

# The influence of media representations on citizens' perceptions towards nurses: a comparison between before and after the Covid-19 pandemic

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**Abstract.** *Background and aim of the work:* In December 2019 in Wuhan, China, an outbreak related to a new Coronavirus (Covid-19) rapidly spread to other countries, including Italy, emerged. On 11 March 2020, the WHO declared a state of pandemic. During the ensuing health crisis, the media exposure of Italian nurses increased. The aim of this research was to investigate whether and how, during the pandemic, citizens' perceptions of nurses have changed, and if this change were related to the public image of health professionals provided by the mass media. *Method:* A multi-centric quantitative exploratory study has been conducted. 2114 online questionnaires were analysed for residents of Italy, including health working but excluding the nurses themselves. The results obtained were compared with the results of the scientific literature. *Results:* Positive perceptions on the part of the citizens towards the nurses are evident, coming to define them "heroes", while discriminatory attitudes are rare. According to the participants, the mass media have conveyed a positive image of the nurses and in relation to this, a percentage of respondents have changed their opinion favourably regarding nurses. *Conclusions:* The Covid19 related health emergency has helped raise awareness of the nursing role among both citizens and other health workers, even if a lack of knowledge has been highlighted in the training and care role of nurses. The opportunity should be taken by nurses to make well-know their role, promoting public communication, in order to make their image clearer and more truthful.

**Key words:** nurses, nursing, mass media, public perception, citizen's representation, pandemic, Covid-19, public image.

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, the nursing profession has experienced considerable development. In particular, the progressive growth of autonomy and professional independence has led the nurse to be an equal professional compared to other health professionals, although, in the common sense, there remain obsolete visions of the role and the nursing figure (1).

A crucial moment has been the birth of the FNO-PI (National Federation of the Nursing Professions)

previewed in the "Lorenzin Law" of 2018. It has defined a "new identity" of the nurse, who leaves behind the erroneous conviction of a profession still perceived as a welfare activity, limited by the job description (2).

In fact, the analysis of the literature reveals negative and stereotypical representations of nursing care. In particular, the images proposed by cinema, web and television appear sexist and obsolete: male nurses are represented as effeminate or poorly professionally competent (3, 4) while the female nurses often have been reduced to sexual objects (5).

In addition, there is also the ancillary/auxiliary role of the nursing figure compared to that of doctors, with a reference to a profession without specific training and/or competence (6).

Even in the newspapers, the nurse has been the most cited health professional involved in deficiencies and errors, disorganization, scams and crimes (7).

The media power of newspapers, televisions radio and social networks is able to influence public opinion with respect to the facts told (8).

The Covid-19 pandemic has helped to put health professionals, and consequently nurses, at the centre of a significant media exposure. There has been an increase in information about the healthcare sector, which has often taken the point of view of health workers, and an increase in television consumption, especially during the most critical phases of the pandemic (9). All this has led the public to recognize the nurses' courage, commitment, knowledge, resilience and perseverance to the point of defining them heroes and saviors (10, 11, 12).

Fear and disinformation, on the other hand, have also contributed to the manifestation of discriminatory behavior and episodes of violence, marginalization and stigmatization against the nursing figure (13, 14).

The experiences of nurses during the Covid-19 pandemic, visibly documented during news broadcasts, have increased public awareness of how nurses operate on a daily basis.

## Aims

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the perception of nurses has changed in Italian public during the health emergency from Covid-19 and in which way, also taking into account the image of the profession presented by the mass media during the pandemic.

The questions that guided the study were:

- How did citizens perceive and describe the nurse before the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Did the representation of nurses change during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Have the mass media influenced this perception? If yes, how?

## Method

### *Study design*

It was a multicentric quantitative exploratory study.

### *Sampling and recruitment of participants*

The target population identified for the completion of the questionnaire included persons residing in Italy of both sexes, of legal age, Italian and foreign citizens, excluding nurses and nursing students. A probabilistic cascade sampling has been selected.

The study began in September 2020 (construction of the instrument) and ended in February 2021 (drafting of the results).

