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REVIEWS

Social image of the nursing professional in latin america: a systematic review

Imagen social del profesional de enfermería en latinoamérica: una revisión sistemática

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ABSTRACT:

Introduction: Nursing has evolved from an empirical practice to a consolidated scientific discipline with defined functions. However, in Latin America, gender stereotypes, traditional care models, and media representations persist, limiting its social and professional recognition.
Objective: To systematically analyze the available scientific evidence on the social perception of the nursing professional in Latin America, identifying and synthesizing the main findings existing in literature.
Method: A systematic review with a mixed-methods approach was conducted on nine studies (2020–2025). The search was performed in BVS, Scopus, and SciELO, following the PRISMA 2020 methodology. The quality of the studies was assessed using the CASP and MMAT 2018 tools.
Results: Findings show that despite progress in professionalization, a reductionist view of the nursing role persists, mainly associating it with traditionally “feminine” qualities such as caring and empathy. This perception obscures essential functions such as autonomy, management, teaching, and research. Additionally, there is limited representation in leadership roles and a strong media influence in reinforcing stereotypes.
Discussion: These representations restrict comprehensive recognition of the profession, reinforce gender inequalities, and hinder its scientific standing and the full exercise of its autonomy.
Conclusions: The results of this review demonstrate the need to strengthen the professional identity of nursing by promoting leadership, highlighting its strategic role within health systems, and recognizing its autonomous functions in management, teaching, and research. Furthermore, it is concluded that it is essential to implement educational, communication, and public policy strategies aimed at promoting gender equality, professional autonomy, and the social and scientific recognition of nursing, as key actions to transform its social image and contribute to the comprehensive development of the profession in Latin America.

Keywords: Social image, social perception, nursing, nursing professional, gender stereotypes, professional identity.

RESUMEN:
Introducción: La enfermería ha pasado de ser una práctica empírica para consolidarse como una disciplina científica con funciones definidas. No obstante, en Latinoamérica persisten estereotipos de género, modelos asistenciales tradicionales y representaciones mediáticas que limitan su reconocimiento social y profesional.
Objetivo: Analizar sistemáticamente la evidencia científica disponible sobre la percepción social del profesional de enfermería en Latinoamérica, identificando y sintetizando los principales hallazgos existentes en la literatura.
Método: Se realizó una revisión sistemática con enfoque mixto de nueve estudios (2020–2025). La búsqueda se efectuó en BVS, Scopus y SciELO, siguiendo la metodología PRISMA 2020. La calidad de los estudios se evaluó con las herramientas CASP y MMAT 2018.
Resultados: Los resultados evidencian una visión reduccionista aún del rol enfermero, asociándolo principalmente con cualidades "femeninas" como el cuidado y la empatía. Esto invisibiliza funciones esenciales como la autonomía, la gestión, la docencia y la investigación. Además, se observa baja presencia en espacios de liderazgo y fuerte influencia mediática en la reproducción de estereotipos.
Conclusiones: Los resultados evidencian la necesidad de fortalecer la identidad profesional de la enfermería mediante el impulso del liderazgo, la visibilización de su papel estratégico dentro de los sistemas de salud y el reconocimiento de sus funciones autónomas en la gestión, la docencia y la investigación. Así como implementar estrategias educativas, comunicacionales y de política pública orientadas a promover la igualdad de género, la autonomía profesional y el reconocimiento social y científico de la enfermería, como acciones para transformar su imagen social de la profesión en Latinoamérica.

Palabras clave: Imagen social, percepción social, enfermería, profesional de enfermería, estereotipos de género, identidad profesional.

INTRODUCTION

Today, nursing extends far beyond basic assistance; it has become a scientific discipline, a health profession, and a social practice focused on the comprehensive care of individuals, families, and communities throughout the course of life. Its development has produced a substantial body of knowledge, values, and competencies that underpin professional practice. Nursing functions therefore extend beyond bedside care to include health promotion, disease prevention, rehabilitation, service management, teaching, research, and the development of health policy [1, 2].

This scientific and academic growth has been central to establishing a distinct professional identity. That identity develops through the interaction of university education, ethical values, clinical experience, teamwork, and the recognition granted by society. In this context, nursing practice involves assessing complex needs, making clinical judgements, planning strategic interventions, and evaluating care outcomes. These responsibilities require strong leadership, critical thinking, accountability, and continuous updating in response to changes in health systems [1, 2].

However, the scientific development of discipline has progressed at a different pace from public perception. Studies show that society often reduces nursing work to the mechanical performance of procedures, compliance with medical orders, or simple accompaniment. This view overlooks professional autonomy and renders nurses' contributions to research, management, and decision-making invisible. A clear gap therefore remains between what these professionals are qualified to do and what the community recognizes as their role [2, 3].

