



## Antecedents and consequences of autonomous information seeking motivation

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### ABSTRACT

Autonomously motivated individuals tend to enjoy activities more than those who are extrinsically motivated, and they also tend to invest more effort. Grounded in basic psychological needs theory, the current study examines the motivation of students' autonomous information seeking and its relationship with the amount of effort invested in and enjoyment derived from information seeking. Autonomy support and perceived competence were found to explain 34.7% of the variance in autonomous motivation while autonomous motivation, in turn, explained 13.1% of variance in effort and 25.8% variance in enjoyment. The model indicates a positive relationship between basic psychological needs and autonomous motivation. Higher students' autonomy support and perceived competence levels lead to increases in autonomous motivation to seek information. Higher autonomous motivation levels, similarly, lead to higher levels of effort and enjoyment. Findings confirm that intrinsically motivated students enjoy information seeking more and invest more effort in the activity. This highlights the importance of encouraging students to engage in information seeking independently, while providing the necessary guidance that would increase their competence.

### 1. Introduction

Cultivating autonomous information seeking motivation in students is as important as it is challenging. Intrinsically motivated individuals are more likely to persist in activities and tend to enjoy them more (Grant, 2008). Controlled motivation, in contrast, has been shown to have little impact on goal attainment (Koestner, Otis, Powers, Pelletier, & Gagnon, 2008). If the goal of higher education is to cultivate lifelong learners, promoting and nurturing autonomous motivation (i.e., motivation that encompasses all intrinsic motivation types and extrinsic motivations where activities have been integrated into sense of self) in students is essential in empowering the next generation of researchers.

Psychological need research is arguably very much a work in progress. Therefore, no single theory is currently accepted as the dominant theory in the field. However, basic psychological needs theory, one of the integral theories of the self-determination (SD) metatheory, is unique in that it not only explains how needs (i.e., relatedness, perceived competence, and autonomy support) translate into motivations, but also how they relate to psychological wellbeing and wellness, which in turn influence individuals' effort and enjoyment during an activity.

#### 1.1. Problem statement

Current library and information science (LIS) literature is in need of empirical studies capable of addressing the “why” of information seeking. While situational (i.e., task-based) studies answer important questions to facilitate much needed improvements in negotiating reference transactions as well as enhancing systems, a deeper understanding of information seeking motivation is challenging without a deeper understanding of its antecedents and consequences.

Recent research in motivational psychology shows distinct promise in addressing this research gap. By linking BPNs to motivation, SD metatheory can address both BPNs and their influence on information seeking motivation and offer valuable insights currently lacking in LIS literature. The academic motivation scale: A measure of intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation in education In contrast with earlier theories, SD metatheory has grown out of applied research and has been extensively tested in various contexts, ranging from sports (Pelletier et al., 1995) and physical and mental health (Bernard, Martin, & Kulik, 2014; Hartmann, Dohle, & Siegrist, 2015; Moran, Russinova, Yim, & Sprague, 2014), to organizational management (Oostlander, Guntert, Schie, & Wehner, 2014; Robson, Schlegelmilch, & Bojkowszky, 2012). The theory has also been validated across cultures (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003; Deci et al., 2001), with no significant differences found in

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BPNs and their influence on motivational orientations between collectivist and individualist societies. A recent study (Dubnjakovic, 2017) also confirmed the self-determination theory (SDT) motivational continuum in students' information seeking. Building on this research, the current study will examine how BPNs, as defined by SDT, affect students' autonomous information seeking motivational orientation.

Additionally, SDT posits internally motivated individuals experience joy and exhibit more persistence while engaged in pursuit of intrinsic goals. In contrast, individuals who feel controlled experience pressure and stress and are far less likely to continue with their efforts (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Evidence supporting these hypotheses in information seeking contexts would enable librarians and teaching faculty to plan interventions promoting healthy life-long learning habits in students.

Through the application of SDT to information seeking motivation, the subjectivist information seeking motivational perspective will be validated by providing empirical evidence for motivational antecedents beyond mere goal attainment. Understanding the interplay of students' BPN satisfaction (i.e., autonomy, support, and competence) with their motivational orientation to seek information will also provide valuable insights that will pave the way for further research. For instance, current research demonstrates students prefer to receive their information from their peers (Gross & Latham, 2009). If basic BPN satisfaction relationship with information seeking motivation is understood, research could also address the role complex social interactions play in students' motivation to seek information from their peers.