### *Instrument*

A purpose-made on-line questionnaire was developed especially for the research, on the basis of the bibliographical research previously conducted on the subject. Telematic administration was motivated by the need to reach a sample of citizens as wide and representative as possible of the population.

The questionnaire, created using the Google Form software, was accompanied by a presentation letter for the research, which specified compilation instructions, the respect of anonymity and the rules for the protection of privacy.

In the introduction letter it was specified that those who work as nurses or are studying nursing are excluded from the research.

The questionnaire consisted of 8 areas (32 closed questions and 2 open questions) exploring respectively:

1) *Social and personal data* (8 items): gender, age, title of study, citizenship and geographical origin, employment status, and whether the interviewee worked as a health professional or in the social health field.

If the answer was yes, they were asked to answer what kind of health care professional they were and what role they had in the social health area.

2) *Knowledge of nurse training* (3 items): evaluated how much the citizen knew about the training of the nurse, and in particular which course of studies he considered was required in Italy to carry out the nursing profession, if the nurse had to be enrolled in a specific register and if continuing education was necessary, mandatory or optional for the nurse.

3) *Nurse perception of the professional role and work-related risks during the Covid-19 pandemic* (7 items): investigated whether or not the nurse was perceived as a figure acting independently or was subjected to the doctor, if the figure of the nurse had been important during the pandemic from Covid-19, if the nurse during the pandemic had been exposed to occupational stress, if the nurse during the pandemic had been at greater risk of infection than the entire Italian population. Specifically, compared to other health workers, was asked if the nurses exposed to risk of infection their family members, and if the nurses would have to suffer special restrictions to their individual liberty.

4) *Nurse perception related to a possible diagnosis of Covid-19* (4 items): exploring whether the respondent had received a diagnosis of Covid-19, whether a relative or friend had received a diagnosis of Covid-19, whether the possible infection from Covid-19 had led to hospitalization, either of oneself or of a family member or friend, assessment of the nursing care received and who was the professional figure with which he would have preferred to interface.

5) *Public opinion and the persistence of stereotypes* (4 items): assessing whether the public's perception of the figure of the nurse had changed as a result of the Covid pandemic19; if any stereotypes related to the figure of the nurse were confirmed; if, with the pandemic, these stereotypes were modified or re-confirmed; if the respondent advised young students to take up the nursing profession.

6) *Influence of mass media informing public opinion on the nurse figure* (4 items): investigated whether the respondent had happened to follow news provided by mass media concerning nurses; whether the latter were more or less than before the pandemic; whether, according to the respondent, the media representations during the Covid-19 emergency presented the nurses in a positive or negative way and whether or not these representations might have influenced his personal opinion of the nurses.

7) *Influence of nursing acquaintances in public opinion of the nurse figure* (2 items): investigated whether or not the interviewee knew at least one nurse personally and whether or not this knowledge might have influenced his opinion about the entire professional category.

8) *Adjectives associated with the word Nurse (before and after the Covid-19 pandemic)*: finally, through two open questions, respondents were asked to indicate 1, 2 or 3 adjectives that would have associated the word nurse before and after the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### *Dissemination*

The online dissemination of the questionnaire has allowed the use of different media channels, in order to reach a large number of citizens resident in Italy. Social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, Research Gate, messaging channels such as WhatsApp, Telegram and email contacts were the means used to proceed in the disclosure phase. The questionnaire was completed by 2234 citizens: of these 120 were found to be nurses or nursing students, and therefore excluded from the sample. 2114 questionnaires were therefore considered valid.

#### *Data Analysis*

The analysis of the collected data was carried out with the support of the statistical software SPSS (Statistical Package of Social Science) through which it was possible to produce descriptive analysis (means, standard deviation, frequencies and percentages).

#### **Ethical considerations**

Prior to initiating the questionnaire, an information note was provided clarifying how the study is voluntary, with the possibility to terminate at any time, and providing full details of the study that has been conducted. Participants may modify or delete the collected data when and if they so wish. The questionnaire has been anonymized and the personal data collected through the compilation have been processed in compliance with the conditions and within the limits established by EU Regulation 679/2016 and Legislative Decree 196/20003 as amended and supplemented by Legislative Decree 101/2018.

