

# Trends and Developmental Process of Publications on Nursing Ethics: A Bibliometric Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyse the current knowledge structure of publications on nursing ethics and determine the developmental process through a bibliometric analysis. This is a retrospective descriptive study. Data were gathered on September 26, 2022, from the Web of Science (WoS) and analysed using Excel and VOSviewer programs. Studies were searched by title using the following descriptors: “nurse” and “ethics”. A total of 467 studies published between 1977 and 2021 and authored by 785 individuals were examined. Approximately 73.6% of these publications were original articles, and a significant majority (95.1%) were published in English. Studies were from 52 countries and 99 distinct journals. Leading the pack in terms of productivity was the United States (n= 154). The primary keywords utilized across these studies included “ethics,” “nursing,” “nursing ethics,” “code of ethics,” and “education.” Moreover, the emergence of “COVID-19” as a prevalent keyword was observed in studies published from 2020 onwards. Nursing spans a wide array of topics, with a significant focus on imparting ethical values, a subject extensively deliberated within the realm of scientific literature. This study gives an idea about the performance of research and publications on nursing ethics. Ethics principles are essential in providing quality care, in addition to being fundamental for the appreciation of the nursing profession. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new ethical dilemmas to the nursing profession. As nursing ethics will never be a saturated or outdated topic, it is important to encourage research on ethics in the field of nursing.

**Keywords:** Ethics, health, nursing, research

## ÖZ

### Hemşirelik Etiği Konulu Yayınların Eğilimleri ve Gelişim Süreci: Bibliyometrik Bir Analiz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, hemşirelik etiği konusundaki yayınların mevcut bilgi yapısını incelemek ve bibliyometrik bir analiz yoluyla gelişim sürecini belirlemektir. Bu çalışma retrospektif ve tanımlayıcıdır. Veriler 26 Eylül 2022 tarihinde Web of Science (WoS) üzerinden toplanmış ve Excel ve VOSviewer programları kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. “Etik” ve “hemşirelik” anahtar kelimelerini kullanarak başlıklara göre çalışmalar taranmıştır. 1977-2021 yılları arasında yapılan 467 çalışma, 785 yazar tarafından gerçekleştirilmiş ve yayımlanmıştır. Bu yayınların %73,6’sı bilimsel makale olarak belirlenmiş ve %95,1’i İngilizce olarak yayımlanmıştır. Çalışmalar, 52 ülkeden araştırmacılar tarafından gerçekleştirilmiş ve 99 farklı dergide yayımlanmıştır. En üretken ülke Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (n= 154) olarak belirlenmiştir. En çok kullanılan beş anahtar kelime “etik”, “hemşirelik”, “hemşirelik etiği”, “etik kurallar” ve “eğitim”dir. “COVID-19” ise 2020 yılından itibaren yayımlanan çalışmalarda ortak bir anahtar kelime olarak yer almaktadır. Hemşirelikte etik, çeşitli konuları ele almaktadır ve özellikle etik değerlerin öğretimiyle ilgili konular bilimsel literatürde geniş çapta tartışılmaktadır. Bu çalışma, hemşirelik etiği konusundaki araştırma ve yayınların performansı hakkında bir fikir vermektedir. Etik prensipler, kaliteli bakım sağlamak için temel olmasının yanı sıra, hemşirelik mesleğinin değerini anlamak için de temel unsurlardır. COVID-19 pandemisinin, hemşirelik mesleğinde yeni etik ikilemlere yol açtığını vurgulamak son derece önemlidir. Hemşirelik etiği hiçbir zaman doymuş veya eskimiş bir konu olmayacaktır. Bu nedenle, hemşirelik alanında etik konuları üzerine yapılan araştırmaların teşvik edilmesi büyük bir önem taşımaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Etik, sağlık, hemşirelik, araştırma

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethics is one of the most important topics in healthcare; therefore, it is widely addressed in the scientific literature. Nursing ethics is discussed by several researchers to elucidate ethical dilemmas and provide information that is used as guides by nurses (1). The first international code of ethics for nursing was established in 1953 by the ICN. The code has changed over time, and currently, nurses follow what the code of ethics updated in 2021 dictates (1). The code of ethics for nurses involves principles, rights, duties, and prohibitions related to the profession (1).

Being ethical means acting according to rules and moral codes. Beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice are the principles of bioethics that guide nurses during the care process (2). Nurses, therefore, must act to do good for the patient and the community, taking care not to cause harm while performing their duties (3). Nurses must know that patients have the right to receive information about their health status and care process; nurses should also pay attention to patients' right to confidentiality (2,4). In addition, equity, fairness, proportionality, and justice must be present at all stages of the nursing care process (5). Nurses are trained to act ethically when providing care to a diverse population with very varied needs. The ethical principles of the profession are emphasized during nursing courses, and all nurses must assume a pledge in which they affirm they will act with conscience and dedication, respecting human rights and obeying ethical principles (6,7).

