Motivation to Learn Online: An Overview of Students' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Student motivation is crucial for engagement and success in online learning. This quantitative study is based on Bandura's (2012) Social Cognitive Theory and Fowler's (2018) motivation framework for online learning. Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the interaction between personal factors, behaviour, and environment in learning. The study examines how value, expectancy, and social support shape online learning motivation. A 5-point Likert survey with four sections was administered to 229 purposively selected participants. Section A covered demographics, Section B measured value, Section C measured expectancy, and Section D measured social support. Results show value strongly enhances motivation, while expectancy boosts confidence and belief in success. Social and instructor support also improve performance in online language learning. Overall, all variables demonstrated strong positive correlations with online motivation. The study refines the MLOQ framework and suggests future research on cultural, gender, and emotional factors to sustain long-term online learning motivation.

Keywords: Motivation, Online Learning, Perceptions, Social Cognitive Theory

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

With the swift shift to digital learning, understanding factors that support student engagement is increasingly important. Motivation strongly influences participation, persistence, and performance in online learning (Artino, 2008; Keller, 2008). It fuels learning behaviors, sustains attention, and shapes positive attitudes, making learning more meaningful (Bedi, 2023).

Guided by Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), this study investigates how value, expectancy, and social support shape Malaysian public university students' motivation in online language learning. SCT highlights the interaction of individuals, behaviors, and environments, stressing the roles of observational learning, self-efficacy, and reinforcement in fostering intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as sustained engagement.

Statement of Problem

Despite the rise of online learning, sustaining student motivation remains challenging. Collaborative learning often lacks scaffolding, leading to passive participation and limited engagement (Ku et al., 2013). Fragmented social interactions weaken motivation, while unclear relevance of tasks to careers or society reduces commitment (Al-Thani & Ahmad, 2020). Disconnections between curriculum and authentic practices further contribute to disengagement (Devkota et al., 2017).

Liu et al. (2024) found that intrinsic motivation, emotional engagement, and psychological capital strongly predict performance in blended learning, while extrinsic motivation has a negative direct but positive mediated effect. Other studies highlight the roles of teacher feedback (Guo & Zhou, 2021), wellbeing and relationships (Sudarnoto et al., 2025), and consistent platform use (Clark et al., 2025). In Malaysia, expectancy, task value, and social support are key motivators (Siok et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2025).

However, existing studies show inconsistent findings and seldom address students' perceptions of motivational constructs in practice. Limited research explores how university learners experience self-efficacy, goal orientation, value beliefs, and social support in online language learning. This gap is significant in Malaysian higher education, where online language instruction is expanding but under-researched.

This study explores how students perceive value, expectancy, and social support in shaping their online learning motivation. Findings aim to guide course design, improve teaching strategies, and foster sustained engagement in digital learning.

Objective of the Study and Research Questions

This study is done to explore motivation to learn online. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

- How do value components influence students' motivation to learn online?
- How do expectancy components influence students' motivation to learn online?
- How does social support influence students' motivation to learn online?
- Is there a relationship between all components in motivation to learn online?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework of the Study

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Bandura (2012) presented the SCT that states that reflects the dynamic interaction between a learner's behaviour, their cognitive processes and his/her environment. This theory emphasizes that a learner learns through the observation he/she made on others. With reference to figure 1 below, learning may begin by the learner. This learner carries within himself/ herself some personal factors. Nevertheless, through observing others, the learner experiences changed behaviour. This changed behaviour is influenced by the environmental factors around the learners. These factors in turn may change the learners' personal factors. Similarly, in the context of online learning today, the environment of learning has been changed to online mode. The online mode sets the background for learning. The learner "enters" the online learning with hope and motivation to succeed on learning. Whatever takes place within the online classroom affects the learner (personal factors). This can take the form of modelling of behaviour from the learner through online interactions.

