ABSTRACT
Objective: to identify and synthesize research findings about the image of nursing, published between 1990 and 2007. Method: historical-social research with a narrative literature review design. Data was collected from four databases of international impact. Results: 832 articles were found, and 30 of these matched the inclusion criteria. The articles were organized in groups according to the type of sample. Common stereotypes were confirmed. Conclusion: considering the current recruitment crisis, it is surprising that samples of high school students were the focus in few articles. It seems urgent to improve the image of nursing and conduct research on interventions strategies. Descriptors: Nursing; Nursing Image; Professional Marketing.

RESUMO

RESUMEN

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INTRODUCTION

● Background and significance

The period 2006-2015 was called the “Decade of Human Resources in Health for the Americas” during the Regional Meeting of the Observatory of Human Resources in Health in Toronto, Canada in 2005. The most important resolutions focus on the need to strengthen health care human resources in the Americas. The goal is to plan and study alternatives to improve health care around the world by focusing on value health care professionals.1-2

Anecdotal evidence and research findings indicate that a limited number of young people wish to select nursing as a profession. In a study conducted in Scotland3 surveyed 1059 students in grade 5 and 6 and found that 702 already had career aspirations. Remarkably, only 56 students were interested in nursing as a first choice, and 143 thought nursing could be a possibility if their grades were too low to enter other fields of study. Female students considered nursing 3.77 times more than male students.

Thirty-one first-year American nursing students enrolled in a baccalaureate program who were interviewed indicated that most had chosen nursing after having been in contact with nurses in clinical settings during the illness of someone close to them, and usually during their high school years.4

In this context, talent recruitment and retention strategies are important to lower the shortage of nurses many countries face. Nursing literature has addressed negative stereotypes about nursing and nurses as a female profession, handmaids, low complexity, work under others’ orders, looking at historical events and social contexts that have contributed to form and maintain stereotypes, as well as the role of the media.

In the 1980’s, a classical study on the image of nursing analyzed 207 novels found that nursing characters were 99% female. Stereotypes could be classified in three categories: “the nurse as man’s companion”, “man’s destroyer” and “man’s mother or the mother of his children”, and usually the man referred to was a physician.5

More recently, analyzing the content of 144 web sites in 2001 and 152 in 2004, researchers found the existence of a general positive image of nursing, with specialized knowledge and skills, with almost 70% of web sites showing aspects like intelligent and educated, 60% respected, committed, competent and trustworthy. However, from 2001 to 2004, there was a decline of important characteristics, such as nurses being powerful, autonomous, accountable, scientific, committed, trustworthy and creative, while the portrayal of nurses as being sexually promiscuous, cool/ “with it”, and attractive/well groomed significantly increased.6

Apparently there is a general agreement about the image of nursing being problematic in the literature, however, few studies have focused on how to improve the image of nursing with prospective nurses and people in general.7 Seems that small studies are addressing the image of nursing, but these studies reveal negative mass media influences on the image of nursing, besides the fact that the media usually ignores the contribution of nurses in health care. Some authors also discuss that social image influences nurses’ self-image, satisfaction and recruitment.7

General literature suggests that the problem of negative stereotyping about nurses is still present today. But do recent research results point in the same direction? And, if the answer is yes, what are nurses doing around the world to try to solve this problem? The present paper addresses these questions.

OBJECTIVE

● To identify and synthesize research findings about the image of nursing, published between 1990 and 2007.

METHODS

Historical-social study with a narrative literature review design.8 The methodological strategy involved the search for articles, using key words, selected in four databases of international impact, which reported on research involving human beings or the media and focused on the image of nursing in general, were available on the web or in print in an international library network. All possible efforts and strategies were used to access the full versions of the papers, published in peer-reviewed journals in English, French, Portuguese or Spanish, between 1990 and 2007.

The four databases were Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature by EBSCO Publishing (CINAHL/EBSCO), United States National Library of Medicine by Ovid Technologies (OVID-MEDLINE), PASCAL and Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS).

The key words used were “image of nursing” and “professional image of nursing” and their respective translations to Portuguese, French and Spanish. The authors
selected the papers independently based on the title and abstract and discussed until reaching a consensus. Then, the full versions of the papers were analyzed and those with a clear and consistent methodological approach were selected. Quantitative studies were retained if they included solid statistical analysis and used validated instruments. Similarly, for qualitative studies, the use of theoretical models for content analysis, and demonstration of rigor were considered.

