

**EXPLORING INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES THROUGH THE LENS OF
SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY: SUPPORTING STUDENT
MOTIVATION IN ONLINE COLLEGE COURSES**

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Kelsei D. Thomas
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Examining Committee Members:

James Byrnes, Advisory Chair, Psychological Studies in Education
Avi Kaplan, Psychological Studies in Education
Maia Cucchiara, Policy, Organizational and Leadership Studies
Wanda M. Brooks, External Reader, Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how instructors in four online college courses employed instructional strategies to support student motivation and how students enrolled in these courses perceived and responded to those strategies. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017), the study examined how autonomy, competence, and relatedness were supported or thwarted in online higher education learning environments. Using a phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with four instructors and thirteen students at a university in the northeastern United States. Thematic analysis revealed that motivation in online college courses is not a singular or static phenomenon, but a dynamic, reciprocal process shaped by the interaction of instructional strategies, student characteristics, instructor beliefs, and institutional context. While instructor presence, structured autonomy, and competence-supportive feedback were perceived as motivational, the study also uncovered divergences between intended strategies and student experiences. These findings extend SDT by illustrating that effective motivational support is contextual, complex, and shaped by mutual influences between students and instructors. Institutional constraints and differing beliefs about motivation further shaped strategy implementation. This study underscores the importance of reflective teaching practice and flexible course design and calls for future research that centers cultural context, evolving student needs, and the ideological stances of instructors.

Keywords: online college courses, student motivation, Self-Determination Theory, instructional strategies, qualitative research

To my guardian angels, my beloved grandmother Ruthie Thomas, and my cherished mentor Mrs. Cherry Jackson—your love, wisdom, and unwavering belief in me continue to guide my every step, even in your physical absence. This journey, and this work, carry your imprint.

To those who dare to dream and lift others as they rise—may this research remind us that barriers are not endpoints, but invitations to forge new paths, ensuring that motivation is nurtured, and education remain accessible to all.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Student motivation is widely recognized as a critical predictor of academic achievement, engagement, and success in higher education (Black & Deci, 2000; Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016; Steinmayr, Weidinger, Schwinger, & Spinath, 2019). Higher levels of motivation contribute to improved academic performance (Steinmayr & Spinath, 2009) and greater persistence in overcoming obstacles (Allen, 1999; Liao, Hung, Wu, & Hsu, 2014). While motivation has been well-studied in traditional learning environments, online education presents unique challenges that may impact students' motivation (Hartnett, 2016; Richardson, Swan, & Ice, 2015). Online learning requires students to be more self-directed, manage their own time, and engage in coursework with limited direct interaction, making instructional strategies that foster motivation even more critical (Kizilcec & Halawa, 2015).

As online learning continues to expand, understanding how instructors support student motivation has become increasingly important. The online education industry has grown by 900% since 2000, and 61% of undergraduate students in the U.S. were enrolled in at least one online course as of Fall 2021 (Devlin Peck, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). While students cite flexibility as a primary benefit of online education, instructors often struggle to maintain student motivation in these environments (Bay Atlantic University, 2024). Unlike traditional classrooms, online courses may create greater autonomy but also increased feelings of isolation and

disengagement, requiring instructors to adopt intentional, theoretically grounded strategies to support motivation (Walker, 2003).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017) provides a useful framework for understanding how instructional strategies can enhance student motivation. SDT emphasizes three key psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—which, when fulfilled, lead to higher levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement. While research has explored the relationship between SDT and online learning outcomes, limited qualitative research has examined how instructors deliberately apply SDT-based strategies to foster student motivation in online college courses (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Hartnett, 2016; Jacobi, 2018). Jacobi (2018) emphasized that further exploration of instructional strategies that promote autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness could ultimately benefit both students and instructors across disciplines.

Instructors play a pivotal role in shaping student motivation in online courses, but there is little research on how they design and implement motivational strategies in practice. The Distance Education Learning Environments Survey (DELES) highlights the importance of instructor presence, engagement, and pedagogical strategies in fostering student motivation (Walker, 2003). However, much of the existing research focuses on student outcomes rather than the instructional decisions instructors make to support motivation. As VanHorn, Pearson, and Child (2008) found in a study of 240 online instructors, maintaining motivation was one of their most significant challenges. Similarly, Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, and Thompson (2012) noted that without an

instructor actively guiding the learning process, students must regulate their own motivation, often leading to disengagement. Given the continued expansion of online education, it is imperative to explore how instructors perceive and apply instructional strategies to foster motivation in online college courses.

There is a gap in the literature regarding how online instructors apply strategies to support student motivation in practice. Specifically, there is a need to examine which instructional strategies instructors use to foster motivation in online college courses and how students perceive the effectiveness of these strategies (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). A qualitative approach is essential for capturing the lived experiences of instructors and their students, offering deeper insight into how motivation is supported in real-world online learning environments.

Therefore, this study examined instructional strategies employed to motivate students within online college courses, with a specific focus on gaining insights into these strategies and their impact on student motivation. Additionally, the study explored instructors' and the perspectives of their respective students on the effectiveness of these strategies in supporting motivation. Furthermore, this research assessed the applicability of SDT as a pedagogical framework in online higher education.

To address these objectives, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do instructors in online college courses describe their lived experiences with motivating students, including the instructional strategies they use, the outcomes they perceive, and the challenges and successes they encounter?
- RQ2: How do students in online college courses describe their motivational experiences, and how do they perceive the instructional strategies used by their instructors in relation to their motivation?
- RQ3: What similarities, differences, and insights emerge from comparing instructor and student perspectives on motivation-supportive instructional strategies in online college courses, and how do these perspectives align with the principles of Self-Determination Theory?

Guiding Frameworks for the Study

This study was guided by two complementary frameworks that shaped its design and interpretation. Phenomenology informed the methodological approach, allowing for an in-depth exploration of lived experiences, while Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017) provided the theoretical lens for interpreting how motivation was supported or hindered through instructional strategies in online college courses.

Phenomenology as a Methodological Approach

Phenomenology provided the methodological foundation for this study, enabling a rich understanding of the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses. Rooted in the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl and further developed by Martin Heidegger, phenomenology explores how individuals make sense of and give

meaning to their experiences (Giorgi, 2012). This approach aligned with the qualitative nature of this study and supported deep exploration into how instructional strategies were experienced and perceived in relation to motivation.

Heidegger's concept of "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1927) was particularly useful for this research as it emphasizes the importance of understanding individuals' experiences within their unique contexts. This was especially relevant in examining how instructors and students navigated motivation within the broader realities of online education. Centering participant perspectives, phenomenology allowed the study to surface the complex, dynamic interactions between instructional strategies, course structures, and student motivation.

Self-Determination Theory as the Theoretical Framework

Complementing the phenomenology approach, SDT offered a well-established psychological framework for interpreting the data. SDT focuses on the social and environmental conditions that either support or hinder human flourishing, emphasizing the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). When these needs are met, students are more likely to experience autonomous regulation, sustained motivation, and engagement in learning.

SDT provided an analytical structure for examining how the instructional strategies described by participants either supported or thwarted these needs. It helped illuminate how students' perceptions of instructional feedback, flexibility, course

structure, and interpersonal connections shaped their motivation in online learning environments. A more detailed overview of SDT is provided in Chapter 2.

Integrating Methodology and Theory

By combining a phenomenological methodology with SDT as a theoretical framework, this study was able to explore both the essence of participants' experiences and the motivational processes underlying those experiences. Phenomenology grounded the study in the lived realities of instructors and students, while SDT provided a focused lens to interpret how specific strategies aligned with psychological need satisfaction. This integration allowed for a comprehensive examination not only of what strategies were used and how they were experienced, but also why they were effective—or not—based on how they supported or hindered motivation.

Definition of Key Terms

This dissertation uses key terms central to exploring the experiences of instructors and students in online college courses and examining instructional strategies employed by instructors to promote student motivation within the online college course environment. The key terms include “online college courses,” “instructional strategies,” and “motivation,” as defined below.

Online College Courses

This study explored the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses. The term "online college course" refers to a higher education course that is conducted primarily over the internet rather than in a traditional face-to-face classroom setting. Online college courses can vary significantly in structure, incorporating different

modes of instruction to accommodate diverse learning needs and institutional requirements.

Some online college courses are asynchronous, meaning students can access course materials—including lectures, assignments, and discussions—at any time that is convenient for them within a specified timeframe. Other courses are synchronous, requiring real-time interaction between students and instructors through video conferencing or chat platforms at scheduled times. In synchronous courses, students are expected to attend virtual class sessions similar to traditional in-person instruction.

Additionally, some online courses blend both synchronous and asynchronous elements within their design. For example, a course may have weekly synchronous meetings where students interact with their instructor and peers in real time, while also requiring asynchronous activities such as discussion board participation, readings, or assignments to be completed outside of live sessions. In other cases, a course may alternate between synchronous and asynchronous instruction on a weekly basis, with some weeks requiring live participation and others allowing students to engage with course content independently.

To examine the instructional strategies used to motivate students in online learning environments, this study analyzed the lived experiences of instructors and students who participated in courses delivered in synchronous, asynchronous, or mixed formats.

Instructional Strategies

This study focused on instructional strategies employed by instructors to support student motivation in online college courses. The term "instructional strategies" refers to the instructional materials, methods, and procedures used by educators to facilitate student learning and help students achieve course objectives (Hill & Jordan, 2021). Instructional strategies can vary based on course design, instructor preferences, and student needs.

Examples of instructional strategies used in online learning environments include self-introduction videos, recorded lectures, discussion boards, small group work, collaborative projects, and interactive learning activities. The study explored how instructors intentionally implemented these strategies to foster student motivation in online college courses.

Motivation

The term "motivation" is defined as "to be moved to do something" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 54). This study examined how instructional strategies were perceived to influence students' motivation in online college courses.

Motivation was analyzed through the lens of SDT, a psychological framework that explains human motivation and behavior in relation to three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to an individual's sense of choice and control over their learning. Competence relates to an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in learning tasks. Relatedness reflects a

sense of connection and belonging with others in the learning environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017).

SDT posits that students are more likely to be motivated and engaged in activities that align with their personal values, provide a sense of mastery, and foster positive relationships with peers and instructors. This study explored how instructional strategies aligned with these three psychological needs and influenced students' motivation in online college courses. A more detailed discussion of SDT, its theoretical foundations, and its application in educational contexts will be provided in Chapter 2.

Organization of the Dissertation

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the study's purpose and overarching goals. Chapter 2 presents the rationale for the study, including a review of the literature on motivation in online college courses and a discussion of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) as a theoretical framework. The literature review situates the study within the existing body of research and highlights the gap that this study addresses.

Chapter 3 details the methodological approach used in this study, including the rationale for a qualitative design, participant selection criteria, data collection procedures, data analysis methods, and a discussion of the study's limitations.

Chapter 4 presents the study's findings, including themes that emerged from the data, supported by participant perspectives and relevant interpretations. The results are analyzed in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the study's findings, their implications for research and practice, and recommendations for future studies. Additionally, this chapter

addresses the study's limitations and offers insights into how instructional strategies can be refined to better support student motivation in online college courses.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Online college courses have grown in popularity over the past decade due to their flexibility and convenience, enabling students to learn from any location and mostly at any time. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, with educational institutions making online courses mandatory to ensure the safety of their students and employees. However, despite their benefits, persistence rates of online courses are significantly lower compared to those offered in-person (Xavier & Meneses, 2020; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Delnoij, Dirkx, Janssen, & Martens, 2020). Recent studies highlight key factors influencing persistence, including student satisfaction, anxiety, and engagement levels (Lakhal, Khechine, & Mukamurera, 2021).

Online learners often struggle to complete their courses, with attrition being the leading problem encountered in many colleges (Bowden, 2008, as cited in Shaikh & Asif, 2022). This challenge is especially daunting for online education administrators and instructors (Clay, Rowland, & Packard, 2008; Chiyaka, Sithole, Manyanga, McCarthy, & Bucklein, 2016; Hobson & Puruhito, 2018; Johnson, Bates, Donovan, & Seaman, 2019; Li & Wong, 2019).

For example, Online Universities offer open-access education to anyone, regardless of educational background or credentials. However, just 15% of their students graduate with degrees or other credentials, demonstrating a low perseverance rate among those enrolled in online courses (Mishra, 2017). According to data from the Educational Data Initiative, a staggering 36,400,771 college dropouts reside in the U.S., excluding

residents of territories, multiple states, and students attending college online (Hanson, 2022). A recent systematic review further emphasizes the growing concern of dropout rates in online higher education, identifying various determinants that contribute to student attrition, including lack of social interaction, feelings of isolation, low self-regulation, technical difficulties, and insufficient instructor support (Rahmani, Groot, & Rahmani, 2024).

The high dropout rate among online students can often be attributed to low motivation levels, leading to reduced learning and increased likelihood of dropping out (Friðriksdóttir, 2018; Poellhuber, Chomienne, & Karsenti, 2008, as cited in Shaikh & Asif, 2022). The consequences of online dropout experience include frustration and shattered confidence, preventing future enrollments (Willging & Johnson, 2009; Gomez, 2013), as well as institutional inadequacy, questionable quality, and profit loss. Therefore, addressing this issue is critical for enhancing the overall quality of online education.

The Role of Motivation in Online College Courses

Several definitions of motivation include the following: (a) “To be motivated means to be moved to do something” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.54) and (b) motivation is a construct that is used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence on an individual’s behavior in a particular situation (Wigfield, Eccles, Fredricks, Simpkins, Roeser, & Schiefele, 2015). Instructors aim to inspire students’ intrinsic motivation so that they are moved to take an active role in their education, maintain their attention, and

attain mastery of the course content. Stimulating students' drive and determination are vital to successful teaching and learning.

Motivation drives students' engagement, effort, and academic performance in online college courses. Without sufficient motivation, students may struggle to stay focused and on track, leading to lower grades, reduced learning, and an increased likelihood of dropping out (Dabbagh & Kitsana, 2012; Deci & Ryan, 1980; Online Learning Consortium, 2003). In online learning environments, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play significant roles. While intrinsic motivation—such as curiosity, personal interest, and the desire for mastery—is ideal for sustained learning, extrinsic motivators, such as grades, rewards, and recognition, can also drive engagement and persistence.

Research suggests that students who receive consistent external reinforcement, such as timely instructor feedback or gamified learning experiences, exhibit higher motivation and course completion rates (Rahmani et al., 2024).

Additionally, self-regulation and autonomy are crucial for online learners, as these students must manage their own learning pace without constant face-to-face guidance. Research has consistently shown that self-regulation skills are critical for student success in online learning environments. Students who effectively set goals, manage their time, and maintain discipline are more likely to complete their online courses successfully. For example, a study by Cho and Shen (2013) found that learners with high levels of self-regulation are more independent in managing their learning, increasing their likelihood of success in online courses. Similarly, Lee and Choi (2011) identified that a lack of self-regulatory skills is a significant factor contributing to higher dropout rates in online

courses. These findings underscore the importance of self-regulation in enhancing student retention and success in online education.

Challenges in Online College Courses

Maintaining student motivation is a universal obstacle that instructors daily and affects students at all levels, subjects, educational institutions, and courses. In 1989, John Keller stated that motivation is generally perceived as being highly unpredictable, changeable, and susceptible to a multitude of factors beyond the instructor's control. The difficulty to motivate students is particularly pronounced in online courses, which require a higher degree of self-motivation, discipline, and time management skills.

Motivation is a primary source of both overachievement (students who achieve above and beyond the standard or expected level) and underachievement (students who achieve less and below the standard or expected level) (Dabbagh & Kitsana, 2012; NSSE, 2000; Online Learning Consortium, 2003). The issue of failure and dropout in online college courses is still relevant to many higher education institutions and educational researchers. Research has identified several key factors contributing to student attrition in online courses, such as the absence of face-to-face interaction can lead to reduced motivation and engagement, as students may feel disconnected from their instructors and peers (Purdue Global, 2023). According to Kori, Ye, and Smith (2016), low motivation to study is one reason students drop out. The lack of motivation can cause a strong discrepancy between potential and actual success in learning, explaining why highly qualified students may perform poorly. In contrast, students with average potential can be among the best (Figas, Palas, & Herodotou, 2013).

Furthermore, online learners often struggle with technical barriers, such as unreliable internet access or inadequate technology, which can disrupt their learning experience and contribute to dropout rates (Hurix, 2023). Health concerns are another challenge, as prolonged screen time and sedentary behavior can lead to fatigue and decreased motivation (Amber Student, 2023). Additionally, time management difficulties make it challenging for students to balance coursework with personal and professional responsibilities, often resulting in decreased engagement and academic struggles (Wilson, Joiner, & Abbasi, 2021; Yabut, 2023).

Considering the significance of motivation in student success, the role of the instructors continues to play a critical role in creating structured, engaging, and supportive online college courses.

The Role of Instructors in Online College Courses

In online college courses, instructors are vital in creating a supportive and engaging learning environment that motivates students to participate and learn. Instructors aim to inspire their students to develop a genuine interest in the subject matter and actively participate in their lessons. Instructors are advised to use various strategies to motivate their students effectively, such as establishing clear expectations, providing timely feedback, fostering a sense of community, and utilizing interactive and engaging teaching methods. According to Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, and Thompson (2012), online learning requires students to regulate their own work and take more responsibility for the learning process, as there is no instructor present to provide structure and guidance (p. 314). However, in an online learning setting where students have more

autonomy, it can be challenging for instructors to motivate them effectively. This challenge raises the question of how instructors can foster motivation in this environment, given that motivating students is a key principle of effective instruction (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Volery and Lord (2010) identified three essential components of effective online education: instructor support, technology, and previous experience using technology. Among these components, the instructor stands as an essential element in online education, serving as both a learning facilitator and a motivator.

While the instructor's role in motivating students in online college courses is important, it is essential to note that a complex interplay of individual factors, such as self-efficacy, interest, and personal values, ultimately determines student motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1970; Dweck, 2006; Keller, 1980). Therefore, while instructors can use effective strategies to encourage motivation and engagement, they may not be able to guarantee that all students will be motivated throughout the course.

The Role of Student Motivation in Online College Courses

Student motivation is essential in online learning environments because it can significantly impact students' learning outcomes and success. When students are motivated in their online learning, they are more likely to succeed in the course. Research has shown that motivated students are likelier to participate in discussions, complete assignments on time, and achieve higher grades. For example, Wang and Chen (2020) examined the influence of motivation on academic achievement in online learning environments. The researchers used a mixed-method approach to examine the

relationship between motivation and academic achievement among undergraduate students enrolled in online courses. The study involved 305 participants enrolled in an online course at a university in China. They found that students who were more motivated had higher academic achievement than those who were less motivated, and that intrinsic motivation was a more significant predictor of academic achievement than extrinsic motivation. In online courses, students generally have more control over their learning environment and schedule, which could provide opportunities for increased autonomy and motivation (Brophy, 2010). Moreover, motivated students are more likely to continue their online education and complete their degree programs (Clark & Mayer, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Xie, DeBacker, & Ferguson, 2006).

This study examined instructional strategies used to enhance student motivation in online college courses from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT has a long history of exploring motivation, and its application has been linked to improving academic performance and reducing the high dropout rates commonly seen in online courses. SDT for learning in the online context is important to consider in the context of online instruction. Without regular synchronous meetings, online courses may require that students have advanced time management skills and self-discipline compared to face-to-face courses (Ko & Rossen, 2010). The subsequent section presents a comprehensive review of SDT.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017) is a comprehensive macro-theory that aims to explain the underlying drivers of human behavior and choices.

Developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in the 1980s, SDT proposes that people have innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness that drive intrinsic motivation. The theory distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation, where intrinsic motivation is driven by internal factors such as interest and satisfaction. In contrast, extrinsic motivation is driven by external factors such as rewards and punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

According to SDT, individuals are more motivated and engaged when their psychological needs are met, and they have some degree of control over their environment. A lack of need satisfaction or perceived control can lead to demotivation, disengagement, and negative emotions. SDT offers a meta-theory for framing motivational studies, a formal theory that defines intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation, and a description of how intrinsic and extrinsic motivation shape cognitive and social development and individual differences. The theory also emphasizes the role of social and cultural factors in facilitating or undermining people's sense of initiative, volition, well-being, and quality of performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

SDT has been applied to various fields, such as education, healthcare, sports, and work settings, to understand how people can be better motivated and how environments can be structured to support more autonomous and satisfying behavior. SDT has been studied in various settings, such as families, classrooms, teams, organizations, clinics, and cultures, providing implications for enhancing need satisfaction and overall functioning (Fowler, 2018; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ratelle & Duchesne, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2013, 2017). Numerous research studies have demonstrated that individuals who

are motivated autonomously, whether it be through intrinsic motivation or well-internalized forms of extrinsic motivation, exhibit greater interest, enthusiasm, energy, and self-assurance, which leads to improved performance, ingenuity, perseverance, and general wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

To illustrate SDT, consider a college student who fails an important test. A self-determined student takes responsibility for their actions and believes they are in control of their behavior. They are self-motivated by their internal desire to be competent and knowledgeable. In response to failing the test, a self-determined student might take action by requesting a makeup opportunity, spending more time studying, and informing the professor of their plan to improve their performance. In contrast, a student who is low in self-determination might blame external factors, such as the professor, classmates, or friends, for their poor performance, feeling like a victim of their circumstances.

Deci and Ryan (2002) conceptualized SDT as a meta-theory that encompasses six interconnected sub-theories. These sub-theories are cognitive evaluation theory, causality orientations theory, goal contents theory, relationships motivation theory, organismic integration theory, and basic psychological needs theory. Each sub-theory provides a different lens through which to understand the complexity of human motivation, behavior, and development. In the following section, I will provide a brief overview of five of the sub-theories. However, I will focus more extensively on the basic psychological needs theory, which has gained significant support in the literature as an effective approach to motivating students through instructional strategies that foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When exploring the motivational strategies

reported by instructors and students in online college courses, these strategies are expected to be prominent, reflecting their importance in enhancing motivation.

Self-Determination Theory's Six Mini Theories

SDT consists of six sub-theories, each developed to explain specific motivation-related phenomena observed in laboratory and field research (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Each sub-theory addresses a unique aspect of motivation or personality functioning.

Causality Orientations Theory (COT). COT aims to understand how individuals differ in their tendencies to engage with their environments and regulate their behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2017). COT defines and evaluates three distinct causality orientations: autonomy, control, and impersonal (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The autonomy orientation refers to individuals who are intrinsically motivated and value the task at hand. In contrast, individuals with a control orientation are motivated by rewards, gains, and approval from others. Those with an impersonal or amotivated orientation experience anxiety about their competence and may lack motivation to engage with the task. By identifying these orientations, COT provides insights into individual differences in motivation and behavior regulation.

It is important to recognize that causality orientation is not a static personality trait and is not mutually exclusive. It is common for individuals to possess multiple causality orientations in varying degrees (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). Also, causality orientation is susceptible to changes in response to environmental factors, indicating it is context-specific and can be modified (Vansteenkiste et al., 2010).

Research has found that individuals with an autonomy orientation tend to achieve more positive outcomes (Gagne, 2003). This suggests that promoting autonomy orientation can have a positive impact in various environments, including classrooms (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989) and workplaces (Deci, Ryan, Gagne, Leone, Usunov, & Kornazheva, 2001). Conversely, individuals with a control orientation tend to achieve lower outcomes and exhibit higher levels of negative emotions like stress and defensiveness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Reeve, 2012).

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET). CET explains how people's intrinsic motivation can be influenced by the social context in which they operate. Intrinsic motivation, which refers to the motivation to engage in an activity for its own enjoyment and satisfaction, has been found to have a positive impact on performance, creativity, and satisfaction (Amabile, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). On the other hand, individuals who feel that external rewards or punishments control their behaviors are likely to experience decreased intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Decades of research have shown that intrinsic motivation, or the motivation to engage in an activity for its inherent enjoyment and satisfaction, can be a powerful force throughout life (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

One of the key insights of CET is that motivation can exist along a continuum, from amotivation to extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation. CET underscores the unique value of intrinsic motivation and how it can drive long-term engagement and high-quality performance. However, CET also recognizes that social contexts can have complex and multifaceted effects on motivation. Rewards, for instance, can sometimes enhance motivation for tasks that are perceived as uninteresting, but can undermine

intrinsic motivation for tasks that are already enjoyable (Deci, Ryan, Gagne, Leone, & Usunov, 1999). Likewise, social pressure or criticism can diminish feelings of autonomy and competence, leading to a decrease in intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Organismic Integration Theory (OIT). OIT extends CET explaining how external factors can become integrated into a person's sense of self and values. OIT is a framework developed within the context of SDT to categorize different forms of extrinsic motivation. According to Ryan and Deci (2000b), extrinsic motivation is the urge to engage in an activity to achieve a particular outcome. However, research indicates that extrinsic motivation is generally less effective than intrinsic motivation, as those driven by external factors tend to display lower levels of engagement, effort, persistence, and time spent on tasks compared to intrinsically motivated individuals (Froiland & Oros, 2014; Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2013; Meece, Blumfield, & Hoyle, 1988; Ryan & Connell, 1989; Ryan, Kuhl, & Deci, 1997).

OIT provides a framework for categorizing different forms of extrinsic motivation based on the perceived locus of causality. It proposes that motivation exists on a scale that includes amotivation (no motivation), extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation. SDT categorizes extrinsic motivation into four distinct types that differ in their level of autonomy and have different implications for classroom practices and learning outcomes.

The first type of extrinsic motivation is *external regulation*, which is the least autonomous. This occurs when students engage in behavior solely to obtain a reward or avoid punishment. For example, a student may study for an exam to get a good grade; once the exam is over, they may not continue learning about the topic. The second type is

introjected regulation, which occurs when students engage in a behavior to satisfy internal contingencies, such as avoiding feelings of guilt or shame. For example, students may study to avoid feeling guilty for not studying enough. The third type is *identified regulation*, where students engage in a behavior because they consider it valuable or important. For example, a student may study anatomy and physiology because they believe that mastery of this information is essential for their future competence in medicine. The fourth and most autonomous type of extrinsic motivation is *integrated regulation*, where students have synthesized their identified regulations with their values and interests. For example, students may study medicine because they value helping others and believe that becoming a doctor aligns with their interests and values.

Educators need to encourage autonomous forms of motivation, such as identified and integrated regulation, as these types of motivation are more likely to result in deep conceptual learning and long-term engagement with the material. On the other hand, more controlling forms of motivation, such as external regulation and introjected regulation, may lead to rote memorization and disengagement from the material once the controlling factors are removed.

The subcategories of extrinsic motivation differ in various characteristics, but the primary determinant is the perceived locus of causality. External regulation, the least integrated form of extrinsic motivation, involves external factors driving behavior, while integrated regulation, the most integrated form, involves internalized factors driving behavior. As individuals internalize the motivational factors driving specific behaviors,

they become more engaged, and their behavior begins to resemble that of intrinsically motivated individuals more closely.

Numerous studies have confirmed that extrinsic motivation featuring more internalized loci of causality produces higher quality outcomes than those featuring more externalized loci of causality. For instance, studies have found that students who identify with the values of the task or feel a sense of personal importance about it display higher levels of engagement, effort, and persistence than those who do not (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002; Hulleman, Durik, Schweigert, & Harackiewicz, 2008; Miserandino, 1996; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992; Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2016).

Despite its limitations, extrinsic motivation is more prevalent in common social environments such as classrooms and workplaces, where external agents such as employers and teachers can foster it. Therefore, understanding different forms of extrinsic motivation and identifying ways to optimally utilize it has become a topic of great interest.

Goal Contents Theory (GCT). Whereas cognitive evaluation theory and organismic integration theory are concerned with the orientation of motivation, goal contents theory is focused on the orientation of the objects of goals. GCT proposes that individuals' pursuit of goals can have a significant impact on their overall well-being and sense of self-determination. The theory posits two types of goals: intrinsic and extrinsic. Pursuing intrinsic goals, such as personal growth and relationships, is considered more conducive to well-being than pursuing extrinsic goals, such as money and fame. This is

because intrinsic goals are believed to satisfy basic psychological needs, which are essential for positive mental health (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001).

Research has consistently shown that the pursuit of extrinsic goals is associated with lower levels of psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness, as well as higher levels of anxiety and depression (e.g., Vansteenkiste, Sheldon, & Deci, 2003). Conversely, pursuing intrinsic goals has been linked to higher levels of psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness, as well as lower levels of anxiety and depression (e.g., Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). Therefore, the type of goals pursued is a crucial factor in determining an individual's overall well-being and mental health.

Relationships Motivation Theory (RMT). RMT highlights the importance of social relationships and relatedness in shaping human behavior and well-being. According to this theory, individuals have an innate desire for positive relationships and a need to connect with others. Satisfying this need for relatedness is associated with numerous positive outcomes, such as increased happiness, better mental health, and enhanced overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research has consistently shown that social support and positive relationships are important factors for maintaining good physical and mental health (Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Conversely, social isolation and loneliness have been linked to negative outcomes, including increased risk of chronic diseases and mortality (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Luo, Hawkley, Waite, & Cacioppo, 2012). Therefore, understanding and

managing social relationships is crucial for promoting and maintaining overall well-being.

Basic Psychological Needs Theory. In their work, Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017) contend that to nurture self-determined learners, it is crucial to address three basic human needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are essential for optimal functioning, motivation, and well-being. However, the degree of satisfaction of each need may vary depending on the context, so tailored support is crucial to ensure individuals reach their full potential. Although autonomy and competence are crucial, relatedness is equally important for promoting motivation and well-being. The three needs are interdependent and lacking in one can undermine the satisfaction of the others. For instance, a learner who feels autonomous and competent but lacks a sense of belonging may not experience the same level of motivation and well-being as someone who has all three needs fulfilled.

In essence, to facilitate the development of self-determined learners, Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017) emphasize the importance of supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs, which are interconnected and context dependent. Satisfaction of these needs is crucial for promoting motivation, well-being, and optimal functioning.

The three fundamental needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

Autonomy. SDT defines autonomy as an individual's sense of control over their actions and decisions and their perceived locus of causality for those actions. SDT proposes that individuals are motivated to seek autonomy, and when they experience

autonomy, they feel a sense of volition, willingness, and authenticity. Conversely, when autonomy is restricted or taken away, individuals may feel pressured, conflicted, and disengaged.

SDT distinguishes between two types of perceived locus of causality: internal and external. Internal perceived locus of causality refers to factors such as personal enjoyment or the desire to succeed, which are inherent to the individual and represent an internal sense of control. External perceived locus of causality refers to external factors such as social pressure or coercion, which represent an external sense of control. SDT suggests that autonomy is promoted when individuals can align with their internal perceived locus of causality and when the external perceived locus of causality is minimized or eliminated. Research has shown that extrinsic rewards for intrinsically motivated behavior can undermine intrinsic motivation by shifting the perceived locus of causality from internal to external, creating a sense of coercion or manipulation (Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999).

In contrast, studies have found that increased autonomy can increase intrinsic motivation for a given task (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Zuckerman, Kolin, Price, & Zoob, 1978).

Deci and Ryan (2000) refer to an individual's sense of control over their actions and decisions, leading to a feeling of volition and willingness. When individuals feel in control of their actions and decisions, they experience a sense of autonomy, which can lead to feelings of authenticity and alignment with their true selves. This sense of

congruence between thoughts, feelings, and actions contributes to a sense of integrity and well-being. On the other hand, when people's autonomy is restricted or taken away, they may experience a sense of conflict, pressure, or even a loss of self. This can result in feelings of frustration, resentment, and disengagement from the task or activity at hand.

The literature strongly supports the role of autonomy in motivating students, and various instructional strategies have been found effective in promoting autonomy. For example, providing flexible learning options that allow students to choose the pace and mode of learning can enhance their sense of control and self-direction (Williams, 2005). Instructors promote a sense of ownership and engagement in the learning process by providing a meaningful rationale for tasks (Deci, Eghari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Song & Hill, 2009; Xie, DeBacker, & Ferguson, 2006). In addition, using instructional language that conveys student choice is also effective (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1994; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Xie & Ke, 2011; Xie, 2013). Using validating language to acknowledge and support negative emotions that students may experience when engaging in challenging or tedious activities can also help promote their autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Chen & Jang, 2010; Deci et al., 1994; Shroff, Vogel, & Coombes, 2008).

For instance, Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1994) conducted an experiment aimed at examining the role of autonomy in motivating students. The study involved 96 college students randomly assigned to two groups, the autonomy-supportive or controlled condition. The college students were asked to solve a series of puzzles. The first group was instructed to complete the puzzles in a specific way that was predetermined by the researchers, while the second group was given the freedom to complete the puzzles in

any way they chose. The researchers then measured the amount of time each group spent on the puzzles and their level of interest and enjoyment in the task. The study results revealed that the group with autonomy spent more time on the puzzles and reported higher levels of interest and enjoyment in the task than the group without autonomy. These findings suggest that autonomy can be an important factor in motivating students, as it allows them to take ownership of their learning and approach tasks meaningfully and relevantly.

Given the increased use of online education in recent years, there has been a growing interest in understanding how autonomy impacts student motivation and engagement in virtual learning environments. Several studies have found that autonomy-supportive approaches in online education, such as providing choices in assignments, allowing flexibility in pacing, and encouraging self-regulated learning, can enhance student motivation and engagement. For example, a study by Wang and Newlin (2002) found that online students who were given choices in their assignments reported higher levels of intrinsic motivation and satisfaction with the course. Another study by Joo, Lim, and Kim (2011) found that online students who were given autonomy in their learning process, such as through self-regulated learning and online collaboration, reported higher levels of engagement and academic achievement. Instructors should consider incorporating autonomy-supportive practices to enhance student motivation and engagement in virtual learning environments. Research suggests that autonomy is important in motivating students in online courses. By providing opportunities for autonomy in the classroom, teachers can help students develop a sense of control and

ownership over their learning, leading to greater interest, enjoyment, and, ultimately, better learning outcomes.

It is important to note that autonomy in SDT specifically refers to an individual's ability to direct their own time and attention within a particular task, as opposed to individualism or independence (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This idea is supported by intercultural studies that show increased autonomy is associated with increased intrinsic motivation, regardless of culture (Kim, Butzel, & Ryan, 1998).

Autonomy is essential to a student's sense of competence in academic settings. Allowing students to experience autonomy can help promote their motivation, engagement, and well-being.

Competence. SDT describes competence as understanding the expectations and skills required to succeed in a particular task or domain. To enhance students' perceived competence, instructors can use a range of instructional strategies, such as providing a balance between requirements and freedom in online discussions, establishing clear class routines, and providing effective feedback. These strategies can help students feel more confident and capable of learning and enhance their motivation to engage with course materials and activities.

Xie (2013) conducted a study to examine the relationships between motivation, peer feedback, and students' posting and non-posting behaviors in online discussions. The study explored how different types of feedback and instructional strategies can impact students' motivation and engagement in online discussions. The study included 57

students who were enrolled in an online course. Over the course of the semester, Xie tracked the posting and non-posting behaviors of the students in online discussions and measured their motivation levels using the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory. Xie found that when instructors provided a balance between discussion requirements and freedom in online discussions, students were more motivated to engage. They wrote more messages and rated more. Xie also found that when students received more responses from their peers, they were more motivated to participate in online discussions and write longer messages.

The study suggests that creating opportunities for students to participate in online discussions in a way that enhances their sense of autonomy and competence can increase their motivation and engagement in online courses. Researchers in education and psychology have recommended that instructors can foster these conditions by providing clear expectations and guidelines for online discussions while allowing students to have some degree of autonomy and control over their participation. Additionally, instructors can encourage students to provide feedback to one another, enhancing students' sense of competence and motivation to engage in online discussions.

In the context of academic settings, both competence and relatedness are essential for student's motivation and engagement. For example, students who feel competent in their academic work are more likely to be motivated to learn and persist in facing challenges. In contrast, students who feel connected to others in their academic community are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and to be motivated to participate in academic activities.

Relatedness. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), relatedness is essential for promoting human growth and well-being and is closely linked to other psychological needs, such as autonomy and competence. Individuals who feel a sense of relatedness are more likely to experience positive emotions, have a stronger sense of identity and engage in prosocial behavior. Moreover, Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that relatedness can be satisfied through various means, including social support, positive relationships with family and friends, and a sense of belonging in a larger community or social group. When relatedness needs are met, individuals tend to experience greater satisfaction, motivation, and well-being in all areas of their lives.

Research has investigated the role of relatedness in motivating students in online courses, drawing on SDT's emphasis on the importance of relatedness for motivation and well-being. For instance, Rovai and Jordan (2004) conducted a study on the impact of a sense of community on online learning. They discovered that students who perceived a stronger sense of community in their online courses reported higher levels of satisfaction, motivation, and course persistence than those who perceived a weaker sense of community. Similarly, Richardson and Swan (2003) found that students who experienced greater social presence in their online course – that is, a sense of being part of a group – reported greater satisfaction, motivation, and perceived learning.

Other research has found that promoting relatedness in online courses can be challenging but can be achieved through various strategies. These strategies include fostering student interaction and collaboration, providing opportunities for social support and feedback, and using online communication tools to enhance social presence

(Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Lowenthal, Dunlap, & Snelson, 2017). These studies suggest that relatedness is essential in motivating and engaging students in online courses and that instructors and course designers can promote relatedness through various instructional strategies and communication tools.

Application of Self-Determination Theory in Traditional (Face-to-Face) Classrooms

SDT has garnered substantial attention in research studies investigating its application within traditional face-to-face classrooms. These studies collectively provide a rich understanding of how SDT's principles intersect with student motivation and engagement in educational settings.

Trenshaw, Revelo, Earl, and Herman (2016) conducted a comprehensive exploration of SDT's impact in a second-year engineering course (Computer Engineering I) that was redesigned to promote students' intrinsic motivation to learn. By interviewing 17 students, the researchers discovered that, contrary to expectations based on the literature for K-12 students, relatedness emerged as the dominant psychological need underpinning motivation, overshadowing the roles of autonomy and competence. Students' statements were coded least frequently as pertaining to autonomy out of the three psychological needs of SDT, even though the course designer's primary goal was to support students' autonomy. This intriguing finding underscores the complexity of motivational dynamics in higher education scenarios.