The social image of the profession is not static; it is a dynamic construction shaped by historical, cultural, educational, and media-related factors. It is influenced both by users' direct experiences in health-care settings and by messages disseminated through the media. It is therefore more than an external opinion: this perception directly affects

professional identity, prestige, job satisfaction, career choice, and staff retention within institutions [4, 5].

One of the strongest influences on this construction is the historical association between care and the female role. Nursing continues to be linked with qualities such as kindness, obedience, self-sacrifice, and a spirit of service. Although these qualities form part of humane care, defining them as exclusively feminine devalues the profession's scientific, technical, and intellectual competencies. These gender stereotypes also restrict promotion opportunities and access to senior leadership positions [3, 6].
This bias also affects men who choose nursing, as they often encounter prejudice about their vocation or rigid expectations concerning the areas in which they 'should' work. The symbolic feminization of the profession consequently hinders both its social recognition and the development of an inclusive environment free from traditional roles. Overcoming this barrier requires recognition that care is a human and professional competence that is not determined by gender [3, 6].

Another entrenched stereotype portrays nursing as an activity subordinate to medicine. Although nurses have their own field of decision-making and participate actively in management and science, the general population more readily identifies their technical and care-related tasks. Nursing autonomy, scientific production, and political leadership often remain unnoticed, with adverse effects on professional recognition, salaries, and representation in decision-making [2, 3, 9].

The media play a crucial role in either sustaining or challenging these ideas. Narratives that portray nurses as simplistic, submissive, heroic, or sexualized reinforce an outdated image. By contrast, accurate communication can make the diversity of nursing functions visible. During the COVID-19 crisis, for example, media exposure demonstrated the essential nature of the profession, although this temporary recognition did not necessarily produce a profound change in longstanding stereotypes [7, 8].

These perceptions also vary according to the sociocultural context. A study conducted in Argentina found that 75.5% of respondents held a negative view of nurses, while 44.3% were unable to identify their advanced functions, indicating substantial lack of awareness of management and research roles [9]. These findings confirm the need for deeper analysis of the professional image of nursing in Latin America, where scientific evidence remains scarce and dispersed.

Ultimately, the persistence of these myths affects matters ranging from student recruitment to the design of public health policies [9, 10]. It is therefore essential to gather the available literature and identify the factors that sustain these perceptions. On this basis, the present systematic review aimed to analyze scientific evidence on the social image of nursing in Latin America, identify associated stereotypes and sociocultural factors, and compare the regional situation with findings from the European context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study is a mixed systematic review; that is, it uses a mixed-methods approach to analyze perceptions of the social image of nursing professionals. This approach is appropriate because it seeks to understand meanings, interpretations, and social

constructions, which cannot be addressed through quantitative data alone. A quantitative approach was also used to collect and analyze measurable data reported in scientific articles. To ensure methodological rigor, the PRISMA guidelines were followed as reporting guidance, thereby supporting a clear and replicable process.

PICo question

- **P (Population):** General population, health-service users, and university students over 18 years of age whose perceptions allow analysis of the social or professional image of nursing in Latin American countries.
- **I (Phenomenon of Interest):** Perception/image of nursing professionals.
- **Co (Context):** Community/media/health services in Latin America, 2020-2025.

PICo question

What is the general population's perception of the image of nursing professionals in Latin America?

The PICo model (Population, Phenomenon of Interest, and Context) was used to formulate the research question because it helps structure questions and inclusion criteria in systematic reviews focused on the synthesis of qualitative evidence [11].

Outcome measures focused on identifying analytical categories related to social image, gender stereotypes, professional role, visibility, autonomy, and the social valuation of nursing professionals. These categories were extracted and systematized from the findings reported in each study.

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria are fundamental because they ensure that the review findings are accurate and relevant and that the selected articles contribute to the systematic review.

Inclusion criteria

- Qualitative studies (interviews, focus groups, discourse analyses, etc.) and quantitative studies (descriptive/analytical) conducted among members of the general population, health-service users, or university students over 18 years of age that examined the perception, image, social representation, or identity attributed to nursing professionals.
- Studies published in Spanish, English, or Portuguese.
- Studies published between 2020 and 2025.
- Studies for which the full text was available.

Exclusion criteria

- Studies focused exclusively on nurses' work experiences, satisfaction, occupational health, or working conditions when they did not assess the image or social representation of the profession.
- Studies conducted among nursing professionals.
- Grey literature, editorials, theses, reviews, and letters/opinion pieces.
- Studies containing duplicate information.

- Studies conducted in North America.
- Systematic, narrative, or integrative reviews.
- Full text is unavailable.

Variables

In this systematic review, the study variables were not conceived as numerically measurable entities, but as analytical categories, interpretive dimensions, or thematic units that allowed an in-depth understanding of the meanings and social representations associated with nursing professionals. These qualitative variables were essential to structuring the analytical process because they facilitated the organization, comparison, and synthesis of findings from different studies.