RESULTS

The initial search generated 832 papers.

Table 1. Distribution of papers according to sample of high school students or general population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>INS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Droes, et al. (1993) USA</td>
<td>Nursing image among high school students and educational intervention</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>Experimental design/ Educational intervention - theories of diffusion of innovations and social change</td>
<td>LI†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luchesi, Santos (2005) Brazil</td>
<td>Nursing image among high school students and educational intervention</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Experimental design: Pretest/posttest. Educational intervention*</td>
<td>LI†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foong, et al. (1999), China</td>
<td>Nursing image among high school students</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Descriptive and exploratory design/ content analysis</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kemmer, Silva (2007a) Brazil</td>
<td>Nursing image among high school students</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Qualitative / Moscovici’s methodology and discourse analysis</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rossiter, Yam (1998) Australia</td>
<td>Nursing image among non-English-speaking high school students and marketing strategies</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Ethnographic/ Focus group interviews</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kemmer, Silva (2007b) Brazil</td>
<td>Nursing image among media professionals</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Qualitative/ Theory of Social Representation and discourse analysis</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacciarini, et al. (1999) Brazil</td>
<td>Nursing image among people in general</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Opinion poll search-type/ qualitative-quantitative analytical description</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoffstutler, et al. (1998) USA</td>
<td>Nursing image to non-nursing college students and individuals and professionals.</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>Qualitative approach/ Content analysis/ Intrarater reliability tested</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mansour, (1992) Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Nursing image among college students and their parents</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Quantitative / interview group for students and take-home questionnaire for parents*</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May, et al. (1991) USA</td>
<td>Ideal career and nursing career for students grades 6-12, parents, college freshmen, school nurses, teachers and counselors</td>
<td>1116</td>
<td>Quantitative / questionnaire with expert validation*</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kunene, et al. (2001) South Africa</td>
<td>Community perceptions about nursing image</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Descriptive study/ questionnaire with expert validation*</td>
<td>LI†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Distribution of papers according to type of research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>INS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Qualitative study</td>
<td>Quantitative analytical description</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Content analysis/ Intrarater reliability tested</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Classical survey</td>
<td>Opinion poll search</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non classical survey</td>
<td>Opinion poll search</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Description of statistical test use, †Low incidence, ‡ Incidence of negative stereotypes

- The image of nursing among high school or junior high students - (5 papers)

One paper found that students had an image of nursing as caring and scientific before an educational intervention, but that nurses’ autonomy was integrated after the researchers’ intervention. Other paper found that negative stereotypes were not significant prior to the intervention and almost decreased to zero after an educative intervention. 10

On the other hand, three papers found negative images to be more common than positive images. The stereotypes low value or low status, dependent of medicine were found, as well as statements indicative of a lack of knowledge about the education required to be a nurse, and none or very few students indicated serious intentions to choose nursing as a career. 11.12 In addition, nursing was seen as poorly paid, with few opportunities for promotion and including unpleasant work, 11.13 technical work and with simple tasks. 11.2

Some authors also found that students saw some positive aspects, such as caring and being helpful, teaching patients about health and developing interpersonal skills, but considered lack of prestige and low salaries as deterrents to select nursing career. 13

- The image of nursing among people in general (7 papers)

One paper found that, in general, media professionals acknowledged the importance of nursing in health care and the frequent invisibility of nursing in the media and society. 14 Other authors also found stereotypes like charitable individuals, with the lowest scores for university professionals, team member and nursing administrator. 15

Some papers showed lack of knowledge...
about the nursing profession or education\textsuperscript{14,16,17} and the stereotypes doctor’s auxiliary or working under their orders\textsuperscript{15,17} were also found. Not all answers portrayed this relationship as negative, although medicine was considered the health care coordinator.\textsuperscript{16}

The ideal profession was described as respected, appreciated, making decisions, using one’s brain and “caring for people”. The nursing profession was most often scored as hard work, busy, “caring for people”, using one’s brain, and “working with hands”, while it scored the lowest for power and money. Responses also indicated the belief that nurses did not work in safe environments. Surprisingly, nurses in this research had more negative thoughts about the nursing profession than non-nurses. This can be related to work conditions and the need for more information about opportunities in nursing.\textsuperscript{18}

