

## Review Article

# Learning Motivation in Nursing Students of Chinese: A Phenomenological Research Study

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## Abstract

**Background:** Many factors influence learning motivation in schools, particularly in medical universities. This paper explored the learning motivation of nursing students in China.

**Objective:** The learning motivation of students of Chinese has been a popular issue in nursing education reform. This study investigates learning motivation in nursing students, describes the factors that influence this motivation and offers some suggestions.

**Design:** A descriptive cross-sectional study.

**Method:** We analyzed the learning motivation of Chinese and cognition status of 288 junior nursing students using self-developed scales and focus group interviews.

**Result:** Many factors lead to decreased learning motivation in nursing students of Chinese. A major influential factor was unclear learning objectives (65.63%); other factors were a lack of interest in nursing as a profession (56.94%), a realization of the substantial difference between reality and the ideal (49.31%) and other factors. The lack of motivation in nursing students manifested as inefficient learning (51.74%), missed classes (57.99%), a lack of clarity regarding life objectives (35.76%) and other effects.

**Conclusion:** Nursing teachers should prioritize students' learning motivation by reforming their teaching methods and reinforcing training related to nursing motivation and self-management.

**Relevance to clinical practice:** Motivation is a vast domain for nursing learners and teachers to explore. The current research provides advice and suggestions regarding learning motivation and strategies for teaching nursing students in China.

What does this study contribute to the wider global clinical community?

Students who have a strong motivation to learn have a positive attitude toward their studies and make great efforts to master the knowledge and skills required in the nursing profession. Such students have strong confidence in their ability to succeed as professionals. Therefore, they set high goals, persevere through assignments, reach their targets and have better prospects for the future.

**Keywords:** Students of Chinese; Nursing profession; Undergraduates; Learning motivation

## Introduction

Because of the increasing demands in health care, nursing students of Chinese should be motivated to acquire knowledge appropriate to the nursing field and develop the necessary skills to obtain a good professional position and work relationships. Teachers are expected both to convey knowledge and skills and to foster sustained learning motivation in their students. It is important for teachers to be aware of this expectation and to possess the knowledge and ability to encourage and develop students' learning motivation and learning philosophy. Some studies have shown that when students are highly motivated,

they have greater enthusiasm and exert greater efforts to study and to develop their abilities. Motivation is a psychological construct that inspires people to take action. Human activities are derived from particular motives. Consequently, two important questions arise: What is the motivational status of the students at a Chinese nursing school? How can motivation be stimulated and maintained? This paper focuses on nursing students' motivation, the factors that influence motivation, and methods used to stimulate learning motivation at a Chinese nursing school.

## Literature review

Motivation is considered one of the most influential factors in the field of nursing education. Teachers and researchers view motivation as an important factor, and they are concerned with whether students are highly motivated and willing to learn the skills needed to succeed in the nursing profession. Many scholars have investigated learning motivation in recent years; however, strategies for motivating nursing students are still lacking. In China, students are not able to choose their majors because of the Chinese educational system and related laws, and many students have little interest in nursing. Motivation is a crucial force that determines whether a learner will embrace a particular learning path, how much energy he or she will devote to it, and how long he or she will persevere. Students who have a strong learning motivation adopt a positive attitude toward their studies

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and exert considerable effort to master the related knowledge and skills. These students have a clear goal and desire; consequently, they achieve better grades and have better prospects for the future compared with students who are not highly motivated [1]. However, in China, universities choose the educational pathway for each student based on his or her indicated options and exam scores rather than according to the student's wishes. Once a student selects a major in the university entrance examination, it is nearly impossible to change it. Therefore, the selection of a major is critical because it is very likely to determine the rest of the student's life. Additionally, in the Chinese cultural context, Chinese students are well known to comply with authorities (e.g., parents and teachers) and avoid challenging them. Great emphasis is placed on conformity and family interdependence because of the prevailing Confucian values. Given the importance of the university entrance exam, it seems logical that at times, students would allow others (e.g., instructors or parents) to make choices for them, regardless of their own intentions and interests. Accordingly, in the course of their university studies, many students lose sight of their objectives and motivation and, as considerable evidence indicates, the students' capabilities and work quality suffer as a result.

