



Challenges of Choosing Thesis Title in Postgraduate Nursing Students: A Qualitative Study

تحديات اختيار عنوان الرسالة لدى طلبة الدراسات العليا في التمريض: دراسة نوعية

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Background: The process of conducting a student thesis has the stages among which selecting the title is undoubtedly the most important one. Students are faced with numerous challenges at this stage. The aim of this study was to determine the challenges faced by postgraduate nursing students regarding thesis title selection.

Methods: This qualitative study was conducted using the conventional qualitative content analysis approach and purposive sampling method in 2017. Postgraduate nursing students of Tehran University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences who were willing to participate in the study were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Sampling was done using purposeful sampling and continued until data saturation.

Results: Totally, 14 students with a mean age of 27.35 ± 3.43 participated in this study. All students were female. Following data analysis, three categories, seven subcategories, and 245 cods emerged. The main categories extracted in this study included educational, systemic, and individual factors.

Conclusion: According to the results of this study, paying attention to and alleviating educational, systemic, and individual challenges in choosing the appropriate thesis title seems necessary in order to accomplish the research process. Therefore, providing the necessary training, practical guidance from professors and advisors, explaining appropriate strategies in choosing the title, and enabling students in this field can play an influential role in eliminating these challenges.

Keywords: Nursing Education, Postgraduate, Research, Proposal, Qualitative study

چالش های انتخاب عنوان پایان نامه در دانشجویان کارشناسی ارشد پرستاری: یک مطالعه کیفی

زمینه و هدف: فرایند انجام پایان نامه دانشجویی دارای مراحل است که انتخاب عنوان بی شک سخت ترین مرحله آن به حساب می آید. دانشجویان در این مرحله با چالش های فراوانی مواجه هستند. این مطالعه با هدف تبیین چالش های دانشجویان کارشناسی ارشد پرستاری در مورد انتخاب عنوان پایان نامه انجام شد.

روش: این مطالعه کیفی با استفاده از رویکرد تحلیل محتوای کیفی قراردادی و روش نمونه گیری هدفمند در سال 1396 انجام شد. دانشجویان کارشناسی ارشد پرستاری دانشگاه علوم بهزیستی و توانبخشی تهران که تمایل به شرکت در مطالعه داشتند، تحت مصاحبه نیمه ساختار یافته قرار گرفتند. نمونه گیری به روش هدفمند انجام و تا اشباع داده ها ادامه یافت.

یافته ها: 14 دانشجو با میانگین سنی $27/35 \pm 3/43$ در این مطالعه شرکت کردند. همه دانشجویان مؤنث بودند. به دنبال تحلیل داده ها سه طبقه و پنج زیر طبقه بدست آمد. طبقات اصلی استخراج شده شامل عوامل آموزشی، عوامل سیستمی و عوامل فردی بود.

نتیجه گیری: با توجه به نتایج مطالعه توجه و رفع چالش های آموزشی، سیستمی و فردی در انتخاب عنوان مناسب پایان نامه در به فرجام رسیدن بدون چالش این فرایند پژوهشی در دانشجویان تحصیلات تکمیلی بسیار ضروری به نظر می رسد. دادن آموزش های لازم به دانشجویان، راهنمایی های مؤثر اساتید و مشاوران و تبیین استراتژی های مناسب و مؤثر در انتخاب عنوان و توانمند سازی دانشجویان در این زمینه می تواند نقش مؤثری در از بین بردن این چالش ها داشته باشد.

واژه های کلیدی: آموزش پرستاری، کارشناسی ارشد، پژوهش، پروپوزال، مطالعه کیفی

الخلفية والهدف: تتضمن عملية إجراء أطروحة الطالب خطوات أن اختيار العنوان هو بلا شك أصعب مرحلة، ويواجه الطلاب العديد من التحديات في هذه المرحلة. كان الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو شرح التحديات التي تواجه طلاب الدراسات العليا في التمريض في اختيار عنوان الرسالة.

