



Erasmus+ Student's Motives from the Perspective of Self-Determination Theory: A Review of Literature

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ABSTRACT: Numerous theories have explained students' motives for participating in the Erasmus+ mobility program. Push-pull theory, consumer decision-making models, and rational choice theories are the most famous. Regardless of their merits, personal motives for Erasmus+ are ignored. Using the perspective of Self-determination theory, this literature review examines different articles and categorizes the main motives based on fundamental psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. It was found that personal growth, leisure, and travel desire were autonomous motives, language learning, adaptability and independence were under competence while meeting new people and European identity fell under relatedness. This review illuminates the significance of considering personal motives in Erasmus+ and it could serve as a basis for future research in improving and tailoring the program.

KEYWORDS: Erasmus+, Psychological needs, Self-determination, Student motives.

INTRODUCTION

Many theories have been used to explain student's motives for international mobility programs. Among the notable one is push-pull theory which has been vastly recognized as one of the most important frameworks to theoretically explain and give insights about international student mobility (ISM) in the literature. McMahon (1992) first introduced this theory through a study where students from 18 developing countries were examined in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, a pool of studies has been carried out based on the skeleton and aspects of this theory. An example is of Altbach (2004) study in which the push factors were found to be related to the student's sending countries such as strong higher education competition, limited education space, shortage of high-quality education institutions, easy access to the courses the student wants to pursue, presence of discriminatory admission policies and other suppressing factors at home. On the other hand, the pull factors were academic institutions with reputable excellence, more opportunities to be employed after graduation, more chances of getting a job in the host country, more chances to relocate to the host country, enormous efforts to knowledge and cultural sharing with their sending countries, more scholarships available and other financial opportunities found in the host countries.

According to Dee Haas (2009) despite that the push-pull theory is well known as an epitome framework of the international mobility program, more researchers have challenged using an argument that the theory exerts more weight to external or macro factors and too little to the micro or personal factors. As result, a modified push-pull theory came up by taking into account personal factors which includes both personal and career development (Bamber, 2014), advancement in the intercultural awareness (Langley & Breese, 2005), influence from family (Pope et al., 2014), availability of vibrant local networking in the receiving country (Sivakumaran et al., 2013), cost of living (Shanka et al., 2006) and running away from stressful day-to-day life (Forsey et al., 2012). Although these personal factors assist in stretching out the cognitive boundary of push-pull theory, Lauermann (2012) contends that the determined personal factors in the modified push-pull theory are perceived as "concrete" factors and not as intrinsic motives. Then again, another two famous theoretical frameworks which have been vastly worked to explain and interpret individual factors which enhance students' decisions to go and study in a foreign country are: consumer decision-making model (CDM) and rational choice theory (RCT). Consumer behavior theory is the bigger theory where the consumer decision-making model was obtained. This theory stipulates that the decision to purchase is regarded as the outcome of consumer behavior. According to Oliveira and Soares (2016) a purchasing process in the consumer decision-making model has been put in five stages which includes: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. These five stages were applied into the international mobility program context. Need aspiration/recognition to study in foreign country, search for university and scholarships information, evaluate alternatives for study programmes and scholarships, make an application to HEI abroad, and



confirm about it (Haas & Terryn, 2019). In general, the decision-making process is the same as the choice-making process. On the other hand, the assumptions of RCT are that individuals are rational decision-makers who make their choices after weighing their self-interests or utilities by conducting costs-benefits analysis (Eriksson, 2011). Browne (2010) expounds that in the education arena benefits are strongly determined to be linked to higher labor market or earnings returns. The costs are linked to school tuition fees (Gabay-Egozi et al., 2009). Therefore, in as far as the earnings potential is greater than costs, students will surely participate in education (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005).

