative articles that were most relevant to the objectives of the present study were selected and analyzed. According to the results of the studies, the most important factors related to the professional independence of nurses were divided into six groups: individual factors (age, education), organizational factors (management support), collaborative factors (teamwork), professional development factors (further training), psychosocial factors (job satisfaction), and external factors (health system structure).

Conclusion: According to the findings of this study, nursing managers can eliminate the barriers to professional independence of nurses by considering the factors associated with professional independence.

Keywords: professional autonomy, nurses, clinical decision-making, nursing staff.

Introduction



Independence is a complex and multi-layered concept in the areas of medicine and nursing(1). It is a fundamental element in achieving professional status and professional recognition(2, 3). In nursing, professional independence refers to the ability to make informed decisions based on one's own specialist knowledge and judgment and to act independently in patient care(4). Research shows that nurses with greater autonomy report higher job satisfaction and are more likely to remain employed in healthcare than their less autonomous colleagues(5). Conversely, low levels of autonomy are associated with negative outcomes such as burnout, depression, excessive workload, absenteeism, and moral distress(6). Improving professional independence can directly impact the quality of work life of nurses, reducing turnover rates and increasing job satisfaction, ultimately leading to improved quality of care(3). Achieving independence has always been one of the greatest challenges in nursing professionalism(7). Given the rapid changes in healthcare systems and the changing needs of patients, the study of factors related to the professional independence of nurses has gained considerable importance(8). Research has identified several key factors related to nurse autonomy, including education and training, management support, regulatory frameworks, and professional role development(9). A study by Papathanassiou et al. emphasized the development of nursing roles as a key strategy for improving professional independence(10). Another study examined the relationship between educational level and professional autonomy and showed that nurses with higher education typically demonstrate greater independence and commitment to their profession(11). Despite several studies examining factors related to career independence, there remains a lack of comprehensive reviews summarizing these findings to improve understanding of relevant factors. Given the critical role of nurses in healthcare systems, accurately identifying factors associated with their professional autonomy can significantly contribute to improving the quality of healthcare. Furthermore, by examining recent developments in health systems and societal changes, this study aims to identify new patterns that may have been overlooked in previous research.

The results of this study will not only contribute to understanding the challenges and opportunities in nursing practice, but also provide valuable insights for health system managers and policy makers in developing effective programs that promote greater professional independence among nurses. Therefore, the aim of this review is to consolidate the existing literature to identify factors associated with nurses' professional independence.

Method

The present study is a narrative review conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines and aims to examine the factors associated with nurses' professional independence(12). Persian databases used keywords in reputable sources,



including Irandoc, Magiran and SID. Similar keywords for English-language searches—particularly “professional autonomy,” “nurses,” “clinical decision-making,” “nursing staff,” “hospital,” and “nurses” were used in established databases such as CINAHL, Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to effectively combine these keywords to ensure a thorough examination of the literature. Finally, to ensure a thorough search for relevant literature, a Google Scholar search was also conducted to identify additional related articles. In addition, the reference lists of the included articles were checked to identify additional relevant studies.

This review included observational studies published in Persian or English that examined factors related to nurses' professional independence during the specified period. Only studies that provided empirical data on these factors were included. Articles were excluded if they were not accessible in full text, focused on other healthcare professionals or nursing students, or did not specifically address factors affecting nurses' professional independence. This approach ensured that the review was based on relevant, high-quality literature that directly contributes to understanding the dynamics of professional autonomy in nursing. A quality assessment of the included studies was performed using a standardized tool to assess methodological rigor and relevance. This review helped to ensure that only high-quality studies contributed to the findings of this review.

The review process began with the identification of 901 potentially relevant studies. After removing duplicates, 383 studies remained. In the second phase, titles and abstracts were reviewed, resulting in the exclusion of 312 studies that were not consistent with the objectives or inclusion criteria of this review. Additional studies were identified through reference reviews of retained articles. Ultimately, 71 studies progressed to the third phase, where they were assessed independently by two members of the research team to minimize potential bias. This full-text analysis led to the exclusion of an additional 53 studies. A total of 18 articles were selected that were directly related to the objectives of this study. These articles underwent an independent quality assessment by two members of the research team who confirmed their relevance to the analysis. If there were disagreements between researchers, discussions would have taken place with third parties; However, the complete agreement between the two researchers made this unnecessary. The search results and article selection process are shown in Figure 1. To extract essential data relevant to the research question, a summary of each study was prepared, including: study objectives, design methodology, participant details, data collection methods and study results (Table 1).

