



UNPACKING ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT: THE INTERNAL DRIVERS SHAPING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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Abstract:

Academic engagement is a critical factor influencing students' learning outcomes and academic success in higher education. This study aims to explore the psychological factors that shape students' academic engagement, focusing on motivation, self-efficacy, and positive emotions. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected from ten undergraduate students through in-depth interviews, supported by observations and documentation, and analyzed using an interactive qualitative model. The findings show that students with strong intrinsic motivation demonstrate higher participation and initiative, those with high self-efficacy exhibit consistent persistence in completing academic tasks, and students experiencing positive emotions engage more actively in classroom interactions. This study contributes by integrating multiple psychological factors within a single analytical framework. The findings imply that educators should foster motivation, strengthen self-efficacy, and create supportive emotional environments to enhance students' academic engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic engagement has become an increasingly important issue in higher education because it plays a central role in determining students' learning outcomes, persistence, and overall academic success. Universities are expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to develop students' intellectual and personal capacities (Day et al., 2023; Juang et al., 2025; Lam, 2024). However, achieving meaningful engagement in learning activities remains a challenge in many educational contexts. Research shows that engaged students tend to demonstrate higher motivation, stronger critical thinking, and better academic performance than disengaged students. Conversely, low engagement can lead to academic burnout, reduced achievement, and increased dropout rates. In the context of rapidly changing educational environments, understanding the factors that shape students' engagement is essential (Alzouebi et al., 2025; Lim et al., 2024; Puspitasari et al., 2021). Therefore, examining the psychological factors that influence academic engagement is crucial for improving learning quality and supporting students' success in higher education institutions.

Despite the recognized importance of academic engagement, many higher education institutions continue to face challenges related to students' low participation in learning activities. In many classrooms, students often demonstrate passive learning behaviors such as minimal participation in discussions, limited interaction with course

materials, and low commitment to academic tasks (Chaika, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). This phenomenon has been observed at various universities, where students attend classes but show limited cognitive and emotional engagement in the learning process. Various factors, including academic pressure, lack of intrinsic motivation, psychological stress, and feelings of academic inefficacy, can influence such conditions. The increasing complexity of academic demands and competitive environments may also reduce students' willingness to engage in learning actively (Assylbekova et al., 2024; Fidalgo-Blanco et al., 2024). As a result, understanding the psychological dynamics influencing students' engagement has become an urgent issue requiring further investigation.

Previous studies have attempted to explain academic engagement from various psychological perspectives. For instance, (Li et al., 2022) and Wang et al. (2022) conceptualized academic engagement as consisting of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that shape students' participation in learning. Similarly, Printer (2023), Benner et al. (2023), and Burhan et al. (2025) emphasized that engagement reflects a positive psychological state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in academic activities. Other studies conducted by Hartnell et al. (2023) and Strousopoulos et al. (2024) highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation in fostering active participation in learning. Meanwhile, Zhang et al. (2024) emphasized the role of self-efficacy in shaping students' persistence and effort in academic tasks. Although these studies provide valuable insights, many focus on isolated psychological variables rather than examining multiple factors simultaneously. This limitation creates a research gap in understanding how different psychological variables interact to influence academic engagement among university students.

Given the limitations identified in previous studies, there is a need for a more comprehensive examination of the psychological factors influencing academic engagement in higher education. Most prior research tends to emphasize single constructs, such as motivation, self-efficacy, or emotional well-being, in isolation (Addy et al., 2021; Juang et al., 2025). However, students' academic engagement is likely shaped by the interaction among multiple psychological factors operating simultaneously within the learning environment. Therefore, exploring these factors within an integrated framework may provide a more holistic understanding of students' engagement behaviors (Darwanto et al., 2024; Garg et al., 2022). The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to analyze how several psychological variables collectively influence academic engagement among university students. By examining these relationships, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the psychological mechanisms that drive engagement in higher education contexts.

Considering the issues discussed above, an important research problem emerges regarding how psychological factors shape academic engagement among university students. Although engagement has been widely studied, questions remain about which psychological variables most influence students' active involvement in academic activities. Furthermore, there is still limited empirical evidence that simultaneously investigates multiple psychological dimensions within a single analytical framework. This situation raises several key research questions: What psychological factors significantly influence students' academic engagement in higher education? How do these factors interact in shaping students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning? Addressing these questions is essential for developing a clearer understanding

of the psychological determinants of engagement and for designing strategies that enhance students' learning experiences.

