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# 'There is no justice in nursing school': A qualitative analysis of nursing students' experiences of discrimination shared on Reddit

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## Abstract

**Aim:** To explore nursing students' experiences of stigma and discrimination within nursing programmes as shared on Reddit, and how other Reddit users offer support and guidance.

**Design:** Qualitative interpretive description.

**Methods:** Through a critical social theory lens, this study draws on students' posts from three nursing subreddits: *r/studentnurse*, *r/nursingstudent* and *r/nursing*. Data were collected from March 2013 to March 2023. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to generate broad themes of nursing students' experiences of stigma and discrimination, and how other Reddit users offered support and guidance.

**Results:** A total of 43 posts with 1412 associated comments were included in this analysis, which generated three predominant themes of nursing students' experiences. Nursing students faced stigma and discrimination across contexts, including from peers, nurses and other healthcare providers working in clinical practicum sites, and patients. Nursing students' posts described navigating the impacts and consequences of such experiences, including on well-being, and programme and career success. In contexts where students were often alone in their experiences of stigma and discrimination within their programmes and with few identified supports, Reddit users sought support and community through Reddit. While many comments offered validation and support, challenges of this social media platform included conflicting advice and unhelpful, judgmental messages.

**Conclusions:** Despite widely articulated social justice commitments in the profession, nursing students continue to experience stigma and discrimination across contexts within their nursing programmes.

**Implications for Profession:** Nurses and nurse educators have a responsibility to acknowledge and make visible such experiences, and take direct action to prevent and remediate stigma and discrimination within nursing education.

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**Impact:** This research contributes to the growing empirical evidence that nursing students' experience stigma and discrimination within nursing programmes and the healthcare system.

**Reporting Method:** Adherence to COREQ guidelines was maintained.

**Patient or Public Contribution:** No patient or public contribution.

#### KEYWORDS

discrimination, nursing education, nursing students, social justice, stigma

## 1 | INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The nursing profession is committed to promoting equity in health and healthcare with longstanding calls for nurses to uphold social justice: the active engagement in practices that aim to mitigate injustices and enhance equity in health and healthcare (American Nurses Association, 2017; Canadian Nurses Association, 2017; International Council of Nurses, 2021). Indeed, a predominant ideology of the nursing profession is one that is committed to fighting health inequities and preventing stigma and discrimination (National Academies of Sciences et al., 2021), and resultantly, nurses believe that they are egalitarian, non-discriminatory and social justice advocates (Morin & Baptiste, 2020). However, nursing students continue to experience stigma and discrimination pertaining to their race, sexual orientation, gender identity, mental status and disability within nursing programmes (Loftin et al., 2012; Valdez et al., 2023). For example, prior research has demonstrated that racialized nursing students endure microaggressions relating to race and ethnicity, and experience being ignored and overly scrutinized by nursing instructors, patients and nurses in clinical settings (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2020; Hadian Jazi et al., 2022; Jamshidi et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2022; Miller & Vaughn, 2023). Nursing students living with a disability report attempting to hide their disability from nursing instructors due to fear of discrimination (Neal-Boylan & Miller, 2017). These experiences of stigma and discrimination impact nursing students with negative consequences on their mental health, including feeling stressed, devalued and isolated with increased depression, anxiety and substance use (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2022). Moreover, facing stigma and discrimination leads to adverse consequences for student motivation and success during nursing school and interest in the nursing profession (Hadian Jazi et al., 2022; Valdez et al., 2023).

While such experiences of discrimination persist, nursing associations continue to emphasize professional commitments to increasing equity, diversity and inclusivity (American Nurses Association, 2021; Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing, 2020). This tension between the upholding of social justice as a central value within nursing and the experiences of nursing students facing discrimination within their own programmes obscures the reality of harms perpetuated by nurse educators and nursing programme processes and structures (Hamzavi & Brown, 2023). However, this tension has not been fully explored within the literature, which has hindered institutional progress towards remediating such harm. While prior research has explored particular instances of racism, ableism and homophobia within

nursing education, a broader lens exploring the ways in which nursing students across intersecting social locations are experiencing stigma and discrimination is needed to ensure forward movement and change within the profession, particularly in upholding its social justice values. Furthermore, the literature to date lacks a nuanced understanding of how these experiences impact nursing students during their programmes and ways students seek support in coping (Loftin et al., 2012). This current study is responsive to these knowledge gaps, and aims to explore nursing students' experiences of stigma and discrimination within nursing programmes as shared on the popular social media site Reddit, which hosts a number of robust nursing community forums.