During their daily routines, if nurses can be challenged by ethical dilemmas in the presence of new and unexpected situations, the probability of emerging doubts related to ethical decision-making is even greater. A good example of this was the various ethical dilemmas faced by nurses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Several studies address the difficulties experienced by nurses when caring for patients with COVID-19 (2,8-10). During the first periods of the pandemic, the right of nurses to protect themselves was confronted with the obligation to care since the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was a reality faced by many healthcare workers (2,8). Caring for patients while being aware of the lack of sufficient knowledge about COVID-19 and ways of prevention was another difficulty faced by nurses (9,10). In addition, the restrictions on visits to patients with COVID-19, which on the one hand was necessary to protect the population, but on the other hand harmed humanized care, triggered serious ethical dilemmas in the field of nursing (10).

In the face of unexpected situations or not, it is a fact that nursing ethics is always a current subject that needs to be constantly discussed to ensure the health and well-being of

both patients and health professionals (11,12). Given the above, it was identified the importance of investigating publications related to nursing ethics and analyzing the development of the process that involved research on the subject over the years. This study aimed to analyze the current knowledge structure of publications on nursing ethics and to determine the developmental process through a bibliometric analysis.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

### Design

This is a retrospective descriptive study with a bibliometric approach. Descriptive retrospective research exposes the characteristics of a situation or phenomenon by collecting past information (13). Bibliometric studies involve quantitative techniques to present the structure of knowledge and emerging trends on a subject or area of study (14,15). The mentioned design was chosen because it is appropriate for analyzing published studies and determining the research development process on a given topic.

### Data Collection

Data were collected on September 26, 2022, from the Web of Science (WoS). Databases such as WoS, Scopus, and Google Scholar are commonly used in bibliometric studies (16,17). The WoS database was chosen for the ease of exporting information and for having a rich and current history of publications and citations (16,18).

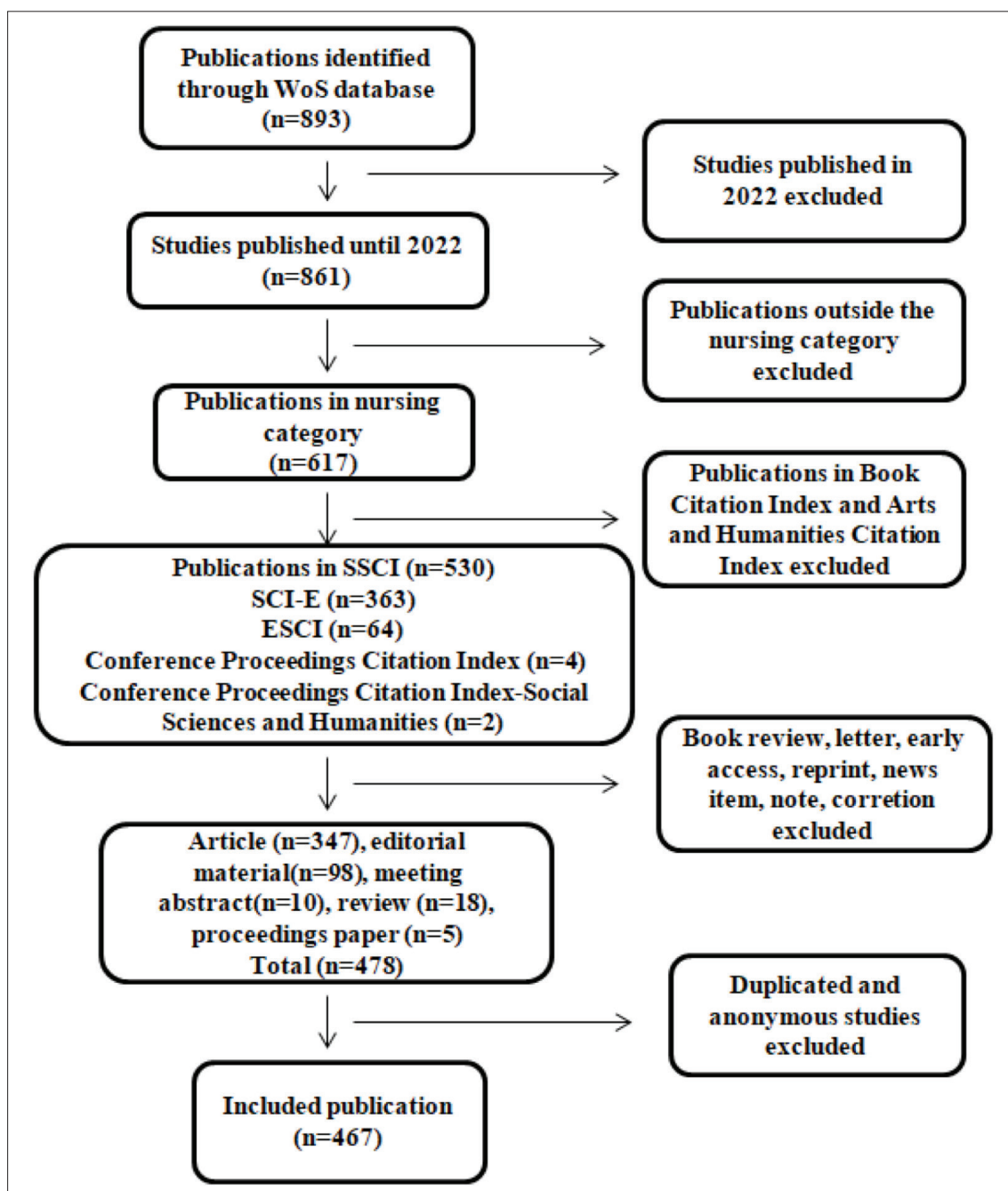
Studies were searched by title using the following descriptors: "nurse" and "ethics." At first, the search was not limited by year of publication, and a total of 893 publications were found. Studies published in 2022 were excluded and the number of publications decreased to 861. The search category "nursing" was selected, and the others were excluded, thus, the number of studies found was reduced to 617. Then, "Science Citation Index Expanded", "Social Sciences Citation Index", "Emerging Sources Citation Index", "Conference Proceedings Citation Index-Social Sciences and Humanities", and "Conference Proceedings Citation Index-Science" were selected as Index categories, and the total number of found studies decreased to 599. Finally, the search was limited by the type of document; "article", "review", "editorial material", "meeting abstracts" and "conference papers" were selected, resulting in a total of 478 publications found. The 478 studies were saved as an Excel document and controlled for typographical errors and duplication. Eight duplicated studies and three studies without authorship were excluded. Titles and abstracts of the 467 remaining publications were read, and all were included in the present study since they were related to