This study argues that psychological factors play a crucial role in shaping students' academic engagement in higher education environments. It is assumed that variables such as motivation, self-efficacy, emotional well-being, and psychological resilience may significantly influence students' participation in learning activities. When students possess strong psychological resources, they are more likely to demonstrate persistence, enthusiasm, and deep involvement in academic tasks. Conversely, weaker psychological conditions may contribute to disengagement and reduced learning outcomes. Therefore, this research seeks to examine the relationship between key psychological factors and academic engagement among university students. The findings are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the literature on educational psychology and practical implications for educators and institutions in designing interventions that promote stronger academic engagement among students.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the psychological factors influencing students' academic engagement in higher education (Fatmawati et al., 2023). The phenomenological approach was selected because it enables the researcher to understand and interpret participants' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to those experiences. This study specifically focuses on how students perceive and experience psychological factors, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and emotional conditions, that shape their academic engagement. By emphasizing participants' subjective interpretations, this approach enables a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The research was conducted in a university setting, which provides a relevant context for examining students' academic engagement within real learning environments. The participants were 10 undergraduate students selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria focused on students with varying levels of academic engagement, from highly active to less engaged. This variation was intended to capture diverse lived experiences and enrich the data's depth. The participants also represented different academic backgrounds and semesters to ensure broader perspectives regarding the psychological dynamics influencing their engagement. Data collection primarily relied on in-depth, semi-structured interviews to capture participants' lived experiences. The interviews were designed to encourage participants to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations related to their academic engagement and the psychological factors influencing it. Through this process, the researcher was able to explore the essence of participants' experiences in a rich and detailed manner.

To support and contextualize the interview data, non-participant observations were conducted during classroom activities to identify visible patterns of student engagement (Rahmanidar et al., 2023). These observations were not intended to replace participants' narratives but to provide contextual insights into how engagement was expressed behaviorally in learning situations. In addition, documentation was used as a supplementary data source to enhance data credibility. The documentation included relevant academic records, learning activity reports, and supporting visual evidence such as classroom activity photos. These materials were utilized solely to strengthen the contextual understanding of the phenomenon and to support data triangulation.

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative analysis model adapted to phenomenological inquiry (Narimo et al., 2021). The first stage involved data condensation by identifying significant statements related to participants' experiences. These statements were then organized and reduced to meaningful units that represent key themes. In the data display stage, the themes were presented in descriptive narratives to reflect patterns of experience across participants. Finally, data verification was conducted by interpreting the essence of the phenomenon and ensuring consistency across data sources. This process enabled the researcher to capture the core meanings underlying students' academic engagement experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed. First, methodological triangulation was applied by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation to ensure consistency. Second, member checking was conducted by returning interview summaries to participants for confirmation of accuracy and meaning. Third, peer debriefing was carried out to obtain critical feedback and minimize researcher bias. Through these procedures, the study ensured that the findings accurately represent participants' lived experiences and provide a credible understanding of the psychological factors influencing academic engagement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the study's findings on psychological factors influencing students' academic engagement in higher education. The results focus on three main aspects: motivation, self-efficacy, and positive emotions. Each finding highlights how these factors shape students' participation, persistence, and involvement in learning activities, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics underlying academic engagement in the classroom context.

Motivation Significantly Increases Students' Academic Engagement Levels

Motivation in this study is operationally defined as the internal drive that encourages students to participate in academic activities, as demonstrated by their enthusiasm, initiative, and persistence in learning tasks. In the field context, motivation is reflected in students' willingness to attend lectures regularly, engage in classroom discussions, complete assignments on time, and show genuine interest in understanding course materials. Students with strong motivation tend to exhibit proactive learning behaviors, such as asking questions, seeking additional learning resources, and participating actively in both individual and group academic activities. This indicates that motivation is not only an internal psychological state but also a factor that manifests in observable academic behaviors.

The results of the interviews revealed that students with high motivation experienced greater engagement in their academic activities. One informant stated, "I feel more enthusiastic when I study subjects that I really like, so I always try to participate actively in class discussions." Another informant explained, "When I have clear goals for my future, I become more serious about my studies and try to be more involved in every learning activity." These responses indicate that intrinsic interest and future aspirations play an important role in shaping students' motivation. The researcher interprets this to mean that students who possess clear personal goals and a genuine interest in their field of study tend to develop a stronger commitment to academic engagement.

