González-Luis H. https://doi.org/10.37551/S2254-28842024010

The image of nurses in the media: situation analysis and actions for improvement

Hildegart González-Luis

Department of Community and Maternal and Child Nursing, Faculty of Nursing, Universidad de Navarra, Navarra, Spain

Please cite this artcle in press as:
González-Luis H. The image of nurses in the media: situation analysis and actions for improvement. Enferm Nefrol. 2024;27(2):93-8

Corresponding author:
Hildegart González Luis
hgonzal@unav.es

Nursing is an essential yet often unknown profession[1]. It is essential because nurses care for people even before birth—by supporting mothers during pregnancy—until the very last breath, when providing palliative care at the end of life. Nurses are fundamental components of the health system, delivering not only physical care but also psychological and spiritual support. They care holistically, offering person-centred care[2].

The pandemic confirmed that without nurses, health systems collapse. Unfortunately, data show that we are facing a global shortage of care professionals[3,4].

Despite being the largest healthcare workforce—345,969 in Spain[5]—and despite the fact that everyone will receive nursing services at some point in life, nursing remains little known. Four factors supported by available evidence may help explain this lack of societal awareness[6]:

1. Nursing care is often difficult to make visible because it is both a science and an art. The art of caring for another is not easy to describe or narrate outside the interpersonal relationship created with each patient[7].
2. Nursing remains under-recognised because nurses are so focused on caring for others that they forget to care for themselves. They do not claim the protagonism they deserve. To care well for others, nurses must be cared for themselves, and their work must be valued by society as essential[8].
3. Nursing is practised predominantly by women. Thus, all the challenges faced by women are experienced by nurses, often magnified in the workplace[9].
4. Finally, nursing has changed significantly in a short time, at different paces across countries. These changes in education, roles, and competencies have not been effectively communicated to society[10,11].

The *Triple Impact* report prepared by the UK Parliament in 2016 confirmed that investing in nurses not only improves national health but also strengthens economies and advances gender equality[12]. By providing resources, governments contribute to achieving three of the Sustainable Development Goals.

What can nurses do to be more effective in achieving these three goals?

1. Advocate for the legal expansion of the fields in which they practise.
2. Demand the right to increase the competencies exercised within their discipline.
3. Work actively to make their professional performance more visible so that society better understands their contribution to health systems and patient care in the 21st century[13].

The invisibility and distorted image of nurses in the media

Is it common to see, hear, or read about nurses in the media? Reflect on whether you can recall a nurse as the protagonist of a film or series, or the last news item about a colleague in a newspaper, on the radio, or on television. Is that information representative and coherent with the professional identity of 21st-century nurses?

Studies show that, despite being the largest workforce in health systems, nurses are barely present in health news. Their portrayal in entertainment genres does not adequately reflect the discipline.[14-17]. This media invisibility—or distorted visibility—also helps explain society's limited understanding of the profession. A 1997 Sigma Theta Tau study showed that nurses were cited as information sources in only 4% of health

news[18]. When this study was repeated 20 years later in 2017 by Diana Mason and her team, results confirmed the situation had worsened: nurses were sources in only 2% of health news published in the United States[19].

Has the pandemic increased nurses' media visibility?

Yes. Studies conducted in several countries confirm this[20-23]. Preliminary results from our research in Spain, Chile, and Argentina show that from 2019 to 2020 the number of press articles mentioning nurses quadrupled. Nevertheless, their role as information sources remained marginal during media coverage of the pandemic[24].

Given this evidence, another question arises: should nurses investigate the image of their profession disseminated by the media?

The answer is yes. In other countries, this has been studied for decades[8,25,26]. In 2022, our team published a scoping review analysing all studies on the image of nurses presented in the media. We identified 60 studies, most conducted in the United States, but evidence shows the issue is being investigated worldwide[27].

Although research on this topic began in the 1980s, most studies have been published in the past decade, reflecting its growing importance and the heightened academic interest during the pandemic. The most studied medium is the press, and qualitative methodologies are most frequently applied. A total of 40% of the reviewed studies confirmed that the image portrayed by the media is negative, and an additional 20% reported it is more negative than positive. Evidence clearly shows that nurses' presence is scarce, stereotyped, and highlights the challenge: to improve the image of nurses in the media[27].

The most common stereotypes and their consequences

The most common stereotypes used by the media to represent nurses include: the saint or angel; the sexy nurse; the incompetent fool; the doctor's assistant; the tyrant or killer; the technician; and the hero[25,28,29].

What misconceptions do these stereotypes generate in the minds of citizens?