## Results

### 1) Socio-personal data variables

Of the socio-personal data characteristics it has put in evidence that the majority of the respondents is constituted by women with 67.4% (N=1425), while 32.6% (N=689) by men. 99.2% of subjects (N=2098) are of Italian nationality and the average age of the population is 42.18 years (DS±14,87), with an age span ranging from 13 to 83 years.

With regards to education, 43.3% of subjects (N=909) have a post-secondary education degree, 15.5% (N=321) Bachelor Degree, 11.9% (N=251) Master Degree (Msc; 5 years), 10.4% (N=219) Master Degree (Msc; 2 years) and 9.5% (N=201) has a high school diploma.

3.5% (N=74) of the sample has a Post-Graduate Degree: 2.8% (N=60) has a Master of I level and 2.1% (N=24) of II level; 1.5% (N=31) of the interviewees has a Ph.D.; subjects with elementary license represent 0.6% of the sample (N=12).

The majority of the sample comes from Lombardy with 34.2% of the sample (N=722), Emilia-Romagna with 31.5% (N=665) and Veneto with 12.5% (N=265).

Of the 2114 respondents, 12.2% (N=258) were health workers. Among these, 37 were doctors, 22 psychologists, 21 health educators and health workers, 20 pharmacists and 19 physiotherapists (Table 1).

### 2) Knowledge of nurse training

78.8% of the sample (N=1680) recognize the need for a diploma to become a nurse and 59.2% (N=1261) was aware of the need to register in order to be able to practice the profession. 87.8% of the sample (N=1872) also recognizes the need for continuing training.

### 3) Nurse perception of the professional role and work-related risks during the Covid-19 pandemic

Almost all of the sample with 90.2% (N=1.917) considers nurses at greater risk of contracting Covid-19 infection than the general population, with 49% (N=1.044) of the sample, nurses are more at risk of Covid-19 infection than other health professionals, while 43.8% (N=930) believe that all health professionals are equally at risk.

53.1% (N=1128) of citizens do not believe that specific restrictions are needed for nurses working with patients Covid-19, 29.8% (N=634) think instead that the personal liberty of nurses should be partially reduced, while 4.8% (N=103) considers total limitations to be necessary.

For the 82.8% (N=1.760) of the sample assisting patients with Covid-19 was a significant source of stress, for 15.4% (N=327) was a quite stressing, while for 0.6% (N=13) was not stressing.

88.5% of respondents (N=1.886), considered the nursing figure to be very important during the current Covid-19 pandemic, 10.6% (N=226) considered it quite significant, while for 0.4% (N=9) it was not significant. None of the respondents considered the role played by nurses to be negligible.

53.4% of the sample (N=1.137), believed that the nurse is legally responsible for its work even if it does not recognize professional autonomy, 27.8% (N=592) recognizes the autonomy and legal responsibility of the nurse, while 12.1% (N=257) considers the nurse as a self-employed professional and subordinate to the figure of the doctor.

### 4) Nurse perception related to a possible diagnosis of Covid-19

19,3% (N=411) of the respondents reported that they had been hospitalized with a diagnosis of Covid-19 infection or had friends/family hospitalized with a diagnosis of Covid-19 infection. The nursing care received for these people is assessed as very satisfactory for 11.1% (N=236), quite satisfactory for 8.2% (N=175), not at all satisfactory for 1% (N=22) of the sample. The preferred health figure of reference in case of hospitalization with Covid-19 infection is the doctor for 69.1% of the sample (N=1469), and the chief physician for 9.8% (N=209). 15.6% of the sample (N=331) indicated the nurse, 2.6% (N=56) the nurse coordinator, 1.2% (26) indicated all figures equally and 0.6% (N=12) did not express a specific opinion.

### 5) How knowing a nurse influences personal opinion

47.1% of citizens (N=1004) believe that knowing a nurse positively influences the personal perception of this profession, while 45.4% (N=968) replied that knowing nurses does not contribute to influencing the perception of this professional figure. 0.7% of the participants (N=15) reported that knowing a nurse has contributed to negatively change their personal opinion of the professional category.