In a parallel vein, Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2010) studied the impact of teachers' autonomy support and structural elements on students' intrinsic motivation and academic achievement was investigated within a high school classroom. The research involved

participants from grades 9 to 11 in various public high school classrooms located in the Midwest region. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study employed trained observers to assess teachers' instructional styles, while students themselves reported their levels of engagement. The findings highlighted a significant positive correlation between autonomy support and instructional structure. Notably, both aspects emerged as predictors of students' behavioral engagement, with autonomy support also being the sole predictor of self-reported engagement. This study offers insights into the interconnected roles of autonomy support and structure in cultivating student engagement, enriched by the inclusion of multiple engagement measurement methods.

Furthermore, the research efforts of Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, and Barch (2004) investigated the effects of teachers' autonomy support on intrinsic motivation and engagement in a high school mathematics context. Their investigation illuminated the positive sway of autonomy support on students' perceived autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and active participation in the learning journey.

Collectively, these studies illuminate the intricate facets of applying SDT principles within traditional face-to-face classrooms. The findings underscore the pivotal role of establishing a nurturing environment that caters to students' psychological needs, including relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Recognizing the nuanced interplay of these factors stands as a valuable compass for educators seeking to foster authentic motivation and profound engagement among their students.

SDT introduced by Deci and Ryan (1985), has garnered substantial attention in the field of education due to its potential to enhance student motivation and engagement.

Extensive research has explored the application of SDT principles across various educational levels, including K-12 and higher education, shedding light on its role in improving learning outcomes. Studies conducted in higher education by Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) demonstrated that integrating SDT principles, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, into instructional practices can significantly impact college students' motivation. For instance, providing students with choices within assignments (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003) and fostering positive teacher-student rapport (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002) align with SDT's emphasis on autonomy and relatedness, leading to increased intrinsic motivation and engagement.

Benefits and Challenges of Implementing Self-Determination Theory

Numerous empirical studies have substantiated the benefits of implementing Self-Determination Theory (SDT) principles in both K-12 and higher education classrooms. In K-12 education, Chen and Jang's research (2010) highlighted how fostering autonomy-supportive environments positively influences students' intrinsic motivation and academic performance. Moreover, SDT's principles have been linked to enhancing students' psychological well-being in both K-12 and higher education contexts (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2006), thereby establishing a positive and conducive classroom atmosphere. In higher education, a study by Mouratidis, Vansteenkiste, Sideridis, and Lens (2020) found that integrating SDT in teacher-student interactions led to improved student engagement and a reduction in classroom conflicts.

However, the application of SDT is not without its challenges, which are evident across both K-12 and higher education settings. Particularly, striking the right balance

between autonomy and structure is crucial. Reeve (2006) pointed out that excessive autonomy without proper guidance might lead to confusion among students, underscoring the importance of combining self-directed learning opportunities with structured instruction. Addressing individual differences presents another challenge, as highlighted by Reeve and Tseng (2011), who found that while autonomy support benefits most students, those with higher levels of external regulation might require different approaches. Furthermore, the successful integration of SDT-based practices might necessitate a paradigm shift for educators accustomed to traditional pedagogies, whether in K-12 or higher education. Vallerand and Bissonnette (1992) emphasized that while SDT offers valuable insights, its effective implementation demands comprehensive teacher training and ongoing support tailored to the specific educational context.

In conclusion, the literature underscores the potential of Self-Determination Theory to enhance motivation and engagement across both K-12 and higher education classrooms. Integrating SDT principles through strategies like autonomy support and promoting relatedness not only fosters intrinsic motivation but also enhances psychological well-being across diverse educational settings. However, effectively addressing challenges related to autonomy, individual differences, and pedagogical transformation is paramount for successful implementation. This comprehensive literature review underscores the significance of customizing instructional strategies and providing continuous professional development to realize the advantages of SDT in traditional educational contexts, regardless of whether they are K-12 or higher education settings.

In transitioning from the examination of benefits and challenges related to the application of SDT in educational contexts, it becomes evident that the cultural dimension plays a pivotal role in shaping how SDT principles are interpreted and applied.

Cultural Influences on Self-Determination Theory

While SDT posits that the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are universal across cultures (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), growing scholarship highlights the importance of examining how these needs are expressed, experienced, and supported in culturally diverse educational contexts. Culture influences not only how students interpret instructional strategies, but also how instructors conceptualize motivation and design learning experiences.

Research by Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, and Kaplan (2003) underscore that individuals from collectivist cultures may view autonomy as interdependence and fulfilling social roles, rather than as individual choice. Similarly, Iyengar and DeVoe (2003) found that students from more hierarchical or authority-oriented cultures may prefer structured guidance over open-ended autonomy, shaping how they respond to flexibility in instructional design. These findings suggest that strategies intended to support autonomy, competence, or relatedness may not be experienced uniformly across learners from different cultural backgrounds.

Instructors also bring their own cultural values and assumptions into the classroom, which can shape the strategies they implement and how they interpret student motivation. Cultural norms about power distance, communication style, and beliefs about learning may influence how instructors provide feedback, structure autonomy, or build

classroom community. As such, applying SDT in multicultural learning environments requires sensitivity to both student and instructor cultural contexts.

Although this study did not focus primarily on culture as a variable, it recognizes culture as a meaningful dimension of the broader context in which motivation occurs. In Chapter 5, the discussion highlights the contextual and dynamic nature of motivation, including how cultural values may influence the perception and effectiveness of instructional strategies. By situating SDT within a culturally responsive framework, educators and researchers can better support diverse learners in online college practices.

Gaps in Research

The literature review highlights the importance of SDT in fostering student motivation, particularly in online learning environments. While previous research has extensively examined SDT in traditional face-to-face settings, fewer studies have explored its application in online college courses through qualitative methods. A recent systematic review of SDT in university-level online learning found that few studies included both instructors and students, emphasizing the need for more qualitative and mixed-methods research to capture the lived experiences of both groups (Rosli, Saleh, Ali, & Bakar, 2022).

Additionally, frameworks like the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) and the ARCS Model of Motivational Design (Keller, 1987) offer useful guidance on how motivation may be supported in online courses. However, limited research has explored how these strategies are perceived by both instructors and students in practice.

To address these gaps, this study takes a qualitative approach to examine the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses. It explores how motivation-supportive instructional strategies are enacted and experienced, and how these strategies relate to students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses, with a focus on how instructional strategies supported or hindered student motivation and how Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) applied in this context. Using a phenomenological methodological approach, the study investigated how motivation was experienced and interpreted through instructional practices in fully online college courses at a university in the northeastern United States of America.

SDT served as the guiding theoretical framework for understanding how the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were addressed within online college learning environments. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this study generated contextual insights into how motivation is co-constructed between instructors and students and how it is shaped by instructional design, instructor beliefs, and course dynamics.

Rather than identifying prescriptive best practices, this study contributes to the literature by deepening understanding of how motivation-supportive strategies function in

online higher education and by examining the contextual complexity involved in applying SDT to real-world online higher education settings.

Research Questions

As previously introduced in Chapter 1, this study was guided by the following research questions. They are restated here to provide a foundation for the methodology outlined in Chapter 3.

RQ1: How do instructors in online college courses describe their lived experiences with motivating students, including the instructional strategies they use, the outcomes they perceive, and the challenges and successes they encounter?

RQ2: How do students in online college courses describe their motivational experiences, and how do they perceive the instructional strategies used by their instructors in relation to their motivation?

RQ3: What similarities, differences, and insights emerge from comparing instructor and student perspectives on motivation-supportive instructional strategies in online college courses, and how do these perspectives align with the principles of Self-Determination Theory?

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 of this dissertation provides a comprehensive overview of the existing literature on student motivation in online college courses. This review serves as the foundation for the study, offering valuable insights into the complex landscape of online education and motivation. The chapter begins by examining the significance of online

college courses in contemporary education, highlighting their growing prominence. From there, it explores the central theme of motivation within the online learning environment. This examination focuses on the Role of Motivation in Online College Courses, emphasizing its multifaceted nature and profound influence on students' experiences and outcomes.

Additionally, the chapter addresses the challenges students face in online courses and the critical role instructors play in fostering motivation.

The theoretical framework of SDT is a focal point of this literature review. It provides an in-depth analysis of SDT, including its Six Mini Theories and the Basic Human Needs Required for SDT (Autonomy, Competency, Relatedness). Furthermore, it examines the Application of Self-Determination Theory in Traditional (Face-to-Face) Classrooms, emphasizing its potential to enhance motivation and learning outcomes. This chapter also considers the Benefits and Challenges of Implementing SDT in Education, discussing the practical implications of applying this theory in real-world educational settings. Additionally, it explores the influence of cultural factors on SDT and the need to consider cultural nuances when applying SDT in diverse educational environments.

The Gaps in Research section highlights areas where the current literature falls short in providing a comprehensive understanding of student motivation in online college courses.

In particular, prior research has called for more qualitative investigations of SDT within online higher education, especially those that include both instructor and student perspectives. This study was designed to respond to that need by exploring how

instructional strategies may support or hinder student motivation in online learning, and by assessing the applicability of SDT in this context.

Finally, the chapter reiterates the Research Questions that guided this investigation, providing a roadmap for the study's progression and its contribution to the field of online education and motivation.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of instructors and their students in online college courses, specifically focusing on instructional strategies used to support or hinder student motivation, as reported by both groups. The study also assessed the applicability of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) as a pedagogical framework for teaching online college courses. By exploring these experiences, the study provided insights that may guide the development of approaches to assist instructors in monitoring and supporting student motivation in online higher education settings.

This chapter outlines the methodology used to conduct the study. The first section, "Research Design and Rationale," describes the qualitative approach and justifies its use in exploring instructional strategies and student motivation. The second section, "Study Context and Participants," provides an overview of the setting and participants, including the selection criteria and recruitment process. The third section, "Data Collection Methods," outlines the data collection methods used in the study, including interviews and other relevant sources of data. The fourth section, "Researcher Positionality and Role," details my positionality and role in data collection and analysis. The fifth section, "Data Analysis Methods," explains the data analysis procedures, describing how the collected data were coded and interpreted. The sixth section, "Ethical Considerations", outlines the measures taken to uphold ethical integrity, including IRB approval, informed consent, confidentiality, and participant protections. The final section,

"Trustworthiness of the Study," discusses the steps taken to ensure the study's credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Research Design and Rationale

Student motivation plays a critical role in online learning environments, influencing academic performance, engagement, and overall learning experiences. While existing motivation theories provide a strong foundation for understanding student engagement in virtual learning settings, further empirical research is needed to explore how instructional strategies are applied in real-world online courses and how students experience these strategies in practice. This study adopts a qualitative approach to gain deeper insights into these experiences, focusing on how instructional strategies align with motivational principles and influence student motivation in online college courses.

Phenomenological Research Design

A phenomenological research design was selected for this study to explore the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses. According to Creswell (2007), phenomenology involves “a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals” (p. 62). The goal of this methodological approach is to capture and interpret the essence of participants’ experiences related to a shared phenomenon.

In this study, the phenomenon under investigation was the experience of instructional strategies intended to support motivation in fully online college courses. Two participant groups were included: instructors, who implemented motivational

strategies, and students, who experienced those strategies as part of their learning environment.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, a secure video conferencing platform, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words. This method supported the collection of rich, descriptive data, which is foundational to phenomenological research. Participants shared their perceptions, emotions, and reflections related to instructional practices and motivational experiences in online learning.

The phenomenological approach was particularly appropriate for this study because it centers the meaning participants assign to their lived experiences, rather than seeking to test hypotheses or produce generalizable results. This design allowed for an in-depth, contextual exploration of how motivation was supported or hindered through instructional strategies. The analysis focused on identifying shared themes and patterns that reflect the essence of motivation as it is experienced in online college environments.

By prioritizing the perspectives of both instructors and students, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how motivational strategies are lived, interpreted, and co-constructed in virtual learning contexts. The findings offer insight into the dynamic interplay between instructional design and motivational experience, supporting ongoing efforts to better understand and improve online teaching and learning.

Study Context and Participants

This study explored the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses, with a focus on the instructional strategies that supported student

motivation in online learning environments. To gain an in-depth understanding of these experiences, four courses from a public, state-related research university in the northeastern United States of America were examined. The institution offers a wide range of online programs across 17 distinct schools and colleges—academic units such as the College of Public Health and the School of Business—and, in Spring 2024, offered over 300 online courses, with more than 200 available in Summer 2024.

Participating courses, offered during Spring and Summer of 2024, varied in instructional design, subject matter, and student demographics. Instructors and students in these courses were invited to participate in the study because they were taught fully online during the specific semesters when the study was conducted and met the eligibility criteria outlined in the next section. Examining these courses provided valuable insight into how instructional strategies shaped student motivation in online higher education.

Descriptions of Participating Courses

To illustrate the diversity in course structure, instructional approaches, and student experiences, the following section presents an overview of each participating course. To maintain confidentiality, course titles have been replaced with aliases.

PPT Course. Offered in Spring 2024, this graduate-level online course was designed to prepare students for roles in public health program planning and evaluation. The course was fully online and structured with bi-weekly synchronous Zoom sessions complemented by asynchronous activities, including video lectures, discussion boards, and independent assignments.

The curriculum focused on developing students' ability to conduct community needs assessments, analyze case studies, and design health programs using evidence-based practices. A central component of the course was the final project, in which students created a comprehensive program plan, incorporating measurable objectives, theoretical justifications, and an evaluation strategy aligned with public health needs. The course aimed to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application, helping students build the skills necessary for leadership in public health administration and policy.

During the Spring 2024 semester, 20 students were enrolled in PPT, with four participating in this study to share their perspectives on instructional strategies that influenced their learning and motivation.

IBA Course. In Spring 2024, this fully online undergraduate-level course was designed to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of core business functions, the course integrated marketing, finance, and operations management within a strategic framework.

A key instructional strategy in IBA was the simulation-based learning component, in which students worked in teams to manage a virtual company in a competitive market. Using Balanced Scorecard methodology, students analyzed financial performance, customer satisfaction, and operational efficiency while making strategic decisions. The course combined weekly synchronous Zoom sessions with asynchronous assignments, allowing students to engage with material both collaboratively and independently.

A total of 36 students were enrolled in IBA, with two initially participating in this study. However, technical issues resulted in the loss of one student's interview transcript

due to file corruption. While their background questionnaire responses and interview notes remained accessible on the local drive, they were discarded after it became clear that the transcript and recordings could not be recovered. Efforts were made to contact the student for a follow-up interview; however, no response was received. As a result, only one student's data from the IBA course was analyzed.

SRHB Course. In this fully online undergraduate-level course, students explored psychological theories related to self-regulation, goal setting, and health behavior change. The course combined asynchronous video lectures with synchronous Zoom meetings held once per week.

Students examined how self-regulation strategies impacted health-related behaviors, such as exercise adherence, dietary habits, and risk-taking behaviors. Course activities included scientific literature presentations, discussion boards, and group article critiques. Assignments were designed to foster critical analysis and application of self-regulation theories, culminating in a reflection paper, multiple-choice exams, and a final project.

In Spring 2024, 41 students were enrolled in SRHB, with five participating in this study to share their insights into how course design, instructional strategies, and online learning environments influenced their motivation.

ADVG Course. Offered in Summer 1 of 2024, this fully asynchronous undergraduate course examined the impact of advertising on global consumer behavior, identity, and media culture. Students critically analyzed themes such as cultural colonialism, ethical considerations, and global branding strategies.

Students engaged in weekly discussion board reflections, reading checks, and individual projects, analyzing digital, print, and broadcast advertising from various global perspectives. Assignments encouraged students to apply theoretical concepts to real-world advertising strategies, culminating in a final research project examining a global brand's international marketing approach.

The course enrolled 14 students in ADVG, with three participating in this study to discuss their experiences with motivation, engagement, and instructional support in a fully asynchronous setting.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

A mixed sampling approach was utilized to recruit participants for this qualitative study. Purposive convenience sampling was used to recruit instructors teaching online college courses and their students, while a random selection process was employed to identify eligible courses. The recruitment timeline spanned two academic terms: Spring 2024 (January–May 2024) and Summer 2024 (May–August 2024).

To identify eligible courses, I compiled a de-identified list of fully online courses from the university's registration portal. Using the Wheel of Names digital randomizer, I randomly selected courses for potential participation. Courses were eligible if they were fully online with no in-person components, offered during the targeted semester, and enrolled at least ten students to ensure a sufficient participant pool. Courses in non-traditional formats, such as apprenticeships and independent studies, were excluded since they focus on individual or advisor-guided projects, limiting exposure to diverse instructional strategies—an essential aspect of this study.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I invited instructors from the randomly selected courses via email. Five courses were initially selected, and the instructors of those courses were invited to participate. If an instructor declined or did not respond within 72 hours, an additional five courses were randomly selected. This rolling selection process continued until at least three to four instructors agreed to participate, aligning with qualitative research guidelines for small but in-depth studies (Patton, 2015). This approach ensured efficiency while allowing sufficient time for recruitment within the study's timeline. For student participation, the goal was to recruit approximately five students per course, ensuring a range of perspectives on instructional strategies and their impact on student motivation.

Once instructors confirmed their participation and completed activities such as a background questionnaire and an initial interview, student recruitment for their courses began. Students who were either currently enrolled in the participating instructor's course or had completed it during the study semester were invited to participate through course announcements and email. To be eligible, students had to be at least 18 years old and have been enrolled in the participating instructor's course during the study semester.

While the recruitment strategy was structured to be efficient, various challenges emerged during the Spring 2024 semester, necessitating modifications to enhance participation. The Participant Recruitment section provides a more detailed account of the recruitment process, including the recruitment timeline extension and the adjustments made to increase participation.

Participants

This study included 17 participants, consisting of four instructors and 13 students representing four different online courses.

The instructor group included four individuals, three females and one male, with teaching experience ranging from three to over 14 years in online education. The student group consisted of thirteen students, most of whom were female. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 years and represented diverse ethnic backgrounds, including eleven White participants, four African American participants, one Asian participant, and one Afro-Caribbean participant. Students were enrolled in various academic programs, such as Social and Behavioral Sciences-Public Health, Business, Psychology, and Advertising.

This qualitative study aimed to capture participants' experiences and insights related to motivational strategies and instructional methods in online college courses. The following section presents a brief overview of each participant, organized by course highlighting their backgrounds and roles within their respective courses. To protect confidentiality, participants selected their own aliases, which are used throughout this study.

Descriptions of Participants

PPT Course Participants. The PPT course included five participants, consisting of one instructor, Hannah, who prioritized community building, structured support, and student well-being, and four graduate students, 22, Ella Jaber, Payton Marrow, and Red_hat, all from diverse academic backgrounds in health-related fields who were balancing their studies with various professional and personal commitments.

Hannah, a White female instructor between the ages of 41-45, brought over seven years of online teaching experience, having taught more than 25 online courses since 2017. In her dual role as instructor and program coordinator for an online graduate degree program, she implemented scaffolded assignments and community-building strategies to enhance student success. Her teaching approach emphasized seeing students as people first, acknowledging their life experiences and responsibilities while providing flexible, structured support through synchronous sessions and detailed feedback. Hannah's passion for online education stemmed from its potential to increase access to learning opportunities for students who might not otherwise have access.

22, a graduate student and African American female between the ages of 21-25, was pursuing a master's degree in public health. She enrolled in the PPT course primarily because it was a core requirement for her degree, with the online format accommodating her work schedule. Balancing full-time studies with work responsibilities, she sought to gain practical skills in program promotion to support her future career goals. Her motivation was driven by the real-world applicability of the course material and Hannah's supportive, constructive feedback.

Ella Jaber, pursuing her master's degree as an African American female graduate student between the ages of 31-35, was specializing in epidemiology within the community health program. She enrolled in the PPT course to gain essential skills in project planning, advocacy, proposal writing, and implementing epidemiological interventions. While balancing coursework with a demanding job, she sought to strengthen her ability to lead public health projects. Though she began the course highly

motivated, challenging group dynamics temporarily impacted her engagement. Her motivation improved when given more autonomy to focus on topics aligned with her professional interests.

Payton Marrow, a graduate student and White female between the ages of 26-30, was enrolled in a master's level public health program. She took the course primarily because it was a requirement for her degree, with the online format being the only option available that semester. While juggling a demanding schedule that included extracurricular commitments, she remained highly motivated by the course's relevance to her career goals in public health, particularly in program promotion and community health. She appreciated the structured nature of the course but experienced fluctuating motivation during asynchronous weeks, which demanded greater self-discipline.

Red_hat, an Asian female graduate student between the ages of 26-30, was pursuing a master's degree in health administration while balancing full-time studies with part-time work and extracurricular activities. She enrolled in the PPT course as a core requirement, drawn by Professor Hannah's strong reputation and helpful accommodation of program requirements. Despite finding the writing-intensive assignments challenging, she maintained motivation through the course's practical applications and Hannah's constructive feedback.

IBA Course Participants. The IBA course included two participants, consisting of one instructor, Ed U. Cator, emphasized structured learning, accountability, and real-world applications, and one undergraduate student (Katya) who was navigating the challenges of online learning while pursuing her business degree.

Ed U. Cator, a White male instructor between the ages of 56-60, brought over 14 years of experience in online education, having been both an instructor and student in online environments. His teaching approach centered on creating an engaging learning environment through structured accountability, real-world applications, and autonomy support. He implemented strategies such as timely feedback through recorded sessions, structured weekly routines, and team-based activities to foster student competence and engagement. While maintaining high expectations through performance-based grading and attendance policies, he encouraged student motivation by bringing energy to synchronous sessions and connecting course content to real-world business experiences. His passion for online education stemmed from his belief that well-structured, interactive learning environments prepare students for the complexities of modern business challenges.

Katya, a White female junior between the ages of 18-20, was pursuing a major in International Business as a full-time student. Having completed three online courses with neutral experiences, she enrolled in IBA as a required course that accommodated her schedule. While she appreciated the course's flexibility, she struggled with motivation due to limited intrinsic interest in the material and a misalignment between the instructional strategies and her learning preferences.

SRHB Course Participants. The SRHB course included six participants, consisting of one instructor, Vera, who prioritized clarity, flexibility, structured peer discussions, and practical application, and five undergraduate students, Ace, Blue Bunny,

Lucy Williams, Mars, and Violet, who brought varying levels of online learning experience and were primarily pursuing psychology-related degrees.

Vera, a White instructor between the ages of 41-45, had over six years of experience in online education and served as the course coordinator for SRHB. As a constructivist educator with dissertation research in self-regulation, she implemented specific strategies to enhance student engagement, including bite-sized lecture videos (10-15 minutes), flexible discussion topics allowing students to explore personal interests, and detailed, constructive feedback. While acknowledging the challenges of building community in an asynchronous format, she structured the course to emphasize practical application of concepts to students' personal lives. Her approach focused on making content accessible through clear instruction while providing students autonomy in their learning process.

Ace, a White male student between the ages of 18-20, was a full-time junior majoring in Psychology with experience in four prior online courses. He enrolled in SRHB to fulfill a required program component. Although initially demonstrating strong motivation, his engagement declined due to what he perceived as insufficient academic challenge and limited peer interaction opportunities. His experience highlighted the importance of rigorous coursework and meaningful peer collaboration in maintaining student engagement.

Blue Bunny, a White female junior between the ages of 21-25 studying Psychology, brought experience from three to five online courses to the program. Her enrollment was driven by credit requirements and initial interest in the course's focus on

self-regulation and health behavior. While the course's flexible format and topic initially appealed to her, her motivation decreased as she encountered assignments that she found repetitive and insufficiently challenging. Her experience emphasized the importance of maintaining appropriate academic rigor in online course design.

Lucy Williams, a White female junior in Psychology between the ages of 18-20, brought substantial online learning experience with eight completed courses. She chose SRHB based on positive experiences with the instructor in a previous in-person class, appreciating the clear instructions and well-defined expectations. While she valued the course's flexibility, particularly the recorded lectures and non-mandatory attendance, her motivation fluctuated due to the lack of frequent assessments and limited engagement opportunities.

Mars, a White female junior between the ages of 21-25, was pursuing a double major in Psychology and Criminal Justice. Having completed 2-3 online courses, she enrolled in SRHB because its focus on health behaviors aligned directly with her lab work on risk behaviors. She particularly valued the course's flexibility and Vera's supportive teaching style, including detailed feedback and willingness to provide accommodations.

Violet, a White female student between the ages of 21-25, was pursuing a bachelor's degree in psychology. Having completed more than five online courses, her enrollment in SRHB was driven by her interest in self-regulation and the course's relevance to her personal goals. While she found the content engaging and applicable to her academic challenges, particularly procrastination management, she noted that the

online format sometimes made it easier to disengage and suggested that more interaction and challenging assignments would have been beneficial.

ADVG Course Participants. The ADVG course included four participants, consisting of one instructor, Monique, who prioritized creating a humanized, supportive classroom environment with clear objectives, and three students, Blue, Jim, and Student B, who brought varying levels of online learning experience and were pursuing diverse undergraduate degrees.

Monique, an Afro-Caribbean female between the ages of 30-35, was both a doctoral student in Media Communications and the instructor for the ADVG course, a fully asynchronous undergraduate class taught during a condensed summer term. With over three years of experience teaching undergraduate courses in both online and in-person formats, her approach emphasized humanizing the online experience, fostering engagement, and making content relatable through interactive video lectures, personalized feedback, and encouraging weekly announcements. She ensured clear course objectives and goal alignment, using Bloom's Taxonomy to structure assessments and guide student learning. While navigating the challenges of a fully asynchronous, condensed summer course, she maintained student motivation by creating a supportive and inclusive environment. Her passion for online education stemmed from her belief that building authentic instructor-student connections enhances engagement and makes learning more meaningful.

Blue, an African American female junior between the ages of 36-40, was pursuing her bachelor's degree in social work as a full-time junior while maintaining a full-time

job of over 40 hours per week. Having completed eleven online courses prior to ADVG, she expressed a neutral view of online learning. She enrolled in ADVG to fulfill a General Education requirement and found the initial course description appealing. While she valued the diverse learning materials and assignments that offered personal choice, she struggled with the demanding workload and rigid requirements of the compressed summer term. Despite these challenges, she maintained very high motivation throughout the course, driven primarily by her commitment to academic excellence and maintaining her GPA.

Jim, an African American male sophomore between the ages of 18-20 studying Finance, had completed four online courses with positive experiences. As a student-athlete required to take summer courses, he chose ADVG to meet program requirements. While he appreciated the course's supportive elements, including the instructor's introductory video and flexible asynchronous format, his motivation remained moderate due to being primarily driven by external factors rather than intrinsic interest.

Student B, a White female senior between the ages of 21-25 pursuing a bachelor's degree in Recreational Therapy, had completed six or more online courses with neutral experiences. She enrolled in ADVG during the summer to fulfill a global liberal learning requirement, finding it convenient for her schedule. Though challenged by strict deadlines and the accelerated summer pace, she maintained motivation through personalized feedback, assignment choices, and general interest in the content.

The detailed profiles above provide important context for understanding the experiences and perspectives shared by participants in this study. Drawing from the

analysis of interview transcripts and course materials from these 17 participants (four instructors and 13 students) across four distinct online college courses, providing a diverse range of perspectives on student motivation in online learning environments. The participants represented varying levels of online learning experience, different academic disciplines, and diverse personal circumstances that could influence their motivation. Data were collected from these participants through multiple methods, as detailed in the following section.

Data Collection Methods

Participant Recruitment

As outlined in the Participant Recruitment and Sampling section, the recruitment process followed a structured mixed sampling approach. Building on the steps described earlier, the Wheel of Names digital randomizer was used to select courses for potential participation. In cases where a course had multiple sections with different instructors, the randomizer selected a specific section, and the instructor of that section was invited to participate. These invitations were sent via email and included detailed study information, such as an overview of the study, a recruitment flyer, a consent form, and IRB approval (see Appendix A for IRB Approval Letter, Appendix B for instructor recruitment email, and Appendix F for instructor invitations). Instructors who expressed interest in participating were then provided with links to a background questionnaire (see Appendix D for the instructor background questionnaire) and Calendly, an online scheduling tool, to arrange their initial interview.

Once an instructor completed their initial interview, student recruitment for their course began. This sequencing was necessary due to the study's purpose—examining instructional strategies employed by instructors and their impact on student motivation. Since the study focused on the alignment between instructor practices and student experiences, it was essential that instructors participated first to establish the instructional context. Additionally, delaying student recruitment until after an instructor's participation was confirmed prevented the risk of students enrolling in the study if their instructor ultimately chose not to participate.

Student invitations were distributed through multiple outreach methods, including direct emails, course announcements, and instructor-mediated invitations. Outreach strategies were tailored to each instructor's preference, ensuring they were comfortable with the recruitment process and had a role in determining how their students were contacted. While email was the primary communication channel, outreach methods were refined by incorporating multiple touchpoints to improve student engagement. The student recruitment eligibility questionnaire (see Appendix E) helped ensure that participants met the study's inclusion criteria.

Despite this structured recruitment plan, securing instructor participation proved more challenging than anticipated. While some instructors initially expressed interest, several later declined or requested postponements due to workload constraints or scheduling conflicts. Others did not respond within the 72-hour timeframe, requiring additional rounds of invitations.

Another challenge that led to modifications in the recruitment process was the timing of instructor interviews. Some instructors completed their initial interview at the end of the semester, delaying student recruitment outreach until the final days of the course or after it had already ended. Because of this shift, student recruitment materials and consent forms were revised to clarify that students would be reflecting on a course they had already completed rather than one they were currently enrolled in (see Appendix C for student recruitment emails and Appendix G for student invitations). These adjustments ensured that recruitment communications remained accurate and that students understood the nature of their participation.

To further address recruitment challenges, communication strategies were modified. I shifted from using lengthy, highly professional emails to more concise and accessible messages to encourage responses. I also streamlined certain processes to reduce participant burden. Furthermore, I obtained IRB approval to extend recruitment into the Summer 2024 session, which ultimately allowed me to secure an additional course (see Appendix A for IRB amendment approval letter). Extending recruitment into the summer provided a broader timeframe to engage potential participants and increased the likelihood of meeting the target sample size.

By refining outreach methods, extending recruitment into the summer, and adjusting communication and participation strategies, I was able to overcome initial recruitment challenges while maintaining the study's integrity. These modifications ultimately allowed for the successful recruitment of instructors and students, ensuring a

diverse and meaningful exploration of instructional strategies and student motivation in online college courses.

Interview Process

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method for this study, providing a structured yet flexible approach to exploring instructors' and students' lived experiences in online college courses. This approach allowed participants to elaborate on their perspectives while maintaining alignment with the study's research questions (see Appendix H for the instructor initial in-depth interview guide and Appendix I for the student initial in-depth interview guide).

Interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience, with options for self-scheduling through Calendly or direct coordination via email. Once scheduled, participants received a confirmation email containing a Zoom meeting link, the estimated interview duration, and a brief reminder of the study's purpose.

All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, ensuring accessibility and consistency with the study's focus on online learning environments. Participants were required to select a pseudonym (alias) before or at the start of their interview. Some provided their alias in their background questionnaire (see Appendices D and E), while others submitted it via email before their scheduled session. At the beginning of each interview, participants confirmed their alias, and their Zoom display name was changed accordingly to ensure that their real name was not captured in the recording.

To foster an open and comfortable dialogue, each interview began with a review of the consent form, a reiteration of the voluntary nature of participation, and an

opportunity for participants to ask any clarifying questions. Efforts were made to establish rapport by expressing genuine interest in their experiences, using active listening techniques, and reassuring participants that there were no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers.

Interview Structure

Instructor Interviews. Each instructor participated in a two-part interview process. The initial interview lasted approximately two hours and focused on their teaching experiences in online courses, educational training, instructional strategies, course design, student engagement, and motivational techniques.

A 30-minute follow-up interview was conducted approximately one month later to discuss any changes that had occurred in the course since the initial interview, clarify responses, or address any additional questions that emerged during data analysis (see Appendix J for the instructor follow-up interview guide).

Three instructors—Ed U. Cator (IBA), Vera (SRHB), and Monique (ADVG)—also participated in an optional member-checking interview, where they reviewed a memo summarizing their interview data (see Appendix M for an example instructor memo). These memos highlighted key themes, direct participant quotes, and the researcher’s interpretations. The member-checking process served as a validation tool to ensure the accuracy of how their experiences were represented in the study (see Appendix N for an example of an instructor member-checking interview guide).

Student Interviews. Student interview structures varied based on whether students were actively enrolled at the time of data collection or were reflecting on a completed course.

Students in the PPT course, taught by Hannah, and the IBA course, taught by Ed U. Cator, who were actively enrolled during data collection, participated in a one-hour initial interview followed by a 30-minute follow-up interview approximately one month later (see Appendix K for the student follow-up interview guide).

Students in the SRHB course, taught by Vera, and the ADVG course, taught by Monique, whose courses had already ended before recruitment, participated in a single interview lasting between 30 minutes and one hour. Since these students were reflecting on a completed course, a one-month follow-up interview was not conducted. However, any necessary clarifications regarding their initial responses were followed up via email to ensure accuracy in documentation.

Most students, except for three, engaged in the optional member-checking interview, allowing them to review their interview summaries for accuracy and provide clarifications or revisions if needed (see Appendix O for an example student memo and Appendix P for an example of a student member checking interview guide).

Use of Probes and Interview Refinement

While the interview guides provided a structured framework for questioning, probing questions were used when necessary to clarify participant responses, encourage elaboration, or explore emergent themes that aligned with the study's focus on instructional strategies and student motivation.

After each interview, I engaged in post-interview reflection by writing notes to evaluate the session, identify areas for improvement, and assess any unintentional biases that may have influenced the conversation. These reflections helped refine subsequent interviews by improving question clarity, ensuring non-leading phrasing, and identifying strategies to enhance data collection.

Additionally, the interview guides were not static but rather evolved throughout data collection. The initial interview guides were developed based on insights from relevant literature, ensuring alignment with established research on motivation and instructional strategies in online learning. Ryan and Deci (2017) informed the exploration of motivation within the framework of SDT, while Jacobi (2018) provided insights into instructional strategies that support student engagement. Additionally, Lareau (2021), a practical guide to qualitative interviewing, informed the structure and design of the interview protocols, ensuring clarity and effectiveness in eliciting rich participant responses.

To further refine the interview guides, they were reviewed by my advisor and committee members, who brought diverse expertise in qualitative research methodology and motivation theory. Some committee members had direct experience with qualitative research design, while others provided extensive insights into motivation theories and their application in educational settings. Their feedback helped ensure that the interview protocols were methodologically sound and effectively captured participants' lived experiences.

Data Handling and Confidentiality

Interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to respond to guiding questions while being encouraged to elaborate on their experiences. Interview guides were designed to align with the study's focus on instructional strategies and student motivation, while remaining flexible to capture unique participant experiences.

All interviews were audio-recorded on Zoom with participants' consent to ensure accuracy in data collection. Zoom's built-in transcription feature was used to create initial transcripts, which were manually reviewed and corrected by the researcher for accuracy.

To maintain confidentiality, all recording files and transcripts were de-identified and stored in an encrypted, password-protected database accessible only to the researcher and dissertation committee members. Participants' real names were never recorded, as aliases were used throughout the study.

If a participant needed to reschedule their interview for any reason, accommodations were made to ensure they could still participate at a more convenient time.

Compensation

Participants were compensated for their time in the study. Upon completion of their required interviews, they received a \$50 virtual Amazon gift card. Those who participated in the optional member-checking interview received an additional \$20 gift card as compensation for their time.

Data Sources

This study explored the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses, with a focus on instructional strategies used to motivate students. It also examined how instructional strategies align with the principles of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Multiple data sources were used to capture both instructor and student perspectives, including background questionnaires, semi-structured interviews using the instructor interview guides and the student interview guides, and course syllabi.

Instructor Data Sources

Instructor Background and Demographics Questionnaire. Before participating in interviews, instructors completed a background and demographics questionnaire hosted on Microsoft Forms. Collecting background data was essential for developing participant profiles and situating their experiences within their professional and educational backgrounds. This information helped contextualize their perspectives on instructional strategies and student motivation. The questionnaire gathered data on teaching experience, instructional approaches, use of technology, professional development, and perceptions of student motivation in online courses. These responses informed the development of interview questions.

Example questions included:

1. How many years of teaching experience do you have, including both traditional and online settings?
2. Have you received any specific training or professional development related to online teaching?

3. How would you characterize the current motivation level of students in this online course?

Instructor Interview Guides. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data source for understanding how instructors conceptualized and implemented instructional strategies to support student motivation. All instructors participated in both an initial interview and a follow-up interview, providing insight into their strategies, challenges, and reflections over time. The initial interview focused on their teaching philosophies, motivation strategies, and overall experiences in online instruction.

Example questions included:

1. Can you share your personal experiences as an online college course instructor?
2. How would you describe your teaching philosophy or your general approach to teaching?
 - a. Probe: How would you describe your teaching philosophy in the online context?
3. Can you tell me about how your strategies to motivate students in your online course have worked?
 - a. Probe: Have you noticed any changes in students' confidence in their ability to succeed as a result of your strategies?

The follow-up interview allowed instructors to reflect on any changes in their instructional strategies or perspectives on student motivation after their initial interview.

1. Since our last conversation, have you noticed any changes in how you see instructional strategies and student motivation in online courses?

- a. Probe: Have you made any adjustments to your strategies based on what you've noticed? If so, what changes have you made?

Course Syllabi. At the conclusion of their interviews, instructors provided copies of their course syllabi or a list of graded assignments as an additional data source. These documents offered insights into course structure, assessment strategies, and instructional methods that may contribute to student motivation.

Student Data Sources

Student Eligibility Screener. Students were required to complete an eligibility screener to confirm their participation in the study. The screener, hosted on Microsoft Forms, collected demographic information, academic background, and prior online learning experiences. Students in the PPT and IBA courses completed the screener online, while students in the SRHB and ADVG courses answered these questions verbally during their interview. This information helped ensure that students met study criteria and provided context for their responses in later interviews.