ethics in the area of nursing. The Excel document was converted into an appropriate format to be used in the VOSviewer program. The step-by-step process of searching for studies is shown in Figure 1.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Excel and VOSviewer programs. VOSviewer is a free software that allows the creation of

visual material according to network data. The program can be used in bibliometric studies to create and analyze maps that show characteristics of publications such as the most productive authors, institutions, journals, and countries among others (19). Thus, VOSviewer provided an appropriate data analysis to achieve the objectives of the present study.



**Figure 1.** Flow chart of the search and selection process of the study.

Through VOSviewer, it is possible to analyze the relationship between items, that is, the connection between authors, countries, and institutions, among others; this connection is called Link (L) and is represented by lines on maps, the thicker the line, the stronger the relationship between the items. The distance between the items represents their proximity concerning the researched factor. In addition, each link has its strength represented by a value called Total Link Strength (TLS). Items are represented by circles, the larger the circle, the greater the incidence of the item. Items can belong to groups that are called “clusters”; each group is represented by different colors (19).

## RESULTS

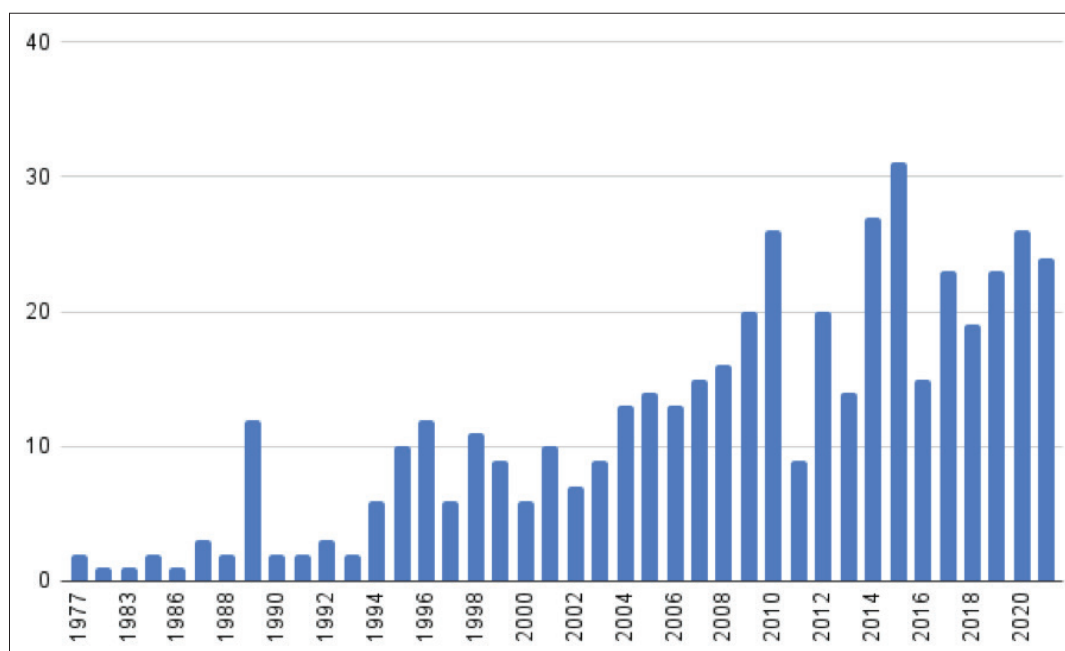
A total of 467 studies published between 1977 and 2021 were examined. The year with the highest scientific production on the researched topic was 2015, with 31 publications. Despite an increase in the production of studies on nursing ethics from 1994 onwards; 1989 is noteworthy for presenting a large number of studies ( $n=12$ ) when compared to previous years. On the other hand, 2011 stands out for presenting only nine publications; in the previous year, 26 studies were published and in the following year, 20 publications were found. The distribution of the 467 studies by year of publication is shown in Figure 2.