Further interview findings also showed that motivated students were more likely to take initiative in their learning process. One informant mentioned, “Even when the material is difficult, I try to understand it by reading more or asking my friends and lecturers.” Another student stated, “I feel responsible for my own learning, so I try to complete all assignments seriously and on time.” These statements suggest that motivation encourages students to remain persistent and actively seek solutions when facing academic challenges. The researcher interprets motivation as not only increasing participation but also strengthening students’ sense of responsibility and independence in learning, which are essential aspects of academic engagement.

The observational results supported the interview findings by showing that students who appeared motivated were more actively involved in classroom activities. These students were observed paying attention during lectures, responding to lecturers’ questions, and contributing ideas during group discussions. They also demonstrated consistent participation and showed initiative in collaborative tasks. In contrast, less motivated students tended to remain passive and showed minimal involvement in classroom interactions. This finding can be restated that motivation is closely associated with visible engagement behaviors, where higher motivation leads to more active participation. The pattern emerging from the data indicates that motivation consistently influences both students’ internal drive and their observable academic behaviors, reinforcing its role as a key factor in enhancing academic engagement.

Self-Efficacy Strengthens Persistence in Academic Learning Activities

Self-efficacy in this study is operationally defined as students’ belief in their ability to complete academic tasks, as reflected in consistent effort, persistence in the face of difficulties, and active involvement in learning activities. In the field context, self-efficacy is observed through students’ behavioral patterns such as regular class attendance, active participation in discussions, persistence in completing challenging assignments, and initiative during group work. Students with high self-efficacy tend to demonstrate confidence in their academic abilities by maintaining effort even when encountering obstacles. This indicates that self-efficacy is not only an internal belief but also a factor that manifests in sustained and observable academic behaviors over time.

The results of observations show that self-efficacy strengthens persistence in academic learning activities

Observed Behavior	Indicator of Self-Efficacy
Students attend lectures consistently without frequent absence	Demonstrates commitment and confidence in managing academic responsibilities
Students actively participate in classroom discussions	Reflects confidence in expressing ideas and engaging with learning materials
Students continue working on difficult assignments without giving up	Indicates persistence and belief in their ability to overcome challenges
Students take initiative during group work activities	Shows confidence in problem-solving and leadership in collaborative settings
Students remain focused during lectures and complete tasks on time	Demonstrates sustained effort and responsibility in learning activities

Based on the observational data presented above, it can be inferred that students with higher self-efficacy consistently demonstrate greater persistence in their academic activities. These students not only participate actively but also maintain their effort when facing challenging academic tasks. The data indicate that self-efficacy is closely associated

with observable behaviors such as consistency, active participation, and resilience in learning situations. Students who believe in their abilities tend to remain engaged and committed, even in demanding conditions. This reinforces the interpretation that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in sustaining students' effort and preventing disengagement in academic contexts.

The pattern emerging from the data shows that self-efficacy is consistently linked to students' persistence across various academic situations. Students who exhibit strong self-efficacy demonstrate stable engagement behaviors, including regular attendance, active participation, and continuous effort in completing tasks. These behaviors recur across different observation contexts, indicating that self-efficacy is a stable psychological factor that influences persistence. In contrast, lower levels of self-efficacy are associated with reduced participation and weaker commitment to academic tasks. Overall, the data pattern suggests that self-efficacy not only influences isolated behaviors but also shapes a consistent tendency toward sustained engagement in academic learning activities.

Positive Emotions Support Active Classroom Participation

Positive emotions in this study are operationally defined as students' emotional states characterized by feelings of comfort, enthusiasm, confidence, and interest during the learning process. In the field context, these emotional conditions are reflected through observable behaviors such as active participation in discussions, willingness to ask questions, responsiveness to lecturers, and engagement in collaborative learning activities. Students who experience positive emotions tend to feel psychologically safe and more confident in expressing their ideas. This indicates that positive emotional conditions are not only internal experiences but are also manifested in visible classroom interactions that support active academic participation.



Figure 1. Student Interaction and Participation in an Emotionally Supportive Classroom

Figure 1 observation results indicate that students who display positive emotional expressions tend to be more actively involved in classroom learning activities. They are more frequently engaged in discussions, provide responses to the learning material, and maintain consistent attention throughout the lecture. In addition, these students appear more confident in expressing their opinions and interacting with both lecturers and peers.

In contrast, students who exhibit negative emotional expressions, such as anxiety or lack of confidence, tend to be more passive and less involved in classroom activities. This suggests that emotional conditions significantly influence the level of students' participation in the learning process.

