

# Review of Nursing Interns' Willingness to Work in Geriatric Care

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of an increasingly aging population in the international context, the demand for geriatric nursing services is growing day by day, and the demand for professional practitioners in the geriatric nursing industry is also constantly expanding. As a fresh reserve force for the future nursing staff, the willingness of intern nursing students to engage in geriatric nursing may affect the development of the geriatric nursing workforce. This study reviews the concept of the willingness of intern nursing students to engage in geriatric nursing, the current situation and influencing factors of their willingness to do so, analyzes the current situation and influencing factors of their willingness to engage in geriatric nursing, and summarizes and analyzes the core influencing factors, in order to enhance the willingness of intern nursing students to engage in the geriatric nursing industry through individualized teaching. It provides a theoretical basis for expanding the workforce of the geriatric nursing industry.

**Keywords:** Nursing students; Geriatric nursing willingness to work; Analysis of influencing factors

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## 1. Introduction

The willingness of intern nursing students to engage in geriatric nursing refers to their tendency and subjective intention to choose geriatric nursing-related positions after graduation upon completing their professional education. By the end of 2023, China's population aged 60 and above had reached 297 million, with those aged 65 and above accounting for 15.4% of the total population. According to relevant international standards, a society is considered moderately aging when the population aged 65 and above exceeds 14%, and severely aging when it surpasses 21%<sup>[1]</sup>. This indicates that China has entered a moderately aging society and is gradually transitioning into a deeply aging one. The rapid increase in the elderly population implies a continuously expanding demand for geriatric nursing care. As a core medical service addressing population aging, the quality of geriatric nursing is directly related to the health and quality of life of the elderly<sup>[2]</sup>.

Research shows that compared with the advancement of geriatric nursing in other countries, professional

elderly services in China still lag <sup>[3]</sup>. Many developed countries in Europe, America, and Asia have established relatively mature geriatric nursing models through long-term exploration, with more comprehensive training and support systems for caregivers <sup>[4]</sup>. In China, however, the development of the nursing professional workforce has failed to keep pace with the growing demands of geriatric nursing, making it difficult to meet the diverse needs of the elderly. As the future reserve of nursing professionals, nursing students' willingness to engage in geriatric nursing directly affects the quality and scale of the geriatric nursing talent pool. However, both domestic and international studies indicate that nursing students' interest in geriatric nursing remains concerningly low, and their willingness to enter this field is generally weak <sup>[5]</sup>.

This low interest is associated with multiple factors. Research shows that nursing students tend to choose clinical positions in general hospitals or leave after a short period of work, leading to high turnover in the geriatric nursing workforce <sup>[6]</sup>. They often hold negative perceptions of geriatric nursing, such as low social status and limited career prospects. This low willingness stands in sharp contrast to the actual demand. Without proactive guidance, it may exacerbate the shortage of talent in geriatric nursing. Therefore, enhancing nursing students' willingness to enter the geriatric nursing field is key to strengthening the industry and improving the living standards and well-being of the elderly. This study reviews the concept, current status, and influencing factors of intern nursing students' willingness to engage in geriatric nursing, identifies existing problems, and proposes future directions. It aims to provide a reference for tailored education strategies to enhance students' willingness to join the geriatric nursing workforce and expand the talent pool.

## **2. Concept definition**

### **2.1. Conceptual connotation of geriatric nursing**

Geriatric nursing is a multidimensional and dynamically evolving professional field. Its conceptual connotation continues to enrich and deepen alongside population aging, transformations in medical models, and social progress. It extends far beyond simply caring for the daily lives of the elderly, representing a comprehensive and professional practice instead. Geriatric nursing professionals must possess specialized knowledge and skills to provide high-quality services. They should be capable of conducting comprehensive assessments of the elderly, accurately identifying and managing various chronic diseases and complex medication regimens, and understanding how to effectively prevent geriatric syndromes such as falls and depression. At the same time, they must be skilled in safeguarding the autonomy and dignity of the elderly, providing psychological support, and addressing their psychosocial needs. Only such professional geriatric caregivers can deliver high-quality care that genuinely enhances the quality of life for the elderly and tackles the complex challenges posed by an aging population.