Identification of studies via databases and registers

Records identified from:
(n= 906)

Records removed *before screening*:
Duplicate records removed (n = 518)

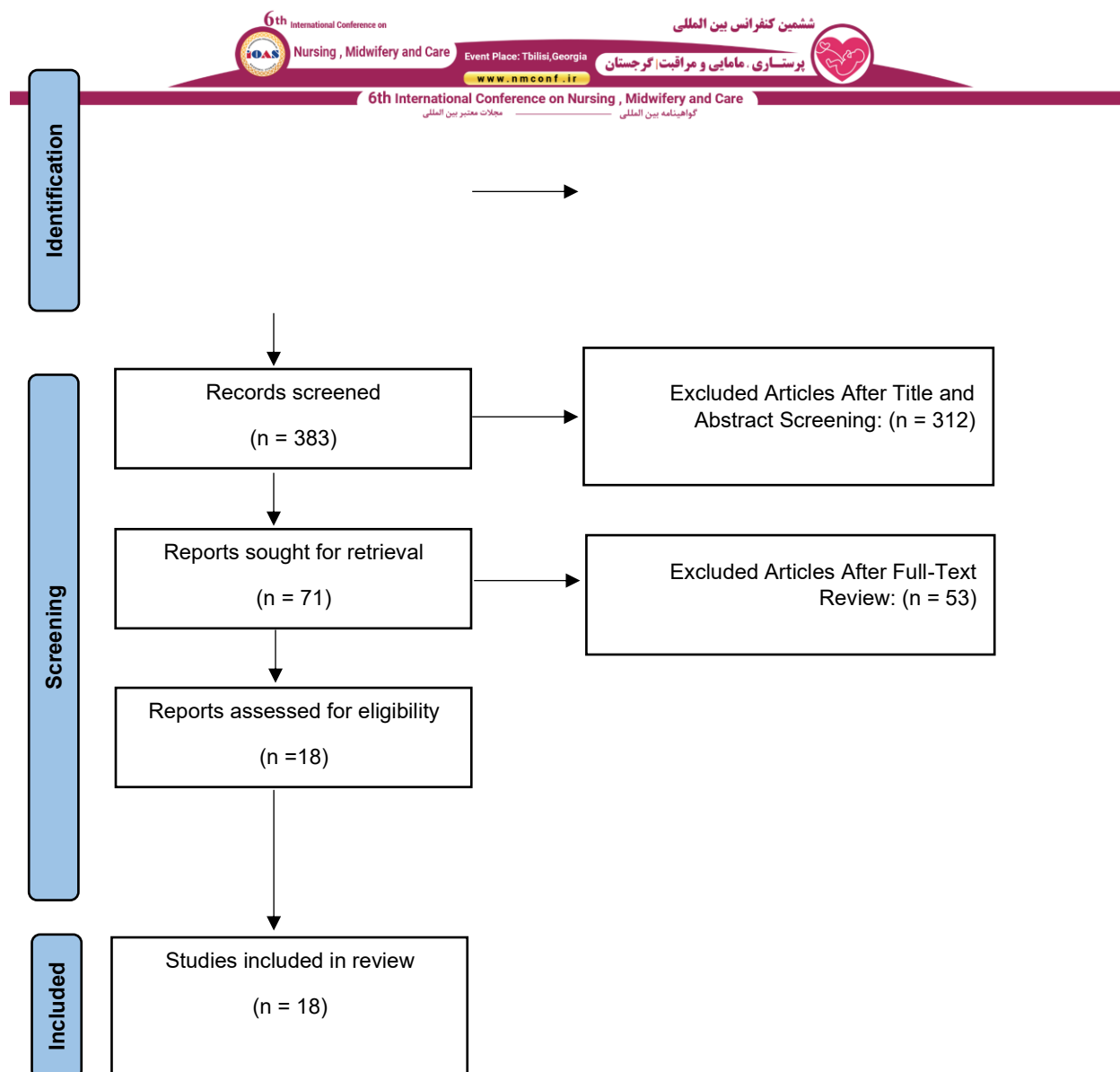


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram for Study Screening Process

Result

This review article presents an analysis of studies conducted between 2010 and 2024. Ultimately, 18 studies were included in this review, which included descriptive quantitative research on diverse groups of nurses in hospitals and health centers(9, 13, 14). Most of these studies were conducted in countries such as Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Finland, South Korea and several European countries(15-20). The sample sizes examined in these studies varied, typically ranging from 100 to 1,000 nurses from intensive care units, emergency departments, oncology, and pediatrics. Furthermore, in these studies, the age range of caregivers was generally set at 25 to 55 years.