Reddit is a widely used online social media platform, ranked the eighth most visited website in the world (Statista, 2023). Within Reddit, users engage in discussion via subreddits – user-created community forums that have their own norms, moderation practices and discussion pertaining to a specific topic. Moreover, the anonymity of Reddit users and its widespread popularity make this social media platform well-suited for conversations that span different geographical regions and may touch on challenging subjects where a user may wish to conceal their identity or discuss among strangers. As such, the utilization of Reddit as a data source for research has become more common in health research, particularly due to the authenticity, richness and vastness of the data (Kepner et al., 2022; Proferes et al., 2021; Slemon et al., 2021). For this current study, we utilized three active subreddits that nursing students frequent to share information and seek advice and support during their nursing education journey.

## 2 | THE STUDY

This study aims to explore nursing students' experiences of stigma and discrimination within nursing programmes as shared on Reddit, and how other Reddit users offer support and guidance.

## 3 | METHODS

### 3.1 | Theoretical framework

Together, our inquiry is guided by critical social theory as a broad theoretical framework that draws attention to structural conditions that create and perpetuate oppression (Browne, 2000). Critical social theory builds upon a rich tradition of critical

theories – including feminist theory, postcolonial theory and queer theory – to enhance foundational theoretical understandings of how oppression operates within society (Browne, 2000). Rather than framing oppression as individual and interpersonal in nature, critical social theory understands oppression – and thus, stigma and discrimination – as foundationally embedded in social and institutional power structures (Fontana, 2004). In taking up critical social theory in this study, we understand stigma and discrimination experienced by nursing students not as individualized ‘incidents’ but rather as resulting from power structures that create and maintain oppression, including academic, institutional and professional policies, guidelines and norms. Moreover, critical social theory supports this research by illustrating the myriad and intersecting ways that oppression operates in society, and thus within nursing education. This research aims to visibilize and critique such power structures that shape students’ experiences of nursing programmes, with the broader aim of ‘critiquing fundamental ideologies on which nursing is developed’ (Browne, 2000, p. 35), including normative constructions of whiteness, compulsory heterosexuality and gendered caring discourses (Bonini & Matias, 2021; Searle, 2019). By calling into question these normative ideologies, we further build on critical social theory towards emancipatory aims of this research, imagining strategies for resisting power structures that shape nursing education and thus redressing stigma and discrimination experienced by nursing students.

### 3.2 | Methodology

This study’s examination of nursing students’ experiences of discrimination is guided by an interpretive description methodological approach. Developed by Thorne (2016), interpretive description is a theoretically flexible methodology that supports the construction of knowledge within ‘the applied world of the practice disciplines’ (2016, p. 56). In this research, we utilize interpretive description to generate disciplinary understandings of stigma and discrimination within the nursing profession and to explore pragmatic strategies for nurse educators towards eliminating oppression. Through a critical social theory lens, interpretive description allows for analysis of the ‘real world’ impacts of nursing, academic and institutional power structures on nursing students, thus informing the development of processes and structures that resist oppression and uphold nursing’s social justice commitments.

### 3.3 | Data collection

Data were collected from three subreddits: *r/studentnurse*, *r/nursing-student* and *r/nursing* with posts and comments ranging from March 2013 to March 2023. These subreddits were selected as the three dominant nursing and nursing student subreddits, comprising a large network of approximately half a million users. To capture original

posts, we utilized Reddit’s search function across each subreddit with search terms including: ‘discrimination’, ‘stigma’, ‘racism’, ‘disability’, ‘pregnancy’, ‘mental illness’, ‘self-harm’, ‘marijuana’, ‘suicide’ and ‘queer’. Reddit’s search algorithm captures any use of these search terms within the original post and/or subsequent comments. We included English-language posts where the original poster identified any prior or anticipated experience of stigma or discrimination (i.e. stemming from unjust social processes such as racism, sexism, homophobia or transphobia, ableism, etc.) within their nursing programme. Posts were excluded if the original poster referenced instances of unfair treatment not considered stigma or discrimination, or experiences outside their nursing programme. As Reddit is a largely anonymous platform that does not provide personal or geographic information about its users, we did not apply any further exclusion criteria. Identified original posts and comments were transferred to Microsoft Word for analysis.