### **2.2. The connotation of intern nursing students' willingness to engage in geriatric nursing**

In the theory of planned behavior in social psychology, behavioral intention refers to the ideological tendency and motivation preceding a specific action, reflecting an individual's adoption of a particular behavior and their readiness to act <sup>[7]</sup>. This theory posits that the strength of behavioral intention is primarily determined by an individual's attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. The more positive and constructive an individual's evaluation of a behavior, the stronger their intention to act, and the higher the likelihood of performing that behavior. The willingness of intern nursing students to engage in geriatric nursing is

more than a simple choice of “willing or not”; it is a complex, multidimensional psychological construct reflecting their comprehensive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral tendencies toward the professional field of geriatric nursing.

### **3. Current status of intern nursing students’ willingness to engage in geriatric nursing**

#### **3.1. Current status abroad**

The nursing practice environments and influencing factors for nurses’ willingness to engage in geriatric nursing differ between countries. Internationally, the competency training system for undergraduate geriatric nursing talents is relatively well-established. Specific training standards are formulated considering the particularities of geriatric nursing, integrating competency throughout the entire educational process and clarifying training objectives. Moreover, clear undergraduate curriculum guidelines or competency standards for geriatric nursing already exist. Different countries have explored and continuously improved training models suited to their national conditions to foster positive attitudes among nursing students toward the elderly. These curriculum designs and training standards provide nursing students with professional advantages in geriatric nursing.

Despite this, nursing students’ willingness to enter the geriatric nursing field remains generally low. When Koskinen *et al.* <sup>[5]</sup> surveyed six European countries, including Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Spain, they found that nursing students in these countries had very low interest in pursuing geriatric nursing, despite significant societal and healthcare demands for elderly care labor. Only nursing graduates with high professional competency and high satisfaction with their nursing program, or those who fully recognized the promising prospects of geriatric nursing, demonstrated the most positive willingness to engage in this field. Therefore, merely improving the nursing curriculum is insufficient to attract students to geriatric nursing. Only by establishing independent geriatric nursing courses and fostering a sense of identity and confidence in the industry’s future during education can students be more effectively motivated to enter this field.

#### **3.2. Current status in China**

The training of geriatric nursing talents in China started relatively late, and the development of a professional geriatric nursing workforce has not yet reached a scalable level <sup>[8]</sup>. Although China has introduced relevant policies to encourage and cultivate geriatric nursing service talents, the training of professionals remains insufficient <sup>[9]</sup>. Nursing students’ willingness to engage in geriatric nursing is generally at a medium level, though a few studies report positive or negative attitudes. Domestic research by Zhou *et al.* <sup>[10]</sup> indicated that nursing students’ willingness to work in geriatric nursing was at a medium level, with 52.16% expressing willingness, a finding consistent with the survey results of Li *et al.* <sup>[11]</sup>. Wen *et al.* <sup>[12]</sup> reported that nursing students’ scores on the Geriatric Nursing Practice Plan Behavior Scale were  $65.16 \pm 12.50$ , at a medium to upper level, suggesting a relatively strong willingness to engage in geriatric nursing services. Scores on the career choice motivation questionnaire were  $65.53 \pm 10.24$ , also at a medium to upper level, aligning with the findings of Ding *et al.* <sup>[13]</sup> and Sun *et al.* <sup>[14]</sup>, indicating certain motivations among nursing students for choosing geriatric nursing.

However, the investigation by Huang *et al.* <sup>[15]</sup> showed that only 39.9% of nursing students were willing to engage in geriatric nursing, indicating a less optimistic situation at a medium to low level. Research by Zhang *et al.* <sup>[16]</sup>, Zheng *et al.* <sup>[17]</sup>, Yan *et al.* <sup>[18]</sup>, Zhao *et al.* <sup>[19]</sup>, Liu *et al.* <sup>[20]</sup>, and Dai *et al.* <sup>[21]</sup> on the willingness of different nursing student groups yielded similar results: overall willingness is generally low. These studies also pointed

out that key factors influencing nursing students' reluctance might include whether nursing was their first career choice, the strength of their professional identity, generally negative attitudes toward the elderly, and perceptions of geriatric nursing as tedious, low-paying, and offering limited opportunities for self-realization.

