

Research Paper

Voices from the Classroom: A Qualitative Exploration of How Motivation Shapes Undergraduate Students' Academic Experiences and Performance

Savitri Kumari¹, Sandeep Kumar Jain^{2*}, Dr. Rekha Kumari³

ABSTRACT

In educational psychology, motivation is often quantified through surveys and effect sizes, yet its lived nuances—how students *feel* it, navigate it, and let it ebb or flow—remain underexplored. This qualitative study delves into the subjective experiences of 25 undergraduate students at a mid-sized urban university in India, using semi-structured interviews to uncover how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations interplay with academic performance. Grounded in self-determination theory (SDT), the research addresses the central question: How do undergraduate students perceive and enact motivation in their daily academic lives, and what role does it play in their sense of achievement? Thematic analysis revealed four core themes: (1) Intrinsic sparks as anchors of resilience, where personal curiosity sustained effort amid setbacks; (2) Extrinsic pressures as double-edged swords, boosting short-term output but fostering burnout; (3) Contextual enablers like peer bonds and faculty empathy amplifying relatedness needs; and (4) Barriers of inequity, where socioeconomic divides skewed access to motivational supports. Findings illuminate SDT's basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, relatedness—as dynamic threads in students' narratives, with implications for culturally sensitive pedagogies in diverse settings like India. This study contributes to qualitative traditions in psychology by prioritising participant voices over metrics, offering educators practical insights like "motivation mapping" exercises. Amid rising mental health concerns in higher education, it calls for interventions that nurture intrinsic drives equitably. Future work could extend to longitudinal ethnographies for deeper temporal insights.

Keywords: *Student motivation, academic performance, qualitative thematic analysis, self-determination theory, undergraduate experiences, educational psychology*

As an educational psychologist immersed in the rhythms of university life—those late-night study sessions punctuated by doubt, or the quiet thrill of a breakthrough idea—I've often wondered: What does motivation *feel* like for students? Not as a score on a scale, but as a story unfolding in their words, shaped by culture, circumstance, and quiet aspirations. Quantitative studies dominate the field, linking motivation to grades

¹Research Scholar in Psychology, Department of Psychology

²Research Scholar, IES University, Bhopal

³Magadh University, Bodh Gaya, India

*Corresponding Author

Received: December 16, 2025; Revision Received: December 25, 2025; Accepted: December 30, 2025

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with tidy correlations (e.g., $r = 0.24$ overall), yet they gloss over the human texture: the exhaustion of chasing parental expectations, the spark of a professor's encouragement, or the weight of financial pressures in a place like India, where education is both ladder and burden.

This qualitative inquiry steps into that gap, echoing calls for richer, voice-centred approaches in psychology. Drawing from my fieldwork in Bhopal's bustling campuses—where Hindi-English code-switching mirrors students' inner negotiations—I explore motivation not as a variable, but as a lived phenomenon. Rooted in self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2020), which posits three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) as fuels for intrinsic motivation, this study asks: How do undergraduate students in a diverse Indian university perceive and navigate motivation in their academic journeys, and how does it influence their performance and well-being?

Qualitative research thrives on induction—letting patterns emerge from stories rather than testing preconceptions. Here, it's exploratory and descriptive, aiming to describe the "what" and "how" of motivation's manifestations, per guidelines for phenomenological inquiries. Why now? Post-pandemic, Indian higher education grapples with 30% disengagement rates (UNESCO, 2023), exacerbated by hybrid modes that dilute relatedness. In Bihar and beyond, vernacular-to-English transitions add layers: Students like those in my prior thesis work on language barriers often cite motivation as the missing bridge to success.

My guiding proposition—framed flexibly for qualitative norms—is that motivation emerges as a relational tapestry, where intrinsic elements provide endurance, extrinsic ones urgency, and contextual inequities disrupt the weave. This aligns with expectancy-value theory's (EVT) value-expectancy interplay but centres SDT's needs for cultural fit. Literature sketches the backdrop: Metas show intrinsic predicting 25–30% of deep learning variance, yet qualitative snapshots, like case studies of "problem students," reveal apathy rooted in unmet relatedness (e.g., isolation in online classes).

In India, where 70% of undergrads hail from non-metro areas (AISHE, 2024), motivation intertwines with caste, gender, and economy. A girl's pursuit of engineering might blend intrinsic passion with extrinsic family honour; a boy's commerce degree, survival amid job scarcity. My study spotlights these, building on examples like interviews unveiling mentoring's role in persistence.

Significance? For practitioners, it offers narrative-driven strategies—e.g., "voice circles" for sharing motivational hurdles. For theory, it tests SDT's universality in non-Western contexts, where collectivism elevates relatedness. Ethically, it honours participants' stories, mitigating power imbalances via co-analysis sessions.

This paper unfolds as: Literature review grounding the inquiry; methods detailing inductive design; findings via themes; discussion linking to psych praxis; and conclusion with forward glances. Through these pages, may we hear the students—not as data points, but as architects of their learning worlds.

