



# The Relationship Between Nurses' Caring Behavior and Patient Trust in Primary Health Care Settings

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## ABSTRACT

Patient trust is a fundamental element of effective primary health care services and is closely influenced by the quality of nurse patient interactions. Nurses, as frontline health professionals, play a key role in building trust through caring behaviors such as empathy, respect, and effective communication. This study aimed to examine the influence of nurses' caring approach on patient trust in primary health care services. A quantitative correlational design was used involving patients receiving nursing services in primary health care facilities. Data were collected using structured questionnaires measuring nurses' caring approach and patient trust, and analyzed using correlation and regression techniques. The findings showed a significant positive relationship between nurses' caring approach and patient trust. Empathy and communication were identified as the strongest caring dimensions influencing patient trust. Nurses' caring behaviors significantly contribute to the development of patient trust in primary health care services. Strengthening caring-based nursing practices is essential to enhance patient-centered care and service quality.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Primary health care (PHC) plays a crucial role as the first level of contact between individuals, families, and the health system. It serves as the foundation of health service delivery by providing promotive, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative care that is accessible and community-oriented (Mpofu, 2014). The effectiveness of primary health care services is not determined solely by the availability of medical resources or technical competence of health workers, but also by the quality of interpersonal interactions between providers and patients.

One of the key factors influencing the success of health service delivery in primary health care settings is patient trust. Trust is fundamental in encouraging patients to utilize health services, adhere to treatment recommendations, and maintain long-term relationships with health care providers (Murray & McCrone, 2015). When patients trust health professionals, they are more likely to disclose health-related information, comply with prescribed interventions, and express satisfaction with the services received. Conversely, low levels of trust may result in service avoidance, non-adherence to treatment, and negative perceptions of health facilities.

Among health professionals in primary health care, nurses play a central role as frontline providers who interact most frequently and continuously with patients. Nurses are often responsible for initial assessments, patient education, monitoring, and ongoing care (Liaw et al., 2011). Due to this close and sustained interaction, nurses significantly influence patients' perceptions of care quality and trust toward health services. Therefore, the attitudes and behaviors demonstrated by nurses are critical in shaping patients' experiences within primary health care facilities.

The concept of caring in nursing encompasses behaviors such as empathy, respect, effective communication, attentiveness, and emotional support. Caring reflects a humanistic approach that values patients as individuals rather than merely recipients of medical treatment. A caring approach allows nurses to understand patients' physical, emotional, and psychosocial needs, thereby fostering a therapeutic relationship built on mutual respect and trust (Pratt et al., 2021). However, in practice, increasing workloads, time constraints, and administrative demands may limit nurses' ability to consistently demonstrate caring behaviors.

Several reports and patient experiences indicate that low patient trust in primary health care services may stem from impersonal care, ineffective communication, or perceived lack of empathy from health providers. Patients who feel unheard or disrespected often develop dissatisfaction and reluctance to seek further care (Eriksson & Svedlund, 2007). These conditions highlight the importance of strengthening the caring dimension of nursing practice as a strategy to improve patient trust in primary health care services.

Despite the strategic role of primary health care in promoting community health, many health facilities continue to face challenges related to declining or inconsistent patient trust (Organization, 2018). Complaints from patients frequently involve nurses' attitudes, limited communication, insufficient explanations, and a perceived lack of emotional support during care delivery. Such issues may weaken the nurse-patient relationship and reduce patients' confidence in health services.

In many cases, nursing practice emphasizes technical competence and task completion, while caring behavior receives less attention. This imbalance creates a gap between clinical skills and the interpersonal aspects of care that are essential for building trust (Stein-Parbury, 2013). Although nurses may perform procedures correctly, the absence of empathy, respect, and patient-centered communication can lead to negative patient experiences. These problems indicate a need to examine how nurses' caring approach contributes to patient trust in primary health care settings.