The literature review identified key factors that help explain how the nursing profession is perceived socially, including professional image, associated stereotypes, the attributed social role, and the sociocultural factors involved in its construction. On this basis, a variable operationalization table was prepared, setting out the corresponding conceptual definitions, dimensions, indicators, variable type, and qualitative measurement scale; this table is presented in the appendices. The systematization contributed to methodological rigor and analytical coherence (see APPENDICES).

Sources of scientific information

Studies were searched in three main databases: the Virtual Health Library (BVS), Scopus, and SciELO.

Search strategy

To ensure a comprehensive and reproducible process, specific search strategies were defined by combining controlled terms from the DeCS/MeSH thesaurus with free-text terms. The Boolean operators AND and OR were used to improve precision, as shown below:

Table 1: Terms combined with the Boolean operators AND, OR, and NOT

Spanish	English	Portuguese
"Percepción Social" AND "Imagen Pública" OR "Imagen Social" OR estereotipos AND (Enfermería OR Profesional de enfermería)	("Social Perception" OR "Public Image" OR "Social Image" OR stereotypes) AND (Nursing OR "Nursing Professional")	("Percepção Social" AND "Imagem Pública" OR "Imagem Social" OR estereotipos) E (Enfermagem OR Profissional de Enfermagem)

Date of last search: 4 August 2025

For Scopus and SciELO, the search strategies were modified to fit the syntax of each database while retaining the structure of the descriptors and keywords.

All potentially relevant articles were initially identified without restrictions, after which specific filters were applied to refine the selection. This method helped ensure the relevance, recency, and accessibility of the evidence and strengthened the validity and reproducibility of the review.

Risk-of-bias assessment

Several methodological tools were used in this systematic review to support quality, transparency, and rigor in the appraisal of the included studies. The PRISMA 2020 guidelines were followed as reporting guidance and used to direct the selection and presentation of articles through a 27-item checklist and a flow diagram. This facilitated assessment of validity, structural coherence, and compliance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria [12].

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using two reference instruments: CASP for qualitative research and MMAT 2018 for quantitative and mixed-methods studies.

CASP focuses on the robustness, credibility, and relevance of qualitative findings through ten key criteria addressing clarity of aims, appropriateness of design, the researcher-participant relationship, and coherence of the findings [13].

MMAT 2018 provides an overall appraisal of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies on the basis of five essential dimensions: relevance of the research question, methodological rigor, internal consistency, validity of the data, and usefulness of the results. The combined use of both instruments supports a structured and reliable analysis and strengthens the transparency and reproducibility of the process [14].

Study selection process.

Rayyan, an online platform designed to support systematic reviews and facilitate the identification of relevant studies, was used to screen and select articles. The platform allowed bibliographic search results to be imported and the articles to be assessed, classified, labelled, and filtered systematically and efficiently. Two independent reviewers supervised the process, ensuring rigorous application of the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Cohen's kappa coefficient (κ) was calculated to determine agreement between the reviewers, yielding a value of $\kappa = 0.79$, which indicated a high level of agreement in study selection. This procedure strengthened reliability and ensured transparency in the methodological process [15].

Ethical considerations

This research was conducted as a mixed-design systematic review of literature from several articles addressing the topic. It therefore involved no direct interaction with human participants. In view of this, strict compliance with the essential ethical principles of health research - respect for people, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice - was maintained in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and current national and institutional ethical regulations.

Scientific integrity was maintained through a systematic, transparent, and reproducible search for evidence in recognized databases. All included studies had previously been published and assessed in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Particular care was taken to select studies with ethical approval where applicable and, in the case of clinical studies, with an explicit statement that informed consent had been obtained.

Copyright was respected and all sources were cited correctly, thereby avoiding plagiarism or misuse of information. A reference manager was used to organize and track citations, and plagiarism-detection software was used before final submission of the document.

The methodological guidance established by the PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews was followed. The findings were also reported responsibly, avoiding misleading interpretations that could cause alarm or inappropriate use of the information.

Gender considerations

The study incorporated a gender perspective as a cross-cutting component in the analysis of studies included in the systematic review. Although no primary data were collected, the review critically assessed whether the included studies reported differences according to biological sex (male/female) and, where possible, considered gender differences in the social image of nursing professionals.

Gender differences may influence gender stereotypes, roles and expectations, and inequalities in occupational and social recognition. The literature was therefore read critically to identify possible gender biases in the design, conduct, or interpretation of studies.

Inclusive language free from sexist bias was used in preparing the final report, and any relevant gender gaps or inequalities in the social image of nursing were made visible. This perspective supported knowledge that was more contextualized and responsive to the differing needs of the general adult population.

Informed consent

Because this study was a systematic review of the literature, no primary data were collected, and no direct contact was established with individuals or patients; individual informed consent was therefore not required.

All studies included in the review were selected from recognized scientific sources and had to have been published previously.