The language of publication of the studies was as follows: English ( $n=444$ ), Spanish ( $n=9$ ), French ( $n=5$ ), Portuguese ( $n=4$ ), Korean ( $n=3$ ), and German ( $n=2$ ). Data regarding the

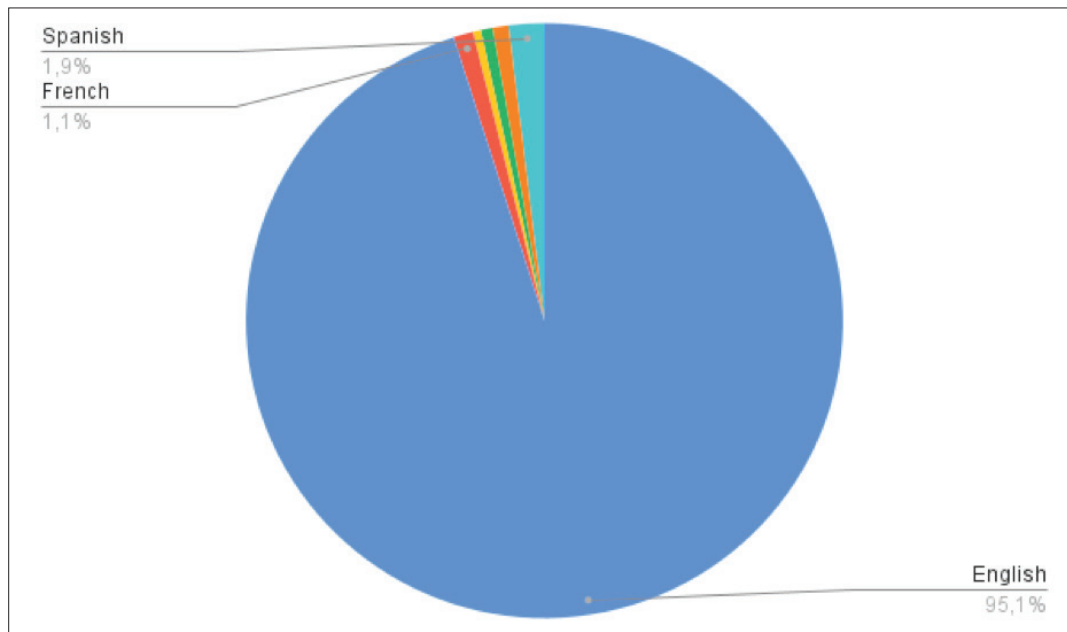
language of the studies is shown in Figure 3. Regarding type of publication, the following was found: article ( $n=344$ ), editorial material ( $n=94$ ), review ( $n=18$ ), meeting abstract ( $n=10$ ), and proceedings paper ( $n=1$ ). Figure 4 presents data on the type of publication of the studies.

These 467 studies were conducted by a total of 785 authors. The five most productive authors were Milton, C.L. ( $n=21$ ), Gastmans, C. ( $n=15$ ), Leino-Kilpi, H. ( $n=11$ ), Gallagher, A. ( $n=11$ ), and Tschudin, V. ( $n=10$ ). The network of authors is represented in nine clusters. Despite being the most productive author, Milton, C.L. does not appear on the network map since all his publications have a single author. The third most productive author, Leino-Kilpi, H., had the highest number of L ( $n=15$ ) and highest TLS ( $n=27$ ). The second most productive author, Gastmans, C., had the second highest number of L ( $n=14$ ) and highest TLS ( $n=24$ ). The network of the most productive authors can be seen in Figure 5.

