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# Students' Motivation for Participating in Discussion Board

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## ABSTRACT

Online discussion boards are considered beneficial to learning activities. The effectiveness of discussion boards is greatly dependent on students' levels of participation. In this study we examine the motivational factors for student participation in online discussion boards in blended learning contexts, that is, hybrids of in-class and online learning. We propose that desire for esteem and affiliation, conformity to group norms, and reciprocity have a direct impact on the level of participation in the activity. A quantitative survey will be conducted to test our theoretical model in the next step of the research.

## Keywords

Motivation, Blended Learning Environment, Online Discussion Board.

## INTRODUCTION

In traditional classroom environments, students need to be multitasking – listening to lectures and taking notes, as well as participating in the lecture/discussion within a limited time period. Consequently, some good inputs to the discussion may not get sufficient attention because of time constraints. Researchers suggest changes be made within classrooms to stimulate students' active learning (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Following this stream of thought, the use of online discussion boards along with traditional face-to-face class rooms can be very useful. Online discussion boards are electronic media in which students contribute to a topic designated by the instructor (e.g. Blackboard, Moodle and SharePoint all have portal discussion board features). Online discussion boards can address some of the challenges of classroom based learning. They have no time constraints, create a common space to share and revisit ideas, and support “reflection and other forms of higher order learning” (Hannafin et al., 1999).

While allowing students to participate in online discussion boards is considered a good pedagogical method (Bonk et al., 2001), students' motivation for participation is essential to the success of the method (Chen, 2010; Xie et al., 2006). Therefore, the question of student motivation is a worthwhile challenge for research. In fact, attempts to answer the question have been made in education literature for the fully online environment. For example, Xie et al. (2006) found that students' perception towards competence, value, autonomy, and relatedness affect the student's online participation in the online learning context. As online discussion boards are popularly used in the blended learning context, we argue that studies on motivational factors for participating in online discussion boards in such a context is of equal import. Therefore, the research question we try to address in this study is:

*What are the motivational factors for students to participate in online discussion boards in the blended learning context?*

In the following sections, we propose a theoretical model to determine the motivational factors for students' participation in the online discussion board and briefly present our research method for the study as well as the potential contributions that this study can bring to the academic and practice communities.

## THEORETICAL MODEL

In order to find out the factors determining student participation in online discussion boards, we examined the body of literature on motivation theories, seeking constructs that could drive an individual to exert himself/herself towards certain goals. As the practical implication of our study is to inform instructors how to manage their courses to encourage online discussion board activities, we focused on external motivating factors, rather than internal factors such as personal traits. Also, online discussion board in our study is understood as a complimentary course component where students participate on voluntary basis. Therefore, while we recognize the importance of the instructors' influence in students' participation in any

class activities, we expect this influence is indirect and through the instructors' manipulation of the independent constructs proposed in our theoretical model.

Explanations for students' motivation to participate in online discussion boards can stem from needs theories which describe how an individual's actions were motivated by his/her needs. Two of the most well-known theories in this stream are Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs and McClelland's (1961) trichotomy of needs. According to Maslow (1954), human needs could fall into any one of the following five types, listed in descending order of importance: (1) *physiological needs* such as hunger or thirst; (2) *Safety*, such as needs for security and protection; (3) *Social*, or the need for friendship and affiliation; (4) *Esteem*, or the needs for achievement and/or recognition; and (5) *Self-actualization*, or the need to be able to grow to one's fullest extent. Similarly, McClelland (1961) wrote that human beings had needs for achievement, for power or the ability to control others, and for affiliation, or friendly relationships with others. In the online discussion board context, esteem and affiliation needs can be the driving forces for student participation in the activity. Actively contributing to an online discussion board not only helps students earn respect from their peers, but also to make a good impression on their instructors which may consequently satisfy their esteem needs. Furthermore, an online discussion board can be a powerful channel for affiliation as students can share their topics of interest, concerns, and begin to know more about one another throughout this activity. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses -

*P1: The greater a student's need for esteem, the more he/she will participate in the online discussion board.*

*P2: The greater a student's need for affiliation, the more he/she will participate in the online discussion board.*

Motivation is also a phenomenon of great interest in organizational behavior research. Research in the field has revealed that an employee could be motivated to do a certain task by specific and challenging goals (goal-setting theory), by his/her belief that he/she can do the task (self-efficacy theory), or by his/her perception of the equity between the reward for his/her work and that of the other colleagues (equity theory) (Robbins and Judges, 2010). We argue that none of the theories are appropriate within the online discussion board context. While setting specific achievement goals may improve learning (Covington, 2000), goal setting is less likely to have a direct impact on students' decision to participate in the online discussion board. The self-efficacy theory is also irrelevant because the desired outcome, participation in the online discussion board, is not an act that requires high level of competency to accomplish. Finally, the equity theory relates closely to the reward scheme an instructor might offer, and it is not within the scope of this study to discuss it.

