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Understanding Academic Motivation: A Review of Major Theories and Their Implications for Higher Education in Vietnam

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Abstract:
Among the most widely researched constructs in educational psychology, academic motivation remains an uneven and patchy theoretical field. The present narrative review examines the major theories of academic motivation, including Self-Determination Theory, Expectancy-Value Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory, along with their principal arguments, empirical support, and contributions to explaining learning behavior within the context of academic motivation. Points of convergence and divergence across the different models, their implications for research and practice in Vietnam's universities, and arguments from recent meta-analytic reviews, integrative theoretical reviews, and empirical research in the context of Vietnamese higher education are drawn out. The review indicates that one theory alone does not provide a full understanding of the complexities involved in student motivation in an exam-oriented educational culture outside the West. Thus, research design and pedagogical intervention are better informed through multi-theoretical perspectives. Some of the evidence upon which these theoretical arguments are grounded comes from recent studies on gamification and English Medium Instruction (EMI) motivation in Vietnam.

Key Word*: Academic motivation; Self-Determination Theory; Expectancy-Value Theory; Achievement Goal Theory; higher education*

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I. Introduction

Motivation has been broadly defined as the activation of behavior directed toward learning goals (Simpson & Balsam, 2015; Bandhu et al., 2024), and it is one of the most extensively studied constructs in human behavior and education. Over many decades of research in different educational contexts, evidence has accumulated that motivation determines not only the amount of effort students invest in learning but also the quality of that effort, the persistence of goal striving despite obstacles, and the ultimate long-term academic and career achievements of students (Ryan et al., 2023; Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023). Therefore, motivation is more than just a theoretical issue; it is a practical concern that all educators, curriculum developers, and institutional administrators must face if they wish to nurture their students' success.

The issue of student motivation is especially salient for Vietnamese universities, given the current reforms. According to Ho & Dimock (2023), the 2013 Fundamental and Comprehensive Education Reform have sought to shift Vietnamese schooling away from extrinsic motivation to develop intrinsically motivated, self-directed learners. At the higher education level, the National Foreign Language Project has placed added pressure on universities to produce graduates who are critically engaged and communicatively autonomously (Nguyen et al., 2023). However, because of the strongly extrinsically motivated educational culture in which most Vietnamese students have been socialized – through teacher-centered pedagogy, high-stakes examinations, and high family and societal expectations regarding credential attainment – studying for good grades, competitive degrees, and the promise of employment opportunities far outweighs learning for intrinsic satisfaction or pure intellectual curiosity (Morris et al., 2022). This is the case even with some recent studies conducted within Vietnam; for example, in an investigation of 339 students in an English Medium Instruction (EMI) program at a university in Southern Vietnam, Nguyen et al. (2023) noted that, despite a relatively autonomous orientation toward studying, many

academic stressors tended to undermine the students' motivation during their studies, thus reinforcing the condition of intrinsic motivation being maintained only if supported at the institutional level.

Given this, higher education researchers and educators must understand the theoretical underpinnings of academic motivation because of the apparent dissonance between the motivational profile of most students in the Vietnamese education system and the more autonomous orientation implied in most reform initiatives. However, there are several competing theoretical frameworks, each with its own concepts, assumptions, and bodies of empirical work, offering alternative answers to questions about what motivates students, what maintains their motivation over time, and what facilitates or inhibits their motivation.

In this study, I will discuss the major theories of academic motivation to highlight their strengths and limitations and explain how their implications are relevant to research and practice in Vietnamese higher education. The structure of this review is as follows: first, the four broad theoretical perspectives on motivation that have been dominant in the literature to date will be reviewed, namely, Self-Determination Theory, Expectancy-Value Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory. This will be followed by a discussion of the complementary contributions of multiple theoretical perspectives.

II. Major Theories of Academic Motivation

Self-Determination Theory

Among the current major theories of academic motivation in higher education, Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) stands at the center stage. It has increased its research base from 33 articles published in 2000 to almost 1800 articles published yearly by 2020 (Ryan et al., 2023). Importantly, SDT proposes that extrinsic motivation differs qualitatively according to the extent to which it is internalized. These varying forms include externally regulated (motivation controlled by external contingencies of rewards and punishments), introjected (controlled by internal pressures such as guilt or the maintenance of self-esteem), identified (an activity is valued for its outcomes), and integrated regulation (an activity is fully integrated into the self-concept and value system).