The first goal of the current study is to confirm the hypothesized relationship between BPN satisfaction and autonomous (i.e., self-determined) motivation. The second goal is to examine the effect autonomous motivation has on undergraduate students' information seeking effort and enjoyment while researching in their chosen field of study as indicated by the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between relevant BPNs as defined by SDT (i.e., perceived competence and autonomy support) and autonomous motivation?
2. What is the relationship between autonomous motivation and effort invested in information seeking?
3. What is the relationship between autonomous motivation and enjoyment experienced during information seeking?

The first question examines the consequences of BPN thwarting or fulfillment relevant to the context of the study. The second and third questions examine the consequences of autonomous motivational information seeking orientation.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. BPN theory

BPN theory is one of the six mini theories comprising the SD metatheory, which is used to explore students' information seeking motivation antecedents in the current study. One of the major distinguishing characteristics of BPN theory, separating it from previous motivation need theories, is the notion that only those human needs which, when acting in concert with the environment, contribute to growth and wellbeing can be considered basic psychological needs. Consequently, physiological needs as described by Murray (1938) and later by Maslow (1943) and Alderfer (1969), are considered motives that energize action (Deci & Ryan, 2000) rather than true needs. The loose definition used to describe needs produced endless lists, rendering the concept meaningless. Furthermore, according to BPN theory, since basic psychological needs are those responsible for optimal psychological functioning, they are innate rather than learned, as was previously hypothesized by Murray.

The three BPNs are relatedness (the need to feel connected with

others in a meaningful way), competence (the need to be considered skilled and successful when interacting with the environment), and autonomy (the need to feel a sense of choice and freedom). Deci and Ryan's view of relatedness and competence is consistent with most psychology literature, while autonomy also accounts for the social nature of the individual. Specifically, autonomy must be supported by significant others (e.g., when a teenager chooses a college major, the parents show support and respect for the choice). When satisfied, the three needs contribute to continued wellbeing, however, when thwarted they produce significant negative consequences. Since the needs are innate, individuals are often not consciously aware of their presence and can engage in pursuit of other, often compensating, actions (e.g., Murray's abasement). However, since those actions usually fail to produce the lasting sense of wellbeing at best, and harm the individual at worst, they are not considered basic psychological needs.

This view of BPNs stems from SDT's organismic dialectic orientation, as seen in Ryan and Deci (2000b), who maintain that humans are naturally inquisitive, growth-oriented organisms who use their capacity to adapt to the environment in such a way as to promote connections with others in an environment supportive of the three BPNs (i.e., competence, autonomy, and relatedness). Deci and Ryan acknowledge the existence of drives and physiological needs but, unlike most other motivation theorists to date, they consider them subordinate to BPNs, maintaining that physiological needs are regulated by psychological needs. Since most drive theories aim to explain how individuals deal with disturbances in their equilibrium, they argue, the goal is to return to that same equilibrium. However, according to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), humans are growth-oriented organisms, and only the satisfaction or thwarting of BPNs would account for their motivations.

Deci and Ryan (2000) acknowledge that since BPNs are innate, need satisfaction is not often pursued as a goal in itself (one reads for pleasure of reading rather than to satisfy the need for autonomy). Direct need satisfaction pursuit is often a result of prolonged thwarting of that need (individuals feeling controlled will seek to free themselves). However, individuals might instead pursue compensatory activities that will satisfy the need in the short term. For example, the need for competence might be temporarily masked by attainment of material wealth or status. Worse still, since the relief from original need thwarting in this manner is temporary, individuals might lock themselves in a perpetual struggle to attain wealth and be left with little energy to engage in activities satisfying the need for competence (which would promote true psychological wellbeing), thus also adversely affecting their physical health.

### 2.2. Cognitive evaluation theory (CET)

In addition to the differing views of BPNs as learned and varying in strength (McClelland, 1965) to innate, Deci and Ryan (2000) also point out that since those needs must be satisfied in order for an individual to function optimally, research concerning their strength in an individual is of little consequence. Therefore, the focus shifts to exploring motivational orientations and goal contents, reflecting need satisfaction (or thwarting). Indeed, empirical research on BPNs is mostly based on research on intrinsic motivations as a growth function and internalization as an essential aspect of psychological integrity and social cohesion (Ryan, Connell, & Deci, 1985). As part of SDT metatheory, CET was formulated especially to address the effects of BPN satisfaction and thwarting and the interaction with the social environment on development and maintenance of intrinsic motivation. Briefly, to the extent that individuals' BPNs are met, they will tend toward autonomous motivational orientation. Autonomous motivation incorporates all forms of intrinsic motivation (i.e., to know, to experience stimulation, and to move toward accomplishment) and autonomously motivated individuals act out of a sense of choice, volition, and self-determination (Stone, Deci, & Ryan, 2009).

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