Example questions included:

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. What is your student classification (e.g., undergraduate, graduate)?
3. How motivated do you currently feel to excel in the online course taught by the instructor you are discussing in this study?

Student Interviews. Semi-structured interviews provided insight into students' experiences, motivational challenges, and perceptions of instructional strategies used by

their instructors. All students participated in an initial interview, and those in courses still in session, PPT and IBA, also participated in a follow-up interview.

Three versions of the student interview guide were developed: an initial interview guide, a follow-up interview guide, and a modified initial interview guide for students whose courses had ended before data collection.

Example questions from the initial student interview guide included:

1. Can you tell me about your experience as a student in online college courses?
 - a. Probe: What have been some of the biggest challenges you've faced in online courses?
2. In what ways do you think [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name]'s strategies have impacted your understanding of the material?
 - a. Probe: Did any of the instructor's strategies make you feel more confident in your ability to succeed? If so, how?
3. What are some things that [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name] did in the course that you found particularly helpful or motivating?
 - a. Probe: Can you describe a specific moment or activity that really motivated you?

For students in the SRHB and ADVG courses, whose courses had ended or were near completion, the student initial interview guide was modified to encourage reflection rather than real-time discussion of course experiences.

An example question included:

1. Reflecting on your experiences, what aspects of [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name]'s teaching style did you appreciate the most in terms of supporting your learning in the course?

For students in the PPT and IBA courses, follow-up interviews allowed them to share changes in their motivation and engagement over time.

1. Since we last talked, have you noticed anything different in your online class or how your teacher tries to motivate you? Please tell me.
 - a. Probe: Do you feel more or less motivated compared to before? What do you think caused this change?

Data Collection Timeline

Data collection occurred over an eight-month period, from January 2024 to August 2024, during which initial and follow-up interviews were conducted. Member-checking interviews took place in December 2024 to allow participants to review and validate the interpretations of their interview responses.

While this section details the primary data sources for this study, the member-checking interviews were also conducted as a secondary method to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. Participants were provided with summaries of their responses and had the opportunity to review and comment on their interview data. The role of member-checking in ensuring data accuracy and validation is discussed in the Trustworthiness and Credibility section.

Researcher Positionality and Role

Personal Background and Insider Perspective

In qualitative research, particularly within Heideggerian phenomenology, the researcher plays an active role in interpreting and understanding participants' lived experiences (Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014; Xu & Storr, 2012). Heidegger's concept of Dasein highlights that researchers bring their own experiences into the interpretive process, shaping their engagement with the phenomenon under study (Heidegger, 1927). In this study, my role extended beyond data collection to include deep engagement in analyzing how instructors' strategies influenced student motivation in online college courses.

As the researcher, I designed the study, recruited participants, and conducted semi-structured interviews with instructors and their students. My positionality played a role in shaping my perspective throughout the study. As a former online college student and previous teacher apprentice in an online course, I had insider knowledge of the learning environment, which allowed me to engage with participants empathetically. However, I was also aware that this prior experience could introduce bias if I assumed my own perspectives aligned with those of my participants.

Additionally, conducting this study required extensive engagement with SDT literature (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017) and research on instructional strategies to support student motivation. While this deepened my understanding of motivation in online learning, it also required me to be mindful of not evaluating participants' strategies based on prior research recommendations. I made a deliberate

effort to center participant voices by relying strictly on transcripts, audio recordings, and interview notes rather than inserting my own interpretations.

Ensuring Researcher Neutrality in Data Collection

To prevent my role from influencing participants' responses, I took several steps to maintain neutrality during the interview process. I structured all interview questions in an open-ended format to allow participants to fully express their experiences in their own words rather than being led toward specific answers. I also maintained a neutral tone and demeanor throughout interviews, ensuring that my reactions did not suggest approval or disapproval of participants' responses. When clarification was necessary, I asked participants to elaborate using non-directive prompts, such as, "Can you tell me more about that?" rather than summarizing or interpreting their statements for them.

Additionally, because I interviewed multiple students from the same class, I remained aware of the risk of assuming similarities across responses. In an early interview, I noticed myself probing a student based on what another student had shared. Recognizing this, I made a conscious effort in subsequent interviews to treat each participant's perspective as unique, approaching every interview as if I were hearing about the course for the first time.

Commitment to Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Throughout the study, I remained reflexive in my role, ensuring that my positionality enriched rather than distorting participants' perspectives. I consistently relied on transcripts, audio recordings, and interview notes to center participant voices, prioritizing their experiences while acknowledging my role as an interpreter of the data.

By taking a participant-driven approach, I reinforced the trustworthiness of the study and ensured that findings authentically reflected the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses. Further steps taken to enhance credibility and neutrality in data analysis are discussed in the Trustworthiness of the Study section.

Data Analysis Methods

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the qualitative data collected in this study. This method provided a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying patterns across instructor and student experiences, allowing for both predefined categories and emergent themes to be explored in relation to the study’s research questions. The analysis process followed a structured sequence, beginning with data preparation, followed by coding, categorization, and comparative analysis to develop a deeper understanding of how instructional strategies influenced student motivation in online college courses.

Figure 1 illustrates this step-by-step analytical approach.

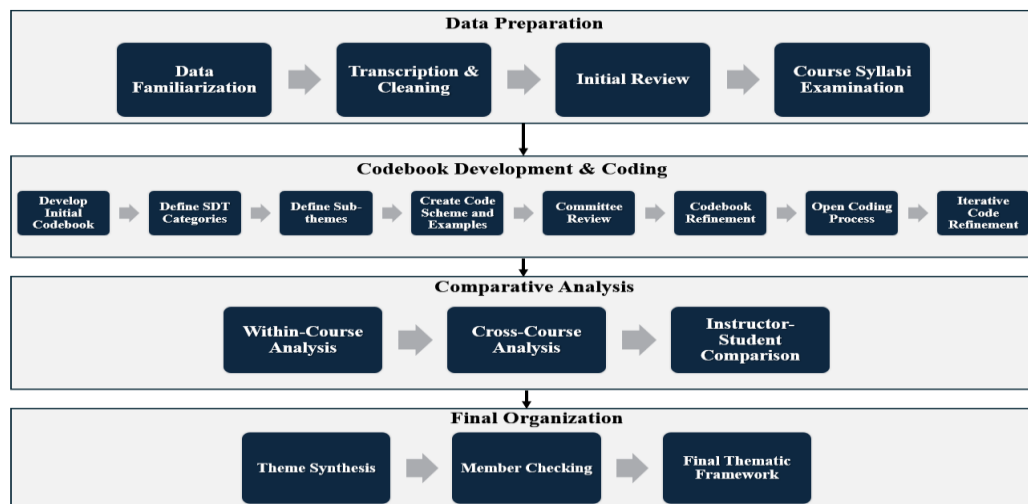


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis Process: From Data Prep to Final Themes.

Note. This figure presents the structured process used to analyze qualitative data in this study. The process included four main phases: data preparation, codebook development and coding, comparative analysis, and final organization. In the data preparation phase, transcripts were reviewed, cleaned, and examined alongside course syllabi. The codebook development and coding phase involved defining SDT categories, developing sub-themes, and refining the coding scheme through committee review and iterative adjustments. The comparative analysis phase included within-course, cross-course, and instructor-student comparisons to identify patterns across the dataset. Finally, the final organization phase ensured the reliability of findings through theme synthesis, member checking, and the development of the final thematic framework.

This structured approach ensured a systematic analysis of how instructional strategies influenced student motivation in online college courses. The following section provides a detailed explanation of each phase in the analysis process, describing how data were prepared, coded, and compared to develop the final thematic framework.

Data Preparation and Initial Review

The analysis began with data familiarization, which involved transcription, cleaning, and preliminary reading of all interview data. Zoom's built-in transcription feature was used to generate initial transcripts, which were then manually reviewed and corrected for accuracy. During this stage, filler words, verbal pauses, and off-topic conversational content were removed to ensure clarity while maintaining the integrity of participants' narratives. Course syllabi, collected from instructors, were converted into text documents for analysis.

After transcription and formatting were complete, I conducted an initial review of the data to gain a holistic sense of key patterns, potential categories, and meaningful variations across participants' experiences. This phase allowed for early observations regarding how instructors described their instructional strategies and how students articulated their experiences of motivation in online college courses.

The unit of analysis for this study was structured around three integral components: individual instructor strategies, student feedback and responses, and instructional strategies aligned with SDT principles. This approach ensured a holistic examination of the ways in which instructional strategies influenced student motivation by integrating multiple perspectives and data sources. Instructor interviews provided insight into their pedagogical choices and instructional strategies, while student interviews captured their lived experiences and perceptions of motivation within online learning environments. Additionally, course syllabi were examined alongside instructor interviews to provide contextual insights into instructional strategies. While syllabi were not coded as stand-alone data, they were used to triangulate findings from instructor interviews, ensuring consistency between reported strategies and documented course materials.

Codebook Development and Thematic Coding

To guide the initial analysis, I developed a codebook with predefined categories based on SDT while also incorporating two broad additional categories—challenges and successes. These categories served as preliminary placeholders to capture aspects of instructional strategies and student experiences that extended beyond SDT's core

constructs. This structure ensured that the coding framework remained flexible, allowing for emergent themes to be incorporated alongside theoretically driven codes (See Appendix L for a sample of the codebook and coding process).

While autonomy, competence, and relatedness were foundational to the coding framework, I recognized that these constructs are not static or binary but rather dynamic and multidimensional. To reflect this complexity, my codebook included sub-themes that captured the varied ways in which each construct could be supported, suppressed, or hindered within the online learning environment. For example, autonomy was further categorized into autonomy-supportive, controlling autonomy, suppressing autonomy, and minimal autonomy to capture variations in instructional strategies. Similarly, competence was broken down into competence support and competence thwarting, while relatedness included both positive and negative relatedness.

By structuring the codebook in this way, I ensured that the analysis accounted for the multi-faceted nature of SDT constructs, rather than treating them as simple, binary categories. This structure allowed for greater specificity in identifying how instructional strategies influenced motivation across different online course contexts.

Coding Process

Using the codebook as a guide, I conducted open coding of all transcripts and course syllabi (see Appendix L for a sample of the coding scheme and thematic analysis). The coding process was iterative and reflexive, meaning that codes were continuously reassessed, refined, and expanded to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences. I systematically coded data course by course, beginning

with instructor interviews, followed by student interviews within the same course. This approach enabled within-course comparisons, helping to identify how instructors' descriptions of their instructional strategies aligned with or diverged from students' lived experiences.

As the coding process progressed, new codes were created as needed to capture relevant findings, and some of these were later grouped under existing SDT themes, while others remained distinct categories. For example, Instructor Expertise and Professional Role and Logistical and Administrative Barriers emerged as meaningful themes that influenced motivation but did not fit neatly within autonomy, competence, or relatedness. The inclusion of these emergent themes ensured that the analysis remained data-driven rather than solely reliant on pre-existing theoretical constructs.

If a passage did not clearly align with an existing category, I flagged it for later review, revisiting these instances after an initial round of coding to determine whether they warranted a new thematic category or integration into an existing one. This process ensured that all relevant themes were captured while maintaining analytic rigor and consistency.

Comparative Analysis Within and Across Courses

Within-course analysis established a foundation for understanding the instructional strategies and student experiences unique to each course. Building upon these insights, cross-course analysis was conducted to identify broader patterns, similarities, and differences across courses.

First, I performed within-course analysis, comparing instructors' descriptions of their instructional strategies with students' experiences in the same course. This helped identify points of alignment, such as when an instructor's intent to provide autonomy-supportive strategies was reflected in student perceptions, as well as points of divergence, such as an instructor believing they fostered student competence while students reported confusion or a lack of clarity in coursework. While student participants were only enrolled in one of the participating courses, cross-course-comparisons helped identify broader patterns in how instructional strategies influenced motivation. Differences in course design, instructor approaches, and course content likely contributed to variations in how students experienced motivation, suggesting that shifts in motivation would be expected if a student transitioned from one course to another with a different instructional approach.

The unit of analysis facilitated a structured approach to this comparative analysis by focusing on three interconnected elements: instructor strategies, student responses, and SDT-aligned instructional practices. By maintaining this framework, I was able to analyze how instructional strategies were implemented, how students perceived them, and whether they aligned with SDT's motivational principles.

After completing within-course comparisons, I conducted cross-course analysis to examine similarities and differences across how instructors described their approaches to fostering student motivation. I also analyzed student experiences across courses to determine which instructional strategies were consistently perceived as supportive or hindering motivation. Finally, I conducted an instructor-student comparative analysis to

explore the extent to which instructors' intended strategies aligned with students' lived experiences. This analysis provided key insights into the effectiveness of various instructional practices in fostering motivation. Through this layered analysis, I was able to explore how instructional strategies operated within specific courses while also identifying broader themes across multiple online learning environments.

Final Thematic Organization and Interpretation

Following the coding and comparative analysis process, I synthesized the data into overarching themes that directly addressed the study's research questions. Codes were grouped into final thematic categories, with representative participant excerpts used to illustrate key findings.

To enhance the credibility of findings, I implemented member-checking, where participants reviewed interview summaries and had the opportunity to provide clarifications or additional insights. This process ensured that the study accurately represented their perspectives. Additionally, the codebook was reviewed by my dissertation committee, which included qualitative experts and scholars familiar with SDT, allowing for refinements before finalizing the thematic framework.

Table 1 provides examples of how thematic coding was applied to instructor and student data, illustrating the alignment between raw data excerpts, identified themes, sub-themes, and specific codes. These examples highlight how instructional strategies were categorized within the framework of SDT and emergent themes.

Table 1. Examples of Thematic Coding Applied to Instructor and Student Data

Raw Data Excerpt	Code	Theme	Sub-Theme	Participant/ Role	Course
"I try to offer students choices whenever possible, like letting them decide between project formats or choosing a topic that resonates with them."	Offering Student Choice	Autonomy	Autonomy Support	Hannah <i>Instructor</i>	PPT
"The professor gave us the option to choose the format of our final project, either a presentation or a written report."	Student Choice	Autonomy	Autonomy Support	22 <i>Student</i>	PPT
"I definitely expect them to be more independent. I want them to manage their own time and take responsibility for their learning."	Encouraging Ownership of Learning	Autonomy	Autonomy Support	Vera <i>Instructor</i>	SRHB
"I liked that I could participate when I felt most motivated."	Flexible Participation	Autonomy	Autonomy Support	Ace <i>Student</i>	SRHB
"I provide feedback, often through recorded videos... These videos are really valuable for students."	Video Feedback	Competence	Competence Support	Ed U. Cator <i>Instructor</i>	IBA
"The videos and the feedback...help me understand what he's looking for."	Video and Feedback for Understanding	Competence	Competence Support	Katya	IBA

Table 1. (Continued)

Raw Data Excerpt	Code	Theme	Sub-Theme	Participant/ <i>Role</i>	Course
"I always tell them to email me or ask me questions during Zoom sessions if they need help. Not many have taken that option, but the support is there if they need it."	Offering Help through Open Channels	Relatedness	Positive Relatedness	Monique <i>Instructor</i>	ADVG
"The discussion boards felt welcoming. We did some video posts, so I got to see people's faces, which made it more personal."	Welcoming Discussion Boards	Relatedness	Positive Relatedness	Jim <i>Student</i>	ADVG

The use of thematic analysis allowed for an in-depth exploration of how instructional strategies shaped student motivation in online courses. By balancing predefined theoretical constructs with emergent themes, the analysis provided nuanced insights into the instructional practices that supported or hindered motivation. These findings will be expanded upon in Chapter 4, where they will be directly linked to the study's research questions.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards to ensure the protection, privacy, and well-being of all participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Temple University before participant

recruitment and data collection. The initial IRB approval was granted on January 19, 2024, allowing for recruitment during the Spring 2024 semester. An amendment was later approved on May 9, 2024, extending recruitment into the Summer 2024 term and modifying recruitment materials, consent procedures, and the study protocol to reflect this extension.

All participants were provided with a detailed consent form, outlining the study's purpose, procedures, duration, potential risks, benefits, data protection measures, and participant rights. In alignment with Temple University's IRB guidelines, participants were not required to sign the consent form. Instead, they acknowledged receipt of the consent form and confirmed that they had reviewed it before participating. At the start of each interview, I, as the researcher, revisited the consent form, addressed any questions, and ensured participants fully understood their rights. Separate consent forms were developed for instructors and students, ensuring that each participant group received relevant information tailored to their role in the study.

To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, all participants selected pseudonyms (aliases), which were used throughout the study, including in interview transcripts, data analysis, and reporting. Identifiable details, such as participant names or institutional affiliations, were omitted to protect identities.

Data security protocols were rigorously maintained throughout the study. All interviews were conducted using Zoom, and the recordings and transcriptions were deleted within one week of the interview's completion to minimize data retention risks. Data collected from background questionnaires for both instructors and students, which

were hosted on Microsoft Forms (MS Forms), were downloaded weekly onto my local computer and stored in a password-protected folder. These data were then transferred into a password-protected spreadsheet for organization and analysis. To further protect participant information, all responses stored on MS Forms were deleted weekly after being securely transferred to the local storage system.

All participant-related data, including transcripts, memos, and research documents, were securely stored on OneDrive, linked to my Temple University email account. Temple University provides institutional OneDrive storage, which allows for managed access and secure document sharing. The research folder was configured as a restricted-access space, shared only with the dissertation committee members listed as part of the research team in the IRB submission. Additionally, a password-protected copy of all data is stored in a secure folder on my personal computer, which is also password protected. Audio recordings were stored separately from de-identified transcripts to further ensure confidentiality. All research materials will be retained for five years following study completion, after which they will be permanently deleted in compliance with ethical research standards.

Participants were informed that participation in the study posed minimal risk, as it focused on their experiences with instructional strategies in online learning rather than sensitive personal topics. However, they had the right to decline to answer any question that made them uncomfortable and could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

To avoid coercion, participants received a \$50 virtual Amazon gift card upon completing their interview(s). Those who participated in the optional member-checking interview received an additional \$20 gift card. Compensation was provided regardless of whether participants completed all aspects of the study, ensuring that incentives did not pressure participation.

All ethical procedures adhered to APA ethical research guidelines and Temple University's IRB protocols, reinforcing a commitment to participant autonomy, data security, and research integrity.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Ensuring trustworthiness in this phenomenological study was essential to accurately capturing and presenting the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses. Trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, aligning with qualitative research standards (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Credibility

Credibility was reinforced through prolonged engagement, member checking, and data triangulation (Buchbinder, 2011; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Peoples, 2021). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to provide rich descriptions of their experiences, ensuring that the study authentically reflected their perspectives on instructional strategies and student motivation in online learning environments.

To enhance credibility, member checking interviews were conducted via Zoom between December 2024 and January 2025, with eight students and three instructors participating. Each participant was sent their memo via email, allowing them to review and edit it at their own pace before the scheduled interview. These memos were developed using data from their background questionnaire responses, interview recordings, and verbatim transcripts, alongside researcher reflections on their experiences. Participants also reviewed all direct quotes that were included in the study's findings, ensuring that their words were accurately represented and that my interpretations aligned with their intended meaning. This process allowed participants to confirm the accuracy of their experiences as presented in the findings and to provide clarifications or additional context where necessary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While no major themes changed because of participant feedback, two instances required additional context and clarification to fully capture participants' perspectives.

Data triangulation was achieved by incorporating multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews, interview notes, background questionnaires, and course syllabi (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Golafshani, 2003). These diverse data points contributed to a comprehensive representation of instructional strategies and student experiences, reinforcing the credibility of the study's findings.

Transferability

Transferability in a phenomenological study is not intended to ensure broad generalizability but rather to provide detailed contextual information so that future researchers can assess the applicability of the findings to other settings (Korstjens &

Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Peoples, 2021). This study enhances transferability by thoroughly documenting the recruitment process, interview protocol, and data analysis approach, allowing researchers to replicate the study's methodology in different educational contexts. Additionally, thick description was used to provide detailed participant profiles, course structures, and instructional strategies, allowing readers to determine how closely the findings relate to their own educational settings.

Dependability

Dependability was established by maintaining consistent research procedures while allowing for necessary flexibility based on participant circumstances (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Peoples, 2021). The core research process remained stable, including the recruitment procedures, informed consent process, data collection structure, and analytical framework. However, adjustments were necessary to accommodate students whose courses had just ended or were about to conclude, requiring modifications to interview timing and the number of interviews conducted. For example, students actively enrolled in their courses engaged in two interviews, whereas those whose courses had ended participated in a single interview designed to capture their reflections. These adaptations ensured that all participants had an opportunity to share their lived experiences while respecting their availability and engagement with the course.

My dissertation committee members played a critical role in ensuring dependability by reviewing the recruitment procedures, interview guides, data analysis

approach, and codebook development. I revised my codebook based on their feedback and received guidance on my coding process, where committee members reviewed how I applied codes to interview excerpts and how themes were constructed. This external review process strengthened the consistency and reliability of the coding process and reinforced alignment between data and emergent themes. Additionally, a structured audit trail of coding iterations and theme development was maintained throughout the analysis process (Patton, 2015).

Confirmability

Confirmability was reinforced through participant review of their direct quotes, research memos, and analytic decisions. Instead of keeping personal researcher memos, I developed participant memos based on interview notes, which included background questionnaire data, key themes, direct participant quotes, and researcher reflections. These memos were used as a reference point during member checking interviews, where participants validated their biographical details, and the accuracy of the interpretations made from their interviews. Additionally, all direct participant quotes that were used in the findings were reviewed and confirmed by the participants to ensure that their words were not misrepresented. The use of direct participant quotations within the findings further strengthens confirmability, providing transparency in data interpretation and allowing readers to assess the connection between raw data and emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Peoples, 2021).

Limitations of Trustworthiness Strategies

Although multiple strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, some limitations were present. A key limitation was related to the recruitment of students whose courses had already ended or were concluding at the time of recruitment. This constraint did not allow for the intended strategy of conducting both an initial and follow-up interview with these students, which would have provided an opportunity to observe how their experiences evolved over time or to gain additional insights while they were still actively engaged in the course. Instead, these students participated in a single post-course interview, which, while still valuable, may not have captured changes in their perspectives that might have emerged during an ongoing learning experience.

Another limitation was the nature of Zoom-based interviews, which required participants to have their cameras off to protect their privacy. As a result, only audio was captured during interviews, eliminating access to nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and spontaneous reactions. The lack of visual engagement reduced the potential for embodied connections that in-person interviews often provide, where subtle cues can yield unexpected insights and emotional depth. This limitation was particularly evident in one interview where a participant became emotional and began to cry while recounting an experience. Due to the lack of video, I initially did not realize the emotional shift, and it took me a moment to recognize the change in tone. Once I became aware, I paused the interview to check in with the participant, offering support and the option to take a break. While tone and verbal cues were helpful in capturing emotional responses, not being able to see participants' facial expressions limited my ability to

respond in real time to moments of heightened emotion. Despite this, the audio format ensured that verbal responses were captured accurately, and strategies such as paraphrasing and follow-up questions were used to further probe participants' experiences.

Despite these limitations, the study's multi-layered approach to data collection, use of diverse participant backgrounds, and rigorous validation methods ensured the credibility and depth of the findings.

By employing these strategies, this study upholds the principles of qualitative rigor in phenomenological research, ensuring that findings credibly and accurately reflect the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses.

Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the research methodology employed in this qualitative study, outlining the systematic approach used to explore the lived experiences of instructors who teach online college courses. The chapter begins with an explanation of the research design, justifying the use of a qualitative, phenomenological approach to capture in-depth perspectives on instructional strategies that support student motivation. The research questions guiding the study are then presented, ensuring alignment between methodology and study objectives.

Next, the participants and sampling strategy are detailed, describing the selection criteria, recruitment process, and efforts to include diverse instructor perspectives. The data collection procedures section outlines the semi-structured interview process conducted via Zoom, including initial and follow-up interviews for instructors, while

acknowledging that some students participated in a single post-course interview due to recruitment timing constraints.

The researcher's positionality and role are addressed, discussing potential biases, reflexivity, and the steps taken to minimize undue influence on the research process. The data analysis procedures are then described, highlighting a rigorous thematic analysis approach used to identify key themes emerging from participant experiences. These themes are examined in relation to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), including strategies that align with or diverge from SDT principles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The Ethical Considerations section outlines the measures taken to uphold ethical integrity, including the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, informed consent, confidentiality, and participant protections.

The final section, "Trustworthiness of the Study," discusses the steps taken to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Although multiple strategies were used to enhance the study's trustworthiness, certain limitations were present. These include the recruitment of students whose courses had ended, limiting the ability to conduct follow-up interviews, and the nature of Zoom-based interviews, which prevented access to nonverbal cues. Despite these constraints, the study's rigorous validation methods, diverse participant backgrounds, and multi-layered approach to data collection ensured the depth and credibility of the findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Building on the phenomenological research methodology and data collection procedures in Chapter 3, this chapter presents the findings of this qualitative study, which explored the lived experiences of 17 participants (4 instructors and 13 students) in online college courses. The focus was on the instructional strategies used to support student motivation as experienced and interpreted by participants. As established in Chapter 2's literature review, this study used Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) as a guiding framework to explore and assess its applicability for motivating students in online college courses. SDT emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in enhancing motivation. Given the continued prominence of online college courses in higher education, understanding how instructors foster motivation in these settings remains essential for improving student learning experiences and academic outcomes. By conducting a thematic analysis of interviews and course materials, this chapter highlights the perspectives of instructors and students, examines the instructional strategies that support motivation, and evaluates their alignment with SDT principles within the context of online college education.

The study's findings are structured according to the research questions introduced in Chapter 1 and examined through the methodology described in Chapter 3. Specifically, this study is guided by the following research inquiries:

- RQ1: How do instructors in online college courses describe their lived experiences with motivating students, including the instructional strategies they use, the outcomes they perceive, and the challenges and successes they encounter?
- RQ2: How do students in online college courses describe their motivational experiences, and how do they perceive the instructional strategies used by their instructors in relation to their motivation?
- RQ3: What similarities, differences, and insights emerge from comparing instructor and student perspectives on motivation-supportive instructional strategies in online college courses, and how do these perspectives align with the principles of Self-Determination Theory?

To address these questions, this chapter presents a comprehensive thematic analysis of both instructor and student experiences, emphasizing the key instructional factors that influence student motivation in online college courses. The findings are organized according to the research questions to ensure a clear and systematic presentation of the data. SDT serves as the analytical framework, allowing for an evaluation of how well the constructs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness align with participants' experiences. As a qualitative study, these findings reflect individual perspectives rather than broad generalizations about online learning.

Throughout this chapter, relevant connections to existing literature are integrated to provide context; however, the primary focus remains on how these strategies and experiences apply specifically to the participants in this study. This chapter also examines

areas of alignment and divergence between instructor and student perspectives, offering insights into how motivational strategies function in practice and how they are perceived by both groups.

Chapter 5 will expand on these findings by exploring their theoretical, practical, and research implications, considering how they relate to existing scholarship and how online instructors might refine their approaches to better support student motivation.

Overview of Study Context, Courses, and Participants

While Chapter 3 provided a detailed description of the study's courses and participants, this section provides a brief overview to contextualize the findings. This study examined four online college courses across different disciplines, each employing distinct instructional formats that shaped student motivation. Additionally, the study included 17 participants—four instructors and 13 students—who shared their lived experiences with motivation in online learning environments.

To provide a concise summary, the tables below outline the course structures and participant characteristics, establishing a foundation for the thematic analysis that follows. To protect confidentiality, both course names and participant names have been replaced with aliases. The following table presents an overview of the participating courses, including the number of student and instructor participants in each.

Table 2. Participating Courses Overview

Course Name	Subject	Format	Instructor Participants	Student Participants
PPT	Social and Behavioral Sciences – Public Health	Bi-weekly synchronous & asynchronous	1	4
IBA	Business Administration	Weekly synchronous & asynchronous	1	1
SRHB	Psychology	Weekly synchronous & asynchronous	1	5
ADVG	Advertising	Fully asynchronous	1	3

The following table provides an overview of the study participants, including their role, demographic information, and experience with online learning. For instructors, the last column highlights the primary strategies they employed to support student motivation in their courses. For students, this column presents their self-reported motivation levels regarding their willingness to attend, excel, and persist in the course, followed by the key factors that influenced those motivation levels throughout the course.

Table 3. Participant Overview Table

Alias	Role	Age Range	Gender	Ethnicity	Online Course Experience	Instructional Strategies (Instructors) / Motivation Rating & Influencing Factors (Students)
Course 1: PPT						
Hannah	Instructor	41-45	Female	White	7 years teaching experience; taught 25+ online courses	Perceived her students' motivation as high; Prioritized community building, structured support, synchronous engagement, and student well-being
22	Student	21-25	Female	African American	5+ online courses	Highly motivated – Driven by real-world applications & instructor feedback
Ella Jaber	Student	31-35	Female	African American	5+ online courses	Initially motivated, but declined – Challenged by group work dynamics
Payton Marrow	Student	26-30	Female	White	5+ online courses	Moderately motivated – Motivation varied based on structured guidance vs. independent work

Table 3. (Continued)

Alias	Role	Age Range	Gender	Ethnicity	Online Course Experience	Instructional Strategies (Instructors) / Motivation Rating & Influencing Factors (Students)
Course 1: PPT						
Red_hat	Student	26-30	Female	Asian	5+ online courses	Highly motivated – Valued course structure & professor reputation
Course 2: IBA						
Ed U. Cator	Instructor	56-60	Male	White	14+ years teaching online	Perceived his students' motivation as moderate; Emphasized structured learning, accountability, and real-world applications
Katya	Student	18-20	Female	White	3-5 online courses	Low motivation – Lack of intrinsic interest in business concepts

Table 3. (Continued)

Alias	Role	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Online Course Experience	Instructional Strategies (Instructors) / Motivation Rating & Influencing Factors (Students)
Course 3: SRHB						
Vera	Instructor	41-45	Female	White	6+ years teaching online	Perceived her students' motivation as moderate; Prioritized clarity, flexibility, structured peer discussions, & practical application
Ace	Student	18-20	Male	White	4 online courses	Initially engaged but lost motivation – Due to low course challenge
Blue Bunny	Student	21-25	Female	White	3-5 online courses	Moderate motivation – Declined due to repetitive assignments and minimal interaction
Lucy Williams	Student	18-20	Female	White	6+ online courses	Moderate motivation—sustained by structured support but impacted by lack of peer interaction and frequent assessments

Table 3. (Continued)

Alias	Role	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Online Course Experience	Instructional Strategies (Instructors) / Motivation Rating & Influencing Factors (Students)
Course 3: SRHB						
Mars	Student	21-25	Female	White	3-5 online courses	High motivation— Driven by the course’s relevance to her lab work and future career.
Violet	Student	21-25	Female	White	6+ online courses	Moderate motivation— Driven by personal relevance but challenged by easy course structure
Course 4: ADVG						
Monique	Instructor ; Doctoral Student	30-35	Female	Afro-Caribbean	3+ years teaching online	Perceived her students' motivation as moderate; Prioritized creating a humanized, supportive classroom environment with clear objectives
Blue	Student	36-40	Female	African American	11 online courses	Highly motivated – Driven by academic performance goals & personal discipline

Table 3. (Continued)

Alias	Role	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Online Course Experience	Instructional Strategies (Instructors) / Motivation Rating & Influencing Factors (Students)
Course 4: ADVG						
Jim	Student	18-20	Male	African American	4 online courses	Moderate motivation – Driven by external expectations (family & degree requirements)
Student B	Student	21-25	Female	White	6+ online courses	Moderate motivation – Preferred structured feedback but struggled with fast-paced deadlines

The tables above provide an overview of the courses and participants in this study, establishing the context for the findings that follow. With a diverse range of instructional strategies and varying levels of student motivation, the data highlight key factors influencing engagement, persistence, and learning experiences in online college courses. The following sections present a thematic analysis of these findings, structured according to the study’s research questions.

Overview Of Findings

The findings from this study are organized by participant group—beginning with the lived experiences of instructors, followed by the perspectives of their students, and concluding with a comparative analysis that explores where these perspectives align or diverge. This structure allows for a detailed exploration of how instructional strategies intended to support student motivation are experienced and interpreted in online college courses. Each section presents thematic findings grounded in participant narratives and informed by SDT, particularly the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. By presenting these perspectives separately and then comparatively, the chapter highlights both shared and contrasting experiences, offering a nuanced understanding of how motivation-supportive strategies function in the context of online college education.

Instructors' Lived Experiences Motivating Online College Students

Instructors in this study shared diverse experiences regarding their roles in online teaching, reflecting on both the rewards and challenges of delivering college courses in virtual formats. Their perspectives highlight the emotional dimensions of online instruction, the institutional and logistical hurdles they navigate, and how their teaching philosophies and approaches have evolved over time in response to student needs, cultural expectations, and institutional demands.

Figure 2 presents an overview of the supportive strategies employed by the instructors in this study, along with the key challenges they faced in motivating students in online college courses.

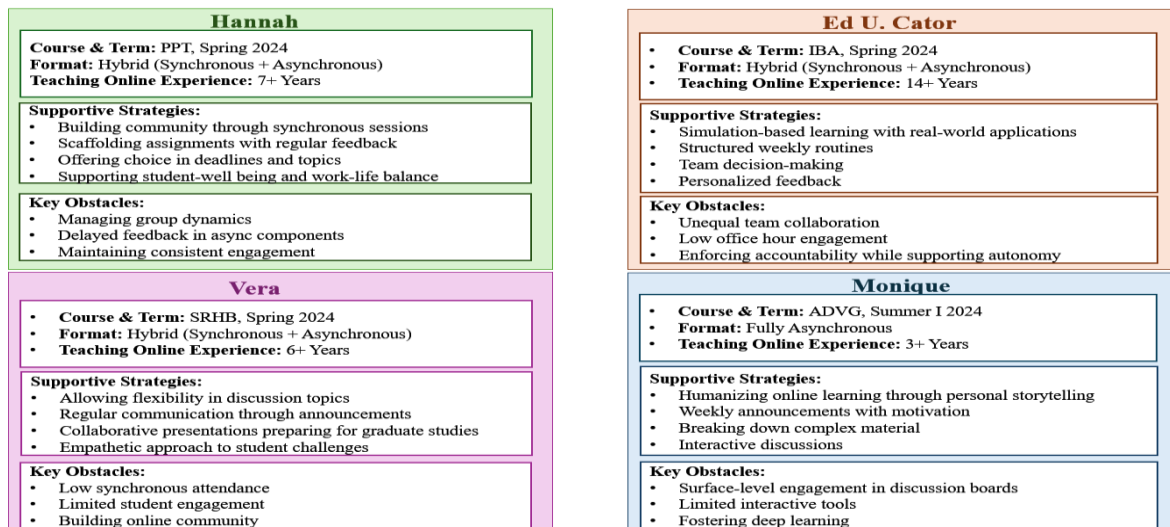


Figure 2. Instructor Supportive Strategies and Key Obstacles in Online College Courses.

Note. This figure summarizes the instructional strategies that instructors implemented to support student motivation in online courses, as well as the key obstacles they encountered in their teaching. Each profile includes course format, teaching experience, and specific methods used to enhance engagement, autonomy, and learning outcomes. The data for these profiles were gathered from instructor interviews.

As illustrated in Figure 2, Hannah, Vera, and Ed U. Cator taught hybrid courses (synchronous + asynchronous), while Monique taught a fully asynchronous course. Instructors teaching hybrid courses reported using synchronous sessions, structured feedback, collaborative assignments, and flexible deadlines to foster engagement. In contrast, Monique, who taught in a fully asynchronous format, relied on personal storytelling, weekly motivational announcements, and interactive discussions to support student motivation.

Despite these efforts, instructors faced persistent challenges. Common struggles included group dynamics and student engagement, with one instructor also noting low synchronous attendance. Meanwhile, asynchronous challenges included surface-level engagement in discussion boards, limited interactive tools, and fostering deep learning. These obstacles highlight the complexities of designing and instructing motivationally supportive online learning environments.

The following section examines the lived experiences of instructors, addressing how they conceptualize and implement motivational strategies, the successes they achieve, and the obstacles they encounter in online teaching.

Emotional and Professional Reflections: Fulfillment, Frustration, and Burnout

Instructors in this study expressed a mix of fulfillment and frustration when discussing their experiences teaching college courses online.

Hannah, the instructor of PPT, described feeling a deep sense of satisfaction in being able to reach students who might not otherwise have access to higher education. She emphasized that online learning, when designed effectively, can be a powerful tool for equity and accessibility, stating, "It has such potential to increase access to education for folks who may not have had the opportunity otherwise. If done well, it really works." However, she also acknowledged that the format requires intentional effort to create meaningful engagement, which can be emotionally taxing.

Monique, the instructor of ADVG, first trained and taught in the Caribbean before transitioning to the U.S. higher education system. She reflected on the significant adjustments she had to make in her teaching approach to adapt to this new academic

environment. She explained, "Where I come from, schooling and teaching are very different. There is more structure, more formality, and a stricter approach to learning. When I started teaching here, I realized that students expect a more informal, conversational style. I had to adjust how I interacted with them and how I presented material." This cultural shift required her to rethink her strategies for engaging students, leading her to adopt a more flexible, student-centered approach that aligned with U.S. expectations.

Similarly, Ed U. Cator, the instructor of IBA with 14 years of online teaching experience, expressed confidence in well-structured online learning environments, particularly those incorporating real-world applications and accountability measures. At the same time, he found it frustrating when students failed to engage with course resources, stating, "Some students don't fully utilize the resources available to them, and that's frustrating." His experience highlights a common challenge in online education: even when instructors design courses with ample opportunities for engagement, students' motivation and propensity to take advantage of these resources can vary, affecting their learning outcomes.

Vera, the instructor of SRHB, had mixed feelings about online education. While she valued the flexibility, she also felt that online courses lacked the personal connection of in-person settings. "It's easy to feel isolated—not just for students, but for instructors too," she reflected. This sense of detachment contributed to moments of professional dissatisfaction, particularly when students disengaged or failed to participate actively.