### Conceptual framework

When individuals reflect on and evaluate their own experiences and thoughts, they engage in self-evaluation and thereby alter their own thinking and subsequent behaviors. Knowledge and skills are poor predictors of subsequent performance. The beliefs we hold about our abilities and about the outcomes of our efforts greatly influence our actions. Of these beliefs, self-efficacy has the greatest influence on student performance [2]. Self-efficacy is defined as "students beliefs about their capabilities to apply effectively the knowledge and skills they already possess and thereby learn new cognitive skills". A learner may have the skills to perform a particular task, such as administer an injection, but unless he or she believes that he or she is capable of performing this task, he or she will be unwilling to demonstrate these skills. Therefore, learners' self-efficacy helps explain why behavior varies widely even among people with similar knowledge and skills. What we do and how we behave are more influenced by our beliefs about our capabilities than by what we are actually capable of achieving. Learners with a weak sense of self-efficacy in a given task perceive difficulties as threats and obstacles rather than focusing on how to overcome them [3]. Subsequently, these learners easily lose faith in their abilities and tend to withdraw from difficult tasks (e.g., nursing tasks). In contrast, learners with high self-efficacy have strong confidence in their ability to successfully learn nursing-related knowledge and skills. Therefore, they set high goals, persevere through assignments, reach their targets and have better prospects for the future.

## Methods

### Sample

The entire data collection procedure was performed in strict accordance with the protocol approved by the Institutional Ethical Approval Committee of Binzhou Medical University (No.2015-81). This was a cross-sectional survey of Chinese nursing students conducted from March to July 2014. The participants included 288 third-year undergraduate students (17 males, 271 females) from the School of Nursing at Binzhou Medical University, Shandong Province, China. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 23 years ( $M=21$ ,  $SD=3.5$ ). A convenience sampling approach was used. All of the participants signed an informed consent form and volunteered to

participate in the research. Six interviewers were trained to collect data and conduct focus group interviews. Volunteers were eligible for inclusion if they were (1) Chinese junior nursing students aged 18 to 24 years old and (2) healthy and able to communicate in Chinese without difficulty. The exclusion criteria were as follows: non-nursing students and nursing students at a grade level higher than the third year. Students who were not available at the time of the interview or who refused to be assessed were also excluded. Nursing students who fulfilled the inclusion criteria were invited to participate in the study.

### Learning questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed based on the relevant literature. The questionnaire included 25 questions that addressed the students' outlook on learning cognition and learning motivation and the factors that influenced these characteristics, the reasons for and manifestations of a lack of motivation, and related questions. The questionnaire began with general demographic items including gender, age, and the number of semesters completed. The students were briefed on the nature of the questionnaires, and confidentiality was assured.

### Focus group interviews

Data were collected using open-ended questions in semi-structured group interviews. The interviews were transcribed, and thematic analyses of the data were conducted. Major categories and the relationships among them were identified; these categories included learning abilities, learning objectives and learning motivation and related categories. All of the groups discussed the focus question and provided their opinions and viewpoints.

### Data analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 19.0) was used for all of the analyses. The data were analyzed using both descriptive and analytical approaches. All tests were two-tailed and set at a 0.05 significance level.

### Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the ethics committee of Binzhou Medical University. Informed consent was obtained according to procedures approved by both the University Research Board and the Human Volunteers Protection Committee. All of the participants gave their written informed consent to participate in the study. We maintained the participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

## Results

Table 1 shows the nursing students' reported reasons for a lack of learning motivation and poor learning efficiency. These reasons included unclear learning objectives (65.63%), an undesired major (56.94%), employment pressure (51.04%), a discrepancy between the ideal and reality (49.31%) and other factors.

Both teachers and students must change their teaching and learning philosophy and methods to focus on the following important aspects of nursing: First, there should be a focus on mastering basic specialized nursing theories and skills. Second, it is important that teachers and students keep in mind that caring is the essence of nursing; the professional mission is "To cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always". Third, employment pressure in the nursing profession should be considered; rapid economic development in China has produced an increasingly high demand for health care, and it is important for nursing undergraduates to set realistic goals.

Nursing students have a variety of employment options, including hospitals, community clinics and nursing homes and other relevant medical institutes. As the Chinese economy continues to open up, nursing undergraduates may also have the option of employment in clinical and nursing companies.

Table 2 shows the manifestations of a lack of motivation in nursing students: 57.99% of students missed classes, and 51.74% of students learned inefficiently. Other manifestations included staying in the dorms, unclear life objectives, and a negative attitude. Many factors led to decreased learning motivation and its subsequent manifestations in nursing students.

Such manifestations may be external, such as missing classes, learning inefficiently and staying in the dorms, or they may be internal, such as having unclear life objectives, a negative attitude and a loss of personal interest in studies.

A positive attitude can promote learning outcomes, help students develop appropriate professional education approaches and objectives, and encourage students to participate in professional activities, such as volunteering to help the elderly and the disadvantaged. Inherent my material will be and nursing is a caring profession. Internal motivation is the key to learning, and methods for motivating nursing undergraduates should be given much more attention.

