

Investigation

Professional values of dentists in the Republic of Korea

Influence of clinical experience and competitive pressure

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ABSTRACT

Background. Dentists' professional values are shaped by means of both career stage and competitive environments. The authors examined how clinical experience and perceived competitive pressure influence Korean dentists' professional values and explored their broader applicability.

Methods. An online cross-sectional, web-based survey was conducted in May 2024 among 28,949 members of the Korean Dental Association, of whom 1,932 completed the questionnaire. Professional values (eg, prestige, service, business expansion, scholarly pursuit, lifestyle, autonomy, and the dentist-patient relationship) were assessed as outcome variables and the following 2 explanatory variables were examined: years of clinical experience and perceived competitive pressure. Data were analyzed using *t* tests, 1-way analysis of variance, and multivariable linear regression analyses ($\alpha = .05$).

Results. Among respondents, 40.0% had 20 years or more of clinical experience and 57.0% reported experiencing high competitive pressure. Dentists with more experience placed greater importance on prestige, service, and scholarly pursuit, and those with fewer years emphasized lifestyle and business expansion. Competitive pressure had weaker effects; dentists experiencing high competitive pressure valued lifestyle more but service less. Autonomy and the dentist-patient relationship consistently had no significant group differences (*P* value of autonomy .369 and .597, *P* value of dentist-patient relationship .075 and .380 for years of clinical experience and competitive pressure, respectively). Multivariable regression confirmed that clinical experience was a stronger and more consistent predictor of professional values than competitive pressure.

Conclusions. Dentists' professional values are dynamic and context-dependent, evolving with career stage while retaining stable core elements of professionalism. Understanding these dynamics requires a life course perspective that accounts for practice environments.

Practical Implications. Dental workforce planning and continuing education programs should account for generational and practice environment differences, providing targeted support for younger dentists, strengthening professional identity, and ensuring sustainability of the profession.

Key Words. Professional values; generational differences; competitive pressure; dental workforce; professional identity.

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The future of the dental workforce is facing a period of complex transformation. Globally, oral health care is evolving into new forms driven by means of technological innovation, an aging population, changes in patient expectations, and advancement of health care delivery

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systems. The American Dental Association projects that by 2040, an oversupply of dentists relative to demand may emerge, heightening the need for diversified career paths, interdisciplinary collaboration, and dentists equipped with technological and managerial competencies.¹ Similarly, in the Republic of Korea (Korea), the number of practicing dentists continues to rise, raising concerns about potential oversupply, intensifying competition, and a decline in service efficiency.²

Korean society has undergone rapid industrialization, democratization, and demographic transition within a few decades. After rapid economic growth in the 1970s and democratization in the 1980s, the 1997 Asian financial crisis ushered in a market-oriented environment that emphasized competition and individual survival strategies.³ Generations shaped by means of these collective experiences exhibit distinct value orientations; those who matured after the crisis prioritize quality of life, personal success, and work-life balance over traditional measures of professional achievement.⁴ Such generational value differences can impede social solidarity, reduce policy acceptance, and generate workplace tensions when left unaddressed.⁵

Research among physicians indicates that older generations perceive medical practice as a calling, valuing professional stability and authority, whereas younger cohorts emphasize work-life balance, emotional rewards, and autonomy.⁶ Similar generational gaps are also reported in the United States; researchers have found that, although they retain a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to others, dental students report lower levels of agency than earlier generations.⁷

In the past several decades, the competitive environment within Korea's dental sector has intensified. This reality often conflicts with the traditional notion of dentistry as a vocation and can contribute to phenomena like burnout.⁸ In the United States as well, burnout among dentists is frequently attributed to heavy administrative and financial burdens, including student debt for early-career dentists and insurance reimbursement pressures for mid-career dental care practitioners as well as long clinical hours and the physical demands of practice, all of which are further exacerbated by means of an increasingly competitive environment.⁹

Gil and Ihm¹⁰ reported that understanding professionalism and maintaining an attitude of continuous reflection are essential for dentists' growth, and that through this ongoing reflection they can strengthen their self-directed learning and ethical decision-making capabilities. Drawing on the social theory of learning, particularly the communities and landscapes of practice framework, we view professional values not as mere personal preferences, but as socially situated constructs shaped through participation in multiple communities and institutional contexts.¹¹