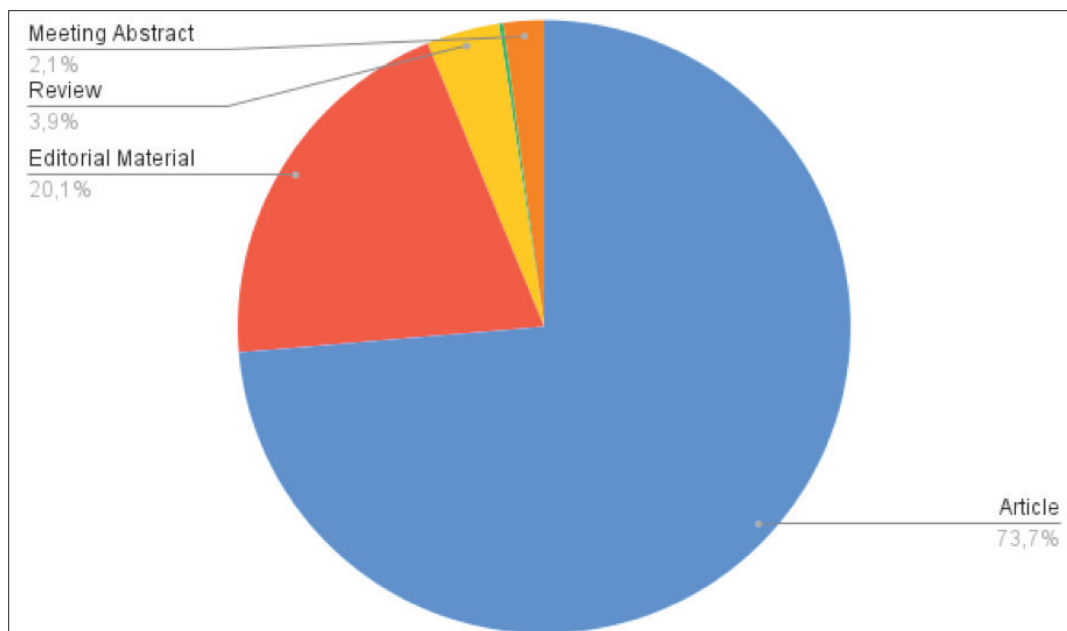
These 467 studies were conducted in 52 countries. The five most productive countries were as follows: the United States ( $n=154$ ), England ( $n=42$ ), Canada ( $n=36$ ), Finland ( $n=20$ ), and Belgium ( $n=19$ ). The network of the most productive countries is represented by 34 countries, divided into eight clusters. The most cited country, the United States, had the highest number of L ( $n=13$ ) and the highest TLS ( $n=20$ ). Figure 6 presents the network of the most productive countries.