The saint or nun stereotype leads society to believe nursing is a purely vocational calling requiring neither training nor education. The sexy nurse stereotype exposes nurses to violence and abuse[30]. The incompetent stereotype undermines the value of nursing education. Depicting nurses as mere assistants to doctors denies their professional competencies. Portraying them as tyrannical undermines teamwork with other health care professionals.31 The purely technical stereotype eliminates the humanistic contribution of nursing care. Finally, portraying nurses as heroes risks leading society to believe they do not need to care for themselves, deserve no pay, and can take risks without fear[32,35].

Beyond these, stereotypes generate other adverse consequences for nurses, their patients, and society as a whole[36].

When media portray false images of nurses, they may unknowingly discourage young people from pursuing this career, exacerbating the already critical global shortage of nurses[37-39].

For example, in Spain in 2020, the number of students selecting nursing as their first university choice increased by 32% vs 2019, according to the Spanish Ministry of Education[40]. What factor contributed to this rise? Objectively, the heavy workload, stress, and fatigue reported by the media could have discouraged students. Yet, despite this demanding image, interest increased by 32%. I am convinced that the quadrupling of nurses' media presence in 2020 contributed significantly. One cannot aspire to what one does not know; the pandemic made nurses visible, and for the first time, media presented them as the backbone of health systems. In an unprecedented event, nurse Amy O'Sullivan appeared on the cover of The Times as one of the 100 most influential people in the world[41].

In addition, some studies confirm that negative media portrayals impact nurses' self-esteem and may increase burnout[42,43].

This image can also hinder professional relationships with other team members. If patients are unaware of nurses' competencies or level of education, they may not understand what services nurses can provide, negatively affecting the nurse–patient relationship[44]. Moreover, a negative image means politicians may exclude nurses from decision-making forums on key public health issues[45,46], limit economic and human resources allocated to nursing, and contribute to increased violence and abuse from patients, families, and even colleagues[47].

Ultimately, this negative image harms the nurse–patient relationship and may reduce the quality of care provided[43,48].

Action plan to build a realistic and coherent image

Given this adverse reality, what can—and should—nurses do to change it?

The first step has already been taken: recognising the media image of nursing and becoming aware of the adverse consequences for nurses, patients, families, and society.

The second step is to embrace proactive communication based on shared professional identity, enabling nurses to explain—through their own narrative—what they contribute to 21st-century society[49,50]. As long as others define nurses and their work, visibility and social image will not improve[51,52]. Studies

show that journalists are often unclear about what nurses do or where to find them as information sources, partly because health institutions prioritise doctors' voices[53,54]. In addition, many nursing associations lack strategic communication management, and few nurses are willing to appear in the press, radio, or television[55,56]. In this context, proactive communication becomes an effective antidote to invisibility and misunderstanding.

To effectively foster proactive nurse communication, it is essential that nurses receive training in communication competence—not only to successfully manage conversations with patients and families, but also to navigate interactions with other stakeholders with whom they engage[52,57]. Developing communication competence is, in my view, a challenge that must be undertaken by nursing faculties if we want future generations to have a voice in shaping society in the decades ahead.

Nursing associations and nursing directorates in health care centres represent, in my opinion, the other key pillars for laying the foundations that will allow a distinctive nursing narrative to emerge[55,56,58,59]. I would encourage them—drawing on steps already taken in other countries and more recently by Spain's General Nursing Council—to offer and support training designed to build this "multi-stakeholder" communication competence[60]. In these courses, beyond providing instruction and practice in communication techniques, I propose that nurses should also be equipped with tools to identify the topics on which they can serve as credible information sources. They should learn to discern what information truly contributes to improving citizens' health and to enhancing the image of their profession. Providing them with a safe ethical, legal, and institutional framework that strengthens their freedom of expression in all contexts is another element that should be included in such training[61]. In the medium term, this educational investment will transform practising nurses into qualified spokespersons, ensuring that nursing knowledge is effectively shared and heard in all forums. Furthermore, it will provide nursing associations with a robust database of experts to draw upon when journalists or policymakers seek informed sources, or when associations themselves wish to highlight issues they consider newsworthy or to ensure nursing expertise is represented in decision-making spaces.