## Discussion

Motivation is a vital factor affecting nursing education, and it should be given much more attention. For junior nursing students, social influence and positive reinforcement are especially important. However, nursing education has traditionally focused on external factors related to employment and teaching, such as exam grades, and has neglected the importance of internal factors, such as students' interest and objectives in nursing. However, to develop strategies that promote effective learning, internal and external factors must be integrated. Motivation has both negative and positive impacts on nursing students' studies. The present study found that students who selected a major based on their own interests were more likely to approach their education with a sense of willingness and volition, which in turn evoked a series of adaptive outcomes, such as studying for the sake of learning, having positive self-beliefs, acknowledging the value of learning, engaging in deep and critical thinking, regulating their efforts and frequently using other learning strategies [4]. Furthermore, the relationship between learning motivation and learning is typically complementary. Motivation to learn can enhance learning behaviors, which promotes learning effects. This paper offers some suggestions to teachers and other relevant authorities to encourage learning motivation among nursing students.

### Setting realistic goals

Table 1 shows that the nursing students often had unclear learning objectives (65.63%), were in an undesired major (56.94%), and felt employment pressure (51.04%) because of a lack of learning motivation and poor learning efficiency and skills. Therefore, the students received poor scores and failed to develop their abilities and consequently felt unhappy and had lower self-efficacy. Because of the Chinese educational system and laws, many of the students disliked their major and did not like communicating with nursing teachers or parents, and many of the students had little interest in the study of nursing.

The need to open up the Chinese education market and reform the educational system and laws is urgent. Doing so would give

greater attention to nursing instruction and learning. Reforming and opening up nursing education in the university would echo China's basic economic policy. Both teachers and students must change their teaching and learning philosophy and methods. Additionally, employment pressure in the nursing profession should also be considered. As a result of the rapid economic development in China, health care is in increasingly high demand. Setting realistic goals should be a priority for nursing undergraduates.

Thus, developing a learning goal or a set of life goals would be helpful to nursing students. Setting a goal (for example, having good professional prospects) will not only motivate the student and provide the impetus to continue studying; it will also give the student a valuable means of tracking professional progress. Students' goals influence their motivation and the efforts they make in their education. When they set learning goals, students study purposefully and devote great effort to learning. Students are able to accomplish tasks without worrying about failure or comparing themselves to others. Helping students set realistic and appropriate goals is an effective strategy for motivating them. Appropriate goal-setting is a catalyst for promoting motivation. Goal-setting theory suggests that individuals who have made specific and challenging goals will outperform those with nonspecific and easy goals [5]. The former persevere longer on a task than the latter. Some studies indicate that students are more motivated to achieve goals they have set for themselves than goals set by others [6]. Having specific and attainable goals in mind may help students become motivated and willing to exert great efforts to achieve those goals. Becoming an expert in nursing and having competence in various aspects of the profession could improve students' enjoyment in life and their future success [7].

### Self-management should be enhanced

Table 2 shows that many of the participants reported learning inefficiently (51.74%), missing classes (57.99%), staying in the dorms (33.68%), engaging in extracurricular activities (34.38%) and having a negative attitude (32.99%). When the students had no clear objectives and a lower desire to learn, those characteristics emerged as various manifestations of poor learning motivation. Interest is a very important factor for accomplishing any task. Students can be inspired to learn what they are interested in [8]. If students are interested in the nursing profession, they are eager to learn all that they can about it and will exhibit good study approaches and self-management. In addition to school, these students have many things to do, such as participating in the student union, working at a part-time job, and engaging in other extracurricular activities [9]. Therefore, self-management and learning efficiency are very important. University students live away from their parents and study at school. Thus, these students want to develop a social life and intimate relationships with peers and others. Students are affected by their interactions with other college students [10]. As the Chinese proverb says, "If you live with a lame person, you will learn to limp", meaning "See your friends and know who you are". God helps those who help themselves. Self-studying and self-management are good habits to develop. Forewarned is forearmed: Students should be encouraged to share their experiences with and stories about self-study and self-management, which can provide external motivation. The right attitude can promote learning, help students develop the right professional goals and objectives, and encourage them to participate in professional activities, such as volunteering to help the elderly and the disadvantaged. Inherent my material will be and nursing is a caring profession. Internal

**Table 1:** Reasons for lack of motivation in nursing undergraduates (n=288).

Item	Frequency	Constituent ratio	Selection ratio
Unclear learning objective	189	18.55%	65.63%
Undesired major	164	16.10%	56.94%
Employment pressure	147	14.43%	51.04%
Difference between ideal and reality	142	13.94%	49.31%
Negative influence of society	135	13.25%	46.88%
Outside distractions	127	12.46%	44.10%
Professional influence	115	11.27%	39.93%

Table 1 shows the nursing students had unclear learning objectives (65.63%), an undesired major (56.94%), and employment pressure (51.04%) and difference between ideal and reality (49.31%) and other reasons because of lack of learning motivation and poor learning efficiency.