In view of this, Mowjee (2013) found that both CDM and RCT theories are grounded in the notion of privatization and commodification of higher education in the framework of neoliberalism in which education in higher institutions are changed from benefiting the public and turned into a service which must be bought and consequently changing the identity of a learner to that of a consumer. In this regard, studying abroad turned out to be a purchase behavior. However, the view of taking education decisions as solely economic behavior sparked enormous debates and numerous criticisms among researchers. According to Teah (2019) and Mowjee (2013), the decision-making process to study in a foreign country is more than just a simple thing to be only dictated by economic motives but it is deep rooted from strong social factors driven by personal motives. For example, Water (2007) argued that in East Asian culture, pursuing studies in world-renowned institutions is recognized as symbol of elites, which make more families to pressure their children in which in the long run, students choose to study in a foreign country not because they desired to do so but bowing to family pressure. The traditional aspect of treating international education as an “adjustment” to the host country values, norms and institutions was also criticized by Marginson (2014) who posited that it is a process of “self-formation” in which students oversee their lives and struggle in shaping and changing their identities.

All these research studies are trying to discover the motives of international students studying abroad from different perspectives. However, as earlier explained, more weight has been exerted on push-pull theory, consumer decision-making models and rational choice theory. This is to say that although these theories have some advantages, the individual motives to pursue education abroad are ignored, hence this review. Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to explain Erasmus+ student motives using the perspective of self-determination theory by combining existing literature on basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Student motives according to Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory of human motivation that is strongly suggested to explain student motives to study abroad (Lauermann, 2012). According to Deci (2015) the theory explains what invigorates people’s behaviors and pushes them into action, as well as how these behaviors are managed in the different spheres of their lives. The theory suggests intrinsic motives followed by three kinds of extrinsic motives which are identified, introjected and external regulation. When using intrinsic motives, students engage in Erasmus+ because to them the program is personally beneficial, valued, interesting or entertaining. This poses the highest form of self-determination. In contrast, linking Erasmus+ participation to extrinsic motives, students join the program to achieve other benefits. Identified regulation explains that students participate in mobility programs that they assume personally significant and meaningful. Both Identified and intrinsic motives together constitute autonomous motivation (Bureau et al., 2022). On the other hand, Introjected regulation draws a state that energizes students to participate in the education activities to dodge feelings of shame and guilt or to show pride. This regulation signifies an average level of self-determination. External regulation draws a state where students’ participation in Erasmus+ programs is propelled by factors outside individuals’ jurisdiction such as job opportunities in the host country, more chances to relocate to the host country and many other factors. External regulation signifies low levels of self-determination. Combining both external and introjected regulations constitutes controlled motivation. Finally, the last kind of non-motivation which can also be linked to Erasmus+ students’ motives is known as amotivation. It discusses the situation where students see no vivid reason to participate in a program. Deci (2015) clearly posed that people are usually amotivated for a behavior when they lack competence in pursuing the behavior or they see no value in the outcomes that are likely to come forth from the behaviors. An example is the survey of Vossensteyn et al (2010) which found out that a bunch of students who were left for the Erasmus+ claimed they are not interested in studying abroad.

Fundamental Psychological needs according to SDT

Self-determination theory describes three basic psychological needs which are very important for individuals’ daily wellbeing. These basic needs include autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci, 2015). The psychological needs are predominant to the concept of SDT because it outlines the nutrients that are crucial in the environment to support people to be more autonomously



motivated, obtaining greater psychological and physiological wellness, and performing more better (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Students who have autonomous motives for Erasmus+ perceive that they are participating in the program for their personal gains without perceiving any coercion in every step of the program process. Again, students who are experiencing competence are strongly confident that their skills and actions are enough and will assist them in shaping their academic experience in a foreign country. Lastly, students who feel relatedness are so much linked and connected to others during the program. This includes building networks with fellow international and local students at the university.

