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**Article**

# Social Image of Nurse in Medical Dramas in Pre and Post-COVID-19 Pandemic: An Observational Study

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**Abstract:** In multimedia, nurses are absent or often shown with any specific competence, totally far away from the actual context. Changes and evolution in the profession are not represented by the social image on the screen which strongly shows a doctor-centric clinical knowledge and responsibility. Considering the COVID-19 Pandemic brings significant media attention to medical staff, we analyze the television medical dramas before and after the Pandemic. The medical drama with the highest sharing index has been analyzed using an observational checklist, including 1) the nurse's presence and characteristics, 2) the role played within the format (main character, secondary character, and appearance) and the main character's features (when present), 3) the acting skills, 4) relationship dynamics in the work context (team and patient), 5) the impact on welfare and health and 6) the respect of the deontological aspects. The result implies that the image of nursing remains obsolete and linked to gender or subordination stereotypes. Heroes in white uniforms are presented in the news for a while, but too soon stigmatized. Therefore, it is necessary to start creating consciousness of the social image of nursing professionals to alert the media power and its related risks and, but above all, to use them as a resource of change.

**Keywords:** Social information, Nurse, Pandemic, COVID-19

## 1. Introduction

Nursing continues to evolve and change in terms of requested competencies, education, and related regulations (Doneland et al., 2008). Nevertheless, this transformation has not been reflected in its social image, which remains obsolete, linked to old stereotypes, and not helped by the media system (Girvin et al., 2016; Paterniani et al., 2012; Kelli et al., 2011). The specific responsibility and autonomy of the nurse are not, or poorly, known, but it strongly emerges a doctor-centric clinical knowledge and responsibility (Alaimo, 2016). The only exception results in people who have had direct experience with nurses, especially patients (Burani and Gradellini, 2019; Nannelli et al., 2015).

On the screen, the figure of nurses is absent or often shown with any specific professional profile (D'Avorgna and Moncharmont, 2015; Gradellini et al., 2013; Weaver et al., 2013), totally far away from the actual context (Martins Cardoso et al., 2014). Thus, it is essential to underline that the public image of nurses strongly affects their professional identity (Girvin et al., 2016), and even how the population sees the profession and what it expects from them (Rubbi et al., 2017; Raezi-Adaryani et al., 2012). Promoting a positive nurse image results fundamentally in outcomes as caring (Montanari et al., 2017).

What has happened with the COVID-19 Pandemic in media is significant attention to this figure (Giorgetta and Pasquot, 2021). The value of nurses starts to be seen in terms of professionalism and competencies by the public and politicians (Catton, 2020). Suddenly, they become heroes in the daily work to fight against the virus (*Ibidem),* and be on the first line to guarantee care and health. An example of this concept is the painting made by the British artist Banksy in the Southampton Hospital, which represents a little boy who discarded his superhero toys to play with a flying nurse, wearing a facemask. As heroes, the nursing staff appears every day, during the pandemic period, first on social media, as icons of tired faces mutilated by the mask in the news, but even in the commercials. In general, nurses started to be everywhere: the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1997) needs new symbols (Miller et al., 2021) to dialogue with the pandemic status. Concerning previous studies, Giorgetta and Pasquot (2021) describe a positive recognition of the nursing profession after the Pandemic. Their study underlines the importance of the nursing work and the sacrifice in work conditions characterized by lack of DPI (at the beginning of the Pandemic), contagious risks, and consequent damage to the physical and psychological wellbeing (*Ibidem)*.

Furthermore, what emerges, together with this ideological figure of the nurse, is the untold side of the front-line hero: the possibility nurse becomes the spreader. Concerning this point, already several articles and reviews report the perceived risk of nurses' stigma all over the world (Brito et al., 2021; Sadati et al., 2021; Barello et al., 2020; Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Chabarkapa et al., 2020; Janeway, 2020; Sorokin et al., 2020).

This dualistic aspect confirms a considerable confusion in the social image of the nurse, worsen by the fact that. Nowadays, audio-visual is the way we communicate and conceive the world. However, even the way the world exists strongly emerges from the need to be appropriately represented. In times of Pandemic, in which people start living in an alternative dimension, media becomes an extension of the perceptual system, and also the way to talk about the contemporary human condition in all its facets (Simonigh, 2020).