Beyond engagement challenges, burnout was a recurring theme among instructors. Monique, who taught ADVG in a fully asynchronous format, noted that constant online communication could be overwhelming. "There's never a clear stopping point. Emails come in at all hours, and it's hard to set boundaries when students expect instant responses." While the flexibility of online teaching had benefits, it also led to an increased workload and difficulty in maintaining a work-life balance.

Institutional and Logistical Challenges: Constraints on Effective Teaching

Beyond personal experiences, instructors encountered institutional constraints and logistical barriers that influenced their ability to implement effective strategies. A significant challenge for Ed U. Cator was academic integrity enforcement. He frequently dealt with students failing to cite sources properly, leading to concerns about plagiarism. "It's frustrating to see juniors and seniors who still don't understand the importance of citing sources. I feel like prior faculty aren't doing their jobs enforcing these standards," he stated. He also noted a lack of institutional enforcement mechanisms, requiring him to take additional steps to educate students on academic honesty.

In addition to academic integrity concerns, Ed U. Cator faced institutional limitations on course design and instructional tools. He explained that instructors must submit their syllabi each semester for approval and adhere to a department-mandated template: "We're required to submit our syllabi every semester to the instructional designers, along with a spreadsheet detailing credit hour equivalency—how much instruction happens in class versus asynchronously." While he sought ways to improve engagement, he felt constrained by the standardization of instructional materials and

assessments. These restrictions extended beyond course design, limiting his autonomy in instructional decision-making. He also noted difficulties with making structural changes to his course, stating, “I’ve been asking—politely—that we consider meeting more often. For example, my section meets from 6:00 to 6:55 once a week. Why can’t I meet twice [with the IBA class] a week? I have Tuesday nights open, so I could spread the contact hours across both nights. Although that idea never gained traction, I’ve heard others teaching upper-level online sections express similar frustrations.” Ed U. Cator’s experience illustrates the tensions between institutional control and instructional autonomy, highlighting how administrative policies can limit instructor’s ability to implement changes they believe would better support student engagement and learning.

For Hannah, institutional policies sometimes limited how she could structure her courses. She recalled having to advocate for synchronous sessions in a primarily asynchronous program, explaining, “I pushed hard for Zoom meetings because without them, it’s so much harder to build community. There was some resistance, but I knew we needed that face-to-face component.” This experience highlighted how university policies can shape course design, sometimes constraining instructors' ability to implement engagement-driven strategies.

Vera struggled with the institutional rigidity of course formats. Her self-regulation course, which relied heavily on discussion-based learning, suffered from low participation in online settings. “It’s a very discussion-heavy class, but online, it just doesn’t work the same way. Everyone has their cameras off, and getting participation

feels like pulling teeth,” she admitted. Despite these difficulties, she felt limited in her ability to make significant changes due to department requirements.

Technology was another constraint. Several instructors noted difficulties with learning management systems (LMS) and analytics tools. Ed U. Cator, for instance, wished for more detailed tracking capabilities, explaining, “It came up in an online faculty meeting yesterday. I asked if there was any way Canvas could give me more insight, especially regarding the videos I upload, which are part of their assigned work and contribute to the course’s credit hour equivalency. Currently, the analytics just show that something was watched, but not the specifics. So, I plan to contact Canvas to see if I can restructure my course to get better insights into what students are watching.” Ed U. Cator wanted to see not just whether students clicked on a video but how much of it they watched and which sections they revisited. Additionally, he relied on Canvas login records and activity tracking but found these tools insufficient for understanding student engagement in meaningful ways. These limitations affected his ability to tailor instruction effectively and identify students in need of additional support.

Adaptations Over Time: Evolving Approaches in Response to Challenges

Despite these challenges, instructors continuously adapted their strategies over time to better support student motivation. Hannah, for example, described how her perspective shifted through experience. Initially, she felt unprepared when assigned her first online course but later sought out professional development opportunities to improve her approach. “There was no formal training when I started. I just dove into every

resource I could find," she recalled. Eventually, she became a certified Quality Matters peer reviewer and began training other faculty members.

Monique's transition from the Caribbean educational system to the U.S. higher education model required her to rethink her teaching style. She realized that students in the U.S. were accustomed to more instructor-student interaction and informal engagement, leading her to incorporate more conversational elements in her course videos and communication. Over time, she found ways to blend the structured approach she was used to with the expectations of U.S. students, stating, "I had to meet students where they are. I couldn't teach the way I was taught because it wasn't translating to them."

Work-Life Balance and the Pressures of Online Teaching

Another critical aspect of instructors' lived experiences was the challenge of maintaining work-life balance while teaching online. While they remained committed to student learning, the pressures of online teaching—constant availability, institutional constraints, and competing responsibilities—may have shaped how they implemented instructional strategies.

Monique struggled with the expectation of constant availability, explaining, "It's really hard to step away when everything is online. There's always another email, another question, another clarification needed." She found that setting clear boundaries—such as limiting response times to certain hours—was essential to prevent burnout. To prevent burnout, she set clear boundaries on response times, though she also acknowledged that limited availability may have impacted how she engaged with students. Additionally, she

lacked the time and capacity to fully redesign her course, which suggests that workload constraints may have influenced how much she could modify instructional strategies.

Vera, who transitioned to online teaching after having a child, appreciated the flexibility but also acknowledged its downsides. "Being home with my son while teaching was a blessing, but it also meant that I was juggling so much at once. Sometimes I felt like I wasn't giving my students or my family 100%." While she valued online teaching for large lecture-based courses, she found it frustrating for discussion-based classes, where low student engagement made it difficult to implement her preferred instructional strategies.

Meanwhile, Ed U. Cator noted that his multiple institutional roles made it difficult to manage time effectively. "I'm in faculty senate, I'm on committees, and I'm teaching multiple sections—it's a lot. Online teaching is supposed to be flexible, but sometimes it feels like there's even less separation between work and personal life." He expressed frustration with institutional constraints on course design and scheduling, which limited his ability to make structural changes that he believed would improve student motivation.

The lived experiences of instructors in this study illustrate the complexities of teaching online courses. Although instructors did not explicitly state that these challenges reduced their motivation to teach, their experiences suggest that work-life balance constraints, institutional policies, and time limitations may have influenced how fully they were able to implement certain instructional strategies. Their experiences highlight the need for institutional support, professional development, and flexible policies that acknowledge both student and instructor needs.

As online education continues to evolve, these insights underscore the importance of culturally responsive teaching, adaptable pedagogy, and sustainable workload management. Instructors' experiences reveal that sustaining motivation in online settings requires intentional instructional design that balances structure with flexibility, fosters meaningful student connections, and supports academic persistence.

Instructor Approaches to Motivating Students and Influencing Factors

This section explores how instructors conceptualized and enacted strategies to support motivation in online college courses, as well as the contextual and ideological factors that influenced those decisions. Rather than applying a uniform set of techniques, instructors described a range of approaches shaped by their course structures, perceptions of student needs, and underlying beliefs about effective teaching and learning in digital environments.

Instructors reflected on how they offered students meaningful choices while maintaining structure and accountability. Their narratives revealed different interpretations of what it means to support student agency—some emphasized opportunities for self-directed learning, while others framed choice within clear, instructor-defined boundaries. These differences illustrate how instructors' decisions about fostering autonomous regulation were closely tied to their expectations for student responsibility, their prior teaching experiences, and the cultural or institutional norms within which they worked.

In many cases, instructors described motivation as emerging not solely from instructional strategies, but from a dynamic interplay between their teaching practices and

students' responses. For example, some instructors described adapting their course policies when they noticed that students became overwhelmed or disengaged, while others expressed frustration when students did not respond to flexibility as intended. These reflections point to the complexity and reciprocal nature of motivation—what supports one learner's engagement may hinder another's, depending on their prior experiences, goals, and capacities for self-regulation.

Ultimately, instructors' approaches to motivating students were not only pedagogical but deeply influenced by their philosophical commitments to equity, academic rigor, and student development. Their reflections emphasized that designing for motivation in online learning requires navigating multiple, and sometimes competing, goals—such as promoting independence while ensuring accountability, or creating flexibility without sacrificing clarity. These findings highlight the importance of examining how instructors' beliefs, values, and contextual constraints inform the strategies they use to promote autonomous regulation in online college settings.

Fostering Autonomy Through Structured Flexibility

A central theme in instructors' descriptions of their teaching approaches was the integration of structured flexibility—providing students with choices while maintaining clear expectations. Instructors responded to this question:

"Do you consider giving students choice or autonomy in their learning? For example, within the syllabus itself, are they able to choose different topics or assignments? Do they have opportunities to provide input on what they want to work on or how they approach their learning?"

Their responses revealed various ways they structured autonomy while balancing student needs for guidance and accountability.

Hannah, who structured her PPT course to emphasize student choice, described autonomy as a means of empowering students. She explained, "I wanted students to feel like they had control over their learning, so I let them decide how they engaged with certain assignments." She also encouraged students to negotiate due dates, stating, "When students had a voice in setting deadlines, they were more invested in meeting them."

Similarly, Vera, who taught SRHB, placed greater emphasis on student-led discussions as a way to foster autonomy. She explained, "Students should have the ability to explore what interests them rather than just responding to pre-set prompts." However, she acknowledged that some students struggled with too much choice, noting, "Some students preferred more structure and needed additional guidance, so I had to adjust accordingly."

Ed U. Cator, who designed IBA around a flipped classroom model, incorporated autonomy by allowing students to take charge of their group work. He described his approach, stating, "I reinforced the idea that teams needed to manage their own work and problem-solve independently. If I stepped in too much, they wouldn't develop essential decision-making skills."

Monique, who structured ADVG to encourage self-directed learning, framed autonomy as a shared responsibility between the instructor and students. She described her role as providing support and reminders, while students were expected to take

ownership of their work. She explained, "I could guide them, but they also needed to meet me halfway."

While all instructors incorporated some level of choice, their implementation varied based on their beliefs about student responsibility and self-regulation. Some prioritized student independence, while others structured autonomy within clear parameters to ensure accountability. These differences illustrate the varied ways instructors conceptualized and implemented autonomy-supportive strategies in online learning.

Building Community and Fostering Relatedness

Instructors also reflected on their efforts to foster a sense of community in their online courses in response to the question: "How do you approach motivating your students?" They described a range of strategies for building instructor presence, encouraging peer interaction, and maintaining engagement in both synchronous and asynchronous environments.

Hannah emphasized synchronous sessions as essential for student engagement. She explained, "Without real-time discussions, students felt like they were learning in isolation. That's why I advocated for live Zoom meetings whenever possible." To further strengthen peer connections, she structured icebreaker activities into each session, explaining, "Even a simple question about their favorite movie helped students feel like they belonged to a learning community, rather than just completing assignments on their own."

Monique, whose ADVG course was fully asynchronous, acknowledged the challenge of fostering relatedness without live interaction. To compensate, she maintained a high instructor presence through weekly announcements and personalized messages. She stated, "I tried to remind students that I saw them and their efforts. Even a short message saying, 'I know this week is tough—keep going!' made a difference."

Ed U. Cator prioritized industry relevance as a means of fostering engagement. He frequently incorporated business case studies and guest speakers, explaining, "Students were more motivated when they saw how the material connected to real life. That's why I brought in guest speakers and shared my own industry experiences whenever possible."

In contrast, Vera placed less emphasis on interpersonal connection, instead focusing on self-regulation and independent engagement with the material. She described relatedness as "valuable but not essential" to student motivation, stating, "Students should engage because the content is meaningful to them, not because they feel connected to their instructor or classmates."

These differences suggest that while most instructors recognized relatedness as an important factor in motivation, some prioritized self-directed engagement over social interaction, reflecting different perspectives on the role of community in online learning.

Providing Personalized Feedback to Enhance Competence

Instructors widely emphasized the importance of structured, personalized feedback in supporting students' sense of competence. In response to the question, "How do you balance giving students choices while ensuring they learn the content?" They

described varied approaches, from offering students flexibility in assignments to maintaining clear expectations and structured guidance.

Hannah described video-based responses as particularly effective. She explained, "Students responded better when they could hear my tone—it made feedback feel more like a conversation rather than just a list of corrections." A student, Ella, reinforced this, stating, "Her video feedback really helped me improve. It felt like she was guiding me, not just grading me."

Vera focused on detailed written feedback to support student learning. She explained, "Students needed specific guidance on how to apply theoretical concepts to their own experiences, so I made sure my comments were clear and direct."

Ed U. Cator combined peer evaluations with structured instructor feedback. He described his approach, stating, "Students didn't just get my input—they also received feedback from their teammates, which reinforced their learning from multiple perspectives."

Monique ensured that her feedback was both affirming and constructive. She explained, "Even when I pointed out areas for improvement, I always highlighted what they did well. It was important that students felt encouraged, not just critiqued."

While feedback strategies varied, all instructors emphasized the need for clarity, structure, and personalization to help students develop confidence in their abilities in an online college setting. Their approaches highlight different ways that feedback can be used not only as an evaluative tool but also as a means of fostering student competence and motivation.

More broadly, instructors described a variety of approaches to fostering motivation in online courses, shaped by their teaching philosophies, course design, and beliefs about student engagement. While all instructors incorporated strategies that supported autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they differed in how they balanced structure with flexibility, interaction with independence, and feedback with self-directed learning. These differences illustrate the complexity of designing motivationally supportive online learning experiences and the contextual factors that shape instructional decision-making.

The following section examines how instructors perceive the effectiveness of these motivational strategies, exploring their reflections on student engagement, learning outcomes, and the challenges of fostering motivation in the online learning environment.

Instructors' Perceived Outcomes and Effectiveness of Their Strategies

Drawing from their lived experiences, instructors described how they perceived the effectiveness of their instructional strategies in supporting student motivation in online college courses. These reflections, shared in response to prompts about observed changes in student engagement and motivation, revealed differences in how well various approaches supported students' autonomous regulation. While many instructors believed their strategies promoted meaningful engagement aligned with students' internal goals and values, others identified challenges in sustaining motivation—particularly in asynchronous formats where students struggled with self-regulation, limited interaction, or low engagement with feedback.

Perceived Effectiveness of Autonomy-Supportive Strategies

Instructors largely believed that structured flexibility and student choice played a crucial role in motivating students by giving them a sense of control over their learning. However, they also recognized that autonomy alone was not always enough to sustain motivation, particularly for students who lacked strong self-regulation skills.

Hannah observed that flexibility in group work helped students manage coursework more confidently, leading to greater motivation. She noted, "A lot of students are halfway through their drafts, and it's great to see how they're collaborating effectively with their partners." However, she also found that too much independence overwhelmed some students, stating, "Some students thrive when given flexibility, but others struggle with self-regulation and pacing."

Similarly, Vera found that allowing students to select discussion topics based on personal interest increased motivation by making the material feel more relevant. "I wanted students to be able to choose topics that mattered to them, so they could engage more meaningfully," she explained. However, she noted that some students lacked confidence in making independent academic decisions. "A few students told me they weren't sure what to write about, even though I gave them options. I had to provide more scaffolding than I initially expected."

Ed U. Cator observed that his flipped classroom model encouraged self-directed learning, but motivation waned when students did not actively engage with available resources. "Some students don't take full advantage of the resources, and that's frustrating. They have everything they need, but they don't always engage with it."

Monique valued autonomy but questioned its effectiveness in online learning. While some students thrived on flexibility, others engaged minimally in discussions, contributing little beyond surface-level responses. "Sometimes I see discussion posts that just say, 'Great thoughts,' and it feels like they're just checking the box rather than engaging."

These findings suggest that autonomy-supportive strategies can enhance motivation when paired with structured guidance. However, students who struggle with self-regulation may require additional scaffolding to fully benefit from autonomy.

Perceived Effectiveness of Community-Building Strategies

Fostering relatedness was a common priority among instructors, though their perceptions of how well these efforts translated into long-term engagement varied. Instructors were asked: "How do you check in to see if they're [their students] happy or if they're experiencing any challenges?"

Hannah observed that students who participated in Zoom icebreakers and structured group activities were more engaged throughout the course. She explained, "Building community in the classroom is really important to me. I strive to see each student as a person first, not just as a student." She perceived that a strong sense of community contributed to autonomous regulation by making students feel supported and accountable.

Monique, however, found that asynchronous discussion boards often failed to foster meaningful connections. She noted that disengaged students tended to put in

minimal effort, stating, "Students will post responses that say things like 'I agree' or 'Great thoughts,' but I can tell they're not really engaging with each other."

Vera also struggled to maintain student motivation in an asynchronous setting. She attempted to compensate by providing quick instructor responses in discussion boards, explaining, "I make a point to respond to students as soon as I can, so they feel like there's someone actively engaging with their work." However, despite these efforts, she noted that students still expressed feelings of isolation, leading to decreased motivation over time.

These reflections suggest that relatedness-enhancing strategies must be intentionally structured to sustain motivation. In synchronous settings, real-time engagement fosters a stronger sense of community, while in asynchronous environments, lack of structured interaction may lead to disengagement (Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006).

Perceived Effectiveness of Feedback and Competence-Supportive Strategies

The instructors strongly believed that clear, structured feedback was one of the most effective ways to support motivation by reinforcing competence. Their reflections revealed that not only the content but also the mode of delivery influenced how students engaged with feedback.

In describing their strategies for motivating students, Hannah shared that video feedback was especially effective, noting that students responded positively to hearing her voice. "I create quick video summaries of my feedback... a focused video message helps students digest the feedback better." However, she also observed that some students never watched the feedback, limiting its impact on motivation.

Ed U. Cator found that peer evaluations reinforced accountability and competence, but students still valued instructor feedback more. "Peer evaluations help students reflect on their contributions, but I find that they still place the most weight on instructor feedback."

Monique discovered that email-based feedback often went unnoticed by students. In response, she shifted her approach, embedding feedback directly within the learning management system: "I've started incorporating more feedback into Canvas instead of email because students would just ignore the emails."

These findings reinforce that competence-supportive strategies are critical to student motivation, but their effectiveness depends on accessibility and meaningful engagement with feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

While instructors recognized the value of autonomy, relatedness, and competence-supportive strategies, they acknowledged that these approaches were not always effective for every student or context. Maintaining student engagement posed challenges, as fostering interaction and accountability required additional effort. Issues such as group conflicts, student fatigue, and inconsistent participation often complicated motivation-supportive efforts, prompting instructors to refine and adapt their strategies over time.

The following section explores the challenges and successes instructors encountered in sustaining student motivation in online learning. Their reflections reveal how course design, student needs, and instructional decision-making interact, underscoring the necessity of intentional, flexible, and responsive teaching strategies in online education.

Challenges and Successes in Supporting Student Motivation Online

Instructors in this study encountered both challenges and successes in their efforts to sustain student motivation in online courses. They shared that course, student interactions, and instructional strategies significantly influenced engagement, often requiring ongoing adaptation to maintain persistence. While they reported positive outcomes from offering autonomy, fostering relatedness, and reinforcing competence, they also described common obstacles—such as group conflicts, student fatigue, and fluctuating levels of motivation over time. These challenges led instructors to adjust their teaching approaches, underscoring the need for intentional, responsive, and flexible strategies to support student motivation in online learning environments.

Challenges in Sustaining Motivation

Managing Motivation in Challenging Course Formats. Instructors faced challenges in sustaining motivation due to constraints related to course format, such as scheduling limitations and declining engagement in certain online structures. Hannah, for instance, observed that fatigue in late-evening classes contributed to lower participation, noting, "Students are tired at the end of the day, and participation drops." To address this, she incorporated interactive tools like Padlet, breakout discussions, and icebreakers, explaining, "These activities help reinvigorate students when external factors like fatigue threaten engagement." Research supports that varied instructional activities sustain motivation in demanding learning environments (Boling, Hough, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012).

Vera, in her synchronous course, observed a gradual decline in attendance and motivation when synchronous sessions were optional. "We started with around 60 people in the first meeting, then it dropped to about 30, and by the end of the semester, only 9 attended," she noted. She also found that participation was often low, particularly in discussion-based courses, explaining:

In my self-regulation class, I'm starting to feel like the online format doesn't work as well. It's a very discussion-heavy class, and online, it just doesn't lead to rich conversations. Everyone has their cameras off, and it's like pulling teeth trying to get people to participate. Only one or two students chime in, and it's supposed to be a fun elective.

While Vera had not yet made adjustments by the end of the semester, she acknowledged these challenges and expressed interest in refining her approach in future courses.

These challenges highlight how the online format can sometimes hinder engagement, particularly in courses that rely heavily on discussion and interaction—a phenomenon well-documented in research on online learning environments (Richardson, Maeda, & Swan, 2017; Fiock, 2020; Castelli & Sarvary, 2021).

Group Dynamics and Their Impact on Motivation. Instructors identified group work as both a motivator and a challenge, depending on how effectively teams functioned. Throughout their interviews, instructors responded to various questions about collaboration, balancing autonomy with structure, and the role of teamwork in student motivation. These included: How do you balance giving students choices while ensuring they learn the content?", "Do the teams collaborate with one another, or are they not supposed to?", "How do you approach motivating your students?", and "Have you noticed any changes in student motivation during the semester?"

Hannah found that structured group activities increased motivation, but unresolved interpersonal conflicts led to frustration and disengagement. To address this, she implemented “brain trusts,” where independent students could collaborate briefly in breakout sessions instead of being locked into dysfunctional groups. "The dynamics of a group can significantly impact motivation, so I've learned to be more flexible in structuring these interactions," she explained. Research indicates that adjusting group structures can sustain motivation by mitigating negative interactions (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Ed U. Cator also faced challenges with team participation, noting that some students contributed minimally to projects which demotivated their peers. To address this, he implemented peer evaluations and grading penalties but acknowledged the risk of undermining autonomy with excessive monitoring. "I know penalties feel like surveillance, but I also need students to take responsibility for their learning," he stated. His experience highlights the delicate balance between accountability and autonomy in maintaining motivation (Reeve, 2009).

Feedback as a Motivational Tool—Challenges in Application. Instructors emphasized feedback as essential to sustaining motivation, yet ensuring students engaged with it remained a challenge. At various points in their interviews, they reflected on the role of feedback in motivation in response to questions such as: “How do you approach motivating your students?” and “Have you noticed any changes in student motivation during the semester?”

Hannah observed that students often felt demotivated after receiving grades, sometimes withdrawing or reducing effort. To counteract this, she scheduled one-on-one meetings to provide reassurance, stating, "These conversations helped students get over that hump." This aligns with research suggesting that timely, specific feedback sustains motivation by helping students process setbacks constructively (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Monique expressed frustration when students did not apply feedback, explaining, "Some students ignored the comments, which affected their final work quality." She attributed this to the asynchronous format, where lack of immediate reinforcement reduced students' motivation to engage with revisions. Recognizing this challenge, she introduced interactive feedback elements, including video instructions and live Q&A sessions, to increase student investment in the revision process. Research on student motivation in online learning suggests that timely and interactive feedback enhances engagement by reinforcing competence and encouraging self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sun & Rueda, 2012).

Successes That Sustained Student Motivation

Humanizing Instruction to Strengthen Relatedness. Instructors found success in humanizing their instructional approaches, helping students develop a stronger sense of connection in online college courses. Their responses to questions about student motivation provided insights into how they fostered relatedness. These included: "How do you approach motivating your students?" and "Have you noticed any changes in student motivation during the semester?"

Monique emphasized that unscripted, informal videos helped establish a strong instructor presence, reinforcing students' sense of relatedness. She intentionally left minor errors or interruptions in her recordings, explaining, "I don't edit my weekly lecture videos... If my dog barks or I mess up a word, I just keep going. It adds authenticity to the experience." She believed that these moments helped students feel more comfortable and connected, reducing the perceived distance in online learning.

Hannah also found that direct interactions, such as one-on-one meetings, strengthened students' confidence, particularly when they faced challenges with assignments. She observed that students who struggled with major assessments were more likely to disengage unless they received additional instructor support. To address this, she scheduled personalized check-ins to discuss feedback and reassure students of their progress. She reflected, "After a big assignment, some students get really discouraged. I make sure to meet with them individually to talk about their progress and remind them that one grade doesn't define their ability." These interactions helped students regain motivation by reinforcing their sense of competence, a critical factor in SDT's framework for autonomous regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017).

Ed U. Cator also prioritized developing an instructor presence that fostered student motivation, particularly by making himself highly accessible to students through multiple communication channels. He found that quick and responsive communication helped students stay engaged, explaining, "I try to answer student emails as fast as I can. If they feel like they can't reach me, they disengage. But if they know I'm available, they're more likely to ask for help and keep going." He also engaged with students in

discussion forums to sustain their motivation throughout the course. “I always jump into the discussion boards, not just as an observer but as a participant. If students know I’m reading their work and responding, they take it more seriously.”

This finding highlights the importance of instructor presence in online courses and its role in sustaining student motivation, a point that will be furthered explored in Chapter 5. His experience aligns with research by Richardson, Maeda, Swan, and Kwon (2017), which suggests that instructor responsiveness and availability contribute to students’ sense of connection, reducing the likelihood of disengagement in online learning environments.

Course Design Strategies That Supported Motivation. Instructors found that clear structure and goal alignment helped sustain motivation by reinforcing competence. In response to questions about balancing structure with student choice, they described their approaches to course design, including “How do you balance giving students choices while ensuring they learn the content?”

Monique emphasized that explicitly linking assignments to course objectives helped students see their relevance, explaining, "If students don’t see the connection between an assignment and their learning goals, their motivation drops." This aligns with research suggesting that competence-supportive environments enhance autonomous regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Vera found that flexibility in discussion topics encouraged student ownership of learning but also noted that some students needed more structure to stay engaged. "Too

many choices can overwhelm some students—they need more guidance to stay on track," she reflected.

Hannah structured her course so that assignments built toward a final project, explaining, "When students have checkpoints along the way, they feel like they're making progress, and that keeps them going." Research suggests that structured progression reinforces competence, sustaining motivation over time (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Ed U. Cator found that connecting coursework to real-world applications increased motivation, stating, "I always tell my students, 'This is exactly what you'll be doing in the real world,' and that connection keeps them engaged." By linking assignments to professional relevance, he reinforced competence and autonomous regulation.

Motivating students in online courses requires intentional, flexible, and evolving strategies. Instructors continuously navigated challenges such as disengagement, course structure limitations, and balancing autonomy with accountability, adapting their approaches to sustain motivation in a virtual setting.

While previous sections have explored how instructors' strategies shaped student motivation, the following section examines how these approaches align with SDT's core principles. This analysis provides insight into how instructors' strategies explicitly supported—or in some cases, constrained—autonomy, competence, and relatedness, further informing our understanding of motivation in online learning.

Evaluating the Alignment of Instructors' Strategies with SDT

While instructors aimed to support student motivation through autonomy, competence, and relatedness, their strategies varied in how effectively they aligned with Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Some instructional choices successfully reinforced SDT's psychological needs, while others unintentionally limited autonomy, failed to fully develop competence, or did not sustain relatedness over time.

This section evaluates the extent to which instructors' strategies supported or constrained these three psychological needs, highlighting both successes and areas where motivation was unintentionally weakened.

Autonomy: Balancing Choice with Structure

According to SDT, autonomy refers to the experience of volition and self-endorsed action, which supports more internalized forms of motivation such as autonomous regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Instructors in this study aimed to support student agency by offering choice in assignments, flexible deadlines, and opportunities for independent engagement. However, the success of these approaches depended not only on how instructors structured these choices but also on how students interpreted and responded to them—often in ways that reflected their prior experiences, self-regulation skills, and contextual constraints.

Hannah and Monique intentionally structured flexibility in their courses to encourage student ownership of learning while maintaining clear boundaries. Hannah explained, "If students prefer to work alone, I encourage it, but I provide deadlines, so they stay on track." Monique emphasized giving students autonomy over project topics

and pacing but noted, “They also need structure to guide them.” These approaches reflect an understanding that autonomy must be supported, not simply granted.

In contrast, Vera and Ed U. Cator encountered challenges when autonomy was offered without sufficient scaffolding. Vera allowed students to select their own discussion topics, but some students found the open-ended nature of the task disorienting. “A few students said they weren’t sure what to write about, even though I gave them options,” she noted. Similarly, Ed U. Cator’s reliance on student-led group work sometimes resulted in disengagement when students did not feel confident navigating the expectations independently. “They have all the resources they need, but some don’t take full advantage of them,” he observed.

These accounts reveal that instructional practices intended to foster autonomy can yield varied outcomes depending on student readiness and interpretation. Rather than a simple matter of more or less choice, effective support for autonomous regulation requires aligning flexibility with students’ evolving capacities for decision-making, accountability, and meaning-making. Instructors who paired choice with guidance—through clear expectations, rationale, and feedback—appeared more successful in promoting sustained engagement. This finding underscores the importance of viewing autonomy not as a static offering but as a dynamic process shaped by both instructor intent and student response.

Competence: Reinforcing Confidence Through Feedback and Assessment

SDT highlights competence as key for sustained motivation, as students need to feel capable of mastering academic tasks to remain engaged (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Instructors attempted to reinforce competence through feedback, skill progression, and clear expectations, but the effectiveness of these strategies depended on delivery, frequency, and student engagement with assessments.

Hannah and Monique provided structured feedback mechanisms that effectively reinforced competence. Hannah's use of video feedback helped students process critiques more constructively, making feedback feel personal and engaging rather than discouraging. Monique designed assignments to gradually build skills, ensuring that students had multiple opportunities to apply feedback and improve over time.

In contrast, Vera and Ed U. Cator faced barriers in reinforcing competence effectively. Vera provided detailed written feedback, but students lacked regular checkpoints to track their progress, leading to uncertainty. "Some students told me they couldn't tell how well they were doing because there weren't enough assessments," she reflected. Similarly, Ed U. Cator used peer evaluations to promote self-reflection, but students still placed greater value on instructor feedback, making peer assessments less effective in reinforcing competence.

These experiences highlight that reinforcing competence requires more than feedback alone—students benefit most when assessments are structured to provide multiple opportunities for improvement. Without regular progress monitoring, students may struggle to gauge their learning, leading to frustration rather than motivation.

Relatedness: Structuring Engagement to Sustain Connection

SDT emphasizes relatedness as a fundamental motivational driver, particularly in online environments where students may feel isolated (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017).

Instructors employed varied approaches to fostering connection, with some strategies effectively strengthening relationships and others falling short due to inconsistent interaction structures.

Hannah and Monique successfully created structured engagement opportunities that enhanced peer and instructor connections. Hannah prioritized synchronous Zoom sessions and interactive discussions, ensuring students had consistent avenues for connection. "Students engage more when they feel part of a learning community," she explained. Similarly, Monique used personalized video messages and frequent instructor engagement to reduce the perceived distance in asynchronous learning.

Conversely, Vera and Ed U. Cator struggled to sustain relatedness in their courses. Vera's optional synchronous meetings saw declining participation, making peer interaction sporadic rather than consistent. "If students don't interact regularly, motivation fades," she noted. Ed U. Cator, who incorporated real-world industry discussions, found that while some students appreciated this connection, others found his strict expectations intimidating rather than relational. One student shared, "It felt like he was frustrated when we didn't know something, so I hesitated to ask for help."

These findings suggest that relatedness-supportive strategies must be intentionally structured and sustained. Simply providing opportunities for interaction is not enough— instructors who actively facilitated engagement and participated consistently saw stronger motivation outcomes than those who relied on self-directed student interaction.

While the previous sections explored how instructors designed their courses to foster student motivation and the extent to which their strategies aligned with SDT, the

effectiveness of these approaches cannot be fully understood without considering the perspectives of students themselves.

Instructors made intentional efforts to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, but their success was often shaped by how students experienced and interpreted these strategies in practice. Some students thrived under flexible, student-centered learning environments, while others struggled with self-regulation, engagement, or feelings of isolation.

The following section shifts focus to the lived experiences of students in online college courses, examining how they navigated challenges, sustained their motivation, and responded to instructional strategies. These perspectives provide critical insight into how motivational principles play out in real learning contexts and highlight the factors that shape student persistence and motivation in online education.

Students' Lived Experiences and Motivation in Online College Courses

Students' experiences in online college courses illustrate how instructional strategies, interpersonal dynamics, and course design influence motivation. Their reflections provide insight into how autonomy, competence, and relatedness, key principles of SDT, shape student motivation in online college learning environments. This section examines how students navigated work-life balance, instructional strategies, peer interaction, and course design, and how these experiences align with SDT.

Figure 3 highlights four student participants whose experiences exemplify distinct motivational trajectories observed in this study. These cases were selected to demonstrate the range of student experiences and to illustrate how different combinations of

instructional strategies and personal factors influenced motivation in online learning environments.

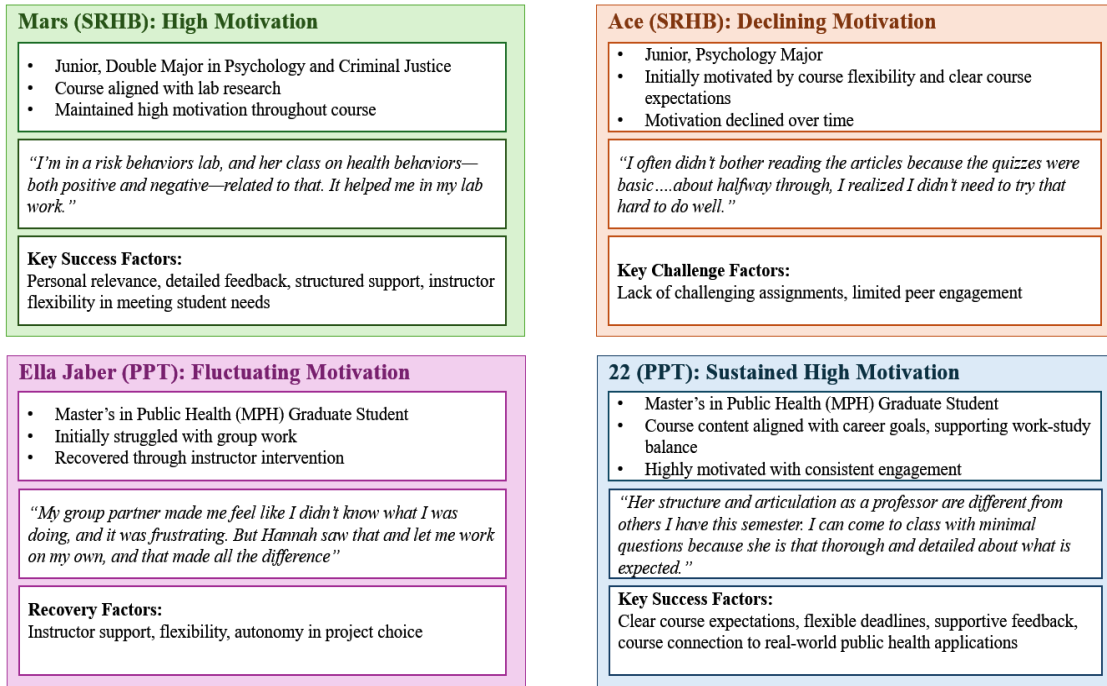


Figure 3. Student Motivational Trajectories in Online College Courses.

Note. This figure presents four student cases, each representing a distinct motivational pattern in online courses: high motivation, fluctuating motivation, sustained high motivation, and declining motivation. The profiles demonstrate how various factors—including instructional support, course relevance, autonomy, and engagement opportunities—shaped student motivation. The data for these profiles were drawn from student background questionnaires and interviews.

As illustrated in Figure 3, students' motivation in online courses was shaped by multiple factors, including instructional feedback, course expectations, and peer interaction. Some students, like Mars and 22, remained highly motivated due to course

relevance, structured feedback, and instructor support. Others, such as Ace, experienced declining motivation when assignments lacked challenge and peer engagement was minimal. Ella Jaber's experience highlights how motivation can fluctuate over time, particularly when group work dynamics presented challenges, but can recover with appropriate instructional support and autonomy.

While these four cases illustrate distinct motivational patterns, other students exhibited a mix of these characteristics. For example, students like Blue Bunny and Violet demonstrated moderate motivation but experienced disengagement due to passive learning activities and repetitive assignments. Similarly, Jim and Student B were moderately motivated but relied on structured feedback or external expectations to sustain their engagement. This range of experiences suggests that while the four identified patterns capture broad trends, individual student motivation remains complex and influenced by multiple, interacting factors.

These cases underscore the dynamic nature of motivation in online learning, demonstrating how student engagement shifts based on course design, personal goals, and instructor-student interactions. While some students thrived due to the relevance of course material and structured support, others disengaged when instructional strategies did not align with their learning needs. The following sections further explore these themes, analyzing how students' experiences with autonomy, competence, and relatedness influenced their persistence and motivation in online courses.

Balancing Responsibilities: The Role of Autonomy

A defining characteristic of online learning is the flexibility it provides, allowing students to balance coursework with employment and personal responsibilities. For many students, this flexibility was a primary motivator, enabling them to persist in their studies without compromising other commitments.

Payton Marrow, a graduate student in PPT, emphasized how control over her schedule supported her motivation, stating, “It was stressful balancing work, school, and my commitments, but knowing I could complete assignments when it worked for me made a huge difference.” Similarly, 22, a graduate student in public health, described how autonomy in scheduling reduced academic stress, explaining, “There comes a time when we have to choose between school and work, and my motivation stems from not feeling burdened by schoolwork.”

For students with non-traditional schedules, such as Jim, a student in ADVG and a football player, autonomy was essential in managing his academic and athletic commitments. He explained, “The flexibility of the asynchronous schedule made it easier to fit coursework around practices and games.” His experience highlights the way autonomy-supportive course structures allow students to remain motivated to stay engaged, even under demanding schedules.

Beyond schedule flexibility, some students valued autonomy in how they engaged with course content. Student B, also a student in ADVG, found that flexibility in discussion participation enhanced engagement, stating, “I liked that I could engage in discussions at my own pace—it gave me time to think before responding.” This suggests that autonomy in online courses is not only beneficial for scheduling but also for allowing

students to engage in ways that align with their cognitive processing styles and learning preferences.

