Investigating Online Learning Motivation through Mc Clelland Motivation Theory

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ABSTRACT

Understanding what drives and sustains learners' motivation is crucial in online learning, as some learners struggle to stay engaged in virtual settings. Therefore, this study aims to explore learner motivation in online language learning through the lens of McClelland's Theory of Needs, which outlines three fundamental needs derived from life experiences: the need for power, the need for achievement, and the need for affiliation. It also seeks to examine how these fundamental needs influence learners' behaviour and outcomes in the online learning environment. This quantitative study employed a 5-point Likert scale survey consisting of four sections: Section A (4 items on demographic profile), Section B (13 items on the Need for Power), Section C (16 items on the Need for Achievement), and Section D (12 items on the Need for Affiliation). A total of 251 students from two Malaysian public universities, enrolled in German as a third language or as an elective for basic communication, participated in the study. The findings reveal that McClelland's Theory of Needs has a positive impact on online language learning. A strong positive correlation was found among all the variables that influence motivation in online language learning, specifically the need for power, achievement, and affiliation, which can help improve the design and delivery of online language instruction.

Keywords: Motivation, Language learning, Online Learning, McClelland's Theory of Need

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

Online learning is a teaching and learning approach that utilises digital platforms, typically delivered in two modes: synchronous and asynchronous. The synchronous mode refers to real-time interaction between educators and students through platforms such as Zoom, Webex, or Google Meet, involving live video conferencing, discussions, and presentations. In contrast, the asynchronous mode allows students to access learning materials at their convenience, through pre-recorded videos or applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and YouTube (Abdul Rahman & Rosli, 2022). The rapid advancement of information technology, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to the widespread adoption of online learning across educational institutions globally. However, several factors affect effectiveness and engagement in online

learning, including student attitudes, peer collaboration, and especially students' psychological motivation, which plays a crucial role in sustaining engagement and success (Mohamad et al., 2024).

One of the established psychological frameworks for explaining intrinsic motivation is McClelland's Theory of Needs. According to McClelland, human behaviour is driven by three primary needs: Need for Achievement, Need for Power, and the Need for Affiliation. The Need for Achievement reflects a person's desire for personal success and excellence. McClelland found that individuals with a high need for achievement tend to perform better than those with a moderate or low need for achievement. The Need for Power refers to the desire to influence and control others. Lastly, the Need for Affiliation describes individuals who strongly value creating and maintaining social relationships and enjoy being part of a group (Osemeke & Adegboyega, 2017).

In Malaysia, as Open and Distance Learning (ODL) continues to be integrated into academic programs beyond the pandemic era, it is imperative to understand how these fundamental psychological needs influence student motivation. The need for affiliation becomes particularly important in addressing the issue of student isolation in online settings, while the needs for achievement and power may shape students' engagement with content and participation in collaborative activities. Thus, by exploring online learning motivation using McClelland's Three Needs framework, this study aims to provide practical guidance to educators and course designers on enhancing student motivation and engagement in online educational settings.

Statement of Problem

In Malaysia, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary teaching method was face-to-face classroom instruction. The rapid shift from conventional teaching to online learning has presented significant challenges for the country's education sector. Several factors can contribute to the effectiveness of online learning, and one of the most crucial is student motivation. According to Meşe & Sevilen (2021), motivation is a key element influencing L2 learners' performance and success in the language learning process. Their study found that factors such as peer interaction, teacher support, self-discipline, and the usability of digital platforms all affect students' motivation. These findings support the notion that motivation is a multifaceted construct that plays a major role in determining the effectiveness of online learning environments.

In the Malaysian context, Mohd Basar et al. (2021) found that while secondary school students generally had access to devices and internet connections, their motivation for online learning remained low (41.5%), and collaborative learning skills were only moderate. These findings highlight that motivation is a persistent challenge in sustaining effective online learning experiences. Similarly, Abdul Rahman & Rosli (2022) identified challenges in online learning, including device availability, emotional well-being, learning environment, and workload, which are closely linked to student motivation.

However, existing studies have not examined these challenges through the lens of psychological needs theories. Meşe and Sevilen (2021) recommended designing online courses that enhance interaction and promote independent learning but did not address how different types of motivational needs, such as affiliation, achievement, and power, will affect student engagement. This study aims to address that gap by applying McClelland's Three Needs Theory to explore the relationship between these needs and student motivation in Malaysia's online learning context.

Objective of Questions and Research Questions

This study is done to investigate students' online learning motivation through McClelland's theory of Needs. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

- How does the need for power influence motivation for online learning?
- How does the need for achievement influence motivation for online learning?
- How does the need for affiliation influence motivation for online learning?
- Is there a relationship between all factors in motivation to learn online?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework of the Study

McClelland's Human Motivation Theory (1961, 1965, 1975, 1985), developed in collaboration with Henry Murray's (Boyatzis, 2015), initially focused on achievement needs. Later, in the late 1940s through the 1960s, he developed and changed the focal point to the need for power (Boyatzis, 2015). This theory explains that human behaviour is shaped by three dimensions of needs, which are the need for achievement, the need for power, and the need for affiliation. McClelland highlighted professional and social interaction as the factors that are progressively shaping the need for achievement within learners; thus, these needs are not innate but rather shaped over time (Boyatzis, 2015).

According to Turabik & Baskan (2015), the need for achievement is defined as an individual's desire to set and accomplish challenging tasks or goals, solve problems, and seek feedback for continuous improvement. Learners with these characteristics often prefer situations that involve a moderate level of risk, value clear performance indicators, and consistently display persistence to acquire mastery knowledge over the tasks. Meanwhile, the need for power is reflected in the learners' desire to influence and control other students or peers and is related to resources and task outcome. This meaning has been applied to broader definitions ranging from personal to broader organisations or social. While the need for affiliation refers to a desire for warm, friendly relationships, individuals with this need tend to prefer cooperation and avoid conflict (Riley, 2005).

