Identification Required; Public Perception of Nursing Uniforms
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ABSTRACT

Problem and Purpose: Clinicals are part of life as a nursing student, but when entering the halls of local area hospitals, one problem shines glaringly clear: it is difficult to distinguish the educated professional nurse from anyone else wearing a scrub uniform. Because name tags are not always visible and seeking qualified help is often problematic, student researchers wanted to discover if this issue was of concern to the general public.

Sample, Setting, and Design: Using a descriptive study design, a convenience sample of 204 local shoppers was recruited to choose from three photographs depicting a nurse in uniform. Shoppers filled out a survey identifying ten nursing image traits best represented by each photograph. An optional question was included for write-in, which asked: Why do you think it is important/not important for a nurse to be identifiable?

Results: The colorful, printed uniform was chosen most often for traits such as approachable, cooperative, and caring. The same uniform was chosen over the others in all but three traits in which the white scrubs were selected most often; professional, competent, and reliable. The navy colored scrubs received high marks most often in traits such as efficient, reliable, and competent but not enough to exceed scores for printed or white in the same category. The most remarkable comment for write-in purposes told researchers that study participants would prefer a nurse who appeared more caring than professional.

Conclusion: Similar to other studies conducted, data indicated that the public prefers a nurse to wear colorful, printed uniforms over solid or white. This is especially true when a nurse wants to appear friendly and approachable. However, many write in comments also mentioned the need to find essential nursing help quickly, and that it is important for an identifiable uniform to fulfill such a requirement. Further research is needed to see how the public would identify a licensed professional from someone unlicensed, if all wore various multicolored scrubs.

Problem, Purpose, and Aims of Study

Past studies have shown that patients and public have difficulty in identifying their nurse when all healthcare workers wear a non-identifying universal uniform. This is especially problematic when patients need to access their nurse for questions or concerns as related to their condition, medications, or diagnosis. The purpose of this study was to analyze the non-verbal communication processes established by attire, in public perception and identification of nurses and to discover why such identification might or might not be important.

Study Design, Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Study design was descriptive. Theoretical framework was in part based on a health communication model developed by Northhouse and Northhouse (1998) in which the nurses’ uniform, confidence, and bearing, comprised a vital role in a healthy patient-to-nurse rapport. On July 29, 2004, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution announced that the nurses at Grady Memorial Hospital returned to wearing all-white uniforms in an attempt to help patients distinguish them from lab technicians, respiratory therapists, dieticians, and other hospital staff who wear a variety of colorful smocks and scrubs. Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta and St. Clair Hospital in Pittsburgh are two of the few facilities with strict uniform policies in place so that patients can distinguish who is who among the persons delivering care (Skorupski & Rea 2006). Without such designation, patients and their families must search the caregiver’s name tag which may not be facing the proper direction, or rely upon their introduction, if given.

Five of the studies reviewed supported the fact that the person wearing an all white uniform was the most easily recognizable as nurse. Skorupski & Rea (2006) quoted five non-research articles which denounced the professional image of cartoon characters worn by nurses unless working with pediatrics. Kaser et al (2009) interviewed 20 patient families and 12 nurses from two children’s units and found that the primary need of families was to know who to approach when they had issues concerning their child. At best, the distinctiveness of each nurse was featured in the non-traditional uniform or at worse, the unidentified nurse may have been creating confusion in a frightening hospital environment filled with lack of control.

Sampling Procedure and Instrument Usage

A convenience sample of 204 shoppers was recruited using a standard script and the incentive of a free sandwich coupon from a local restaurant. Participants were given instruction for completion of the survey. Investigators attempted to recruit a variety of age groups, race/ethnic groups, and gender to be as random as possible, but did not exclude anyone without debilitating visual impairment, who were at least 18 years of age, able to read and write English, and who wanted to participate. Requested demographic data included age of participant, gender, and race. A modified nursing image scale, originally developed by Sandra Mangum (Mangum et al, 1991), was used to collect data and a write-in question was posed, “Why is it important or not important for a nurse to be identifiable?” The scale was further modified after a pilot study proved the rating aspect of each image as too complicated for the purpose of the survey.

Picture 1:                      Picture 2:                      Picture 3:
Three photographs depicting a nurse in uniform at a hospital-like location were mounted on a single white page and labeled 1) over the navy colored scrubs, 2) over the white scrubs, and 3) over the brown, blue and yellow print top. Participants were asked to select the nurse from the photographs who looked (based on her clothing) the most caring, confident, reliable, attentive, cooperative, empathetic, competent, professional, efficient, and approachable by circling the number of picture 1, 2, or 3.

Findings

Sample Description:
Participants surveyed included 138 women and 60 men. There were 126 participants identified as white, 67 as black, 4 as Hispanic, and 2 as other. Ages of participants were divided into four categories: age 18-24 had 41 participants, age 25-35 had 45 participants, age 36-55 had 62 participants, and age 56+ had 48 participants. Six participants did not give demographic data. Demographic data did not reveal obvious variations in participant responses and was not further analyzed.

Overall Analysis:
Table 1:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nursing Image Trait</th>
<th>Picture 1</th>
<th>Picture 2</th>
<th>Picture 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentive</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficient</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approachable</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each of the ten characteristics in each photograph, student researchers calculated how often each uniform was selected by the public. Table 1 indicates these results. The navy uniform was never selected as the greatest in any category but received the most selections for appearing efficient, reliable, and competent. The white uniform was the most frequently selected for appearing professional, competent, and reliable while the printed uniform was chosen most often for all seven of the other characteristics, the top three being approachable, cooperative, and caring. Some of the study participants remarked that it was difficult to know whether or not a nurse was caring or empathetic by simply looking at her clothing. A few participants issued remarks about the model’s shoes in the photographs. She wore the same fashionable dark sneakers in each photo but they tended to look less neat when wearing all white. One shopper refused to participate and instead offered the remark, “It’s not about what you wear.” Another shopper argued that he would much prefer his nurse to look approachable and caring, over appearing professional.

Interesting write-in comments for the question, Why is it important or not important for a nurse to be identifiable? included:
- Because the patient might be in a confused state.
- To reassure patients that they have been properly trained and educated in their profession.
- If a person is good, it does not matter what they are wearing.
- When one is in a hospital bed, it is comforting to see an immediately identifiable white-uniformed nurse but in a doctor’s office, uniforms aren’t necessary; it is more comforting to see friends.
- So they can correctly address concerns and questions to the right person.
- Because when you are ill, you do not want to have the burden of chasing down the proper health care professional. Answers such as these were common and at odds with the overall results. Certainly there is much more to detecting a caring and competent nurse than simply noticing a uniform and yet society is accustomed to seeing airline crews, police, utility workers, and grocery clerks in identifying attire. Public confidence might be shaken if the airline pilot or police force
simply wore a golf shirt with logo. Results clearly reveal a public preference for a nurse who appears approachable, yet when professional input is required, the result of a demanding educational and clinical experience, people know that they need appropriate help in a hurry. How they identify such a person, needs further research.

Resources