However, while autonomy enhanced motivation for many students, too much flexibility without structure introduced challenges. Lucy Williams, a student in SRHB, noted that flexibility sometimes encouraged procrastination, stating, “Without frequent deadlines, it was easy to put off studying until just before exams.” Similarly, Katya, a student in IBA, appreciated the ability to complete work on her own schedule but found the instructor’s rigid grading expectations limiting, explaining, “I definitely tried much harder... but I was a little resentful. It felt like I was doing the assignment just to meet his standards rather than to learn.”

These findings align with SDT’s assertion that autonomy must be balanced with structure and guidance to fully support motivation (Reeve, 2002). Beyond autonomy, students’ motivation was also shaped by competence, particularly how course design, instructor feedback, and workload expectations supported or hindered their ability to succeed.

Course Design, Workload, and Competence

Students’ perceptions of competence, or their belief in their ability to succeed, were shaped by course structure, workload, and feedback. Well-organized courses with scaffolded assignments contributed to motivation, helping students track progress and build confidence in their learning.

Mars, a student in SRHB, described how coursework relevance strengthened her sense of competence, stating, “I’m in a risk behaviors lab, and her class on health

behaviors—both positive and negative—related to that. It helped me in my lab work.” Because she was able to apply course concepts directly to her research, she gained practical skills and a deeper understanding of behavioral health topics. Additionally, the structured assignments and research-focused activities challenges her in meaningful ways, reinforcing her competence in her academic abilities.

In addition to course relevance, instructor feedback played a critical role in fostering competence. Mars further noted how structured feedback contributed to her learning, stating, “The comments on my first paper helped me improve so much. I felt more prepared for the next assignment and more confident.” She initially believed her work was strong, but targeted feedback allowed her to refine her approach and develop stronger academic skills. Similarly, the course’s presentation component—while initially daunting—helped her build research and public speaking confidence, which was particularly valuable as it was her first semester as a lab student.

Ella Jaber, a student in PPT, found that consistent instructor reminders helped sustain engagement, explaining, “The fact that she constantly reminds me... makes it impossible to ignore the class.” These experiences highlight SDT’s argument that competence is strengthened when students receive structured, constructive feedback that supports their learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Additionally, the use of structured guidance and reminders reflect principles of scaffolding, where appropriately calibrated support enables students to develop confidence and mastery over time (Vygotsky, 1978).

Conversely, when coursework was unclear or overly demanding, students struggled with motivation. Katya, in IBA, found that an overwhelming number of

objectives made it difficult to engage with the material, explaining, “The course is loaded. There are too many objectives for what we should be learning.” Similarly, Student B in ADVG expressed frustration with assignments that did not clearly align with learning goals, stating, “We had all these tasks to complete, but I didn’t always understand how they related to what we were actually supposed to be learning.”

These findings suggest that competence is reinforced when students feel coursework is clear, manageable and relevant to student’s academic goals (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). Given the importance of competence in sustaining motivation, instructor support and feedback were critical in supporting student confidence and persistence in online college learning.

Autonomous Regulation and the Meaningful Engagement of Course Material

Beyond perceptions of competence, students’ motivation was also influenced by the extent to which they found personal meaning and relevance in their coursework. According to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci 2017), autonomous regulation arises when students find learning inherently interesting and enjoyable, engaging in it for its own sake rather than being driven solely by external rewards. While relevance to personal goals can enhance motivation, autonomous regulation is primarily driven by curiosity and a sense of enjoyment in the learning process.

Several students described experiences where course design and instructional strategies fostered autonomous regulation by connecting coursework to real-world applications, future career goals, and personal values. A common theme among students

was the importance of understanding why assignments mattered, which increased their engagement.

22, a student in PPT, noted that having clarity on the purpose of coursework made a significant difference, stating, "It was easier to engage with assignments once I understood why they mattered." This aligns with research suggesting that when students perceive coursework as purposeful, they are more likely to persist in learning and develop autonomous regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Similarly, Payton, a student in PPT, found that seeing coursework as preparation for professional settings strengthened motivation: "I can see how this coursework would be useful in a future interview. It aligns with what I imagine would be standard interview questions, so it's motivating to think about how I could use this experience as an answer."

Beyond clarity in assignments, many students were motivated by the real-world relevance of course material, particularly when they saw direct connections to their academic or career goals. Ella Jaber, a student in PPT, explained, 'The course material relates a lot to what I want to do in my future career, so I'm motivated to learn as much as I can.' This reflection suggests that when students perceive coursework as relevant to their personal or professional aspirations, they are more motivated to engage deeply with the material.

For some students, motivation was enhanced through course activities that encouraged reflection on personal values, fostering a deeper connection to the material. Student B, a student in ADVG, shared how an instructor's approach to values-based learning increased engagement: "I liked it when she asked us to reflect on our three main

values... it made the content feel more personal." This approach aligns with research indicating that when students can connect coursework to their own identity and values, they experience greater autonomous regulation (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

Additionally, instructor communication played a role in fostering autonomous regulation by reinforcing the real-world significance of course material. Ella Jaber, a student in PPT, described how an instructor's intentional approach to explaining assignments strengthened her appreciation for the coursework, stating, "She always explained why we were doing each task and how it connected to real-life applications, which made me appreciate the assignments more." Similarly, Red_hat, a student in PPT, emphasized how career relevance increased engagement, explaining, "The course material is directly relevant to what I want to do in my future career... It's motivating to think about how I could use this experience in a real-life context." These responses suggest that when instructors explicitly articulate the applicability of coursework to students' futures, they are more likely to engage deeply and persist in their learning (Ormrod, 2020).

Balancing External Pressures and Autonomous Regulation in Online Learning

While several students described experiences that reflected autonomous engagement—such as valuing course relevance or connecting learning to future goals—others emphasized external drivers of participation, including grades, deadlines, and family expectations. These accounts highlight the contextual and dynamic nature of motivation in online learning and suggest that students' regulatory styles may vary over time or across tasks.

For example, Blue, a student in ADVG, rated their motivation level as high but clarified that it was driven entirely by grades: “I was very motivated because I needed to finish for my grade and GPA.” Similarly, Jim, another student in ADVG, shared that his primary source of motivation was familial expectation rather than the course itself, stating, “Mostly my family. I want to do well for them. But there wasn’t anything specific about this course that made me more motivated.” These examples reflect more controlled forms of motivation, where engagement is shaped by external contingencies rather than internalized value.

Katya, a student in IBA, described how her motivation declined when external incentives were removed, explaining, “Without any incentive, I’m not really doing the readings in detail.” Her experience illustrates a key limitation of controlled regulation: while external motivators can support compliance, they may not promote sustained engagement or deeper learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

These reflections suggest that student motivation in online courses cannot be cleanly categorized as intrinsic or extrinsic. Instead, they support SDT’s view that motivation exists along a continuum—from externally regulated behaviors to more autonomous forms of regulation—shaped by students’ evolving goals, values, and contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Course design, therefore, should not only promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness but also account for the reality that many students begin with external motives. Instructional strategies that offer meaningful rationale, personal relevance, and supportive feedback may help students internalize

academic goals over time, fostering more autonomous forms of regulation and deeper integration of learning goals into their sense of self.

Instructor Support and Its Influence on Motivation

Instructor presence played a vital role in shaping motivation by providing structured feedback and fostering a sense of connection, both of which strengthened students' competence and relatedness. Many students described positive experiences where instructors offered timely feedback, flexibility, and responsiveness, reinforcing their motivation. Payton Marrow, in PPT, appreciated how her instructor's feedback helped her progress, explaining, "Her [Hannah] feedback helped me improve my work. Even when I did well, she gave suggestions to push me further." Similarly, Ella Jaber, another student in PPT, described how her instructor's flexibility in course structure improved her motivation when she faced challenges in group work. "When my instructor noticed I was struggling with my group, she let me work independently. That completely changed my motivation."

Mars, a student in SRHB, found instructor responsiveness and structured guidance essential to staying engaged in the course. "When the professor [Vera] clarified expectations and checked in on us, it helped me feel like I wasn't just completing tasks alone." For these students, instructor support not only helped them develop competence but also created an environment where they felt encouraged to persist.

Not all instructor interactions, however, fostered motivation. Some students described negative experiences with instructor communication that discouraged engagement. Katya, a student in IBA, hesitated to seek further help after a harsh response

regarding citation formatting. “It really felt like he [Ed U. Cator] was yelling at us, and it just made me not want to ask him questions anymore.” Similarly, Blue, a student in ADVG, perceived sarcasm in feedback as demotivating, stating, “Her [Monique] responses became a bit sarcastic. If I reached out to her, the replies felt condescending.”

These experiences highlight how instructor communication style—whether supportive or discouraging—directly influences students’ willingness to engage with the course and persist in their learning (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). While encouraging feedback, flexibility, and responsiveness helped students feel supported, perceived criticism or dismissiveness created barriers to engagement, discouraging students from seeking further support. Although SDT does not explicitly focus on communication style, these reactions align with the theory’s emphasis on relatedness. When students perceive instructors as approachable and supportive, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and connection in the course, which fosters engagement and motivation. Conversely, when communication is perceived as critical or unresponsive, students may feel isolated, reducing their sense of relatedness and, in turn, their motivation to persist in learning.

Beyond instructor interaction, peer collaboration also played a significant role in motivation in online college learning environments.

Peer Interaction and Relatedness

For many students, the ability to connect with peers influenced their motivation in online courses. Some students described discussion boards and collaborative activities as key motivators, while others reported feeling isolated due to a lack of structured peer

engagement. Jim, a student in ADVG, appreciated discussion boards and occasional video posts as tools for fostering a sense of community, while Violet, a student in SRHB, found the lack of structured peer interaction demotivating, stating, “Sometimes it felt like I was just doing the work on my own, without a real connection to classmates.” Blue Bunny echoed this sentiment, explaining, “The only interaction I had with my classmates was during a group presentation.”

At the same time, small instructor-led efforts helped some students develop a stronger sense of community. Jim described how a simple introductory video from his instructor created a sense of connection, stating, “She [Monique] sent out a video at the beginning of the class, and I learned she was a Black woman, which was cool.”

Students' lived experiences in online college courses highlight how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape motivation. When students had flexibility with structure, clear expectations, and strong instructor presence, they remained motivated to engage with coursework. However, when autonomy led to procrastination, excessive workload reduced competence, or peer interaction was limited, motivation declined. These findings emphasize the need for intentional course design that balances autonomy with structure, reinforces competence through clear expectations and feedback, and fosters relatedness through meaningful instructor and peer interactions.

While these findings provide insight into how students experience motivation in online college courses, their perspectives do not always align with instructors' intentions or perceptions of effective teaching strategies. To fully understand the dynamics of

motivation in online learning, it is essential to examine where students and instructors share common perspectives on motivational strategies and where discrepancies emerge.

The following section explores these points of similarity and difference, shedding light on how instructional decisions impact student motivation from both viewpoints.

Where Students and Instructors Agree—and Differ—on Motivation

Building on the difficulties of how SDT principles manifest in online college learning, this section examines the extent to which students' and instructors' perceptions align or diverge regarding motivational strategies. While both groups recognize the importance of instructor presence, structured organization, and autonomy-supportive teaching, key differences emerge in areas such as feedback delivery, workload expectations, and peer interaction. These discrepancies illustrate how instructional practices intended to promote motivation are sometimes perceived differently by students, shaping their effectiveness in online learning environments in higher education.

Shared Perceptions of Motivational Strategies

Both students and instructors acknowledged the importance of instructor presence and timely feedback in fostering motivation. Instructors viewed frequent communication, structured engagement, and accessibility as essential to keeping students motivated.

Hannah, who taught PPT, described her approach to engagement: “Even when we don’t meet synchronously, I make sure students know I’m still here—I send messages, I check in, I hop into breakout rooms when possible.”

Students in her course affirmed that her consistent communication helped them stay motivated. Payton Marrow, a student in PPT, stated, “Even during the weeks we

didn't meet, her [Hannah] presence was felt through her emails and check-ins. It kept me motivated to stay on track.” Similarly, students in Monique’s ADVG course appreciated her use of unscripted video announcements, which helped humanize the online learning experience. However, while some students found these strategies encouraging, others, such as Blue in ADVG, felt that the tone of communication influenced their motivation, stating, “Her responses became a bit condescending, which made me hesitant to reach out.”

Students and instructors also agreed that structured organization supports motivation by reducing uncertainty in online courses. Vera, who taught SRHB, explained, “I try to make sure everything is mapped out in advance—students should always know what’s coming next.” Students like Ace, enrolled in SRHB, appreciated this structure, sharing, “After the first class, I knew exactly when my group presentation would be and who I’d be working with. That structure helped me plan ahead.”

However, some students found that course structure alone was not always enough to eliminate confusion, particularly in hybrid or asynchronous formats. Payton Marrow, in PPT, described initial difficulties adjusting to a mix of synchronous and asynchronous sessions, stating, “At first, I was confused about when we were supposed to meet and when we weren’t, but after a few weeks, I got used to it.” These experiences suggest that while structured organization helps reduce uncertainty, students may still require explicit guidance on course expectations, especially when navigating multiple modes of learning (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens 2012).

Instructors and students also agreed that autonomy-supportive practices foster motivation. Monique, in ADVG, explained her approach: “I want students to feel ownership over their work, so I let them choose research topics that are meaningful to them.” This approach aligned with SDT’s emphasis on autonomy, and students such as Blue in ADVG found this motivating, stating, “I loved that we got to pick our own topics. It made the assignments more interesting and personal.” However, some students noted that too much flexibility without clear guidance led to procrastination, reinforcing SDT’s claim that autonomy must be balanced with structure to be effective (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008).

Divergent Perceptions of Motivational Strategies

While students and instructors largely agreed on the importance of instructor presence and structured organization, notable differences emerged in perceptions of feedback, workload, peer interaction, and learning formats. These discrepancies highlight the complexity of fostering motivation in online courses, as the same strategies were experienced in divergent ways.

Feedback Delivery: Clarity vs. Discouragement. One notable area of divergence involved perceptions of feedback delivery. In Ed U. Cator’s IBA course, Katya found the feedback effective in improving her academic writing, particularly around APA formatting, but felt discouraged by its tone. “The detailed feedback really helped me improve,” she explained, “but sometimes it felt like I was being yelled at.” For her, the emotional tone of the communication shaped how she interpreted the feedback—undermining her sense of connection and diminishing her motivation to engage. From Ed

U. Cator’s perspective, however, direct and public feedback was necessary to promote high standards and student accountability. “I believe in setting the bar high and making sure students know where they stand,” he stated. “Public feedback ensures accountability.” His approach reflects a belief in academic rigor and personal responsibility, shaped by his teaching philosophy and institutional norms. This example illustrates the complex and reciprocal nature of motivation in online learning environments—while feedback may be designed to promote competence, its motivational impact depends on how it is delivered, how it aligns with the instructor’s values, and how it is received and interpreted by students. These dynamics are supported by Reeve (2012), who emphasized that the motivational effects of instructional strategies depend not only on the strategy itself but also on students’ perceptions of autonomy support, emotional tone, and instructor intent. These findings align with SDT’s emphasis on the need for competence and relatedness and highlight the importance of delivering feedback in ways that support students’ autonomous regulation and emotional well-being.

Workload Expectations: Too Easy vs. Overwhelming. Perceptions of academic rigor and workload further illustrated these differences. Vera, the instructor of SRHB, believed her course provided essential graduate-level preparation. “I want my students to experience what it’s like to work collaboratively on research analysis,” she explained. “They need to review and analyze a research article together and then present it to the class.” While she saw this as an opportunity to develop critical thinking and teamwork, some students felt the assignments were too easy. Ace reflected, “About halfway through

the semester, I realized I didn't need to try that hard to do well. That made me disengage a little.”

On the other hand, students in Monique's ADVG course, which was offered during the condensed six-week Summer I session, had the opposite experience, feeling overwhelmed by the workload. Blue, a student in ADVG, described it as “excruciating... It was work on top of work. It became almost unbearable.” These conflicting experiences suggest that while structured challenge can enhance motivation, excessive demands may have the opposite effect, particularly in intensive course formats (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Research on motivation highlights that both overly simplistic and overly demanding coursework can diminish students' motivation to engage if students do not perceive a balance between challenge and support (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Peer Interaction: Intentional vs. Superficial Engagement. A similar disconnect appeared in peer interaction. Instructors designed group discussions, collaborative projects, and asynchronous discussion boards to foster social presence, yet students often felt these activities failed to create meaningful connections. In Vera's SRHB course, Violet noted, “We did group presentations, but they weren't really group projects. Everyone just did their own part separately.” Likewise, in Monique's ADVG course, Blue Bunny expressed disappointment: “I only interacted with my classmates during the presentation, and even then, we didn't really work together.” Mars suggested that Vera could add interactive elements in the SRHB improve engagement, stating, “Starting with a poll or an engaging question to get everyone talking right away would help.” These insights align with research suggesting that while structured collaboration is meant to

enhance relatedness, poorly designed interactions can feel superficial and fail to support motivation (Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006).

Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Learning: Flexibility vs. Discussion.

Differences in preferences for synchronous versus asynchronous learning further complicated the online experience. Some students valued the flexibility of asynchronous learning, while others struggled with the lack of real-time interaction. Ella Jaber, a student in Hannah's PPT course, explained, "The asynchronous weeks were the hardest. I had questions, but there was no immediate way to get answers. It made me feel disconnected." Hannah acknowledged this challenge: "In a traditional classroom, if a student makes an incorrect assumption, I can correct it right away. In an online environment, especially with asynchronous discussions, that's much harder." These insights reinforce Hrastinski's (2008) argument that while asynchronous learning supports autonomy, it can reduce immediacy, potentially hindering motivation for students who thrive on real-time engagement.

The analysis of student and instructor perspectives highlights key areas of alignment and divergence in motivational strategies. While both groups recognized the importance of structured organization, instructor presence, and autonomy-supportive teaching, perceptions of feedback, workload, peer collaboration, and learning formats varied significantly. Students' motivation was shaped not only by the instructional strategies themselves but also by how they were implemented and experienced.

The next section examines the lived experiences of both students and instructors to identify the most effective strategies for motivating students in online college courses.

By centering on firsthand accounts, this analysis highlights instructional approaches perceived as most impactful, offering insights into how online courses can better support student motivation.

Instructor and Student Insights on Motivation in Online College Courses

Instructors and students in the PPT, SRHB, IBA, and ADVG courses shared firsthand experiences that provide valuable insights into how motivational strategies function in online college courses. While previous research offers theoretical principles of motivation, this study highlights how these strategies were perceived and experienced in practice.

Through their reflections, participants emphasized the role of instructor presence, course structure, autonomy-supportive practices, constructive feedback, and peer interaction in shaping motivation. Their experiences reveal not only what sustains motivation but also what undermines it, offering practical guidance for fostering long-term student engagement and persistence in online learning. These insights emerged in response to interview prompts such as: “What aspects of the course helped you stay motivated?”, “Can you describe a time when you felt engaged or disengaged in the course?”, and “How did the instructor’s feedback or communication impact your motivation?” These questions allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and provide nuanced perspectives on motivation in online courses.

Insight: Instructor Presence and Communication Are Vital for Motivation

Instructor presence emerged as one of the strongest motivational factors. Students responded positively when instructors maintained consistent communication, provided timely feedback, and conveyed approachability.

For students, regular instructor engagement helped sustain motivation. Payton Marrow in PPT noted, “Even during the weeks we didn’t meet, Hannah’s check-ins and emails kept me motivated to stay on track.” Similarly, Blue Bunny, a student in SRHB, found lectures more engaging than self-directed reading, sharing, “Hearing her [Vera] talk about the material was much more engaging than trying to read it or having my classmates explain it.”

Beyond availability, the tone and delivery of communication also shaped motivation. While some students valued detailed feedback, others felt its delivery influenced their willingness to engage. Blue, a student in ADVG, stated, “Her [Monique] replies felt sarcastic, which made me hesitant to reach out.” Likewise, Katya in IBA appreciated the instructor’s expertise but found his feedback discouraging. These experiences reinforce research suggesting that instructor presence is most effective when it combines availability, warmth, and responsiveness (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001).

These reflections highlight that instructor presence extends beyond accessibility—it requires active support. When instructors regularly check in, use an encouraging tone, and show genuine investment in student success, students feel more competent and motivated to persist, aligning with Self-Determination Theory’s emphasis on competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Insight: Structured Course Organization and Predictability Support Motivation

A well-organized course with clear guidelines, structured materials, and predictable routines played an important role in student motivation. When students understood what was expected of them, they were able to manage their workload effectively and focus on learning.

In response to the question, “How did course structure impact your motivation?,” students described a range of experiences. In the SRHB course, Vera structured assignments with clear expectations, aiming to simulate graduate-level collaboration. While some students appreciated this structure, others found the coursework overly predictable, making engagement difficult. Violet noted, “I was hoping for more challenging assignments... That would have added more depth.” Similarly, Lucy Williams expressed that without variation in assignments, it felt repetitive, making it harder to stay engaged.

Conversely, in Monique’s ADVG course, students benefited from a weekly schedule with assignments due on Tuesdays, which provided consistency. Jim explained, “Having a set routine made it easier to manage my workload.” However, other students found the workload to be overly demanding rather than motivating. Blue shared, “It was just work on top of work—I couldn’t keep up.” These contrasting experiences highlight that while structured course design helps students plan and manage their workload, excessive demands or unclear expectations can diminish motivation.

Additionally, students critiqued courses that were too repetitive or lacked variation. Blue Bunny in SRHB described, “The structure was pretty much the same

every week: read a study, write a discussion board post, and then discuss it in a group on Friday.” While she appreciated predictability, she also found the course lacked variation, adding, “It’s a three-credit class, so it should require more than just that.” This suggests that while predictability is helpful, monotonous coursework may lead to disengagement if assignments do not offer intellectual stimulation.

These experiences suggest that structured courses support motivation when they provide clarity without being overly rigid or monotonous. Students feel more motivated when they can predict their workload while still encountering novel, intellectually stimulating challenges.

Insight: Actionable and Flexible Feedback Supports Motivation

Students emphasized that timely, detailed, and constructive feedback played a crucial role in their motivation. They described a range of experiences that shaped their engagement in coursework. Red_hat appreciated the efficiency and usefulness of her instructor’s feedback, stating, “Her [Hannah] feedback is quick and really valuable, helping me progress in the course.” Katya, in the IBA course, found that video-based feedback clarified expectations, explaining, “The videos and the feedback...help me understand what he’s [Ed U. Cator] looking for.” Similarly, Student B in ADVG found feedback encouraging, sharing, “She [Monique] left nice feedback and seemed engaged with my work, which was nice. It felt like she was really reading and interacting with my assignments.”

However, some students found that feedback was not always actionable or timely due to rigid grading policies. Student B acknowledged that while their instructor provided

detailed comments, she was discouraged by the inability to act on this feedback due to strict late-work policies. She explained, “The zero-tolerance policy for late work was a little demotivating... Even if late work were accepted for partial credit, I probably would have submitted it.” This suggests that feedback is most effective when students have opportunities to apply it—whether through revisions, resubmissions, or grading policies that recognize progress. Strict grading structures may unintentionally limit the motivational impact of feedback by discouraging students who struggle with deadlines, rather than supporting their persistence in learning.

Overall, students’ lived experiences suggest that feedback must be timely, specific, and actionable, with opportunities to improve performance. Without these elements, even well-intended feedback may fail to motivate students.

Insight: Providing Autonomy in Learning Choices Enhances Student Motivation

One of the most effective motivational strategies was giving students autonomy in their coursework, including assignment selection, flexible engagement options, and decision-making. When students were able to make choices in their learning, they felt more ownership over their coursework, which increased their autonomous regulation and persistence. In response to interview prompts such as “How did having choices in your coursework impact your motivation?” and “Can you describe a time when autonomy helped or hindered your learning?,” students shared various experiences.

Blue in ADVG described the motivational impact of autonomy, explaining, “I loved that we got to pick our own topics. It made the assignments more meaningful.” Similarly, Student B in ADVG found open-ended assignments motivating, stating, “The

assignments were open-ended, and we could choose the topics, like picking companies for our final paper.” These experiences highlight that allowing students to make meaningful choices in coursework increases motivation by fostering a sense of personal relevance and investment in their learning.

Instructors implemented autonomy-supportive strategies in ways that helped students stay motivated. Hannah in PPT highlighted the importance of making assignments feel purposeful for students, stating “I try to show students how each task contributes to their learning rather than just assigning work for the sake of it.” She explained that she consistently reinforces the value of assignments by helping students see how smaller tasks, such as quizzes, contribute to long-term knowledge retention and scaffold into larger assignments like final papers. By framing coursework as interconnected, she encouraged students to engage with assignments more intentionally.

Beyond emphasizing assignment relevance, Hannah also encouraged students to recognize how course activities supported their academic growth. She explained that discussion board posts were not just participation tasks but could serve as resources for later projects, stating, “I remind them that their discussion posts are valuable. They can go back and pull from them when writing their final papers.” This reflects SDT’s emphasis on fostering autonomy by helping students see coursework as personally relevant (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Similarly, 22 in PPT noted that having a clear understanding of why assignments mattered increased engagement, stating, “It was easier to engage with assignments once I understood why they mattered.” These insights suggest that autonomy is most effective when paired with instructor-provided rationale

and structure, ensuring students recognize the value of their work rather than feeling directionless.

Beyond assignment selection, giving students flexibility in how and when they engage with learning also increased motivation. Jim in ADVG highlighted how autonomy in scheduling made it easier to sustain motivation, explaining, “I like that they’re asynchronous. My schedule isn’t very free, so not having to attend Zoom meetings at specific times makes it easier for me to do the work when I can.” Ace in SRHB shared a similar experience, stating, “I liked that I could participate when I felt most motivated.” These experiences suggest that providing students with structured autonomy—such as allowing them to engage with content when they feel most prepared—can reduce stress and support sustained motivation.

While autonomy played a crucial role in motivation, students also noted that too much autonomy without structure could be frustrating or even demotivating. Katya in IBA found that excessive flexibility without clear grading criteria diminished motivation, explaining, “I had the flexibility to choose my project focus, but I felt like I was doing the assignment just to meet his standards rather than to actually learn something.” Similarly, Ed U. Cator in IBA reinforced the idea that students must take an active role in learning, stating, “You chose this online section, and you need to be actively engaged.” These perspectives highlight that autonomy must be combined with clear expectations and structured support to prevent students from feeling lost or disengaged.

Overall, providing structured autonomy—such as assignment choice, flexible engagement options, and a clear rationale for learning activities—was a key motivational

strategy. Students responded most positively when autonomy was balanced with guidance, ensuring they understood both why their choices mattered and how to succeed in the course. Without clear structure, autonomy could become overwhelming rather than empowering. By designing courses that integrate autonomy-supportive strategies with instructor guidance, online college courses can foster students' autonomous regulation, persistence, and meaningful engagement with their learning.

Insight: Building a Sense of Community Enhances Motivation

For many students, feeling connected to their peers and instructors played a key role in sustaining motivation. When students experienced a sense of belonging, they were more likely to persist in their coursework, whereas feelings of isolation often led to lower motivation and disengagement. In describing how peer interaction and a sense of community influences their motivation, students shared their perspectives on moments of connection and disconnection within the course.

Hannah, an instructor in PPT, emphasized the importance of fostering a supportive online learning environment, stating, "Establishing a sense of community is vital. I strive to convey to my students that they are individuals, not just names on a roster." To encourage engagement, she incorporated structured discussion boards and synchronous breakout rooms. Several students found these features helpful in building connections with their peers. 22, a student in PPT, shared, "The breakout rooms really helped me feel more connected with classmates, even though we were all remote." Similarly, Payton Marrow, also in PPT, explained, "The breakout rooms during synchronous classes help because it can be difficult to have conversations with other

students when everyone is just in one big room." Ella Jaber further reinforced the value of structured discussions, stating, "I appreciate the way we use discussion boards—it makes it easier to get to know other students and feel like I'm not alone in the course." Red Hat echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the benefits of synchronous peer collaboration, sharing, "We have in-class breakout sessions where we discuss what we've covered and collaborate with our peers."

However, not all peer interactions contributed to motivation. Some students found that superficial group work or poorly structured discussions failed to provide meaningful connection, making participation feel like an obligation rather than a motivating factor. Violet, a student in SRHB, reflected, "Our group presentations didn't really feel collaborative—we each did our own parts separately, so it didn't help my motivation." Similarly, Ace noted, "The group work felt forced, and since there wasn't much discussion, I didn't feel motivated to engage beyond the minimum requirement."

Additionally, the absence of structured expectations for peer interaction contributed to motivational challenges. Ace explained, "Dr. Vera said attendance wasn't required, so people stopped showing up, which made me less motivated to put effort into group discussions."

These experiences highlight that a sense of community supports motivation when students feel their interactions are meaningful, purposeful, and encouraged by instructors. Simply adding group activities or discussion boards is not enough to sustain motivation—instructors must actively facilitate relationships and create environments where students feel that their participation matters.

These findings highlight the complex factors that influence student motivation in online college courses. While strategies such as instructor presence, structured course design, and autonomy support fostered motivation for many students, challenges such as unclear expectations, workload imbalances, and limited peer interaction sometimes undermined it. Understanding these experiences provides valuable insight into how instructional strategies can either support or hinder student motivation in online college courses.

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter examined the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses, exploring how instructional strategies shaped student motivation. The analysis identified key themes aligned with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), particularly the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While both groups emphasized the value of instructor presence, structured autonomy, and clear organization, notable divergences emerged in how strategies were perceived—especially regarding feedback, workload, and peer collaboration. The findings highlight the complex, contextual, and sometimes conflicting nature of motivational strategies in online learning environments.

Instructor Perspectives on Student Motivation

Instructors identified consistent presence, structured course design, and practices that supported student autonomy, competence, and relatedness as critical for fostering motivation in online courses. They emphasized strategies such as personalized feedback, real-world application of content, and ongoing communication to support engagement.

Their reflections revealed that the implementation of these strategies was shaped by institutional policies, their evolving teaching philosophies, and their beliefs about student learning and responsibility.

Instructors also encountered recurring challenges that shaped their ability to enact motivational strategies. These included patterns of student disengagement—such as declining attendance in optional synchronous sessions, limited participation in discussions, and reluctance to use cameras during live classes—as well as institutional constraints, such as standardized syllabi, limited flexibility in course design, and restricted access to instructional technologies. Instructors noted that these structural conditions influenced the degree to which they could respond flexibly to student needs or adapt their pedagogy in real time.

To support students' need for autonomy, instructors commonly integrated flexible deadlines, assignment choices, and independent learning opportunities. However, their perspectives revealed that autonomy was not a singular or universally effective strategy. Some instructors emphasized the importance of structured flexibility, finding that student motivation improved when autonomy was offered alongside clear guidance and expectations. Others observed that, in the absence of sufficient structure or scaffolding, some students struggled with time management, procrastination, or disengagement. These reflections suggest that strategies intended to support autonomous regulation must also consider students' capacity for self-regulation within the constraints of the online environment.

Fostering relatedness was also a key goal, yet instructors described difficulty in cultivating meaningful peer engagement—especially in asynchronous formats. Despite efforts to incorporate group projects, discussion boards, and interactive assignments, many instructors observed that students often experienced these activities as superficial or disconnected from their learning. These challenges led some instructors to reexamine their assumptions about the role of peer collaboration in online learning and to adjust their practices accordingly.

Overall, instructors' reflections highlighted the complex, context-dependent nature of motivating students online. Their approaches were not simply driven by pedagogical technique but were deeply informed by their beliefs about teaching, their institutional realities, and their understandings of what their students needed to succeed. These findings reinforce the importance of examining not only the strategies themselves but also the ideological and contextual factors that shape how instructors design for motivation in online college education.

Student Perspectives on Motivation in Online Learning

Students' experiences reinforced the importance of instructor presence, course structure, and timely feedback in sustaining motivation. They valued clear expectations, responsive communication, and engaging course content. However, rigid grading policies, excessive workload demands, and impersonal feedback were frequently cited as demotivating factors.

Autonomy played a complex role in student motivation. Many students appreciated the flexibility of online learning, which allowed them to balance coursework

with other responsibilities. However, some struggled with self-regulation, reporting that excessive flexibility led to procrastination and disengagement.

Competence was closely tied to feedback quality and assessment clarity. Students felt more confident when feedback was timely, specific, and constructive. However, some noted that critical feedback, when delivered without supportive framing, diminished motivation and discouraged engagement.

Relatedness yielded mixed responses. While some students found discussion boards and group projects beneficial, others reported that these activities felt forced, lacked structure, or did not foster meaningful collaboration. This disconnect suggests that relatedness-supportive strategies must be intentionally structured to facilitate engagement.

Alignment and Divergence Between Instructor and Student Perspectives

While instructors and students generally agreed on the importance of structured organization, instructor presence, and opportunities for student choice, this study revealed key areas where intended motivational strategies diverged from how students experienced them. These differences underscore the complexity of motivation in online learning and support the need to interpret instructional practices as dynamic and contextually mediated rather than uniformly effective.

Feedback delivery emerged as a notable point of divergence. Instructors often viewed detailed and critical feedback as necessary for promoting growth and competence. However, some students perceived this feedback as discouraging or overly harsh—especially when tone, delivery, or lack of framing impacted how the message was

received. These instances reveal that strategies intended to support competence may undermine motivation if students interpret them as judgmental or unapproachable, especially in asynchronous formats where relational cues are limited.

Expectations around workload and academic rigor also diverged. While instructors designed assignments, they believed were appropriately challenging, some students found the pace and volume overwhelming, particularly in compressed formats. Others found assignments too predictable or insufficiently engaging. These findings suggest that students' motivation is shaped not only by the difficulty of tasks but also by their perceived relevance, cognitive demand, and the degree of alignment with students' goals and capacities.

Peer collaboration and community-building strategies presented another area of divergence. Instructors implemented group projects and discussion boards to foster relatedness and engagement, yet many students experienced these activities as superficial or poorly structured. Rather than fostering authentic collaboration, students often described group work as fragmented or performative. These findings suggest that relatedness-supportive strategies require intentional design and facilitation to create the kind of social presence that supports sustained engagement.

Together, these points of divergence illustrate that motivational strategies are not universally experienced in the ways instructors intend. Students' engagement is influenced not only by what instructors do but also by how students interpret, internalize, and respond to those strategies—responses shaped by their prior experiences, values, learning preferences, and academic context. This reciprocal, interpretive process

highlights the importance of designing online learning environments that are responsive to students' evolving needs and capacities.

This chapter has examined the alignment and misalignment between instructor intentions and student experiences of motivation in online college courses. As the study is grounded in SDT, the next chapter will revisit the research questions to evaluate how the findings extend, challenge, and complicate SDT's core constructs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the context of online higher education. Chapter 5 will also explore theoretical contributions, practical implications, and directions for future research that can support more nuanced and contextually grounded motivational design.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study explored how instructors support student motivation in online college courses and how students perceive the effectiveness of these strategies through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Specifically, the study aimed to identify instructional practices that enhance student motivation by promoting autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as outlined in SDT. It also assessed the applicability of SDT in online college contexts, examining how well its principles align with the realities of online learning in higher education and how they influence student motivation.

To achieve these aims, a qualitative research design guided by a phenomenological methodological approach was employed. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of four instructors and thirteen students enrolled in fully online college courses. Thematic analysis was used to examine participants' experiences and perceptions of motivational strategies in online college settings. A structured coding process, informed by both inductive and SDT-guided codes, was applied iteratively to identify key patterns.

By centering human experiences rather than abstract constructs, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how motivation functions in online learning. It provides insights for instructors and institutions aiming to create learning environments that not only deliver content effectively but also sustain student motivation. Research has shown that fostering motivation can lead to greater student engagement and academic persistence, ultimately enhancing learning outcomes (Alivernini & Luicidi, 2011; Carless

& Boud, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; Richard, Maeda, & Swan, 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006; Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner, 2004; Sun & Rueda 2012; Tinto, 1993; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004; Winstone, Nash, Parker, & Rowntree, 2017).

A reflexive approach was used to examine my role as the researcher in the data collection and interpretation process. Given the qualitative nature of this study, I remained aware of how my background, prior experiences, and engagement with participants could influence the interpretation of findings. Acknowledging this influence enhances the transparency and trustworthiness of the research, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in participants' lived experiences while minimizing potential biases.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study confirm the applicability of SDT in online college courses but also extend the theory by highlighting its contextual and dynamic nature. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness were consistently relevant, but their support depends on the intersection of instructor strategies, student characteristics, course design, and institutional context. Importantly, the findings underscore that motivational strategies are not experienced uniformly across students.

A key insight from this study is the divergence between the strategies instructors intended to be motivational and how students actually experienced them. For example, what instructors viewed as providing choice or flexibility was sometimes perceived by students as a lack of structure, leading to stress or disengagement. This highlights the

complexity of designing strategies that are not only theoretically sound but contextually and experientially effective.

Rather than simply validating SDT, this study demonstrates that SDT must be applied with attention to nuance. For example, autonomy-supportive practices were most effective when they included structure and guidance—illustrating the importance of "structured autonomy." Similarly, competence was supported not just by feedback, but by feedback that was encouraging, timely, and framed to foster confidence. Relatedness was most effectively supported through intentional instructor presence, rather than surface-level peer interaction.

These findings align with and extend SDT by suggesting that effective motivational support in online learning is a non-linear, mutually influencing process between instructors, students, course structures, and institutional contexts.

Furthermore, instructor beliefs, values, and assumptions about student motivation shaped their choice of strategies. Some instructors emphasized student independence, while others prioritized real-time support and guidance. These beliefs directly influenced whether and how they implemented motivational strategies. Motivation-supportive instruction is not a neutral process; it is shaped by the instructor's identity, values, and experiences. Instructors also adjusted strategies in response to perceived student engagement levels, suggesting that motivation is a dynamic, reciprocal process—not a one-directional outcome of teaching.

Reframing Motivation as Complex, Contextual, and Dynamic

This study affirms that motivation in online college courses is not a fixed or universally experienced phenomenon but is deeply contextual, dynamic, and shaped by multiple interacting factors. While the constructs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were consistently relevant, how they were supported or thwarted depended on the course structure, instructor beliefs, student characteristics, and institutional policies. One of the most significant findings of this study is the divergence between the strategies instructors intended to be motivational and how students actually perceived those strategies.

