

The Impact of Media Perception On Nursing Stereotypes

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Abstract

The recent increase of media attention on nurses during the COVID-19 Pandemic has brought attention to accurate and inaccurate nursing portrayals in media. This paper explores how inaccurate media portrayals could possibly factor into the growth or shortages in the nursing field. Inaccurate media portrayals through television could also contribute to these shortages as well as perpetuation of nursing stereotypes that have been around for decades. Regardless of whether or not the public has had a positive experience with a nurse, it is still possible for them to retain these stereotypes due to media influence. Nursing stereotypes in the media have also impacted males in the nursing profession by perpetuating stereotypes related to sexuality, and masculinity versus femininity. Nurses can take action themselves by educating others on nurses' responsibilities and advocating for each other.

Introduction

According to several healthcare facilities, the year 2020 was branded as “the year of the nurse” due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Along with this title, nurses were branded as “healthcare heroes”, and received a large amount of media coverage compared to the past. While this media attention has provided the public with a different perspective, several media outlets continue to portray nurses inaccurately. This inaccurate portrayal leads to the public developing preconceived notions about nurses or the enhancement of ones that already existed.

There are many different kinds of stereotypes that are circulating about nurses. Examples include, “...angel of mercy, naughty nurse, battle-axe, bimbo and the doctor’s handmaiden” (Weaver et al., 2014). The “naughty nurse” stereotype sexually objectifies female nurses. This can be seen through Halloween costumes as well as some forms of media. The angel of mercy stereotype harbors the belief that nurses are “spiritually pure” and gentle. This stereotype disregards the amount of education and clinical hours required in order to be considered to take the NCLEX. The battle-axe stereotype is the belief that nurses are angry and intimidating and provide poor patient care. In other words, these stereotypical nurses would let their anger and frustration out on to their patients. A good example of a portrayal with this stereotype is Nurse Ratched from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. This stereotype does not consider every nurse’s goal to provide patient-centered care. The doctor’s handmaiden stereotype insists that nurses are somewhat of a personal assistant for a doctor, and that they just do the physical work such as bathing a patient or helping them preform activities of daily living. While this is somewhat true, this completely disregards the critical thinking that is necessary for a nurse to complete assessments or make decisions about medications for patients. Many instances, nurses are the

eyes for the doctor, and can contact them to question an order that could potentially endanger a patient. Nurses complete both physical tasks and critical thinking tasks.

Inaccurate portrayal of nurses through the media perpetuates stereotypes about nurses regarding profession and gender, and also clouds the public's perception which contributes to the decreased number of nurses joining the field.

The Current Status of the Nursing Profession

Nursing is a very demanding and competitive field. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the role of a registered nurse is defined as, "Assess patient health problems and needs, develop and implement nursing care plans, and maintain medical records. Administer nursing care to ill, injured, convalescent, or disabled patients. May advise patients on health maintenance and disease prevention or provide case management" (Department of Labor, 2021). It is expected that the demand for nurses will increase due to the aging U.S. population. Not only will this lead to some nurses retiring due to old age, but many older adults present with chronic conditions and other medical conditions that require care and education from nurses (Department of Labor, 2021). This statistic emphasizes the need for nurses in specific fields such as geriatrics and psychiatric facilities. It is projected that employment will increase from 3,096,700 in 2019 to 3,318,700 by 2029 (Department of Labor, 2021). While these projections seem to be moving towards opportunity for growth in the nursing field, there is room for change between 2021 and 2029.

Many factors can impact whether the projections increase or decrease, such as the public's perception of the nursing profession. These perceptions of nurses are impacted by what the public views on popular media outlets such as television and social media platforms. In other words, content released by media outlets regarding nurses could help or harm these statistics

depending on whether or not the connotation of the content is positive or negative. The impact of media involvement on public perception of nurses will be further discussed throughout this paper.