In the context of online learning, McClelland's theoretical framework provides insight and explanation on how these three needs contribute to students' engagement and persistence in online-based learning. Furthermore, learners with a strong focus on an achievement mindset will perform better than others in self-paced online learning that provides clear progress markers and quick feedback. In this study, the need for achievement is explored through the intrinsic and extrinsic goal orientation, along with task value. Meanwhile, learners who are driven by power may find that leadership roles or decision-making influence can contribute to their engagement and participation in the classroom, whereas learners high in affiliation find that community building and cooperative learning activities make them more engaged. In the present research, these two elements were studied through the dimensions of expectancy and social support.

Although all three motivational needs are important, there is a necessity to balance among them, as it's crucial in sustaining learners' engagement and participation in the classroom (Bargh, 1990, 1997). Integrating McClelland's dimensions into online learning by designing course structures and flow (Siok et al., 2023) can foster and sustain learners' satisfaction and performance. This approach also strongly supports the tailoring of online learning, suggesting the adaptation to the change of learning environment, as well as fostering and strengthening learners' engagement and participation.

Motivation to Learn Online

List of motivations to learn online by different experts.

Motivation is an important factor in determining students' participation and commitment in online education. Researchers have discovered various elements that encourage students to actively engage in online learning. According to Hartnett (2016), motivation in online education is driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic elements, including individual interest and satisfaction, as well as academic performance and professional advancement. For instance, motivation in online learning is increased when learners consider tasks as relevant and immediately applicable to real-life situations, which strengthens their intrinsic motivation to persevere in the face of difficulties (Pan et al., 2024). On the other hand, extrinsic motivation in online education is frequently associated with tangible consequences such as improved grades, fulfilling institutional standards, or achieving awards that improve chances for employment (Fowler, 2018). Taken together, these data indicate that a well-balanced integration of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators is required for long-term engagement and success with online learning.

In addition, flexibility, accessibility, and convenience are key motivators, as these factors enable students to schedule study sessions around work or personal obligations (Al-Maroof et al., 2020; Basar et al., 2021). Flexibility allows learners to study when and where they want, which is especially advantageous for people with various responsibilities because it avoids scheduling conflicts and improves autonomy in the learning process (Fowler, 2018). Accessibility boosts motivation by making course materials available on a variety of platforms and formats, allowing students to review content at their own pace and revisit complex themes when necessary (Basar et al., 2021). Thus, technological flexibility and reliability such as uninterrupted connectivity, intuitive platforms, and easily accessible resources, help to keep learners motivated by preventing cognitive overload and frustration.

Furthermore, the presence of helpful teachers who provide immediate feedback and maintain continuous interaction helps to keep learners engaged by minimising feelings of isolation and improving confidence (Basar et al., 2021). Similarly, opportunities for peer contact and collaborative work reinforce social presence, which has been demonstrated to be a powerful predictor of continuing participation in online courses. (Franken, 2007; Miao & Ma, 2022). According to phakhot and Attahakul (2024), active learning strategies, multimedia tools, and planned group activities have been demonstrated to boost student engagement and long-term motivation in virtual environments. These characteristics, when applied in well-structured online learning environments, fulfill a variety of McClelland's motivational demands by allowing for mastery, collaboration, and autonomy, resulting in more involvement and better learning results.

Past Studies

Past Studies on Online Motivation

Many studies have been conducted to investigate factors influencing students' motivation in online learning, including the role of needs such as achievement, affiliation, and power, as outlined in McClelland's Motivation Theory. These studies also examined how motivational constructs interact with instructional design and learner engagement in digital environments.

The study by Siok et al. (2023) was conducted to examine how the needs for achievement, affiliation, and power influence learners' motivation to participate in online learning. The researchers surveyed 208 respondents from public and private universities in Malaysia, employing a questionnaire adapted from Fowler (2018) that comprised seven sections measuring the three motivational constructs. Findings indicated a significant association between all three needs—affiliation, achievement, and power—and learning motivation. The implications of this study suggest that educators can design strategies to enhance learner motivation by addressing these specific needs, while policymakers may consider fostering supportive learning environments that promote student engagement and satisfaction.

Similarly, Fowler (2023) also investigated learners' online learning motivation from the perspective of McClelland's (1965) Theory of Needs. This quantitative study involved 156 participants from a Malaysian public university and used a five-point Likert scale survey consisting of four sections: demographics, power, achievement, and affiliation. The results showed that intrinsic motivation and the three needs were positively correlated with cognitive engagement, whereas extrinsic motivation was found to slightly predict lower cognitive engagement. The study concluded that fostering intrinsic motivation and fulfilling the needs for achievement, affiliation, and power may significantly enhance engagement in online learning environments.

In summary, the reviewed studies emphasise that the needs for achievement, affiliation, and power play a critical role in shaping students' motivation in online learning contexts. They also highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation in enhancing cognitive engagement. In relation to the current study, "Investigating Online Learning Motivation through McClelland's Motivation Theory", these findings affirm the relevance of focusing on the three needs identified by McClelland. Such a focus is expected to provide deeper insights into how online learning motivation can be strengthened through targeted pedagogical strategies and learner-centred instructional designs.