Where primary studies involved human participants, the review verified that they had received the appropriate ethical approval and explicitly reported obtaining informed consent from participants.

This measure ensured compliance with the ethical principles governing health research and protected the privacy of personal information contained in the scientific publications consulted.

RESULTS

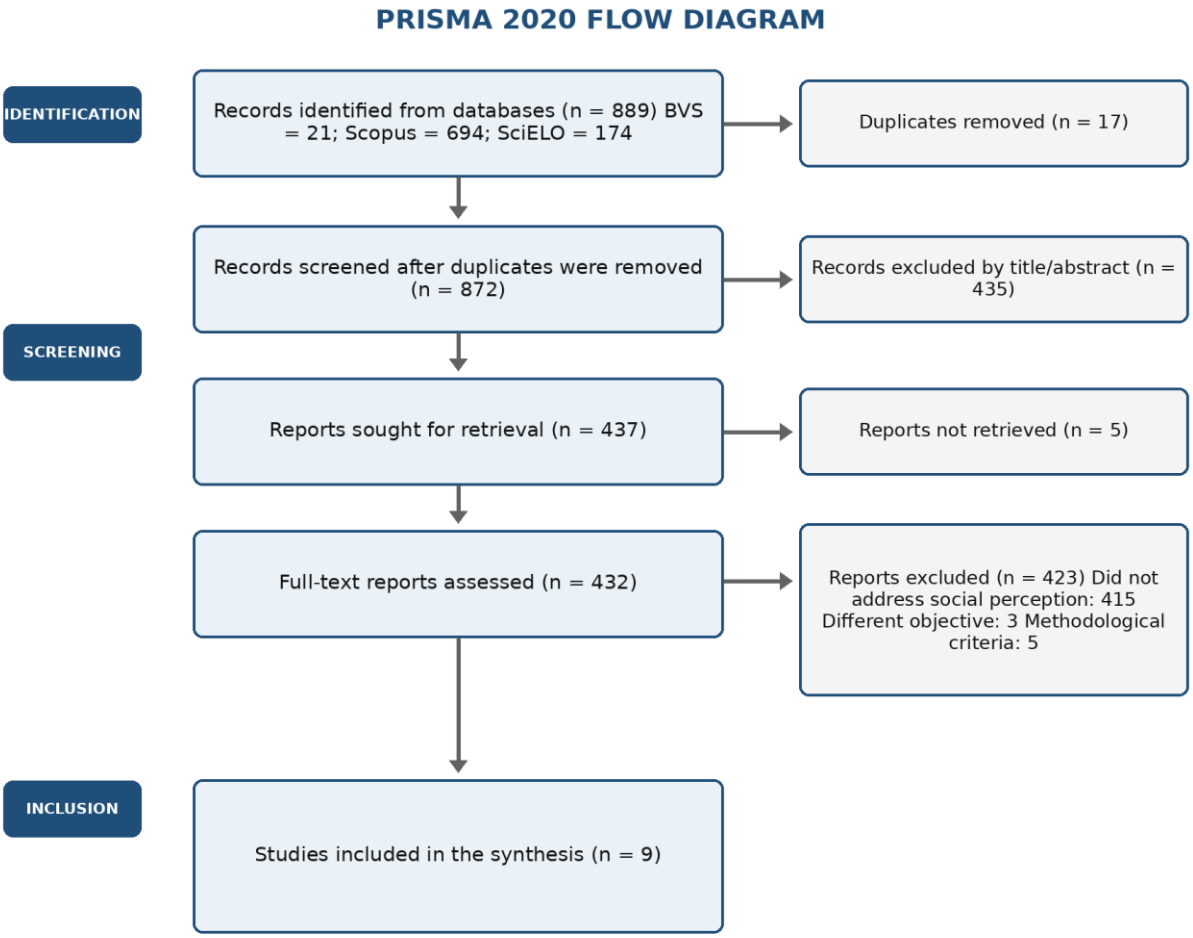
The results were organized according to the following categories: social image of nursing professionals, associated stereotypes, attributed social role, influential sociocultural factors, and positive or negative perception of the profession. The studies are described narratively, with a clear distinction between empirical findings and their interpretation, which is developed subsequently in the Discussion section.

Figure 1 presents the application of the PRISMA matrix, which made it possible to organize the process of study identification, selection, and inclusion systematically. All potentially relevant articles were first identified, after which the following filters were applied: original studies published between 2020 and 2025, in Spanish, Portuguese, or

English, conducted in Latin America and, preferably, available through open access, thereby ensuring relevance, recency, and validity. The systematic search identified 889 articles in total (BVS = 21, Scopus = 694, SciELO = 174). After 17 duplicates were removed, 872 studies remained for initial screening; 435 were excluded because they did not meet the thematic criteria, leaving 437 for full-text assessment. Subsequently, 427 articles were excluded: 415 did not address social perception, three had different objectives, five did not meet the methodological criteria, and five were unavailable. Finally, nine studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed in detail.