Therefore, understanding individual professional values enables a deeper comprehension of how professionalism is recognized and practiced at both the personal and collective levels.¹² Understanding dentists' professional values is critical to gaining a fuller picture of the profession.¹³ Despite the importance of examining how professional values are interpreted and practiced, depending on the generational cohort and career stage, research in this area has been limited to date. We aimed to investigate dentists' perceptions of professional values according to years of clinical experience and perceived competitive pressure and to examine how these factors influence variations in professional values. The findings are expected to inform policy debates on dental workforce planning and strategies to strengthen professionalism in an era of oversupply and rapid change.

METHODS

Participants and data collection

Study participants were member dentists of the Korean Dental Association registered in May 2024. A total of 28,949 practicing dentists were identified. Data collection was conducted through a pilot survey and the main survey using an online self-administered questionnaire (ie, Google Forms; Google). The pilot survey was conducted with 245 participants to validate the reliability of the questionnaire. The main survey was administered by means of sending a structured questionnaire link via text message to all identified dentists. It was conducted over 6 days (May 30-June 5, 2024), during which 2,067 responses were received, yielding a response rate of 7.1%. After excluding ineligible people, nonrespondents, and those with erroneous or insincere answers, a total of 1,932 participants were included in the final analysis.

Table 1. Descriptions of the 7 domains of dentists' professional values and survey respondents' scores.

DOMAIN	DESCRIPTION	SCORE, MEAN (SD)
Prestige	Importance of being recognized as an excellent dentist by peers or patients	3.65 (0.84)
Service	Importance of providing care for underserved and disadvantaged groups in the community	3.35 (0.84)
Scholarly Pursuit	Importance of contributing to the academic advancement of dentistry	3.49 (0.90)
Lifestyle	Value placed on earning a high income to enjoy a wealthy and leisurely lifestyle	3.44 (0.88)
Business Expansion	Importance of expanding dental practices into a large-scale clinic	1.97 (0.89)
Autonomy	Importance of working in one's preferred manner	4.03 (0.79)
Dentist-Patient Relationship	Importance of sufficiently informing patients and engaging in shared decision making regarding treatment options	4.18 (0.76)

Outcome measures

In our study, dentists' professional values were assessed by means of adapting and modifying the Physician Values in Practice Scale, originally developed to measure the professional values of physicians and medical students.^{14,15} In addition, using the Delphi method, expert opinions were incorporated to add an item addressing dentist-patient relationships, which was not included in the original instrument. During the pilot survey, participants responded to 36 items across 7 domains: 6 each on prestige, service, business expansion, scholarly pursuit, and lifestyle; 5 on autonomy; and 1 on dentist-patient relationships. Cronbach α analysis was performed to assess the reliability of each domain, and 3 items with low reliability were eliminated. From the remaining items, 1 representative item for each domain was selected on the basis of cultural relevance and representativeness, resulting in a final total of 7 items. The final domains and representative items used in the study are summarized in Table 1.

Explanatory variables

In addition to the outcome measures, the following 2 explanatory variables were considered: years of clinical experience and perceived competitive pressure.

Years of clinical experience were categorized into 3 groups (ie, < 10 years, ≥ 10 and < 20 years, and ≥ 20 years). This categorization reflects shared socioeconomic experiences in Korea, such as the 1997 Asian financial crisis (International Monetary Fund crisis) and the 2008 global financial crisis, which may have influenced dentists' professional values across different cohorts.¹⁶

Perceived competitive pressure was measured by means of asking respondents to rate the extent of competitive pressure from surrounding dental practices on a 5-point Likert scale (range, 1 [strongly disagree]-5 [strongly agree]). Based on the responses, scores from 1 through 3 were classified as low competitive pressure, and scores from 4 through 5 were classified as high competitive pressure.

Data analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics software, Version 23.0 (IBM Corp), with the significance level set at .05. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the general characteristics of the study participants and frequencies and percentages were presented for categorical variables. The means and SDs were computed for the 7 domains of professional values to describe their distribution among dentists.