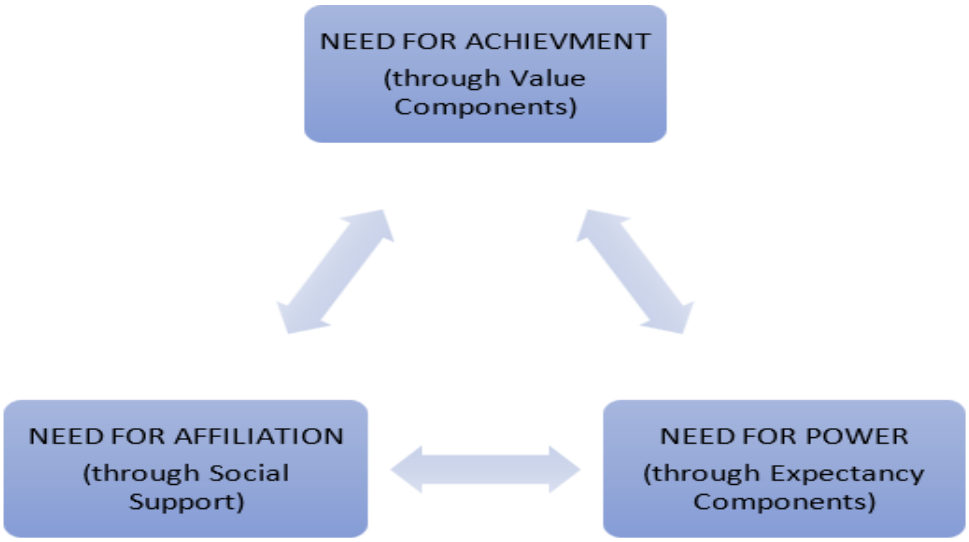
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The conceptual framework of this study is presented in Figure 1 below. This study is anchored on McClelland's (1965) theory of motivation and combined with Fowler's (2018) factors for online motivation. Online learning pushed learners to be more flexible in the way they gain knowledge (Rahmat & Thasrabian, 2024). So, what is it that is motivating learners to stay in online learning?

Mc Clelland (1965) states that learners are motivated because of three types of need; the need for power, the need for achievement, and the need for affiliation. The need for power requires learners to have control of their own beliefs. This is translated into the expectancy components that Fowler (2018) presented.

Next, learners who need achievement begin with their intrinsic and extrinsic goals. Their motivation is fuelled by the task value of learning success. This is in accordance with MacClelland's (1965) value components. Finally, learners' need for affiliation is obtained from their social support. This study also explores if there is a relationship between all types of needs for online learning.

Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study Relationship of All Types of Needs in Motivation for Learning



METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study is done to explore types of needs in motivation for learning. A convenient sample of 251 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey. Table 1 below shows the categories used for the Likert scale; 1 is for Never, 2 is for Seldom, 3 is for Sometimes, 4 is for Often, and 5 is for Almost Always.

Table 1- Likert Scale Use

1	Never
2	Seldom
3	Sometimes
4	Often
5	Almost Always

Table 2 shows the distribution of items in the survey. This study is anchored on McClelland's (1965) theory of motivation and replicated from Fowler (2018) to reveal the variables in the table below. Section B has 13 items on Need for Power. Section C has 16 items on Need for Achievement, and Section D has 12 items on Need for Affiliation.

Table 2- Distribution of Items in the Survey

SECTION	McClelland	MOTIVATION (KEYWORD)	SUB-SCALES	NO OF ITEMS	TOT ITEMS	
B	NEED FOR POWER	EXPECTANCY	Self-Efficacy	8	13	.919
			Control of Learning Beliefs	5		
C	NEED FOR ACHIEVEMENT	VALUE	Intrinsic Goal Orientation	5	16	.942
			Extrinsic Goal Orientation	5		
			Task Value	6		
D	NEED FOR AFFILIATION	SOCIAL SUPPORT	Social Engagement	5	12	.896
			Instructor Support	7		
			TOTAL ITEMS		41	.964

Table 2 also shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .919 for Need for Power, .942 for Need for Achievement, and .896 for Need for Affiliation. The overall Cronbach Alpha for all 41 items is .964; thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument used (Jackson, 2015). Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Analysis

Table 3- Percentage for Demographic Profile

Question	Demographic Profile	Categories	Percentage (%)
1	Gender	Male	36%
		Female	64%
2	Mode of Study	Full-time	97%
		Part-time	3%
3	German Course Level	Level I	28%
		Level II	27%
		Level III	45%
4	Discipline	Science & Technology	48%%
		Social Sciences	38%%
		Business	14%

Table 3 shows the distribution of respondents by category, including gender, mode of study, and course level by discipline. In terms of gender, data from the survey show that 36% respondents are male and 64% are female. Most respondents (97%) are enrolled in full-time study mode, while only 3% are enrolled part-time. Among those taking the German course, 28% are at Level I, 27% at Level II, and 45% at Level III. The respondents also represent various disciplines, with 48% from Science and Technology, 38% from Social Sciences, and 14% from Business.

Descriptive Statistics

Findings for Need for Power

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How does the need for power influence motivation for online learning? In the context of this study, this is measured by expectancy components such as (i) self-efficacy, and (ii) control of learning beliefs.