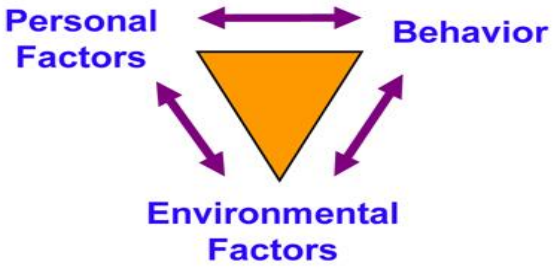

Figure 1- Social Cognitive Theory (Source:Bandura, 2012)

Motivation to Learn Online

Motivation, a crucial element in education, significantly influences a student's desire and commitment to learning within a specific environment (Mazlan et al., 2021). Motivation in online learning is multifaceted, encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that significantly impact student engagement and academic outcomes (Liu et al., 2024).

Different experts identify several motivational factors for learning online. These factors are derived from SCT (Bandura, 1986), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and Mindset Theory (Dweck, 1999). Additionally, applied tools such as the Motivation to Learn Online Questionnaire (MLOQ) (Fowler, 2018) provide further insights into learners' motivational drivers.

Bandura's SCT emphasizes the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, behavior, and the environment in shaping motivation and learning. In his foundational work, Bandura (1986) elaborated key concepts such as self-efficacy, observational learning, and self-regulation. Learners with high self-efficacy are more likely to persist through challenges, especially when they receive support from mastery experiences, role models, feedback, and a responsive learning environment (Fuente et al., 2022; Siok et al., 2023).

Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory pinpoints autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs that drive motivation. Online learners are more engaged when they feel in control of their learning (autonomy), observe themselves as capable (competence), and experience a sense of belonging (relatedness) (Fowler, 2018; Jiang & Xie, 2022; Siok et al., 2023). These needs foster both intrinsic motivation-driven by curiosity or personal development - and extrinsic motivation, which depends on how well external goals are internalized by the learner.

Dweck's (1999) Mindset Theory further contributes to understanding motivation through the difference between growth and fixed mindsets. A growth mindset is the belief that abilities can be improved through effort, it promotes resilience and long-term engagement. In contrast, a fixed mindset can decrease motivation when students face failure. Feedback that highlights effort over innate ability is found to support a growth-oriented mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2023).

In addition to these theoretical models, the MLOQ (Fowler, 2018) outlines several practical motivational factors, including control of learning beliefs, task value, instructor support, social engagement, and both intrinsic and extrinsic goal orientation. Students who believe they can control their learning, find value in course content, and receive support from instructors are more likely to remain engaged. However, the lack of face-to-face interaction in online environments may reduce social motivation unless intentional actions are taken to enhance peer and instructor interaction (Liu et al., 2023).

Past Studies

Past Studies on Motivation to Learn Online

Many studies have explored factors shaping students' motivation in online learning. Zahid et al. (2024) found that value, expectancy, and social support influence motivation, with curiosity, self-efficacy, and peer or teacher support enhancing engagement among 108 Malaysian engineering students. Similarly, Elshareif and Mohamed (2021) showed that motivation at Ajman University was strongly linked to e-teaching materials and e-assessments, supported by reliability and validity analyses.

In contrast, Meşe and Sevilen (2021) highlighted challenges to sustaining motivation among Turkish L2 learners during the COVID-19 shift to online English classes. A qualitative case study with 12 students found that online education negatively affected motivation due to reduced social interaction, mismatched expectations, organizational issues, and poor course design.

These studies show that learners' perceptions of online learning involve both supportive and hindering factors. Guided by SCT, this study highlights how personal, behavioral, and environmental factors shape online learning motivation.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 2 below presents the conceptual framework of the study. This study is supported by the SCT by Bandura (2012) and is supported by Fowler's (2018) motivation for online learning. The SCT presents a general representation of factors that facilitates learning, personal factors, behaviour and environment. Since the context of this study is online learning, the environment is set as online mode. Online learning has encouraged learners to be flexible in their quest for attaining knowledge (Rahmat & Thasrabiab, 2024). To begin with the personal factors in Bandura (2012) refer to the learners' internal state and can be understood by the expectancy components in online learning. When learners go online, their personal factors such as self-efficacy and control of learning beliefs motivated them to be curious to learn. Next, as hard as online learning may be, learners' motivation is derived from the value they put into the learning task. This value is seen in their behaviour towards the learning.