Although sex and age were recorded (Table 2), the main explanatory variables for analysis were years of clinical experience and perceived competitive pressure. To analyze differences in professional values according to years of clinical experience, 1-way analysis of variance was performed, and Scheffé post hoc tests were used when significant group differences were observed. To compare differences according to perceived competitive pressure, independent samples *t* tests were performed. Finally, multivariable linear regression analyses were performed to identify the independent effects of clinical experience and perceived competitive pressure, adjusting for both explanatory variables simultaneously.

Table 2. General characteristics of the study participants.*

CHARACTERISTIC	NO. (%)
Sex	
Male	1,475 (76.3)
Female	457 (23.7)
Age, Y	
≤ 49	1,259 (65.2)
≥ 50	673 (34.8)
Experience, Y	
< 10	527 (27.3)
≥ 10 and < 20	633 (32.8)
≥ 20	772 (40.0)
Competitive Pressure	
Low	831 (43.0)
High	1,101 (57.0)

* Frequency analysis was performed for all categorical variables.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Seoul National University (S-D20240000). Participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study on the first page of the survey and were allowed to proceed only after providing their consent.

RESULTS

General characteristics of the participants

The general characteristics of the study participants are presented in Table 2. Most respondents were male (76.3%) and 40.0% had 20 years or more of clinical experience. More than one-half of the dentists (57.0%) reported experiencing high competitive pressure.

Perceptions of professional values according to years of clinical experience

Dentists with 20 years or more of experience placed significantly greater importance on prestige, service, and scholarly pursuit than those with fewer years of experience (Table 3). In contrast, dentists with less than 10 years of experience rated lifestyle and business expansion values higher than their more experienced counterparts (all P values < .001). No significant differences according to years of experience were found for autonomy ($P = .369$) and the dentist-patient relationship ($P = .075$).

Perceptions of professional values according to competitive pressure

Dentists who reported experiencing low competitive pressure rated service and scholarly pursuit significantly higher than those experiencing high competitive pressure (Table 4). In contrast, dentists perceiving high competitive pressure placed greater importance on lifestyle values. No significant group differences were found for prestige, business expansion, autonomy, or the dentist-patient relationship.

Multivariable regression analysis of professional values

As shown in Table 5, years of clinical experience was positively associated with prestige, service, and scholarly pursuit, suggesting that longer careers are linked with greater emphasis on these values. In contrast, experience was negatively related to lifestyle, business expansion, and dentist-patient relationship values, and autonomy had no significant association.

Perceived competitive pressure had weaker effects. Dentists experiencing higher competitive pressure placed less importance on service and greater emphasis on lifestyle, with no notable

Table 3. Professional values of dentists according to years of clinical experience.

EXPERIENCE, Y	NO.	SCORE, MEAN (SD)*	F TEST [†]	P VALUE [†]
Prestige				
< 10	527	3.54 (0.89) ^a		
≥ 10 and <20	633	3.59 (0.87) ^a	13.948	.000
≥ 20	772	3.77 (0.78) ^b		
Service				
< 10	527	3.23 (0.91) ^a		
≥ 10 and < 20	633	3.22 (0.83) ^a	33.232	.000
≥ 20	772	3.53 (0.77) ^b		
Scholarly Pursuit				
< 10	527	3.35 (0.99) ^a		
≥ 10 and < 20	633	3.45 (0.86) ^a	14.386	.000
≥ 20	772	3.62 (0.86) ^b		
Lifestyle				
< 10	527	3.63 (0.88) ^c		
≥ 10 and < 20	633	3.51 (0.84) ^b	33.927	.000
≥ 20	772	3.25 (0.86) ^a		
Business Expansion				
< 10	527	2.19 (1.00) ^b		
≥ 10 and < 20	633	1.94 (0.90) ^a	23.643	.000
≥ 20	772	1.85 (0.79) ^a		
Autonomy				
< 10	527	4.04 (0.80)		
≥ 10 and < 20	633	4.05 (0.81)	.997	.369
≥ 20	772	4.00 (0.78)		
Dentist-Patient Relationship				
< 10	527	4.23 (0.72)		
≥ 10 and < 20	633	4.19 (0.78)	2.600	.075
≥ 20	772	4.13 (0.77)		

* Superscript letters represent Scheffé post hoc tests: a < b < c. † One-way analysis of variance comparing mean professional value scores across the 4 age-location groups.

associations found for the other values. Overall, these results indicate that clinical experience is a stronger and more consistent predictor of professional values than competitive pressure.