### 3.4 | Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to inform our data analysis processes, as an experiential and critical approach well suited to generating themes that capture patterns of meaning across a dataset while acknowledging the researcher’s role in knowledge production (Braun et al., 2022). Analysis involved reading and re-reading original posts and comments and collectively documenting initial reflections and overarching patterns, particularly nursing students’ experiences in navigating oppression and power structures within their programmes. Within the context of the research aims, codes were inductively generated by all members of the research team and matured into preliminary broad themes during team meetings. As analysis continued, these themes were re-examined for coherency and validity which involved a recursive process of comparing emerging themes with the original data and identifying meaningful patterns across the dataset (Braun et al., 2022). Throughout the analysis, we critically reflected on our values and assumptions, carefully considering the decisions that shaped our final themes.

### 3.5 | Ethical considerations

This research did not require institutional ethics review board approval, as data were not collected directly from human participants and social media data are considered to be in the public domain (Proferes et al., 2021). However, we recognize the complex ethical challenges associated with collecting and reporting social media data, including risks of reverse searchability of direct quotations, which may compromise an individual Reddit user’s anonymity (Adams, 2022; Ayers et al., 2018). To avoid such risks, we followed other research teams’ protocols regarding the use of social media data, including avoiding reporting any usernames or identifying characteristics, and modifying all direct

quotations (Kepner et al., 2022). In altering quotations, we aimed to preserve the meaning and tone of the original post, while preventing reverse searching by using synonyms, rearranging words and/or lightly paraphrasing. All modified quotations presented in this paper were reverse searched through Google to ensure that original posts could not be located. In lieu of quotation marks, we utilize *italics* to denote modified quotations.

### 3.6 | Positionality

We approach this study as nurse educators, new graduate nurses and nurse researchers invested in advancing social justice and preventing discrimination experienced by nursing students across intersecting social locations. Our team includes people who have experienced stigma and discrimination both during and after nursing programmes related to our diverse social identities, including queer, immigrant, racialized and living with mental health challenges. The diverse and varied experiences among our team led to rich, reflexive team analysis meetings, in which we engaged in a rigorous and nuanced process of identifying key themes within the data.

## 4 | FINDINGS

From our search of three nursing subreddits, we identified 43 posts recounting students' experiences of stigma and discrimination in nursing schools, all from different user accounts which are represented by ID numbers throughout the presentation of findings. Across posts, there were a total of 1412 comments (Median = 16; Range = 4–388). Our analysis of posts and comments generated three predominant themes of nursing students' experiences: facing stigma and discrimination across contexts; navigating impacts and consequences; and seeking support and community through Reddit.

### 4.1 | Facing stigma and discrimination across contexts

Nursing students reported experiencing stigma and discrimination across contexts within their programme, including from instructors, peers, nurses and other healthcare providers working in clinical practicum sites, and patients. Such experiences involved multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including racism, ableism, hetero-/cis-normativity, sexism and mental health and drug use stigma. For example, one student described that the director of the nursing programme

...targets Indigenous students with ACTUAL red flags by our names in the system. She accused an Indigenous student of drug abuse (after a personal

loss), fat-shamed a student who has stomach cancer, and disparages Indigenous culture (13).