**Figure 2.** The distribution of the studies by years.



**Figure 3.** The distribution of the studies by language.

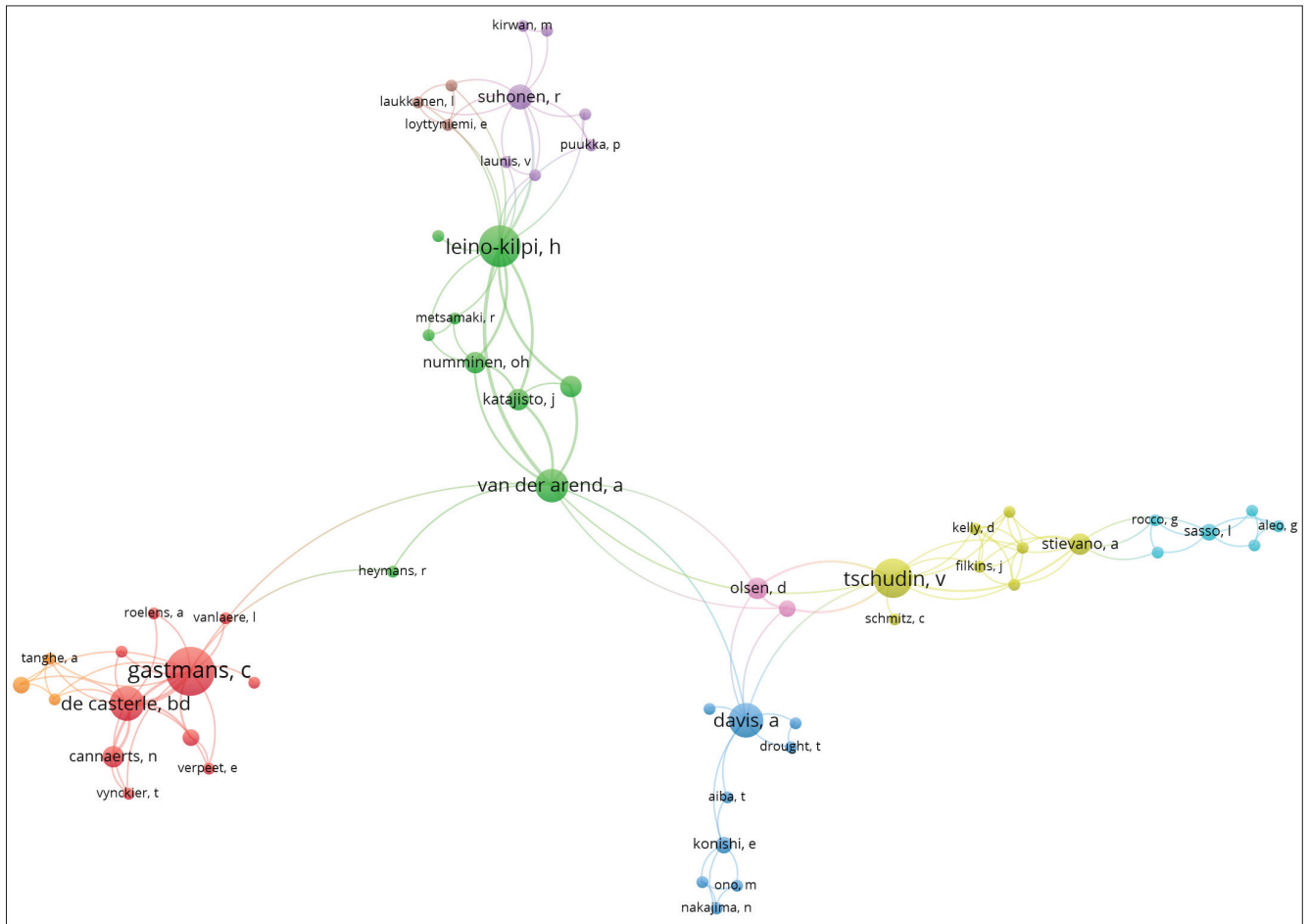


**Figure 4.** The distribution of the studies by type.

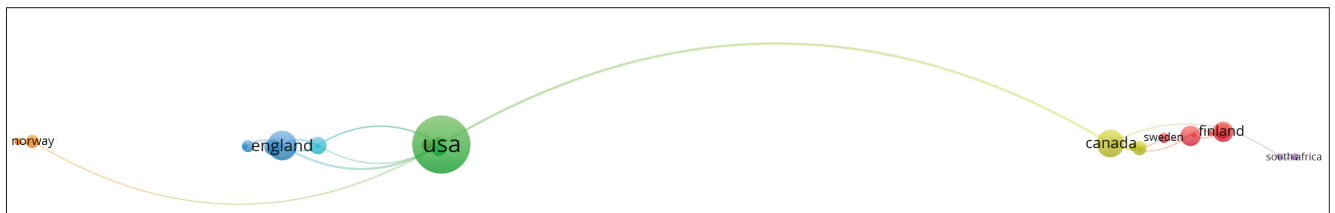
These 467 studies were conducted at a total of 459 institutions. The most productive ones were as follows: Surrey University (n= 15), University of Turku (n= 11), Catholic University of Leuven (n= 11), Azusa Pacific University (n= 11), University of Ottawa (n= 7), and California Baptist University (n= 7). However, the organization with the most L (n= 12) and highest TLS (n= 13) was the National Institutes of Health. The network of the most productive institutions is represented

by 30 items distributed in four clusters. Figure 7 shows the network of the most productive organizations.

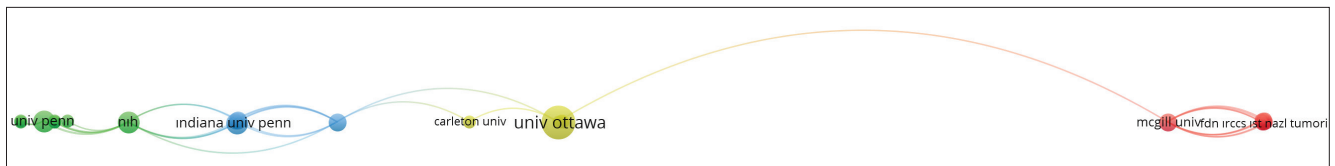
The studies are from 99 journals. Nursing Ethics (n= 162), Journal of Advanced Nursing (n= 25), Nursing Science Quarterly (n= 23), Nurse Education Today (n= 14), and Advances in Nursing Sciences (n= 13) were the five most cited journals. As for the network, the newspapers are presented by 85 items in 13 different clusters. Nursing Ethics