Perception of Nurses Through Television

Grey's Anatomy is a popular television show that has been airing new episodes for years. Unfortunately, the portrayal of different healthcare workers that would be present in an acute setting has remained constant over the years. The nurses in this television show are typically just extras in scrubs that sit at the nurse's station or walking down the hallway. An interesting observation is that the surgeons who are the main characters of the show ambulate their patients, are always performing CPR, and interpreting lab values. These tasks are always delegated to nurses because it is within an RN scope of practice, and doctors typically do not have the time to complete those tasks due to the large volume of patients they have, and timely procedures that need to be completed in addition to charting. In addition, this makes the role of nurses in an acute setting seem insignificant. *Grey's Anatomy* also shows surgeons, residents, and surgical interns all paging each other. The main characters are almost never paged by the patient's assigned nurses nor are they paging nurses to get more information about their patient or assessment findings from the nurse. Nurses are the bridge between the healthcare provider and the patient. Nurses spend much more time with the patient than the provider which makes the nurse an advocate for their patient to receive the best care possible.

Most portrayals of nurses on *Grey's Anatomy* involve the nurses having sexual relations with the surgeon main characters. While this is inappropriate in a professional setting, it also portrays nurses in a negative way in the sense that they do not display professionalism. Specifically, Nurse Olivia seen in the earlier seasons of the show had sexual relations with two

of the main character surgeons. She had gotten syphilis from one of the surgeons and then spread it to the other surgeon. Nurse Olivia is mentioned one other time when she is fired due to hospitals merging but is never mentioned for any of her other accomplishments or responsibilities as a nurse. This scenario specifically contributes to the “naughty nurse” stereotype and is harmful to the perception of nurses.

Nurses on medical drama television shows such as *Grey’s Anatomy* also show poor portrayals of nurses in operating rooms. Nurses are involved with surgeries as well and take on several roles during a procedure. Scrub nurses assist with handing instruments to surgeons and monitoring the patient, while maintaining a sterile field to prevent infection. A circulating nurse is also assigned in every operating room who perform a “time-out” to ensure that they have the right patient, right area of the body, and right procedure. Specialty nurses may be involved with procedure too, depending on what the surgery is. For example, a cesarean section may require a labor and delivery nurse to be present (Ignatavicius et al., 2021). Bokhee is a scrub nurse on *Grey’s Anatomy* who has been on the show since the early seasons. She is in the operating rooms with the main character surgeons frequently but has been given very minimal dialogue. This is an inaccurate portrayal because communication is necessary in the operating room between professionals of all specialties present to ensure patient safety throughout the procedure. More specifically, this contributes to the “doctor’s handmaiden stereotype” because Bokhee does not get an opportunity to display her critical thinking skills, and simply completes physical tasks such as handing a surgeon a scalpel.

This previous concept as well as all the examples above contribute to an inaccurate portrayal of nurses. Since *Grey’s Anatomy* continues to be a popular show to this day, the public watches this show and influences their thoughts and perceptions of nurses. This can lead to the

development of preconceived notions also known as stereotypes. Many of the stereotypes seen in this television show are very prevalent in today's society which means that this television show contributes to the perpetuation of those nursing stereotypes.

The Center for Nursing Advocacy, which is now an organization named "The Truth About Nursing" seeks to "challenge inaccurate depictions of nursing in the media" and "improve public understanding of nursing". This organization hosts an award ceremony where they recognize the top five best and worst portrayals of nurses through media. It is not surprising that *Grey's Anatomy* as well as other popular television shows such as *Scrubs* were categorized in the top five worst portrayals (Center for Nursing Advocacy, 2006).

Another article titled, "Nurses Say NBC's "ER" Contributes to Nursing Shortage" confirms the ranking of these shows as well by discussing another popular medical drama television show. The Center for Nursing Advocacy called upon writers and producers of this television show to display a more accurate portrayal of nurses because this organization believed that the show was contributing to nursing shortages. More specifically, the nurses in the show were reporting to physicians and acting as their assistants (2004). This is an inaccurate portrayal because nurses are autonomous and practice under their own licensure. They can report abnormal findings or questionable orders such as a large dose of medication, but they are not physicians' personal assistants.