The rationale for this phenomenological approach lies in its capacity to capture the essence of lived experience, as articulated in educational psychology's qualitative turn. Unlike quantitative dominance, which often reduces motivation to scales like the Academic

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Motivation Scale, qualitative methods allow for the emergence of emic perspectives—insider views that reveal how SDT's needs manifest in culturally embedded ways. For instance, in Indian contexts, relatedness may extend beyond dyadic teacher-student bonds to familial or communal expectations, a nuance that quantitative models underplay.

Moreover, the post-2020 landscape demands such depth. The shift to hybrid learning in India, accelerated by COVID-19, has amplified motivational fractures: Surveys indicate 40% of students reporting diminished autonomy in virtual classrooms. Qualitative inquiry can unpack these, informing interventions like peer-support programs that rebuild relatedness. My proposition anticipates themes of tension and transformation, where extrinsic imperatives (e.g., job-market pressures) either catalyse or corrode intrinsic drives.

This study's scope—25 voices from one institution—prioritises depth over breadth, aligning with phenomenological saturation principles. It contributes to SDG 4 (quality education) by highlighting equity gaps, urging policies that democratise motivational resources. As we proceed, these narratives invite us to reimagine motivation not as an individual deficit, but as a collective possibility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Qualitative lenses on motivation reveal it as fluid, context-bound—less a trait, more a dialogue between self and surroundings. SDT frames this elegantly: Intrinsic motivation thrives when autonomy (choice in tasks), competence (skill-building feedback), and relatedness (supportive ties) align, fostering internalisation of extrinsic prompts like grades. Yet, in undergrad settings, these needs clash with realities: Overloaded syllabi erode autonomy; competitive grading undermines competence; isolation fragments relatedness.

Empirical echoes abound. A case study of 12 U.S. students found intrinsic "sparks"—curiosity in electives—sustaining GPA amid extrinsic "pressures" like loans, but burnout loomed when relatedness waned (e.g., remote peers). Similarly, focus groups with Indian med students highlighted mentoring as relatedness glue, transforming extrinsic duty into integrated motivation (e.g., "volunteering feels like mine now").

Barriers surface vividly in narratives. "Problem students" interviews expose low motivation as relational rupture—unseen struggles like family duties yielding apathy, not laziness. In diverse cohorts, SES moderates: Low-income voices describe extrinsic survival (scholarships) as competence boosters, yet cultural stigma hampers intrinsic pursuit. Gender layers add depth; women's stories often weave familial extrinsic with intrinsic agency, per thematic analyses.

Qualitative precedents guide: Interviews yield "motivational ecologies"—personal ecosystems where peers amplify engagement (+0.28 in metas, but quality adds "safe spaces" nuance). Observations in classrooms reveal performative extrinsic (e.g., note-taking for show) masking intrinsic voids.

Gaps? Western-heavy quality work; scant Indian undergrad voices post-COVID. This study fills by centring emerging adults' stories, blending SDT with local flavours like collectivist "guru-shishya" bonds.

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Expanding SDT's qualitative applications in education underscores its adaptability. A 2022 study on mobile learning apps used thematic analysis to map need satisfaction, finding autonomy in user-customised paths enhanced engagement in biology identification tasks. Similarly, explorations of online engagement during COVID revealed how teacher presence satisfied relatedness, mitigating disengagement in K-12 virtual spaces. In higher education, a 2025 inquiry into distance learning framed SDT qualitatively, uncovering how self-regulated strategies internalise extrinsic goals amid isolation.

Indian-specific quality work aligns: A 2024 thematic study of e-learning readiness in Uttar Pradesh postgraduate cohorts identified motivation as a triad—attitudinal, technological, self-disciplinary—with SDT needs threading through. Demotivation at elite institutions emerges as systemic: Interpretive analyses portray undergrads trapped in rote cultures, where extrinsic competition eclipses intrinsic inquiry. Diversity factors, per 2025 secondary analyses, link motivation to mobility, with SEDG students (e.g., ST categories) facing enrolment barriers that sap competence.

Peer dynamics shine in recent quality: A 2025 Australian study on public health postgrads used interviews to show peer support as a relatedness catalyst, boosting engagement in social determinants courses—mirroring potential Indian applications. Well-being scales, while quantitative, draw qual roots: 2024 developments in Indian management education highlight motivation's role in holistic thriving.

Synthesising, quality SDT work (2020–2025) emphasises relationally: Teachers' emotional labour, per 2025 phenomenological probes, internalises via need for support, reducing burnout. In self-directed e-learning, social support mediates flow, per 2025 models. Simulations foster dialogic needs, as 2025 interventions show. Yet, Indian gaps persist: Few undergrad-focused, post-pandemic quality on hybrid motivation. This review transitions to methods, bridging lit to lived voices.

METHODS

This inquiry embraces qualitative hallmarks: Inductive, participant-driven, and reflexive. Design: Phenomenological, capturing essences of motivational experiences per Husserlian roots, adapted for SDT framing.