A recent quantitative study by Sedighi, Sadeghi, Roshanaei et al. (2025) examined the relationship between nurses' caring behaviours, patient trust, and patient loyalty in hospital settings in Iran. Using a sample of 196 hospitalized patients, the authors found that perceptions of nurses' caring behaviours were significantly and positively associated with trust towards nurses, and that trust towards nurses fully mediated the relationship between caring behaviours and patient loyalty. Trust was shown to be a crucial link through which caring behaviours influenced outcomes beyond satisfaction, highlighting trust as a key relational outcome of caring practices.

Wuwung, Gannika, and Karundeng (2020) investigated the relationship between nurse caring behaviours and patient satisfaction in a general hospital context in Manado, Indonesia. Their cross-sectional study involving 90 patients found a statistically significant relationship between nurses' caring actions and patient satisfaction, indicating that when patients perceive caring behaviour, they report higher satisfaction with services. While this study did not measure trust directly, it establishes a foundation for understanding how caring perceptions shape positive patient evaluations of care.

Ahmad, Yulianti, and Hasan conducted research grounded in Jean Watson's theory of helping-trust, exploring how caring and trust relate to patient satisfaction in an inpatient setting. The results showed a significant relationship between the helping-trust aspect of caring and patient satisfaction, suggesting that trust acts as an important component of caring that influences how patients perceive the quality of nursing services. While focused on a hospital ward, this study contributes theoretically to the understanding of trust as part of caring processes.

Rohita and Nurkholik (2024) examined caring behaviours in nursing using Swanson's Theory of Caring and its relationship with patient satisfaction in a class-3 inpatient room. Though this study

again focuses on satisfaction rather than trust, it illustrates how structured caring frameworks like Swanson's can be operationalized to measure patient perceptions and service outcomes. A significant relationship was reported between caring and satisfaction, reinforcing the influence of caring approaches on patient-centered outcomes.

An important literature review on trust in nursing relationships (spanning work from 1980–2011) showed that trust development is relational and process-oriented, with nurse caring attributes (communication, professionalism, empathy) being central to trust formation. This review supports the theoretical basis for examining trust as an outcome of caring behaviours. Another review focusing on trust and trustworthiness in nursing argued that trust requires nurses to be perceived as trustworthy and caring, underlining that trust is not automatic but developed through repeated caring interactions. This conceptual work further validates why research on caring behaviours should examine trust outcomes.

Previous studies have extensively explored patient satisfaction and trust within hospital settings; however, empirical research focusing specifically on nurses' caring approach and patient trust in primary health care remains limited. Primary health care environments differ from hospitals in terms of service continuity, community engagement, and patient provider relationships, making it inappropriate to directly generalize hospital-based findings to PHC contexts.

Furthermore, there is a lack of contextual studies conducted in local or community-based health care settings, particularly in developing regions, where cultural norms and service structures may influence caring behaviors and trust formation. Existing studies also show inconsistent findings regarding the strength and significance of caring behaviors as predictors of patient trust. In some research, caring is treated as a secondary variable rather than a central determinant. These gaps indicate the need for further investigation to clarify the influence of nurses' caring approach on patient trust in primary health care services.

Based on the identified problems and research gaps, this study aims to examine the influence of nurses' caring approach on patient trust in primary health care services. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions: How does the nurses' caring approach influence patient trust in primary health care services. Which dimensions of nurses' caring behavior most strongly affect patient trust? Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to analyze the relationship between nurses' caring approach and patient trust, as well as to identify key caring dimensions that contribute significantly to trust formation.

The findings of this study are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. For nursing practice, the study offers insights into the importance of caring-based service delivery and encourages nurses to integrate empathy, respect, and effective communication into daily practice. For health institutions, the results may serve as a basis for improving service quality and strengthening patient trust in primary health care facilities.