## 2. Materials and Methods

This survey is carried out to analyze how the nursing role is described by the media system, specifically in television medical dramas, before and after the Pandemic. The medical drama having the highest sharing index has been analyzed using an observational checklist, including 1) the nurse's presence and characteristics, 2) the role played within the format (main character, secondary character, appearance) and the main character's features (when present), 3) the acting skills, 4) relationship dynamics in the work context (team and patient), 5) the impact on welfare and health, and 6) the respect of the deontological aspects (Gradellini et al., 2013).

The medical dramas have been selected from 1) *USA Today* (the third American newspaper for circulation, tenth in the world, in the English language), 2) *YouTube*, 3) *Best Medical Degrees* (an independent online group providing information for university students), and 4) *IMDb* (the Internet Movie Database of Amazon, which catalogs movies and television serials). The inclusion criteria of the format are that its latest season must not be within ten years. In the selections recommended by the criteria, other exclusion criteria have been applied, excluding the following formats: 1) *Bionic Vet* because is talking about veterinary medicine, 2) A *young doctor's notebook, The doctor Blacke mysteries, The knick,* and *Call the midwife* because they take place n the first half of 1900, and 3) ER *(Emergency Room), Dr. Kildare, Mash, Chicago hope Everwood, St. Elsewhere*, *Nip and Tuck, Northern Exposure, Scrubs, Third Watch,* and *Doogie Hoswer* because ended more than ten years ago. The series included in the survey have been: *The good doctor, Dr. House: medical division, Chicago Med, Code black, Grey's Anatomy, Private practice, Nurse Jackie, The night shift, The Mindy Project,* and *New Amsterdam and Pandemic.*

In all formats, the first and last seasons have been analyzed. In the specific all the first episodes of each series, plus a randomized selection of the following, using *random.org*. The draw episodes' interval (number 4) has been found using *Random.org*, and permits the selection of the two seasons' episodes, as explained in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Episodes' randomization process (pre-pandemic).

| Title | Number of Seasons | Total Number of Episodes | First Season Number of Episodes | First Season Selected Episodes | Last Season Number of Episodes | Last Season Selected Episodes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chicago med | 3 | 61 | 18 | 5 | 20 | 6 |
| Code black | 3 | 46 | 18 | 5 | 12 | 4 |
| Dr. House: medical division | 8 | 177 | 22 | 6 | 22 | 6 |
| Grey's anatomy | 14 | 310 | 9 | 3 | 24 | 8 |

| Private practice | 6 | 112 | 10 | 3 | 13 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nurse Jackie | 7 | 80 | 12 | 4 | 12 | 4 |
| The good doctor | 1 | 18 | 18 | 5 | / | / |
| The Mindy project | 6 | 117 | 24 | 7 | 10 | 3 |
| The night shift | 4 | 47 | 8 | 3 | 10 | 3 |

For the post-pandemic period, the series which afford the Pandemic have been selected as follows: 1) *Grey's Anatomy,* 2) *The Good doctor,* 3) *Pandemic. How to prevent the outbreak,* and 4) *New Amsterdam.* The observational checklist remains the same used for the previous analysis. For what concerns *Grey's Anatomy*, and *t*he *Good Doctor*, because already analyzed, it has been considered only the seasons pandemic-related, with the randomized selection of the episodes used for the first phase: 17° season for *Grey's Anatomy*, 4° season/episodes 1 and 2 for *t*he *Good Doctor*. *Pandemic* has six episodes, and all of them have been analysed. *New Amsterdam* has 22 episodes, and they have been analyzed using the same selection as the first (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Episodes' randomization process (post-pandemic).

| Title | COVID-related Season | Total Number of Episodes | Number of Selected Episodes |
|---|---|---|---|
| New Amsterdam | / | 22 | 5 |
| Grey's anatomy | 17° | 17 | 4 |
| Pandemic | / | 6 | 6 |
| The good doctor | 4° | 20 | 2 |

In both phases, the selected episodes have been observed separately by two nursing researchers (CG and ANI). Each series' first episode has also been analyzed by a third external partner, outside of the nursing context (ZG).

## 3. Results

The analyzed episodes were 99 for the pre-COVID phase (9 different series) and 17 (4 different series) for the post-COVID one (116 in total).

The following is the analysis result in the alphabetical order of the formats.

