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Examining Motivation in Turbulent Times: A Self-Determination Theory Replication

Jessalyn I. Vallade
University of Kentucky, jessalyn.vallade@uky.edu

Renee Kaufmann
University of Kentucky, renee.kaufmann@uky.edu

T. Kody Frey
University of Kentucky, terrell.frey@uky.edu

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Jessalyn I. Vallade, University of Kentucky
Renee Kaufmann, University of Kentucky
T. Kody Frey, University of Kentucky

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to replicate and extend previous work (Chiu, 2021a, 2021b; Vallade et al., 2020) by applying self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to student motivation and engagement in the basic communication course during the shift to online learning in the initial onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Results indicated that students were most often motivated and engaged through instructor communication and behavior that met their need for relatedness, with a particular emphasis on instructor presence. Theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed within the context of the basic communication course.

Keywords: self-determination theory, student motivation, student engagement, COVID-19.

Although we have learned much about student motivation generally (e.g., Goldman & Brann, 2016; Goldman et al., 2017), and in the basic communication course (BCC) specifically (e.g., Titsworth, 2000), both anecdotal and empirical evidence have demonstrated the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of faculty and students (Browning et al., 2021). Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) provides a helpful lens for framing investigations of student motivation in instructional communication studies (e.g., Shin & Bolkan, 2021). Moreover, Vallade et al. (2020) utilized SDT to examine how instructors can

facilitate student motivation specifically within the BCC. However, the major disruption and heightened levels of uncertainty in higher education caused by COVID-19 during the Spring 2020 semester may have shifted students' motivation levels and influences from their regular trajectory. To explore this possibility, it is necessary to replicate and bolster our understanding of what students perceive as motivating from their BCC instructors.

Further, the creators of SDT, Ryan and Deci (2020), suggested that future research from this theoretical perspective should more closely examine student engagement and outcomes in e-learning and remote classrooms. Chiu (2021a, 2021b) answered this call by exploring students' motivation and engagement in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on K-12 students. Thus, the current study expands Vallade et al.'s (2020) application of SDT within the BCC and extends Chiu's (2021a, 2021b) investigations into the college classroom, while addressing the need to continue applying SDT in digital spaces. By replicating and building upon existing research, we test whether the argument stands across a variety of settings (e.g., FtF versus online setting), students (e.g., demographics, majors, institutions), or contexts (e.g., pre-pandemic versus during pandemic) to make broader claims about what we know (Kaufmann & Tatum, 2017).

A Brief Review of SDT

Self-determination theory posits that motivation can be extrinsic or controlled (i.e., influenced by external pressures) or intrinsic or autonomous (i.e., derived from internal enjoyment, interest, or fulfillment) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008). Intrinsic motivation results when students' basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy refers to a perception that students have control over their own behavior and therefore see these behaviors as indicative of their true selves (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence involves students' feelings of effectiveness and ability, with a particular focus on the need to be able to demonstrate this effectiveness to others. Finally, relatedness includes students' feelings of connection and belonging, as well as their perceptions that they are cared about (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Vallade et al. (2020) argued that the BCC provided a unique context in which to apply SDT in order to understand how we can facilitate students' motivation within a widely required general education course. The results of this study found that students were most frequently motivated through instructor messages and behaviors

that met their needs for relatedness, including a positive teaching style (e.g., rapport, immediacy), content relevance, demonstrating care, and creating a positive classroom climate, among others. Students were also motivated through their need for competence, including instructors' messages that helped reduce uncertainty, communicate encouragement, and provide feedback to students. Autonomy-related behaviors, such as adapting course material to student needs, promoting diverse assignment topics, facilitating individuals' time management, and respecting students were the least frequently reported themes from BCC students, despite previous research asserting the particular importance of autonomy-supportive instruction (Baker & Goodboy, 2019; Goldman & Brann, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Indeed, Vallade et al. (2020) found that BCC students more frequently reported extrinsic motivators than autonomy-supportive instructor behaviors as keeping them motivated in the BCC. The authors argued that these results and the ways they differ from previous instructional research may be indicative of the contextual influence of the BCC. We believe that the acknowledgement of the larger context is a strength of SDT and makes this a particularly useful theoretical framework to apply here.

SDT maintains that students' motivation and growth can be influenced by their educational environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedly, Vallade et al. (2020) pointed out, "in addition to the clear implications stemming from instructor communication behaviors, student motivation is also influenced by the larger context in which instruction occurs" (p. 127). In the Spring of 2020, this context involved the onset of a global pandemic and an abrupt shift in the way we conducted ourselves, both in society and in higher education.