**Figure 5.** Network of the most productive authors.



**Figure 6.** Network of the most productive countries.

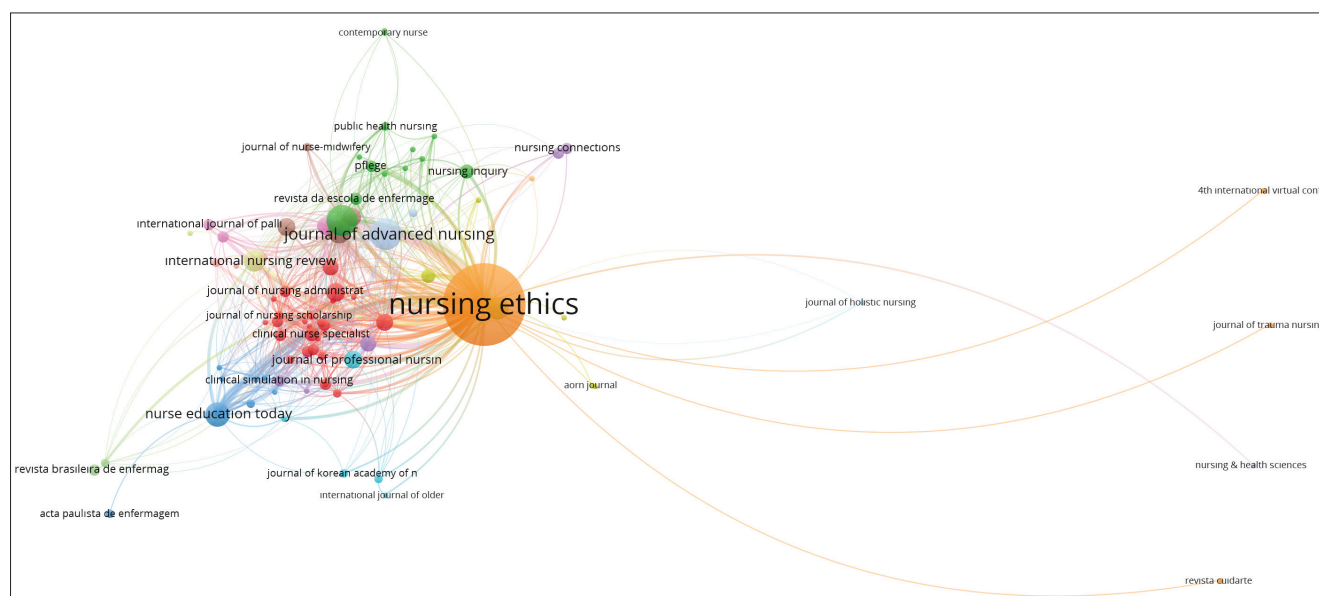


**Figure 7.** Network of the most productive organizations.

was the journal that presented the most L ( $n= 77$ ) and highest TLS ( $n= 2.386$ ). The network of the most productive journals can be seen in Figure 8.

The studies were cited 4542 times. The 10 most cited studies corresponded to 18.36% of the total citations. The most cited study was that of McCarthy & Gastmans. (20), whose title is “Moral distress: A review of the argument-





**Figure 8.** Network of the most productive journals.

based nursing ethics literature”, published in the journal “Nursing Ethics”, which received a total of 125 citations up to September 26, 2022. Six of the most cited studies were published by the journal “Nursing Ethics”. General information about the 10 most cited publications is shown in Table 1.

A total of 770 keywords were used by the authors of the 467 publications included in this study. Ethics (n= 124), nursing (n= 71), nursing ethics (n= 47), codes of ethics (n= 20), education (n= 20), nursing education (n= 14), professional ethics (n= 12), nurses (n= 12), nursing research (n= 11), and ethics education (n= 11) were the 10 most used keywords.

**Table 1.** Most cited studies (till September 26, 2022)

Reference	Title	Journal	Citations
McCarthy, Gastmans (2015) (20)	Moral distress: A review of the argument-based nursing ethics literature	Nursing Ethics	125
Ulrich, et al. (2010) (21)	Everyday ethics: ethical issues and stress in nursing practice	Journal of Advanced Nursing	116
Turale, Meechamnan, Kunaviktikul (2020) (22)	Challenging times: Ethics, nursing and the COVID-19 pandemic	International Nursing Review	94
Park, et al. (2012) (23)	The relationship of ethics education to moral sensitivity and moral reasoning skills of nursing students	Nursing Ethics	83
Woods (2005) (24)	Nursing ethics education: Are we really delivering the good(s)?	Nursing Ethics	81
Lin, et al. (2010) (25)	A comparison of problem-based learning and conventional teaching in nursing ethics education	Nursing Ethics	76
Gastmans (2002) (26)	A fundamental ethical approach to nursing: Some proposals for ethics education	Nursing Ethics	66
Fry (1989) (27)	Toward a theory of nursing ethics	Advances in Nursing Science	66
Vanlaere, Gastmans (2007) (28)	Ethics in nursing education: Learning to reflect on care practices	Nursing Ethics	64
Kangasniemi, Pakkanen, Korhonen (2015) (29)	Professional ethics in nursing: An integrative review	Journal of Advanced Nursing	63



## DISCUSSION

The knowledge and application of nursing ethics are



According to the present study, 2015 was the year in which most studies related to nursing ethics were published; this increase may have been driven by the fact that the American Nurses Association (ANA) named 2015 “the Year of Ethics” (35). It was also noticed that 2011 stood out for presenting far fewer publications than the years that preceded and followed it. This is an interesting fact considering that the theme chosen by the ICN for international nurses’ day in 2011 was “Closing the Gap: Increasing Access and Equity” (36), which could boost the production of studies on ethics in the field of nursing.