- *Chicago Med* is an American series (Wolf and Olmstead) started in 2015, set in a medical center in Chicago. Between the main characters, two nurses are working in the emergency department: April Sexton, a young nurse, and Maggie Lockwood, the nursing coordinator. Both are African-American. The other nurses do not have a definitive role except for a Latin-American new entry in season 3. However, they are described as background figures, most females, engaged in reading/writing clinical reports or not-clear activities at the patient's bed. Physicians are responsible for most of the activities and the relationship with patients. One of the nurse characters (April Sexton) demonstrates good knowledge, relational, and professional skills, often

under the doctors' prescription: stretcher-bed patient transfer, vital signs monitoring, pulmonary ventilation with bag valve mask, and positioning of venous accesses. The relationship with the team is globally good, while in the third episode is involved in a love relationship with a doctor. In one episode of this season, a deontological issue emerges because she refuses to care for a pedophile patient. The nursing coordinator is a good manager with booth human resources and patients' understanding and good clinical and advocacy competencies (e.g., patient assessment, pulmonary auscultation). In some episodes, the nursing job is described with a significant workload, daily schedule, and staff shortage.

- *Code Black* is an American format (Seitzman), started in 2018, and placed in a Los Angeles hospital's emergency department, often describing a critical emergency categorized with the black code. The central figure is a doctor (Loanne Rorish), but the series includes a male nursing coordinator within the principal characters (Jesse Salander). The other nurses are extras, often involved in activities with doctors, without speaking and answering prescriptions (e.g. preparing material or therapies). Even if the nursing coordinator has an important role, he is competent in giving information, having the situation under control, and collaborating in the most critical cases. However, the medical staff dominates the scenario. She is competent in managing the relationship with the multidisciplinary team, patients, and families.

- *Doctor House-Medical Division* (Shore and Attanasio) is an American format running from 2004. The protagonist is Gregory House, the doctor in chief of a university hospital in New Jersey. In the entire series, nurses appear sporadically, A primary or secondary defined role is never played, but they appear in dialogues or activities made with physicians. Most of them are young females. Sometimes, they are nominated by the doctors when they have to delegate activities such as blood tests, patients' hygiene, or clinical reports management. When they appear, nurses are involved in writing (documents or PC), moving wheelchairs, and sometimes assisting during doctors' activities (e.g. preparing materials), in silence. The nurse never speaks to the patient, rarely with the doctor if not to positively answer activities' prescriptions. Collaboration in an emergency or therapy administration is sporadic. For the lack of focus on the role, it is impossible to analyze the impact on the health path and the deontological issues. In season VII, almost all the nurses are African-American. Five episodes do not show the nurse.

- *Grey's Anatomy* (Rimes) is an American format, started in 2005, set in an imaginary Seattle hospital. The protagonist is Meredith Grey, a surgeon trainee in a context characterized by her fellow students. The series is medical-centered with marginal figures of nurses. In the first season, a nurse appears, as a secondary role, and she is bad-treated by a doctor who declares to hate nurses. Her competencies and activities are unknown, as well as her relationship with patients and the team. The other two nursing figures appear in other episodes. In number 4, an Afro-American nurse fight with a trainee doctor because he is trying to reanimate an NR patient (who chooses to be not reanimated). This happening could give an idea of a professional being aware of the patient respect (deontological dimension), but the fact is brief, and any other specifics emerge. In number 8, a nurse collaborates with a doctor during patient intubation while preparing and giving the requested materials. In the last season, a nurse is visible as a background figure engaged in making a bed in one episode. Episodes 1, 4, 12, 16, 20, and 24 are characterized by a total absence of nurses. The 17° season describes the hospital during the management of the Pandemic. Nurses appear as background figures in all the analyzed episodes. When their activities are visible, the role appears as secondary to the physicians. In fact, most of the described activities are preparing materials, for the operating theatre, helping the surgeon during an intervention, and transporting patients, often in a relation to a submissive role. In the relationship with the patient, it happens nurse tries to reassure a person. In two episodes, the nurse collaborates in the management of an emergency.

