

### Why you should read this article:

- To understand the factors that can influence people to pursue a career in nursing
- To identify strategies that could enhance the recruitment of nursing students
- To recognise methods for improving the image of nursing among the general public

# Promoting recruitment by rebranding the image of nursing

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### Citation

Price S, MacMillan K, Awad C et al (2019) Promoting recruitment by rebranding the image of nursing. *Nursing Standard*. doi: 10.7748/ns.2019.e10937

### Peer review

This article has been subject to external double-blind peer review and checked for plagiarism using automated software

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### Conflict of interest

None declared

### Accepted

8 September 2017

### Published online

September 2019

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### Abstract

Understanding the factors that can influence people to pursue a career in nursing is essential for healthcare service managers, human resource professionals and nurse educators, particularly given the global shortage of nurses. There is evidence that the public perception of nursing can be negatively influenced by the media and nursing recruitment advertisements, and that this can discourage some people from choosing nursing as a career. At the Dalhousie University in Canada, evidence regarding the career choices of prospective nurses was used to inform a rebranding strategy for the School of Nursing's recruitment materials. The aim of the rebranding strategy was to present the School of Nursing as a diverse institution that provided a range of career opportunities for its nursing students. This article describes the background and implementation of the rebranding project. It also details how the university's evidence-based rebranding strategy was designed to positively influence people to choose nursing as a career.

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### Keywords

career pathways, education, image of nursing, nursing in the media, pre-registration education, professional issues, student recruitment, students, universities

Nursing recruitment and retention are recognised as priorities for healthcare organisations worldwide (World Health Organization 2006). In response to a global nursing shortage, healthcare researchers have examined how the image of nursing may inspire or discourage individuals from choosing a career in nursing (Gordon and Nelson 2005, Seago et al 2006, Price and McGillis Hall 2014, Twomey and Meadus 2016). The images depicted in traditional and social media such as television, films, newspapers and the internet have been shown to influence individuals' perceptions (Price et al 2014). Moreover, the often stereotypical and negative portrayal of nurses in traditional and social media has implications not only for nurse recruitment and retention, but also for job satisfaction, workplace behaviour and interprofessional relations (Cohen et al 2004, Takase et al 2006, Price et al 2014).

The public image of nurses and nursing in the media has been studied for decades (Kalisch and Kalisch 1982, Kalisch et al 1982, Kalisch

and Kalisch 1983, Kalisch et al 2007). Despite researchers identifying the need to update the image of nursing in the media, research has continued to demonstrate that a stereotypical portrayal of nurses persists (Eley et al 2012, Price et al 2013a, Price and McGillis Hall 2014). For example, Price et al (2013a) found that nursing was often depicted stereotypically in the media as a 'virtuous' profession with an emphasis on characteristics such as kindness and caring, which can trivialise the complexity and knowledge base required in nursing. Price et al (2013a, 2013b) also studied nurses' career choices and professional socialisation and found that this stereotypical portrayal of nursing resulted in a negative impression of the profession among prospective new recruits. For example, in the absence of personal experience of nursing or healthcare, Price et al (2013a, 2013b) found that participants' understanding of nursing arose predominantly from depictions in television programmes, novels, films and on the internet, where nurses were often depicted as minor

participants in patient care.

One example of how the media presents a stereotypical representation of nurses was demonstrated by the case of Kelley Johnson, a contestant in the 2016 Miss America pageant, who, during the round of on-stage monologues designed to display the contestants' abilities, discussed her work as a nurse, specifically how caring for one patient with Alzheimer's disease had demonstrated that she was not 'just a nurse' (Palatnik 2015). Johnson was ridiculed by some commentators, who made derogatory comments about her monologue, for example questioning why she wore a stethoscope. These negative comments received widespread media coverage and were subsequently criticised by nurses and members of the general public on social media (Kuperinsky 2015).

There is a need for nurses to participate in improving the image of their profession by engaging in public discourse to demonstrate their expertise and voice their professional opinions, for example by speaking at healthcare conferences and using innovative approaches such as writing an online blog (McAllister et al 2014, ten Hoeve et al 2014). It is also important that there is an improved understanding of nurses' contribution to patient care and population health from the general public and among healthcare leaders.