Here, the director's enactment of racism reflects power structures that perpetuate anti-Indigenous racism, and then, in turn, reifies structural oppression as enshrined in the nursing programme's student records. In another instance of racism within nursing programmes, a student described being unwillingly used by an instructor as an example of conducting assessments on racialized patients: *without asking, they pulled down my eyelid in front of the class (11)* to demonstrate assessment of conjunctivae. Similarly, many students recounted experiences of discrimination enacted by classroom and clinical instructors, including one individual who after struggling with the challenges of a recent divorce and loss of a pet was told by an instructor to both *get over it and consider quitting the programme (5)* due to their lack of engagement, older age and prior university degree. Another student articulated uncertainty in how to identify themselves in job applications as a trans person and was advised by a faculty member to *state my legal name and assigned sex to avoid confusion (6)*, which the student described as invalidating *my identity*. Nursing students additionally described experiencing discrimination in the clinical practicum setting, including one Reddit user who recounted *racist comments* from patients, compounded by their being the *only person of colour on the unit (10)*; with many Reddit posts describing experiences of being the only racialized student in their programme, such incidents illustrate how a lack of diversity in nursing reproduces dominant whiteness and incidents of racism. Similarly, another student recounted how stereotyping intersected with racism in an incident with another healthcare provider in the clinical practicum setting, who *said she assumed I was from house-keeping... then I later realized it's because I'm Hispanic (14)*. Such experiences illustrate how seemingly 'interpersonal' experiences of stigma and discrimination are situated within power structures that create and perpetuate oppression across contexts for nursing students.

Indeed, Reddit posts revealed how stigma and discrimination were hard-wired into professional and institutional processes and systems, and illuminated the impacts of such power structures on nursing students' experiences of their programmes. For example, some Reddit users who described histories of mental health challenges expressed concern that they may not be able to apply to nursing school, or may not be eligible for a nursing licence after graduation. Many students described drug testing procedures as a part of nursing programme admission and enrolment that they worried would expose prescription drug use, including for mental illnesses and other chronic conditions, and thus disqualify them from studying nursing. Furthermore, despite post-secondary structures that are intended to support accommodations for students with disabilities, many students described having accommodations denied within the classroom setting. Disciplinary notions of what nurses 'are' and 'do' shaped such instances of discrimination, with one student describing a pervasive mentality among nurse educators that *there are no accommodations in real life (7)*. While power structures within nursing and nursing education shaped students' experiences of stigma and discrimination, students were further implicated in

healthcare system processes and structures that perpetuated such experiences. Students described anticipated challenges in applying for nursing jobs due to ableist policies around staff absences, and concerns that their identities – for example, as racialized or queer nurses – would jeopardize employment and invite further discrimination. Illustrating how healthcare system power structures create and perpetuate discrimination against nursing students, one student cited a national *bare below the elbows* (33) policy – created for infection control purposes – which they described would make visible their self-harm scars in the clinical practicum setting, potentially leading to forced withdrawal from the programme. Such instances of systemic injustice not only perpetuated experiences of stigma and discrimination but also further led to nursing students questioning the central values of the nursing profession. As reflected by one student: *they teach us not to discriminate... and yet stigma shows right up in the nursing profession* (41).

## 4.2 | Facing impacts and consequences

As a result of nursing students' experiences of stigma and discrimination across contexts within their nursing programmes, Reddit users described facing a wide range of impacts and consequences. Students described impacts on their emotions and well-being, including feeling *nervous, anxious, uncomfortable, beaten down, lost* and *so alone*. Many students explicitly worried about their own declining mental health, including one student reflecting on multiple instances of racism within the clinical practicum setting, stating *this could be what breaks me* (10). Students further articulated impacts on their learning, with one student feeling they were *denied a learning opportunity* (17) and another commenting that rather than expend time and energy addressing incidents of racism within the clinical practice setting, *I should be learning how to be a nurse* (14). Compounding such impacts, nursing students additionally expressed fears of consequences for their programme progression and completion. Reddit users reflected: *I don't want to fail* (42), *I can't afford to repeat* (25), *I'm nervous I won't be successful* (11) and *I'm worried instructors will believe that I shouldn't be a nurse* (19). Students further expressed potential consequences for their future nursing careers, with multiple students stating that they had begun to doubt if they were *fit to be a nurse* (40, 42). One student, stating that they were unsure if they would be able to successfully secure nursing employment after graduation from their programme, mused that perhaps they should *give up my dream now* (21). Indeed, many students considered dropping out of the programme to avoid impacts and anticipated consequences of their experiences of stigma and discrimination.