### 6) Public opinion and persistence of stereotypes

62.4% (N=1330) of the sample says that the opinion of nurses remained unchanged following the Covid-19 health emergency, 36.6% (N=779) improved, while for 1% (N=22) the opinion as a result of the pandemic worsened.

**Table 1.** Role of health professionals and/or working area

ROLE AND/OR WORKING AREA			
ROLE AND WORKING AREA	RATE	ROLE AND WORKING AREA	RATE
Doctor	37	Driver (Hospital Medical Transport)	1
Psychologist	22	Association of Voluntary Blood Donors	1
Professional Educator	21	Worker In Private Clinic	1
General Practitioner	21	Worker In Covid Unit	1
Pharmacist	20	Hospice	1
Physiotherapist	19	Palliative Care	1
Veterinarian	8	Data Manager in Research Office	1
Unspecified	8	Dietitian	1
Administrative	7	Scientific Directorate	1
Radiology Technician	7	Administrative Manager	1
Assistant To The Armchair	6	Senior Volunteer	1
Laboratory Technician	6	Worker In Hospital	1
Volunteer	5	Health And Prisons	1
Social Worker	4	Scientific Informant	1
Coordinator	4	Healthcare Area	1
Psychotherapist	4	Prevention Area	1
Dental Hygienist	3	Clinical Research	1
Rehabilitation Hospital	3	Physiotherapist	1
Student (Not Nurses)	3	Respiratory Sector	1
Technical Aspects Of Prevention	3	Worker In Medical Humanities	1
Trainer/Teacher	3	Psychiatric Rehabilitation Technician	1
Employee	2	Worker In Health and Social Road Units	1
Speech-Therapist	2	Health Care Operator Rescuer	1
Dentistry	2	Osteopath	1
Specialised Technical Operator	2	Pensioner	1
Midwife	2	Podiatrist	1
Technician Contract Maintenance	2	Social Cooperative	1
Health Care Worker	2	Specialist	1
Worker in Associations	1	Analyst	1
TOTAL RESPONSES			258

About half of the sample with 55.5% (N=1183) would recommend nursing as a professional and occupational choice, 14.2% would advise against it, while 30.3% of the sample (N=303) did not express an opinion on the subject.

7) *Adjectives associated with the word Nurse (before and after the Covid-19 pandemic)*

The words associated with the nurse, both before and during the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, were in total 5677.

In order to clarify the analysis carried out, it was

necessary to describe the words, bringing them back to the masculine singular. After the adjectives and nouns associated with the nurse were categorized as follows and grouped into:

- Positive adjectives/nouns
- Negative adjectives/nouns
- Neutral adjectives/nouns
- Adjectives/nouns related to the working condition of the nurse
- Adjectives/nouns related to the relationship of the nurse with the doctor

**Table 2.** Positive adjectives/nouns (grouped by meaning)

Before Covid Comes		After Covid Comes	
Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency	Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency
Professional / Professional / Professionalism	300	Professional / Professional / Professionalism	213
Fundamental	245	Fundamental	369
Indispensable		Indispensable	
Essential		Essential	
Irreplaceable		Irreplaceable	
		Unique	
		Priceless	
Assistant / Support / Helper	225	Assistant / Assistance / Assistance / Helper / Help	115
Comforting / Relief		Comfort	
Rescuer		Rescuer	
Reassuring		Reassuring	
Solidary		Solidarity / Solidarity	
Support		Support	
Support		Support	
Protective			
Accompaniment			
Available	187	Available	77
Present		Present	
Proximity / Near to		Proximity / Near to	
Capable / Competent / Prepared	183	Competent / Capable / Competence / Ability / Prepared	84
Complete		Specialized / Qualified / Expert	
Specialized		Multitasking / Multifaceted / All-rounder	
Multitasking / Multifaceted			
Clever			
Necessary	170	Necessary	123
Important		Important	
Useful		Useful	
Precious / Special		Precious / Special	
Passion	125	Passion	165
Dedication / Ligio		Dedication / Ligio	
Sacrifice		Sacrifice	
Spirit of self-denial		Spirit of self-denial	
Predisposition to the service of the patient		Predisposition to the service of the patient	
Passionate / Motivated		Passionate / Motivated	
Altruism	111	Altruism	93
Generosity		Generosity	
Patient / Patience	110	Patient / Patience	42
Diligent	108	Diligent	77