The motivational continuum is organized according to the degree of autonomy or self-determination characterizing the different forms of regulation, ranging from externally controlled to fully autonomous forms. Indeed, a recent meta-review by Ryan et al. (2023) covering 60 meta-analyses provides the most comprehensive empirical test of these propositions to date. Need satisfaction has consistently and positively related to autonomous motivation and well-being, whereas need frustration has related to controlled motivation and ill-being across meta-analytic reviews in the educational, organizational, health, and sport domains. In education, autonomous motivation has consistently been related to deeper learning strategies, persistence, higher academic achievement, and a more robust and enduring commitment to the studied domain.

In this sense, Ryan et al. (2023) concluded that, although the behavioral manifestations of the needs may differ cross-culturally, the three basic psychological needs are universal based on the findings of South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. In Vietnam, two recent studies provide direct empirical support. In 2019, Nguyen and Nguyen provided evidence for the validity of the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS-C 28; Vallerand et al., 1992) in the sample of Vietnamese university students. This evidence supports further investigations of motivation using the SDT framework in this population. Later, in 2023, Nguyen et al. explored motivation through SDT in an EMI program with 339 students from a university in southern Vietnam, showing that competence and relatedness were the leading psychological needs that motivated students to enroll and that, although students generally showed a high level of autonomous orientation, this was reduced under conditions of academic stress and inadequate support for their language needs. Relatedly, in an ELT context, Nguyen (2024) examined the SDT profile using AMS-C 28 of 167 third-year TESL student teachers from Dong Nai University after their teaching practicum. Findings revealed that student teachers showed moderate levels of autonomous motivation, and extrinsic motivation was significantly higher than intrinsic motivation, with Cohen's $d = 0.66$.

Expectancy-Value Theory

Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT; Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) complements this perspective on academic motivation from psychological needs with a focus on beliefs and values. According to this model, the behavior activated toward a task – the decision to begin the task, the level of effort to invest, and the length of time to persist – is determined by two sets of cognitions: the expectancies about success or how well a student thinks she or he will do on an upcoming task and the subjective task values or reasons for doing a particular task. The model differentiates task value into four specific components: intrinsic value or interest and enjoyment derived from a task; attainment value or the importance of doing well on a task for one's identity; utility value or the usefulness of a task for future goals; and cost, which relates to the perceived sacrifices or negative consequences of engaging in the task.

In their Integrative Action Model of Motivated Behavior, Urhahne and Wijnia (2023) place EVT at the level of the goal and self stages of motivated behavior. At this level, the students' expectations and values

influence which goals to set and the self-concept to develop even before the students take action. It is thus not surprising that EVT has particular relevance to the context of Vietnamese higher education, in which the students place great emphasis on utility value as an instrumental reason for studying (Tran & Taylor-Leech, 2023). While, from the perspective of SDT, a motivation based on utility is, in essence, an external regulation and is, therefore, less likely to result in deep learning, according to EVT, utility value is a legitimate and strong source of motivation that can be used by teachers when their students have to be convinced about the relevance of the course content to their career goals. Finally, from the perspective of EVT, a significant notion emerges that is entirely absent from SDT: motivational cost. For example, a typical Vietnamese university student has to cope with many other commitments – such as financial pressure, part-time work, and family obligations – which are even more challenging than the academic tasks themselves (Bandhu et al., 2024).

Achievement Goal Theory

AGT (Dweck, 1986; Elliot & McGregor, 2001) addresses an aspect of motivated behavior that is not so explicitly foregrounded in SDT or EVT: the particular goals students bring to bear on academic tasks and how such goals are supposed to affect the quality of learning and performance. AGT distinguishes mastery goals, where success is defined in terms of learning, improvement, and mastering the task, from performance goals, where success is defined relative to others, either outperforming others or avoiding showing incompetence. In addition, an approach-avoidance orientation distinction within each type of goal leads to a 2x2 framework, as elaborated by Elliot and McGregor (2001), in which one could speak of mastery-approach goals (seeking to learn and improve), mastery-avoidance goals (seeking to avoid deterioration), performance-approach goals (seeking to do better than one's peers), and performance-avoidance goals (seeking not to appear incompetent).