Since Bandura (2012) states that there is a dynamic interaction between the factors, this study attempts to investigate the relationship between all motivational factors in online learning.

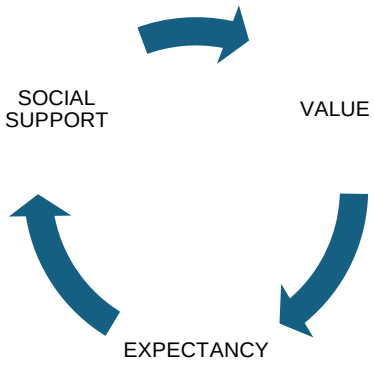

Figure 2- Conceptual Framework of the Study Relationship of Motivational Components for Online Learning

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study is done to explore learners' motivation to learn online in the learning of Mandarin as a foreign language. A convenient sample of 229 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey and is replicated from Fowler (2018) to reveal the variables in table 3 below. 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- Distribution of Items in the Survey

SECTION	MOTIVATION (KEYWORD)	SUB-SCALES	NO OF ITEMS	TOTAL ITEMS	CRONBACH ALPHA
B	VALUE	Intrinsic Goal Orientation	5	16	.938
		Extrinsic Goal Orientation	5		
		Task Value	6		
C	EXPECTANCY	Self-Efficacy	8	13	.917
		Control of Learning Beliefs	5		
D	SOCIAL SUPPORT	Social Engagement	5	12	.870
		Instructor Support	7		
		TOTAL ITEMS		41	.963

Table 2 shows the distribution of items in the survey. This study is replicated from Fowler's (2018) constructs on motivation to learn online. Section B has 16 items on value; section C has 13 items on expectancy while section D has 12 items for social support.

Table 2 also shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .917 for expectancy, .938 for value and .870 for social support. The overall Cronbach alpha for all 41 items is .963; thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument chosen/used. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Analysis

Table 3- Percentage for Demographic Profile

Question	Demographic Profile	Categories	Percentage (%)
1	Gender	Male	24%
		Female	76%
2	Course Level	Level 1	38%
		Level 2	55%
		Level 3	7%
3	Experience for Learning Mandarin	Yes	49%
		No	51%
4	Discipline	Science & Technology	17%
		Social Science	17%
		Business Management	66%

Table 3 shows the percentage for demographic profile of the respondents. 24% of the respondents are male while 76% of them are female. Next, the Mandarin course offers three levels, level 1, level 2 and level 3. 38% of the respondents are studying level 1. Next, 55% are learning level 2 and 7% are at level 3. Learners reported that 49% of them had experience learning Mandarin and 51% did not have any experience learning Mandarin. Lastly, 17% of the respondents are studying in the science & technology discipline, 17% are studying science & technology discipline while 66% are in business management.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

4.2.1 Findings for Value Components

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How do value components influence students' motivation to learn online? In the context of this study, this refers to (i) intrinsic goal orientation, (ii) extrinsic goal orientation and (iii) task value.

(i) Intrinsic Goal Orientation (VI)