In a quantitative study with 77 individuals, author found that most college students and their parents believed that nursing is a humanistic career with academic preparation, and that males should be part of the profession, but 86% of the students had not considered choosing nursing as a career. Students (45%) and 55.9% of parents did not want their children in nursing, based on stereotypes like work hours and work with members of the opposite sex. On a scale of prestige, nursing scored lower than medicine and pharmacy.\textsuperscript{17}

In another study, the most cited answer to the question “nursing is…” was “a caring, helping profession”, seen as a “noble calling”.\textsuperscript{16} A search who studied children’s drawings, found that nursing was usually depicted in hospital settings. In the same study, nurses’ activities were seen as less complex activities, but nurse-patient interaction was described positively.\textsuperscript{16} Positive descriptions of nursing characteristics were more frequent than negative ones in both studies.\textsuperscript{16,19}

In the same direction, other study found that, for most participants, there was good contact with nurses and they held a good image of profession, as commitment, good communication and respect for clients' rights, and they felt safe under care facilities. Participants merely commented on not feeling safe when nurses joined unions or went on strike.\textsuperscript{20}

Table 2. Distribution of papers according to sample of nursing students and nurses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>INS†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brodie, et al. (2004) UK\textsuperscript{17}</td>
<td>Impact of changes in the image of nursing on nursing student retention</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>Mixed research/grounded theory</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiger, UK\textsuperscript{22} (1993)</td>
<td>Nursing image among nursing students</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Qualitative/ Grounded Theory</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse, UK\textsuperscript{13} (2000)</td>
<td>Nursing students’ image of the profession upon admission into their program</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Multi-method/constructivist/naturalistic paradigm/ content analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vieira (1999) Brazil\textsuperscript{14}</td>
<td>Cultural image of nursing among nurses</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Qualitative/ Moscovici’s Social Representation Theory</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grainger, Bolan (2006) Canada\textsuperscript{25}</td>
<td>Nursing as a career choice for B.Sc. Nursing students</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>Longitudinal descriptive study/ Use of two scales validated by other authors*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ehrenfeld, et al. (1998) Israel\textsuperscript{16}</td>
<td>Reason for choosing nursing, image and satisfaction with nursing students</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>Quantitative approach/ Use of validated questionnaire *</td>
<td>Lit†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kersten, et al. (1991) USA\textsuperscript{22}</td>
<td>Career choice motivation for nursing students</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>Exploratory study. Questionnaire- content no validation and inter-rater reliability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takase, et al. (2001) Australia\textsuperscript{18}</td>
<td>Nurses’ perception of public image, self-concept, satisfaction and performance</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Descriptive correlational study/Five different scales validated by other authors *</td>
<td>SP §</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takase, et al. (2002) Australia\textsuperscript{18}</td>
<td>Nurses’ perception of image, self-concept, self-esteem, satisfaction and performance</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Descriptive correlational study/Six different scales validated by other authors *</td>
<td>SP §</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mendez, Louis, (1991) USA\textsuperscript{30}</td>
<td>Nursing image among nursing and non-nursing students</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>Descriptive survey/ Mixture of two yes questionnaires, tested for reliability*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tseng, Taiwan\textsuperscript{11} (2006)</td>
<td>Nursing image to undergraduate/graduate students and university staff</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study/ Questionnaire based on another author, expert validation *</td>
<td>Lit†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Description of statistical test use. †Low incidence. § Incidence of negative stereotypes. §§ocial Perception.

- The image of nursing among nursing students and registered nurses (11 papers)

Most studies found positive images of nursing among nurses or nursing students. However, traces of stereotypes were documented. Nursing was seen as underpaid,\textsuperscript{21-23} hard work, subordinate\textsuperscript{24-26} or requiring few skills\textsuperscript{21,24}.