Based on these findings, it can be restated that positive emotions play an important role in enhancing students' active participation in the classroom. Students who feel comfortable and confident are more likely to engage in academic interactions and actively contribute to learning activities. In other words, positive emotional conditions create a supportive learning environment that encourages students to be involved not only physically but also psychologically in the learning process. This interpretation reinforces the idea that positive emotions are a key factor in promoting optimal academic engagement.

The data show a consistent relationship between positive emotional conditions and students' level of participation in classroom learning. Students who demonstrate enthusiasm, confidence, and interest in learning tend to engage more actively in various classroom activities. This pattern appears repeatedly across different learning situations, including group discussions and whole-class interactions. Conversely, lower levels of positive emotions are associated with reduced participation and a tendency to withdraw from learning activities. This indicates that emotional conditions are not merely supporting factors but are consistently shaping students' engagement patterns in academic contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that motivation plays a central role in enhancing students' academic engagement, as reflected in both their internal drive and observable learning behaviors. This result is consistent with the perspective of Vallerand et al. (2022) and Klemenčič (2023) In Self-Determination Theory, intrinsic motivation significantly influences individuals' active involvement in tasks. The students in this study who demonstrated enthusiasm, initiative, and persistence align with the concept of intrinsic motivation, where engagement is driven by internal satisfaction rather than external pressure. However, this study extends prior findings by showing that motivation not only influences engagement at a psychological level but also manifests consistently in observable classroom behaviors, suggesting a stronger behavioral dimension than often emphasized in theoretical discussions.

In addition, the role of self-efficacy in strengthening students' persistence aligns with Albert Bandura's theory of Self-Efficacy (Lujan et al., 2021). The observational findings in this study support the idea that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more resilient, persistent, and willing to face challenges. Students who consistently attended classes, actively participated, and persisted in completing difficult tasks reflect Bandura's assertion that belief in one's capabilities directly influences effort and perseverance. Unlike many previous studies that rely heavily on self-reported data, this research strengthens the existing literature by providing direct observational evidence of persistence, highlighting that self-efficacy can be clearly identified through sustained behavioral patterns in real classroom contexts (Besser et al., 2022; Kaepfel, 2021).

Furthermore, the findings on positive emotions support Barbara Fredrickson's assumptions in the Broaden-and-Build Theory, which suggests that positive emotions broaden individuals' thought-action repertoires and enhance engagement (He et al., 2023; Patel et al., 2022; Waters et al., 2022). The observed active participation, confidence, and willingness to interact among students experiencing positive emotions confirm that emotional conditions significantly shape learning behaviors. This study aligns

with existing literature and also emphasizes the situational and contextual nature of emotions in classroom settings, where emotional comfort and psychological safety directly influence students' willingness to participate (Veronika et al., 2024; Waite-Jones et al., 2022). This highlights a practical nuance: the emotional climate in the classroom is not merely supportive but foundational to active engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the integration of motivation, self-efficacy, and emotional factors as interconnected psychological constructs influencing academic engagement. While previous theories often examine these variables separately, this study's findings demonstrate that they operate simultaneously and reinforce one another in shaping students' engagement. Motivation initiates engagement, self-efficacy sustains persistence, and positive emotions enhance participation. This integrative understanding provides a more comprehensive framework for explaining academic engagement, particularly within higher education contexts. It suggests that engagement should be viewed as a multidimensional construct influenced by overlapping psychological dynamics.

From a practical perspective, the findings imply that educators and higher education institutions should adopt holistic strategies to enhance student engagement. Lecturers should design learning environments that foster intrinsic motivation by connecting learning materials to students' interests and future goals. In addition, teaching practices should aim to strengthen students' self-efficacy by providing constructive feedback, achievable challenges, and opportunities for success. Equally important, creating a positive emotional climate in the classroom through supportive interactions, inclusive discussions, and reduced fear of negative evaluation can significantly increase students' active participation. Therefore, improving academic engagement requires not only instructional strategies but also attention to students' psychological and emotional needs within the learning environment.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that psychological factors, particularly motivation, self-efficacy, and positive emotions, play a crucial role in shaping students' academic engagement in higher education. The findings reveal that motivation serves as the initial driving force for active participation, self-efficacy supports persistence in overcoming academic challenges, and positive emotions foster a supportive environment that enhances engagement. These factors operate interactively, forming a comprehensive psychological mechanism that underlies student involvement in learning activities. Using a phenomenological approach, this study provides rich insights into students' lived experiences and contributes an integrated perspective on engagement. Although limited by its small sample size and single-institution focus, the findings offer valuable theoretical and practical implications. Future studies should involve larger, more diverse samples and mixed-method or longitudinal approaches to strengthen generalizability and deepen understanding.

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