**Table 2.** Positive adjectives/nouns (grouped by meaning)

Before Covid Comes		After Covid Comes	
Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency	Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency
Challenging		Challenging	
Worker		Worker	
Operational / Active		Operational / Active	
Empathic / Empathy	81	Empathic / Empathy	66
Listening		Listening	
Sensitive		Sensitive	
Dialogue			
Human	71	Human / Humanity	86
compassionate		Compassionate/Compassionate/ Understanding / Understanding	
Understanding		Charitable	
Love / Loving	63	Love / Loving / Loving / Caring / Heart	44
Thoughtful / Heart		Brother / Friend / Family	
Amicable		Sympathy / Smile	
Sympathetic / Confidential / Sociable		Welcoming / Welcome	
Welcoming		Life	
Solar			
Bold / Brave	60	Bold / Brave	220
Care	58	Care	37
Nice / Good / Very good / Wonderful	57	Nice / Good / Very good / Wonderful / Fantastic / Excellent colleague	72
Kind	54	Kind	17
Courteous		Courtesy	
Responsible	54	Educated / Educated	49
Serious		Serious	
Autonomous / Organized		Autonomous	
Careful	52	Watch out / Watch out	40
Solicitous / Discipline		Solicitous / Diligence	
Scrupulous / Accurate / Meticulous		Scrupulous / Accurate	
Rigour			
Vocation / Mission	52	Vocation / Mission	43
Custos / Angel / Saint	36	Custos / Angel / Saints	67
Strength / Strength	26	Savior / Salvation / Savior	83
Tenacity / Tenacity		Strength / Strength	
Resilience / Resilient		Tenacity / Tenacity	
		Resilience / Resilient / Adaptable / Flexible	

**Table 2.** Positive adjectives/nouns (grouped by meaning)

Before Covid Comes		After Covid Comes	
Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency	Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency
Strength / Resistant / Firmness		Resistance / Resistant	
Perseverance			
Admirable / Commendable / Exemplary	25	Admirable / Commendable / Exemplary / Commendable	49
Estimation / Respect		Estimation / Estimation / Observance / Respectable	
		Noble	
		Pride	
		Decanted	
		Revalued / Considerable / Considered	
Hero	23	Hero	132
		Warrior	
Determined	22	Determined	39
Pragmatic			
Concrete / Practical			
Enterprising	21	Enterprising	12
Effective/ Efficient		Efficiency / Efficient	
Skillful		Skillful / Creative	
		Strategic / Pioneer	
Tireless	20	Tireless	49
Constant		Constance	
		Workaholic	
Collaborative	19	Collaborator / Collaboration / Collaborative	17
Complementary		Complementary	
Ombudsman/ Conciliator		Ombudsman / Legante	
Reliable	18	Reliable	7
Trusting		Trusting	
Referencing		Referencing	
Humble / Modest	17	Humble / Modest	12
Calm / Discreet		Calm / Discreet	
Prudent		Prudent	
Safety	9	Safety	9
Protection		Protection	
Tolerance / Acceptance	7		
Dignity			
First line	4	First line	18
TOTAL WORDS	2613	TOTAL WORDS	2526



**Table 3.** Negative adjectives/nouns ( grouped by meaning )

Before Covid Comes		After Covid Comes	
Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency	Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency
Idle Whiny Lazy / Ineffective / Annoyed / Lazy / Lazy / Slothful / Slothful / Negligent / Little stressed	13	Idle Whiny Unjustly hero Irritated	8
Presumptuous / Arrogant Freddo / Menefreghista / Insufferent / Elusive / Distant / Insensitive / Indifferent	15	Presumptuous / Arrogant Freddo / Menefreghista Not present / Detached	7
Some few professional / Some unwilling	7	Not always professional	1
Unprepared Marginal / Unimportant / Not of vital importance Unreliable Without sense of urgency Pointless	7	Unprepared Marginal Dereapabilized Disorganized	5
Sour, unavailable Gruff Grumpy	4	Angry Tough Rude	4
Hygiene / Washing the patient Medicine giver	3		
Unionized Overprotected	2		
		Scared / Worried Unlucky	12
TOTAL WORDS	51	TOTAL WORDS	37

#### 8) Influence of the mass media in public opinion

83.7% of the sample (N=1785) reported having had access to news about the working situation of nurses through mass media, while 15.3% (N=325) of subjects said that media channels rarely spoke about the working situation of nurses.