Needleman (2015) stated that 'nursing is complex, cognitively and managerially challenging work, a fact not appreciated by [the] public or frankly all healthcare executives'. Similarly, a white paper on the essential role of nurses from the Australian College of Nursing (2016) commented that 'nursing is not being used to its potential. Nursing is under-represented in debates and decision making, meaning that the nursing voice is not being heard, and patient-centred and sustainable reform is being placed at risk.'

Several websites aim to improve the academic profile of nursing. For example, the Truth about Nursing (<https://truthaboutnursing.org>) is a non-profit website that aims to increase public understanding of the nursing role. There is evidence to suggest that changing attitudes

towards the nursing profession are influencing nurses' roles (Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions 2018). At a local level, Roberta Heale, associate professor in the School of Nursing at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Canada, has made a significant contribution to the development of the nurse practitioner role across the Canadian healthcare system, while dozens of nurse practitioner clinics have been established in Ontario, Canada (Mulligan 2015).

### Background to the rebranding strategy

The School of Nursing at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada is part of the university's Faculty of Health. Dalhousie University is situated in a culturally diverse urban setting, with a population including: African Nova Scotians, most of whom were the descendants of people who fled slavery in the US; a small indigenous population of Mi'kmaq First Nation people; recent immigrants and refugees; and descendants of European colonial settlers. The School of Nursing offers a full range of undergraduate, master's and PhD nursing programmes, and admits 210 BSc nursing students each year. Although the School of Nursing is situated in Halifax, a medium-sized urban centre, its graduates also serve the province's extensive rural population. With its diverse undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, the School of Nursing represents a significant source of clinical nurses and nurse researchers in the region.

The advent of a new undergraduate curriculum in 2016 provided the opportunity to consider a redesign of the School of Nursing's approach to recruitment. The authors wanted to prepare a nursing workforce that could meet the complex needs of the local healthcare system such as a largely rural and ageing population, high rates of chronic disease, and uneven distribution of healthcare resources. Meeting these complex needs would require critical thinking, problem-solving, effective leadership, teamwork and interpersonal communication skills. The authors also wanted to increase the diversity of the nursing student

## Key points

- The often stereotypical and negative portrayal of nurses in traditional and social media has implications not only for nurse recruitment and retention, but also for job satisfaction, workplace behaviour and interprofessional relations
- Communications and marketing experts should work with researchers to design evidence-based recruitment materials that challenge long-held stereotypes about the roles of nurses
- Because stereotypical depictions of nursing often go unchallenged in the media, the general public requires updated portrayals of nurses so that the image of the profession can be reconceptualised

population and raise the numbers of male and transgender applicants, as well as recruiting from a variety of professional backgrounds, which would enhance the contribution of nurses to society. However, during the consultations on the revised curriculum with nursing stakeholders such as government representatives, members of regulatory bodies such as unions and licensing boards, and employers, it became apparent that traditional views of nurses, nurse education and nursing practice were still prevalent.

Researchers have investigated the image of nursing and the implications for human resource planning in healthcare organisations, and interprofessional collaboration (Kalisch and Kalisch 1982, 1983, Kalisch et al 1982, Price 2013a, 2013b). This research identified the need to update the imagery associated with nursing. In response, the authors examined the existing branding strategy at the School of Nursing, identifying that most of the branding and recruitment material presented an anachronistic and conservative portrayal of nursing and nurses, for example young women of European ancestry dressed in hospital scrubs caring for patients who were experiencing acute illness. In some of the images the nurses portrayed were static, as if waiting for instructions.

By using branding and recruitment materials that included this type of imagery, the School of Nursing was contributing to a traditional ‘virtue script’, which promotes a traditional depiction of nurses as altruistic and caring, while underemphasising the need for knowledge, skills and critical thinking in nursing (Gordon and Nelson 2005, Price 2013a). The School of Nursing required an updated branding strategy that would assist in the recruitment of nursing students who have the potential to become nursing leaders and change agents. This required branding and recruitment materials that reflected gender inclusivity, and cultural and racial diversity, as well as innovative approaches such as the use of social media, when promoting career options for nurses.