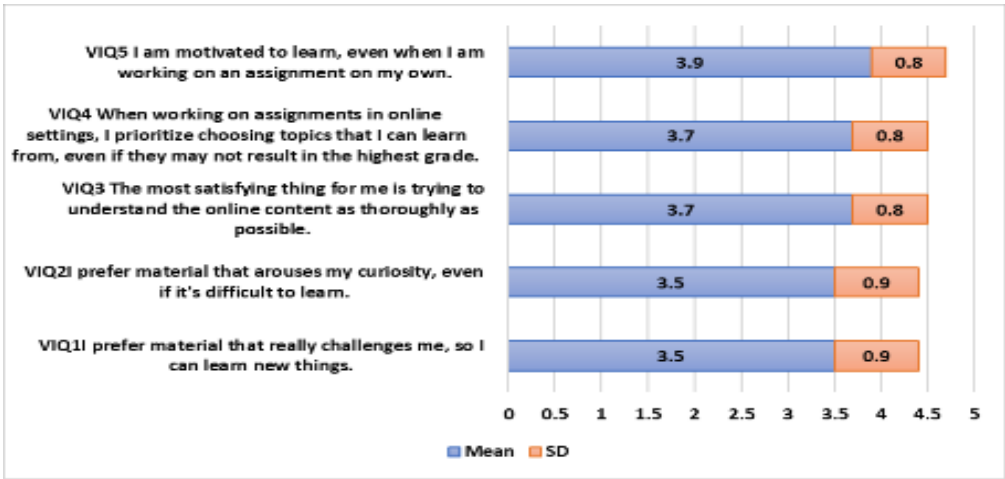

Figure 3- Mean for (i) Intrinsic Goal Orientation

Figure 3 presents the mean scores for intrinsic motivation. The highest mean is 3.9(SD=0.8), corresponding to item 5, which states that learners were motivated to learn even when they had to work on the assignment on their own. Next, two items share the same mean of 3.7. Item 3 (mean = 3.7, SD = 0.8) states that learners found the most satisfying aspect was understanding the online content. Item 4 (mean = 3.7, SD = 0.8) indicates that learners reported choosing topics from which they would learn a lot, even if it meant not receiving a high grade. Two items recorded the lowest mean of 3.5. Item 1 (mean = 3.5, SD = 0.9) states that learners preferred challenging materials. Item 2 (mean = 3.5, SD = 0.9) states that learners preferred materials that aroused their curiosity.

(ii) Extrinsic Goal Orientation (VE)

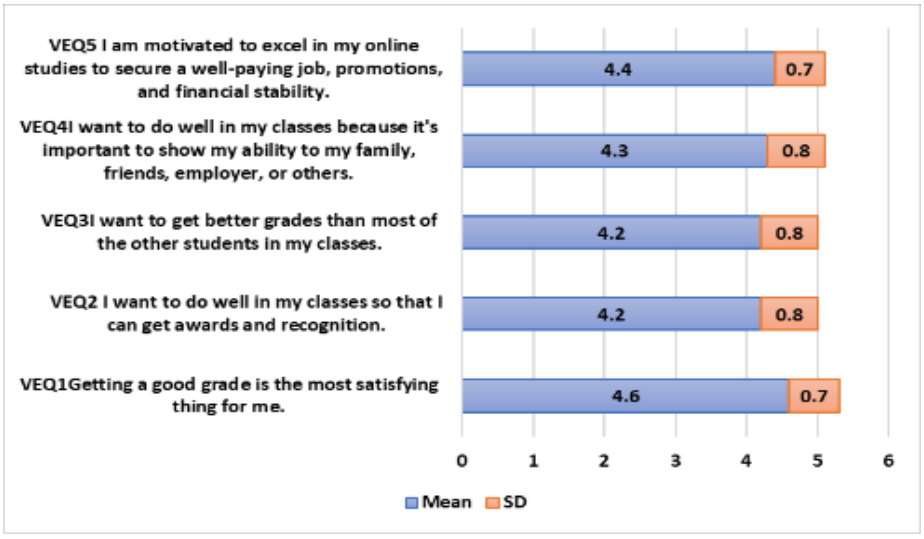

Figure 4- Mean for (ii) Extrinsic Goal Orientation

Figure 4 shows the mean scores for extrinsic goal orientation. The highest mean score, 4.6 (SD=0.7), corresponds to item 1, indicating that achieving high grades is the primary source of motivation for most learners. This is followed by item 5, with a mean of 4.4 (SD = 0.7), which reflects that learners were driven to excel in their online studies to attain well-paying job, promotions, and financial stability. Item 4 has a mean of 4.3 (SD = 0.8) and suggests that learners were motivated to perform well in their classes to demonstrate their abilities to family, friends, employer, or others. Items 2 and 3 share the same mean score of 4.2 (SD = 0.8). Item 2 highlights learners' desire to earn awards and recognition, while item 3 points to a competitive drive to achieve higher grades than their peers.