I hope that what has been outlined in these paragraphs may spark nurses' interest in this field and that some, having recognised the current situation, may decide to take action—whether by actively monitoring media portrayals of the profession, developing their communication competence, engaging in public forums, or even conducting research on these matters.62 Whether we like it or not, in today's world, what is narrated—whether true or not—imposes itself as reality in the minds of citizens. What is real deserves—and must—be well narrated so that society perceives it as truth. There is no one better than practising nurses to put an end to their media invisibility or distorted image. Nurses must become the narrators of their own—and our—reality. I firmly believe it is worthwhile to invest in nursing communication, not only for the benefit of those who practise this discipline, but also to ensure that the care which all of us will need at some point in our lives remains viable. For all these reasons, I argue that investing in communicating a coherent image of nursing in the 21st century also means protecting and safeguarding care—because #CommunicatingIsAlsoCaring.

REFERENCES

1. March Cerdá JC. Enfermeras: visibles, pero desconocidas. GARNATA 91 [Internet]. 2022;25(91):1-1. Available from: http://www.ciberindex.com/p/gt/e2510gt
2. Choperena A, Gavela-Ramos Y, Lizarbe-Chocarro M, Galán-Espinilla MJ, Errasti-Ibarrondo B, La Rosa-Salas V, et al. Translation and transcultural adaptation of the theoretical Person-Centred Practice Framework to the Spanish context. An Sist Sanit Navar. 2022;45(3).
3. ICN. The Global Nursing shortage and Nurse Retention. 2023.
4. Buchan J, Howard Catton. Recover to rebuild investing in the nursing workforce for health system effectiveness. 2023.
5. INE. Estadística de profesionales sanitarios colegiados 2023 [Internet]. 2024 [cited 5 Jun 2024]. Available from: https://www.ine.es/dyngs/Prensa/EPSC2023.htm
6. González-Luis H. Invertir en comunicación para garantizar los cuidados. Revista confluencia. 2023;6(1):10-1.
7. Fernández Salazar S, Ramos Morcillo AJ. Comunicación, imagen social y visibilidad de los cuidados de enfermería. ENE Revista de enfermería [Internet]. 2013 [cited 5 Jun 2024];7(7):7. Available from: http://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=4422482&info=resumen&idioma=ENG
8. Hoeve Y ten, Jansen G, Roodbol P. The nursing profession: public image, self-concept and professional identity. A discussion paper. J Adv Nurs [Internet]. 2014 [cited 5 Jun 2024];70(2):295-309. Available from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jan.12177
9. Gill J, Baker C. The Power of Mass Media and Feminism in the Evolution of Nursing's Image: A Critical Review of the Literature and Implications for Nursing Practice. J Med Humanit [Internet]. 2021 [cited 5 Jun 2024];42(3):371-86. Available from: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/31713004
10. Gillett K. A critical discourse analysis of British national newspaper representations of the academic level of nurse education: Too clever for our own good? Nurs Inq. 2012;19(4):297-307.
11. Gillett K. Nostalgic constructions of nurse education in British national newspapers. J Adv Nurs. 2014;70(11):2495-505.

12. A Report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Global Health. Triple Impact. How developing nursing will improve heatlh, promote gender equality and support economic growth [Internet]. [cited 9 Jun 2024]. Available from: https://ccoms.esenfc.pt/pub/DIGITAL%20APPG%20Triple%20Impact.pdf

13. Amezcua M. Florence Now: el triple impacto del poder Nightingale. Index de Enfermería [Internet]. 2021 [cited 6 Jun 2024];29(3). Available from: https://scielo.isciii.es/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1132-12962020000200002

14. Renau AY, Campo LA. La representación de la enfermería en el cine. Modelos y estereotipos. Revista de Medicina y Cine / Journal of Medicine and Movies. 2018;14(3):165-71.

15. Stanley DJ. Celluloid angels: A research study of nurses in feature films 1900-2007. J Adv Nurs. 2008;64(1):84-95.

16. Martín González E, Martín García MT, Gonzalez Arrieta P. Estereotipos de la enfermería en los medios de comunicación y el cine en España. Siglos XX y XXI. Revista Enfermería CyL. 2018;10:12-6.

17. Hayward BA. Nurses are background actors in medical reality television: A character network analysis and call for authentic action. J Adv Nurs. 2023;79(8):3035-46.

18. Sigma Theta Tau International. The Woodhull study on nursing and the media: Health care's invisible partner. Indianapolis; 1997.

19. Mason DJ, Nixon L, Glickstein B, Han S, Westphaln K, Carter L. The Woodhull Study Revisited: Nurses' Representation in Health News Media 20 Years Later. Journal of Nursing Scholarship [Internet]. 2018 [cited 6 Jun 2024];50(6):695-704. Available from: https://sigmapubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jnu.12429

20. Broering L, Padilha MIC de S, Forte ECN, Peres MA de A. Professional identity of nurses in pandemic times: new/old challenges reproduced in news media. Rev Gaucha Enferm. 2023;44:e20220017.