الطريقة: أجريت هذه الدراسة النوعية باستخدام منهج تحليل المحتوى النوعي التقليدي وطريقة أخذ العينات الهادفة في عام 2017. تمت مقابلة طلاب ماجستير التمريض في جامعة طهران للرعاية الاجتماعية وعلوم إعادة التأهيل الذين كانوا على استعداد للمشاركة في الدراسة بشكل شبه منظم. تم إجراء أخذ العينات بطريقة مستهدفة واستمر حتى تشبع البيانات.

النتائج: 14 طالباً بمتوسط عمر $27/35 \pm 3/43$ شاركوا في هذه الدراسة. كان جميع الطلاب من الإناث. بعد تحليل البيانات، تم الحصول على ثلاث فئات وخمس فئات فرعية. وشملت الفصول الرئيسية المستخرجة العوامل التربوية والعوامل النظامية والعوامل الفردية.

الخلاصة: بناء على نتائج هذه الدراسة، فإن الاهتمام والتحديات التعليمية والنظامية والفردية في اختيار عنوان الرسالة المناسب أمر ضروري لإنجاز عملية البحث. لذلك، فإن توفير التدريب اللازم والتوجيه العملي من قبل الأساتذة والمستشارين، وشرح الاستراتيجيات المناسبة في اختيار العنوان، وتمكين الطلاب في هذا المجال يمكن أن يلعب دوراً مؤثراً في القضاء على هذه التحديات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليم التمريض، ماجستير، بحث، اقتراح، دراسة نوعية

پوسٹ گریجویٹ نرسنگ طلباء میں مقالہ کا عنوان منتخب کرنے کے چیلنجز: ایک معیاری مطالعہ

پس منظر اور مقصد: طالب علم کا مقالہ میں ایسے مراحل ہوتے ہیں کہ عنوان کا انتخاب بلاشبہ سب سے مشکل مرحلہ ہوتا ہے۔ اس مرحلے میں طلبہ کو بہت سے چیلنجز کا سامنا کرنا پڑتا ہے۔ اس مطالعہ کا مقصد مقالہ کے عنوان کے انتخاب میں پوسٹ گریجویٹ نرسنگ طلباء کے چیلنجز کی وضاحت کرنا ہے

طریقہ: یہ معیاری مطالعہ 2017 میں روایتی معیار کے مواد کے تجزیہ کے نقطہ نظر اور مقصدی نمونے لینے کے طریقہ کار کو استعمال کرتے ہوئے کیا گیا ہے۔ تہران یونیورسٹی آف سوشل ویلفیئر اینڈ ری بیلیٹیشن سائنسز کے ماسٹر آف نرسنگ طلباء جو مطالعہ میں حصہ لینے کے خواہشمند تھے ان کا نیم ساختہ انٹرویو لیا گیا۔ نمونے لینے کو ابدائی انداز میں انجام دیا گیا اور ڈیٹا کی سترپتی تک جاری رہا۔

نتائج: 27.35 ± 3.43 کی اوسط عمر کے 14 طلباء نے اس مطالعہ میں حصہ لیا۔ تمام طالبات خواتین تھیں۔ اعداد و شمار کے تجزیہ کے بعد، تین کلاسز اور پانچ ذیلی طبقات نکالی گئی ایم کلاسوں میں تعلیمی عوامل، نظامی عوامل اور انفرادی عوامل شامل تھے۔

نتیجہ: مطالعہ کے نتائج کے مطابق، گریجویٹ طلباء میں چیلنجز کے بغیر اس تحقیقی عمل کو مکمل کرنے کے لیے مقالہ کے مناسب عنوان کے انتخاب میں تعلیمی، نظامی اور انفرادی چیلنجز کی طرف توجہ اور ان کا حل بہت ضروری معلوم ہوتا ہے، جس کے لیے ضروری تربیت دی جاتی ہے۔ طلباء، پروفیسرز اور کونسلرز کی موثر رہنمائی اور عنوان کے انتخاب میں مناسب اور موثر حکمت عملیوں کی وضاحت اور اس شعبے میں طلباء کو بااختیار بنانا ان چیلنجز کو ختم کرنے میں موثر کردار ادا کر سکتا ہے۔