(iii) Task Value (VT)

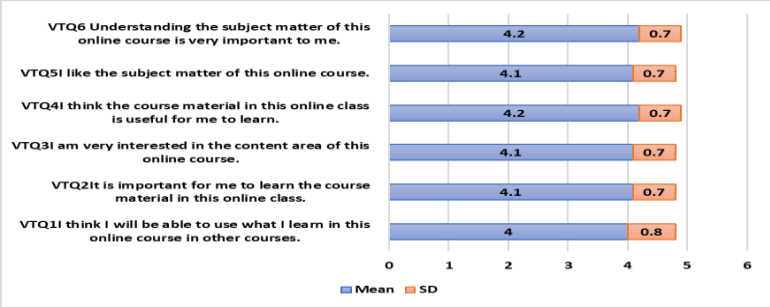

Figure 5- Mean for Task value

Figure 5 demonstrates the mean scores for task value. The highest mean score, 4.2 (SD=0.7) is shared by items 4 and 6. Item 4 indicates that learners found the course material useful, while item 6 highlights that understanding the subject matter is very important to them. Items 2, 3 and 5 all have a mean of 4.1 (SD = 0.7). Item 2 reflects learners' belief in the importance of learning the course material. Items 3 and 5 suggest a strong interest in the content area and a liking for the subject matter, indicating engagement with this online course. Item 1, which has the lowest mean score of 4.0 (SD = 0.8), though still relatively high, reflects learners' perception of the transferability of knowledge from this course to other courses.

Findings for Expectancy Components

This section presents data to answer research question 2- How do expectancy components influence students' motivation to learn online? In the context of this study, this is measured by (i) self-efficacy, and (ii) control of learning beliefs.

(i) Self- Efficacy (ESE)

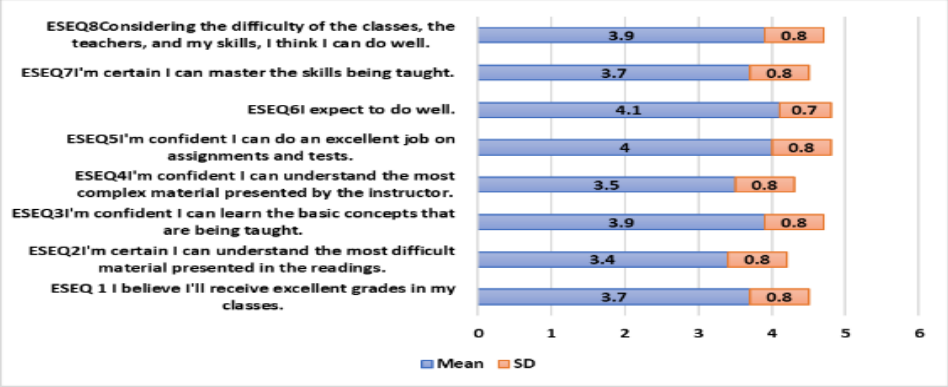

Figure 6- Mean for Self-Efficacy

Figure 6 presents the mean scores for self-efficacy. The highest mean score, 4.1 (SD=0.7) was recorded for item 6, which shows that learners expect to do well. The second highest mean score, 3.9 (SD=0.8), is shared by items 3 and 8. Item 3 suggests that learners are confident in their ability to learn the basic concepts being taught, while item 8 reflects that, despite the difficulty of the classes, the teachers, and skills, learners believe they can do well. Item 2, which has the lowest mean score of 3.4 (SD = 0.8), suggests that learners are less certain about understanding the most difficult material presented in the readings. Overall, a large number of the respondents expressed confidence in their ability to perform well in their classes.