DISCUSSION

We examined how years of clinical experience and perceived competitive pressure influence the professional values of Korean dentists. The findings indicate that professional values are not uniform but vary according to career stage and perceived competitive context, suggesting that both individual trajectories and competitive pressures play important roles in shaping dentists' professional values.

One strength of our study was our use of a large-scale, nationwide survey of Korean dentists, which enabled us to examine how clinical experience and perceived competitive pressure are associated with professional values. By means of analyzing these 2 key factors together, our study results provide insights into how dentists' professional priorities may shift across career stages and competitive contexts.

The results suggest that the development of professional values is influenced not only by means of individual characteristics but also the structural features of practice life and the career cycle. For example, dentists with fewer years of experience who report higher competitive pressure may prioritize management-related values and operational concerns as psychological defense mechanisms or

Table 4. Professional values of dentists according to competitive pressure.

COMPETITIVE PRESSURE	NO.	SCORE, MEAN (SD)	t TEST*	P VALUE*
Prestige				
Low	831	3.65 (0.83)	0.081	.935
High	1,101	3.65 (0.86)		
Service				
Low	831	3.42 (0.79)	3.124	.002
High	1,101	3.29 (0.88)		
Scholarly Pursuit				
Low	831	3.54 (0.89)	2.192	.029
High	1,101	3.45 (0.91)		
Lifestyle				
Low	831	3.38 (0.88)	-2.902	.004
High	1,101	3.49 (0.87)		
Business Expansion				
Low	831	1.96 (0.87)	-0.446	.655
High	1,101	1.98 (0.91)		
Autonomy				
Low	831	4.04 (0.77)	0.529	.597
High	1,101	4.02 (0.81)		
Dentist-Patient Relationship				
Low	831	4.16 (0.73)	-0.878	.380
High	1,101	4.19 (0.78)		

* Independent samples *t* test for between 2 groups.

survival strategies in response to intense competition. Such tendencies have been linked in previous research to job stress and burnout, which are exacerbated by means of managerial responsibilities, heavy patient loads, and the demands of practice administration.¹⁷ Moro and colleagues¹⁷ identified these factors as consistent contributors to burnout and emotional exhaustion among dentists.

Autonomy has long been regarded as a core element of medical professionalism,¹⁸⁻²⁰ and our study results reinforce this, showing it is not influenced by means of dentists' years of clinical experience or perceived competitive pressure. Moreover, dentists with greater clinical experience placed stronger emphasis on intrinsic values, such as prestige, service, and scholarly pursuit, which may reflect cohort or career-stage differences in how professional meaning is constructed, particularly regarding contributions to society and others.²¹⁻²³ For example, Kalleberg and colleagues²⁴ reported that US workers increasingly value intrinsic rewards over career advancement opportunities as they age, and Kooij and colleagues²⁵ found that older workers are more strongly motivated by means of contributing to others and society, whereas younger workers place greater importance on job security. The findings from these prior studies are in line with those of our study.^{24,25}

In contrast, business expansion and dentist-patient relationship were perceived as less important as dentists gained more clinical experience. This may be because younger dentists tend to place greater emphasis on management-related competencies, although more experienced dentists consider such skills as already acquired through years of practice.²⁶ In addition, this tendency may reflect a broader social transition from a paternalistic, physician-centered atmosphere to a more rational and patient-centered society.²⁷

Service and lifestyle were the only 2 of the 7 domains that had significant associations with both years of experience ($P < .001$ for both service and lifestyle) and competitive pressure ($P = .002$ for service, $P = .004$ for lifestyle). Dentists with longer clinical experience tended to place greater value on service and less on lifestyle, and those facing higher competitive pressure placed less value on service and more on a relaxed lifestyle. This may be because greater clinical experience brings

Table 5. Multivariable linear regression of professional values according to years of clinical experience and competitive pressure.*