PRISMA MATRIX

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram



The methodological appraisal of the included studies (Table 2) showed that six investigations attained a high-quality rating according to the criteria established by CASP and MMAT 2018. These studies were distinguished by clear objectives, coherence between their designs and methods, and rigorous data analysis. Three studies were rated as moderate quality because of limitations related to sample size, insufficient description of methodological procedures, and difficulty generalizing the findings. This appraisal helped priorities the strongest evidence and reinforce the validity and reliability of the results of this systematic review by integrating methodologically robust studies that lend consistency to the final conclusions.

Analysis of the studies included in the review identified recurring findings related to gender stereotypes, the invisibility of autonomous nursing functions, the influence of the

media, and the construction of professional identity. The categories established through the research are supported by the bibliographic references shown in Tables 2 and 3, which were identified using the Boolean operators and keywords reported in Table 1.

Table 2. Methodological appraisal of the studies used

No	Author/year	Reference	Country	Study type	Tool	Score	Level of Evidence
1	Barrientos et al., 2020	16	Chile	Qualitative	CASP	9/10	High quality
2	Silva-Sánchez et al., 2024	17	Chile	Quantitative	MMAT 2018	4/5	High quality
3	Cajachagua et al., 2022	18	Peru	Quantitative	MMAT 2018	3/5	Moderate quality.
4	Sousa et al., 2021	19	Brazil	Qualitative	CASP	8/10	High quality
5	Bastías et al., 2020	20	Argentina	Qualitative	CASP	7/10	Moderate quality
6	Ferreira et al., 2020	21	Brazil	Qualitative	CASP	8/10	High quality
7	Brunelli et al., 2025	9	Argentina	Quantitative	MMAT 2018	4/5	High quality
8	Pierrotti et al., 2020	22	Brazil	Qualitative	CASP	8/10	High quality
9	Lima et al., 2020	23	Brazil	Qualitative	CASP	7/10	Moderate quality

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3 summarizes the studies used. First, the studies demonstrate the need to understand how different social groups form their views of nursing professionals. They show that there is no single perception: the image varies among users, students, professionals in training, and society in general, reflecting both strengths and weaknesses in the construction of professional identity. Second, the articles make it possible to examine the effect of educational, communication, and management strategies on the transformation of nursing's social image, highlighting the value of academic education. The adoption of protocols, the promotion of continuing education, and media visibility are identified as strategic elements that can improve social appreciation of the profession. Third, the findings help analyze the effect of these perceptions on the development of professional practice and the strengthening of the group's autonomy. Although stereotypes and limited social recognition persist, nursing is valued for its role in care, empathy, and the humanization of services. Finally, the reviewed articles provide sufficient evidence to support the need for cultural and social change in relation to the profession, with direct implications for quality of care, patient safety, and the strengthening of nursing's social and scientific recognition.

Table 3: Summary of the articles

No	Bibliographic citation	Reference	Methodology	Results	Limitations
1	Barrientos, et al. (2020)	16	Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the information was analyzed using thematic content analysis.	The results were organized according to nurses' and users' perceptions into four thematic categories: 1) Nursing as a profession of human care. 2) Nursing and its administration/management function. 3) Nursing as an educational profession. 4) Nursing as a profession. Users also described nursing as heavy and arduous work.	The time required for data collection was considered a limitation. Future research should include other instruments to complement the study findings.
2	Silva – Sánchez C., et al (2024)	17	The study sought to assess the perceptions of male nursing students in their final year of education. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 15 male students completing the final year of a nursing degree.	Male nursing students recognized advantages such as greater employability and, in some cases, preferential treatment by faculty. However, they faced stigma and prejudice that restricted access to certain settings. Although direct discrimination was uncommon, isolated episodes of exclusion and sexist comments were reported. They were attributed characteristics such as sociability, autonomy, and lower conflict, which influenced the assignment of physical tasks. They also encountered prejudice concerning sexual orientation and pressure to assume leadership roles in areas considered 'masculine'. Despite	The main limitation was that the study included only men in the city of Santiago; the findings therefore have limited usefulness and cannot be applied nationally in Chile.