Autonomous motives for Erasmus+

Distinguished studies have found autonomous motives among Erasmus+ students which drive their decisions to study abroad. Empirical research conducted by Yue and Lu (2022) confirmed that external factors alone were enough to lead the decision of international students to study in China. Among the powerful motives which dictated their decision-making for them to study in China were attainment value and intrinsic values. In other words, the perceptions which the students had about the significance of studying abroad as benefiting their identities and the degree at which pursuing education outside their country will at all costs satisfy their inherent interests were two basic determinants. Personal growth was the most cited motive by Turkish undergraduate students for their students to go for an exchange mobility program. In this context, personal growth includes a personal system of values and self-confidence. The program offers a unique opportunity for personal growth and improves our system of values and self-confidence as we live in a multicultural environment, probably Europe which offers more multiculturalism. This is contrary to their host country where there is adoption of a particular culture. Conversely, the study indicated that opportunity for personal growth was outlined as overcoming challenges which includes living alone, adaptation and controlling their finances. In this case, most students indicated that, if they pursue Erasmus+ program, they will return to their respective homes as high-powered and self-confident people (Bozoğlu et al., 2016). The results support the claim of EFL teacher's candidates in Turkey that Erasmus+ program aided them to learn how to cope with challenges which made them improve and grow up (Sal İlhan & Külekçi, 2022). Leisure is also mentioned as an important motive which inspired the Turkish students (68 out of 170) to go to Europe through Erasmus+ program. The students see the program as an opportunity for a vacation where they can have a lot of fun while enjoying local food, seeing architecture, and attending festivals (Bozoğlu et al., 2016). In a similar manner, Teichler (2004) mentioned relaxation and vacation as a motive for two-thirds of ERASMUS students, and similar results are found in several other studies. (Krzaklewska, 2008) substantiates this result in her research study which showed that more students opted to go Erasmus+ to have fun and create memories for their lives. This motive is graspable as students go along with Rojek's (1989) proposition to utilize their rights (to engage in Erasmus+) to find leisure as a way to evade from routine and regulated work at their universities to other institutions abroad (Lesjak et al., 2015). The proposition agrees with Deci (2015) that adults are autonomously motivated for some activities which are mostly their leisure-time pursuits. Again, studies have pointed out the desire to travel as an autonomous motive for Erasmus+ program. Students are happy to travel and see the countries around Europe. The study conducted at University of Debrecen in Hungary found that international students chose Hungary because of its presence in the Schengen area which made it easy and cheap to travel around European countries (Casas Trujillo et al., 2020). Equally, most students consider Erasmus+ program as a golden chance to live abroad which may influence them to move to another country after graduating (Vossensteyn et al., 2010).

Competence motives for Erasmus+

As earlier discussed, competence in SDT is referred to the desire to have an effective interaction with one's environment (White, 1959). The desire pushes the students to pursue new challenges and thereby perceive themselves as competent (Guay, 2022). Students are obliged to gain mastery of tasks and acquire an array of skills. When students recognize that they possess skills which are needed for success, the likelihood for them to achieve their goals becomes so high. Several researchers on Erasmus+ have found diverse student motives related to competence which drives them to study abroad. There is some empirical evidence to support the fact that language acquisition skill is a popular motive often mentioned by a large share of Erasmus+ students across diverse surveys (González et al., 2011). The study conducted by Bozoğlu et al. (2016) showed that students wanted to participate in an exchange program to learn or improve at least a single language (preferably English). The results correspond to that of Krzaklewska (2008) which indicated that 90% of the students considered foreign language learning as the main motive for having studies abroad. The survey by Vossensteyn et al. (2010) also showed the same results in which 90% of the respondents in most countries indicated learning or improving language as the major motive to go for Erasmus+ program. However, this motive has sparked a heated ongoing debate if language factor can be either a motive or a barrier to the Erasmus+ program. Researchers such as Fombona et al. (2013)



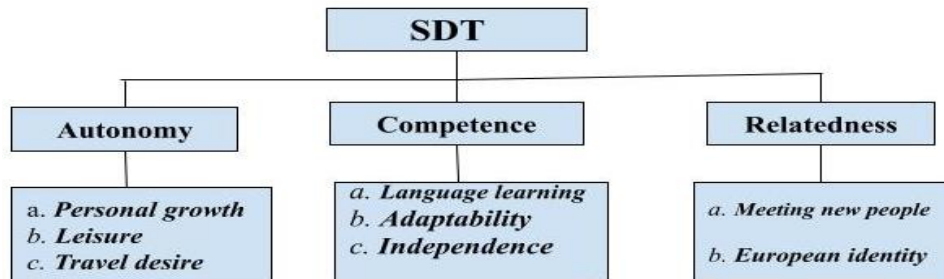
argued that language factor can turn to be a motive if the person feels stimulated and capable of dealing with relationships in another language, but it can be a challenge due to lack of knowledge and worry of not being able to express and communicate in the destination language. In the research of Olmos (2010), it is treated as a demotivator in 77.8% of the cases and a stimulator in 68.8%. Several authors including (Lesjak et al., 2015) and (Teichler, 2004) argued that development of soft skills such as adaptability and proactivity is also a significant motive for students to participate in Erasmus+ mobility program. In this case adaptability is referred to the ability of adjustment and suiting one's environment and responding satisfactorily to the change demands. The Erasmus Impact Study found that nearly 9 of the 10 participants report improvements in the soft skills such as adaptability and intercultural competences during the Erasmus period (Souto-Otero et al., 2019). As of Onorati et al. (2017), these findings are vindicated by the literature measuring self-reported competences before and after Erasmus+ mobility. Dolga et al. (2015) mentioned independence skills as a vibrant motive for Erasmus+. As the students live alone during the Erasmus+ time, they are obliged to possess certain survival skills on how to run their daily lives independently through managing their limited finances. In contrast to this argument Krzaklewska (2008) found the statement 'to be independent' with a lowest score as students did not choose it as an explicit motive to study abroad.