81.4% of respondents (N=1735), replied that the news had increased compared to before the advent of Covid-19, 8.7% (N=186) replied that the news remained more or less unchanged, while 5.7% (N=122)

that it had decreased. 79.2% (N=1687) stated that it received a more positive representations of nurses through media than before the pandemic, while 3.1% (N=65) reported more negative representations. 11.6% (N=248) did not perceive differences in the media representations of nurses before and after Covid-19.

The 8.9% (N=189) of the sample believed that the news and information provided by the media about nurses have greatly influenced the personal perception of this professional images, 26.2% (N=559) considered

**Table 4.** Neutral adjectives/nouns

Adjectives / Neutral Nouns			
Before Covid-19 Comes		After Covid-19 Comes	
Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency	Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency
I don't know	23	I don't know	13
Routine Normal Employee asl/public	13	Everyday life work Normal work Public employee	13
TOTAL WORDS	36	TOTAL WORDS	26

**Table 5.** Adjectives/nouns about the working condition of the nurse (grouped by meaning)

Before Covid Comes		After Covid Comes	
Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency	Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency
Underestimated / Underestimated	26	Underestimated / Underestimated Undeveloped	25
Exploited / Underpaid / Precarious	26	Exploited / Underpaid Unprotected / Unprotected Insufficient	38
Stressed out / Stress Tired Sacrificed Overburdened Fatigue	25	Stressed out / Stress Tired / Tired / Overwhelmed / Exhausted Sacrificed / Expendable, Overburdened Victim / Martyr Enviably	125
Protected / Laid down / Lucky	6	Risk / Risky / Danger / Exposed	42
		Fragile Abandoned Unionized Attacked by all	6
		Satisfied, Satisfaction	3
TOTAL WORDS	83	TOTAL WORDS	239

**Table 6.** Adjectives/nouns related to the relationship between doctor and nurse (grouped by meaning)

Before Covid-19 Comes		After Covid-19 Comes	
Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency	Adjectives / Nouns	Frequency
Doctor's right hand / Doctor's performer / Doctor's worker / Doctor's helper / Doctor's slave / Doctor's assistant / Doctor's handmaid Paramedic Wannabe doctor	38	Doctor's Right Hand / Doctor's Enforcer / Doctor's Worker / Doctor's Helper / Doctor's Slave / Sub- mitted to doctor / Required to doctor / Doctor's Second / Doctors Added Wannabe doctor	15
Secondary / Auxiliary / subordinate	12	Subordinate	1
TOTAL WORDS	50	TOTAL WORDS	16

them to influential, 26% (N=555) quite influential and 35.6% (N=759) not at all influential.

## Discussion

The study made it possible to collect the citizens representations and attitudes toward nurses. The representations of nurses in literature were predominantly negative and full of stereotypes, contrary to the findings of the present research.

In a study conducted by the Civic Observatory on the Nursing Profession in 2018, most of the citizens

interviewed recognized the nurse as a kind, helpful and empathetic figure (Civic Observatory on the Nursing Profession, 2018). The positive reputation of the nursing profession in Italy had already been taken over by CENSIS in 2016: the citizens appreciated nurses in 84.7% of cases and trusted them in 53.8% (CENSIS, 2016).

Even during the current pandemic period, which has seen an exponential increase in health news, the sample confirms this perception.