Acknowledging the considerable impacts and consequences of experiences of stigma and discrimination on students' well-being, learning and programme and career success, many students described taking action to mitigate such impacts and avoid adverse consequences. Reddit users who had experienced discrimination from instructors frequently described contacting programme leaders to report the incident, with one student describing that they directly

contacted the dean *because I believe that my evaluation is being informed by racial prejudice* (11). Students also recounted pushing back against power structures – including policies and administrative protocols – to ensure equitable treatment, including advocating for their own accommodations or seeking options for changing a prior 'legal' name to a preferred name within academic records. Yet, while some students took action following incidents of stigma and discrimination, others described absorbing the experience out of fear of *facing further discrimination* (5) and *making it worse* (25). A few students turned to Reddit for advice on such decisions, with one asking *should I report the instructor?* (43) and another weighing whether to report or to *just take it, knowing that my instructors are the gatekeepers to nursing* (38). Ultimately, with students expressing uncertainty about whether and how to act, and anticipating consequences of taking action, Reddit posts illustrated a pervasive lack of structural support within nursing programmes for preventing, reporting, or remediating experiences of stigma and discrimination.

## 4.3 | Finding support and community through Reddit

As described above, nursing students' Reddit posts recounted experiences of stigma and discrimination across contexts within their nursing programmes, and a resultant range of impacts and consequences of these experiences. With nursing students reporting few structural supports for addressing such experiences and often describing being the only person in their programme who shared their identity or experiences, students turned to Reddit communities for support. Many original posters directly asked for advice, insights and validation within their posts, and all students' posts reflected an intentional decision to share their experiences on this social media platform, often through lengthy and detailed multi-paragraph posts. In response to these posts, other nursing students, prospective students, practicing nurses and nursing educators replied in the comments section, which in many cases sparked conversation among Reddit users – including the original poster – through comment threads. Many commenters reflected that posts resonated with their own experiences, with responses such as *I feel your pain* (10), *this is my exact experience* (2), *I'm in the same boat* (3) and *you're not alone* (4). In this way, through post comments, nursing students were able to connect with others who shared a similar experience, across programmes and geographies. For example, many commenters on posts describing racism came from other nursing students who also reported being the only person of colour in their programmes, with one commenter stating, *I am also a person of colour completing practicums in mostly white areas* (10) and reported similar experiences of racism. Many commenters also offered validation of nursing students' experiences, emphasizing the seriousness of the incident, such as *yes this is discrimination* (5) and *this is racism!* (38). Commenters frequently responded to posts with supportive words, with messages such as *neurodivergent people can be amazing nurses* (27) and *don't doubt yourself* (21). One individual implored a fellow nursing student – who identified as Indigenous in their original

post – *don't quit. Do it for your family, your community, the elders. Think of what you bring to the profession* (13). Much of this validation and support extended beyond individual incidents alone, and more broadly spoke to the challenges of nursing school for people who more routinely experience stigma and discrimination related to their social locations and identities. For example, commenters stated *there is no justice in nursing school* (8) and reflected the irony of students' experiences of discrimination within *the most trusted profession* (15). One individual, commenting on a post in which a nursing student described experiences of mental health stigma within their nursing programme, referenced the commonly used phrase *nurses eat their young* and stated *if you ask me, this begins in nursing school* (20).

Beyond offering validation and support, many Reddit users utilized the comments section to provide direct advice, with varying messages. For example, a post (8) with 32 comments advanced a range of suggestions from commenters on how to address an incident of sexism reported by the original nursing student, from *I would back down* and *take the loss, to make an appointment with the director*. Another post (6) with 33 comments that asked for advice on whether to include pronouns on a resume for applying to nursing positions similarly brought forward conflicting advice, including *do not include information that will lead to discrimination, I would definitely include pronouns and save it for the interview*. In addition to advancing conflicting messages across comments, the comments section of posts often included invalidating, unhelpful and judgmental comments such as *there's nothing you can do* (14), *you're taking it out of proportion* (42) and *you're being sensitive* (43). Many commenters advised nursing students to develop a *thicker skin* (39, 43), drawing on and perpetuating notions of nursing work as necessitating the brushing off antagonistic comments in the workplace. One nurse working as an educator responded to a post (10) recounting an incident of racism, reflecting that such comments from patients are *a reality of the nursing profession*, and described teaching their own students the *maxim don't take it personally*. Such messages not only diminished and invalidated original posters' experiences but also perpetuated messages of discriminatory treatment as inherent to the experience of being a nurse, and thus inappropriate to address or challenge. Such messages were emphasized by comments such as *work in a team, pull your weight* (35) and *focus instead on what you can learn* (15). Yet, despite the presence of unhelpful comments, many Reddit users sought to reframe the conversation and emphasize the importance of acknowledging and responding to stigma and discrimination. For example, on one post (14), where a nursing student recounted an experience of racism in the clinical practicum setting, many comments included invalidating statements such as *with racism, intention is key and you are creating an assumption*. Following these comments, other individuals weighed in to challenge *the excuses others are making* and emphasize that *incidents like this are not accidental or innocent no matter how you try to sugar coat it*.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