مطلوبہ الفاظ: نرسنگ کی تعلیم، ماسٹر، تحقیق، تجویز، کوالٹیو اسٹڈی

INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of health improves lifestyle through health promotion by producing new knowledge via technologies and providing evidence-based decision making and is, therefore, a necessity for economic and social development (1). University theses, indeed, are the most demonstrative instance of students' research projects (2,3). In this regard, the medical universities play an essential role in the scientific progress of society by conducting basic and applied research as student theses. A crucial part of this role can be evaluated by reporting students' research activities, particularly the number of articles published (4). Students demonstrate their knowledge, skills, attitude, strength, initiative, confidence, perseverance, and the research spirit throughout the research (5). The thesis is, in fact, effective in students' self-assessment of mental abilities, experimental and clinical skills, as well as their level of scientific and logical maturity; therefore, it provides a path for them to gain knowledge on the research method and critical analysis skills of published articles (6).

According to the educational protocol, nursing as a university discipline in Iran includes 6 Master's thesis credits and 20 Specialized Doctoral dissertation credits. The nursing thesis is an essential part of graduate nursing students' education, by which they make their first systematic and scientific attempt to learn the research basics. Articles extracted from nursing theses contribute to the dissemination of science and the development of the nursing profession as an important field (7). Implementing a student thesis has steps, among which choosing the title is undoubtedly the most challenging. Students face numerous challenges at this stage. Despite its importance, writing a thesis is often a source of distress and anxiety for final-year students. Most students refer to their thesis title as a cause of anxiety, worry, and confusion in this educational step (6,7).

Studies in this field have shown that nursing students have insufficient information about the process of conducting research and thesis; therefore, they are required to utilize numerous studies to choose their thesis title (7,8). Students' ability to identify and choose a title among various titles causes anxiety while making decisions. In such situations, students are overwhelmed by multiple subjects, so their ability to decide on the appropriate thesis title is reduced. The approach and limitations of the chosen thesis are of the utmost concern for students; whether they would have adequate time or find useful papers to complete the thesis were also among their concerns (6). According to most students, perfect topics for the thesis are those that thoroughly reflect their interests. Some students were anxious not to maintain their interest in their chosen title throughout the thesis (8). In this regard, in a study conducted by Amini et al., 65.9% of students felt compelled to perform their thesis while lacking any interest. According to the mentioned study, the most common criteria for students to choose a thesis topic and the supervisor were "straightforward and short-term topic" and "the supervisor's cooperation to accomplish the thesis," respectively. The students' enthusiasm for preparing the

thesis, the time of choosing the thesis topic, and choosing the topic by themselves were among the factors influencing their selection criteria (4).

Postgraduate students' lack of previous experience and insufficient familiarity with the research and thesis implementation has caused this process to become highly stressful and challenging for students who enter the new educational level. In this regard, identifying postgraduate nursing students' challenges and ideas in conducting research activities and choosing the thesis title can help educational planners reduce and resolve students' complications throughout their studies and modify the thesis-related research processes. It guides students toward conducting useful and favored studies in the nursing field with the least challenge, resulting in the promotion of nurses' level of education and research in the health field. Since qualitative research method including content analysis examines the views of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and understood the problems in its cultural and social context (9-11), the researchers of this study were determined to conduct a study using content analysis approach to explain the challenges of choosing a thesis title faced by postgraduate nursing students of Tehran University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences.