Medical drama television shows contribute to nursing stereotypes by displaying minimal character dialogue and an insignificance of nurses. More specifically, TV networks are quick to portray doctor's handmaiden and naughty nurse stereotypes which are inaccurate and negatively influence the public's perception on nurses. If the public's perception is clouded by these

television shows, it may hinder someone who was initially interested in becoming a nurse, from joining the field and could negatively impact the expected growth of the nursing profession.

Public Perception of Nurses Influenced By Media

A study was conducted where a questionnaire was filled out by members of an urban population, and nurses filled out the same questionnaire. This questionnaire helped to calculate a PNI score which determines whether the public's perception of nurses was overall positive or negative. This score ultimately influences how many people join the nursing field because the score determines the profession's reputation. The PNI score was found to be lower with the public completing the questionnaire. This finding indicates that it "may reflect the power of existing stereotypes in the society, which is counted as an obstacle to the improvement of nursing professionalism" (Maliheh et al., 2020).

While this study was conducted internationally, there are parallels between the findings from this study in Iran and the way society conducts itself with nursing stereotypes in the United States. Many are impacted by the media's perception of nurses, but some people have different perceptions of nurses when they are interacting with them first-hand. When nursing students are asked what drove them to join the field, many of them said because of a previous interaction they have had with a nurse whether it be in the acute care setting or in an outpatient facility. To justify this statement, the study found that, "...perceived PNI by citizen was found associated with advising the nursing profession to relatives, experiencing various type of hospital during individual hospitalization, being a family caregiver and estimated the minimum level of education for nurses" (Maliheh et al., 2020). Many of those who have interacted with nurses can say that they had a great experience. It is still possible for an individual to verbalize their gratitude for nurses yet still inadvertently believe nursing stereotypes such as nursing being a

“feminine profession” or that nurses are just assistants for physicians, which is also known as the doctor’s handmaiden stereotype. It is important for nurses to step up and advocate for accurate portrayals of nurses in the media in attempt to eliminate stereotypes that have been in society for decades.

Gender & Nursing Stereotypes

In the past, male nurses were almost non-existent since nursing was considered a “feminine profession”. To this day, people still have the same beliefs and ideas. Due to this pre-existing stereotype, many are quick to assume a male nurse’s sexuality and because he is joining a feminine profession, this therefore, makes him feminine. The portrayal of male nurses in the media adheres to this stereotype, which is typically used in television shows for comedy reasons. Portrayal of male nurses on the media is worse than the portrayal of female nurses because male nurse characters are very rare in television shows and not as common as female characters.

Existing stereotypes regarding male nurses have contributed to poor recruitment methods for having male nurses join the nursing field. To validate, “...it is timely to pay attention to how men in nursing are represented in popular culture given that sexual stereotypes and a lack of male nursing role models in the media have been identified as barriers to recruitment” (Weaver et al., 2014). Some examples of male nursing stereotypes other than sexuality include that they most likely dropped out of medical school. Another assumption many have is that they are a doctor simply because they are male. On some television shows, people refer to the male nurse as doctor because they assume his profession since he is a male in a medical setting.

“Men in nursing on television: exposing and reinforcing stereotypes” is an article that discusses a study conducted in which all of the authors watched medical drama television

episodes and films and thoroughly analyzed them to search for examples of the media perpetuating nursing stereotypes surrounding male nurses. Some more specific examples of male nursing stereotypes being perpetuated through television shows includes people assuming that the male nurses are physicians and refer to them as “doctor”. Some shows reinforce male nursing stereotypes regarding sexuality by presenting male nursing characters that are gay. There is a delicate balance between portraying a diverse nursing population of all races and genders, and portraying male nursing stereotypes. Sexuality of the nurse is not important when the sole purpose of the nurse is to deliver the best patient care.