Findings from this study illustrate that nursing students are experiencing myriad forms of stigma and discrimination within their

nursing programmes, extending prior literature that has identified students' particular experiences of racism, homophobia and ableism (Kim et al., 2022; Neal-Boylan & Miller, 2017). Within our analysis, nursing students described being confronted by power structures that perpetuated discrimination related to a wide range of intersecting social locations, identities and behaviours, including race, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, mental health status and drug use. Moreover, the contexts of these power structures shaping nursing students' experiences are trifold, as students are situated within nursing disciplinary norms and ideologies, academic processes and systems and healthcare system institutional structures. Building on prior literature that has identified nursing students as experiencing racism from a variety of sources including classroom and clinical settings (Hadian Jazi et al., 2022; Miller & Vaughn, 2023; Valdez et al., 2023), this study emphasizes that nursing students experience discrimination compounded across these multiple contexts. Importantly, this research contributes to the growing empirical evidence that stigma and discrimination persist within nursing more broadly (Saadi et al., 2023), despite claims of the nursing profession as upholding a social justice mandate.

Reddit users within this study grappled with such tensions, reflecting that fundamental disciplinary ideologies of nursing as a trusted profession concerned with remediating inequities were in conflict with their own experiences of stigma and discrimination from peers, nurse educators and nurses working within the healthcare system. Moreover, some nursing students described developing core beliefs of the nursing profession that directly contradicted dominant upheld ideologies, including notions that nurses 'don't take it personally' when faced with discrimination and 'eat their young' by perpetuating discrimination towards students. Such findings illustrate that to meaningfully uphold a central social justice mandate in nursing beyond ideology, educators must make visible the power structures that perpetuate discrimination within nursing programmes and acknowledge that students are indeed experiencing stigma and discrimination across contexts, whether or not these are disclosed to educators.

Beyond highlighting students' experiences of stigma and discrimination, findings from this study underscore the negative impacts that such experiences have on the overall well-being of nursing students, as explored in prior literature (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2022). Many students recounted the feelings of fear, defeat and injustice relating to the experiences of stigma and discrimination across contexts within their nursing programmes. Such experiences were illustrated to have significant impacts on their mental health, compounding the considerable mental health challenges experienced among nursing students more broadly, related to universal stressors such as high workloads and clinical practice demands (Labrague et al., 2017). Moreover, both prior experiences of stigma and discrimination and anticipated fear of further oppression led many students to reconsider their status in the programme with concerns of failure and expulsion, considerations of withdrawing or thoughts of leaving the profession altogether. With global attrition rates from nursing programmes as high as 50% (Eudy

& Brooks, 2022), increased attrition due to experiences of stigma and discrimination may compound the current nursing shortage, which is jeopardizing health and healthcare worldwide (Buchan & Catton, 2023). Furthermore, with international calls to increase inclusivity and diversity within the nursing profession (American Nurses Association, 2021; Canadian Nurses Association, 2020), if nursing students who are experiencing discrimination are forced out of nursing programmes, we risk perpetuating the homogeneity of nursing.