The Impact of COVID-19

In March of 2020, colleges and universities were asked to pivot from face-to-face (FtF) to online instruction, often with little notice and few resources (Gudmundsdottir & Hathway, 2020). Students were required to move out of campus housing, with many students returning home to their families or finding alternate housing on short notice to complete the remainder of the semester virtually (Ashby-King, 2021). Students experienced barriers to learning in the form of limited or no access to technology or Internet, food and housing insecurity, as well as shifts in or additions to their daily routines and responsibilities; moreover, students experienced problematic online course design, communication overload, and a lack of digital competence from their instructors (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Hampsten, 2021; Son

et al., 2020). With all the issues and limitations centered around the quick transition, Daniels et al. (2021) found that students' "achievement goals, engagement and perceptions of success all significantly decreased, while their perceptions of cheating increased" (p. 299) when they transitioned into the online space. They explain this could be attributed to online teaching approaches or course design. Moreover, Schmits et al. (2021) explained that students during this time felt overwhelmed, anxious, and depressed.

Meanwhile, instructors rushed to adopt, implement, and communicate the new means of delivering content to support their students' educational needs, which in turn, placed many in situations that were overwhelming, challenging, and uncertain (Carey, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Frey, 2021; Miller et al., 2021). Yet, amid this upheaval and uncertainty, instructors still found ways to connect and motivate their students (Kaufmann et al., 2021). In the present study, we wanted to explore what instructors did or said to help motivate and engage their students during the turbulent transition at the onset of COVID-19 through the lens of SDT. Thus, the following research questions were posed:

> RQ1: What instructor behaviors do students identify as motivating them in the BCC following the initial shift to online learning during COVID-19?
>
> RQ2: What instructor behaviors do students identify as keeping them engaged in the BCC following the initial shift to online learning during COVID-19?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants included 526 undergraduate students enrolled in one of two lower-level basic multimodal communication courses during the Spring 2020 semester at a Midwestern university. Participants self-identified as female (n = 327), male (n = 196), female to male transgender (n = 1), and nonbinary (n = 1), with one participant preferring not to identify their gender. Participants self-reported as white (75.9%), Black or African American (8.4%), Asian or Asian American (8.2%), bi- or multi-racial (3.4%), a race or ethnicity not listed (3.4%), and Native American (0.6%). The

majority of participants were first-year students (80.5%), with some sophomores (12.2%), juniors (4.9%) and seniors (1.0%). Eight students (1.5%) were new transfer students and were unsure of their class standing. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 43 (M = 18.87, SD =1.54) and represented 52 academic majors across campus. Finally, participants reported that their classes utilized a combination of synchronous and asynchronous meetings (43.3%), involved completely asynchronous course material (43.0%), or met synchronously each week (13.3%).

Data for the current study were collected as part of basic course assessment. Specifically, students in the basic course are required to complete a post-test at the end of the semester (i.e., week 15 and 16). Only responses of students who consented for their work to be used beyond internal assessment are reported in the current study. Several additional cognitive and affective questions were included for assessment purposes but are not reported in this study.

Measurement

As part of larger BCC assessment data, students were asked to respond to two open-ended questions about their experiences with the course "following the university's decision to move all classes online for the second half of the semester." Specifically, they were asked (1) *"How, if at all, has your instructor impacted your motivation during this time?"* and (2) *"How has your instructor tried to keep you engaged during this time, and how has it affected your experience?"*

Data Analysis

To answer the proposed research questions and replicate previous work, we employed the codebook developed by Vallade et al. (2020), who utilized SDT as their guide. Additional themes were added to the codebook as they emerged from participant responses. The authors met, reviewed the themes, and randomly selected approximately 20% of responses (n = 105) to code to establish intercoder reliability. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion, resulting in Krippendorff's alpha coefficients of .95 for motivation and .98 for engagement. The remaining responses (n = 421) were divided amongst the research team members and coded independently.

Results

RQ1: Student Motivation

All categories and themes, with frequency counts, for RQ1 are displayed in Table 1. Several participant responses required multiple codes.