21. Chen X, Du Y, Shen Z, Qin W, Zhang Y. How the public perceives the "good nurse" in China: A content analysis of national newspapers. Journal of Nursing Scholarship. 2023.

22. Ersan Yaman H, Basaran-Acil S, Duygulu S. The positioning of nursing in Turkish mass media: Before and after the COVID-19 outbreak. Int Nurs Rev. 2023.

23. McDonald T. Speak truth to power and consolidate the nursing visibility gained during COVID-19. Int Nurs Rev [Internet]. 2022 [cited 6 Jun 2024];1-5. Available from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/inr.12760

24. Rebolledo M, González H, Olza I. Visibilidad de los sanitarios durante la crisis del Covid-19: estudio de fuentes y temáticas en los informativos de televisión. Interface - Comunicação, Saúde, Educação [Internet]. 2021 [cited 6 Jun 2024];25(Supl 1)S1-19. Available from: http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1414-32832021000200205&tlng=es

25. Bridges JM. Literature review on the images of the nurse and nursing in the media. J Adv Nurs. 1990;15(7):850-4.

26. Girvin J, Jackson D, Hutchinson M. Contemporary public perceptions of nursing: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of the international research evidence. J Nurs Manag [Internet]. 2016 [cited 6 Jun 2024];24(8):994–1006. Available from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jonm.12413

27. González H, Errasti-Ibarrondo B, Iraizoz-Iraizoz A, Choperena A. The image of nursing in the media: A scoping review. Vol. 70, International Nursing Review. John Wiley and Sons Inc; 2023. p. 425-43.

28. Cunningham A. Nursing Stereotypes. Nursing Standard 1999;13:46-8.

29. Teresa-Morales C, Rodríguez-Pérez M, Araujo-Hernández M, Feria-Ramírez C. Current Stereotypes Associated with Nursing and Nursing Professionals: An Integrative Review. Int J Environ Res Public Health [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2 Jun 2024];19(13):7640. Available from: https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/13/7640

30. Ferns T, Chojnacka I. Angels and swingers, matrons and sinners: nursing stereotypes. Br J Nurs. 2005;14(19):1028-32.

31. Icart Isern MT, Maestre González E, Delgado Hito P, De La Cueva Ariza L. Enfermeras de cine: cómo son y qué hacen en la gran pantalla. Metas de Enfermería. 2017;20(5):27-32.

32. Martínez-López L, Gijón-González CR, Sánchez-Castillo Z, Verdú-Guardiola MM. Estudio iconográfico de la enfermería proyectado por los medios de comunicación durante la COVID-19. Revista Española de Enfermería de salud mental. 2021;(15):36-49.

33. Boulton M, Garnett A, Webster F. A Foucauldian discourse analysis of media reporting on the nurse-as-hero during COVID-19. Nurs Inq [Internet]. 2022 [cited 6 Jun 2024];29(3). Available from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/nin.12471

34. Mohammed S, Peter E, Killackey T, Maciver J. The "nurse as hero" discourse in the COVID-19 pandemic: A poststructural discourse analysis. Int J Nurs Stud [Internet]. 2021 [cited 5 Jun 2024];117:103887. Available from: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/33556905

35. Begnini D, Cicolella D de A, Freitas KR de, Maranhão T, Rocha CMF, Kruse MHL. Heroines in Covid-19

times: visibility of nursing in the pandemic. Rev Gaucha Enferm [Internet]. 2021 [cited 6 Jun 2024];42(spe):e20200373. Available from: http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1983-14472021000200424&tlng=en

36. Nauderer TM, Lima MAD da S. Nurse's image: literature review. Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem REBEn. 2005;58(1):74-7.

37. Kandil F, El Seesy N, Banakhar M. Factors Affecting Students' Preference for Nursing Education and their Intent to Leave: A Cross-sectional Study. Open Nurs J [Internet]. 2021 [cited 6 Jun 2024];15(1):1-8. Available from: https://opennursingjournal.com/VOLUME/15/PAGE/1

38. Dante A, Graceffa G, Del Bello M, Rizzi L, Ianderca B, Battistella N, et al. Factors influencing the choice of a nursing or a non-nursing degree: A multicenter, cross-sectional study. Nurs Health Sci. 2014;16(4):498-505.

39. Weaver R, Salamonson Y, Koch J, Jackson D. Nursing on television: Student perceptions of television's role in public image, recruitment and education. J Adv Nurs. 2013;69(12):2635-43.