Relatedness motives for Erasmus+

According to Ryan & Deci (2017) the need for relatedness refers to the requisite for close and emotional relationships with others and having a feeling of collectives. The absence of this need makes it unyielding to explain why people are always ready to associate effectively and harmoniously with others in their groups. Expanding social networks by meeting new people from different cultures is the popular Erasmus+ motive mentioned by many studies. For example, in Erasmus+ higher education impact study by Souto-Otero et al. (2019), found that 49% of the former Erasmus+ students chose social networking and meeting new people as their important motive to go for the program. These results correspond to the impact study by Brandenburg et al. (2014) about effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalization of higher education institutions. The analysis of the data showed that over 80% of the participants mentioned the opportunity to meet new people and make friends as their main reason to go Erasmus+ program. Due to the expansion of their personal network and social connection, and through relations brought by various communication media which includes virtual ones, many students felt a sense of belonging to a group or their community in which they stay during the program (Dolga et al., 2015). Evidence from Erasmus Mobility Impact on Professional Training and Personal Development of Students Beneficiaries showed that 85.3% of the students appreciated positively the influence of the Erasmus+ program on the relational skills obtained during the program. Most students showed some significant changes in relation to understanding of people's diverse culture and ethnic groups (Dolga et al., 2015). On the same, the survey by Fombona et al. (2013) found that there was high integration and cohesion of Erasmus+ students with the host society. Apart from being hosted in university establishments or with families from the community, 73.8% of the participants found the relationships with their local classmates acceptable and superb. The effect on the European identity of the students is also recognized as a relatedness motive for Erasmus+ participation (Souto-Otero et al., 2019). Some studies have indicated a strong positive effect on the advancement of European Union identity among the participants. This is to say that, after the Erasmus+ experience, the participating students feel more European than before, and their connection to the EU booms during the study period in the foreign country. Van Mol (2022) studied Intra-European student mobility and the different meanings of 'Europe', and the results showed that many university graduates had strong assumptions that former Erasmus+ students will create and build a pan-European identity. To give an example Stefan Wolff, a professor of political science at the University of Bath coined the term 'Erasmus-Generation' and argued that within the period of 15 to 25 coming, Europe will be governed by leaders with different aspects of socialization from those of today. However, opponents of this idea maintain that Erasmus+ has no or little effect on the enhancement of EU identity. For instance, Sigalas (2010) doubted the effectiveness of short-term student mobility programs such as Erasmus+ in promoting European identity. Serious questions were posed about the transformative potential of the programs by arguing that no miraculous transformations can be anticipated within a single year.



Overall image of Erasmus+ motives according to Self-determination Theory



Source: This is the work of the author

CONCLUSION

Self-determination theory is continuously being used in studying the driving forces (motives) of student’s participation in the Erasmus+ mobility program. As the review has indicated, external factors alone are not enough to lead students to go for Erasmus+ which makes SDT a central theory not to be abandoned. The theory brings a strong understanding that students pursue the program intrinsically to enhance their personal development. Alternatively, students decide to go for Erasmus+ to satisfy their psychological needs which are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. From the review, students autonomously go for Erasmus+ to enhance their personal growth, have leisure time, and quench their travel desire. They are also compelled to possess different competencies which include language acquisition, adaptability, and independence. Finally, they are also eager to expand their social network by meeting new people and consequently enhancing their European identity.

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