



## Image and message: Recruiting the right nurses for the profession. A qualitative study



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### ABSTRACT

**Aim:** The aim of this study was to identify the key word(s) or phrases; and key image(s) new to nursing professionals would recommend using in a recruitment poster to encourage school leavers to study nursing or midwifery.

**Background:** An updated imaging and messaging in the profession is needed in recruitment initiatives targeting high school students to perceive registered nursing as a lifelong career.

**Method:** Open-ended responses reported through the Graduate e-Cohort Study (GeS) Survey 7 2015, representing 109 nursing and midwifery graduates from Australia and New Zealand. Responses were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Results:** The top-three messages these new to the profession registered nurses would use to recruit high-school leavers to the profession were 'opportunity', 'rewarding' and 'travel'. The three core images identified were those depicting 'care', 'opportunity' and 'task, technical, technology and role'.

**Conclusion:** Findings provide a contemporary image and message for a nurse recruitment poster initiative targeting high school students. Nurse educators must become media savvy and media trained; and twitterers telling stories, sharing examples of exemplary practice, education and research; and promoting the achievements of the nursing workforce.

### 1. Introduction

There are some bleak discussions about the image of nurses and the profession (Morris, 2010). The image of nursing is or has been a negative one (Kalisch et al., 2007; Cabaniss, 2011; Varai et al., 2012). This said, there is a need to have real insights into the professional self-image of nurses in order to better understand 'the personnel crisis in nursing' (De Vlieghe et al., 2011). However, contemporary portrayals of nurses are mixed (Anderson, 2010; Girvin et al., 2016).

In some parts of the world, the image of the nurse is a very positive one, especially in the face of health crises of significant scale and threat (Fong, 2013; Hyo-jin, 2016; Rozyla, 2016). Bolstering this world-view, the profession has a proud 22 consecutive year history of recognition as the most ethical and honest among the professions (Morgan, 2016). Nurses as independent practitioners attend to what they do with great professionalism, warmth and good humour – either attending to the older person (Mundy Castle, 2016) or the family (Newby, 2010). Yet, these images are not always about what constitutes a typical good nurse (Morris, 2010). In stark contrast, the nurse burning down the residen-

tial aged care facility (nursing home) (Unknown, 2011) and nurses assaulting persons with dementia (O'Neil, 2013) are images we would not hold up as the 'poster-person' for the profession.

Our research contributes to ongoing image and message work that is about encouraging students and registered nurses and members of the public to perceive nursing as a lifelong career (Morris, 2010). The stories told through societal and popular culture images and messages about nurses impacts the career choice of potential candidates (Price et al., 2013). In so doing, the image of nursing informs the quality and quantity of persons who choose it as a career (Kalisch et al., 2007). Where the image is presented as negative and inaccurate, the public will not be swayed that a career in nursing is desirable; the consumer will think ill of the professions and hold to a narrow view of what nurses actually do (Kalisch et al., 2007).

Our work fits into what others have called career choice research (Price and McGillis Hall, 2013). The study reported here seeks to reveal what new (< 10 years) to the profession registered nurses would have as the image(s) and the message(s) used to recruit high-school leavers to the professions.

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## 2. Background

At least in the UK, the image of nursing requires attention in order to improve public confidence in nurses and the quality of care provision (Morris, 2010; Girvin et al., 2016). This might seem harsh, but others contend that “nursing’s public image represents a monumental challenge to the viability of the profession itself” (Cabaniss, 2011). There is a consensus that the image is how peers, the public, patients and their families perceive nursing and formulate expectations about the profession; and that this perception is influenced by images and messages of it in popular culture and society (Morris-Thompson et al., 2011; Price and McGillis Hall, 2013).

A substantial body of literature presents an image and message that nurses engage in dirty work, within a subservient role and meet media clichés (Morris, 2010). Historically, images of the nurse have included the good nurse, hero, naughty nurse, nurse as a sex object, the nurse as an angel, a battle-axe and the doctor’s hand maiden (Cabaniss, 2011; Morris-Thompson et al., 2011, Norman, 2013; Price and McGillis Hall, 2013; ten Hoeve et al., 2013).

Conversely, an image and message of the profession does exist whereby nurses describe it as internationally transferable, always challenging, having daily variety, having flexible working, role diversity, career stability, and involves fun and teamwork (Morris, 2010; Morris-Thompson et al., 2011). These images and messages are complemented by a reality described by nurses who possess technical skills, a caring attitude and an ability to think critically (Mooney et al., 2008; De Vliegher et al., 2011); an image of nursing associated with the excitement of high technology care, people skills and fulfilment (Morris-Thompson et al., 2011). Lastly, countering historically negative images and messages, nurses are depicted on the internet as compassionate (Kalisch et al., 2007) whilst remaining caring and nurturing (Mooney et al., 2008; Price et al., 2013).