(ii) Control Of Learning Beliefs (ECB)

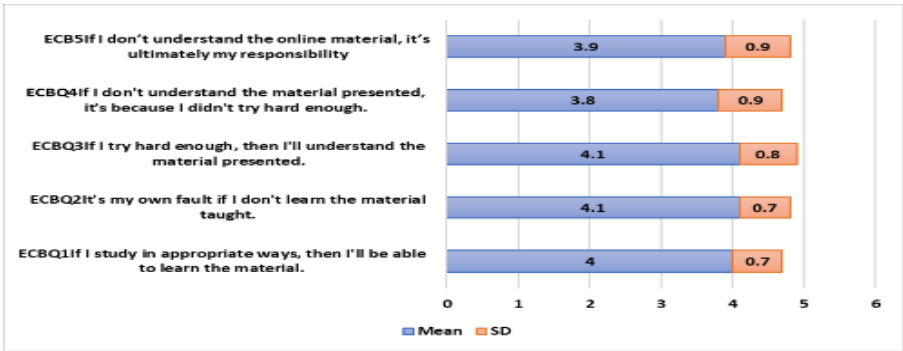

Figure 7- Mean for Control of Learning Beliefs

Figure 7 shows the mean scores for control of learning beliefs. The highest mean score, 4.1 (SD=0.7 and 0.8), is shared by items 2 and 3. These items show that learners feel it's their own fault if they don't learn the material taught, and that they will understand the material if they try hard enough. The second highest mean score, 4.0 (SD=0.7), is for item 1, which indicates that learners believe if they study in appropriate ways, they will be able to learn the material. Item 4, with the lowest mean score of 3.8 (SD = 0.9), suggests that learners feel if they don't understand the material presented, it's because they didn't try hard enough.

Findings for Social Support

This section presents data to answer research question 3- How does social support influence students' motivation to learn online? In the context of this study, this is measured by (i) social support and (ii) instructor support.

(i) Social Engagemnt (SSE)

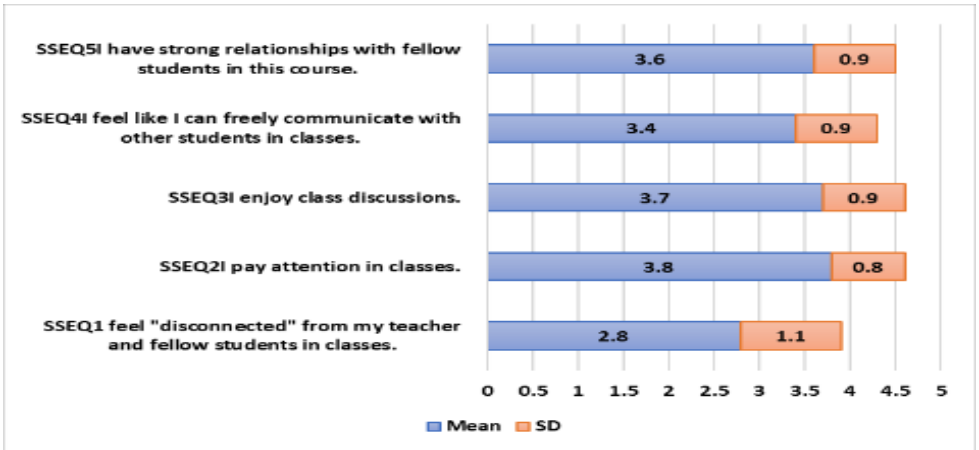

Figure 8- Mean for Social Engagement

Figure 8 reveals the mean scores for social engagement. The highest mean score is 3.8 (SD = 0.8) for item 2, indicating that most learners reported paying attention in classes. The second highest mean score is 3.7 (SD = 0.9) for item 3, showing that learners enjoy class discussions. Item 1, which has the lowest mean score of 2.8 (SD = 1.1), reflects that learners feel "disconnected" from their teacher and fellow students in classes. The relatively high standard deviation suggests varied experiences – some learners feel quite connected, but others feel significantly isolated.