## 5.1 | Recommendations for nursing programmes

For nursing students who posted their experiences of stigma and discrimination on Reddit, many of the comments offered commiseration, encouragement, connection and belonging, with numerous instances of students connecting across geographies with others who shared their particular identities and experiences. However, there were also many unhelpful and damaging messages, a well-documented challenge with Reddit and other online community forums (Proferes et al., 2021). As such, the benefits Reddit may offer do not replace official institutional processes and structures that ought to be embedded within nursing programmes. Indeed, nursing students described feeling alone among peers, unable to report experiences to instructors or directors and fearing retaliation for speaking out, leading to many students choosing to not take action. To prevent nursing students from turning to the potentially harmful Reddit community, we propose three recommendations for nursing programmes that can provide an alternative to anonymous online social media platforms in preventing experiences of stigma and discrimination, and responding to such incidents if they occur. These recommendations, discussed below, include: (i) enhanced awareness of resources; (ii) explicit anti-discrimination policies; and (iii) reporting pathways for discrimination.

First, we encourage nurse educators to build awareness of existing organizations that bring together nursing students with shared social locations and identities and to disseminate information about these communities among nursing student cohorts. For example, in the Canadian context, the Canadian Nursing Students Association (2023) has created caucuses for students to connect and share experiences, including 2SLGBTQ+, Black, Diversability, Indigenous and People of Colour caucuses. Other community organizations include the Canadian Black Nurses Alliance (2023), which aims to 'serve, mentor, and empower Black Canadian Nurses', and build community among Black nursing students through its many affiliated academic institutions. Peer mentorship initiatives within nursing programmes may also serve to bring together students within and across cohorts in what Murray et al. (2023) term 'affinity groups', and potentially connect students with graduated nurses working in their geographical location.

Second, while anti-discrimination policies and processes often exist within academic institutions at a broader level, we advocate for the creation of explicit policies regarding stigma and discrimination

within nursing programmes, which integrate our disciplinary and professional mandates for upholding social justice, remediating inequities and preventing discrimination. Moreover, we propose that these policies are created in partnership with healthcare institutions where nursing students complete their clinical practicums, to ensure a streamlined and collaborative effort towards preventing and remediating stigma and discrimination across institutional contexts. While such policies may support the construction of a nursing education climate that shifts power structures to uphold social justice, dominant social forces that perpetuate oppression may still produce incidents of harm among nursing students.

In such instances, we therefore lastly propose that programmes of nursing develop reporting pathways for discrimination, involving the identification of individuals within the academic institution to whom both nursing students and educators can bring forward concerns regarding particular incidents or broader structural conditions that are reproducing harm. The creation of such reporting structures is an under-explored area of nursing school administration, and warrants further examination. However, potential considerations for reporting pathways are offering multiple modalities for reporting including anonymous and/or online options, and developing cross-institutional processes that support allied responses to stigma and discrimination across academic and healthcare system contexts.

## 5.2 | Limitations of the work

While this study has many strengths, including drawing on a unique and robust dataset from nursing students' Reddit posts, there are important limitations to consider. First, while we aimed for an extensive search of subreddits, varying language use may not have captured all posts recounting students' experiences of stigma and discrimination. However, this qualitative inquiry aimed for a nuanced analysis of central themes rather than an exhaustive capturing of Reddit posts. Additionally, the anonymity of Reddit precludes identifying users' geographic areas, demographics, types of nursing programmes and student status, hindering understanding of the context of students' experiences shared in Reddit posts. As the subreddits included in this study are largely English-language spaces, our analysis did not include any non-English posts or comments. Lastly, this study focused on experiences of stigma and discrimination more broadly, and further qualitative inquiry may be needed to develop nuanced understandings of how students are connecting through social media in response to racism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism specifically within their nursing programmes.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Nursing students' experiences of stigma and discrimination within nursing programmes are in fundamental contradiction with nursing's social justice mandate and cannot be ignored by nurse educators. To respond to the harmful impacts of such experiences, immediate

intersectoral action is needed across nursing discipline, academic and healthcare system contexts. Nurse educators – who hold multiple roles including as nurses, mentors, liaisons with the health care system and often researchers – have the responsibility and the potential to lead such action to create meaningful forward momentum towards social justice within the nursing profession.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have agreed on the final version and meet at least one of the following criteria (recommended by the ICMJE\*):

1. Substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data or analysis and interpretation of data;
2. Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

\*<http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/>.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

## PEER REVIEW

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the social media site Reddit. However, to protect the privacy and confidentiality of Reddit users, we have not created a public repository. The data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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