The studies identified several key factors associated with nurses' professional autonomy. To better understand these influences, the factors can be divided into six different groups: individual factors (e.g. age and education), organizational factors (e.g. management support and policies), collaborative factors (e.g. teamwork and interprofessional relationships), professional development factors (e.g. continuing education), psychosocial factors (e.g. job satisfaction and emotional well-being) and external factors (e.g. health system structure). This classification allows for a comprehensive examination of how these various elements work together to shape the autonomy that nurses experience in their practice.

1. Individual factors:

Age and experience: Older nurses or those with more experience may have a higher level of professional autonomy(15, 21).

Level of Education: Higher levels of education can improve nurses' decision-making skills and confidence.

Self-efficacy: Nurses' beliefs in their abilities can influence their professional autonomy(22, 23).

2. Organizational Factors:

Support from Nursing Staff: Support from nursing managers and leaders can create an environment conducive to professional autonomy(24, 25).

Work environment: A positive work culture and a supportive organizational structure can increase the independence of nurses(20).

Policies and Regulations: Clear and supportive guidelines for nursing practice can empower nurses(26).

3. Collaborative Factors

Interprofessional Collaboration: Effective communication and collaboration with physicians and other healthcare professionals can increase the autonomy of nursing staff(19).

Teamwork: A collaborative team environment can help nurses make independent decisions(24).

4. Professional development factors:

Continuing education: Opportunities for ongoing training and education can improve nurses' skills and confidence in their role(27).

Role clarity: Clearly defined roles and responsibilities can help nurses understand their scope of practice(28).

5. Psychosocial factors

Job satisfaction: Higher job satisfaction is often associated with greater job autonomy.

Emotional well-being: Factors such as burnout, stress, and ethical pressures can negatively impact a nurse's sense of autonomy(29).

6. External factors

Health system structure: The overall structure of the health system, including bureaucratic constraints, can impact the autonomy of nursing staff(30).

Cultural attitudes: Societal perceptions of nursing roles can influence the level of independence nurses experience in practice(31).

These categories include a range of factors that may influence nurses' professional independence. Understanding these factors is critical to developing strategies to improve autonomy in nursing practice, ultimately leading to better job satisfaction, retention, and patient care outcomes.

Table1: Characteristics of Eligible Studies in the Review of Factors associated with nurses' Professional autonomy

No.	Authors	Year	Study Design	Sample Size	Key Findings
1	Aysan Judi et al.	2023	Descriptive Correlational	385	Identified moderate levels of professional autonomy and organizational commitment among ICU nurses. A significant positive relationship was found between job autonomy and organizational commitment.
2	Moluk Pouralizadeh et al.	2017	Descriptive Correlational	180	Most nurses experienced moderate moral distress. A significant positive correlation was observed between job autonomy and moral distress scores.
3	Arash Ghodousi et al.	2017	Descriptive Comparative	120	Results indicated a significant positive relationship between professional autonomy and moral distress among pediatric nurses.
4	Katja Pursio et al.	2024	Descriptive Cross-sectional	586	The study found that nursing involvement, expertise sharing, organizational quality standards, nursing management and leadership, collegial relationships and job satisfaction are all associated with the professional autonomy of hospital nurses in Finland.
5	Elizabeth D.E. et al.	2020	Descriptive Correlational	255	The study found a significant positive association between professional autonomy and nurse-physician collaboration, while a significant



negative association was observed between professional autonomy and moral distress among intensive care unit nurses in European countries.

6	Younhee Kang et al.	2024	Descriptive Correlational	147	The study found that communication skills and professional autonomy have a significant positive association with clinical reasoning skills of oncology nurses in Korea.
7	Jamileh Mohtashami et al.	2018	Descriptive Correlational	196	The study showed that professional autonomy significantly influences the implementation of evidence-based nursing practices among hospital nurses in Iran.
8	Kourosh Amini et al.	2019	Descriptive Correlational	371	The study showed a significant positive relationship between job autonomy and happiness, with job autonomy predicting 23% of the variance in happiness among hospital nurses in Iran.
9	Leila Dehghani et al.	2015	Analytical Cross-sectional	385	The study found significant correlations between professional autonomy and individual factors such as age, gender, work experience, education level, and nursing attitude among hospital nurses in Iran.
10	Duygu Kurt et al.	2022	Cross-sectional	212	The study found a significant positive correlation between nurses' attitudes toward professional autonomy and patient support, suggesting that as nurses' perceptions of their autonomy increase, their support for patients also increases.
11	Ebtesam Saeed Ahmed Abd-Elrhman et al.	2023	Descriptive Correlational	55 head nurses and 327 nurses	The study found significant positive correlations between head nurses' perceptions of creative management, mindfulness tendencies, staff well-being and perceived professional autonomy among nurses in Egypt.