(ii) Instructor Support (SIS)

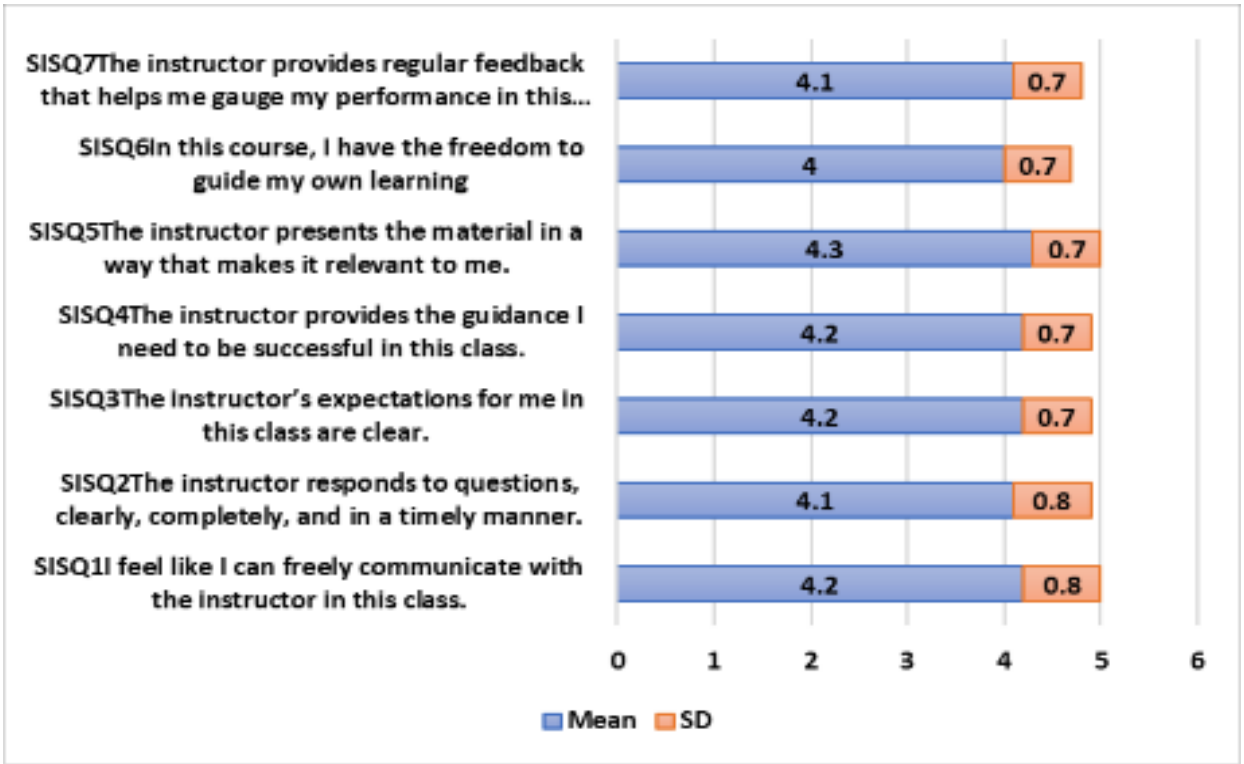

Figure 9- Mean for Instructor Support

The data presented in Figure 9 show the mean scores for instructor support. Notably, item 5, "The instructor presents the material in a way that makes it relevant" gained the highest mean score of 4.3 (SD = 0.7). The second highest mean scores, 4.2 (SD = 0.8, 0.7, and 0.7), is shared by items 1, 3, and 4. Item 1 indicates that learners feel they can freely communicate with the instructor in class. Item 3 reveals the instructor's expectations for learners are clear, while item 4 shows that the instructor provides the guidance needed for learners to succeed. The lowest mean score, 4.0 (SD = 0.7), is for item 6, which indicates that learners feel they have the freedom to guide their own learning in the course. These findings suggest a strong instructor-learner relationship that is conducive to online learning.

Exploratory Statistics

Findings for Relationship between components in motivation to learn online

This section presents data to answer research question 4- Is there a relationship between all components in motivation to learn online?