The dissonance between students’ initial images and the reality they faced during the program, including difficult experiences with
nursing staff, could cause disappointment and influence retention.\textsuperscript{21}\textsuperscript{9} Other study, found that students had a positive image of nursing. Although not statistically significant, it appeared that fourth-year students considered nursing less valued than first-year students.\textsuperscript{25}

In two studies, nursing was seen as providing work security, employment opportunities and economic advantages.\textsuperscript{26,27} In other, students were positive about sharing with others that they were nursing students. However, female nursing students reported that young males they encountered often saw nursing through the lenses of the sexual object image, while male nursing students feared being labeled as deviating from accepted sex roles.\textsuperscript{22}

Nurses saw the social image of nursing more negatively than they see themselves and this incoherence can influence job satisfaction.\textsuperscript{26} Authors also found that many nursing students saw nursing as being undervalued by society.\textsuperscript{21}

Other study found that most non-nursing college students did not consider choosing nursing as a career, did not know their counselors’ thoughts about nursing and did not feel influenced by nursing role models they met. In contrast, most nursing students reported that their guidance counselors had been positive about the nursing career and had been influenced by nursing role models.\textsuperscript{30} Satisfaction with nursing services was the most important factor leading to a positive image of nursing. Authors also found a relationship between finding the image of the angel of mercy positive and having an overall positive view of nursing.\textsuperscript{31}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Powers (2001) USA\textsuperscript{32}</td>
<td>Hospital campaign materials image of nursing</td>
<td>Qualitative approach/Discourse analysis.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fealy, (2004) Ireland\textsuperscript{33}</td>
<td>Nursing image in Nursing Journal (NJ) and Lay Journal (LJ)</td>
<td>Historical research, based on neo-Marxist and feminist modes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallam, (1998) UK\textsuperscript{34}</td>
<td>Image of nursing in British post-war media</td>
<td>Qualitative/Post-Foucaultian feminism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rambor &amp; Kruse (2007) Brazil\textsuperscript{35}</td>
<td>Image of nurse in Hollywood movies</td>
<td>Qualitative design close to “cultural studies” field</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lusk, (2000) USA\textsuperscript{36}</td>
<td>Nursing image in pictorial advertisements/hospital administration journals 1930-50”</td>
<td>Content analysis/another classical author’s previous study, inter-rater reliability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aber, Hawkins, (1992) USA\textsuperscript{37}</td>
<td>Nursing image in pictorial advertisements in medical and nursing journals</td>
<td>Mixed approach/ Content analysis and statistical analysis to measure reliability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lipoman, Ponton, (1993) Brazil\textsuperscript{38}</td>
<td>Nursing image among guidance counselors</td>
<td>Quantitative /Questionnaire with expert validation</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

● The image of nursing in the media (6 papers)

A study found that nursing is visible in hospital promotional brochures because the public associates quality hospitals with quality nursing care and it works as a thermometer for marketers to emphasize nursing. In the brochures, nursing gained visibility as nurses’ duties got closer to medicine or administrative tasks.\textsuperscript{32}

During wartime, official and public discourse was enthusiastic and sentimental about the value of nursing. Nursing was portrayed as feminine, heroic and willing to serve the medical profession in the UK. By the 1960’s, the press began to consider the contribution of nurses to health services and, in the following decades, nurses’ work was portrayed as being more complex. The public, however, still lacks an understanding of nurses’ expertise.\textsuperscript{33}

In the 1960s, in Britain, recruitment materials paralleled media influence, where nurses were shown as medical helpers or as only part of medical work. Images common in popular magazines also seemed to exert influence, where nursing was portrayed as “glamorous” and displayed as “romantic and fun” and carried out by beautiful young women. Most Hollywood, British movies and recruitment material showed nursing as an honorable profession with high moral. In the post-war period, nurses lost the central figures in cinematic physicians.\textsuperscript{34}

In six Hollywood movies up to the 1990’s, nurses were usually in hospital situations, mostly female and Caucasian, doing technical or administrative functions, dictating hospital rules, submissive, low status, and even as heroes or villains. Male nurses protagonists had their masculinity questioned in two of these films.\textsuperscript{35}

Analyzing the image of nursing in advertisement pictures in hospital administration journals during the 1930’s, 1940’s and 1950’s, and nursing journals from 1990 studies realize the most nurses were females and doctors were males using stethoscopes and male figures were shown in more active situations than females.\textsuperscript{36,37} Nurses were portrayed in subordinate situations.\textsuperscript{38} Similarly, Authors found the image of nursing was more positive during the war period.\textsuperscript{34,36}
● The image of Nursing among Guidance Counselors - (1 paper)

In one study, in general, guidance counselors saw nursing in a good light, as important in health care and that professional education is important. The high percentage of counselors who had contact with nurses may have influenced results. The angel of mercy stereotype and sex symbol were found but, for the last, it seems that the counselors were not so sure about this image.38

DISCUSSION

From the 30 papers included, 60% show incidence of negative stereotypes, 30% low incidence of negative stereotypes, 7% that nurses believe society has negative stereotypes about them and 3% did not find negative stereotypes.