Self-Efficacy (Ese)

Figure 2- Mean for Self-Efficacy

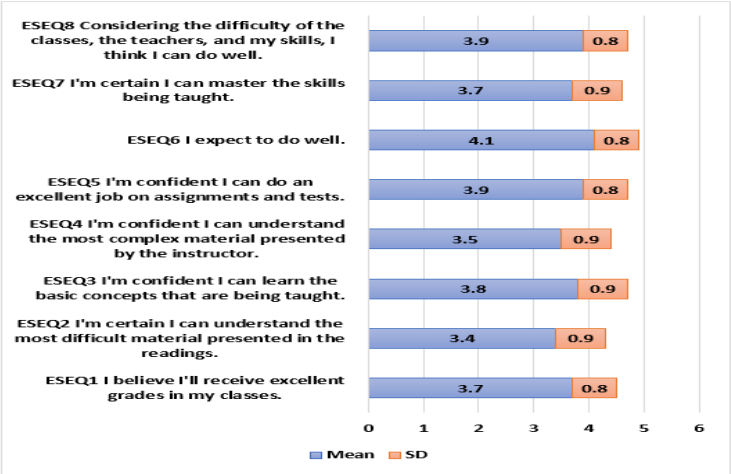


Figure 2 shows the mean for Self-Efficacy, with the highest mean score (M=4.1, SD=0.8) for item ESEQ6, which indicates that students expect to do well. Two items share the same mean score (M=3.9, SD=0.8) for items ESEQ5 and ESEQ8, indicating that students are confident in doing an excellent job on assignments and tests.

They also believe they can do well, considering the difficulty of the classes, the teachers, and the required skills. Next, for items ESEQ1 (M=3.7, SD=0.8), students believe they will receive an excellent grade in the class if they master the skills being taught, as indicated in item ESEQ7 (M=3.7, SD=0.9). They are also confident and able to understand the most complex material presented by the instructor, as reported in item ESEQ4, with a min score of M=3.5, SD=0.9. The lowest mean for Self-Efficacy was (M=3.4, SD=0.9) for item ESEQ2, which states that students can understand the most difficult material presented in the readings.

Control Of Learning Beliefs (Ecb)

Figure 3- Mean for Control of Learning Beliefs

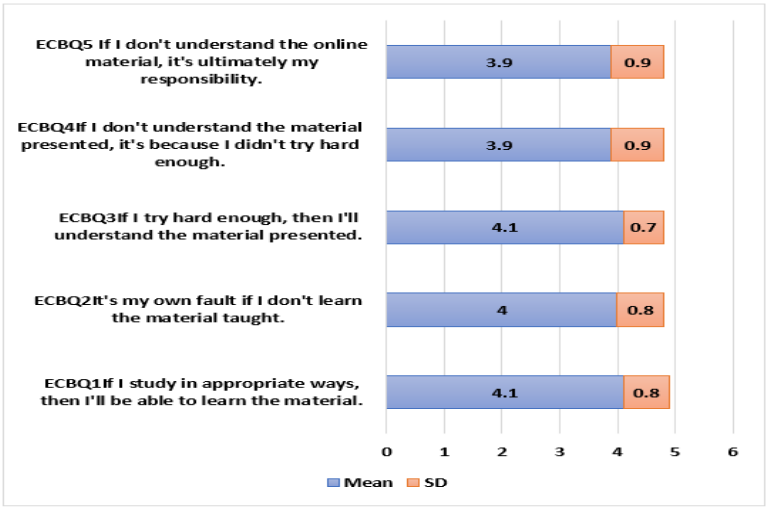


Figure 3 shows the mean for control of learning beliefs. Two items share the highest mean of 4.1. The first is item 1 (mean=4.1, SD=0.8), which states that if the students study in appropriate ways, they will be able to learn the materials. Next, item 3 (mean=4.1, SD+0.7) reports the students saying if they tried hard enough, they would understand the material. Item 2(mean=4, SD=0.8) states that the students felt it was their fault if they did not learn the material taught. Item 4 (mean=3.9, SD=0.9) reported that the students perceived if they did not understand the material presented, it was because they did not try hard enough. Finally, item 5

(mean=3.9, SD=0.9) reports the students saying that if they did not understand. The online material was their responsibility.

Findings for Need for Achievement

This section presents data to answer research question 2- How does the need for achievement influence motivation for online learning? In the context of this study, this is measured by value components such as (i) intrinsic goal orientation, (ii) extrinsic goal orientation, and (iii) task value.

Intrinsic Goal Orientation (VI)

Figure 4- Mean for Intrinsic Goal Orientation

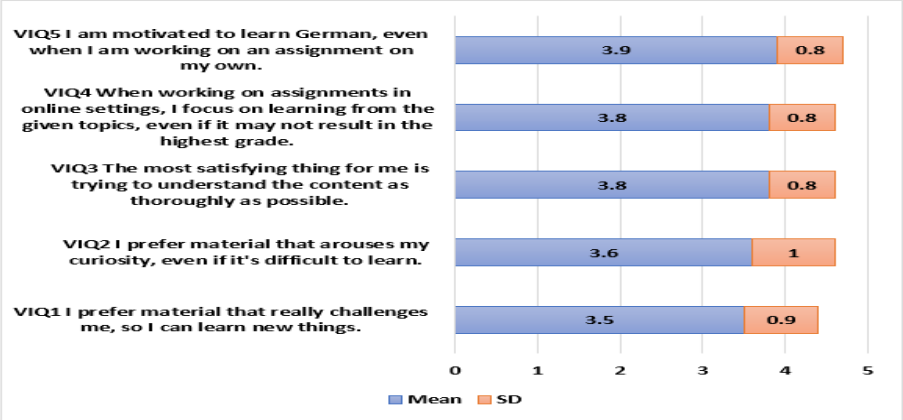


Figure 4 displays the mean score for Intrinsic Goal Orientation. The highest mean score (M=3.9, SD=0.8) in item VIQ5 indicates that students are motivated to learn German, even when working on an assignment on their own. Next, two items, VIQ3 and VIQ4, share the same mean score (M=3.8, SD=0.8), which shows that the most satisfying aspect for students is trying to understand the content as thoroughly as possible. When working on assignments in online settings, they focus on learning from the given topics, even if it may not result in the highest grade. In item VIQ2, with a mean score (M=3.6, SD=1.0), students prefer material that arouses their curiosity, even if it is difficult to learn. This is also reflected in the lowest mean score (M=3.5, SD=0.9), in item VIQ1, which states that students prefer material that challenges them to learn new things.