Of the studies examined, 95.1% were published in English; similar results were observed in other bibliometric studies carried out in nursing and in other areas (37-40). English is the dominant language in scientific production and studies are increasingly being produced in English to facilitate the dissemination of scientific knowledge, so the result was expected (41,42).

Most studies are original articles. This result is in line with other bibliometric studies carried out in the nursing field (38,43). Most of the studies examined were conducted by authors and organizations from countries such as the United States, England, Canada, Finland, and Belgium. Similar results were identified in previous bibliometric research (43-45). In countries like the United States, it is known that scientific research is fundamental for economic growth, thus, important investment is made to encourage scientific studies (46,47).

The included studies were published by 99 journals. The most cited journals were “Nursing Ethics”, “Journal of Advanced Nursing”, “Nursing Science Quarterly”, “Nurse Education Today”, and “Advances in Nursing Sciences”. The most cited journal, Nursing Ethics, published 34.69% of the studies, in addition, six of the ten most cited studies were published by “Nursing Ethics”; these facts were expected since the theme of the present study is directly linked to the objectives and scope of the journal. “Nursing Ethics” is a journal rated Q1, with a Journal Citation Indicator (JCI) worth 1.43 (48,49). It was noted that although all of the most cited journals are in the field of nursing, they focus on very varied subjects, covering both nursing practice and education, thus reaffirming the importance given to ethics in various dimensions of the nursing profession.

The authors of the 467 publications used 770 different keywords. Keywords are essential for studies to reach their target audience and to disseminate scientific knowledge as they promote important information about the publication in question (50). The most used keywords in the included studies were as follows: ethics, nursing, nursing ethics,

codes of ethics, education, nursing education, professional ethics, nurses, nursing research, and ethics education. It was noted that the 10 most used keywords revolved around four concepts: nursing, ethics, education, and research, which shows that nursing ethics is largely linked to nursing education (6,12,51). It was also observed that 50% of the 10 most cited publications discussed issues related to ethics education. Many of the studies conducted on nursing ethics address the teaching of ethical values to nurses and nursing students (52-55). Ethical values in the field of nursing are increasingly researched. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to new and unexpected situations in which health professionals, especially nurses, had to make quick decisions based on their ethical values. There are many scientific publications that address topics related to COVID and nursing ethics (8,9,56), which can be observed by the presence of the keyword “COVID-19” among the studies published from 2020 onwards. This fact highlights the importance of training nurses to act ethically both in the face of factors that are part of their routines and, in emergencies. The present study has some limitations. Only publications found by searching the WoS database were included. In addition, searches were limited to the nursing category, and studies published in 2022 were not included. More comprehensive search strategies could generate slightly different results.

## CONCLUSION

This study gives an idea about the performance of research and publications on nursing ethics. It was found that there is a growing number of publications on nursing ethics, which is very important, as the health sector is a dynamic area where changes constantly occur, and nurses must be prepared to act guided by ethical principles at all stages of the care process. It was observed that ethics in nursing addresses a wide range of subjects and, mainly, those involving the teaching of ethical values are widely discussed in the scientific literature. This emphasis is also crucial for nursing management, as the theoretical and practical knowledge of ethical values fosters the formation of a culture of integrity and professionalism within healthcare institutions. Therefore, by instilling ethical values, management ensures patient-centered care, respects individual rights, and guides the team in making ethical decisions. Ethical leadership promotes team morale, trust, and job satisfaction, thereby enhancing the quality of care and fostering a collaborative work environment. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new ethical dilemmas to the nursing profession, thus, it is believed that in the coming years, many studies involving nursing ethics and the COVID-19 pandemic will be carried out. As nursing ethics will

never be a saturated or outdated topic it is important to encourage research on ethics in the field of nursing. Ethical principles are essential in providing quality care, in addition to being fundamental for the appreciation of the nursing profession.

**Ethics Committee Approval:** As it is a bibliometric study, there was no need to acquire ethical permissions. Ethical aspects were ensured through the legitimacy of information and authorship of the publications used for the preparation of this study.

**Informed Consent:** The study was not conducted with patients.

**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Author Contributions:** Concept and Design- ALFA; Analysis/ Interpretation- ALFA; Data Collection or Processing- ALFA; Writing- ALFA; Review and Correction- ALFA; Final Approval - ALFA.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest or funding to disclose.

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