No	Bibliographic Reference citation	Methodology	Results	Limitations
			progress towards inclusion, stereotypes and cultural barriers persisted in the academic environment.	
3	Cajachagua C., et al. (2022) [18]	The study was conducted in three populations with similar socioeconomic conditions in Chiclayo, Cusco, and Puno, Peru. Multistage sampling and a cluster method were used; each locality or community was divided into sectors according to population density, producing the specified sample.	A study of 514 participants analyzed the social perception of nursing professionals. No relevant differences were found by sex, age, or educational level, but differences were observed by place of origin: a low perception predominated in Ayaviri-Puno (66.66%), whereas the perception was higher in Atusparia-Chiclayo (36.00%), with significant differences (p = 0.00). Among those who rated invisible care as average, 76.92% also reported a low social image. A positive association was observed between a high valuation of invisible care and a favorable social image. Logistic regression identified place of origin and a positive perception of invisible care as independent predictors, explaining 20.5% of the variance.	The study's limitations arose mainly from working with a small group of community nurses, which restricted generalization to other settings or populations. The analysis also focused exclusively on the nurses' own perceptions and did not include the views of other health-system participants, such as users, physicians, or other professionals, who might have provided a broader perspective. Finally, the qualitative design allowed in-depth understanding of the phenomenon but limited extrapolation of the results to universal conclusions.
4	Sousa A., et al. (2021) [19]	A semi-structured instrument was used, which contained three questions on the subject of the study. The results were analyzed through	The study included 24 male students aged 18 to 42 years, most of whom were in the early semesters of their first degree. Fourteen had relatives or friends in nursing, which may have influenced their career choice. They viewed nursing	This study had important limitations regarding its population, particularly the difficulty of collecting data because half of the classes were undertaking practical activities outside the educational

No	Bibliographic Reference citation	Methodology	Results	Limitations
		content analysis, based on social representations theory.	as a 'science of care' associated with empathy, active listening, and the well-being of others, and also as a vocation and an opportunity to help. They recognized that nursing was still associated with a female role, generating prejudice and sexist comments. They also perceived that society undervalued the profession in comparison with others and emphasized the need for equality and greater visibility.	institution. Further studies on gender representation in nursing are recommended to encourage the entire health-care team to reflect on the principle that the value of the profession is independent of the professional's sex.
5	Bastias F., et al. (2020)	The study used non-probability sampling and included 194 students from a university in San Juan Province, Argentina. Of these, 90 were completing the final semester of the three-year University Technical Degree in Nursing, and 104 were attending the programmer's entry course. Participation was entirely voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed.	Marked differences were observed in the social representations of nurses between incoming students and those approaching graduation. Incoming students held a broad and unspecific view centred on the concept of 'health', whereas graduating students emphasized the role of 'care' and prioritized vocation, empathy, and humanization. The latter distanced themselves from the traditional medical model, emphasized professional autonomy, and recognized expanded functions such as prevention and research. By contrast, incoming students associated nursing mainly with hospitals and injections, using terms more closely related to assistance and help.	The study was limited to a specific sample of students from one institution in San Juan, Argentina, restricting generalization to other settings or populations. It also used only a word-association technique, which may have limited the breadth and depth of the social representations analyzed.

No	Bibliographic Reference citation	Methodology	Results	Limitations
6	Ferrerira J. C., 21 et al. (2020)	Data were collected at a public higher education institution located in central Piauí during the second semester of 2017. Inclusion criteria were nursing students over 18 years of age who were regularly enrolled at the institution, watched health-related series, and were in the first, fourth, or ninth semester of the degree programmed. Participants with inactive enrolment were excluded. This target population was selected because nursing students commonly watch these audiovisual productions.	Most participants were young female nursing students who mainly watched health-related series such as Grey's Anatomy and House. They identified stereotyped portrayals of nursing in these productions, with an auxiliary role subordinate to physicians that reinforced a biomedical model of care. They also noted the profession's limited visibility, pointing out that nurses did not even appear as characters in domestic productions. Although some participants expressed admiration for health work, they did not feel that these television portrayals had influenced their career choice.	The study has important limitations. The small, non-probability sample comprised only 30 nursing students from one institution in Piauí, limiting generalization to other educational or cultural contexts. The descriptive and exploratory design, based solely on interviews and content analysis, restricted the depth and scope of the conclusions because it included neither longitudinal follow-up nor methodological diversity. The analysis also focused mainly on international series such as Grey's Anatomy and House and did not explore the local media context and its representations more broadly.
7	Brunelli, M., et 9 al. (2025)	The study used snowball sampling among the Argentine population over 18 years of age.	A negative perception was reported by 75.5% of respondents. Knowing a nurse improved rating, although the difference was not statistically significant. A total of 44.3% did not fully recognize nursing	The study has several limitations. The sample was heterogeneous because snowball sampling was conducted through social media, preventing an even geographical