Extrinsic Goal Orientation (VE)

Figure 5- Mean for Extrinsic Goal Orientation

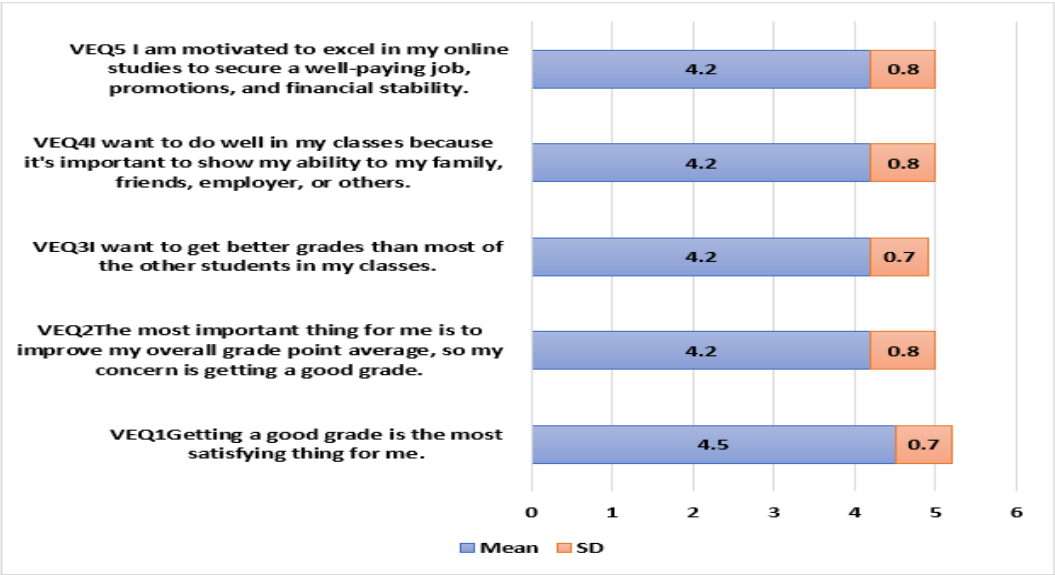


Figure 5 shows the mean for extrinsic goal orientation. Based on the findings, students believe that getting a good grade is the most satisfying aspect for them, as reflected by the highest mean score (M=4.5, SD=0.7). Similarly, item VEQ2T, with a mean score of 4.2 (SD=0.8), indicates that improving their overall grade average is very important to them, highlighting their strong concern with academic performance. In item VEQ4I, students reported wanting to do well in their classes to demonstrate their abilities to family, friends, employers, or others. Additionally, item VEQ5 shows that students are motivated to excel in their online studies to secure a well-paying job, promotions, and financial stability. Lastly, item VEQ3I (M=4.2, SD=0.7) shows that students also strive to achieve better grades than most of their classmates.

Task Value (VT)