### Developing the rebranding strategy

In response to research on career choice, professional socialisation and nursing imagery, all of which indicated a need for updated and realistic portrayals of contemporary nursing practice (Kalisch et al 2007, Eley et al 2012, Price 2013a,

2013b), two of the authors (KM and SP), acting as representatives of the School of Nursing, began a collaboration with the university’s communications team with the aim of developing a rebranding strategy for the School of Nursing. The authors met with the communications team to share ideas about how the rebranding strategy could challenge common images of nurses in the media. The authors explained the type of nursing students the rebranding strategy would aim to recruit, for example:

- » People seeking a career where they could have a positive effect on people’s health.
- » People who had reached a high level of academic achievement.
- » Students from other university programmes, such as arts, sciences, management and computer science, who might be interested in pursuing a career in nursing.
- » People seeking a second career.
- » People from culturally diverse backgrounds.

In collaboration with the communications team, it was decided

that any rebranding would seek to avoid perpetuating the virtue script of nursing, for example over-feminised images and text, and a reliance on explicit references to caring. The caring role is predominant in nursing recruitment campaigns, and while this is a fundamental aspect of the role of the nurse, the authors wanted to emphasise the importance of critical thinking and practice-based knowledge.

### Priorities for recruitment

An evidence-based approach to the School of Nursing’s rebranding strategy was employed, alongside close collaboration between the authors and the communications team. It was hoped that this approach would lead to improved recruitment diversity at the School of Nursing and contribute to a greater understanding of the nurse’s role among the general public. Table 1 details the priorities for nursing recruitment that were identified in the research evidence, alongside the proposed strategies to achieve them (Kalisch et al 2007, Eley et al 2012, Price et al 2013a, 2013b).

### Implementation of the rebranding strategy

It was decided that the School of Nursing’s rebranding strategy would position nursing as a career with a significant academic component. The completed rebranding package of posters, leaflets, and online and print recruitment materials included slogans, for example ‘The first life you will change will be yours’, alongside relevant images and video. The use of images was influenced by the motivational recruitment videos used on the Be a Nurse website ([www.beanurse.ca](http://www.beanurse.ca)), which is based on the research of Price et al (2013a, 2013b). These videos incorporate images that focus on gender and cultural diversity, and portray nurses undertaking a broad range of practice roles in a variety of settings. To reflect this diversity, the School of Nursing’s rebranded recruitment materials were made available in electronic and print formats, and through social media platforms.

The aim of the rebranding strategy was to portray nurses as effective clinicians, managers,

**Table 1. Priorities for nursing recruitment and proposed strategies to achieve them**

Priority for nursing recruitment	Proposed strategy
» Depict caring and critical thinking	» Portray nurses undertaking effective interactions with patients
» Reflect the effects of nursing care on individuals and populations	» Portray nurses in diverse settings where their care contributes to health
» Represent diversity in gender, culture and race	» Ensure photos and videos depict nurses from diverse genders, cultures and races that reflect the populations they serve
» Depict various practice settings and populations	» Portray nurses in a wide range of contexts, for example critical care, mental health and community settings, and with patients of various ages and stages of illness
» Represent the rewards and challenges of nursing practice accurately	» Portray nursing as periodically challenging, for example when caring for patients who are at the end of life, patients with mental health conditions and substance use disorders, and older patients who are frail » Depict nursing as a highly satisfying career where individuals can ‘make a difference’
» Emphasise professional development opportunities	» Portray nursing career options, including advanced practice, postgraduate education, research, management and leadership
» Emphasise science and research	» Depict nurses as clinical scientists and academics » Portray examples of knowledge and research being translated into practice
» Depict interprofessional teamwork	» Portray nurses as active members of multidisciplinary teams

(Kalisch et al 2007, Eley et al 2012, Price et al 2013a, 2013b)

scientists and educators in scenarios that conveyed power and influence, as outlined in Table 1. For example, one image used in the rebranding strategy depicted the nurse as part of an air ambulance team triaging a critically ill patient, which conveyed the intensity and urgency of modern nursing practice. Similarly, one of the slogans used – ‘Be more than a student’ – was directed at university students who were enrolled in other faculties but were seeking career opportunities where they might apply their existing knowledge and education. For example, students of computer science or bioengineering might apply their knowledge to the development of technological innovation in nursing; similarly, a student of research methodology might apply their knowledge to advancing the quality of nursing research.