The concept of masculinity vs. femininity in these inaccurate media portrayals are also prevalent. While most showed did not conform to the traditional “masculinity” image, few shows did, implying that male nurses are different from all males. Some television shows tended to feminize male nurses on to re-masculinize them and continue this cycle (Weaver et al., 2014). This allows for the public to believe in the stereotype that male nurses are more feminine because of their profession. On the television shows that were analyzed in the study, male nurses are used as a source of comedy. This is not in the sense that they are comedic themselves, but rather being the object of comedy (Weaver et al., 2014). Inaccurate media portrayals of male nurses lead to a generalized rejection and ignorance of those in the nursing field, due to the stereotypes that are perpetuated.

In addition to the inaccurate portrayal of male nurses, “Such narrow and inaccurate portrayals of men in nursing in the media may hamper the acceptance of men in the nursing profession” (Weaver et al., 2014). The public’s perception of male nurses is impacted by television shows that inaccurately portray them. Other nurses on television shows with male

nurses are neither welcoming nor unwelcoming to them. Male nurses may fear rejection in the field due to what is being shown through the media. This is why it is important for universities and nursing programs should reach out to try and engage with males who are interested in nursing and raise awareness of gender stereotypes and debunk any myths surrounding being a male in the nursing field. Nursing programs can also foster open discussions regarding males joining the nursing field. All nurses, regardless of gender should advocate for more accurate media portrayals of nurses, but especially for male nurses

What Can Nurses Do to Ensure Accurate Media Portrayal?

Nurses are responsible for providing patient teaching and education whenever there is an interaction. The nurse's role as an educator can be used to educate others on awareness of inaccurate portrayals and provide better insight on the true responsibilities of a nurse. It is highly unlikely that the media and television networks will change their content to better fit the demand from nurses for a more accurate media portrayal. The best actions nurses can take are to raise awareness and be mindful of their own media portrayal.

Nurses should also be mindful about their social media platforms, and the content that they post on them. It is possible for nurses to inadvertently contribute to the very stereotypes that they try to combat. Some examples of this occurring include posts that, "... show nurses breaching patient privacy, bullying each other, as well as other health professionals, and demonstrating a range of unprofessional behaviours" (Bickhoff, 2014). Other media platforms are quick to call out negative social media posts from nurses and may try to highlight why nursing stereotypes are "correct" in a sense. For example, a nurse may post a provocative picture on his or her personal social media account. Assuming that this nurse's account is public, other media outlets as well as his or her place of work could easily access this post. Not only could the

nurse face disciplinary action from work depending on the facility's policy, but if the nurse has enough of a public following, it could be further displayed on other media platforms such as news networks because it directly applies to the "naughty nurse" stereotype.

This concept should not hinder nurses from using social media. Nurses simply need to think about the impact the content of their posts may have, and what the intended and possible unintended messages the post may convey (Bickhoff, 2014). Awareness of this issue with nurses and social media is a great way to prevent it from happening as well. One of the other roles of nurses in providing patient-centered care includes being an advocator. Nurses need to advocate for each other when they see a post that contributes to a nursing stereotype or is unprofessional. As mentioned earlier some nurses are not even aware of the impact that their post may have, so advocating for each other increases awareness.

Nurses can combat stereotypes in the media by contacting the media source directly. Nurses are allowed to ask radio or television shows to speak about the profession and provide more accurate insight on the profession without speaking on behalf of the facility they work for. Nurses are also encouraged to send in letters to television show producers or even publicly confront them about the impact of their actions on the people's perception, and what can be done to ensure a more accurate portrayal. It can even be as simple as talking about one's experience as a nurse in a way that is accurate if it comes up in conversation (Geller & Summers, 2014).

