

# Chapter 1

## What Changes in Adult Online Learners' Motivation?

### A Systematic Meta-Review of the Scholarly Landscape of Research on Adult Online Learning Motivation

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*Adult online learning can be a very complex and volatile process, often leading to different expected and/or unexpected outcomes attributed to both learner-specific and non-learner-specific motivational factors. Despite the growing research literature recently, most studies examine online adult online learning motivation only from one perspective at a particular time. Therefore, this chapter aims to conduct a systematic meta-review to provide an integrated overview of the relevant research literature in the past four decades.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Motivational research has a long-standing historical tradition developing from the early focus on an individual's instinctual behaviors in response to environmental concerns (Freud, 1957), transitioning to human cognitive processes behind motivation as self-governing, thought-processing units with intellectual capacity and curiosities (Hendrick, 1942; Fenichel, 1945; Hartmann, Kris, & Loewenstein, 1949; Herzberg, 1966; Piaget, 1952; White, 1959), and now seeing flourishing new research in observational studies of human interaction highlighting the significant societal contexts underlying motivational processes.

Laying the foundation for motivational studies, particularly in educational research, investigations of *locus of control* and *personal causation* as determinants of human motivation highlight the origins, direction, and strength of motivational factors on individual choices and behaviors in learning (De Charms, 1968; Rotter, 1966). This gives rise to the two most influential educational motivation theories: Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Bandura and Schunk's (1981) Achievement Goal Theory (AGT). While SDT sets up a theoretical framework for educational motivation research along the continuum of self-determination: *intrinsic*, *extrinsic*, and *amotivation*; AGT focuses on attitude towards learning as the critical determinant of learner motivation, with concepts such as goal-mastery or the joy of learning serving as critical motivators for some learners (Hegarty, 2011).

However, the research body on adult online learning motivation is comparatively less grounded in its own comprehensive, solid theoretical framework. It thus appears more fragmented/disconnected by addressing primarily field-based issues specific to certain target learner groups, online programs, classes/courses, pedagogical approaches, or adoption of detailed instructional design, modalities, and/or technologies (Abedini et al., 2021; Hashim et al., 2015).

For instance, the practice and research of adult education in general (and adult online education is no exception) have been heavily influenced by Knowles' (1980) five andragogical assumptions: (1) adult learners are self-directed, (2) adult learners bring a wealth of experience to the educational setting, (3) adults learners are ready to learn to begin with, (4) adults are problem-centered in their learning, and (5) adults are intrinsically motivated (Blondy, 2007). In contrast to child learning, adult online education should be cooperative, student-centered, and flexible, highlighting shared responsibilities in planning, goal setting, and evaluation while encouraging and supporting SDL. Unfortunately, these andragogical assumptions have long been criticized due to a lack of empirical evidence, including inconsistent/conflicted empirical findings (Atherton, 2003; Bellager & Van Slyke, 1988; Brookfield, 1995; Hartree, 1984).

In this chapter, we conducted a systematic meta-analysis of the most recent scholarly literature to address the theory-practice disconnection in the adult online learning motivation research field. We started by clearly stating the **Mission/Aim** of this chapter and proceeded to introduce the methodological appropriateness of the systematic meta-analysis approach compared to other systematic review techniques in the **Methods** section, including the detailed demonstration of why and how to conduct such a study. Next, the **Results** section highlighted the five main research themes/trends/areas that we extracted from the past four decades of research literature on adult online learning motivation: *Motivation and Self-Efficacy*, *Learning Environments*, *Contextualization*, *Gamification*, and *Student and Teacher Challenges*. The following **Conclusion/Further Research** section summarized the major findings of this systematic meta-analysis and emphasized again the importance of the holistic/systematic turn in empirical research on adult online learning motivation. Finally, the **Significance/Implications** section outlined the potential contributions of this chapter's systematic meta-analysis to deepening our understanding of the theory-

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