For example, what instructors described as offering flexibility through open-ended assignments or extended deadlines was sometimes experienced by students as a lack of structure or clarity, leading to stress or disengagement. Similarly, feedback intended to support competence was occasionally perceived as vague or overly critical, resulting in diminished motivation. These findings illustrate that motivation-supportive strategies are not universally effective—they must be interpreted within the specific context and by the individuals experiencing them. This divergence reveals that motivational strategies cannot be universally prescribed but must be evaluated based on contextual and experiential factors.

Moreover, this study challenges the notion of a universal list of “best practices” in motivation. Instead, it highlights that effective motivation-supportive strategies must be adaptive, evolving in response to the unique interplay of instructor intentions, student needs, course design, and institutional constraints. These insights reinforce the idea that

motivation in online learning is a complex and evolving process that resists simple categorization. This perspective aligns with critiques in the motivational theory literature, which caution against relying on a universal “strategy list of motivational strategies,” and instead emphasize the importance of strategies that are contextually grounded, adaptive, and responsive to the unique characteristics of instructors, students, and learning environments (Kaplan, Katz, & Flum, 2012).

The Reciprocal Nature of Motivational Influence

While the findings clearly show how instructor strategies influenced students’ motivation, they also reveal a critical but underemphasized dynamic: student motivation shaped instructor behavior. Instructors described modifying their strategies based on students’ engagement levels, questions, or emotional cues. For example, some instructors increased communication efforts or adjusted assignment flexibility when students expressed feeling overwhelmed or disengaged.

This reciprocal influence suggests that motivation-supportive instruction is not a linear, one-way process from instructor to student. Instead, it is a dynamic and mutual interaction in which instructors respond to students’ motivational cues, and students in turn respond to the strategies and structures created by instructors. Recognizing this dynamic interplay offers a more accurate and holistic view of how motivation is co-constructed in online learning environments.

The Role of Instructor Beliefs and Ideological Stance

Another critical finding is the influence of instructor beliefs, values, and assumptions on the selection and enactment of motivational strategies. Instructors did not

simply apply generic strategies; their decisions were shaped by their own goals for students, beliefs about learning, and understandings of what motivates students. For example, instructors who valued student independence tended to emphasize flexibility and autonomy, while those who prioritized connection and support provided more frequent check-ins and structured guidance.

These ideological stances significantly influenced how instructors interpreted students' needs and how they framed their instructional strategies. As such, motivation-supportive instruction is not neutral—it is shaped by the instructor's identity, experiences, and professional values. This finding suggests that professional development for online instructors should include reflective practice around beliefs, assumptions, and teaching philosophies. Helping instructors critically examine how their values influence their approach to motivation can support more intentional and responsive instructional design.

Revisiting Motivation as a Singular Construct

During the analysis, it became clear that motivation was not experienced as a singular or uniform construct by participants. Instead, students and instructors interpreted motivation in varied ways depending on the instructional strategy being discussed. For example, some students felt motivated to complete assignments and earn good grades, while others were motivated by opportunities to engage deeply with course content or apply their learning to real-world contexts.

This finding highlights the multidimensional nature of motivation in online learning and cautions against overly narrow definitions. Instructional strategies may activate different types of motivation—ranging from performance-oriented goals to

autonomous regulation driven by personal meaning or long-term academic persistence. Recognizing this variation is essential for accurately capturing the motivational impact of instructional practices. Although this study did not isolate motivation toward a singular outcome, this variation reflects the complex and multidimensional nature of motivation in online learning environments.

Autonomy in Online College Courses

The findings align with SDT's assertion that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental psychological needs that contribute to student motivation. Instructors in this study described using strategies intended to support autonomy, such as offering flexibility in assignments, incorporating student choice, and designing coursework that allowed learners to engage in ways that best fit their learning preferences. Students perceived these strategies as sustaining their motivation, as they felt greater ownership over their learning, which is central to autonomy need satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

Students in the study reported that course designs that included flexible deadlines, assignment choice, and asynchronous components helped them manage their responsibilities more effectively and stay engaged. Jim, a student in ADVG, valued the ability to balance his academic and athletic commitments due to flexible scheduling, explaining that the asynchronous structure made coursework more manageable around practice schedules. This reflects findings by Sun and Rueda (2012), who reported that students in online learning environments with greater autonomy support tend to sustain motivation more effectively. Similarly, Blue in ADVG noted that assignment choice

helped sustain motivation, stating, “I loved that we got to pick our own topics. It made the assignments more meaningful.” This aligns with Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008), who suggest that providing students with choice fosters motivation, particularly when the choices are meaningful and align with students’ personal interests.

However, both students and instructors described instances in which instructional strategies that offered flexibility—such as open-ended deadlines or loosely structured assignments—were perceived as disorienting or stressful when they lacked adequate support. When flexibility was offered without clear expectations, feedback, or opportunities for guidance, students sometimes experienced diminished motivation due to difficulty with self-regulation. Lucy Williams, a student in SRHB, acknowledged, “Without frequent deadlines, it was easy to put off studying until just before exams.” This concern aligns with Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, and Turner (2004), who argue that instructional designs intended to support autonomy are most effective when accompanied by structured guidance and instructor presence to prevent procrastination and disengagement.

Instructors also reflected on the challenges of balancing flexibility and structure in online courses. Monique, an instructor in ADVG, expressed that while flexible policies were valuable, some students struggled with self-regulation when given too much freedom. She described making herself readily available to students and ensuring they had clear guidelines to follow, recognizing that some students benefited from structured support to help them stay on track. Other instructors similarly noted that when students were given extensive flexibility without structured milestones or regular instructor check-

ins, some struggled with time management, which led to missed deadlines, incomplete assignments, or difficulty keeping up with coursework.

Several instructors described how these flexible strategies were most effective when combined with clear expectations, frequent communication, and scaffolded guidance. Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2010) found that instructional environments intended to support autonomy foster motivation, but without sufficient structure, students may experience autonomy frustration, making it harder to persist in coursework. In this study, instructors noted that excessive flexibility sometimes left students uncertain about their choices or led them to seek additional guidance. Some instructors explained that when students had too many options without clear parameters, they struggled to make decisions about their coursework or frequently contacted instructors for clarification.

Research by Alivernini and Lucidi (2011) highlights that students are more likely to persist in learning environments they perceive as well-organized and supportive. Instructors who actively checked in with students, sent reminders about deadlines, and consistently communicated expectations for the week were seen as more effective in creating learning contexts that supported volitional engagement.

These findings suggest that autonomy in online learning must be intentionally structured—balancing flexibility with clear guidelines, frequent communication, and instructor support—to ensure that students experience volitional engagement rather than confusion or disengagement. Both students and instructors acknowledged that high degrees of flexibility without structure could be overwhelming, while instructional

strategies that blended choice with clarity and support helped students maintain motivation and persist in their coursework.

Competence and the Role of Feedback in Online College Courses

Competence was either supported or thwarted depending on the quality and structure of feedback, scaffolded assignments, and opportunities for students to track their progress. Research suggests that competence-supportive environments contribute to students' motivation and persistence in online learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002). Instructors who provided prompt, detailed, and constructive feedback helped students feel more confident in their ability to succeed, reinforcing competence need satisfaction. In contrast, when feedback was unclear, overly critical, or delayed, students perceived diminished support for their competence, which contributed to disengagement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

A consistent finding across all courses was that students valued video feedback and instructional videos that clarified assignment expectations or provided additional context on course topics. They described these videos as making feedback feel more personal, easier to understand, and more effective in reinforcing learning. This aligns with research by Borup, West, Thomas, and Graham (2015), who found that video-based feedback enhanced engagement and comprehension among adolescent learners in online learning environments. While their study focused on adolescents, the findings suggest that video feedback may similarly support students' motivation in online college courses by making instructor guidance more accessible and personalized.

Clear expectations and assignment relevance also contributed to students' perceptions of competence support. When instructors explicitly communicated assignment expectations, provided detailed grading criteria, and explained how coursework connected to real-world applications, students felt more capable of completing coursework successfully. Several participants described that uncertainty around assignment requirements made them feel unsure of their abilities, whereas when instructors clearly defined expectations and reinforced the value of assignments, students felt more confident and engaged.

Mars, a student in SRHB, described how structured feedback strengthened her competence and confidence, stating, "The comments on my first paper helped me improve so much. I felt more prepared for the next assignment and more confident." Rather than viewing motivation as a singular construct, this experience illustrates how her increased confidence in managing future coursework reflects the fulfillment of her competence need, which SDT identifies as a central driver of autonomous regulation and sustained motivation. Feeling more capable in this context is not separate from motivation—it is a manifestation of it. Prior research supports this connection, suggesting that competence support through feedback not only informs students about their performance but also reinforces self-regulation and academic persistence (Carless & Boud, 2018).

On the other hand, when feedback was perceived as vague, overly critical, or inflexible, students felt less competent and became discouraged. Jonsson (2013) found that unclear or harsh feedback can demotivate students and discourage them from seeking

help. Katya, a student in IBA, hesitated to reach out after receiving harsh, discouraging feedback, noting, "It really felt like he [Ed U. Cator] was yelling at us, and it just made me not want to ask him questions anymore." This aligns with Rowe (2011), who found that feedback tone significantly influences student receptiveness, with overly critical responses reducing students' willingness to engage in future learning interactions.

These findings emphasize that feedback plays a key role not just in correcting errors, but in shaping students' perceptions of their own competence and their ability to succeed. When students received feedback that highlighted progress and effort, rather than just correctness, they experienced a stronger sense of competence and were more likely to persist (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021). Furthermore, feedback serves as a critical learning tool that provides modeled examples of success and clear pathways for improvement, supporting both competence and autonomous motivation (Bandura, 1986).

These experiences highlight the importance of balancing rigor with encouragement in online learning environments. Shute (2008) suggests that feedback should be timely, specific, and framed in a way that promotes growth, rather than discouraging further inquiry. When structured effectively, feedback reinforced competence need satisfaction and contributed to students' perceptions of their motivation being supported over time.

Relatedness and Social Presence in Online College Courses

Relatedness was another key factor influencing student motivation in online college courses, as students emphasized the importance of instructor presence and peer interaction. When students felt emotionally and socially connected to their instructors or

classmates, they reported greater motivation to persist in coursework. In contrast, when relatedness needs were thwarted, students described feeling isolated, disconnected, and less engaged.

Instructors who maintained frequent communication, personalized engagement, and fostered a sense of community helped students feel supported. These findings align with research indicating that students are more likely to persist in coursework when they perceive instructors as accessible, responsive, and invested in their success (Richardson, Maeda, & Swan, 2017). Hannah, an instructor in PPT, emphasized the importance of humanizing instruction, stating, "Building community in the classroom is really important to me. I strive to see each student as a person first, not just as a student." Similarly, Monique, the instructor of ADVG, highlighted her commitment to being accessible, stating, "I always tell them to email me or ask me questions during Zoom sessions if they need help." These strategies reflect prior research showing that proactive communication and instructor outreach reinforce students' sense of belonging and relatedness in online learning (Martin, Wang, & Sadaf, 2022).

Students also described how consistent instructor engagement contributed to their willingness to persist in coursework. Payton, a student in PPT, noted, "Even during the weeks we didn't meet, her [Hannah] presence was felt through her emails and check-ins. It kept me motivated to stay on track." This finding reinforces that when instructor presence is felt, relatedness needs are supported, leading to increased engagement and persistence (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012).

While the instructor's presence played a critical role in sustaining motivation, peer interaction had mixed effects. Some students described collaborative activities as supportive, while others felt disconnected. Research suggests that structured collaborative learning can enhance motivation (Shea et al., 2006; Ku, Akarasriworn, Glassmeyer, Mendoza, & Rice, 2013), but when peer interactions were limited to surface-level discussion board exchanges, students found them uninspiring. Violet, a student in SRHB, described, "Sometimes it felt like I was just doing the work on my own, without a real connection to classmates." This supports Dolan, Kain, Reilly, and Bansal's (2017) argument that discussion boards alone do not effectively support relatedness unless designed for meaningful collaboration.

To address these challenges, structured peer interactions and instructor presence played a key role in students' sense of social connection. Instructors who designed intentional peer interactions and remained actively involved were more effective in supporting motivation. Research suggests that real-time collaboration, such as breakout rooms, group work, and synchronous discussions, helps students sustain motivation by fostering accountability and meaningful engagement (Means, Neisler, & Langer Research Associates, 2021).

Beyond structuring peer collaboration, instructor presence during these interactions further contributed to students' sense of relatedness. Students described instructor participation in breakout rooms, monitoring of group discussions, and timely support during collaborative activities as strategies that helped sustain their motivation. Hannah, teaching PPT, demonstrated this by checking into breakout rooms during

synchronous sessions, ensuring that students remained engaged and had opportunities to seek guidance. Students reported that direct instructor involvement made them feel seen, supported, and more connected to the learning process.

22, a student in PPT, shared, "The breakout rooms really helped me feel more connected with classmates, even though we were all remote." However, students also noted that when instructors remained absent or uninvolved in group interactions, peer collaboration often felt superficial, leading to unmet relatedness needs. These findings suggest that peer interaction supports relatedness when it is intentionally structured and supported by active instructor presence.

Overall, relatedness in online college learning was best supported when instructors actively fostered social connection—not only through direct engagement with students but also by structuring and participating in meaningful peer interactions. When relatedness needs were met through instructor immediacy, structured peer collaboration, and visible instructor presence, students remained motivated and felt a stronger sense of belonging. However, when students perceived their interactions as impersonal, unsupported, or lacking instructor involvement, relatedness was thwarted, leading to disengagement.

These findings reinforce prior research on the role of instructor immediacy and structured peer engagement in sustaining motivation in online learning (Richardson et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2022). By not only designing collaborative learning experiences but also maintaining an active presence within them, instructors can create a more motivating and supportive environment for students in online college courses.

A Note on Cultural Context

Although this study did not explicitly focus on cultural dimensions of motivation, the findings suggest that motivation-supportive strategies are likely influenced by cultural norms and expectations. For example, what one student experiences as autonomy-supportive flexibility may feel disorienting or overwhelming to another, depending on prior educational experiences, cultural norms around authority, and expectations for instructor involvement.

One illustrative example emerged from Monique, the instructor of the ADVG course, who described how her teaching practices had to shift after moving from the Caribbean to the United States. In her earlier experiences teaching in the Caribbean, direct and authoritative communication was both expected and respected. However, after transitioning to a U.S.-based institution, Monique shared that her tone and communication style were sometimes perceived by students as harsh. One student critiqued her tone in course feedback, prompting Monique to reflect that her approach might not have been seen as problematic in her home culture. This example underscores how cultural context shapes not only how instructors implement motivational strategies but also how students interpret them.

This case highlights the importance of acknowledging that psychological needs, as outlined in Self-Determination Theory, may be expressed or fulfilled differently across cultural settings. What supports relatedness or competence in one cultural context may not produce the same experience in another. Moreover, instructors may unintentionally enact strategies based on their own cultural norms, which can lead to misalignment

between intention and student experience. Recognizing these dynamics is critical for designing motivational strategies that are inclusive and responsive to diverse student populations.

Theoretical Implications

This study confirms the applicability of SDT in online college courses, reinforcing its relevance as a framework for understanding how instructional strategies influence student motivation in fully online learning settings. Findings indicate that autonomy, competence, and relatedness remain central to sustaining motivation, demonstrating that SDT effectively explains how course design and instructor strategies impact student experiences.

Extending SDT in Online College Courses: The Role of Structured Autonomy

While SDT emphasizes autonomy as volition rather than just choice, these findings suggest that in online college courses, autonomy support must include both meaningful choices and clear instructional expectations. Some students in this study reported that excessive flexibility without guidance led to autonomy frustration, supporting prior research that autonomy support is most effective when it is accompanied by structure that fosters volitional engagement (Reeve, 2009). These findings reinforce SDT's assertion that autonomy is not simply about minimizing external constraints but about creating conditions where students feel ownership of their learning within a supportive framework.

Competence Need Satisfaction and the Impact of Feedback in Online College Courses

Competence support was strongly tied to feedback quality and instructional design. Instructors who provided timely, detailed, and constructive feedback enhanced students' competence need satisfaction by reinforcing their ability to master course content. However, students who received vague, delayed, or overly critical feedback reported competence thwarting, which discouraged engagement. These findings align with SDT research indicating that competence support is not just about task difficulty but about providing clear, actionable feedback that fosters self-efficacy and growth (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Additionally, the mode of feedback delivery—particularly the use of video-based feedback—emerged as an important factor, suggesting that online college courses may require further exploration into how technological affordances shape competence need satisfaction.

Relatedness in Online College Courses: The Instructor's Role in Social Connection

Relatedness in online college courses was primarily supported through instructor presence and responsiveness, with students reporting higher motivation when they felt that instructors were actively engaged in their learning. This aligns with SDT research indicating that relatedness is not merely about interaction quantity, but about the quality of connections formed (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, peer interaction did not consistently fulfill relatedness needs. Many students reported that participation in discussion boards and group projects did not result in meaningful connection, and some even described group work as isolating when collaboration was poorly structured.

These findings suggest that relatedness in online education may be more dependent on instructor-student relationships than traditional SDT models assume, particularly when peer interaction lacks depth or engagement. Future research should explore how peer-to-peer interaction can be intentionally designed to support relatedness rather than assuming that collaboration inherently fulfills this need.

Broadening the Motivational Framework: Theoretical Reflections on EVT and SCT

While This study was grounded in a phenomenological methodological approach to explore the lived experiences of instructors and students in online college courses. SDT was used to define motivation and served as the sole theoretical framework for data analysis and interpretation. Findings presented in Chapter 4 and discussed earlier in this chapter were examined exclusively through the lens of SDT, consistent with the study's original design.

However, in reflecting on the findings after analysis, I recognized that certain patterns—particularly around students' perceptions of assignment relevance and their confidence in succeeding—resonated with constructs from other motivational theories. Specifically, Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) surfaced as useful frameworks that could complement SDT in future research. While these theories were not used in the design, analysis, or interpretation of this study's findings, they are introduced here as part of a broader theoretical reflection.

EVT centers on the idea that motivation is shaped by both the value students place on a task and their expectations for success (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In retrospect, this framework may offer additional insight into participants' comments about meaningful

learning, perceived usefulness of assignments, or disengagement from tasks that felt irrelevant. Similarly, SCT's emphasis on self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to succeed (Bandura, 1997)—offers a complementary perspective on competence, especially in highly autonomous online environments where self-regulation is critical.

While SDT identifies competence as a fundamental psychological need, SCT provides a more detailed explanation of how efficacy beliefs develop, through mechanisms such as mastery experiences and social modeling. Although this dissertation previously distinguished between competence (SDT) and self-efficacy (SCT), it is important to acknowledge that these constructs are conceptually related. Supporting competence, in many ways, also entails fostering self-efficacy.

The introduction of EVT and SCT at this point reflects a theoretical reflection prompted by engagement with the data, not a re-analysis or extension of findings. These perspectives are offered not as part of the analytic framework for this study, but as a suggestion for future research that may seek to integrate or compare motivational theories to deepen our understanding of online learning experiences.

Implications for Practice

The implications discussed in this section are directly informed by the lived experiences of instructors and students in this study, as presented in Chapter 4. Findings demonstrate how the instructional strategies used by instructors were perceived as either supporting or failing to support student motivation. Specifically, these findings highlight the role of instructor presence, structured course design, autonomy-supportive instruction, competence-supportive feedback, and peer interaction in shaping students' motivational

experiences in online college courses. Additionally, the findings reveal challenges instructors faced in implementing these strategies, offering insights for instructional designers and institutional leaders seeking to support faculty in fostering student motivation.

Instructor Presence and Communication as a Strategy for Supporting Motivation

Findings suggest that consistent and proactive instructor presence played a central role in how students perceived motivation in online college courses. As described in Chapter 4, student participants reported that instructors who maintained regular communication through announcements, discussion board engagement, and direct outreach helped them feel more connected to the course and sustained their motivation. Instructors who actively participated in discussions, checked in with students, and provided timely responses were seen as reinforcing motivation, whereas those who were less present in course interactions were perceived as offering less instructional support. While students did not necessarily describe a lack of instructor presence as decreasing their motivation, they noted that it was a strategy that did not effectively support their motivation and was something they disliked about their course experience.

Instructor participants also acknowledged the importance of presence but described challenges related to workload balance and the “always-on” nature of online teaching. As noted in Chapter 4, some instructors expressed difficulties in maintaining consistent engagement, particularly in asynchronous courses where student emails, discussion posts, and questions could arrive at any time. Others described that institutional constraints, such as limitations on synchronous class meetings or restrictions

on course modifications, sometimes made it difficult to maintain consistent instructor presence. Instructors noted that limited synchronous time reduced opportunities for real-time instruction, answering student questions, and fostering stronger connections, leading to increased reliance on asynchronous communication to support students. These findings suggest that while instructor presence is an essential motivational strategy, institutions must also consider workload demands and policies that affect how faculty engage with students.

Structured Course Design as a Strategy for Supporting Student Motivation

Findings indicate that students perceived clear course structures, transparent expectations, and predictable routines as supporting their motivation. As described in Chapter 4, students reported that when courses followed a consistent format with well-defined deadlines and grading criteria, they felt better equipped to manage their coursework and persist in their learning. These findings reinforce the importance of clarity in course design, as it contributes to competence need satisfaction by reducing uncertainty and helping students feel capable of meeting course demands.

However, students also expressed that while structure was necessary, excessive predictability could lead to disengagement. Some courses in this study followed repetitive patterns (e.g., weekly discussion posts, group presentations and responses without variation), which some students found uninspiring. These findings suggest that while structure is beneficial, incorporating variation in assignments, opportunities for creativity, and real-world application can enhance motivation by preventing monotony.

Instructor participants, however, noted that institutional policies sometimes restricted their ability to modify course content, limiting their flexibility in incorporating new tools, updated materials, or alternative assessment methods. Additionally, instructors in departmentally standardized courses described having little control over the design of learning activities, which in some cases prevented them from integrating the motivational strategies they found most effective. These findings suggest that institutions should evaluate the extent to which course standardization supports or constrains student motivation and instructor effectiveness.

Competence-Supportive Feedback and Its Role in Motivation

Feedback was consistently described by student participants as one of the most important factors influencing their sense of competence in online courses. As detailed in Chapter 4, students responded positively to timely, detailed, and constructive feedback that provided specific guidance for improvement. Many students found video feedback particularly useful, describing it as more personal and effective in clarifying instructor expectations compared to written comments. These findings suggest that multimodal feedback approaches, including video or audio feedback, may be beneficial for reinforcing competence need satisfaction in online college courses.

However, some students expressed frustration when feedback was vague, overly critical, or delayed, as they found it difficult to determine how to improve their work. Additionally, strict grading policies that did not allow for revisions or resubmissions were perceived as limiting the usefulness of feedback since students had no opportunity to apply what they had learned. Instructor participants acknowledged the difficulty of

providing high-quality feedback in a timely manner, particularly in large courses, with some expressing that institutional expectations for grading turnaround times did not always allow for in-depth feedback. These findings suggest that institutions should consider how grading policies and faculty workload structures impact the effectiveness of competence-supportive feedback strategies.

Autonomy-Supportive Instructional Strategies and Their Impact on Student Motivation

Findings suggest that providing students with meaningful choices in coursework was perceived as supporting motivation by fostering a sense of ownership over learning. As described in Chapter 4, students valued flexibility in assignment topics, options for engaging with course content, and scheduling choices as ways that instructors supported autonomy need satisfaction. These findings align with SDT's assertion that autonomy-supportive environments contribute to motivation when students perceive their coursework as personally relevant.

However, some students also noted that when autonomy was too open-ended, it became difficult to navigate coursework effectively. As detailed in Chapter 4, several students described struggling with assignment flexibility when clear grading rubrics or instructor guidance were not provided, which at times left them feeling unsure of how to succeed in the course. Instructor participants similarly noted that while they aimed to provide autonomy, some students needed additional scaffolding and structured guidance to make effective choices. These findings suggest that autonomy is most effective when paired with clear expectations, structured support, and opportunities for students to seek clarification from instructors.

Intentional Peer Interaction and Community Building to Sustain Motivation

Peer interaction had mixed effects on motivation, depending on how collaboration was structured. As detailed in Chapter 4, some students described that group discussions, structured collaborative assignments, and peer feedback helped them feel connected to their learning community and supported their motivation. Others, however, found discussion boards and group projects ineffective when they lacked clear expectations or meaningful engagement. These findings suggest that peer collaboration is most effective when it is structured with clear objectives, accountability measures, and instructor facilitation.

Instructor presence in peer interactions was also a key factor—when instructors monitored discussions, provided feedback on collaboration, and encouraged participation, students described feeling more engaged in the process. Conversely, when group work was unstructured or lacked accountability, students reported feeling disconnected from their peers. These findings suggest that collaborative learning should be designed to promote interaction and shared accountability rather than being included as an obligation without meaningful engagement.

Institutional Support for Motivation-Enhancing Online Course Design

Findings suggest that institutional policies play a role in shaping how effectively instructors can implement motivation-supportive strategies. As described in Chapter 4, some instructors expressed that department-level policies restricted modifications to course content, limiting their ability to update materials, revise assessments, or incorporate new instructional tools. Others noted that limitations on synchronous class

meetings affected their ability to engage with students in real-time, particularly in courses that would have benefited from more frequent live interactions.

These findings suggest that institutions should consider how course design policies, faculty development, and instructional flexibility influence student motivation. Providing instructors with greater flexibility in course design, access to training in SDT-aligned strategies, and workload policies that support high-quality feedback and engagement may enhance student motivation in online college courses.

These findings provide insight into how instructional strategies support student motivation in online college courses and how SDT applies in this context. However, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which may inform future research and considerations for the broader application of these findings.

Limitations of the Study

This study provides important insights into the instructional strategies that support student motivation in online college courses, as understood through the lived experiences of students and instructors. However, as with all research, this study is shaped by certain contextual and methodological limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. While these limitations do not diminish the contributions of this study, they provide important context and highlight areas for further exploration.

Participant Representation and Sampling Considerations

As the researcher, my goal was to explore the lived experiences of students and instructors in online college courses to understand how instructional strategies were perceived in relation to motivation. This study aligns with qualitative research principles

by prioritizing depth and richness of participant narratives over broad generalizability. Rather than seeking representativeness, qualitative research aims to deeply explore participants' perspectives. However, it is possible that the individuals who agreed to participate were already motivated to reflect on their experiences, whereas those who chose not to participate may have had different perspectives on instructional strategies and motivation.

The participant sample included students between the ages of 18 and 40 and instructors ranging from 30 to 60 years old, representing a range of traditional and non-traditional learners, as well as faculty with varied levels of experience in online teaching. While this diversity allowed for exploration across different career and academic stages, the racial and gender composition was more limited. Most participants identified as White, with a few African American participants, and there was less representation from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, the number of male participants was notably lower, with only three men (one instructor and two students) represented across all courses.

While this demographic composition reflects the authentic makeup of the courses studied, it also means that certain perspectives may be underrepresented. The findings should be understood within this specific context, and it remains possible that individuals who chose not to participate may have had different experiences with motivation and instructional strategies. Rather than making broad claims about best practices, these findings illustrate what worked—or did not work—for the students and instructors who participated in this study. These insights contribute meaningfully to understanding

motivation in online learning environments but should be considered alongside further research that includes a wider range of perspectives.

Temporal Constraints in Data Collection

Another limitation relates to the timing of data collection and how it influenced participants' responses. While most participants were interviewed while actively engaged in their courses, some were interviewed after their courses had ended.

Specifically, two courses required student participants to provide post-course reflections rather than real-time accounts of their motivational experiences, and two instructor participants completed their follow-up interviews after the academic term ended. While post-course reflections allowed participants to provide holistic insights into their overall experiences, they may not have captured real-time fluctuations in motivation or immediate reactions to instructional strategies.

These temporal variations introduced the potential for recall differences between participants providing immediate versus retrospective accounts. However, the combination of real-time and reflective perspectives also enriched the data by capturing both immediate reactions and more integrated understandings of how motivation evolved throughout the learning experience.

Environmental Constraints in Interview Data Collection

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, with participant cameras turned off to protect participant identities and comply with IRB confidentiality requirements. This approach ensured ethical research practices and participant comfort, but it limited my

ability as a researcher to observe participants' facial expressions, body language, or emotional reactions during the interviews.

For example, one student became emotional while discussing their experiences, crying during the interview, but because I could not see their face, I did not immediately realize this was happening. Similarly, another participant became frustrated and overwhelmed while reflecting on their experience. Without visual cues, I had to rely on verbal indicators and probing questions to ensure that I was accurately understanding their emotional state.

Despite these constraints, the audio-focused approach maintained high ethical standards for participant confidentiality while still yielding rich narrative data. I addressed this limitation by developing heightened attention to vocal cues, using careful probing questions, and creating space for emotional expression through attentive listening techniques.

Future research may explore alternative interview methods, such as in-person interviews or video sessions a different advice that can capture the recording so that participants could still show their face is they felt comfortable doing so, to provide additional insights into nonverbal communication.

Limited Access to Course Artifacts and Observational Data

This study primarily relied on interviews with instructors and students, which provided rich descriptive insights into how motivation-supportive instructional strategies were experienced. While I was able to collect some course syllabi, a departmental

restriction prevented one instructor from sharing their syllabus due to intellectual property concerns.

Additionally, while students described the types of feedback they received, some chose not to share actual examples due to privacy concerns, despite assurances of confidentiality. As the researcher, my priority was ensuring participant comfort, so I did not press participants to share materials they were hesitant to provide.

Because of these considerations, this study did not include direct course observations or full instructional artifact analysis (e.g., assignment guidelines, instructor feedback, discussion board interactions). While these additional data sources were not required for the study's focus on lived experiences, they could have provided supplementary data to compare participant perceptions with actual course structures. Future research could integrate artifact analysis to deepen the contextual understanding of how instructional strategies are enacted in practice.

In conclusion, while these limitations provide important contextual considerations for interpreting the study's findings, they do not undermine its contributions to understanding how instructional strategies support student motivation in online college courses. Instead, they highlight the specific context within which these findings should be understood and point to valuable opportunities for future research to build upon this foundation.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provides important insights into the instructional strategies that support student motivation in online college courses, as understood through the lived experiences of students and instructors. While the findings contribute to the existing literature on motivation in online learning, several areas warrant further exploration to expand understanding of how instructional strategies function across different contexts and over time. Future research could build upon these findings by incorporating longitudinal perspectives, exploring diverse institutional settings, applying additional theoretical lenses, and expanding data sources.

Examining Motivation Over Time in Online College Courses

This study captured participants' experiences at a specific point in time, with some students reflecting on motivation while actively engaged in their courses and others providing post-course reflections. While these perspectives offered valuable insights into how instructional strategies influenced motivation, a longitudinal approach could extend these findings by tracking how motivation fluctuates over the duration of a course or multiple academic terms.

A longitudinal study could provide a deeper understanding of how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are sustained or challenged throughout an entire course. Additionally, exploring motivation across multiple courses could reveal whether students develop different motivational needs as they progress in their academic journey and whether instructional strategies need to adapt accordingly. Examining motivation over

time would further illuminate how students respond to instructional strategies at different stages of their learning experiences.

Investigating How Motivation-Supportive Strategies Function in Different Online College Course Formats

This study included three full-term courses that incorporated both synchronous and asynchronous components and one condensed summer course that was fully asynchronous. This design allowed for an exploration of how instructional strategies were perceived across different course formats. Future research could further examine how motivation-supportive strategies function in fully asynchronous, fully synchronous, and hybrid online college learning environments, as well as investigate how the duration of a course (full-term vs. condensed) influences the effectiveness of these strategies.

Instructor presence emerged as a key factor in this study, with students emphasizing the role of regular check-ins, video feedback, and active participation in discussions. A future study could explore whether these strategies are equally effective in fully asynchronous courses, particularly in a condensed format where real-time interaction is absent, or whether alternative methods, such as structured peer collaboration and interactive course design, play a greater role in fostering relatedness and motivation. Examining differences across course structures and durations could provide insights into best practices for designing online courses that sustain student motivation across diverse learning environments.

Exploring the Application of SDT Across a Broader Range of Institutional Contexts

This study was conducted within a single institutional setting, providing a focused examination of how instructional strategies support motivation in online college courses. Future research could extend these findings by examining how motivation-supportive strategies function in different institutional contexts.

Expanding research into community colleges and open-enrollment institutions could reveal how students with varied academic preparation and external commitments experience motivation-supportive strategies in online courses. Further investigation into Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) could provide insight into how institutional culture, faculty-student dynamics, and social support systems shape motivational experiences. Additionally, examining motivation-supportive strategies in STEM-focused online programs may highlight how motivation is influenced by high cognitive demands, collaborative learning needs, and discipline-specific instructional strategies.

By exploring these diverse learning environments, researchers could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how instructional strategies function across different academic and institutional settings.

Examining How Perceptions of Task Value and Self-Efficacy Influence Motivation-Supportive Strategies

While this study was guided by SDT, participants also emphasized that the relevance of coursework and their confidence in their ability to succeed shaped their motivation. Future research could integrate Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) and Social

Cognitive Theory (SCT) to explore how perceptions of task value and self-efficacy interact with SDT's psychological needs in online learning.

Students indicated they were more motivated when assignments were personally meaningful or connected to real-world applications. From an SDT perspective, this reflects internalization — the process by which external tasks become aligned with a student's values and sense of purpose, thus supporting autonomy. Rather than suggesting these strategies go beyond SDT, the findings reinforce the importance of designing autonomy-supportive instruction that fosters personal relevance and task value through real-world connections.

Additionally, examining the role of self-efficacy in how students respond to competence-supportive feedback could be beneficial. This study demonstrated that feedback plays a critical role in fostering competence, but further research could investigate whether students with different levels of self-efficacy respond differently to constructive feedback and whether certain feedback approaches are more effective based on students' self-perceptions of their academic abilities.

Expanding Data Collection to Include Observational and Course Artifact Analysis

This study relied on interviews with students and instructors to explore their perceptions of motivation-supportive strategies. While this method provided rich qualitative insights, future research could integrate course observations and instructional artifacts, such as syllabi, discussion board transcripts, instructor feedback, and student work samples, to provide additional context to participant narratives.

For example, analyzing discussion board interactions could reveal whether student engagement patterns align with their self-reported motivation levels. Similarly, examining actual instructor feedback alongside student reflections could offer insight into how students interpret feedback and whether their perceptions differ from instructor intentions.

Additionally, future research could incorporate learning analytics, such as course log data and assignment submission patterns, to examine whether students' motivational experiences, as described in interviews, correspond with actual engagement behaviors within the course. A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative interviews with observational and learning analytics data could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how motivation-supportive strategies function in online learning.

Investigating What Motivates Instructors to Employ Motivation-Supportive Strategies

While this study focused on how instructional strategies influenced student motivation, it did not examine what motivates instructors to employ—or choose not to employ—specific motivation-supportive strategies. Future research could explore the factors that influence instructors' decisions to implement strategies aligned with SDT or other motivation-supportive frameworks in online learning environments. Understanding instructors' motivations, beliefs, professional development experiences, and perceived barriers could provide valuable insight into how and why certain strategies are adopted, adapted, or omitted. This line of research could also explore whether institutional culture, prior experiences, or personal teaching philosophies shape instructors' willingness or ability to support student motivation in online courses.

Investigating Cultural and Institutional Contexts in Student Motivation

This study was situated within a single institutional setting, and while some participant diversity was present, future research should explicitly examine how motivation-supportive strategies function across a wider range of cultural and institutional contexts.

For example, studies could explore student motivation in institutions serving historically marginalized groups such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges, and international universities. Cultural identity, language background, and students' lived experiences likely shape how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are perceived and satisfied. Similarly, institutional values and norms can influence how strategies are designed and experienced.

Future studies should also consider how instructors' own cultural, ideological, and philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning influence their motivational strategies—and how students from various cultural backgrounds respond to them. Greater attention to these dynamics can reveal important nuances in how motivational theories apply across diverse educational spaces.

Investigating Institutional Policies That Shape Instructional Strategies

Instructor participants in this study described institutional constraints that influenced their ability to implement motivation-supportive strategies, such as department-mandated course structures, limitations on modifying course content, and restrictions on increasing synchronous meeting times. Future research could explore how

institutional policies impact instructors' ability to create motivation-supportive online courses and whether greater flexibility in course design enhances student motivation.

Examining how institutional mandates on course structure influence instructor autonomy in implementing motivation-supportive strategies could provide insight into the balance between consistency and adaptability in online learning. Future research could also explore how professional development programs impact instructors' ability to effectively integrate SDT-aligned instructional strategies and whether greater instructional autonomy leads to increased motivation-supportive teaching practices.

Understanding these institutional dynamics could help administrators develop policies that support instructors in fostering student motivation while maintaining consistency and academic quality.

These recommendations for future research build upon the findings of this study while highlighting opportunities to expand knowledge on motivation-supportive instructional strategies in online college courses. By examining motivation over time, instructional differences across course formats, diverse institutional contexts, theoretical expansions, enhanced data collection methods, and institutional influences, future research can deepen understanding of how online learning environments can best support student motivation.

Reflections as a Researcher

As someone who comes from a quantitative research background, diving into a phenomenological study was a leap into uncharted waters — and what a journey it's been! This was my first time using phenomenology as a methodological approach, and it

stretched me in the best possible ways. Instead of focusing on numbers and patterns, I had to slow down, listen deeply, and trust the process of uncovering meaning through people's lived experiences. I will admit, at times I caught myself trying to fit everything neatly into Self-Determination Theory (SDT) — classic case of "when you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail." But over time, I learned to let the themes emerge on their own and to appreciate when participants' stories did not align perfectly with SDT — because that is where the really rich insights were hiding.

One major takeaway for me was realizing that motivation is far from a one-size-fits-all experience. What works beautifully for one student at one point in time might completely miss the mark for another — or even for the same student in a different context. Flexibility, timing, and individual needs matter more than any “perfect” strategy. This hit home during my within-course and cross-course analysis, where I saw just how differently the same strategies could be experienced.