Local involvement is another way to help advocate for accurate media portrayal to combat nursing stereotypes. Hospitals typically only allow physicians and other healthcare providers speak on behalf of a facility, and not nurses in order to provide an "expert opinion". However, nurses are autonomous and can speak on behalf of themselves, and even provide their

own expert opinion regarding healthcare trends or even health promotion. Nurses can reach out to local media sources and offer their expert opinion (Muehlbauer, 2012).

Conclusion

Inaccurate portrayal of nurses through the media perpetuates stereotypes about nurses regarding profession and gender, and also clouds the public's perception which contributes to the decreased number of nurses joining the field.

Several medical drama television shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER* contribute to nursing stereotypes by displaying them through insignificant characters. The physical actions of nurses in this show are not accurate because nurses perform assessments, administer medications, collaborate with other healthcare professionals, and document all interventions and assessment findings for multiple patients that they are assigned. These television shows also contribute to several nursing stereotypes such as battle-axe, naughty nurse, and doctor's handmaiden. Media portrayal directly impacts the public's perception of nurses and could cause some to disregard interactions that they may have had with nurses that contradict stereotypes seen on the media.

Males who are involved in the nursing field are underrepresented in media worse than female nurses and have stereotypes surrounding their sexuality and masculinity vs. femininity. Medical drama shows have displayed and perpetuated male nursing stereotypes by providing poor and inaccurate portrayal of male nurses. Male nurses are rarely seen on television causing those who are interested in becoming a nurse, fear rejection. This can contribute to the low percentage of male nurses joining the field.

Nurses can take action in an attempt to combat these stereotypes by being mindful of social media platforms, becoming involved in local affairs, and directly confronting media

platforms and news networks. Nurses can empower others to advocate for the same by providing the public with awareness and education about nursing responsibilities.

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References

Bickhoff, L. (2014). Smart nurses thoughtless posts on social media: ANJ. *Australian Nursing and Midwifery Journal*, 22(4), 31. Retrieved from <https://sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/smart-nurses-thoughtless-posts-on-social-media/docview/1566915061/se-2?accountid=28645>

This article discussed the various ways that nurses themselves contribute to stereotypes through the use of social media. The author is warning nurses to be careful about what they post because in some cases it can breach patient confidentiality, or cause concern in the general population. Something as simple as a post to social media can possibly highlight negative misconceptions about nurses that may be seen from the media and perpetuates stereotypes.

This article is informative on how social media influences the image of nurses. While this paper explores several other forms of media, social media is very prevalent to today. It also provides a perspective on how nurses themselves can possibly be contributing to their own media coverage, therefore perpetuating stereotypes.

Geller, L., & Summers, S. (2014). Changing how the world thinks about nursing. *Canadian Nurse*, 110(1), 26-30

This source points out several examples of nursing misconceptions such as nurses just help doctors and nurses require minimal education and are therefore not knowledgeable on any medical information. The authors also point out that in several media outlets hospitals encourage doctors to speak more and receive more coverage because they are healthcare experts and nurses are not.

This source is useful in providing specific examples of how misconceptions are continuously displayed in the media and even provides examples of how nurses can help eliminate stereotypes and misconceptions. This source also calls out popular television shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* which was also mentioned in another source to provide shallow insight of nurses in a hospital setting.

Ignatavicius, D. D., Workman, M. L., Rebar, C. R., & Heimgartner, N. M. (2021). *Medical-surgical nursing: Concepts for interprofessional collaborative care* (10th ed., Vol. 1). Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Maliheh, Nekouei Marvi Langari, MSN, RN, Doctoral Candidate, Ashraf, Abdollahi, M.S.N., R.N., Hamid, H. M., PhD., Taghi, S. M., PhD., & Fatemeh, H. N., PhD. (2020). The public nursing image as perceived by nurses and citizens: A questionnaire survey. *International Journal of Caring Sciences*, 13(3), 1611-1617. Retrieved from <https://sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/public-nursing-image-as-perceived-nurses-citizens/docview/2480362500/se-2?accountid=28645>

A study was conducted involving nurses and other citizens from an urban population. These people were given a questionnaire to complete and a PNI score was calculated which determines the public's perception on the nursing profession and influences how many people join the field. The PNI score was lower in the citizens completing the questionnaire indicating that stereotypes influence people's perceptions of nurses.