To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between components in motivation to learn online, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented separately in table 4, 5 and 6 below.

Table 4- Correlation between Value and Expectancy Components

		VALUE	EXPECTANCY
VALUE	Pearson Correlation	1	.832**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.000
	N	229	229
EXPECTANCY	Pearson Correlation	.832**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	229	229

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

Table 4 shows there is an association between value and expectancy components. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between value and expectancy components (r=.832**) and (p=.000). According to Jackson (2015), 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 value and expectancy components.

Table 5- Correlation between Expectancy and Social Support Components

		EXPECTANCY	SOCIAL SUPPORT
EXPECTANCY	Pearson Correlation	1	.728**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.000
	N	229	229
SOCIAL SUPPORT	Pearson Correlation	.728**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	229	229

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

Table 5 shows there is an association between expectancy and social support components. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between expectancy and social support components (r=.728**) and (p=.000). According to Jackson (2015), 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 expectancy and social support components.

Table 6- Correlation between Social Support and Value Components

		SOCIAL SUPPORT	VALUE
SOCIAL SUPPORT	Pearson Correlation	1	.715**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.000
	N	229	229
VALUE	Pearson Correlation	.715**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	229	229

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

Table 6 shows there is an association between social support and value components. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between social support and value components (r=.715**) and (p=.000). According to Jackson (2015), 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 social support and value components.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings and Discussions

This section summarizes findings on how value, expectancy, and social support shape online learning motivation. Fowler's (2018) framework highlights intrinsic goals, extrinsic goals, and task value. Learners enjoyed independence, valued challenges, and felt satisfied when mastering content, contrasting with Meşe and Sevilen's (2021). Extrinsically, grades, career advancement, recognition, and competition motivated them, consistent with Zahid et al. (2024). For task value, course materials were seen as useful, relevant, and transferable. Expectancy influenced motivation through self-efficacy and control beliefs. Learners showed strong confidence in completing tasks and achieving goals, aligning with Siok et al. (2023). Socially, most learners paid attention and enjoyed discussions, though connection levels varied. Instructor support was positive, with relevant materials, clear guidance, autonomy, and timely feedback, echoing Elshareif and Mohamed (2021). In line with Zahid et al. (2024), correlation analyses showed strong links among value, expectancy, and social support. Each component reinforced the others, forming an active, interrelated system of motivation in online learning.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Theoretical and Conceptual Implications

This study applies Bandura's (2012) SCT and Fowler's (2018) framework to online learning motivation. It reinforces SCT by linking personal factors, behavior, and environment, with expectancy highlighting the role of self-confidence and control. Value emerged as a primary influence, extending Fowler's MLOQ

framework, while strong correlations suggest integrating value into SCT enhances its explanatory power. Social and instructor support affirmed SCT's environmental reinforcement, showing that interaction can boost motivation and reduce passive participation (Ku et al., 2013). Overall, the study refines links among value, expectancy, and support within MLOQ, addressing its limitations.

Pedagogical Implications

Since value components strongly influence motivation, educators should design meaningful, culturally relevant courses with clear objectives, such as real-world language tasks (Jiang & Xie, 2022). Expectancy factors highlight the need for scaffolding, peer modeling, and interactive feedback to build confidence, consistent with SCT and prior research (Keller, 2008; Elshareif & Mohamed, 2021). Social and instructor support can be strengthened through collaborative activities and regular check-ins to reduce isolation, aligning with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan; Sudarnoto et al., 2025). Demographic differences also suggest tailoring strategies—for example, directive feedback for male students and praise for female students. A blended approach that balances autonomy and support, supported by professional development (Meşe & Sevilen, 2021), can sustain student engagement in online learning.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should use qualitative and longitudinal methods to capture evolving learner experiences and address the limits of static surveys. Exploring gender, cultural factors, and platform design can refine the MLOQ across diverse contexts. Further study of emotional engagement, psychological capital, and motivational interventions may clarify their long-term effects on persistence, proficiency, and learner autonomy.

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