- *Nurse Jackie* (Brixius, Dunsky, and Wallem) is another American series that aired between 2009 and 2015. The protagonist is Jaqueline Peyton, a nurse working in an Emergency Department of a New York hospital. Jackie has a controversial personality associated with her considerable knowledge and experience, which brings her to several fights, especially with the physician's team. In fact, her principal convention is that doctors often look at the pathology instead of the patient. She is a drug addict (this leads her to self-destruction in the latest season) who falsifies documents to obtain her opiates, steals the department's pharmacy, and has a clandestine relationship with the pharmaceutical manager. Jackie embodies what can be defined as characteristics of the anti-hero, a figure who, sometimes, does not abide by laws, regulations, professionals, or ethical rules, engaging in inappropriate and incorrect behavior. Towards the patient, however, she displays excellent empathy, understanding, sweetness, and excellent relational skills. Jackie takes charge of their health condition by taking care of all the details to the minimum, without neglecting anything, observing patients and making clinical deductions, demonstrating great technical familiarity, reassuring them, and finding words of comfort. Occasionally, she collaborates with doctors in the management of emergencies, for which she is always well prepared. The secondary characters are two doctors, a trainee nurse, and a nurse colleague. Good interpersonal skills with patients emerge from the trainee who flanked Jackie. In the last season, she becomes the emergency room coordinator, but she plays a marginal role, rarely in contact with patients. The colleague who appears sporadically is a homosexual nurse, never taken up again in specific care activities.

- *Private Practice* (Rhimes) has been aired from 2007 to 2013, set in a Los Angeles hospital. It is a *Grey's Anatomy* spin-off. The series describes the work of the neonatal surgeon protagonist and her colleagues. In the whole first season, any nurse emerges. Nursing care is marginally described, in an operating theatre context, with surgeons' support activities (e.g. drug administration under prescription or vital signs monitoring). The fact that nurses make these activities is a deduction from any specific mention is made. In the last season, a new figure is introduced as a doctor team collaborator, but it is unclear if she is a nurse or a midwife (her activities are not caring ones). She has a flirt with a doctor.

- *The Good Doctor* is an American series that began in 2017 (Shore). The protagonist, Shaun Murphy, is a surgical resident hired by a California hospital. He has autism, which makes the relationship difficult, giving him extraordinary memory, intuition, and clinical skills. The series is medical-centric, with frequent settings in the operating room. Nurses are present only as sporadic characters. It is difficult to identify specific skills or activities. They emerge as background figures engaged in reading documents and looking into computers' monitors. In the first episode, nurses appear to be busy at the patients' beds but in indefinite activities. In one episode (8), an African-American nurse analyzes vital parameters in collaboration and supports the doctor in managing a respiratory emergency, preparing the materials under indication. In other episodes, the alleged nurses (the roles are not explicitly defined) are engaged in transporting patients or in activities subordinated to the medical examination. The relationship with the patient is non-existent, and it is impossible to establish how much regarding ethical and deontological aspects. In some episodes, nurses are absent. The 4° season starts with a double episode centered on the COVID-19 Pandemic. While remaining medical-centric, a nursing figure emerges in Deena Petringa. Even if she is narrated as working 40 years in the hospital, she does not cover a primary role in the previous randomized episodes. She appears as a competent nurse with a good relationship with the multi-professional team. In the first episodes of this season, she is infected by COVID, and she dies after having helped the team with the suggestions coming from her long experience.

- The *Mindy Project* is an American comedy (Kaling), broadcast from 2012 to 2017, and stars Mindy Lahiri, an Asian-born gynecologist. Among the secondary characters, mainly doctors, a nurse often looks neglected even during working hours. Only in the last season, a second nurse takes over. The patient is not visible, and the scenes/dialogues are mostly centered on professionals, not just in the workplace. No specific nursing skills or activities emerge to be analyzed.

- *The night shift* is an American series (Sachs and Judah), aired from 2014 to 2017, telling the story of an emergency department in Texas. There are several main characters, including a nurse (Kenny Fournette) who has African American origin. Except for him, other nurses are background figures cooperating in medical-centric activity. Most of them are female, taken up in consultation activities of the clinical documentation or near the patient's bed. Even the nurse who has the central role is rarely represented during care activities, making hard the specific evaluation. Instead, his relationship skills with the patient emerge in several episodes, while one with other professionals is confidential but denotes subordination to the doctor. The ethical-professional aspect cannot be evaluated as well as private life.

- *New Amsterdam* (Schulner) is a Netflix series that started in 2018. His protagonist is Doctor Max Godwin, the new anticonformist Director of the hospital, which gives the name to the format. All defined figures are doctors, except for a Hispanic nursing coordinator. The series is centered on doctors' figures, and nurses' activities are general when visible. The second season planned the last episode centered on the flu pandemic Although it was shot before the arrival of COVID-19, the schedule coincided with the Pandemic, and series production, together with protagonists, decided not to broadcast it out of respect for the victims of the COVID-19.