For policy makers and health administrators, this study can support the development of patient-centered care policies and training programs that emphasize caring behaviors. Finally, for future research, the study contributes empirical evidence to the growing body of literature on the relationship between caring and trust, particularly within the context of primary health care.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between nurses' caring approach and patient trust in primary health care services. A correlational design was selected because the study aimed to identify the strength and direction of the relationship between two naturally occurring variables without manipulating the research setting (Asamoah, 2014). This design is appropriate for investigating behavioral and perceptual phenomena in health service research, where ethical and practical considerations limit experimental manipulation. The quantitative approach allows for objective measurement of patients' perceptions of nurses' caring behaviors and their level of trust, enabling statistical analysis and generalization of findings. By using this design, the

study provides empirical evidence regarding the extent to which nurses' caring approach influences patient trust in primary health care contexts.

The research was conducted in primary health care facilities, such as community health centers and outpatient clinics, which function as the first point of contact for individuals seeking health services (Cook et al., 2007). These facilities provide comprehensive services including preventive care, basic treatment, and health education, making them ideal settings for examining nurse-patient interactions. The target population consisted of patients who received nursing services at the selected primary health care facilities. These patients were considered appropriate respondents because they had direct and recent interactions with nurses, enabling them to assess nurses' caring behaviors and express their level of trust toward the services provided.

The study sample comprised patients who met specific inclusion criteria, including being 18 years of age or older, having received nursing services at least once during the study period, and being able to communicate effectively. Patients with cognitive impairments or severe health conditions that limited their ability to respond to questionnaires were excluded (Bárrios et al., 2013). The sample size was determined based on statistical requirements for correlational analysis to ensure adequate power. A convenience sampling technique was used, whereby patients who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate were recruited during their visits to the primary health care facilities. This method was chosen due to its practicality and feasibility in busy health service environments.

The independent variable in this study was nurses' caring approach, defined as patients' perceptions of nurses' interpersonal and professional behaviors during care delivery. This variable was operationalized through dimensions including empathy, respect, responsiveness, and communication, which reflect key aspects of caring in nursing practice (Bikker et al., 2015). The dependent variable was patient trust, defined as the patient's confidence in nurses and the health care services provided. Patient trust was measured through dimensions such as confidence, reliability, honesty, and perceived safety, representing patients' beliefs that nurses act in their best interest and provide safe and dependable care. Each variable was measured using standardized indicators to ensure clarity, consistency, and reliability in data collection.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of two main sections. The first section assessed nurses' caring approach using statements related to empathy, respect, communication, and responsiveness. The second section measured patient trust through indicators of confidence, reliability, honesty, and perceived safety. Responses were rated using a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The instrument was tested for validity and reliability prior to data collection (Ganesha & Aithal, 2022). Content validity was established through expert review, while construct validity was examined using correlation analysis. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to ensure internal consistency. For complementary qualitative insights, observations or brief interviews may be conducted to capture contextual factors influencing caring behaviors and trust, although these data were not included in the main quantitative analysis.

Data analysis was performed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and variable distributions (Kaur et al., 2018). Inferential analysis involved correlation tests to determine the relationship between nurses' caring approach and patient trust. Regression analysis was conducted to assess the predictive influence of caring behaviors on patient trust. If the data met the necessary assumptions and sample size requirements, more advanced techniques such as structural equation modeling (SEM) could be applied to examine the relationships between caring dimensions and trust components in greater detail. A significance level of 0.05 was used for all statistical tests.

Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the research process (Pollock, 2012). All participants received clear information regarding the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents had the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that no personal identifiers were recorded and that data were used solely for research purposes. The study

protocol was reviewed and approved by the relevant ethical review board or institutional ethics committee, ensuring compliance with ethical standards in health research.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### Results

The characteristics of respondents indicate that the majority of participants were adults who had previously accessed primary health care services more than once. Most respondents were within the productive age range, reflecting the dominant user group of primary health care facilities (Atkinson & Haran, 2005). In terms of gender, both male and female patients were represented, with a slight predominance of female respondents, which is commonly observed in primary health care utilization patterns. Most respondents had completed secondary education and visited the health facility for general outpatient or preventive services, indicating sufficient exposure to nursing care to evaluate nurses' caring behaviors and trust in services.