Demographics are a factor to consider, but these findings allow for very generalized statements about how the public may perceive nurses, due to several media outlets.

Media portrayals: Cheers and jeers. (2006). *Nursing*, 36(3), 33. <https://doi-org.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/10.1097/00152193-200603000-00027>

The Center for Nursing Advocacy had an awards ceremony where they named the top five best and worst media portrayals of nurses in the media. Several well-known TV shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scrubs* were ironically in the worst portrayal category.

This source allows for further exploration as to why popular media tends to portray nurses poorly and how this can contribute to nursing stereotypes that have been present in society for quite some time.

Muehlbauer, P.M. (2012). How Can We Improve the Way the Media Portrays the Nursing Profession? *ONS Connect*, 27(12), 21.

This source discusses common arguments regarding comical media portrayal of nurses on television. One side of the argument claims that depictions of nurses in television are not intended to be accurate and that it is harmless. The other claim is that the way the public behaves towards nurses is impacted by the way nurses are portrayed through the media. This source also goes into detail about how nurses can improve the media's portrayal of the profession.

This article supports that the media typically depicts nurses in a negative or inaccurate way by providing specific examples of TV shows. This article also explains how nurses can put themselves out into the public to correct misconceptions, and even provides media examples of diverse and accurate depictions of nurses.

Nurses Say NBC's "ER" Contributes to Nursing Shortage. (2004). *Dermatology Nursing*, 16(2), 190.

The Center for Nursing Advocacy called upon NBC to correct their inaccurate portrayal of nurses on their show "ER". This organization also called upon nurses to write letters themselves about how this portrayal has an impact on their profession. This article discusses how TV shows typically portray nurses and how this can lead to generalized misconceptions throughout the public and may inhibit those who may have been interested in nursing from joining the field.

This along with other sources have pointed out how this show is a poor portrayal of nurses and contributes to many other media outlets that inaccurately portray nurses.

Promoting recruitment by rebranding the image of nursing. (2019). *Nursing Standard* (2014+), 34(11), 24-28.

This article discusses how negative media portrayals and inaccurate television depictions of nurses contributes to the global shortage of nurses. In order for media portrayals to improve, nurses need to step up and advocate for their profession by addressing misconceptions and stereotypes. A big contributor to providing accurate information and recruiting future nurses are nursing education institutions. Nursing schools can help future nurses advocate for themselves and can also promote diversity within the nursing population to eliminate stereotypes such as recruiting male and transgender nurses.

This source provides an example of an attempt to provide accurate media coverage regarding nurses in an attempt to properly educate those interested in the profession. It is interesting to think about what the possibilities are if all forms of media properly portrayed nurses correctly.

United States Department of Labor. (2021, March 31). 29-1141 registered nurses. Retrieved April 28, 2021, from <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes291141.htm#ind>

Weaver, R., Ferguson, C., Wilbourn, M., & Salamonson, Y. (2014). Men in nursing on television: exposing and reinforcing stereotypes. *Journal of Advanced Nursing (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)*, 70(4), 833-842. <https://doi-org.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/jan.12244>

This article discusses how many popular medical TV shows poorly depict nurses who are male. These nurses are almost always referred to as a “male nurse” rather than just their name. In the media, male nurses are generally portrayed as irrelevant characters and are there for comedic purposes. Because nursing involves caring and compassion, these are seen as “feminine traits”. A study was conducted involving U.S. TV shows that have nurses as characters. Dialogue was transcribed and notes were taken by the researchers who then met and discussed their findings.

This article provides a very interesting perspective about media portrayal of nurses especially in the perspective of males. Gender is a factor that contributes to stereotypes and negative media coverage. Many tend to make assumptions about male nurses’ sexuality and masculinity.