METHODS

This qualitative study was conducted using the conventional content analysis approach and purposive sampling method in 2017. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with postgraduate nursing students of Tehran University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences who were willing to participate in the study and selected their title thesis. Interviews were carried out after coordination with students at the end of the classes in one of the empty classes of the Nursing Department. The questions were included in an interview guide. The sequence of questions was not identical for all participants and depended on the interview process. At first the questions were general and led interviewees to share their experiences. Sample questions were: What is the process of choosing a thesis title at your university? How did you choose the title of your thesis? What problems and challenges did you have in choosing the title? According to the interview flow, these initial questions were asked with similar statements or continued with other exploratory questions. Participants were selected using the purposive method. The process of selecting participants continued until data saturation was obtained and 14 postgraduate nursing students were interviewed. The duration of the interview depended on the participants' condition ranging from 30 to 55 minutes. The interviews were recorded by a pocket recorder, and the full text was transcribed instantly after each interview.

Data analysis

In order to analyze the data, conventional qualitative content analysis was used according to the steps proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) (12). Using this qualitative method and immersing herself in the data, the

researcher, while refraining from imposing an opinion or using pre-determined categories, tried to gain a new understanding of the concept and extract the constituent categories of the concept directly from the data resulting from the participants' experiences (9,12). The study researchers read the transcribed content of the recorded interviews several times to obtain a general and accurate understanding. All interviews and observations were considered as a unit of analysis. Words, sentences, and paragraphs were considered as meaning units. Afterward, the meaning units reached the level of abstraction and conceptualization according to the embedded concept and were labeled with codes. The codes were compared with each other in terms of their similarities and differences and classified into more abstract subcategories and categories with a specific label (12,13). Data analysis was performed using MAXQDA software ver. 2010.

Trustworthiness

To determine the trustworthiness of the findings, Guba and Lincoln's four criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were used (13,14). To this end, the interviews' texts and the codes, as well as the emerged categories were provided to several experienced researchers to review the data analysis process and comment on its accuracy. For credibility, prolonged engagement with the research subject and data was used. Interviews, extracted codes, as well as subcategories and categories, were shared with some participants and qualitative research experts, and their opinions were applied. The research steps and decisions made during it were accurately recorded and reported to establish data dependability and enable others to follow up on the research if required.

RESULTS

Totally, 14 post graduated nursing students (6 students in the fourth semester, 4 in the third semester and 4 in the second semester) with a mean age of 27.35 ± 3.43 participated in this study. All students were female. Following data analysis, 3 categories and 7 subcategories, as well as 245 cods emerged. The main categories extracted in this study included educational, systemic, and individual factors. The extracted subcategories included Insufficient education, Lack of specific educational strategy, choosing a title in a specific field, lack of specific educational strategy, Obligation to choose a title in specific fields, Restricted time, A shortage of professors, decreased motivation, Inability to choose thesis title, and Unpreparedness.

Category: Educational factors

The first category extracted from participants' statements was 'Educational factors,' which included two subcategories: 'Insufficient education,' and 'Lack of specific educational strategy.'

Subcategory: Insufficient education

Participant No. 2: "I hadn't already been educated in this field as I entered Master's degree. I didn't know how to search. When the first semester ended, they told us to choose the title. I was really confused. I was just looking for someone to guide me; I met senior students. They should teach first and then ask students to choose a title. The title is very important. Because I think the future of our career depends on it."

Subcategory: Lack of specific educational strategy

Participant No. 4: "I didn't know how to choose a title. If there's a specific method and structure in choosing a title,