This study also showed me that online learning is not so different from in-person settings when it comes to certain core needs. Whether face-to-face or remote, students value instructor presence, approachability, clear and actionable feedback, and meaningful peer engagement. And group work? Still tricky in any format! The need for intentional, well-structured collaboration is universal, and both environments benefit when relationships are thoughtfully built and nurtured.

Conducting this study has helped me grow — not just as a researcher, but as a person. I now understand the beauty of letting findings breathe, embracing complexity, and being okay with not having all the answers. I also developed a real appreciation for

phenomenology. It gave me the space to slow down and honor the fullness of participants' experiences — their thoughts, emotions, contradictions, and surprises.

I am leaving this dissertation not just with findings, but with a mindset shift: motivation is contextual, dynamic, and co-constructed. It is not just about which strategies we use — it is about how we show up, how we listen, and how we adapt. And that is a lesson I will carry with me into every classroom, every research study, and every learning space I encounter moving forward.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a discussion of the study's findings in relation to existing literature, theoretical implications, practical applications, limitations, and recommendations for future research. This study explored the instructional strategies that support student motivation in online college courses through the lived experiences of students and instructors, with the purpose of assessing the applicability of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in this context.

The findings confirm that SDT is applicable to online college courses, demonstrating how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported or thwarted through instructional strategies. Autonomy was best supported when instructors balanced freedom with structure, providing options for engagement while maintaining clear expectations. Competence was nurtured through encouraging, actionable feedback that reinforced student ability and growth. Relatedness was most meaningfully fostered through intentional instructor presence and communication, rather than assumed peer connection.

However, this study extends beyond confirming SDT's usefulness—it reveals that motivation is not a static or universal process. Instead, it is contextual, complex, and dynamic, shaped by the interaction of instructor beliefs, course design, institutional norms, and diverse student needs.

A major insight from this study is the divergence between what instructors intend as motivational strategies and how students experience them. Autonomy, for example, was not universally perceived as supportive—some students experienced unstructured flexibility as disengaging rather than empowering. Similarly, feedback that instructors believed was constructive was at times perceived as harsh or demotivating by students. These findings underscore the need for educators to not only implement strategies but to continuously assess their impact from the learner's perspective.

The study also reveals the reciprocal nature of motivation in online teaching. Instructors were not merely shaping student motivation—they were also responding to it. Students' levels of engagement, feedback-seeking behavior, and course participation influenced the strategies instructors chose to use, often in real time. This non-linear, mutually influencing dynamic challenges the notion of a one-size-fits-all list of strategies and instead calls for a relational, responsive approach to motivating instruction.

Importantly, the study brings attention to the beliefs, values, and ideological stances of instructors. These orientations shaped how instructors defined motivation, what they prioritized in their teaching, and which strategies they selected. Professional development should encourage educators to examine these underlying assumptions and how they shape their practice.

Additionally, this study supports the idea that motivation is not a singular construct. Participants described motivation in multiple forms—motivation to complete assignments, stay engaged in the course, or pursue deeper learning—and these were not always aligned. Recognizing these distinctions is key to designing instructional practices that effectively support multiple facets of student motivation.

Although cultural context was not the central focus of this study, participant narratives hinted at the importance of cultural and identity-related influences on motivation. Future research should attend more explicitly to how race, gender, language, and institutional culture intersect with students' and instructors' experiences of motivation in online courses.

The implications for practice suggest that online instructors should implement instructional strategies that align with SDT principles, ensuring that students experience meaningful autonomy, competence reinforcement, and social connection. Institutions must also consider how course policies, faculty development programs, and instructional design support instructors in effectively integrating motivation-supportive strategies. As part of this effort, professional development should foster reflective practice, where instructors interrogate their own beliefs and positionalities in relation to motivation.

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged, including participant representation, temporal constraints, the challenges of defining motivation in an online context, and limitations in data collection methods. These considerations provide important context for interpreting the findings and highlight directions for future research. Future studies should expand upon these findings by

examining motivation over time, exploring instructional strategies across different course formats and institutional settings, integrating additional theoretical perspectives, and incorporating multiple data sources to deepen understanding of how instructional strategies influence student motivation in online college courses.

Ultimately, this study confirms that SDT is a meaningful and applicable framework for understanding student motivation in online college courses. At the same time, it urges researchers, instructors, and policymakers to move beyond surface-level applications of theory and engage more deeply with the contextual realities of teaching and learning. As online education continues to expand, sustaining student motivation requires instructional approaches that are flexible, relational, and responsive to diverse lived experiences.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVALS

IRB Approval for Research Study

The following document is the official approval letter from Temple University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), granting permission to conduct the study. This approval was necessary to ensure the ethical treatment of participants and compliance with institutional research policies.

IRB Approval Document:

 Temple University Office of the Vice President for Research	Research Integrity & Compliance Student Faculty Center 3340 N. Broad Street, Suite 304 Philadelphia PA 19140	Institutional Review Board Phone: (215) 707-3390 Fax: (215) 204-4609 e-mail: irb@temple.edu	
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Approval for a Project Involving Human Subjects Research that is Approved as Exempt

Date: 19-Jan-2024

Protocol Number: 31195
PI: JAMES P BYRNES
Review Type: EXEMPT
Approved On: 19-Jan-2024
Risk: Minimal risk
Committee: A2
Sponsor: NO EXTERNAL SPONSOR
Project Title: Exploring Instructional Motivational Strategies Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory: A Step Towards Enhancing the Quality of Online College Course Instruction and Supporting Student Motivation

The IRB approved the protocol 31195.

The study was approved under Exempt review. The IRB determined that the research **does not require a continuing review**, consequently there is not an IRB approval period.

As this research was approved as Exempt, the IRB will not stamp the consent or assent form(s).

Note that all applicable Institutional approvals must also be secured before study implementation. These approvals include, but are not limited to, Medical Radiation Committee ("MRC"); Radiation Safety Committee ("RSC"); Institutional Biosafety Committee ("IBC"); and Temple University Survey Coordinating Committee ("TUSCC"). Please visit these Committees' websites for further information.

Finally, in conducting this research, you are obligated to submit the following:

- **Amendments** - Any changes to the research that may change the Exempt status of this study must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Examples of such changes are: including new, sensitive questions to a survey or interview, changing data collection such that de-identified data will now be identifiable, including an intervention in the methods, changing variables to be collected from medical charts, decreasing confidentiality measures, including minors or adults lacking capacity to consent as subjects when previously only adults with capacity to consent were to be enrolled, no longer collecting signed HIPAA Authorization, etc. Please reach out to the IRB Staff with any questions about if a change to the study warrants an Amendment.
- **Reportable New Information** - Using the Reportable New Information e-form, report new information items such as those described in HRP-071 Policy - Prompt Reporting Requirements to the IRB **within 5 days**.
- **Closure report** - Using a closure e-form, submit when the study is permanently closed to enrollment; all subjects have completed all protocol related interventions and interactions; collection of private identifiable information is complete; and analysis of private identifiable information is complete.



For the complete list of investigator responsibilities, please see the HRP-070 Policy - Investigator Obligations, the Investigator Manual (HRP-910), and other Policies and Procedures found on the Temple University IRB website: <https://research.temple.edu/irb-forms-standard-operating-procedures>.

Please contact the IRB at (215) 707-3390 if you have any questions.

IRB Amendment Approval for Extended Recruitment (Summer 2024)

The following document is the official amendment approval letter from Temple University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), permitting an extension of the study's participant recruitment to include the Summer 2024 term. This amendment allowed for additional data collection beyond the original timeframe.

IRB Amendment Approval Document:

 Temple University Office of the Vice President for Research	Research Integrity & Compliance Student Faculty Center 3340 N. Broad Street, Suite 427 Philadelphia PA 19140	Institutional Review Board Phone: (215) 707-3390 Fax: (215) 204-4609 e-mail: irb@temple.edu	
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Amendment Approval

Date: 09-May-2024

Protocol Number: 31195
PI: JAMES P BYRNES
Review Date: 09-May-2024
Committee: A2
Risk: Minimal risk
Sponsor: NO EXTERNAL SPONSOR
Project Title: Exploring Instructional Motivational Strategies Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory: A Step Towards Enhancing the Quality of Online College Course Instruction and Supporting Student Motivation

On 09-May-2024, the IRB approved the amendments requested in Submission # **31195-0004**. A summary of the approved Amendments is below:

1- Updating all relevant recruitment materials, consents, and protocol to reflect an extension of the recruitment period.

*If you amended the consent form for a non-Exempt study, you can access your IRB-approved, stamped consent document or consent script through ERA. Open the "Attachments" tab within the approved submission (# **31195-0004**) and open the stamped documents by clicking the View link next to each document. The stamped documents are labeled as such. Copies of the IRB approved stamped consent document or consent script must be used in obtaining consent.*

Please contact the IRB at (215) 707-3390 if you have any questions.

If you would like to tell us how we are doing, please complete this 5-minute Satisfaction Survey:
<https://forms.gle/9EcqYGDEEAnvMw37>

APPENDIX B

INSTRUCTOR RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research Study on Instructional Motivational Strategies in Online College Courses

Greetings [Instructor's Name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Kelsei Thomas, a doctoral candidate pursuing a PhD in Educational Psychology in the College of Education and Human Development here at Temple University, under the guidance of Dr. James Byrnes.

I am reaching out to invite you to participate in my research study titled "Exploring Instructional Motivational Strategies in Online College Courses." Your experience in instructing a full-term online college course makes you an ideal candidate for this study.

The primary objective of my study is to examine the teaching strategies employed by instructors in online college courses to enhance student motivation in virtual learning environments.

I have received approval for this research project from the Temple Institutional Review Board, as indicated in the attached certification of approval document.

Participation in this study involves three virtual interviews conducted via Zoom, with an initial interview lasting approximately 2 hours, a follow-up interview lasting around 30 minutes, and an optional third interview lasting approximately 1 hour.

Your involvement in this study includes not only sharing your experiences as an instructor but also assisting in recruiting 4 to 5 students enrolled in your online course. Their insights about being in your course will provide valuable perspectives for the research.

As a token of appreciation, both instructor and student participants will receive a virtual Amazon gift card valued up to \$70.00.

Attached to this email, you will find essential documents including:

- Instructor Consent Form
- Student Consent Form
- Recruitment Flyer for Instructors
- Recruitment Flyer for Students
- IRB Approval Notice

To express your interest or decline participation in this research study, kindly respond to the poll question displayed above within the next 72 hours [POLL LINK EMBEDDED IN EMAIL] or reach out to kelsei.thomas@temple.edu.

Poll Question:

Would you like to take part in this study?

- Yes
- No

If you should have any questions for me, please feel free to contact me via email at kelsei.thomas@temple.edu.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to the possibility of your valuable contribution to this research.

Thanks, and Regards,
Kelsei Thomas, Doctoral Candidate
James Byrnes, PhD, Dissertation Advisory Chair
Educational Psychology
College of Education and Human Development
Temple University
Kelsei.Thomas@temple.edu

APPENDIX C

STUDENT RECRUITMENT EMAILS

1. Spring 2024 Student Recruitment Email Template

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research Study on Online College Courses

Greetings Students Enrolled in [NAME OF COURSE!] with [NAME OF INSTRUCTOR]!

I hope all is well. My name is Kelsei Thomas, and I am conducting a research study for my dissertation requirement titled "Exploring Instructional Motivational Strategies in Online College Courses" under the guidance of Dr. James Byrnes. The focus of my research is to examine student experiences in online college courses. Specifically, the study aims to identify the strategies used by instructors to motivate students in the online learning environment.

We are inviting students from [NAME OF INSTRUCTOR AND COURSE TITLE] course at Temple University during the Spring 2024 semester. Please note that only five participants will be selected for the study. These participants will be chosen randomly from those who express interest and meet the eligibility criteria. Additionally, participants must be 18 years of age or older.

Participants will be asked to participate in:

Three virtual interviews conducted via Zoom, a virtual conference platform.

- Initial interview lasting approximately 2 hours.
- Follow-up interview lasting around 30 minutes.
- Optional third interview lasting approximately 1 hour.

For taking part in this research, you will receive a virtual Amazon gift card with a total value up to \$70.00.

Attachments:

Attached to this email, you will find important documents related to the research study. Please take a moment to review the following:

- **Consent Form:** These forms outline the details of your participation in the study. Kindly review and complete them if you decide to take part.
- **Recruitment Flyer:** This flyer provides a brief overview of the study. Feel free to share it with others who are enrolled in this course and might be interested.

- **IRB Approval Notice:** This document confirms that our study has received approval from the Temple Institutional Review Board.

The link below will direct you to a recruitment questionnaire for you to express interest and to determine if you are eligible to participate in the research study. I will truly appreciate your involvement in this study.

[Click Here to Access Recruitment Questionnaire](#)

If you should have any questions, feel free to contact me via email at kelsei.thomas@temple.edu.

Thanks, and Regards,
Kelsei Thomas, Doctoral Candidate
James Byrnes, PhD, Dissertation Advisory Chair
Educational Psychology
College of Education and Human Development
Temple University
Kelsei.Thomas@temple.edu

2. Summer 2025 Student Recruitment Email Template

Subject: Earn \$50! Share Your Experiences in [Participating Course]

Hello [Student First Name],

I hope your summer is going well!

SRHB Students:

I am reaching out because you were a student in [PROFESSOR NAME] [PARTICIPATING COURSE] this past spring. For my dissertation, I am conducting research on students' experiences in online classes and would love to talk with you.

ADVG Students:

I am reaching out to invite you to participate in a research study for my dissertation, which focuses on students' experiences in online classes. As you are currently enrolled in [PROFESSOR NAME] [PARTICIPATING COURSE] this Summer I session, your insights would be incredibly valuable.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour and will be conducted via Zoom at a time that is convenient for you. To thank you for your participation, you will

receive a \$50 virtual gift card. Please be assured that all information shared will be kept confidential.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. I look forward to the possibility of speaking with you.

Thanks, and Regards,
Kelsei Thomas, Doctoral Candidate
James Byrnes, PhD, Dissertation Advisory Chair
Educational Psychology
College of Education and Human Development
Temple University
Kelsei.Thomas@temple.edu

APPENDIX D

INSTRUCTOR BACKGROUND AND DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

Welcome to the Instructor Eligibility and Background Questionnaire for the "Exploring Instructional Motivational Strategies in Online College Courses" study. I'm Kelsei Thomas, a doctoral candidate at Temple University, working under the guidance of Dr. James Byrnes. We appreciate your interest in participating.

To be eligible for this study, instructors must meet the following criteria: be 18 years or older, currently employed at Temple University, and currently teaching an online course at Temple University in the Spring or Summer I 2024 semesters.

This questionnaire is specifically designed to gather information about your background and experiences, offering insights into the diverse perspectives involved in instructing online college courses. It is estimated to take 8 to 10 minutes to complete. Your thoughtful responses will play a significant role in enhancing our understanding of instructional practices in the online learning environment.

Please take a moment to share details about your demographics and background experiences. Your input is crucial to our research on instructional motivational strategies and their impact on online learning.

Thank you for your time and valuable contribution. Please proceed to answer the questions to provide insights into your unique experiences.

Instructor Background and Demographics Questionnaire

Section 1: Consent Form

1. Do you possess the instructor version of the consent form for this research study?
 - Yes [BRANCH TO Q2]
 - No [BRANCH TO Q4]
2. Have you had the opportunity to review the instructor version of the consent form for this research study?
 - Yes [BRANCH TO SECTION 2]
 - No [BRANCH TO Q3]
3. Before proceeding with the study, it is essential that you carefully read the provided Consent Form. Your participation in this study is important to us, and we want to ensure that you have a clear understanding of what this study entails.

Please confirm that you understand the importance of reading the Consent Form by selecting 'Yes' below:

- Yes, I understand that I should read the Consent Form before proceeding. [BRANCH TO SECTION 2]
 - No, I do not understand that I should read the Consent Form before proceeding. [BRANCH TO Q3]
4. Which email address is most convenient for our research team to send you a copy of the consent form? [BRANCH TO Q3]
5. Thank you for your response. We appreciate your honesty. Could you please let us know the reason for not intending to read the Consent Form before proceeding? Your feedback will help us improve our communication and ensure that participants have the necessary information. [BRANCH TO END OF FORM]

Section 2: Eligibility and Basic Information

6. Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Yes
 - No [END SURVEY]
7. Are you currently employed at Temple University?
- Yes
 - No [END SURVEY]
8. Will you be instructing an online college course at Temple University during the Spring or Summer I 2024 semesters?
- Yes
 - If yes, which semester:
 - Spring 2024
 - Summer I 2024
 - No [END SURVEY]

Section 3: Teaching Experience

9. How many years of teaching experience do you have, including both traditional and online settings?
- Less than
 - 1-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-10 years

- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- More than 20 years

10. How would you describe your teaching style in online courses? (Select all that apply)

- Traditional/lecturing
- Interactive/discussion-based
- Project-based
- Other: _____

11. What technologies or tools do you commonly use in your online courses? (Select all that apply)

- Learning management system (LMS)
- Video conferencing tools
- Discussion forums
- Online quizzes and assessments
- Other: _____

12. Have you received any specific training or professional development related to online teaching?

- Yes
- No

Section 4: Courses and Semesters

13. Please list the name of the program(s) you teach at Temple University.

14. How many courses do you typically teach in a semester, whether online or in a traditional classroom?

- 1 course
- 2 courses
- 3 courses
- 4 courses
- 5 courses or more

15. During which semesters do you typically teach online courses? (Select all that apply)

- Fall semester
- Spring semester
- Summer semester

16. How many courses are you currently instructing at Temple University for the Spring or Summer I 2024 semester?

- 1 course
- 2 courses
- 3 courses
- 4 courses
- 5 courses or more

17. How many of these courses will be conducted online?

- 1 course
- 2 courses
- 3 courses
- 4 courses
- 5 courses or more

18. What is your favorite setting to teach?

- Online
- In-person
- Hybrid, a mixture of online and in-person

Section 5: Specific Course Details

19. For the purpose of this research study, please specify the online college course you would like to discuss, providing specific insights and examples related to your experiences.

- _____

20. What is the population of students that are enrolled in this specific online course? (Select all that apply)

- Undergraduate
- Graduate
- Non-Degree Seeking
- Other: _____

21. In your perspective, how would you characterize the current motivation level of students to perform well in this particular online course?

- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High

- Very High
- Not Sure

Section 6: Additional Information

22. Do you have other employment?
- Yes [BRANCH TO Q23]
 - No [BRANCH TO Q24]
23. Kindly provide a brief description of any additional employment opportunities in which you are currently involved.
- _____
24. What is the highest degree you have earned and in what field?
- _____
25. Have you participated in at least one online college course as a student?
- Yes [BRANCH TO Q26]
 - No [BRANCH TO Q27]
26. How many online college courses have you participated in as a student?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5 or more
27. What is your favorite setting to teach?
- Online
 - In-person
 - Hybrid, a mixture of online and in-person
28. How many interviews are you willing to participate in for this study? The first interview is an initial in-depth session lasting 120 minutes, the second is a follow-up for 30 minutes, and the third is an optional verification interview lasting 60 minutes.
- One (Initial In-Depth Interview)
 - Two (Initial In-Depth Interview + Follow-Up)
 - Three (Initial In-Depth Interview + Follow-Up + Optional Verification Interview)
 - None

Section 7: Demographic Questions

The last few questions are for classification purposes only. All survey responses will be kept strictly confidential.

29. Name: (Last, First)
30. Email Address: Please provide your primary or preferred email address.
31. Phone Number: Please share your primary or preferred phone number.
32. Hometown: Can you tell us the city and state of your hometown?
33. Current City and State of Residence: What is the name of the city and state where you currently reside?
34. What is your gender?
 - Female
 - Male
 - Non-Binary
 - Prefer not to say
 - Other (Please specify) _____
35. Which of the following best describes your age?
 - Under 18 [END SURVEY]
 - 18 - 20
 - 21 - 25
 - 26 - 30
 - 31 - 35
 - 36 - 40
 - 41 - 45
 - 46 - 50
 - 51-55
 - 56-60
 - 61-65
 - 66-70
 - 71-75
 - 75-80
 - Over 80

36. Are you of Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin?

- Yes
- No

37. How would you best describe yourself?

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other (Please specify) _____

38. In this study, your information will be de-identified to maintain confidentiality. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms for identification purposes. Please specify the pseudonym you would prefer us to use for your identification in the study. _____

APPENDIX E

STUDENT RECRUITMENT ELIGIBILITY SCREENER

Introduction:

Welcome to the Eligibility Screener for the "Exploring Instructional Motivational Strategies in Online College Courses" study. I'm Kelsei Thomas, a doctoral candidate at Temple University, under the guidance of my advisor, Dr. James Byrnes. Thank you for your interest in participating. To qualify, you must be a current Temple University student enrolled in specific online college courses designated for this study, and you should be aged 18 or above. This screener involves a series of questions designed to assess your eligibility. It is estimated to take 7 to 9 minutes to complete. Your responses are vital to enhancing our understanding of instructional motivational strategies. Participation is voluntary, confidential, and may include compensation in the form of a virtual Amazon gift card valued at up to \$70.00. We appreciate your consideration in contributing to research on online learning and student motivation. Please proceed to answer the questions to confirm your eligibility.

Section 1: Consent Form

1. Do you have the consent form for this research study?
 - Yes [BRANCH TO Q2]
 - No [BRANCH TO Q4]

2. Have you had the opportunity to review the consent form for this research study?
 - Yes [BRANCH TO SECTION 2]
 - No [BRANCH TO Q3]

3. Before proceeding with the study, it is essential that you carefully read the provided Consent Form. Your participation in this study is important to us, and we want to ensure that you have a clear understanding of the details and expectations associated with this study.

Please confirm that you understand the importance of reading the Consent Form by selecting 'Yes' below:

- Yes, I understand that I should read the Consent Form before proceeding. [BRANCH TO SECTION 2]
 - No, I do not understand that I should read the Consent Form before proceeding. [BRANCH TO Q5]
4. Which email should we use to send you the consent form? [BRANCH TO Q3]

5. Thank you for your response. We appreciate your honesty. Could you please let us know the reason for not intending to read the Consent Form before proceeding? Your feedback will help us improve our communication and ensure that participants have the necessary information. [BRANCH TO END OF THE FORM]

Section 2: Recruitment Screener Questions

Please answer the survey questions honestly and know that your responses will be kept private and confidential.

6. Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Yes
 - No [END SURVEY]
7. Are you registered as a student at Temple University for the Spring 2024 or Summer I 2024 semester?
- Yes
 - If yes, which semester:
 - Spring 2024
 - Summer I 2024
 - No [END SURVEY]
8. For the Spring 2024 or Summer 2024 semester, please specify the participating instructor's online college course in which you are currently enrolled. If you are enrolled in multiple courses, kindly choose one for sharing your experiences.
- PPT, Spring 2024
 - IBA, Spring 2024
 - SRHB, Spring 2024
 - ADVG, Summer I 2024
9. Please indicate your enrollment status:
- Full-Time
 - Part-Time
10. What is your student classification for Spring '24 or Summer I '24?
- Freshman [BRANCH TO Q12]
 - Sophomore [BRANCH TO Q12]
 - Junior [BRANCH TO Q12]
 - Senior [BRANCH TO Q12]
 - Graduate [BRANCH TO Q11]

- Non-Degree Seeking_ [BRANCH TO Q13]
- Other: _____ [BRANCH TO Q12]

11. As of Spring '24 or Summer I '24, please indicate the number of years you have been a graduate student.

- Less than 1
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 or more
- Not Sure
- Other: _____

12. What degree are you pursuing?

- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctoral degree
- Professional degree
- Other: _____

13. What is your current area of study or academic field, whether you are pursuing a degree or enrolled as a non-degree seeking student? _____

14. How many online courses have you participated in?

- None [BRANCH TO Q18]
- 1-2 [BRANCH TO Q15]
- 3-5 [BRANCH TO Q15]
- 6 or more [BRANCH TO Q15]
- Not Sure [BRANCH TO Q15]

15. Please select all that apply to the format of the online courses you have taken:

- Asynchronous: Self-paced, internet-based course that allows learners to access course materials and complete assignments at any time.
- Synchronous: Virtual, instructor-led class in which all participants are present at the same time and can interact with each other in real-time.
- Hybrid: Combination of both asynchronous and synchronous components
- Other: _____

16. How would you describe your overall experience with online college courses? Please select the option that best reflects your experience:
- Positive
 - Negative
 - Neutral
17. In what learning environment do you thrive the most?
- Online
 - In-person
 - Hybrid, a mixture of online and in-person
18. Do you participate in any campus extracurricular activities or organizations?
- Yes [BRANCH TO Q19]
 - No [BRANCH TO Q20]
19. How many extracurricular activities or organizations are you currently involved in on campus? Please select the applicable number:
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5 or more
20. Are you currently employed while attending college?
- No [BRANCH TO Q22]
 - Yes, Part-Time [BRANCH TO Q21]
 - Yes, Full-Time [BRANCH TO Q21]
21. Approximately how many hours per week are you currently working?
- 1-10 hours
 - 11-20 hours
 - 21-30 hours
 - 31-40 hours
 - 41 hours or more

22. Do you have a support system, such as family, friends, or mentors, who encourage and support your education?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
23. How motivated do you currently feel to excel in the online college course instructed by the instructor you chose to share experiences about in this research study?
- Very motivated
 - Somewhat motivated
 - Neither motivated nor unmotivated
 - Somewhat unmotivated
 - Very unmotivated
24. Do you feel comfortable discussing personal experiences related to your motivation and interaction in online college courses, including your experiences with instructors and their instructional strategies?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
25. How many interviews are you willing to participate in for this study? The first interview is an initial in-depth session lasting 120 minutes, the second is a follow-up for 30 minutes, and the third is an optional verification interview lasting 60 minutes. **For the SRHB course and ADG course, they only had the options of doing a 45 minute to a 60-minute initial in-depth interview and an optional verification interview**
- One (Initial In-Depth Interview)
 - Two (Initial In-Depth Interview + Follow-Up)
 - Three (Initial In-Depth Interview + Follow-Up + Optional Verification Interview)
 - None

Section 3: Demographic Questions

The last few questions are for classification purposes only. All survey responses will be kept strictly confidential.

26. Name: (Last, First)

27. Email Address: Please provide your primary or preferred email address.
28. Phone Number: Please share your primary or preferred phone number.
29. Hometown: Can you tell us the city and state of your hometown?
30. Current City and State of Residence: What is the name of the city and state where you currently reside?
31. What is your gender?
- Female
 - Male
 - Non-Binary
 - Prefer not to say
 - Other (Please specify) _____
32. Which of the following best describes your age?
- Under 18 [END SURVEY]
 - 18 - 20
 - 21 - 25
 - 26 - 30
 - 31 - 35
 - 36 - 40
 - 41 - 45
 - 46 - 50
 - Over 50
33. Are you of Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin?
- Yes
 - No
34. How would you best describe yourself?
- American Indian or Alaska Native
 - Asian
 - Black or African American
 - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - White
 - Other (Please specify) _____

35. In this study, your information will be de-identified to maintain confidentiality. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms for identification purposes. Please specify the pseudonym you would prefer us to use for your identification in the study.

APPENDIX F

INSTRUCTOR INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY EMAIL

Dear [INSTRUCTOR],

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in my research study, "*Exploring Instructional Motivational Strategies in Online College Courses*." I appreciate your willingness to contribute. Your involvement will aid in examining teaching strategies used by instructors to promote student motivation in online learning environments.

To begin, here is an overview of the next steps in the participation process:

1. Complete the Instructor Background and Demographics Questionnaire: This questionnaire aims to gather information about your background and experiences.
2. Schedule your Initial Interview Session: Using the link, kindly find a suitable time for your initial interview to gain insights into your perspectives and experiences related to instructional motivational strategies.

Additionally, as part of your involvement, I kindly request your assistance in promoting the research study to students enrolled in your [NAME OF COURSE] course. Attached are the necessary materials, including a student recruitment email, a recruitment flyer, and the student consent form. If you believe it would be more effective, I am prepared to take on the responsibility of distributing these materials directly via email to your students. Your insights on the best approach would be highly valuable.

Thank you again for your interest in this study, and I look forward to our research collaboration.

If you should have any questions, feel free to contact me via email, kelsei.thomas@temple.edu.

Thanks, and Regards,
Kelsei Thomas, Doctoral Candidate
James Byrnes, PhD, Dissertation Advisory Chair
Educational Psychology
College of Education and Human Development
Temple University
Kelsei.Thomas@temple.edu

APPENDIX G

STUDENT INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY EMAIL

Greetings!

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in our research study, *Exploring Instructional Motivational Strategies in Online College Courses*. Your voluntary participation will help me examine teaching strategies employed by instructors to promote student motivation and engagement in online learning environments.

Participation in this study will involve the following:

Three virtual interviews conducted via Zoom, a virtual conference platform.

- Initial interview lasting approximately 2 hours.
- Follow-up interview lasting around 30 minutes.
- Optional third interview lasting approximately 1 hour.

*For SRHB and ADVG students, the following was shared,

Participation in this study will involve the following:

Two virtual interviews conducted via Zoom, a virtual conference platform.

- Initial interview lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour.
- Optional third interview lasting approximately 30 minutes to an hour.

For taking part in this research, you will receive a virtual Amazon gift card with a total value up to \$70.00.

If you are still interested in participating in this research opportunity, please click the link below to schedule your initial interview session.

[Click Here to Schedule Initial Interview](#)

Participation slots in the study are limited and will be assigned on a first-come, first-served basis. If you should have any questions, feel free to contact me via email, kelsei.thomas@temple.edu.

Thanks, and Regards,
Kelsei Thomas, Doctoral Candidate
James Byrnes, PhD, Dissertation Advisory Chair
College of Education and Human Development | Psychological Studies in Education
Temple University
Kelsei.Thomas@temple.edu

APPENDIX H

INSTRUCTOR INITIAL IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Initial In-Depth Interview | Time: ~120 Minutes

Introduction and Consent:

Greetings,

I'm Kelsei Thomas, a doctoral candidate in the College of Education, pursuing a Ph.D. in Education with a focus on Psychological Studies in Education. I am conducting a study that delves into your experiences as an instructor within online courses, specifically exploring the instructional strategies you employ to motivate students.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. My goal is to gain insight into the challenges and strengths of online courses and to identify ways to improve the learning experience for students. Your participation and input are invaluable to my research.

I'm here to listen and learn from your experiences, not to evaluate or interrogate. Your willingness to share your insights is a valuable gift.

Now, let's take a moment to go over the consent form together. *Review consent form*

Would you like to seek further clarification or have any questions regarding the study, or any aspects covered in the consent form?

With your permission, may I record this session? The recording will only be used for research purposes and will help me with transcription.

Once again, thank you for your time and willingness to participate.

Background:

1. How many times have you taught online courses?
 - a. Probe: What motivated you to choose online teaching as a mode of instruction?

2. Can you share your personal experiences as an online college course instructor and how you got involved in teaching in this format? (*Aligned to Research Question 1*)
3. Overall, what are your feelings towards online education?
4. How would you describe your teaching philosophy or your general approach to teaching? (*Aligned to Research Question 1*)
 - a. How would you describe your teaching philosophy in the online context? Is it similar to your approach to in-person teaching?
 - i. Probe: Can you give me an example of what this approach looks like in an online setting?
 - b. Can you describe any past experiences or challenges you have faced in online teaching that have significantly impacted your teaching methods? (*Aligned to Research Question 1*)
 - c. Can you describe any past experiences or successes you have had in online teaching that have significantly impacted your teaching methods? (*Aligned to Research Question 1*)
5. How would you describe your general goals as a teacher for [STATE CODE NAME FOR COURSE] the online course we are discussing in this interview?
6. How did you learn how to teach in a higher education setting?
 - a. What experiences, information, or support that you found influential in your approach to online teaching students? (*Aligned to Research Question 1*)
7. What kind of feedback do you receive regarding your online courses? (*Aligned to Research Question 1b.*)
 - a. How do you use that feedback?
 - b. What do you think works well and what does not in your online course?
 - c. Has any student feedback prompted changes or improvements in your teaching methods for online courses?
8. How many hours do you dedicate to [STATE CODE NAME FOR COURSE] this online course? (*Aligned to Research Question 1*)

- a. Could you describe the different tasks you do during that time, such as preparation, grading, and responding to emails?

Motivating Students in Online Courses:

9. What do you believe motivates students in general? (*Aligned to Research Question 2*)
 - a. May you provide me with an example?
10. How do you approach motivating your students? (*Aligned to Research Question 1a*)
11. What role do you expect students to take in your course? (*Aligned to SDT: Autonomy and Research Question 2*)
 - a. Probe: Do you think about giving students choice or giving them autonomy of their learning? (*Aligned with SDT: Autonomy*)
 - i. What does that look like? May you give me an example?
 - b. [If instructor gives choice] How do you balance between giving students choice versus making sure they learn the content?
12. What strategies or approaches do you use to help your students gain a deeper understanding and mastery of the course content? (*Aligned to SDT: Competence and Research Question 1a and Research Question 2*)
 - i. Probe: Are you offering additional forms of support outside of the classroom to help students who may be struggling with the course material? (*Aligned with SDT: Competence*)
13. Why do you use these strategies instead of others? (*Aligned to Research Question 1a; Research Q2; SDT: Relevance*)
 - a. What impact do you think these strategies have on student motivation?
 - b. [If they say they want to make the content relevant] Probe: Can you discuss how you ensure that the instructional strategies you choose make the course content feel relevant and meaningful to your students?

- i. Probe: In your view, how does making course materials more relatable to students' interests and goals enhance their motivation in the course?

- 14. Could you share some stories from your online teaching experience when you had to adjust your teaching methods to fit your students' different cultures and learning styles (*Optional Question; Aligned to Research Question 1a*)
 - a. Probes: when, where, what situation, who with, how felt, how felt in body

- 15. How do you get to know what your students need based on their backgrounds and how they like to learn? (*Aligned to Research Question 1*)
 - a. Can you share some examples of how this has influenced the way you teach?

- 16. Can you tell me about how your strategies to motivate students in your online course have worked? (*Aligned to Research Question 1c*)
 - a. Have you noticed improvements in how your students understand the material and feel more confident about succeeding? (*Aligned with SDT: Competence*)

- 17. What challenges do you come across when trying to motivate students online? (*Aligned to Research Question 1c*)
 - a. How have these experiences changed how you motivate your students?

- 18. Could you share a moment when your efforts to motivate students online were particularly successful? (*Aligned to Research Question 1c*)

- 19. What feelings or thoughts come to mind when you think about motivating students online? (*Aligned to Research Questions 1 and 4*)

- 20. Are there specific parts of your syllabus or specific assignment that speak to how you motivate students? (*Aligned to Research Question 5*)
 - a. Probe: What was your goal with these elements?

21. What lessons have you learned from teaching online that have changed how you teach and your understanding of motivating students? (*Aligned to Research Question 1c*)
22. From your experience, what teaching strategies or approaches have worked best in online courses, and how have they made students' learning experiences better? (*Aligned to Research Question 1c*)
23. How would you perceive the current motivation level of students in this specific online course? Please choose one of the following options: Very Low, Low, Moderate, High, or Very High.
 - a. Probe: To provide more context to your choice, could you share the factors influencing your perception?

Enhancing Student Motivation Strategies:

24. Based on your experience, what do you think teachers could do to boost student motivation in online college courses? (*Aligned to Research Question 6*)
 - a. To what extent does giving students a say in course decisions make them feel more in control and motivated to participate actively?
 - i. Probe: [Why and how do you think this works?]
 - b. Probe: Can you provide examples of specific course decisions or activities that you believe would effectively involve students and enhance their sense of ownership and motivation in an online college course? (*Aligned to SDT: Autonomy and Research Question 2*)
25. Reflect on your experiences as an online instructor. Can you share moments when you noticed changes in your students' motivation during a semester? What signs or behaviors did you see, and how did you figure out these changes? (*Aligned to Research Question 1*)
 - a. What methods did you use if any to assess their motivation levels?
26. Can you talk about times when you took action to reignite your students' motivation during a course? What did you do to get them back on track, and what did you learn from these experiences? (*Aligned to Research Questions 1c and 2*)
 - a. Probes: Did you see any specific results from these strategies?

Demographic Questions:

During the recruitment process for this study, you completed a screener questionnaire. I'd like to verify your responses and see if there have been any changes.

Review Screener Responses

Wrap-Up:

32. Any final thoughts, feedback, questions?

- a. Do you happen to know any instructors who might be interested in participating in this study? If so, would you be willing to share my email address, kelsei.thomas@temple.edu, to contact me.
- b. Do you have any current students who are currently enrolled your online courses and whom you would like to recommend for participation in this study? If so, would you be willing to share my email address, kelsei.thomas@temple.edu, to contact me.

33. Are you interested in continuing with participating in the follow-up interview? If so, we can schedule the follow-up interview now.

- a. If not, thank you for your valuable participation in this research study!

APPENDIX I

STUDENT INITIAL IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Initial In-Depth Interview | Time: ~60 Minutes

*Note: For students enrolled in the SRHB and ADVG course, their initial in-depth interview was ~30 minutes to 60 minutes. *

Introduction and Consent:

Hello! I'm Kelsei Thomas, a doctoral candidate studying Education here at Temple University. I'm really interested in your experiences as a student in online college classes, specifically those taught by [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name].

Thank you so much for agreeing to chat with me. Your thoughts are important for understanding online learning and how we can make it better. I'm here to listen and learn from you, not to judge or quiz you. Don't worry if some questions seem similar; that's just to get a really good picture of your experiences.

Now, let's take a moment to go over the consent form together. *Review consent form*

Do you have any questions about this study or anything we talked about in the consent form?

Is it okay if I record our chat? It's just for taking notes. With your permission, may I record this session? The recording will only be used for research purposes and will help me with transcription.

Thanks again for your time and willingness to participate!

Background and Experience:

1. How many times have you been enrolled in an online college course?
2. Can you tell me about your experience as a student in online college courses?
(Aligned with Research Question 3)
 - a. Probe: What made you decide to take online courses?
3. What is your preferred mode of interaction in an online course (e.g., discussion forums, video conferencing, email)?