DEPENDENT VARIABLE AND PREDICTOR	B	β	P VALUE	ADJUSTED R ² †
Prestige				
Years of experience	.12	.115	.000	.012 [‡]
Competitive pressure	.02	.011	.638	
Service				
Years of experience	.16	.152	.000	.027 [‡]
Competitive pressure	-.09	-.054	.016	
Scholarly Pursuit				
Years of experience	.13	.116	.000	.015 [‡]
Competitive pressure	-.07	-.037	.104	
Lifestyle				
Years of experience	-.19	-.175	.000	.034 [‡]
Competitive pressure	.08	.047	.037	
Business Expansion				
Years of experience	-.16	-.148	.000	.021 [‡]
Competitive pressure	-.01	.006	.788	
Autonomy				
Years of experience	-.03	-.025	.268	.000
Competitive pressure	-.02	-.015	.520	
Dentist-Patient Relationship				
Years of experience	-.05	-.050	.029	.002
Competitive pressure	.02	.015	.526	

* Values are from multivariable linear regression models adjusted for years of experience (3 categories) and perceived competitive pressure (2 categories). Results are presented as B (unstandardized coefficient), β (standardized coefficient), and P value.

† Adjusted R² values are shown per model. ‡ P < .001 (model significance from analysis of variance F test).

wisdom about life and a stronger sense of professional pride and professionalism. In contrast, under intensified competition, similar trends have been reported in previous studies; dentists tend to become less service-oriented²⁸ and more likely to adopt aggressive treatment approaches.²⁹ Therefore, it is important to have a critical perspective on competition within dentistry.

Taken together, this suggests that the patterns observed among Korean dentists may not be unique to just 1 national context. Generational and career-stage dynamics in professional values have also been identified in US dentistry.^{7,30} These parallels support the broader applicability of our findings to other health care systems, including in the United States.

These findings provide empirical evidence that dentists' professional values are layered and context dependent. They also highlight the importance of tailored interventions. For example, younger or less experienced dentists facing high competitive pressure may benefit from targeted management education, mentoring programs, and practical training in operational strategies. Continuing education systems should be adapted to reflect differing needs across career stages, and policies should expand access to resources and information for early-career practitioners and strengthen community-based support systems to alleviate the effects of competition. Future research would benefit from international collaborations, for example, between the American Dental Association and the Korean Dental Association, to conduct long-term, comparative studies on dentists' professionalism and professional identity formation across different health care systems. Such efforts could provide valuable insights into how professional values evolve globally and inform workforce and policy strategies in both contexts.

Finally, our study results showed that research on professional values, which has been focused largely on physicians, can be extended to dentistry to capture its professional challenges. Future researchers may develop theoretical frameworks specific to dentists' professional values and

investigate how professional identity evolves across the career span in the context of changing competitive environments.

However, our study has some limitations. First, in a cross-sectional survey study, causal relationships cannot be established. Second, social desirability bias is possible because the sample was limited to members of the Korean Dental Association, and the study relied on self-reported data. Third, although the sample included dentists nationwide, variations according to employment setting (eg, university hospitals, public health care institutions, and different specialties) were not fully captured. Fourth, differences in dental education systems, such as Korea's 6-year undergraduate-entry program compared with the 4-year graduate-entry doctor of dental surgery model in the United States, may influence the timing and process of professional identity formation, which should be considered when interpreting the generalizability of the findings. Finally, competitive pressure was measured through self-perception only, rather than objective structural indicators such as clinic density or income levels. Future studies should incorporate longitudinal designs, broader sampling, and more structural measures to further elucidate the development of dentists' professional values.

CONCLUSIONS

The results from our large-scale survey of more than 1,900 Korean dentists across Korea showed that professional values are dynamic, varying according to career stage and competitive context. Younger dentists experiencing competitive pressure emphasized management-related values, whereas autonomy and the dentist-patient relationship remained stable as core elements of professionalism. With greater clinical experience, intrinsic values, such as prestige, service, and scholarly pursuit, became more salient, reflecting broader life course shifts also observed in international studies.

Therefore, dentists' professional identity and values must be approached not through a single uniform standard, but through a life course perspective that considers the clinical environment. Longitudinal and qualitative studies are warranted to explore changes in professional values and the career development process among dentists in greater depth.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT-4.5 (OpenAI) to improve readability and language. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication. ■

DISCLOSURE

None of the authors reported any disclosures.

SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

Supplemental data related to this article can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adaj.2025.10.020>.

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