The slogan ‘Changing more lives, more ways’ was aimed at engaging potential donors with the School of Nursing’s research mandate, encouraging them to consider gifts directed at research rather than the traditional focus on scholarships and bursaries. The aim was to accentuate the variety of nursing roles – including practitioner, educator, policymaker and researcher – and their ability to improve healthcare outcomes for patients, families and communities.

Critical analysis and self-reflection are essential elements of nursing practice (Josephson 2014). Before the rebranding strategy, the School of Nursing had not focused on identifying stereotypical representations of nurses in its recruitment materials. Using the research evidence on nursing stereotypes, the authors and the communications team analysed the messages and images that had previously been used in the School of Nursing’s recruitment and promotional material (Kalisch et al 2007, Eley et al 2012, Price et al 2013a, 2013b). This research evidence provided guidance on the development of recruitment materials that represented gender and racial diversity.

Any rebranding strategy involving nurses must evolve to reflect the

changing demographics of the nursing profession. The authors’ intention was not to develop a series of ‘glossy’ adverts for the School of Nursing that would manipulate the general public’s perception of nursing, nor to hide the challenges involved in a nursing career. Rather, the aim was to inform potential nursing students and donors of the reality of a career in nursing and the opportunities available. The aim of the rebranding strategy was to communicate that nursing requires a skill set that involves critical thinking and compassion, as well as the ability to respond to changing care environments and patients’ needs.

The rebranding strategy and the collaboration between the authors and the communications team also represented a change in how schools and departments within the university traditionally developed promotional materials for the general public.

### Future developments

Following the implementation of the rebranding strategy, the authors aim to identify any ongoing use of stereotypical elements in the School of Nursing’s recruitment materials, as well as exploring the effect of the recruitment materials on stakeholders’ understanding of nursing as a profession. One of the strategies employed will be to obtain stakeholders’ views of nursing practice at a series of donor events where the School of Nursing will showcase the research and scholarship activities of the Faculty of Health and its students.

The long-term success of the rebranding strategy will be measured by requesting that incoming nursing students voluntarily supply information about their gender and ethnicity on admission forms. This will enable the authors to quantify the proportion of male and minority ethnic nursing students in each cohort. The authors also plan to survey incoming nursing students to determine if the School of Nursing’s recruitment materials have improved their understanding of the nursing profession. Finally, the authors aim to audit donations to the School of Nursing arising from the rebranding strategy to assess its

success in raising funds to support nursing research.

The rebranding strategy undertaken by the authors showed that communications and marketing experts should collaborate with researchers to design evidence-based recruitment materials that challenge long-held stereotypes about the roles of nurses. Because stereotypical depictions of nursing often go unchallenged in the media, the general public requires updated portrayals of nurses so that the image of the profession can be reconceptualised.

The School of Nursing’s rebranding strategy was designed to attract future nurse researchers, educators, clinical innovators and policymakers from increasingly diverse backgrounds. However, during the rebranding process, the authors realised that the rebranding strategy did not address the recruitment of people with a physical disability. The image of nursing as a profession that requires a certain level of physical fitness to undertake tasks such as moving and handling is one of the outdated stereotypes that the authors hope to address in the future by depicting nurses with physical disabilities in the School of Nursing’s promotional materials (Ferguson et al 2009).

### Conclusion

It is important that undergraduate and postgraduate nursing courses reflect the demographic of the communities that they serve, and that nursing is respected as a viable career choice. However, the image of the profession portrayed in the media has often focused on over-feminised and somewhat trivial depictions of nurses.

The authors have described a rebranding strategy of the recruitment materials used at their School of Nursing, which aimed to attract a diverse mix of applicants across gender and ethnicity. They also attempted to ensure that their recruitment materials portrayed nursing accurately, complete with its challenges and positive elements. Educational institutions should adopt recruitment materials that reflect diversity and inclusiveness, as well as promoting an accurate portrayal of nurses and the nursing profession.

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