4. Why did you choose to take [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name]'s online college course?
 - a. Probe: Did anything about the course description, syllabus, or what your friends said make you want to take this instructor's class?
 - b. What do you think of [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name] as an instructor? Did that affect your decision to take their course?
 - c. When you decided to take this class, did you have any particular goals in mind?
 - i. Probe: How does [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name]'s course match up with those goals?

Experience in [Instructor's Last Name]'s Online Course:

5. Could you briefly walk me through a typical day when you have to attend [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name]'s online college course? *(Aligned with Research Question 3)*
6. How has your overall experience in [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr.]'s online college course been? *(Aligned with Research Question 3)*
 - a. Probe: Are there any standout moments, highlights, or challenges that affected your motivation or engagement? *(Aligned with Research Question 3)*
 - b. Probe: Can you provide examples of how these strategies encourage you to take more control of your learning? *(Aligned with Research Question 4; SDT: Autonomy)*
 - c. Probe: Can you share any specific examples of interactions with [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name] or your classmates that positively influenced your motivation during the course? *(Aligned with Research Question 6)*
 - d. Probe: Conversely, were there any challenges or obstacles you encountered during the course that affected your motivation? How did you handle them? *(Aligned with Research Question 3)*
7. In what ways do you think the strategies used in the course have impacted your understanding of the material? *(Aligned with Research Question 4 SDT: Competence)*
 - a. Probe: Can you provide specific examples?
8. Can you reflect on how you were feeling at the beginning of this course compared to how you feel now? Have there been any notable shifts in your emotions or attitudes throughout the course, and if so, could you share your insights on what might have contributed to these changes? *(Aligned with Research Question 3)*

9. On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being very low and 5 being very high, how motivated do you currently feel in [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name]'s course. (1 - Very Low, 2 - Low, 3 - Neutral, 4 - High, 5 - Very High)(*Aligned with Research Question 3*)

Course Materials and Strategies for Motivation:

10. Could you take me through parts of the syllabus, assignment instructions, or discussion posts from [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name]'s course and point out areas where you felt particularly motivated? (*Aligned with Research Question 5*)
- What elements in these materials or instructions contributed to your motivation?
 - Probe: On the contrary, do you recall any instances where you felt your motivation was hindered or challenged by course materials or instructions?
 - What aspects contributed to this feeling?
11. To what extent have you felt that the course materials and activities were tailored to your interests and goals? (*Aligned with Research Question 4&5; SDT: Relatedness*)
- Probe: How does this affect your motivation?
12. How much say do you think you have in the course activities, like assignments, discussion topics, or assessments? (*Aligned with Research Question 4 & SDT: Autonomy*)
- How do you feel about this?
 - Probe: Could you share examples of times when you felt that your input was valued or not valued?
13. Reflecting on your experiences, what aspects of [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name]'s teaching style did you appreciate the most in terms of supporting your learning in the course? (*Aligned with Research Questions 5*)
14. What are some things that [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name] did in the course that you found particularly helpful or motivating? (*Aligned with Research Question 5*)
- Probe: Any specific examples that stand out?
15. What are some things that your [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name] did that you found unhelpful or made you less motivated? (*Aligned with Research Question 5*)

16. Looking back, can you remember times when your motivation changed during the course? (*Aligned with Research Question 3*)
- Probe: What contributed to these changes, positively or negatively?
 - Probe: How did [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name] support or not support you during these times?

Recommendations for Online College Course Instruction:

17. Based on your experiences, what strategies do you think instructors could use to motivate students to actively engage in online courses? (*Aligned with Research Questions 5 and 6*)
18. Is there anything else you would like to share, or any additional thoughts related to your experience in [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr.]’s online college course? (*Aligned with Research Question 6*)

Demographic Questions:

During the recruitment process for this study, you completed a screener questionnaire. I’d like to verify your responses and see if there have been any changes. *Review Screener Responses*

Note: If responses to the questionnaire were not captured prior to the start of the interview, the participants would be asked those questions at the start of the interview.

Wrap-Up:

19. Any final thoughts, feedback, questions?
- Are you aware of anyone else currently enrolled in this course who might be interested in participating in our study? If you do, kindly let them know to reach out to our research team at kelsei.thomas@temple.edu.
20. Are you interested in continuing with the follow-up interview? If so, we can schedule the follow-up interview now. *Note: SRHB and ADVG students were not asked this question. They were asked if they would be interested in participating in the optional member check interview.*
- If not, thank you for your valuable participation in this research study!

APPENDIX J

INSTRUCTOR FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Follow-Up Interview | Time: ~30 Minutes

Introduction and Consent:

Greetings,

I'm Kelsei Thomas, a doctoral candidate in the College of Education, pursuing a Ph.D. in Education with a focus on Educational Psychology. I am continuing my study on instructional strategies in online courses, specifically looking into your experiences and insights as an instructor. I greatly appreciate your willingness to participate in this follow-up interview.

This session aims to build upon our initial conversation and gather any additional insights or reflections you might have had since our last discussion. Your input is immensely valuable and will contribute significantly to the depth of my research.

Now, let's take a moment to go over the consent form together. **Review consent form** Would you like to seek further clarification or have any questions regarding the study, or any aspects covered in the consent form?

As with our previous interview, I would like to record this session solely for research purposes, primarily for transcription. Your consent for recording would be greatly appreciated.

Once again, thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences. Shall we proceed?

Follow-Up Interview Questions (*Please note that these interview questions were adjusted based on the participants' initial interview responses to ensure a more targeted discussion.*)

1. Since our last conversation, have you noticed any changes in how you see instructional strategies and student motivation in online course?
 - a. [If they have noticed changes] Probe: Tell me more about it.
2. Did our previous conversation affect how you think or teach online? Were there any big takeaways or moments that stuck with you?

3. Have you faced any new challenges or situations related to student motivation in your recent online courses? Anything you would like to talk about or share?
4. Is there anything specific you would like to add about how you motivate students online? Any new insights or strategies since our last talk?
5. Can you give more examples or details about teaching strategies that work well for motivating students online?
6. Have you noticed any patterns in student motivation over multiple semesters or courses? How has this affected how you teach?
7. Have you tried new ways or tools to keep track of and support student motivation online? Any experiences or results to share?
8. Based on your ongoing experiences, any extra tips for instructors looking to boost student motivation in online courses?
9. Would you be up for reviewing the information I have gathered so far and making any corrections or clarifications? We can schedule a time for that.
10. Any last thoughts, feedback, or questions? And do you happen to know anyone else interested in joining our study?

APPENDIX K

STUDENT FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Follow-Up Interview | Time: ~30 Minutes

Note: SRHB and ADVG students did not participate in follow-up interviews.

Introduction and Consent:

Greetings,

I'm Kelsei Thomas, a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at Temple University, continuing my research on instructional strategies in online courses. Your previous participation and insights were extremely valuable, and I greatly appreciate your willingness to engage in this follow-up interview.

This session aims to build upon our initial conversation, allowing you to share any additional experiences, thoughts, or reflections you might have had since our last discussion. As always, your input is highly valued and will contribute significantly to the depth of my research.

Now, let's take a moment to go over the consent form together. **Review consent form**

Would you like to seek further clarification or have any questions regarding the study, or any aspects covered in the consent form?

As with our previous interview, I would like to record this session solely for research purposes, primarily for transcription. Your consent for recording would be greatly appreciated.

Once again, thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences. Shall we proceed?

Follow-Up Interview Questions *(Please note that these interview questions will be adjusted based on the participants' initial interview responses to ensure a more targeted discussion.)*

1. Since we last talked, have you noticed anything different in your online class or how your teacher tries to motivate you? Please tell me.

2. On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being very low and 5 being very high, how motivated do you currently feel in [Dr./Mrs./Ms./Mr. Instructor's Last Name]'s course to stay enrolled and excel. (1 - Very Low, 2 - Low, 3 - Neutral, 4 - High, 5 - Very High)
 - a. Probe: How would you define excelling in this course?
3. Did our last chat change how you feel about online classes or what your teachers do to help you learn? Did you learn anything important?
4. Have you faced any new problems when it comes to staying motivated in your online class that you want to talk about?
5. Is there anything else you'd like to share about what your teacher has done to keep you interested in their online course? Did they try anything new since our last talk?
6. Can you give more examples or details about what makes you want to learn in online classes?
7. Did you notice any patterns in how motivated you feel over time? Did this change how you approach your classes?
8. Did your teacher try new things to help you stay interested in their online class? How did it go?
9. Based on your recent experiences, do you have any advice for teachers who want to motivate students better in online college classes?
10. Can we set up a time to review what I've learned from you? You can check if I got it right and add anything I might have missed. This is optional.
11. Is there anything else you would like to say?

APPENDIX L

CODEBOOK AND DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

1. Note on the Codebook

- **Title:** Predefined Codebook Based on Literature
- **Brief Note:** The following table presents the predefined codes that guided the initial coding of interview transcripts. These codes were developed based on existing literature, particularly Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and were used to categorize instructional strategies, motivational factors, and student experiences in online learning. The coding process included both deductive (predefined) and inductive (emerging) approaches to refine themes based on participant data.

2. Predefined Codebook Based on Literature

Theme	Definition	Sub-Theme	Sub-Theme Definition	Indicators
Autonomy	Refers to the strategies and practices that enable students to have a sense of control and choice over their learning process.	Autonomy Support	Teaching strategies that actively foster a students' sense of ownership, self-direction in learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assignments with flexible topics, formats, or deadlines. ▪ Instructor explains rationale for assignments, providing context for restrictive requirements. ▪ Encouragement of independent problem-solving. ▪ Instructor listens and adapts based on student feedback.
		Controlling Autonomy	Strategies that restrict or limiting the choices available to students, but without entirely removing their previous sense of autonomy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pre-set topics with minimal flexibility. ▪ Strict grading rubrics with rigid guidelines. ▪ Limited opportunities for students to diverge

				from predetermined options.
		Suppressing Autonomy	This is an active, deliberate effort to take away students' ability to make choices or express their values. It occurs when previously existing autonomy is curbed or restricted, or when students' personal values and preferences are undermined or overridden, even when opportunities for autonomy are expected.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Instructor revokes student choices on assignments. ▪ Instructor dismisses student feedback or requests for flexibility. ▪ No option for students to adapt assignments to personal values or interests.
		Minimal or Low Autonomy	Describes a learning environment where students have little to no opportunities for autonomy from the beginning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fixed assignments with little to no flexibility. ▪ Standardized assessments without personalization. ▪ Instructor-led discussions with no student input.
Competence	Strategies and practices that help students feel capable and effective in their learning.	Competence Support	Instructional elements that enhance skill development and confidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clear and detailed assignment instructions. ▪ Constructive feedback that guides improvement. ▪ Resources that support comprehension (summary tools, review sessions).
		Competence Thwarting	Elements that create stress or	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Focus on grades rather than learning.

			self-doubt in students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of constructive feedback (only pointing out errors). ▪ High assessment anxiety due to unclear expectations.
Relatedness	Refers to strategies that support a sense of connection among students and between students and instructors.	Relatedness Support	Practices that foster community, connection, and belonging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Opportunities for peer collaboration (group projects, breakout discussions, study groups). ▪ Instructor presence through timely feedback, regular communication. ▪ Activities that build community (icebreakers, peer reviews, office hours).
		Relatedness Thwarting	Factors that hinder students' sense of connection and support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students report feeling isolated or disengaged. ▪ Lack of instructor presence (delayed or insufficient feedback). ▪ Course design does not facilitate meaningful peer interaction.

3. Example of How Codes Were Applied in Data Analysis (Coding Scheme Table)

Participant & Course	Transcript Excerpt	Applied Code	Category	Theme/ Sub-Theme	Emerging Theme
Hannah (Instructor, PPT Course)	<i>"I try to offer students choices whenever possible, like letting them decide"</i>	Offering Students Choices	Supportive Strategies	Autonomy Support	Instructional Strategies that Support Motivation

	<i>between project formats or choosing a topic that resonates with them."</i>				
Red-Hat (Student, PPT Course)	<i>"I appreciated that she allowed us to choose which assignments to focus more effort on, especially when I had a busy week with work."</i>	Flexible Assignment Prioritization	Supportive Strategies	Autonomy Support	Instructional Strategies that Support Motivation
Ed U. Cator (Instructor, IBA)	<i>"I provide feedback, often through recorded videos... These videos are really valuable for students."</i>	Video Feedback	Supportive Strategies	Competence Support	Instructional Strategies that Support Motivation
Katya (Student, IBA)	<i>"We had a presentation based on a case study that had little to do with the Capsim simulation. It felt like my attention was being split between the two."</i>	Misalignment of Instructional Activities	Non-Supportive Strategies	Competence Thwarting	Instructional Strategies that Hinder Motivation
Vera (Instructor, SRHB)	<i>"I make sure to send at least two announcements per week to keep the lines of</i>	Consistent Announcements	Supportive Strategies	Relatedness and Competence Support	Instructional Strategies that Support Motivation

	<i>communication open."</i>				
Blue Bunny (Student, SRHB)	<i>"When she explained things during the lectures, she really expanded on the topics in a way I couldn't get from reading alone."</i>	Enhancing Understanding Through Explanation	Supportive Strategies	Competence Support	Instructional Strategies that Support Motivation
Monique (Instructor, ADVG)	<i>"I use PowerPoints to break down the information... and record video lectures to explain things in layman's terms... making them relatable is key."</i>	Breaking Down Content	Supportive Strategies	Competence Support	Instructional Strategies that Support Motivation
Jim (Student, ADVG)	<i>"Mostly my family [reason why Jim persists and strives to do well in course]. I want to do well for them. But there wasn't anything specific about this course that made me more motivated."</i>	Extrinsic Motivation (Family)	Non-Supportive Strategies	Lack of Course-Specific Motivation	Extrinsic Motivation Over Intrinsic
Blue (Student, ADVG)	<i>"Her responses became a bit sarcastic..."</i>	Condescending Responses	Non-Supportive Strategies	Relatedness Thwarting	Instructional Strategies that

	<i>the replies felt condescending."</i>				Hinder Motivation
Ella Jaber (Student, PPT)	<i>"The instructor always checks in with us during the live sessions to see how we're doing and to address any concerns."</i>	Instructor Check-Ins	Supportive Strategies	Relatedness Support	Instructional Strategies that Support Motivation

4. Theme Development Table (Synthesizing Codes into Themes)

Theme	Definition	Example Codes Contributing to Theme	Theoretical Connection
Instructional Strategies that Support Motivation	Teaching practices that foster student motivation by supporting autonomy, competence, or relatedness.	Autonomy Support (Offering Students Choices, Flexible Assignment Prioritization), Competence Support (Breaking Down Content, Video Feedback, Enhancing Understanding Through Explanation), Relatedness Support (Instructor Check-Ins, Consistent Announcements)	Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017)
Instructional Strategies that Hinder Motivation	Teaching practices that negatively impact student motivation by limiting autonomy, competence, or relatedness.	Competence Thwarting (Misalignment of Instructional Activities), Relatedness Thwarting (Condescending Responses), Lack of Course-Specific Motivation	Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017)
Challenges to Student Motivation in Online Learning	Broader environmental or structural factors that make it difficult for	Overwhelming Workload, Limited Peer Interaction, Compressed Course Format	Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017); Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964)

	students to stay engaged.		
The Role of Instructor Presence	The extent to which students feel supported and connected to their instructor.	Relatedness Support (Instructor Check-Ins, Announcements), Relatedness Thwarting (Lack of Personal Connection, Limited Instructor Feedback)	Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017); Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000)
Extrinsic Motivation as a Driver of Persistence	Students who continue striving in the course due to external influences, rather than the course itself fostering motivation.	Extrinsic Motivation (Family Expectations, Degree Requirements, Career Goals)	Self-Determination Theory – Controlled Regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000)

APPENDIX M

EXAMPLE OF AN INSTRUCTOR MEMO

Note on Member Check Interview Guides: Each instructor memo was created based on initial and follow-up interviews. These memos summarize key themes related to instructional strategies, challenges, and perspectives on student motivation. The content of these memos directly informed the study's findings, capturing participants' experiences and insights in alignment with the research questions. Below is an example of a memo created for Monique, the ADVG instructor.

Memo for Interviews with Monique (ADVG Instructor)

- **Date of Initial Interview:** June 17, 2024
 - **Date of Follow-Up Interview:** July 2, 2024
 - **Interviewer:** Kelsei Thomas
 - **Location of Interview:** Zoom
-

Introduction

Monique is a doctoral student with experience teaching both online and in-person undergraduate courses. For this study, she shared her experiences teaching a fully asynchronous summer course, *ADVG*, a six-week course focused on global advertising strategies in Summer I of 2024. With just 13 students enrolled, the course included weekly readings, discussion board posts, and a final project. Monique described her teaching approach as student-centered and highly relational, emphasizing the importance of making real-world connections to advertising concepts.

What stood out immediately in my conversations with Monique was her intentionality—she sees her role not just as an instructor but as a facilitator of learning. She spoke passionately about creating an environment where students felt comfortable engaging, sharing their perspectives, and applying course content to their lives. As a fellow doctoral student, she was eager to participate in this research, viewing it as an opportunity to reflect on and refine her teaching strategies.

Interview Context

Monique participated in two interviews via Zoom. Our first conversation lasted about an hour, during which she provided rich insights into her instructional strategies, challenges,

and experiences teaching *ADVG*. In the follow-up interview, which lasted approximately 30 minutes, she reflected further on our discussion, offering additional thoughts on areas where she saw room for improvement.

From the outset, Monique was highly engaged, often pausing to think critically about her responses. She openly discussed the rewards and difficulties of teaching an asynchronous course, emphasizing her efforts to make the online environment feel personal and engaging. She also reflected on her journey of adapting to U.S. cultural norms in the classroom, which was particularly significant given her background teaching in the Caribbean.

Defining Motivation

When asked how she defines motivation, Monique responded:

“Motivation is like a will—it’s the energy or enthusiasm to do something. It can come from a goal, your attitude, or just the desire to get something done.”

Teaching Approach: Fostering a Humanized Online Learning Experience

Monique’s philosophy of teaching revolves around *humanizing the online experience*. She sees herself as more than just an authority figure—her goal is to be approachable, relatable, and supportive.

“I don’t want to be the scary, authoritarian figure. I want students to feel comfortable asking questions and participating in discussions.”

She believes that when students perceive her as a real person rather than a distant figure behind a screen, they are more likely to engage meaningfully. She actively builds this connection by incorporating unscripted moments into her video lectures—letting small mistakes or real-life interruptions (such as her dog barking in the background) remain in the final recordings.

“If I make a mistake or my dog interrupts... I leave it in. It adds a bit of authenticity to the experience.”

Her commitment to transparency and relatability aligns with the *relatedness* component of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). By presenting herself as a real, imperfect human,

she creates an inviting space where students feel more at ease engaging with course materials.

Another key aspect of Monique’s teaching approach is goal alignment. She carefully designs assessments to align with course objectives, ensuring that students understand *why* they are completing each assignment. She integrates Bloom’s Taxonomy into her course structure to scaffold learning and help students progress from basic understanding to higher-order thinking.

“I focus a lot on goal alignment, making sure all the assessments align with the course objectives. That’s something I’ve been paying more attention to—having clear course objectives, class goals, and ensuring that the assignments align with those.”

Her awareness of goal alignment demonstrates her focus on fostering competence, another core component of SDT. By ensuring that students clearly understand expectations, she creates an environment where they feel capable of succeeding.

Instructional Strategies: Encouraging Student Motivation

Throughout our discussions, Monique described a range of strategies she employs to support student motivation in an asynchronous setting. These strategies focus on three key areas: building community, fostering autonomy, and reinforcing competence.

1. Personalized Communication to Keep Students Engaged

To maintain motivation in the fast-paced six-week course, Monique uses weekly announcements featuring motivational messages, reminders, and even lighthearted GIFs.

“I send out weekly announcements on Canvas... reminding them that while it's intense, it's short and they're almost there.”

This small yet consistent gesture reassures students and reminds them that she is present and invested in their success.

2. Shared Responsibility in Learning

Monique balances support with accountability, encouraging students to take an active role in their own learning.

“I’ve adopted the mindset that I’ll try my best, but students have to meet me halfway.”

She recognizes that motivation is a shared effort—while she provides encouragement, structured learning experiences, and detailed feedback, students must also take ownership of their learning.

3. Detailed and Encouraging Feedback

Monique makes a deliberate effort to craft specific and meaningful feedback, ensuring that students feel their work is seen and valued.

“With feedback, I make sure to include comments like, ‘I really liked your point about X,’ so they know I’m actually reading their discussion posts.”

This reinforces competence by affirming students’ efforts and guiding them toward improvement.

4. Breaking Down Complex Concepts

To support comprehension, Monique simplifies challenging material through a combination of PowerPoint presentations and video lectures that present concepts in relatable ways.

“I use PowerPoints to break down the information... and record video lectures to explain things in layman's terms... making them relatable is key.”

This strategy aligns with research on cognitive load and student engagement—by presenting content in accessible ways, she supports deeper understanding and reduces feelings of overwhelm.

5. Adjusting Teaching Style to Fit Cultural Expectations

Monique adapts her teaching style to align with cultural expectations in the U.S., balancing relatability with maintaining respect, which fosters a supportive learning environment.

“Teaching in the Caribbean is very different from teaching in the U.S. I’m used to a more traditional system where teachers were seen as authority figures, and there was a lot of respect for them... So, adjusting to the American culture has been a learning experience”

Monique’s approach to adjusting her teaching style helps her connect better with her students in the U.S. by considering cultural differences. This adaptation aligns with the relatedness component of SDT, fostering a supportive environment where students feel understood. Reflecting on these cultural differences with students could deepen mutual understanding and enhance respect, supporting a stronger teacher-student relationship.

Challenges in Student Engagement

Despite her efforts, Monique noted several challenges in motivating students:

- **Superficial Discussion Board Engagement:**
“They'll respond with comments like ‘Great thoughts’ or ‘I like your idea,’ and it’s obvious they’re just doing it to fulfill the requirement.”
The lack of meaningful interaction hindered her ability to foster relatedness among students.
- **Limited Use of Interactive Tools:**
“I think I could have definitely had students more engaged and more motivated if I did more videos and more interactive stuff.”
She expressed a desire to incorporate more Canvas-based interactive tools, such as quizzes or video discussions, to increase engagement.
- **Comprehension Struggles in a Fast-Paced Course:**
“It often feels like they’re just going through the motions to finish the course rather than internalizing what I’m trying to teach.”
The six-week format posed a challenge in fostering deep learning, as some students focused more on completion than comprehension.

Final Reflections

Monique’s experiences illustrate the complexities of fostering motivation in an asynchronous online course. While she has found success in humanizing her teaching presence, providing detailed feedback, and aligning assessments with clear objectives, she continues to reflect on ways to improve engagement.

Her insights contribute to a broader understanding of how instructional strategies align with SDT, emphasizing that motivation in online learning is a dynamic interplay between structure, communication, and relatability.

Moving forward, Monique sees opportunities to incorporate more interactive elements, scaffolded discussions, and reflective activities to further support student motivation. As she put it:

“Teaching online is a constant learning process. I’m always figuring out what works, what doesn’t, and how to make it better.”

APPENDIX N

INSTRUCTOR MEMBER CHECK INTERVIEW GUIDE

Note on Member Check Interview Guides: Each member check interview guide was customized based on the corresponding participant's memo. The purpose of these guides was to verify the accuracy of the findings and provide participants the opportunity to clarify, refine, or expand on the information presented in their memo. The questions in each guide were tailored to ensure that the study accurately reflected their experiences. Below is an example of the member check interview guide created for Monique, the ADVG instructor.

Monique Member Check Interview Guide Member Check Interview | Time: ~30 - 45 Minutes

Introduction and Consent:

Greetings,

I'm Kelsei Thomas, a doctoral candidate in the College of Education, pursuing a Ph.D. in Education with a focus on Educational Psychology. Thank you for joining this follow-up interview! This step is essential to ensure that the information I've gathered is accurate and truly reflects your experiences.

In our previous interview, you shared valuable insights, and I used those conversations to create a memo that highlights the key points about your experiences, perspectives, and the themes that emerged. During this session, I'll share the memo with you, and I'd love to hear your thoughts. If there's anything that doesn't feel accurate or needs adjustment, your feedback will help improve the research.

Our goal today is to ensure that the memo captures your experiences authentically. I'll give you time to review it, and then we'll discuss any edits, clarifications, or additional details you'd like to include. This process is all about making sure your voice and perspective are accurately represented.

Before we begin, I'd like to check that I sent you the consent form for this study in advance. Do you have any questions about it before we proceed?

Also, as before, I'd like to record our conversation so I can focus on listening to you and review your feedback later. Is it okay if I record this session?

If you're ready, we can begin. Thank you again for your time and thoughtful participation—shall we get started?"

Reading Instructions:

Feel free to take your time to read the memo. As you go through it, note anything you'd like to clarify, adjust, or expand on. Let me know if you have questions while reading.

Memo Discussion:**General Impressions:**

1. What are your overall thoughts after reading the memo? Does it feel accurate to your experience?

Specific Feedback:***Introduction and Overview:***

2. The introduction describes your role as a doctoral candidate teaching a fully asynchronous course and your emphasis on a relatable, student-centered teaching style. Does this section capture your background and approach accurately? Is there anything you'd like to add or adjust?

Supportive Strategies:

3. The memo highlights strategies like humanizing the online experience, providing detailed feedback, and breaking down complex material. Do these examples reflect your teaching practices? Are there any additional strategies you'd like to include?

Non-Supportive Strategies:

4. The memo also mentions challenges, such as surface-level engagement in discussion boards, limited use of interactive tools, and some students struggling to grasp the material. Does this match your experiences? Are there other challenges or areas for improvement you'd like to highlight?

Student Motivation:

5. The memo describes how you used encouraging announcements, personalized feedback, and relatable examples to foster motivation, but also noted the compressed 6-week course format as a potential barrier. Does this reflect your observations? Are there specific successes or challenges related to student motivation you'd like to emphasize?

Impact of Instructional Strategies:

6. The memo discusses the outcomes of your strategies, like improved competence through feedback and relatability through unscripted video lectures. Do these sections capture the effectiveness of your strategies accurately? Are there other outcomes you'd like to include?

Cultural Adjustments:

7. The memo mentions your efforts to adjust your teaching style to align with U.S. cultural expectations, balancing relatability with maintaining respect. Does this section feel accurate? Would you like to expand on this aspect of your teaching experience?

General Feedback:

8. Overall, does the memo reflect your teaching experiences and perspective? Is there anything you'd like to clarify, add, or reframe?

Wrap-Up:

Final Thoughts:

9. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to add or clarify about the memo or your experiences teaching the ADVG course?

Gratitude and Closing:

Thank you so much for your time and feedback! Your input is really valuable in ensuring the research reflects your perspective accurately. Your \$20 virtual Amazon gift card will be sent right after this interview.

APPENDIX O

EXAMPLE OF A STUDENT MEMO

Note on Member Check Interview Guides: Each memo was created based on initial and follow-up interviews with participants. These memos summarize key themes related to instructional strategies, challenges, and perspectives on student motivation. The content of these memos directly informed the study's findings, capturing participants' experiences and insights in alignment with the research questions.

SRHB and ADVG students did not participate in follow-up interviews; their memos were developed solely from their initial interviews. Below is an example of a memo created for Student B, a student in the ADVG course.

Memo for Interview with Student B (ADVG Student)

- **Date of Interview:** July 17, 2024
 - **Interviewer:** Kelsei Thomas
 - **Location of Interview:** Zoom
-

Participant Overview

- **Participant Alias:** Student B
 - **Role:** Full-time senior, undergraduate student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Recreational Therapy
 - **Participating Course:** ADVG, Summer I 2024
 - **Online Course Experience:** Participated in six or more online college courses
 - **Overall Experience with Online Learning:** Neutral
 - **Extracurricular Activities:** Involved in 3 extracurricular activities during the Spring 2024 semester- off on the summer
 - **Age:** 21-25
 - **Gender:** Woman
 - **Race/Ethnicity:** White
 - **Motivation Level:** Motivated
 - **Reason for Course Selection:** She chose this class to fulfill a global liberal learning requirement. It was more convenient to take it over the summer rather than trying to fit it into her busy senior year schedule.
-

Participant Overview

Student B is a full-time senior majoring in Recreational Therapy who took the ADVG course over the summer to fulfill a global liberal learning requirement. Given her already packed schedule during the regular semester—where she was involved in three

extracurricular activities—taking this course online during the summer was the most convenient option.

At the time of the interview, Student B had completed six or more online courses, making her familiar with the online learning format. However, she described her overall experience with online courses as neutral—she appreciated their flexibility but felt they lacked opportunities for meaningful peer connections. Despite this, Student B described herself as motivated throughout the course and committed to staying on top of her assignments.

Interview Context

Student B participated in a single 45-minute Zoom interview, where she spoke openly about her experiences in the ADVG course. She reflected on both what helped her stay motivated and what made learning more difficult in the asynchronous format. While she expressed appreciation for aspects of the course, she also shared frustrations with certain policies, challenges with time management, and difficulties in forming connections with peers.

Throughout the interview, she was thoughtful and reflective, often pausing before answering to ensure she articulated her experiences accurately. She described herself as goal-driven, highlighting that completing assignments and progressing toward graduation were strong motivators for her.

Defining Motivation

When asked about her personal definition of motivation, Student B responded:

"Motivation is about being driven to keep going, especially when you have goals that need to be met. It's what pushes me to complete my assignments and stay on top of things."

Her definition describes a goal-oriented perspective, where motivation is closely tied to progress and achievement rather than enjoyment or engagement with the course content itself.

Instructional Strategies that Supported Student B's Motivation

Throughout the interview, Student B described several aspects of the course that helped sustain her motivation. These included having the freedom to choose her own topics, receiving personalized feedback, and engaging with reflection-based assignments that connected course content to her personal values.

1. Choice in Assignments Fostered Engagement

Student B appreciated the open-ended nature of assignments, which allowed her to choose topics that genuinely interested her. For example, she enjoyed selecting the companies she analyzed for her final paper.

"The assignments were open-ended, and we could choose the topics, like picking companies for our final paper."

By giving students control over aspects of their learning, the course supported Student B's autonomy, a key factor in sustaining motivation according to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

2. Weekly Summary PowerPoint Presentations Helped Simplify Complex Material

Student B found weekly summary PowerPoint presentations particularly useful. These slides broke down key concepts from the readings, making it easier for her to grasp essential ideas.

"She did weekly summary PowerPoint presentations, which highlighted the key points of the readings. I found that very helpful."

Her experience aligns with research on cognitive load theory (Mayer, 2003), which suggests that summarizing material in a structured way helps students retain and process information more effectively. By reducing cognitive overwhelm, these summaries contributed to her sense of competence, a critical factor in student motivation.

3. Reflection-Based Assignments Made the Content Feel Personal

Another instructional strategy that supported Student B's motivation was the use of reflective assignments. She particularly liked activities that encouraged her to think about her own values and apply them to the course content.

"I liked it when she asked us to reflect on our three main values... it made the content feel more personal."

Connecting coursework to students' personal experiences can enhance relatedness and intrinsic motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). By asking students to engage in self-reflection, the instructor helped Student B find personal meaning in the material, which increased her engagement.

4. Personalized Feedback Enhanced Student-Instructor Connection

Student B also valued personalized feedback from her instructor, Professor Monique. She appreciated that the feedback was thoughtful and felt that the instructor was genuinely engaged with her work.

"She left nice feedback and seemed engaged with my work, which was nice. It felt like she was really reading and interacting with my assignments."

This reinforced her sense of relatedness—she felt seen and supported, which helped maintain her motivation. Research suggests that when instructors provide meaningful, individualized feedback, students are more likely to feel connected to the learning experience (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Challenges That Hindered Motivation

While Student B found certain elements of the course supportive, she also faced challenges that negatively impacted her motivation.

1. Zero-Tolerance Policy for Late Work Felt Demotivating

One of her biggest frustrations was the zero-tolerance policy for late work. She explained that even if partial credit had been offered for late submissions, she would have been more likely to submit her work rather than opting to skip it entirely.

"The zero-tolerance policy for late work was a little demotivating... Even if late work was accepted for partial credit, I probably would have submitted it."

Strict deadlines can undermine student autonomy, making them feel that they have little control over their learning (Reeve, 2012). Flexible deadline policies might better support motivation, particularly in online courses where students juggle multiple responsibilities.

2. Time Management Challenges in the Fast-Paced Summer Format

The accelerated summer schedule made it difficult for Student B to stay on top of assignments. She described struggling with keeping track of deadlines, occasionally realizing too late that an assignment was due.

"Just staying on top of things during the summer... Sometimes I'd forget what day it was and realize I had something due that evening."

A fast-paced course structure can overwhelm students and hinder their sense of competence (Vroom, 1964). In future iterations of the course, built-in time management supports—such as weekly planning reminders or pacing guides—could help students navigate the workload more effectively.

3. Difficulty Forming Peer Relationships in an Asynchronous Course

Despite enjoying aspects of the course, Student B found it challenging to connect with her classmates. The asynchronous nature of the course limited opportunities for relationship-building.

"It can be harder to form relationships... For the students, definitely the discussion board."

Her experience aligns with findings from Garrison, Anderson, & Archer (2000), who emphasize that a strong sense of community is essential in online learning. Without real-time interactions, relatedness suffers, making it harder for students to feel engaged.

Overall Perception of Motivation in the Course

Student B rated her motivation as 4 out of 5 throughout the course. While she remained motivated overall—largely due to her personal goals and the flexibility of assignments—certain aspects, such as the zero-tolerance policy and lack of peer interaction, negatively impacted her experience.

Her reflections highlight the complexity of motivation in online learning: while autonomy-supportive strategies (such as choice in assignments) and competence-building strategies (such as summaries and feedback) were helpful, rigid deadlines and limited peer engagement hindered her motivation.

Final Thoughts

Student B's experiences reinforce key findings from Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The course successfully supported autonomy and competence through flexible assignments and instructor feedback, but relatedness remained a challenge due to the asynchronous nature of the course.

Moving forward, greater flexibility in deadlines, structured peer interactions, and embedded time-management supports could enhance motivation and improve the online learning experience.

"Motivation is what pushes me to complete my assignments and stay on top of things."

For Student B, success in an online course wasn't just about engagement—it was about managing time, feeling supported, and being able to connect content to personal goals.

APPENDIX P

STUDENT MEMBER CHECK INTERVIEW GUIDE

Note on Member Check Interview Guides: Each student member check interview guide was customized based on their memo. The purpose of these guides was to verify the accuracy of the findings and provide participants the opportunity to clarify, refine, or expand on the information presented in their memo. The questions in each guide were tailored to ensure that the study accurately reflected their experiences. Below is an example of the member check interview guide created for Blue, a student in the ADVG course.

Student B Member Check Interview Guide Member Check Interview | Time: ~30 - 45 Minutes

Introduction and Consent:

Greetings,

I'm Kelsei Thomas, a doctoral candidate in the College of Education, pursuing a Ph.D. in Education with a focus on Educational Psychology. Thank you for joining this follow-up interview! This step is essential to ensure that the information I've gathered is accurate and truly reflects your experiences.

In our previous interview, you shared valuable insights, and I used those conversations to create a memo that highlights the key points about your experiences, perspectives, and the themes that emerged. During this session, I'll share the memo with you, and I'd love to hear your thoughts. If there's anything that doesn't feel accurate or needs adjustment, your feedback will help improve the research.

Our goal today is to ensure that the memo captures your experiences authentically. I'll give you time to review it, and then we'll discuss any edits, clarifications, or additional details you'd like to include. This process is all about making sure your voice and perspective are accurately represented.

Before we begin, I'd like to check that I sent you the consent form for this study in advance. Do you have any questions about it before we proceed?

Also, as before, I'd like to record our conversation so I can focus on listening to you and review your feedback later. Is it okay if I record this session?

If you're ready, we can begin. Thank you again for your time and thoughtful participation—shall we get started?"

Reading Instructions:

Feel free to take about 5-10 minutes to read the memo. As you go through it, note anything you'd like to clarify, adjust, or expand on. Let me know if you have questions while reading.

Memo Discussion:

General Impressions:

1. What are your overall thoughts after reading the memo? Does it feel accurate to your experience?

Specific Feedback:

Introduction and Overview:

2. The memo describes your role as a full-time senior in recreational therapy, balancing extracurricular activities while taking the ADVG course to fulfill a requirement over the summer. Does this section feel accurate? Is there anything you'd like to add or adjust?

Motivation:

3. The memo describes your motivation as steady throughout the course, supported by personalized feedback and assignment flexibility, but impacted by strict deadlines and the workload. Does this feel accurate? Would you like to elaborate on any specific factors that influenced your motivation?

Supportive Strategies:

4. The memo highlights supportive strategies like the open-ended assignments, weekly summary PowerPoints, and personalized feedback. Do these examples reflect your experience? Are there any additional strategies that you found particularly helpful?

Non-Supportive Strategies:

5. The memo also mentions challenges like the zero-tolerance policy for late work, the fast-paced summer workload, and difficulty building relationships with classmates. Does this align with your experience? Are there other challenges you'd like to share?

Course Structure and Feedback:

6. The memo discusses how structured tools like the weekly PowerPoint summaries helped reinforce your understanding and confidence in the material. Do you agree

with this? Are there other aspects of the course structure or feedback that you'd like to highlight?

Engagement and Relatedness:

7. The memo mentions that while personalized feedback helped you feel connected to the instructor, the asynchronous format limited your ability to build relationships with peers. Does this reflect your experience? Are there ways you think the course could have improved peer interaction or engagement?

General Feedback:

8. Overall, does the memo capture your experience in the ADVG course accurately? Is there anything you'd like to add, clarify, or reframe?

Wrap-Up:

Final Thoughts:

9. Is there anything else you'd like to share or any questions you have pertaining to this study?

Gratitude and Closing:

Thank you so much for your time and feedback! Your input is really valuable in ensuring the research reflects your perspective accurately. Your \$20 virtual Amazon gift card will be sent right after this interview.