Table 1

Motivation themes and frequencies

Category/Theme	Frequency
Relatedness	241
Instructor Presence*	92
Demonstrating Care *and Understanding**	64
Positive Teaching Style	63
Promoting Group Work and Collaboration	10
Encouraging Out-of-Class Communication	3
Content Relevance	3
Positive Climate	3
Active Engagement/Asking Questions*	2
Self-Disclosure	1
Competence	170
Providing Help*	76
General Encouragement	61
Reducing Uncertainty	19
Oral and Written Feedback	14
Autonomy	52
Adapting Course Material Around Student Needs	28
Time Management *and Flexibility**	20
Promoting Diverse Assignment Topics	2
Respecting Students	1
Eliciting and Considering Opinions *and Feedback**	1
Self-Motivation	6
Extrinsic/Controlled Motivation	65
Reminders	50
External Motivators	13
Emphasizing Extrinsic Rewards/Punishments	2
Amotivation	3
No Impact*	56

Note. *denotes codes unique to or modified for the current study. Italicized portions indicate modifications to codes identified by Vallade et al. (2020).

Similar to results obtained by Vallade et al. (2020), participants most frequently identified instructor messages and behaviors that met their need for relatedness as motivating during this tumultuous time. However, what these relatedness behaviors looked like differed from previous results. The most frequently reported theme in this category was one that emerged in the present study, *instructor presence*, which encompassed student descriptions of the consistency, synchronicity, and modality of instructor communication, as well as instructor messages highlighting their continued availability to students. This theme included instructors' use of video meeting software (i.e., Zoom), announcements posted in the learning management system, and the use of videos and other rich media to relay information to students. For example, participants' responses for this theme ranged from: "The online zoom meetings were very helpful;" "…. has done an excellent job during this time because he is keeping us updated and as if we were still on campus, as well as, he makes himself available to us;" "Yes, his videos on canvas motivated me to stay on top of the work and to reach out;" to "She has continuously sent us announcements of what we need to accomplish and has been checking up on us."

The next most frequent theme involved instructor demonstrations of *caring and understanding*, often recognizing the personal challenges brought on by the pandemic, and letting students know that the instructor cares about them. For example, participants reported responses for this theme that included: "… very positive and supportive which keeps me going;" "He was very helpful for us to keep going. All motivation level was lower than usual, but he was very encouraging and tried to make sure we were all doing okay personally before pushing more work at us;" and "by providing positive messages and understanding that personally this was a difficult transition for me." The third most frequent relatedness theme involved an instructor's positive teaching style, with students describing their instructors' enthusiasm, interesting classes and activities, or otherwise exciting or entertaining teaching style. For this theme, participants noted their instructors: "…had a really positive attitude and that was really nice to have;" and made "class interesting and actually makes me look forward to online classes. This is the only class that I have synchronously and I look forward to [the professor's] class every week because he has a way of making the content he delivers/teaches us interesting and fun."

The second most frequent SDT category to emerge involved competence, generally in the form of *providing help*, a new code that emerged from the current data. Participants described instructors providing help with course content or assignments

or mentioned general assistance. For example, one participant noted their professor "has been extremely positive and helpful." Other participants explained their instructor "… always made sure we knew he was here to help us;" and "… was very helpful and positive with any questions I had." *General encouragement* was also a frequently described element of competence, as instructors provided motivational messages regarding students' abilities and capacity to complete their work, do their best work, or make it through the semester, which helped boost students' confidence in their abilities. For example, participants noted that the instructor would: "often give us words of encouragement and examples of how to be motivated and active during this time;" and "…continued to send us motivating messages..." Student participants also appreciated instructors *reducing their uncertainty*, generally through clear organization and communication, particularly with regard to what was expected each week or what was expected for course assignments. For this theme, one participant explained that instructors gave them "all the information we need to be successful."

It should be noted that participants also relied relatively heavily on extrinsic motivators, particularly reminders, as this helped them stay on track and motivated to finish the semester. Additionally, 56 participants indicated that their instructor did not impact their motivation at all during this time.

RQ2: Student Engagement

All categories and themes, with frequency counts, for RQ2 are displayed in Table 2. Several participant responses required multiple codes.

Table 2

Engagement themes and frequencies

Category/Theme	Frequency
Relatedness	436
Instructor Presence*	228
Promoting Group Work and Collaboration	79
Demonstrating Care *and Understanding**	49
Positive Teaching Style	40
Active Engagement/Asking Questions*	14
Content Relevance	7
Self-Disclosure	6
Encouraging Out-of-Class Communication	6
Using Humor	5
Positive Climate	2
Competence	67
Reducing Uncertainty	24
Providing Help*	23
General Encouragement	13
Oral and Written Feedback	6
Challenging Assignments and Assessments	1
Autonomy	51
Adapting Course Material Around Student Needs	30
Time Management *and Flexibility**	8
Promoting Diverse Assignment Topics	5
Respecting Students	5
Eliciting and Considering Opinions *and Feedback**	3
Extrinsic/Controlled Motivation	97
Reminders	54
External Motivators	43
Amotivation	1
No Impact*	19

Note. *denotes codes unique to or modified for the current study. Italicized portions indicate modifications to codes identified by Vallade et al. (2020).