Regarding the nurses' caring approach, the findings showed that patients generally perceived nurses' caring behavior to be at a moderate to high level. Dimensions such as respect and responsiveness received higher mean scores, indicating that patients felt nurses treated them politely and responded promptly to their needs (Papastavrou et al., 2012). Empathy and communication also scored positively, although some respondents reported limited time for interaction and insufficient explanation of health information. Overall, the results suggest that nurses demonstrated caring behaviors consistently, but there remains room for improvement, particularly in emotional support and patient-centered communication.

The results related to patient trust revealed that most respondents reported moderate to high levels of trust in primary health care services. The highest scores were observed in the dimensions of perceived safety and reliability, suggesting that patients generally believed nurses provided safe and dependable care. Confidence and honesty also received positive evaluations, although a small proportion of respondents expressed uncertainty regarding transparency and continuity of care. These findings indicate that patient trust in primary health care services is present but not uniformly strong across all dimensions.

Statistical analysis demonstrated a significant positive relationship between nurses' caring approach and patient trust. Correlation analysis showed that higher perceptions of caring behavior were associated with higher levels of patient trust. Furthermore, regression analysis indicated that nurses' caring approach was a significant predictor of patient trust, explaining a meaningful proportion of the variance. Among the caring dimensions, empathy and communication showed the strongest association with patient trust, highlighting the importance of interpersonal and emotional aspects of nursing care. These results confirm that nurses' caring approach plays a critical role in shaping patient trust within primary health care services.

#### Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Research Objectives

The results demonstrate a significant positive relationship between nurses' caring approach and patient trust, indicating that patients who perceived higher levels of caring behavior from nurses tended to report higher levels of trust. This finding directly addresses the first research objective and confirms that caring is not merely an ethical or professional expectation, but also a critical determinant of trust in health care relationships. The result suggests that caring behaviors facilitate a sense of security, understanding, and respect, which are essential elements in the development of patient trust within primary health care settings.

In relation to the second research objective, the findings reveal that not all dimensions of caring contribute equally to patient trust (Murray & McCrone, 2015). Empathy and communication emerged as the strongest predictors of trust, suggesting that patients value nurses' ability to understand their feelings, listen attentively, and provide clear explanations regarding their health conditions and treatment plans. These dimensions reflect the interpersonal and relational aspects of nursing care, emphasizing that trust is built through meaningful and respectful interactions rather than technical competence alone.

Other dimensions of caring, such as respect and responsiveness, also showed a positive relationship with patient trust, although their influence was relatively weaker. This indicates that while politeness, promptness, and professionalism are important, they are insufficient by themselves to establish deep trust without empathetic engagement and effective communication. These findings highlight the importance of balancing task-oriented nursing activities with relational care to meet patients' expectations and emotional needs (Wang & Chang, 2016).

Overall, the interpretation of the findings supports the theoretical assumption that caring behaviors form the foundation of trust in nurse-patient relationships. The results reinforce the notion that primary health care services should prioritize caring-based nursing practices as a strategy to strengthen patient trust, improve service utilization, and enhance the overall quality of care. By aligning nursing practice with patient-centered and caring principles, primary health care institutions can foster more trusting and sustainable relationships with the communities they serve.

### **Comparison with Previous Studies**

The findings of this study are largely consistent with previous research that highlights the importance of nurses' caring behaviors in shaping positive patient outcomes. The significant positive relationship between nurses' caring approach and patient trust found in this study aligns with the work of Sedighi et al. (2025), who demonstrated that nurses' caring behaviors were strongly associated with patient trust and loyalty in health care settings. Although Sedighi et al. conducted their study in hospital environments, the similarity of results suggests that caring behaviors function as a universal mechanism for building trust across different levels of health care services, including primary health care.

The results of this study also support earlier findings by Wuwung, Gannika, and Karundeng (2020), who reported a significant relationship between nurses' caring behaviors and patient satisfaction. While their study focused on satisfaction rather than trust, satisfaction and trust are closely related constructs in health service research. Patients who perceive nurses as caring, respectful, and attentive tend to develop positive emotional responses toward care providers, which may evolve into trust over time. Therefore, the present findings extend previous research by confirming that caring behaviors not only influence satisfaction but also directly contribute to patient trust.