Table 1. Extracted categories, subcategories and codes

Codes	Subcategories	Categories
Insufficient education on writing research papers in the undergraduate course, insufficient education to search for references, the difference between postgraduate and undergraduate courses	Insufficient education	Educational factors
Lack of a specific program to choose the title, lack of a specific educational strategy to choose a thesis title	Lack of specific educational strategy	
The compulsion to choose a title in the fields introduced by professors, professors' disinterest in students' preferred fields, choosing a title according to the supervisor's or advisor's opinion, the unfeasibility of conducting research in some topics selected by students, ignoring titles in some cultural and gender issues, inadequate samples on some topics	Obligation to choose a title in specific fields	Systemic factors
Limited time to implement the thesis, postgraduate students' employment, prolonged process of defending the title	Restricted time	
A shortage of faculty members, a large number of theses, a shortage of professors to guide and advise students, senior students' delayed defense process	A shortage of professors	
Lack of aspiration and motivation to do research, lack of interest in the selected title, entering a new level and dealing with the problems of continuing education, disinterest in the title chosen by professors	Decreased motivation	Individual factors
Postgraduate students' unfamiliarity with the thesis process, insufficient knowledge on choosing a title, not taking courses in the title selection method, insufficient knowledge on the research steps	Inability to choose a thesis title	
Unpreparedness to enter the Master's course, entering the new stage without sufficient preparation	Unpreparedness	

it'll be clear for the student how to do it. Universities should have a specific planning strategy so that the students won't be confused."

Category: Systemic factors

The second category was 'Systemic factors,' which consisted of three subcategories: 'Obligation to choose a title in specific fields,' 'Restricted time,' and 'A shortage of professors.'

Subcategory: Obligation to choose a title in specific fields

Participant No. 1: "In the very first days, they told us to specify the supervisor; each professor had a scope specific to him/her, and they told us to choose a title only in that field..."

Subcategory: Restricted time

Participant No. 2: "they told us that we had to defend the proposal before the third semester, so we needed to choose a title quickly. It was very stressful for me because we had to choose a title to do the research quickly, and also we had to choose the title in a very short time"

Subcategory: A shortage of professors

Participant No. 6: "The number of professors was also small. I had to choose one of those professors as a supervisor. I couldn't find a professor whose scope I was interested in. I had to choose the one that was closer to the field I liked."

Category: Individual factors

The third category was 'Individual factors' consisting of three subcategories: 'Decreased motivation,' 'Inability to choose a thesis title,' and 'Unpreparedness.'

Subcategory: Decreased motivation

Participant No. 10: "Master's course is very different from Bachelor's. There're subjects in Master's course that I hadn't gained any knowledge about in Bachelor's course; so when I realized that research and thesis are very important in Master's course, I lost my motivation ..."

Subcategory: Inability to choose a thesis title

Participant No. 13: "I had no knowledge of the thesis, choosing the title, and doing research; as if I had entered a new world..."

Participant No. 5: "Bachelor courses are very different from Master's. If you want to study a Master course, you must be prepared to do research and thesis. Students usually don't know anything the first days; professors should hold some classes and teach them. At first, they just tell students to choose a title. We were all looking for a title in different magazines and articles. Well, it's hard; not everyone can do this, know what to do, or where to search....."

Subcategory: Unpreparedness

Participant No. 2: "I wasn't completely prepared... because in Bachelor's course, all courses were specialized, and I knew very little about statistics and research. I think they should plan a preparation course so that we know how to look for a good title....."

DISCUSSION

As the present study was conducted to determine postgraduate students' challenges in choosing a thesis title, educational, systemic, and individual factors were considered by students to be the challenges of choosing a