Figure 6- Mean for Task Value

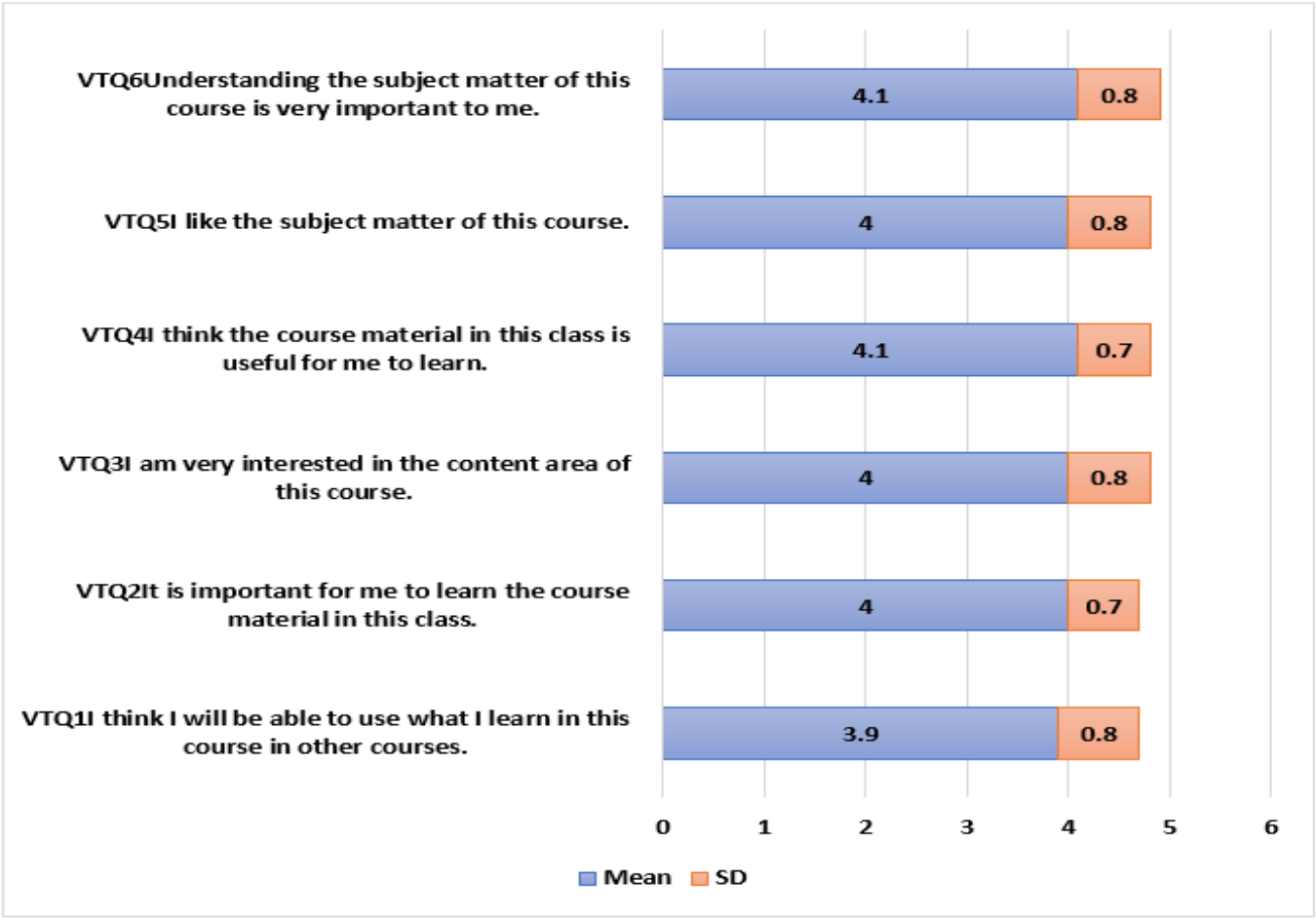


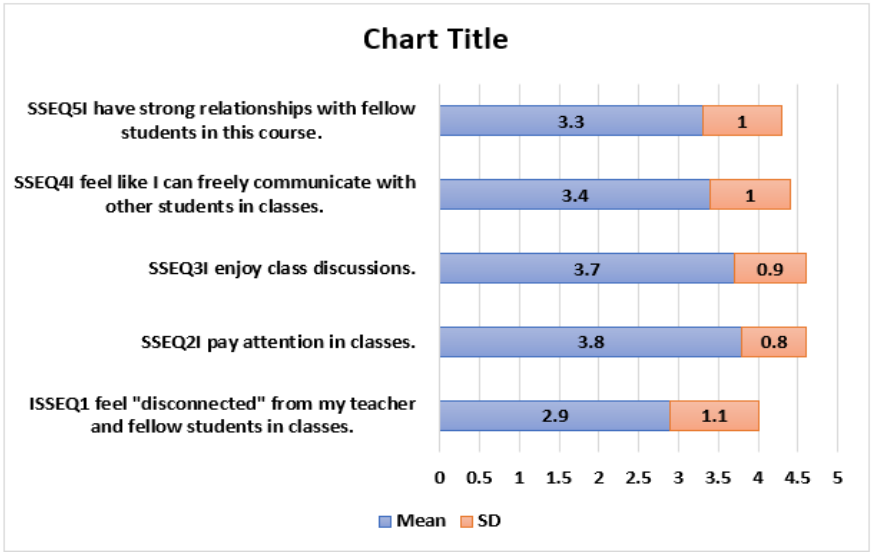
Figure 6 displays the mean scores for task value. The highest mean is 4.1 for two items. The first, item 6 (mean=4.1, SD=0.8), indicates that students believe understanding the subject matter of this course is very important to them and consider the course material in this class useful for their learning, as reported in item 4 (mean=4.1, SD=0.7). Next, for the same mean score of 4 (SD=0.8), students said that they like the subject matter of this course and are very interested in its content. They also stated that it is important for them to understand and learn the course material in class. Finally, in item VTQ1I (mean=3.9, SD=0.8), students think that they will be able to use what they learn in this course in other courses.

Findings for Need for Affiliation

This section presents data to answer research question 3- How does the need for affiliation influence motivation for online learning? In the context of this study, this is measured by social support such as (i) social engagement, and (ii) instructor support.

Social Engagement (SSE)