No	Bibliographic Reference	Methodology	Results	Limitations
			functions, particularly research and management, with differences between those who knew a nurse and those who did not. Nursing was viewed as a self-sacrificing profession (68.2%) and associated with unpleasant tasks (68.6%), although strong commitment and kindness were also recognized. Only 6.1% considered it an exclusively female profession, and more than half viewed nursing as a secure employment opportunity.	distribution, although participants from all Argentine provinces were included. Women and people with relatives or acquaintances who were nurses predominated, which could produce affiliation bias; however, the number of respondents without close ties (n = 299) allowed more impartial perceptions to be assessed, and this variable was considered in the analysis. Participation also requires access to technology. Despite these limitations, this was the first study to examine public perceptions of nursing in Argentina.
8	Pierrotti V., et al. (2020)	22 Findings were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed within a phenomenographic framework, supported by a rereading of nursing patterns of knowing.	Participants attributed positive qualities to nurses, including responsibility, patience, and dedication, which they considered essential to patient care and recovery. They recognized nurses' roles in diagnosis, medication administration, and clinical follow-up. However, nurses face challenges such as dealing with difficult patients and heavy workloads. Although the image was largely positive, negative perceptions such as mistreatment or arrogance were also	Perceptions of nurses' image were examined in a group of students enrolled in a professional degree programmed. The programmed includes a subject that provides information about the different degree courses offered by the university, including nursing, and this may have influenced the students' image of the profession. Other young people without this educational experience might hold

No	Bibliographic Reference citation	Methodology	Results	Limitations
			mentioned. Nursing work was associated mainly with hospitals, but also with home care and teaching. Nurses were perceived as close assistants to physicians, with a valuable and essential role, although physicians enjoyed greater prestige.	a different view of nurses, although the phenomenographic study treats each participant's experiences as unique.
9	Lima R., et al. 23 (2020)	Data were collected through individual interviews using a semi-structured guide. The data were examined through thematic analysis.	Four themes were identified: 'The individual in motion towards becoming a nursing professional: from previous experiences to entering the programmed'; 'The nursing teacher in the construction of the student's professional identity: two sides of the same mirror'; 'The pedagogical relationship: an instrument for constructing the student's professional identity'; and 'Historical and cultural conditions: a space for constructing the student's professional identity'.	The study was conducted at a single educational institution, restricting the findings to a specific sociocultural context and limiting generalization. Data were also obtained solely through interviews, reducing the diversity of sources and potentially influencing interpretation of the findings. Nevertheless, this method was selected on the basis that language is the essential means of approaching the historical meanings and personal interpretations assigned by students, which are central to analyzing the formation of professional identity.

Source: Authors' own work

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review show that the social perception of nursing in Latin America remains conditioned by historical and cultural factors that limit professional recognition. Despite nursing's development as a scientific discipline with established competencies in research, management, and teaching, its social image remains anchored in traditional representations that do not reflect its contemporary development.

One of the principal findings was the persistence of gender stigma associated with the profession. The literature analyzed indicates that nursing continues to be linked to socially feminized attributes such as empathy and care, reinforcing its portrayal as an extension of domestic responsibilities. This symbolic construction creates additional barriers for men in the profession, who encounter prejudice related to masculinity, restrictions in certain clinical contexts, and different expectations of their professional performance. These findings agree with previous studies emphasizing the need to dismantle the view of nursing as an exclusively female occupation and to promote fairer and more inclusive working environments.

The review also reveals the limited visibility of nurses' autonomous functions. Although current competencies include clinical decision-making, service management, research, and health education, broad sectors of society - including health professionals - continue to associate nursing with a role subordinate to medicine. This reductionist perception directly affects social recognition, pay conditions, access to leadership positions, and participation in strategic decision-making. Communication strategies that position nursing's specific contribution to public health and health systems should therefore be strengthened.

The findings also show the influence of the media and popular culture on the construction of professional images. Media representations are dominated by narratives that place nursing in a secondary position or reproduce it through stereotypes. Nevertheless, European studies included in the review show that nursing gained considerable media visibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. In European countries, press coverage highlighted the central role of nursing staff in the health response and associated them with leadership, technical competence, and professional commitment. In contrast, media narratives in most Latin American countries were ambiguous: although staff sacrifice was recognized, heroic discourse reinforced a vocational framing without giving sufficient prominence to scientific and management competencies.

Another relevant finding concerns the effect of academic education on the construction of professional identity. Comparative studies of students entering and completing their programmed show a progressive transformation in perceptions of nursing. While new students tend to view nursing as predominantly care-related work, graduates recognize its autonomous, scientific, and preventive character and include areas such as research and health education. This finding confirms the fundamental role of higher education in strengthening professional identity, while also highlighting the need to transfer this knowledge to society so that collective recognition of the profession can expand.

Overall, the results indicate that progress towards greater nursing autonomy and visibility in Latin America remains insufficient. Persistent stereotypes, the absence of sustained communication campaigns, and limited participation in decision-making spaces help maintain the profession in a subordinate position within health systems.

This situation requires comprehensive and sustained strategies addressing three priorities: strengthening education and continuing professional development, developing communication policies that make nursing's actual contribution to public health visible, and promoting active participation by the profession in health-policy formulation.