**Table 2:** Manifestations of lack of motivation in nursing undergraduates (n=288).

Item	Frequency	Constituent ratio	Selection ratio
Inefficient learning	149	14.62%	51.74%
Missing classes	167	16.39%	57.99%
Staying in the dorms	97	9.52%	33.68%
Unclear life objectives	103	10.11%	35.76%
Engaging in extracurricular activities	99	9.72%	34.38%
Negative attitude	95	9.32%	32.99%
Loss of personal interest	87	8.54%	30.21%

Table 2 shows: Manifestations of lack of motivation in nursing students which is 57.99% students missing classes and 51.74% students has the inefficient learning and other manifestations such as staying in the dorms, unclear life objectives, negative attitude and so on.

motivation is the key to learning, and methods for motivating nursing undergraduates should be given much more attention.

If relationships with classmates, roommates or partners are not healthy, this psychological burden can affect learning and reduce the motivation to learn. Some students spend so much time playing computer games that they neglect their studies. Some students do not like to study for their major and spend their time on extracurricular activities that they like instead of studying. Consequently, those students' scores and capabilities are poor, and their parents despair and become upset. Students should learn to limit the time they spend on entertainment and allow time for learning the knowledge and skills that will benefit their future careers and lives [11].

### Cultivate an interest in nursing

Interest is an essential factor that affects the ability to accomplish a task, and teachers play a very important role in generating interest among students [12].

Interest is the best teacher. Hence, teachers should find a way to cultivate their students' interest in learning about nursing. For example, they could use appealing nursing stories, such as the stories of Florence Nightingale and contemporary Chinese nursing heroes, to draw their students' attention and help them enjoy nursing. These methods could help students develop the knowledge and skills to help others in the future.

Personalized education based on student's needs and interests is necessary. Students who do not like the nursing major could be given the option of switching to another major within the university. Additionally, students should be encouraged to participate in many types of activities within the university.

### Provide appropriate comments to students

Evaluation typically refers to scores, but evaluations also include grade assessments, comments, praise and criticism. Such evaluations can strengthen motivation [13]. Students' motivation can be changed by their evaluations; thus, nursing teachers must pay careful attention

to the evaluations they provide.

A review must be based on a student's performance. Therefore, teachers' comments must be in line with their students' circumstances, personality characteristics and gender. Hurlock's research showed that the appropriate recognition of the effect of an action was significantly more effective than criticism [14]. Apparently, rewards greatly improve students' motivation to learn. A good student is boasting because the university students are youth and the outlook on life formation and development period. The teacher's role is crucial.

As a result, teachers should reward students appropriately. Rewards may be material or intangible and could include a small gift, a smile, a nod or a comment, such as "perfect", "wonderful", or "very good". In these ways, teachers can properly encourage students [15].

### Introducing scientific methods for studying

Because motivation restricts possible learning strategies and learning strategies also affect academic performance, teachers have a duty to introduce scientific studying methods to students, especially those who work hard but obtain unsatisfactory results and need teachers' guidance. Learning to learn and learning to care are necessary strategies. Success is always attributable to good habits, and good habits are those that have a good method and yield good results.

Therefore, teachers should use a variety of learning methods to guide students and enable them to find their own ways of learning [16]. So that they can more efficiently complete their learning tasks and enjoy their nursing education.

### Limitations

Some limitations to this study should be noted. First, because the current study is based on students enrolled in a single undergraduate program at a university in China, the results may not be generalizable to all university students. Second, much research has shown that students' self-efficacy beliefs influence their academic motivation and aspirations, academic goal persistence, learning and achievements, and other factors. Future research must address these factors and

other social-contextual variables (e.g., parental education and socio-economic status) that have been shown to influence academic motivation. Another limitation of this study is that 6 interviewers collected the data in face-to-face interviews rather than using a self-reporting method. Therefore, although the interviewers were trained, each of them may have collected the data differently. Additionally, the students' moods when they answered the questionnaires may have affected their responses. Qualitative research may provide valuable insight about ways to explore junior nursing students' motivation.

## Conclusion

Motivation interacts in complex ways to affect nursing students' learning, and it is one of many factors that influence the learning process. We cannot conclude that we have developed a thorough understanding of motivation from our study. Furthermore, in analyzing the variables that influence motivation and suggesting tactics for improving it, we may have missed other factors that influence the learning process, such as the learners' personality. Although the discussion in this thesis is enlightening and helpful to nursing education, there is still much to be understood regarding learning motivation, and more practical strategies for nursing education must be developed. Additionally, the motivational strategies discussed above must be supplemented and justified by further empirical research. In summary, motivation is a vast domain, and the current study offers initial insights and recommendations regarding motivation in nursing students in China.

## Relevance to Clinical Practice

Motivation is a vast domain for nursing students and teachers to explore. The current study offers suggestions for improving learning motivation and strategies for teaching nursing students in China.

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