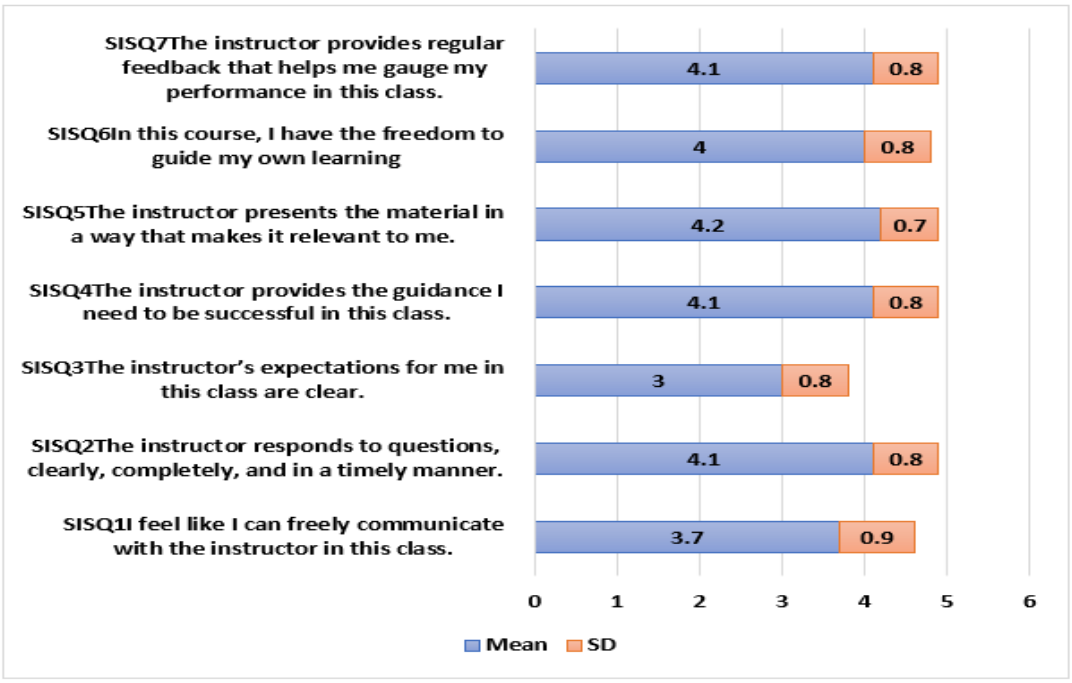
Figure 7- Mean for Social Engagement



The findings show that students' demand for affiliation in online learning is strongly influenced by their amount of social engagement. While the mean score for feeling "disconnected" from teachers and peers was relatively low (M = 2.9, SD = 1.1), indicating that disconnection was not a major concern for the majority of participants, other indications showed overall positive involvement. Students reported being attentive in class (M = 3.8, SD = 0.8) and enjoying class discussions (M = 3.7, SD = 0.9). Opportunities for open communication with peers (M = 3.4, SD = 1.0) and the formation of strong peer relationships (M = 3.3, SD = 1.0) received intermediate ratings, indicating that there is potential for growth in forging stronger connections. Overall, these findings suggest that, while students are engaged and enjoy conversations, improving peer-to-peer contact and relationship development may increase social presence and meet the requirement for affiliation in online learning environments.

Instructor Support (SIS)

Figure 8- Mean for Instructor Support



Overall, the level of instructor support in this online course is perceived positively by the students, as reflected in the mean scores for each statement. The statement SISQ5 ("The instructor presents the material in a way that makes it clear to me") received the highest mean score of 6.0 and the lowest standard deviation of 0.7, indicating strong agreement and consistency among students regarding the clarity of the instructor's presentation. Statements SISQ6 ("I have the freedom to guide my own learning") and SISQ7 ("The instructor provides regular feedback that helps me gauge my performance") also scored highly, with mean values of 5.7 and 5.9 respectively. This suggests that students feel empowered in their learning process and appreciate the feedback provided. On the other hand, SISQ2 ("The instructor responds to questions clearly, completely, and in a timely manner") and SISQ4 ("The instructor provides the guidance I need to be successful") received the lowest mean scores of 4.1, indicating areas where instructor support could be improved. The standard deviation values, ranging from 0.7 to 0.9, show a relatively consistent perception among students across all statements.

Exploratory Statistics

Findings for the Relationship between all factors in motivation to learn online.

This section presents data to answer research question 4- Is there a relationship between all factors in motivation to learn online? To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between all factors in motivation to learn online, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented separately in tables 4, 5, and 6 below.

Table 4- Correlation between Need for Achievement and Need for Power

		ACHIEVEMENT	POWER
ACHIEVEMENT	Pearson (Correlation	1	.724**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.000
	N	251	251
POWER	Pearson (Correlation	.724**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	251	251

**Correlation is significant at the level 0.01(2-tailed)

Table 4 shows there is an association between need for achievement and need for power. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between need for achievement and need for power (r=.724**) and (p=.000). According to Jackson (2015), the coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a strong positive relationship between need for achievement and need for power.

Table 5- Correlation between Need for Power and Need for Affiliation

		POWER	AFFILIATION
POWER	Pearson (Correlation	1	.687**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.000
	N	251	251
AFFILIATION	Pearson (Correlation	.687**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	251	251

**Correlation is significant at the level 0.01(2-tailed)

Table 5 shows that there is an association between need for power and need for affiliation. Correlation analysis shows that there is a highly significant association between need for power and need for affiliation (r=.687**) and (p=.000). According to Jackson (2015), the coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive

correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a strong positive relationship between need for power and need for affiliation.

Table 6- Correlation between Need for Affiliation and Need for Achievement

		AFFILIATION	ACHIEVEMENT
AFFILIATION	Pearson (Correlation	1	.754**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.000
	N	251	251
ACHIEVEMENT	Pearson (Correlation	.754**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	251	251

**Correlation is significant at the level 0.01(2-tailed)

Table 6 shows that there is an association between need for affiliation and need for achievement. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between affiliation and need for achievement (r=.754**) and (p=.000). According to Jackson (2015), the coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a strong positive relationship between affiliation and need for achievement.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on McClelland's Theory of Needs, the major findings revealed that learners' motivation is influenced by all three factors: Power, Achievement, and Affiliation. The investigation of the Need for Power showed a positive impact on students' motivation and self-regulation in online learning. This is supported by Saufianim et al. (2023), who explained that students with a need for power (the desire to influence or control situations) as well as autonomy (the freedom to make decisions in learning) were found to be significantly more motivated. This increased motivation, in turn, encouraged them to be more active and engaged in digital learning environments. In addition, students who were confident in their online learning abilities in terms of self-efficacy and desired motivation, and control belief factors also contributed to achieving the desired outcomes (Siok et al., 2023).

For the Need for Achievement, the findings indicate that students are motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, as well as utility value, to improve their performance in online language learning. Extrinsic motivation shows the highest score, indicating its ability to enhance the learning experience and foster academic excellence (Mat Dangi et al., 2025). In addition, the positive impact of the Need for Achievement also depends on how useful students perceive the task to be and how much they engage with it, especially when driven by extrinsic motivation (Nagle, 2021).

Next, the result of the Need for Affiliation indicates that students were actively engaged and able to communicate openly with their classmates and instructors within the language learning environment. This is supported by Kim & Frick (2021), who explained that a sense of connection with others can enhance students' motivation and level of engagement. Besides that, students with a high need for affiliation are more satisfied and more actively involved in online language courses, thus proving that social connection plays an important role in supporting communication and the learning process. However, this finding differs slightly from the study by Young (2023), which found that 58% of students learning online never discuss their classes with instructors outside of class time and never collaborate on projects with their classmates. This lack of discussion and collaboration causes students to feel isolated and less motivated to engage in online learning.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research.