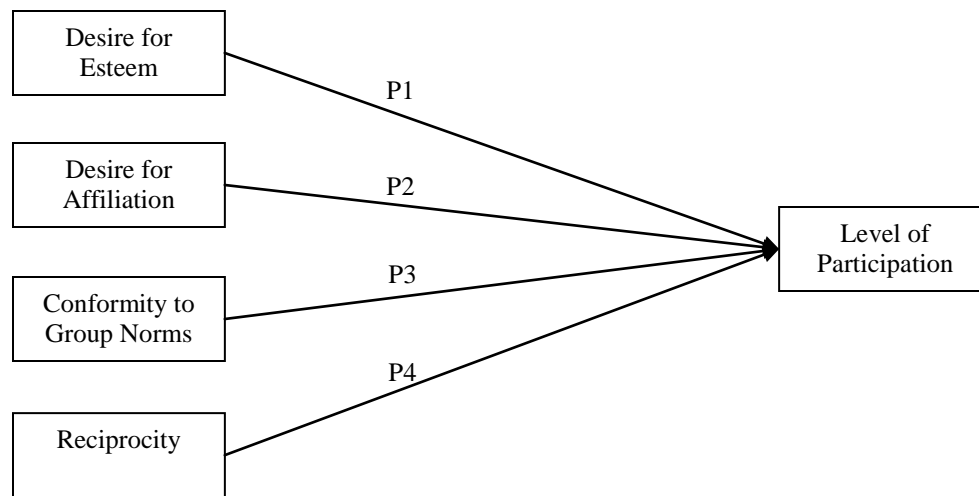
Since online discussion boards are group activities, it is necessary to examine the phenomenon from the group dynamics perspective. Group research literature has long recognized that an individual might behave or make decisions in a way that conforms to the behaviors and decisions of the majority – a phenomenon called social majority influence (Forsyth, 2009) which might occur in any one of three forms: *informational influence, normative influence, or interpersonal influence* (Forsyth, 2009). Within the online discussion board context, informational influence on students' decisions to participate in the activity should be weak because students are supposed to be provided with enough information by course instructors to make their own decisions. Interpersonal influence also may not have significant impact because a course typically lasts only a semester, and therefore would not be of long enough duration for the students to believe their interpersonal relationships derived within the class to be important. In contrast, normative influence is a relevant driving force for students' motivation to participate because the natural tendency of students is to identify themselves with "good" student groups. Therefore, if the act of participating in an online discussion board establishes the identity of a "good" student, students will be motivated to participate. We propose that:

*P3: Conformity to group norms motivates students to participate in an online discussion board.*

It is supposed that one of the main functions of an online discussion board is to let students help and get help from one another regarding course issues and topics. The norm of reciprocity, as universal as it is (Gouldner, 1960), should be another motivation for students to contribute on the board. Reciprocity has been recognized as a source of motivation for sharing in virtual communities (Wellman and Gulia, 1997). In the online discussion board's blended learning context, the norm's effect is expected to be much stronger because unlike virtual communities in which community members are anonymous and physically distant from one another, members of an online discussion board are classmates and so should have a much stronger social bond, and so should feel stronger pressure to conform to standard social norms and etiquette. We therefore propose:

*P4: Reciprocity motivates students to participate in an online discussion board.*

Our theoretical model could be summarized in the figure as follows:



**Figure 1. Theoretical Model**

## RESEARCH METHOD

The study will be conducted using the quantitative survey method, which is briefly described as follows:

*Questionnaire development plan:* To measure the independent constructs in our model, we will search for measurement scales for the constructs in the literature. The dependent construct “level of participation” will be operationalized either as the number of contributions that students under study contribute throughout the semester, or as the subjective evaluation of an instructor of the class that applies the online discussion board.

*Unit of analysis:* individuals.

*Data collection plan:* The survey questionnaire for the independent constructs will be delivered to students who have participated in online discussion boards in their courses. The dependent construct will be measured separately using either one of two ways described in the questionnaire development plan.

*Data analysis plan:* Regression analysis will be applied to examine the relationships between the independent constructs with the single dependent construct of interest i.e. level of participation. We will also conduct factor analysis to check whether the measurement items in the instruments that we will find in the literature to measure independent constructs are still relevant in the online discussion board context.

## CONTRIBUTION

This research work is an attempt to identify the motivational factors in the blended learning environment. This conceptual model is an attempt to help instructors, students, and educational communities by identifying the necessary traits that may enhance the learning and group activity process. These factors may further help to incorporate some of the identified factors in the design and development of discussion boards.

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