thesis title. Students often pointed to the lack of appropriate training courses, the educational system's problems in choosing the title, unpreparedness, and reduced motivation to deal with complications. Similarly, in the study by Khorsandi et al., educational, structural, and human resources barriers were the most critical challenges of choosing the thesis title reported by GP graduates (15). In his study, Behzadi indicated that participation in a training course on research skills can provide students with positive knowledge and performance (16). Similarly, Wayne stated that obtaining necessary knowledge on the studied concept, selecting methods of measuring and interpreting the results, and identifying the relationship between hypotheses in order to develop therapeutic interventions is a necessity for students, and they are required to be trained in this field (17). Likewise, Flint et al. showed that in order to involve medical assistants in the research process, they must first be trained in clinical research (18). According to this study and other study results, it seems necessary to hold educational courses for postgraduate students on research methods of choosing a title, writing a thesis, and conducting research. Regarding systemic barriers, selecting a title in a specific field, lack of specific educational strategy on choosing a thesis title, restricted time to implement the thesis, and a shortage of professors to guide and advise students were among challenges of thesis title selection. Most students complained about being obliged to choose a title in professors' field of work and the ambiguity of choosing a title and referred to it as major challenges. Supervisors play a motivating role in students' research activities and can improve their research spirit by taking their interests into account (18). In the same vein, in Khorsandi's study, most students faced challenges such as a lack of time and implementation problems throughout their thesis (15). Likewise, in several other studies, students needed one more semester and more time to accomplish their thesis (18,19). However, in another study in Germany in 2012, most of the graduates stated that thesis-related activities did not prolong their course of study (20). The number of professors is the fundamental point in the accurate process of thesis implementation and the reduction of related problems. In the study done by Khorsandi, the students mentioned restricted access to supervisors and statistics consultants, the lack of guidance from supervisors, inadequate student support, and lack of professional communication between supervisors and students as some of the supervising barriers. According to the participants, the supervisor plays a crucial role in advancing, directing, and conducting the research, preparing the final report, preparing the student to defend the thesis, and extracting the article from the thesis. A busy schedule and inconvenient access to supervisors were among the barriers to thesis implementation (15). Radafshar et al., in their research, similarly mentioned the supervisor's cooperation and easy access as essential factors in the thesis process (6). Therefore, a high number of supervisors, accurate guidance provided for students to choose the title, not imposing an obligation on students to choose the title in a specific field, and considering students' preferences can result in choosing the title fast and alleviating related challenges.

Regarding individual barriers, lack of ambition and motivation to conduct research, inability to choose a thesis title, and unpreparedness to enter the Master course were considered by the participants as challenges in choosing the Master thesis title. From nursing students' point of view, due to the dramatic difference between the undergraduate and the postgraduate courses, their motivation and enthusiasm to do research were ignored. Regarding the unpreparedness of students and their unawareness, they initially underwent a decreased motivation.

In the study by Khorsandi et al., 'lack of motivation' was extracted from individual barriers. Most students acknowledged that research conducted in Iran is not practical and that their thesis results would be disadvantageous if not published. In addition, in their opinion, the thesis was barely influential on their occupational and scientific future and was not considered. Furthermore, from students' perspective, implementing a thesis does not provide supervisors with material or spiritual rewards, causing them to be reluctant (15). Likewise, in other studies, the role of students' motivation and enthusiasm to implement the thesis is accentuated (21-23). Changiz et al., in their study on the problems in the dissertation process, pointed to the students' low motivation as a deterrent in the process of thesis implementation (23). Therefore, paying attention to informing, preparing, and providing postgraduate nursing students with the necessary motivation will help raise their enthusiasm to conduct research, choose an appropriate and practical title, and perform the subsequent steps of the thesis. Identifying the challenges of postgraduate nursing students and their viewpoints about systemic, educational, and individual problems in choosing the title and topic of the thesis can help educational planners reduce students' complications in their studies and guide them to conduct favored and beneficial studies in the field of nursing education. As a result, the quality of this process can be modified, and the level of health-related research in the country be improved. According to the categories extracted in this study, paying attention to systemic, individual, and educational factors in choosing the

appropriate thesis title and implementing the research process with the least challenges in postgraduate students seems extremely necessary. Therefore, providing the necessary training, professors' and consultants' practical guidance, and allocating financial resources and an efficient educational system in this field can effectively remove these obstacles.

The limitations of this study are specific to qualitative research, the most crucial point of which is the transferability of the research findings. The researcher's responsibility is to provide sufficient descriptive data in the research report for the readers to enable them to evaluate the application of the data in further fields. Therefore, a detailed description and samples of participants' quotations and the researcher's close attention to expressions and taking notes during the interviews can lead to the transferability of the research. An attempt was made to provide transferability of the findings for further evaluation and judgment by using the purposive sampling method and recruiting participants of maximum variety.

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, etc. have been completely observed by the authors.

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Conflicts of interest: Researchers in this study declare no conflicts of interest.

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