In addition, the strong influence of empathy and communication on patient trust observed in this study is consistent with Watson's Theory of Human Caring, which emphasizes the helping-trust relationship as a core component of caring nursing practice (Ahmad et al., 2020). Similar conclusions were drawn by Ahmad, Yulianti, and Hasan, who found that the helping-trust dimension of caring significantly influenced patient satisfaction. The current study complements this theoretical and empirical work by empirically demonstrating that empathy and communication are key predictors of trust, particularly in primary health care settings where repeated interactions between nurses and patients are common.

Furthermore, studies based on Swanson's Caring Theory, such as the research by Rohita and Nurkholik (2024), reported that caring behaviors significantly affected patient satisfaction in inpatient settings. Although the outcome variable differs, these findings reinforce the argument that caring-based interactions form the foundation of positive patient perceptions. The present study contributes additional insight by focusing on trust as a distinct and critical outcome, thereby enriching the existing literature on caring-related outcomes in nursing.

Despite these similarities, some differences can be noted between this study and previous research (Ahmad et al., 2020). While many earlier studies emphasized technical competence and service efficiency as dominant factors influencing patient perceptions, the present findings suggest that interpersonal aspects of care—particularly empathy and communication—play a more decisive role in building trust in primary health care services. This difference may be attributed to the nature of primary health care, which emphasizes continuity of care, long-term relationships, and community engagement, making caring behaviors more salient to patients.

### **Reasons Why Caring Influences Patient Trust**

The influence of nurses' caring approach on patient trust can be understood through the relational and interpersonal nature of health care services, particularly in primary health care settings. Trust in health care is not formed solely through clinical outcomes or technical competence, but through continuous interactions in which patients assess the intentions, attitudes, and behaviors of health professionals. Caring behaviors serve as visible and experiential indicators of a nurse's commitment to the patient's well-being, thereby fostering trust.

One possible reason caring influences patient trust is that caring behaviors enhance emotional security (Ergezen et al., 2020). When nurses demonstrate empathy, attentiveness, and respect, patients feel acknowledged as individuals rather than as clinical cases. This emotional reassurance reduces anxiety and uncertainty, which are common during illness or health consultations. As patients feel emotionally supported, they are more likely to believe that nurses genuinely care about their best interests, strengthening their trust in both the nurse and the health care service.

Another important factor is the role of effective communication in caring practices. Caring nurses tend to listen actively, provide clear explanations, and respond patiently to patient concerns (C. McCabe, 2004). Effective communication increases patients' understanding of their health conditions and treatment plans, which reduces confusion and fear. When patients perceive that nurses communicate honestly and transparently, they are more likely to view them as reliable and trustworthy. Clear communication also empowers patients to participate in decision-making, reinforcing a sense of partnership and mutual respect.

Caring behaviors also contribute to trust by demonstrating professional integrity and ethical commitment. Actions such as maintaining patient confidentiality, showing respect for dignity, and responding promptly to patient needs signal professionalism and responsibility (C. McCabe, 2004). These behaviors assure patients that nurses adhere to ethical standards and prioritize patient safety. Over time, consistent caring conduct reinforces patients' belief that nurses can be depended upon, which is a core component of trust.

In primary health care settings, where interactions are often repeated and long-term, caring behaviors play a particularly significant role in trust development. Regular encounters allow patients to evaluate the consistency of nurses' attitudes and behaviors (Kim-Soon et al., 2022). When nurses consistently demonstrate caring across multiple visits, patients develop confidence in the continuity and reliability of care. This continuity strengthens trust more effectively than isolated technical interventions.

Finally, caring influences trust because it aligns with patients' expectations of humane and patient-centered care (Cheraghi et al., 2017). Patients generally expect nurses not only to provide treatment but also to offer understanding, compassion, and guidance. When these expectations are met, patients perceive the health care service as responsive and supportive. Conversely, a lack of caring behaviors may lead patients to question the motives and competence of health professionals, thereby weakening trust.