The results of this research highlight a substantial increase in the frequency of association of the word

*hero* to the nurse figure after the advent of Covid-19, and the appearance of the words *soldier* and *warrior*, *risky* and *dangerous*, not mentioned before the advent of Covid-19. This figure indicates the influence that the media world may have had on the citizen, recognizing a recurrence in the use of the word “war” and other terminologies in the television world, and an increase in media attention during the early stages of the pandemic (9). There is also a significant increase in nouns/adjectives such as *courage*, *daring*, *angel*, *stressed* and *exhausted*, as well as concepts such as *strength*, *resilience*, *tenacity* and *admiration* towards nurses.

The data confirm what is reported in the literature, namely the emphasis on the heroic aspect of the profession and the tendency to resort to military analogies and metaphors, cementing an ideology that identifies health care workers, and nurses in particular, as heroes in a war between Covid-19 and mankind (10), as happened during the SARS pandemic (15).

In contrast to some studies analysed in relation to the current health emergency (13, 16) and in relation to past pandemics (17) on the other hand, negative perceptions or discriminatory attitudes towards nurses providing care to patients with Covid-19 have not materially emerged, except when deemed necessary, for almost one third of the sample, to place partial restrictions on the personal liberty of the nurses themselves. According to the public who participated in the study, the media have therefore conveyed a more positive image of the nurses than in the past, and in relation to the news learned from media channels a good percentage of respondents have changed their opinion favorably with respect to this category of professionals. The mass media have shown a positive image, far from the traditional stereotypes that emerged from the literature analyzed and that in other countries often characterize the profession (6, 7, 18).

Overall, therefore, the data confirm that citizens have a positive perception of the profession, so as to advise the nursing profession as a career choice (19) and in the literature one of the most appreciated aspects concerns the caring (20).

The cultural legacy of the lack of professional autonomy was recognized only by 27.8% of our sample compared to about 53% of the cases in the study conducted by the Civic Observatory in 2018. This fig-

ure still shows a lack of knowledge on the part of the citizen concerning the role and skills of the nurse: it is placed at the center of health activity and is recognized as little influential in clinical processes, organizational and managerial within the world of health.

From this study it emerges that some health care professionals have positively modified their opinion with regard to the nursing figure, and this could lead to a better integration of the nurse into the multidisciplinary team. The nurse, in fact, aware of its role and autonomous intervention spaces, should operate by breaking down intra-professional barriers promoting the culture of integration between more health professions, as recommended by the study of the Civic Observatory in 2018.

## Conclusions

The nurses were especially celebrated for caring, compassion, kindness and closeness in difficult times, but it is important to reiterate that the nurses are above all educated and qualified professionals who provide health care.

A social reform is needed which will help to increase the recognition and inclusion of nurses in health and public policy debates; the media exposure to which nurses are currently subjected should be exploited by them to change the perception of citizens about what it means to be a nurse so that the community fully learns the role and skills of this professional figure (26).

The responsibility for professional recognition is also the responsibility of the nurse.

In view of the above, it can be said that the current health emergency is making it possible for citizens to become more aware of the nursing profession and that nursing professionals must work to make the social perception of their role permanent promoting and carrying out public communication activities with a view to inform the public who the nurse is, the value and new opportunities that the profession offers.

The question then arises as to whether, after more than two years since the onset of the pandemic, all these expressions and feelings highlighted by the study will still be present, or whether, after the period of intense media exposure of the profession, we will return

to a pre-pandemic situation; it would also be interesting to continue the proposed study to validate or disprove both of these possibilities.

The administration of the questionnaire in on-line mode has excluded the part of the population not reachable through the channels used for its dissemination or unable to complete the form proposed.

In addition, most of the citizens come from Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna and Veneto, the three Italian regions most affected by the pandemic during the period in which the proposed study was carried out. It would therefore be interesting to administer a questionnaire similar to a larger and heterogeneous sample for age and geographical origin.

In the final analysis, the articles selected through the revision of the international literature concern countries that are profoundly different from each other and this has made it difficult to compare the results as different cultures also presuppose different ways of perceiving and living certain professions in different countries and continents. Furthermore, the topicality of the subject matter did not allow a large number of scientific studies to be found dealing with the subject in depth and comprehensively. Further studies and analysis of the literature could then bring out similar data or be refuted and questioned.

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