By a wide margin, relatedness was the most frequently reported category with relation to student engagement. Specifically, participants indicated that they were more engaged in courses where *instructor presence* was prevalent, particularly with the use of synchronous class options, small group, or one-on-one meetings, use of videos for asynchronous messages and lecture material, and frequent and consistent communication from instructors (e.g., LMS announcements). Promoting group work and collaboration was also frequently mentioned, generally through group assignments and discussion boards. For example, participants frequently noted: "My instructor consistently posts video announcements…;" "…posts daily videos, keep us consistently updated, and has discussion boards that keep us engaged in the class;" "…post weekly discussion to help all the folks engaged in the content of the class. It help [sic] me illustrate my ideas about the class;" and even "…would have real time meetings, which I couldn't always do but it was nice that he wanted to have that interaction with us because none of my other professors did that."

Beyond relatedness, students were engaged through *extrinsic motivators*, typically assignments and deadlines, as well as reminders about these deadlines and assignments. For example, one participant stated, "She has made assignments due each week. It has kept me engaged in the course."

Discussion

It is undeniable that the COVID 19 pandemic has had a notable impact on student motivation and engagement in the classroom, a contextual challenge added to the already existing challenges to motivating students in general education courses such as the BCC (Glynn et al., 2005; Jessup-Anger, 2011). In order to extrapolate on these impacts, this study sought to replicate work conducted by Vallade et al. (2020) to examine BCC instructor messages and behaviors perceived as motivating and engaging during a time of turmoil and uncertainty. Based on the data, participants' responses replicate pre-COVID research in the importance of relatedness and connection and offer new insights into how these connections were established (e.g., instructor presence, synchronous meetings) during this unique time in history. Results highlighted the importance of instructor presence and student connection, the need for caring, understanding, and adaptability, and the role of external motivators.

In terms of enhancing motivation and engagement in the current study, BCC students most frequently identified instructor presence and student connection as behaviors that met their needs for relatedness, though their descriptions were both

similar to and different from pre-COVID behaviors (Vallade et al., 2020). Students clearly want to be engaged and to perceive a positive connection with their instructors and peers, and these results add additional support for this across a variety of times and contexts (e.g., Kaufmann & Vallade, in press; Vallade et al., 2020). Unique to the current study, when students perceived the instructor as an integral, social part of the classroom, they perceived the instructor's presence (i.e., "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships," Short et al., 1976, p. 65). Indeed, most, if not all, of the students in this study were enrolled in face-to-face classes with their instructor prior to the online migration caused by the pandemic. Consequently, after moving online, presence appeared to function analogously to immediacy (e.g., Dixson et al., 2017); perhaps instructors who made themselves more salient through frequent and consistent communication with students, even while no longer physically in the same space, facilitated motivation and engagement by coming closer to resembling the traditional face-to-face classroom (Frisby et al., 2013). These results are consistent with student reports that they want the use of provided technology and platforms to serve as opportunities for synchronous interaction and engagement (e.g., see Kaufmann et al., 2016). In the BCC, where conversations about how to effectively engage students in online sections of public speaking courses are carried out regularly (Broeckelman-Post et al., 2019; Westwick et al., 2016), these results have meaningful practical implications regarding instructor training related to technology (e.g., video construction, virtual meeting software), as well as exploring course formatting options (e.g., synchronous/asynchronous, hybrid).

Further, instructor caring and understanding as forms of connection were particularly meaningful to students as they all struggled through personal and academic challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, with instructors checking in on students, expressing solidarity, and being understanding in terms of what students were going through. Students were also kept engaged through continued interaction with their classmates through group work and discussion boards. Although discussion boards may have a negative connotation and are at times incorporated into online classrooms in ways that prompt students to describe them as awkward or cumbersome (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2021), relying on discussion boards seems to be an effective contingency plan when other constraints on communication and interaction are in place. Taken together, students want to communicate and interact with one another to maintain connections, especially when they are not

geographically close or able to be in the same space (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2021). Indeed, being able to see peers and engage in "real-time" increased perceptions of motivation and engagement among students, but it is just as important to consider and recognize that there may be circumstances that hinder or prevent students from turning on their cameras (e.g., home life, privacy, internet bandwidth; Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Moreover, planning to ensure a sense of regularity and modality of communication with instructors, as well as approachability and availability were all deemed important for students.