12	Hasan Shafaati Shamami et al.	2023	Analytical Cross-sectional	69 novice nurses	The study found a significant association between professional autonomy and safe nursing care among student nurses in Iran.
13	Zahra Jafari et al.	2024	Cross-sectional	160	The study showed high levels of professional commitment and autonomy among nurses working in intensive care and intensive care units, with a significant relationship between professional autonomy and educational level.
14	Sima Lakdizaji et al.	2019	Descriptive Correlational	173	The study indicated that a lack of professional autonomy acts as a barrier to effective nursing performance and can lead to moral distress among emergency nurses in Iran.
15	Sanaa Shehata Zaki et al.	2023	Descriptive Correlational	289 (head nurses and nurses)	The study found a significant positive relationship between organizational culture and overall professional autonomy of nurses in Egypt.
16	SM El-Demerdash et al.	2021	Descriptive Correlational	277	The study found a significant positive association between nurses' perceptions of collaboration between nurses and doctors and their professional autonomy among intensive care nurses in Egypt.
17	Emine Turkmen et al.	2020	Descriptive Correlational	138	The study found that experience and training have a significant impact on the level of professional autonomy of oncology nurses in Turkey.
18	Nasrin Elahi et al.	2024	Descriptive Correlational	1601	The study found that the professional autonomy of nurses with 5 to 15 years of experience was 1.82 times higher than that of nurses with less than 5 years of experience, and that the chances of professional autonomy among nurses with more than 15 years were 2, were 25 times higher.



Discussion

The results of various studies on factors affecting nurses' professional autonomy highlight the importance of several interrelated elements. Age and clinical experience prove to be crucial individual factors. Research shows that older and more experienced caregivers tend to have higher levels of autonomy(15). This relationship suggests that as nurses gain experience, they significantly improve their confidence and ability to make independent decisions. In addition, educational level has been proven to play a crucial role in improving professional autonomy. Higher levels of education provide nurses with essential skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving, which are critical for effective clinical decision making. Another important factor for professional autonomy is organizational support. Studies show that a supportive work environment characterized by effective leadership and collaborative practices promotes greater autonomy among nurses(9). In particular, close collaboration between nurses and doctors is associated with an increased sense of responsibility and higher job satisfaction, which further improves the quality of patient care(17). However, moral distress poses a challenge to autonomy; Research suggests that high levels of moral distress can impact nurses' ability to act independently, highlighting the need for supportive mechanisms to address ethical dilemmas in clinical practice(13). Continuing professional development is also essential for promoting autonomy. Through ongoing education and training, nurses are empowered to implement evidence-based practices confidently and independently(32). Additionally, effective teamwork is crucial. Collaboration within healthcare teams not only improves the quality of care, but also increases nursing staff motivation and reduces workplace conflict. Finally, external factors such as the structure of the healthcare system and regulatory standards have a significant impact on professional autonomy. Clear guidelines and supportive policies can increase nurses' confidence in their decision-making abilities, while restrictive organizational policies can impede their independence(33). Overall, understanding and considering these diverse factors is critical to enhancing nurses' professional autonomy, resulting in higher job satisfaction and better quality of care in nursing practice.

Conclusion

In summary, this study highlights the critical factors that influence nurses' professional autonomy. It can provide healthcare administrators and policymakers with valuable insights to develop targeted strategies that improve nurses' autonomy and ultimately lead to better job satisfaction and patient care outcomes. The results can be incorporated into training programs and organizational policies aimed at creating a supportive environment for nurses, thereby strengthening their role in clinical decision-making.

The strength of this study lies in its comprehensive analysis of various research findings, which provides valuable insights into how these factors interact to shape the autonomy that nurses experience in various clinical settings. However, the study also has limitations, such as: B. the possibility of publication bias and

the variability of methods in the reviewed studies, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to better understand the causal relationships between these factors and professional autonomy, as well as examine innovative strategies to improve nurses' independence in practice.

Author contributions

Study concept and design: A.E.

analysis and interpretation of data: A.E. and H.J.

drafting of the manuscript: V.Sh.

critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: L.Sh

Final approval of the manuscript: all authors

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Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not needed.

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