## **4. Influencing factors of intern nursing students' willingness to engage in geriatric nursing**

### **4.1. Personal factors: Attitude towards the elderly**

Attitude towards the elderly is the most significant factor influencing nursing students' willingness to engage in geriatric nursing. Some studies have pointed out that a more positive attitude correlates with a higher willingness to work in this field [22]. Shi *et al.* [23] found that undergraduate nursing students who had close relationships with the elderly, held optimistic views about the development prospects of geriatric nursing, and expressed willingness to engage in it demonstrated a stronger intention to do so ( $P < 0.05$ ). Furthermore, Yu *et al.* [24] showed that among nursing students who were only children, had been cared for by the elderly, and maintained good relationships with them, undergraduates had a higher willingness to engage in geriatric nursing ( $P < 0.05$ ). This was analyzed to stem from positive interaction experiences, fostering a more favorable attitude towards the elderly, potentially changing stereotypes [25]. Harmonious experiences with the elderly increase undergraduate nursing students' confidence in pursuing geriatric nursing [26]. Therefore, positive personal experiences and emotional connections are key to shaping favorable attitudes and enhancing willingness.

### **4.2. Educational factors**

#### **4.2.1. Professional choice**

Nursing students' professional identity also affects their willingness to engage in geriatric nursing. The choice of major and exposure to geriatric nursing courses are determinants of this professional identity. Zheng *et al.* [17] demonstrated that students who chose nursing as their first preference had a higher willingness to engage in geriatric nursing than those who did not ( $P < 0.05$ ), consistent with the findings of Zhou *et al.* [27]. This may be related to the higher degree of professional identity among students who voluntarily selected nursing. Those with a stronger professional identity are more likely to accept the nature of geriatric nursing work and show greater willingness to enter the field. Thus, a positive and stable professional identity, rooted in internal recognition of the profession, can significantly enhance acceptance and willingness.

#### **4.2.2. Geriatric nursing courses**

Geriatric nursing course education is now regarded as an urgent need to enhance nursing students' willingness to join the field [28]. Zhou *et al.* [27] proposed that such courses not only increase knowledge reserves on aging but also cultivate professional identity. By strengthening professional knowledge and attitude education, these courses can enhance students' sense of purpose, mission, and responsibility in geriatric nursing, fostering interest and passion for the work, thereby increasing willingness.

However, research by Zhou *et al.* [10] indicated that lower-grade students who had not yet taken geriatric nursing courses were more willing to engage in such work. A possible reason is that these courses are typically offered in higher grades. Upon learning about geriatric nursing, students might find it heavily focused on basic and daily life care, leading to a prejudice that geriatric nursing workers are merely ordinary caregivers, which could reduce their willingness. Therefore, the implementation of geriatric nursing courses has a dual effect. Well-

designed courses can build knowledge and identity; poorly executed ones might deter students by exposing them to the challenging realities of the work, underscoring the necessity of thoughtful curriculum design.

### **4.3. Social factors**

#### **4.3.1. Perception of industry development**

Perceptions of the industry's development prospects influence willingness. Yu *et al.* [24] demonstrated that nursing students who were optimistic about the future of geriatric nursing were significantly more willing to engage in it than those who were not ( $P < 0.05$ ). Some intern nursing students believed that choosing geriatric nursing offered developmental potential, a promising future, and opportunities for career advancement, leading to a higher willingness. However, research by Han *et al.* [29] showed that 66.5% of nursing students "believed that working in grassroots geriatric nursing holds no promising future." Thus, positive expectations about the industry's future are attractive factors, while widespread professional prejudice remains a barrier.

#### **4.3.2. Perception of occupational characteristics**

Han *et al.* [29] found that 46.5% of students believed that "the elderly nowadays are not easy to take care of." Some also viewed the geriatric nursing workforce structure as unreasonable, with overall low quality, narrow knowledge scope, outdated concepts, intense workload, poor working environments, low social status, inadequate pay and benefits, and high emotional drain from confronting disability, dementia, and death. These expectations of work pressure and emotional exhaustion are deterrents. Therefore, negative perceptions of occupational characteristics such as workload, compensation, social status, and emotional demands are significant barriers.