Although intrinsic motivation is the ideal end goal and SDT provides a framework for helping students reach this objective, the extreme circumstances and uncertainty of a global pandemic, as well as the shift to new and, for many, unfamiliar online formats, unsurprisingly created a situation where intrinsic motivation may have been difficult to maintain. In this situation, external motivators in the form of frequent reminders helped to keep students on track and reduced their uncertainty about what needed to be done. Assignments and deadlines also kept students engaged by ensuring that they did not simply withdraw from the course once it was no longer held in person. In times of ambiguity, external classroom regulations may serve an increasingly important function to ensure students remain motivated and engaged to complete the course and accomplish short-term goals.

Additionally, it is important to note that some students reported that instructors were not able, or perhaps did not do anything, to motivate them, during this time. It was a heavy lift shifting classes online and many instructors were managing personal challenges as well, which may have influenced their ability to develop and sustain a course format that utilized synchronous meeting times or media rich formats. However, a majority of students identified very positive instructor messaging and instructional strategies during this time.

Theoretical Implications

An additional purpose of the current study was to replicate Vallade et al.'s (2020) application of SDT in the BCC to provide further clarification regarding our student population's (e.g., typically first-year students fulfilling general education requirement) motivation and engagement. Ryan et al. (2021) articulated the relevance of autonomy, in particular, within the context of COVID-19, and this extended into the BCC classroom in the form of adapting the course to student needs during the transition online (e.g., utilizing technology effectively, adjusting deadlines and

assignments) and being flexible with regard to students' use of time. However, similar to Vallade et al.'s (2020) findings, although students appreciated flexibility and adaptability, the importance of connection and reminders were clearly more prevalent in their minds. First-year students' needs for relatedness may be higher than in other contexts, as they search for connections that will keep them tethered to a campus community (i.e., retention; McKenna-Buchannan et al., 2020), supporting the importance of examining SDT across different contexts and within the BCC, specifically (see Vallade et al., 2020). Further, although extrinsic motivators are viewed as less desirable for encouraging student progress, they may be especially useful for first-year students who make up the majority of BCC classrooms, particularly in the form of regular reminders, as they may still be learning how to navigate their newfound autonomy and engage in effective time management during the initial transition to college (Cameron & Rideout, 2020).

Practical Implications

These results offer several practical implications for BCC directors and instructors, both as we continue to navigate a global pandemic and beyond. As discussions flourish regarding effective online BCC development and delivery, specifically with regard to the public speaking components (Broeckelman-Post et al., 2019; Westwick et al., 2015; Westwick et al., 2016), we are offered a glimpse into ways in which instructors can maintain presence via mediated channels. BCC directors may think about how to implement or expand technology training for instructors to incorporate more rich and interactive media platforms into their online courses, perhaps offering professional development workshops spotlighting instructional technologies.

Additionally, although online courses have traditionally been conceptualized as asynchronous, exploring a variety (e.g., hybrid, synchronous) of course formats may provide flexibility and autonomy for students without losing many of the desired elements of in-person courses (e.g., geographic flexibility). BCC instructors should also be mindful of the importance and impact that they have in terms of the connections they form with students and how much their messages of care and understanding mean to them (Kaufmann et al., 2021), particularly as first-year students (Vallade et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. Data were collected from one academic unit at one university. Future research should examine how students across multiple institutions perceive instructor messages and behaviors to test if findings are central to this unit or more generalizable across educational spaces. Additionally, the present results offer some perspective regarding the application of SDT within remote classrooms and in conjunction with the use of technology in education (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Future research should continue to incorporate SDT as a theoretical framework for investigating student motivation in mediated and hybrid classrooms, beyond the specific context of COVID-19. For example, in online sections of the BCC that do not have an assigned weekly meeting time, synchronous classes are likely not possible. How might these instructors establish connections through other forms of rich media and technology?

Conclusion

While these results are not groundbreaking, it is noteworthy how straightforward and practical the communication messages and behaviors are for BCC instructors to replicate in their own practice, with a particular emphasis on the connections they form with and among students. BCC instructors must be cognizant of what they say and do in their classroom spaces to bolster students' perceptions of motivation and engagement, albeit during times of normalcy or turbulence.

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