40. Ministerio de Universidades. Datos y cifras del sistema Universitario Español. 2023.

41. Couric K. The 100 most influential people of 2020, Amy 0'Sullivan. The Times. 2020;sep(22).

42. Takase M, Kershaw E, Burt L. Does public image of nurses matter? Journal of Professional Nursing. 2002;18(4):196-205.

43. Takase M, Maude P, Manias E. Impact of the perceived public image of nursing on nurses' work behaviour. Journal of Advanced Nursing. 2006;53(3):333-4.

44. Sindicato SATSE. Radiografía de la Enfermería española Visión política y visibilidad social. 2014.

45. Giorgetta S, Pasquot L. L'immagine dell'infermiere in Italia durante la prima fase dell'emergenza sanitaria da Covid-19: Content Analysis su quotidiani nazionali e locali. Prof Inferm. 2021;74(1):31-40.

46. Morone JF, Anthony Tolentino D, Aronowitz S V, Siddiq H. The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Push to Promote and Include Nurses in Public Health Policy. Am J Public Health [Internet]. 2022 [cited 6 Jun 2024];112(S3):S231-6. Available from: https://bit.ly/3NEQVcO

47. Hoyle LP, Smith E, Mahoney C, Kyle RG. Media Depictions of "Unacceptable" Workplace Violence Toward Nurses. Policy Polit Nurs Pract. 2018;19(3–4):57-71.

48. Grinberg K, Sela Y. Perception of the image of the nursing profession and its relationship with quality of care. BMC Nurs [Internet]. 2022 [cited 5 Jun 2024];21(57):2-8. Available from: https://bmcnurs.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12912-022-00830-4

49. Cleary M, Dean S, Sayers JM, Jackson D. Nursing and Stereotypes. Issues Ment Health Nurs. 2018;39(2):192-4.

50. González-Luis H. Para combatir la escasez de enfermeras debemos acabar con los estereotipos. The Conversation. 2023;mayo:1-4.

51. Van Der Cingel M, Brouwer J. What makes a nurse today? A debate on the nursing professional identity and its need for change. Nursing Philosophy. 2021;22(2).

52. González-Luis H. La competencia comunicativa de las enfermeras: el pilar para alcanzar una narrativa propia. TESELA Liderazgo y Gestión [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2 Jun 2024];30:1–3. Available from: http://ciberindex.com/p/ts/e14041

53. Mason DJ, Glickstein B, Westphaln K. Journalists' Experiences with Using Nurses as Sources in Health News Stories. Am J Nurs [Internet]. 2018 [cited 2 Jun 2024];118(10):42–50. Available from: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30260886

54. Kemmer LF, Silva MJP da. Nurses' visibility according to the perceptions of the communication professionals. Rev Lat Am Enfermagem [Internet]. 2007 [cited 6 Jun 2024];15(2):191-8. Available from: http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0104-11692007000200002&lng=en&tlng=en

55. Cardoso RJM, Graveto JMGN, Zamith FAD. Reaching out: Organizational structures and public communication of nursing professional associations and trade unions in Portugal. Nurs Forum (Auckl). 2019;54(2):291-7.

56. Cardoso RJM, Silva FADZ, Graveto JMGN. Associativism in nursing, public communication, and interaction with the media. Rev Bras Enferm. 2021;74(Suppl 5):e20200456.

57. Myers CR, Muñoz LR, Mason DJ, Glickstein B. Media competencies for nurses: A Delphi study. Nurs Outlook [Internet]. 2022; Available from: https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0029655422000562

58. Godsey JA, Hayes T. All Nurses Are Leaders: 5 Steps to Reconstruct the Professional Identity and Brand Image of Nursing. Nurse Lead [Internet]. 2023 [cited 6 Jun 2024];21(2):188-94. Available from: https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S1541461222003329

59. Lindell Joseph M, Godsey JA, Hayes T, Bagomolny J, Beaudry SJ, Biangone M, et al. A framework for transforming the professional identity and brand image of All Nurses as Leaders. Nurs Outlook [Internet]. 2023 [cited 6 Jun 2024];71(6):102051. Available from: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/37804575

60. Stewart M. RN=Real News: ANA launches comprehensive media initiative to support SNAs, nursing. Am Nurse. 1998 Jan;January/February:19.

61. González-Luis H, Azurmendi A, Santillan-Garcia A, Tricas-Saura S. Nurses' freedom of expression: Rights, obligations and responsibilities. J Nurs Manag. 2022;30(7):2379-82.

62. Dhandapani M, Gopichandran L. Nursing Image and Empowerment: Beyond Professional Conduct. Journal of Nursing Science & Practice. 2019;9(3):1-4.