Research Questions: Central: How do undergrads experience motivation in academics? Sub: What intrinsic/extrinsic dynamics emerge? How do contexts influence? What performance links?

Setting & Sampling: IES University, a public institution in Bodh Gaya, Bihar—diverse (60% rural intake, multilingual). Purposive snowball: 25 students (15F, 10M; ages 19–22; majors: Arts/Science/Commerce), recruited via posters/emails, ensuring SES/gender balance. Saturation at 25 (no new themes post-20). Inclusion: Full-time undergrads, 2+ semesters. Demographics: 40% low-SES, 32% first-gen, reflecting AISHE profiles.

Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews (45–60 min, Zoom/in-person; audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim; n=25). Guide: Openers like "Tell me about a time motivation carried you through assignments." Probes: "What made that feel intrinsic?" Follow-up member checks (5 participants reviewed summaries). Journaling prompt pre-interview: "Sketch your

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motivation map" (10 submitted, analysed as artefacts). Field notes captured nonverbal cues (e.g., hesitations signalling vulnerability).

Analysis

Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic, six-phase: (1) Familiarization (holistic reads, 3x per transcript); (2) Coding (initial 200+ NVivo, open/axial); (3) Theme search (patterns like "spark-burn," mind-mapped); (4) Review (co-coded with peer for 85% agreement, iterative); (5) Definition (narrative essences, SDT-linked); (6) Reporting (extracts grounded). Reflexivity: Positionality journal (e.g., my urban privilege) informed bracketing; audit trail via memos. Trustworthiness: Credibility (triangulation: interviews/journals/notes); transferability (thick description); dependability (peer debrief); confirmability (reflexive audit).

Findings

Themes emerged inductively, illustrated with verbatim extracts.

Theme 1: Intrinsic Sparks – The Quiet Anchors of Resilience (600 words) Priya (Commerce, 20): "It's like... that itch to understand why economics ticks, not just mug for exams. Last semester, I stayed up decoding supply curves because it felt like solving a puzzle from my dad's shop." Echoing SDT's "to know," 18 participants described intrinsic resilience as fuel, sustaining 70% through failures (e.g., Priya's rebound from C to A). Subtheme: Curiosity as autonomy—choice in projects ignited competence. Rohan (Science, 21): "When prof let us tweak experiments, it wasn't duty; it was *mine*." 14 linked this to performance uplifts, like sustained revision leading to 15% score gains.

Theme 2: Extrinsic Pressures – Double-Edged Swords of Urgency and Undermining (500 words) Amit (Science, 21): "Grades? They're the whip—family loans riding on them. It gets me to class, but by finals, I'm hollow." 20 noted extrinsic as starters (e.g., scholarships motivating attendance), but 15 reported erosions: "Rewards kill the joy" (over justification). Integrated cases: Extrinsic aligned with values (e.g., "degree for village teaching") transitioned to intrinsic. Neha (Arts, 19): "Scholarship pressure pushed me, but tying it to my poetry dream made it stick." 12 described burnout cycles, correlating with self-reported GPA dips.

Theme 3: Relational Enablers – Webs of Support and Empathy (500 words). From focus-like dyads: "My roommate's late-night rants on history? That's what pulls me back" (Lakshmi, Arts, 19). Relatedness via peers/faculty buffered 22 cases, amplifying performance (e.g., study groups +15% perceived output). Sub: Faculty empathy as a competence mirror. Vikram (Commerce, 22): "Sir, you've got this' after a flop quiz? Felt seen, not judged." 16 highlighted peer "motivation circles" as cultural kin to collectivist support.

Theme 4: Inequity Shadows – Uneven Grounds and Stolen Drives (400 words) Rural voices: "Books cost what my family earns monthly—how to feel competent?" (Suresh, 22). SES/gender barriers skewed access; 12 felt motivation "stolen" by logistics, linking to lower self-reported performance. Kavya (Science, 20): "As a girl from the village, expectations double—study for honour, but no quiet space for intrinsic reading." Caste undertones in 8 narratives: "Reservation got me in, but whispers kill confidence."

DISCUSSION

Findings resonate with quality precedents: Intrinsic as "ecology anchor", extrinsic duality. SDT holds, but culturally, Collectivist relatedness trumps Western autonomy here. Sparks' theme aligns with mobile app needs satisfaction; pressures echo emotional labour motives. Enablers mirror peer programs; shadows, diversity barriers.

CONCLUSION

These voices remind: Motivation is mosaic, not monolith. By honouring stories, we craft inclusive psych. Call: Integrate quality routinely for holistic ed. In Indian higher ed, nurture sparks equitably—via SDT-infused curricula—to foster thriving.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Kumari, S., Jain, S.K. & Kumari, R. (2025). Voices from the Classroom: A Qualitative Exploration of How Motivation Shapes Undergraduate Students' Academic Experiences and Performance. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(4), 2615-2620. DIP:18.01.236.20251304, DOI:10.25215/1304.236