When the Latin American findings are placed in an international context, the gap between the profession's scientific development and its social recognition is not unique to the region. Comparison with the European study conducted in Spain by Martínez-Rodríguez et al. [26] reveals significant contextual differences. In Spain, nursing has greater media visibility, higher professional prestige, and more active participation in institutional settings. Despite this recognition, representations that associate nursing primarily with direct care and a subordinate position persist, although autonomous, academic, and leadership functions are more visible. Comparison with North American and Asian settings shows greater progress in university education and research, favoring autonomous activities; however, as in Europe, stereotypes based on traditional gender concepts and hierarchical structures remain [24, 25].

By contrast, gender stereotypes, limited professional autonomy, and low participation in political and decision-making arenas persist in several Latin American countries. These differences reflect the influence of structural, cultural, and regulatory factors on the construction of nursing's social image.

These similarities show that the social image of nursing is shaped by shared historical factors that acquire specific features according to the cultural, educational, and organizational context of each region. Transforming this image therefore requires improved communication about nursing functions together with educational, institutional, and political changes that allow its scientific, ethical, and social contribution to be fully recognized.

The results confirm that the social image of nursing is a dynamic and contextual construct shaped by interactions among culture, the media, and health policy. Transforming this perception is both a professional challenge and a necessary condition for making full use of the nursing workforce's competencies, improving quality of care, and strengthening health systems [26].

The principal strengths of this review include selection and appraisal of studies by two independent reviewers, which reduced the risk of bias and increased the reliability of the findings. Cohen's kappa coefficient ($\kappa = 0.79$) indicated a high level of agreement between the reviewers during the selection process. The use of CASP and MMAT 2018 also enabled rigorous appraisal of the methodological quality of the included studies and identified four high-quality investigations characterized by clear objectives, methodological coherence, and sound data analysis.

Nevertheless, this review has important methodological limitations. These include small sample sizes, incomplete descriptions of procedures, a predominance of cross-sectional designs, and difficulty generalizing the findings. Methodological heterogeneity justified narrative and thematic analysis rather than quantitative meta-analysis. In addition, the publication period (2020-2025), which was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, may have influenced the social perception of nursing and situated the findings within an exceptional health context. Restricting inclusion to articles in Spanish, Portuguese, and English may have limited access to relevant evidence published in other languages, and the partial availability of some sources restricted the depth of analysis of certain findings.

CONCLUSIONS

The review gathered primarily from Latin America, with one European study used to compare contexts. The findings reveal heterogeneous perceptions of nursing: gender stereotypes, invisibility, and subordination to the medical model persist in Latin America, whereas the COVID-19 pandemic improved the profession's media visibility in Europe.

Most Latin American studies used qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory methods, which permit in-depth analysis but limit generalization because of their small samples and local focus. Some incorporated correlational or mixed designs with greater validity, although limitations remained. By contrast, the European study was distinguished by broad documentary analysis and a strong theoretical framework based on social representations.

Three key areas were identified: (a) sociodemographic factors, particularly gender and stage of education, that influence professional identity; (b) interventions and representations, whereby academic education, continuing education, the media, and protocols enhance visibility of the role; and (c) associated outcomes, including consolidation of identity, reduction of stigma, improved social perception, and strengthened professional autonomy.

The review concludes that the social image of nursing is dynamic and contextual. Overcoming stereotypes requires comprehensive strategies in education, research, and communication to strengthen professional recognition and improve the quality of health care.

The findings confirm that the social image of nursing changes according to the sociocultural and institutional setting in which it is produced. Stereotypes persist not only because of limited public understanding, but also because of structural conditions that restrict autonomy and the visibility of the professional role. Addressing them requires a multilevel approach that combines improvements in education, greater production and dissemination of evidence, and communication strategies capable of repositioning nursing as a scientific discipline and a key contributor to care. At the same time, strengthening professional identity requires broader nursing leadership and participation in health-service governance, supported by gender-sensitive policies that correct historical inequalities and promote social and academic recognition consistent with nursing's contribution to health systems.

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APPENDICES

Variables

Variable	Conceptual definition	Dimensions	Indicators	Variable type	Scale
Social image	The collective representation held by society of nursing professionals.	Stereotypes, valuation, visibility	Views on autonomy, the role of care, and social participation.	Qualitative	Nominal
Associated stereotypes	Preconceived ideas about gender, role, and the professional capacity of nursing staff.	Gender and vocational stereotypes	Association with 'feminine' traits, sexist comments, and invisibility.	Qualitative	Nominal
Social role	The function that society attributes to nursing professionals within the health system.	Care, teaching, and research	Perception of leadership and recognition of autonomy and competencies.	Qualitative	Nominal
Sociocultural factors	The social, cultural, and media context influences construction of the professional image.	Media, tradition	Representation on television, in the press, and on social media; historical influence.	Qualitative	Nominal
Positive/negative perception	Overall assessment of the professional image of nursing.	High, moderate, low	Percentage of the population with a favorable or unfavorable view of nursing.	Qualitative	Ordinal