Doing research about the image and message representing nurses and the profession resides in the opinion that there remains a need for an updated imaging and messaging in recruitment initiatives (Price and McGillis Hall, 2013). Morris-Thompson et al. (2011) cite research linking a positive image to attracting applicants to the professions to make their claim that image and recruitment outcomes are inextricably linked (Mooney et al., 2008; Varaei et al., 2012; Price and McGillis Hall, 2013). Various writers hold to the view that the positive image of nursing impacts recruitment of the best and brightest students as well as the establishment of a trusting relationship with patients (Cabaniss, 2011; Morris-Thompson et al., 2011).

Research of this kind can inform recruitment campaigns (Morris-Thompson et al., 2011) since a comprehensive understanding of the professions can enhance recruitment and retention among the upcoming generation (Varaiei et al., 2012; Price and McGillis Hall, 2013). The importance of this simple truth is underscored given that a sustainable nursing workforce is necessary for the welfare of others and health system as a whole (Price et al., 2013). Importantly, a recruitment campaign ought to reflect the reality of nursing as deemed realistic by those working in the profession (Morris, 2010). Where the recruitment of nurses is a national and international priority (Price et al., 2013) then recruitment is contingent on increased voice and visibility of nursing work (Cabaniss, 2011).

This paper reports on an analysis of nurses’ responses to two open-ended questions *Identify the key word(s) or phrases that you would use in the poster’s design* and *Identify the key image(s) relating to nursing or midwifery that you would use in the poster’s design*. Findings suggest that the key words for attracting high-school leavers to the profession are ‘opportunity’, ‘rewarding’ and ‘travel’, whilst key images are those depicting ‘care’, ‘opportunity’ and ‘task, technical, technology and role’. Nurse educators and leaders with an eye on recruitment are advised to make use of these findings as well as sharing examples of exemplary practice, education and research; and promote the achievements of the nursing workforce.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Study Design

The Graduate e-Cohort Study (GeS) (<https://graduates.e-cohort.net/>) is an international longitudinal web-based workforce study conducted currently in collaboration with four universities from Australia and New Zealand. The purpose of this larger e-cohort study is to examine the choices graduate nurses and midwives from these universities make in relation to their employment immediately after graduation and in the years following. Participants registered on line and completed baseline demographic and contact details for Survey 1 2008.

The GeS survey consists of 55 items derived from previous workforce research and themes identified in the literature. A full methodological explanation and description of the first cohort of newly graduated and registered nurses participating in the GeS has previously been described (Huntington et al., 2012).

Open-ended responses reported here are from Survey 7 2015, representing nursing/midwifery graduates from Australia and New Zealand. As such, the research described and reported here constitutes a sub-study of the Graduate e-Cohort Study (GeS).

### 3.2. Data Collection

Participants were asked to consider the following:

*You are asked to design a RECRUITMENT poster for nursing or midwifery. The aim of the recruitment poster is to encourage school leavers to study nursing or midwifery. They then responded to two open-ended questions:*

- Identify the key word(s) or phrases that you would use in the poster’s design.
- Identify the key image(s) relating to nursing or midwifery that you would use in the poster’s design.

The responses varied in length from 1–4 words/phrases and 1–3 images. Only those who identified as a nurse provide the data for this paper.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Using a data-driven approach (Namey et al., 2008), initial codes are developed and sorted into categories determined by interrelationships that in turn generate themes. An emphasis is placed on ‘interpreting the pattern’ found in the codes/categories (Morgan, 1993) in order to gain new knowledge and insights (Nandy and Sarvela, 1997).

Details for the foundations of the thematic analysis used here have been reported previously (Tuckett et al., 2009; Tuckett, 2015). The processes used here were as follows. Analysis and labelling were undertaken by the author (AT). The first time, per participant, data were read from an excel spreadsheet and assigned an initial label. This was undertaken in one sitting across the two data sets (data per question), facilitating the constant comparison of data and consequently, credibility (validity) (Anderson, 2010). Assigned data were manually recorded in a coding book. The definition for each label was recorded in the code book for later reference. This process was repeated a second time. The period between the first and second time was six weeks. At the second time, the data assigned to each label, according to the recorded definitions, were also tallied. Whilst the data-label assignment remained mostly unchanged between time one and time two, four additional labels were identified at the second time, namely care, flexible, people and team. This iterative process of assignment and reassignment of data in which the analysis moves from the general to the particular is a feature of thematic analysis of this type and included the counting of pieces of data (Tuckett et al., 2009; Tuckett and Turner,

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