### **4.4. Other factors**

#### **4.4.1. Gender**

Huang *et al.* [15] demonstrated that gender influenced attitudes towards the elderly and willingness to pursue geriatric nursing ( $P < 0.05$ ), with female students scoring higher than males. This aligns with the findings of Zhang *et al.* [16]. Influenced by traditional concepts and income considerations, most male students tend to choose departments like the ICU or operating room. Furthermore, females often possess greater emotional delicacy and empathy, facilitating better communication and understanding with the elderly, thus leading to a higher willingness than their male counterparts. When societal gender expectations interact with individual traits, female nursing students generally exhibit a higher willingness to engage in geriatric nursing.

#### **4.4.2. Educational level**

Shang *et al.* [30] demonstrated that educational attainment is closely related to willingness to provide geriatric nursing. Undergraduate nursing students are exposed to a broader knowledge base and benefit from more advantageous faculty compared to vocational college and secondary vocational students. They also possess stronger practical abilities and a more comprehensive understanding of various nursing fields. Undergraduates have longer study durations, completing nursing-related courses over three years versus two years for vocational students, and more opportunities for practical training in various institutions and nursing homes, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of geriatric nursing work. However, due to their richer knowledge reserve and educational qualifications, undergraduate students often have clearer career directions and broader choices, a finding consistent with Wu *et al.* [31]. Thus, educational level shapes knowledge structure, practical opportunities, and career choice range, influencing professional cognition.

In short, the willingness of intern nursing students to engage in geriatric nursing is profoundly influenced by personal, educational, and social factors. A positive attitude towards the elderly and emotional connections with them are foundational to fostering willingness. Professional identity and positive industry perceptions are key motivators, while practical concerns like workload, compensation, and psychological pressure constitute major barriers. Currently, improving these factors faces challenges: enhancing attitudes towards the elderly often relies on personal experience, with school education insufficient in systematically cultivating empathy; when professional identity is already fragile, overly realistic teaching may deter students by highlighting job hardships; and pervasive social biases like “low income and no prospects” further reduce willingness.

## 5. Conclusion

This study reviewed the conceptual connotation, current status, and influencing factors of intern nursing students’ willingness to engage in geriatric nursing. With the accelerating aging of the population, the demand for geriatric nursing services continues to grow. As an important future reserve for the nursing workforce, nursing students’ willingness to enter this field is directly related to the stability and development of the geriatric nursing talent pool. Both domestic and international studies indicate that, despite established geriatric nursing education systems in some countries, students’ willingness to join this field remains generally low.

Future research should continue to explore the factors underlying this low willingness to provide references for nursing educators and managers. Although existing studies have identified multiple influencing factors, challenges remain in improving students’ attitudes towards the elderly, enhancing their professional identity in geriatric nursing, and eliminating social prejudices. Addressing the shortage of geriatric nursing professionals requires a multi-level support system from the national to the institutional level.

At the national and societal levels, policy support and financial investment are needed to enhance the social status and compensation of geriatric nursing professionals. Simultaneously, public awareness campaigns should highlight the professional image and social value of this industry. At the educational level, nursing curriculum reform should integrate geriatric nursing and humanistic care throughout the teaching process. Experiential teaching methods, such as scenario simulation and case discussions, should be adopted to help students understand and adapt to geriatric nursing work early. Furthermore, deepening collaboration with well-operated geriatric nursing institutions can provide high-quality internship experiences, enhancing students’ sense of professional value through role models and clinical practice.

The ultimate goal is to gradually shift nursing students’ negative perceptions of geriatric nursing. While cultivating professional skills, efforts should aim to stimulate their intrinsic professional identity, thereby building a solid talent reserve to address population aging. Subsequent research should be grounded in China’s actual context, scientifically designing and promoting programs that effectively enhance nursing students’ willingness to engage in geriatric nursing, providing theoretical and practical support for strengthening the geriatric nursing workforce and improving care quality.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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