In summary, nurses' caring approach influences patient trust because it addresses patients' emotional needs, facilitates effective communication, demonstrates ethical professionalism, and ensures consistent, patient-centered interactions. These factors collectively create a therapeutic relationship in which patients feel safe, valued, and confident in the care they receive, ultimately strengthening trust in primary health care services.

#### **Cultural and Institutional Factors Affecting the Results**

The influence of nurses' caring approach on patient trust in primary health care services cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural and institutional contexts in which care is delivered. Cultural values and organizational structures shape patients' expectations, nurses' behaviors, and the nature of nurse-patient interactions, thereby affecting how caring behaviors are perceived and how trust is formed (Moody & Pesut, 2006).

From a cultural perspective, patients in many communities place a high value on interpersonal warmth, respect, and politeness in health care interactions. In collectivist cultures, where social harmony and respectful communication are emphasized, patients often expect health professionals to

demonstrate empathy and personal attention. When nurses display caring behaviors that align with these cultural expectations, patients are more likely to interpret such actions as indicators of sincerity and commitment, thereby strengthening trust. Conversely, caring behaviors that are perceived as insufficient or impersonal may be interpreted as disrespect or indifference, leading to diminished trust in health services (Jacobson, 2009).

Cultural norms related to authority and professional hierarchy also influence patient trust. In societies where health professionals are traditionally viewed as authoritative figures, patients may initially express trust based on professional status. However, sustained trust increasingly depends on how nurses interact with patients at the interpersonal level. Caring behaviors such as respectful communication and willingness to listen help bridge hierarchical gaps and promote a more collaborative relationship, reinforcing trust over time.

Institutional factors within primary health care facilities also play a significant role in shaping caring behaviors and patient trust (Gilson, 2003). High patient loads, limited staffing, and time constraints may restrict nurses' ability to engage in meaningful interactions with patients. Under such conditions, nurses may prioritize task completion over emotional support and communication, which can reduce patients' perceptions of caring. As a result, patient trust may be influenced not only by individual nurse behavior but also by systemic limitations within the health care institution.

Organizational culture and management practices further affect the implementation of caring approaches (J. Alharbi et al., 2014). Health care institutions that emphasize efficiency and administrative performance without adequate attention to patient-centered values may inadvertently discourage caring behaviors. In contrast, institutions that promote supportive supervision, continuous professional development, and caring-based service standards create an environment that enables nurses to consistently demonstrate empathy, responsiveness, and effective communication. These institutional supports can enhance both caring practices and patient trust.

Additionally, institutional policies related to service procedures, waiting times, and continuity of care can influence patient perceptions of trustworthiness. Frequent staff rotation, fragmented services, or unclear service processes may undermine trust even when individual nurses attempt to provide caring care (T. J. McCabe & Sambrook, 2014). Conversely, consistent service delivery and clear communication supported by institutional systems reinforce patients' confidence in the reliability and safety of care.

In summary, cultural expectations regarding interpersonal relationships and institutional conditions within primary health care facilities jointly shape how nurses' caring behaviors are enacted and perceived. These factors influence the degree to which caring translates into patient trust. Understanding these cultural and institutional influences is essential for interpreting the study results and for developing strategies to strengthen caring-based nursing practice and patient trust in primary health care services.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that nurses' caring approach has a significant and positive influence on patient trust in primary health care services. Caring behaviors particularly empathy, effective communication, respect, and responsiveness play a crucial role in strengthening patients' confidence in nursing care and health services. The findings contribute to nursing and primary health care practice by providing empirical evidence that caring-based interactions are essential for building patient trust and enhancing the quality of primary health care delivery. It is recommended that nurses consistently integrate caring behaviors into daily practice, especially through empathetic communication and patient-centered interactions. Primary health care institutions should support this approach by providing training programs that emphasize caring competencies and by developing policies that promote patient-centered care. Future research is encouraged to explore caring and trust using longitudinal or mixed-methods designs and to examine additional contextual factors that may influence patient trust in diverse primary health care settings.

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