

The representation of nursing and nurses in the media has often been discussed. Some authors claim that nurses are virtually invisible in popular media, while others say that if nurses appear on television (TV) they are only following the doctor's orders.

This study focuses on the representations of nurses in TV programs and the influence of this representation on the public's perception of nurses and their profession.

In phase one of the study we investigate the representation of the nurses using a large scale content analysis (CA) on fictional and non-fictional TV programming. Nurses are shown in all types of programs ranging from medical fiction and soaps to news programs. In contrast with other media content studies this CA focuses on all TV content in stead of only one or two types of programs.

In phase two we use the data collected in phase one to study the impact of the representation on the perceptions of TV viewers. In order to study the perceptions, a cultivation analysis is performed on data collected on 1296 adolescents. The basic idea of cultivation theory is that viewers tend to adopt images of the world similar to those presented in the media. If for example almost every nurse on TV is female, heavy viewers will overestimate the number of female nurses on TV.

Results show that nurses are shown only half as much on TV as physicians. In some types of TV programming this difference is even more pronounced. Furthermore the demographics of nurses on TV differ from nurses in real-life. Next, the results of the cultivation analysis suggest an impact of TV viewing on the perceptions of adolescent viewers of nurses and other medical professions. The discussion focuses on the implications of these findings and emphasizes the need for continued research in this area.