In fact, in the integrative action model of Urhahne and Wijnia (2023), the position of AGT is at the goal level. Most meta-analytic evidence points to mastery-approach goals as being related to the most adaptive learning outcomes – such as deeper processing, intrinsic motivation, and persistence – while performance-avoidance goals relate to surface learning, anxiety, and disengagement. Indeed, at the structural level, the competitive nature of high-stakes examinations and grading in Vietnamese higher education tends to foster performance goals over mastery goals. Following this, Bandhu et al. (2024) show that the orientation to particular goal types is related not only to dispositional characteristics but also to the motivational climate of the classroom and the institution – this has obvious implications for the construction of assessments, feedback mechanisms, and competitive ranking procedures in Vietnamese universities.

Social Cognitive Theory and Self-Efficacy

Motivation, in SCT (Bandura, 1986, 1997), is based on the construct of self-efficacy: a person's belief in their capability to perform the actions required to produce given attainments. Academic self-efficacy is one of the most potent individual variables related to motivated behavior, learning engagement, and achievement in school documented in the literature (Ryan et al., 2023; Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023). According to Bandura, such beliefs are developed and maintained by four principal sources of information: mastery experiences, or prior success and failure in similar tasks; vicarious experiences, or observations of others succeeding or failing; verbal persuasion by significant others; and the interpretation of one's physiological state, especially arousal.

Among the recent studies conducted in Vietnam that extend SCT to technology-enhanced learning environments, one is that of Nguyen-Viet and Doan (2025). In a sample of 659 Vietnamese university students from a blended learning context, they found that, among the gamification features, immersion, achievement mechanics, and social interaction positively predicted students' intrinsic motivation, which, in turn, positively predicted learning effectiveness. Moreover, self-regulation moderated both the relationship between gamification and intrinsic motivation and between intrinsic motivation and learning effectiveness, highlighting the role of students as agents of their learning in SCT. The authors thus conclude that, in the context of Vietnamese universities, motivational interventions building self-efficacy and self-regulatory capacity alongside content delivery have more lasting effects than those relying on extrinsic rewards only.

III. Points of Convergence and Divergence Across Theories

Despite their different emphases, the four theories reviewed above share several important assumptions. All four recognize that motivation is not a fixed trait but a dynamic state shaped by the interaction between individual dispositions and environmental conditions. All four identify some form of competence-related cognition – SDT's competence need, EVT's expectancy beliefs, AGT's mastery orientation, SCT's self-efficacy – as central to motivated engagement. And all four acknowledge that the social and institutional context of learning shapes individual motivation: through need satisfaction and frustration (SDT), through the credibility of utility value claims (EVT), through the motivational climate of assessment (AGT), and through the availability of vicarious models and social encouragement (SCT).

The most important point of divergence concerns how each theory conceptualizes the relationship between extrinsic motivation and learning quality. SDT treats extrinsic motivation as inherently less conducive to deep learning than autonomous motivation, though it acknowledges that identified and integrated regulation can support engagement almost as effectively as intrinsic motivation. EVT treats utility value as a potentially powerful and legitimate motivational resource that does not necessarily undermine learning quality when perceived utility is specific, credible, and connected to genuine future goals. AGT's performance-approach orientation is associated with less deep learning than mastery goals but can support achievement in competitive academic environments. SCT does not directly address the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction, focusing instead on the strength and accuracy of self-efficacy beliefs regardless of their source.

These divergences matter practically because they lead to different pedagogical recommendations. An educator working from a pure SDT perspective would focus on creating autonomy-supportive classroom environments. An educator drawing on EVT would focus on making the utility of course content explicit and compelling. An educator informed by AGT would restructure assessment to emphasize mastery criteria over competitive ranking. An educator applying SCT would provide frequent, specific, attainable success experiences that build self-efficacy. As Nguyen et al. (2023) and Nguyen-Viet and Doan (2025) both demonstrate in Vietnamese contexts, the most effective motivational interventions are those that address multiple mechanisms simultaneously rather than relying on a single theoretical lever.