Among the categories, the most cited stereotypes were subordinate to physicians, hard work, doing simple tasks and low status. Citations of people’s lack of knowledge about nursing expertise are also concerning. Good reports about nursing were also displayed, but less than negative, as a caring profession, important and knowledgeable.

Only five research papers focused on high school students’ opinion only. Few or no students in this sample category were interested in choosing this carrier. The same lack of interest was appointed in some papers involving students in the category “people in general”. The same pattern was addressed in a study with 269 high school students, which found that 76% of the students did not think of nursing as a career, without statistical differences between men and women regarding this choice. The results signaled potential recruitment difficulties in the future, considering that the place of study hosted a nursing college with international visibility.39

From the papers that focus on nursing students or nurses, five papers presented stereotypes. Nurses reported that the social image of nursing was more negative than how they themselves saw nursing, and that the dissonance between their personal beliefs and societal views could be a source of frustration. On the other hand, new nursing students presented some stereotypical images, with probable changes during their program. One wonders, however, if the dissonance between their initial views about the image of nursing and reality can make them abandon nursing.

Some authors point that, faculty members have a very important role to play in helping students go through the dissonance process and support them.71-3

Media papers also included negative findings and stereotypical views. Nursing needs to monitor the media and react in case of problems. To promote a positive image, nurses can encourage and recognize when the mass media has good news or when television series portray nurses positively.40

As for the marketing issue, media professionals highlighted the responsibility of nursing to improve marketing of its image14, also emphasized by other authors.41 Participants also suggest marketing strategies and propose helping the public develop a clearer understanding of the profession, creating educational activities to introduce nursing, having enthusiastic nurses visit elementary schools to talk about nursing, and finally, the production of pamphlets.7 Media marketing strategies have also been proposed.13,17

The image the public holds about a profession is important for the social, political and professional success of any profession. Distorted images about nurses in the media influence public views and may also affect the number and quality of people choosing nursing as a career, policymakers’ attitudes, and make consumers have a poor understanding of the important role nursing plays in health care delivery, and credit all success in health care to medicine.40

The issue of nursing image affects all fields of nursing. At the educational level, this review alerts that the problem of recruitment and retention seems to continue and seems to be global in nature. Programs such as tutorials on line, and other Web resources should be developed to help students discover nursing.

Training can be done on improving nurses’ skills to be allies for marketing purposes, but also a marketing of themselves as a very important professional to society. The problem is really more complex, and passes through political commitment to health politics, nursing rights in work settings, salaries that correspond to the complexity of their work, time for continuing education, and many other factors, but all those are related with how society sees nurses.

CONCLUSION

The number of selected papers (30) was disturbing considering the long period of time under analysis and the number of initial potential papers (832). Considering the recruitment crisis found in the world today, the limited number of papers among high school students, using high-quality
assessment, is alarming. It is urgent that nursing addresses this problem situation. The fact that the papers reviewed here come from all continents and that most of them show some evidence of stereotypical images can signal that the poor image of nursing is still a global problem.

On the other hand, few studies used samples at state or national level, which should be encouraged. There is a need to improve this image in order not to have any dissonance between students’ perspective of the career and reality. Nursing organizations should monitor the media and be alert to a discourse that propagates stereotypical images.

It is clear that more research about this subject is needed. Doing so may improve the image of nursing among the public, potential students, and also nurses themselves. The improvement of nursing professionals’ self-esteem should start in undergraduate programs. Nursing students also need to be given the opportunity to discuss the image of nursing and be informed about how to intervene when negative images are being portrayed in the media.

LIMITATIONS

The main limitation of this analysis is that some papers could have been missed, as they may have been catalogued in different databases than those examined, but the selection process of databases was based on those integrating and connecting other important health databases. The 832 papers found lead to the belief that sampling was very accurate.

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