- *Pandemic. How to prevent an Outbreak* is a Netflix documentary, made by six episodes in 2020, shooted before the COVID-19 Pandemic. It describes the possibility of pandemic flu worldwide through the point of view of several protagonists: researchers, doctors, experts in epidemiology, crisis management, and infectious diseases. In the first episode, one of the protagonists is a retired nurse volunteering in a migrants' reception center in Tucson, Arizona. She had been a volunteer during the September 11th attack and hurricane Katrina. She emerges as a positive figure as motivated, prepared and competent, with a high level of responsibility and autonomy. The central part of her described job is managing the vaccination process with total autonomy, for children and adults. She competently promotes the importance of vaccines. The relationships with all the target patients are emphatic and effective.

## 4. Discussion

The majority of data confirms a doctor-centric point of view (Alaimo, 2016). Although not always well defined, the figure of the nurse is present in all the analyzed formats. However, in most cases, they are background or secondary figures, even if this aspect is slightly improved compared to previous studies (Alaimo, 2016; D'Avorgnaand Moncharmont, 2015; Weaver et al., 2013). Except for the only series in which the nurse is the protagonist (Nurse Jackie), in four of the analyzed series, nurses are represented by a recognizable character and are always described as a positive figure (Chicago Med, Code Black, The Night Shift).

Gender stereotypes, which have already emerged from previous studies (Girvin et al., 2016; Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2014; Paterniani et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2011), is confirmed, too. Even in the series in which the nurse is a background figure, the prevailing gender is the female. This element contrasts with the increase of male professionals in authentic contexts, analyzed in the literature (Weaver et al., 2014). Two of the nurse characters described in the series (*Nurse Jackie* and *The Mindy Project)* are homosexual, and this emerges with effeminate attitudes, rarely so emphasized in reality (*Ibidem*). Another aspect to consider is nationality, which is often related to an ethnic minority considering the country where the format is set (Gradellini et al., 2013). Starting from the point all formats are from the US, it would be helpful to confront the ethnic distribution with one of the actual populations with data available in the literature.

Almost all series do not have a nurse who plays a role so essential to let personal characteristics emerge. The exemptions to this are the episode of Pandemic and Nurse Jackie. If both describe specific nursing competencies, the overall image is different. On this point, it is necessary to consider that Pandemic, where the nursing role has a positive impact on health, is a documentary, and it does not have the same share as the other format. These are the only examples in which nursing competencies are described. In others, activities are indefinite (as often the role itself), and other professionals can usually do them.

What concerns the deontological aspect of the profession appears in sporadic episodes in which the nurse plays an advocacy role toward patients (e.g. Grey's Anatomy). More often, it appears in Nurse Jackye, but shows questionable ethical behaviors. In fact, the New York Nursing Association has criticized it for numerous ethical code violations (Gradellini et al., 2013).

The relationships with the patient, as described, are always positive, deserving attention and active listening. More controversial is one with doctors often described as subordinative, but it strongly emerges a doctor-centric clinical knowledge (Alaimo, 2016), sometimes in contrast with the nurse's role (e.g. Nurse Jackie and Grey's Anatomy). The positive impact on welfare and health outcomes emerged only in the documentary (Pandemic). The nursing profession's visibility in the COVID-19 Pandemic (Giorgetta and Pasquot, 2021; Catton, 2020) is absent in the medical drama.

## 5. Conclusions

The image of nursing emerging by media remains obsolete and linked to gender or subordination stereotypes. Although the COVID-19 Pandemic brings mediatic attention to this profession (Giorgetta and Pasquot, 2021), most popular television series describe nurses in a role subordinate to doctors. Heroes in white uniforms were presented in the news for a while. Too soon, the same hero became a possible spreader, stigmatized for the sacrifice and the dedication demonstrated till the day before (Brito-Brito et al., 2021; Sadati et al., 2021; Barello et al., 2020; Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Chabarkapa et al., 2020; Janeway, 2020; Sorokin et al., 2020). This means the road is still long to obtaining the deserved social recognition. Literature underlines how much public nurses' image affects professional identity [2] and even the efficacy of the profession and professionals on the care outcomes (Montanari et al., 2017). It is necessary to start creating consciousness in nursing professionals (Capone et al., 2017; Van Bekkum and Hilton, 2013) to alert the media power and its related risks. However, above all, it is important to use them as a resource to change (Karanikola et al., 2011).

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