IV. Implications for Vietnamese Higher Education

Rethinking the Intrinsic-Extrinsic Divide

A multi-theoretical perspective has important implications for the intrinsic-extrinsic divide in educational quality. It can straightforwardly be interpreted through the SDT lens as an externally regulated type of extrinsic motivation; thus, it is problematic. However, EVT provides a more complex account of the role of utility value. Indeed, utility value is theoretically expected to lead to high levels of engagement in the long term when students can perceive a true and credible link between their studies and future goals that they value.

This nuance is important in the Vietnamese context because it reframes the motivational challenge facing universities. Rather than attempting the difficult task of converting extrinsically motivated students into intrinsically motivated ones, a process that may require years and the right environmental conditions, educators and program designers can work more immediately by strengthening the credibility and specificity of utility value. This corresponds well with Nguyen et al. (2023), who found that the dominant motivation among students in EMI programs in southern Vietnam was the instrumental value of English proficiency for their future careers. That is, utility value need not be a relatively weak motivational factor; instead, utility value may be a starting point through which motivation further internalizes over time.

Designing Learning Environments That Support Autonomous Motivation

In empirical studies of Vietnamese students, SDT and SCT have been combined to yield converging evidence for a single design principle: learning environments designed to satisfy competence needs and build students' self-regulatory abilities will have better motivational effects than those that rely on external incentives. Nguyen-Viet and Doan (2025) show that gamification elements enhance students' intrinsic motivation and, consequently, their learning outcomes. This is a concrete example based on empirical evidence showing how such a principle can be implemented. More importantly, their study highlights the moderating role of self-regulation. That is, according to their findings, students with better self-regulatory competencies benefit more, in terms of motivational and learning outcomes, from gamified blended learning environments than those with fewer competencies. According to SDT, this is exactly how autonomy support works: it leads to internalized motivation only when students have internal resources to utilize their autonomy fruitfully.

The Need for Multi-Theoretical Research Design

The second major implication is that motivation studies within the Vietnamese higher education context should not be designed on a mono-theoretical basis. Due to the popularity of SDT in the international literature on motivation and the availability of validated Vietnamese instruments such as the AMS-C 28 (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019), it naturally constitutes a logical point of departure for motivation research in the Vietnamese higher education context. However, the gaps identified through the current review do not allow SDT to explain the whole spectrum of motivational phenomena relevant to university settings in Vietnam. Pairing SDT scales with expectancy and utility value scales from EVT or goal orientation scales from AGT or self-efficacy scales from SCT will contribute to a much richer and more useful understanding of student motivation than can ever be obtained from a single-theory approach. Urhahne and Wijnia's (2023) integrated action model may be a suitable organizing framework for multi-theory designs.

V. Discussion

Academic motivation does not refer to a single construct but rather to a family of phenomena interrelated in a myriad of ways. Self-Determination Theory, Expectancy-Value Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory have each identified crucial dimensions underlying students' initial decisions to become engaged with learning activities and the processes by which this engagement is maintained over time, including the conditions that promote or inhibit such engagement. None, however, offers a complete explanation on its own.

In the specific context of higher education in Vietnam, an exam-driven educational culture, strong utility-value motivation, and newly emerging, rapidly reforming demands construct a particularly distinctive motivational context. Accordingly, the abovementioned theoretical perspectives should be considered different, complementary lenses rather than competing ones. Recent empirical studies in Vietnam, such as motivation based on SDT in the context of English as a medium of instruction by Nguyen et al. (2023) and gamification in blended learning as a means of supporting intrinsic motivation by Nguyen-Viet and Doan (2025), provide further evidence that the field is following this pathway. This review will outline the theoretical landscape in more detail to assist researchers and educators in making informed decisions about which theoretical perspective(s) best fit the purpose at hand, what combinations can be achieved, and which types of questions they can answer. Indeed, such clarity is a prerequisite for systematic, theoretically informed motivation research that Vietnamese higher education urgently needs.

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