The findings of this study imply that learners' motivation in online learning environments is influenced by a

combination of personal drive, perceived task value, and social connection, with the three factors of Power, Achievement, and Affiliation working together to sustain both engagement and performance. Similar findings were in accordance with a study by Siok et al. (2023), who stated that Power through Expectancy, Achievements through Value, and Affiliation through Social Support are closely related and interact with each other. This interaction helps maintain students' level of engagement and performance. However, the level and modes of this interaction are likely to vary among students, as they may be influenced by their academic background, field of study, and experience.

Therefore, future research could be conducted to examine in greater depth how the interaction between Power, Achievement, and Affiliation differs according to students' backgrounds, disciplines, or levels of experience in online learning. Other factors, such as cultural influences or personality traits, should also be considered, as they may affect the combined impact of these three factors on students' motivation and engagement.

Theoretical and Conceptual Implications (look in 2.1 and 2.3 and make the connections to your findings

The findings in this study provide significant empirical support for McClelland's Theory of Needs (1961, 1965, 1975, 1985) as a reliable framework for understanding learner motivation in online language learning situations. Consistent with the theoretical assertions presented in Section 2.1, the findings show that the three fundamental needs are achievement, power, and affiliation. These needs are interconnected and have a considerable impact on learner engagement and persistence in virtual settings. The strong positive correlations found between these needs (Need for Power, r =.724; Need for Affiliation, r =.687; Need for Achievement, r =.754) empirically support McClelland's claim that motivational factors do not operate in isolation but rather interact to influence learner behaviours and outcomes.

From a conceptual aspect, the study verifies the model described in Section 2.3, which combines McClelland's requirements with Fowler's (2018) three elements of online motivation: expectancy, value, and social support. The findings show that expectation (as measured by self-efficacy and control over learning beliefs) is closely related to the Need for Power, allowing students to take control of their learning processes and govern their performance. Similarly, value-related characteristics (intrinsic and extrinsic goal orientation and task value) support the Need for Achievement, indicating that perceived task relevance and outcome usefulness promote perseverance and performance in online language courses. Social support, operationalised through peer involvement and teacher interaction, closely corresponds to the Need for Affiliation, emphasising the function of connectivity in minimising isolation and supporting sustained participation in online learning.

These findings broaden the theoretical application of McClelland's framework to online education by demonstrating how each motivational requirement can be strategically addressed through unique instructional design decisions. Tasks with clear performance markers and feedback loops, for example, appeal to achievement-oriented learners, while opportunities for leadership and decision-making fulfil power-driven learners, and structured peer cooperation activities address affiliation demands. In this approach, the study not only verifies the relevance of McClelland's Theory of Needs in a modern, technology-mediated context, but it also improves the conceptual model by giving empirical evidence on the interaction of needs-based motivation and online learning design. This congruence of theory, conceptualisation, and empirical evidence supports the use of an integrated needs-based strategy to improve learner engagement, satisfaction, and success in virtual learning environments.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study highlight that students' online learning motivation can be strengthened through purposeful pedagogical design that addresses three key motivational needs—power, achievement, and affiliation—as outlined in McClelland's Theory of Needs (McClelland, 1965).

To foster engagement and power, educators can design online learning experiences that encourage autonomy and self-efficacy. Providing students with opportunities to set their own learning goals, choose project topics, or assess their progress using digital tools promotes a sense of control and empowerment (Saufianim et al., 2023). Allowing students to take ownership of their learning helps them build confidence and persistence, which in turn enhances sustained engagement in virtual settings (Mohamad et al., 2024).

To promote affiliation, instructors can implement strategies that help students feel connected and part of a learning community. The use of breakout rooms for small-group discussions, collaborative projects, or peer feedback sessions can build a sense of belonging (Kim & Frick, 2021). Establishing "buddy systems" or online discussion boards also encourages social presence and active participation, reducing feelings of isolation in online learning environments (Miao & Ma, 2022).

To enhance achievement, tasks should be designed to provide students with a clear sense of progress and success. Lecturers may create milestone-based activities such as short quizzes, gamified challenges, or mini-presentations that offer immediate feedback and recognition (Fowler, 2018). Highlighting student achievements through leaderboards, badges, or online certificates can also enhance a sense of accomplishment and motivation to perform better (Mat Dangi et al., 2025).

By integrating these practical strategies, educators can develop more engaging and psychologically supportive online classrooms. Addressing students' motivational needs not only increases engagement but also creates a positive and meaningful online learning experience that promotes long-term academic motivation (Siok et al., 2023).

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into online learning motivation through McClelland's framework, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the quantitative and cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality or capture changes in motivation over time. Future research could adopt longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to track motivational development across semesters or courses (Hartnett, 2016).

Second, this study was limited to students learning German in two public universities, which restricts the generalisability of findings across other disciplines, institutions, and linguistic contexts. Future research could expand the sample to include students from various universities or compare motivational dynamics among learners of different languages and cultural backgrounds (Fowler, 2023).

Third, this study could engage more critically with other motivational frameworks, such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) or Expectancy-Value Theory (Nagle, 2021), to strengthen theoretical comparison and provide a multidimensional understanding of motivation. Exploring how McClelland's needs interact with constructs like autonomy, competence, and relatedness could yield richer interpretations of student engagement.

Lastly, future research may include qualitative or longitudinal methods—such as interviews, reflective journals, or focus groups—to capture the lived experiences of learners and how their sense of power, achievement, and affiliation evolves throughout online learning. This would provide a more comprehensive and human-centred perspective on motivation, which could guide the design of future pedagogical interventions in virtual and hybrid learning settings.

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