# Chapter 14
# Digital Learning During COVID-19:
## An Intersectional Perspective on Secondary Students' Motivation and Perceived Teacher Support

**Marlene Kollmayer**
*University of Vienna, Austria*

**Selma Korlat Ikanovic**
*University of Vienna, Austria*

**Julia Holzer**
*University of Vienna, Austria*

**Elisabeth Rosa Pelikan**
*University of Vienna, Austria*

**Christiane Spiel**
*University of Vienna, Austria*

**Barbara Schober**
*University of Vienna, Austria*

**Marko Lüftenegger**
*University of Vienna, Austria*

## ABSTRACT

*The spread of COVID-19 led to an interruption of physical school attendance for around 1.6 billion students worldwide. During the school closures, schools switched to digital teaching which created a unique situation for all students but especially for groups disadvantaged in the (virtual) classroom. The current study is theoretically based on the situated expectancy-value theory that argues that an individual's motivation is shaped by their social identities. Following the intersectionality framework, the impact of gender and first language on motivation is examined simultaneously. The chapter presents an empirical study of motivation and perceived teacher support for digital learning among 19,337 secondary school students from Austria, shortly after the first pandemic-induced school closures in spring 2020. Results show differences in perceived teacher support, competence beliefs, intrinsic value, and engagement regarding digital learning between students of different gender and first languages. Practical and theoretical implications of the study's findings are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

There have been calls for more digitalization in education over the last decade – especially given its game-changing potential for sustainability. Education for Sustainable Development aims to empower individuals of all ages and backgrounds to make informed decisions facilitating an equitable and environmentally sustainable society. To reach this goal, all individuals have to be provided with the necessary knowledge and skills, as well as the attitudes and values necessary to address sustainable development challenges. Digitalization in education has been proposed to be one key factor for creating transformative learning environments and learning outcomes that can lead to a more sustainable world, and also for enlarging the number of students getting access to Education for Sustainable Development. Digital education is assumed to improve important skills such as global awareness, problem solving and collaboration, to enable children from different parts of the word to connect to each other easily, and to open future job opportunities for young people. Therefore, schools need to build up the competences, skills, and attitudes necessary to take part in the process of digitalization.

The spread of COVID-19 led to temporary school closures in countries worldwide, which caused an interruption of physical school attendance for around 1.6 billion children and adolescents for several months (UNICEF, 2020). Despite the ongoing calls for more digitalization in education, most European school systems had employed face-to-face teaching as their standard method before COVID-19 and did not invest much time or effort in digitalization. During the school closures, schools all over the world switched to digital teaching and learning, often without being prepared for the accompanying challenges. Although digitalization is assumed to hold potential for supporting self-regulated, situated, and informal learning, this created a unique situation for all students and teachers, but especially for groups disadvantaged in the (virtual) classroom (UN, 2020). This might increase the "digital divide" between those who have the skills to use digital media productively and those who do not in early stages of educational careers. However, digitalization in education can only make a valuable contribution to empower people to actively shape the process of transforming towards sustainability when students with different social identities are equally promoted and supported.

This chapter deals with students' motivation for digital learning and analyses if there are individual differences in motivation that might lead to inequalities and thus hinder the potential of digital education for sustainability. First, the Situated Expectancy-Value Theory is introduced as the study's theoretical basis. Second, the chapter presents recent findings on individual differences in digital learning and explicates how intersectional perspectives can contribute to expanding our knowledge on digital education's potential for sustainability. Third, the chapter presents a large quantitative study conducted in Austria shortly after the first school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020. The study investigates associations between students' competence beliefs, intrinsic value and learning engagement regarding digital learning as well as their perceived teacher support before analysing individual differences in these components. Following the intersectionality paradigm, students' age, gender and immigrant background are considered simultaneously. Based on the results of the study, directions for future research and recommendations to teachers and policymakers are derived.

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