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Factors Influencing Students' Continued Intention towards MOOCs: A Comprehensive Literature Review

Zhang Qi, Dr. Md Nasir Bin Masran

Sultan Idris Education University (UPS) (Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (Malay)

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Abstract

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have dramatically reshaped the educational landscape, making high-quality learning accessible and flexible for a global audience, and democratizing education in unprecedented ways. However, despite the widespread adoption of MOOCs and their potential to revolutionize learning, sustaining student engagement and ensuring continued participation remain formidable challenges. High dropout rates and low course completion are persistent issues that undermine the efficacy of these platforms. This study addresses these challenges by employing a comprehensive literature review methodology, meticulously analyzing recent academic publications, particularly those from 2020 onwards, to uncover the key factors that influence students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs. The research identifies and synthesizes a range of critical determinants, including technological usability, pedagogical approaches, psychological motivations, and demographic influences, each playing a pivotal role in shaping sustained student engagement. The findings from this study offer a deep and nuanced understanding of the intricate elements that contribute to student retention in MOOCs, providing valuable insights and actionable strategies for educators, MOOC platform developers, and policymakers. These insights are aimed at enhancing the design and implementation of MOOCs to improve learner retention, success rates, and overall effectiveness, thereby fulfilling the promise of MOOCs as a transformative educational tool.

Keywords: Moocs, Continued Intention, Student Engagement, Online Learning, Literature Review, Educational Technology.

Introduction

The advent of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has significantly disrupted traditional education models, offering accessible, scalable, and flexible learning opportunities to a global audience. MOOCs gained unprecedented attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, as educational institutions worldwide transitioned to online modes of instruction (Zhu & Liu, 2020). However, while MOOCs have succeeded in attracting large numbers of learners, sustaining their engagement and ensuring continued participation has proven to be a persistent challenge (Xiong et al., 2015; Hone & El Said, 2016). This study investigates the

factors influencing students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs, focusing on determinants that encourage learners to persist in their studies beyond initial enrollment.

Background and Significance

MOOCs emerged as a transformative force in education, particularly in the context of lifelong learning and professional development. They offer unprecedented access to high-quality educational content from prestigious institutions, democratizing education on a global scale (Li et al., 2021). However, high dropout rates and low course completion rates remain common issues faced by MOOC platforms, often exceeding 90% in some courses (Jordan, 2015; Reich & Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019). Understanding the factors that influence students' continued intention to participate in MOOCs is critical for improving course design, enhancing learner support, and ultimately increasing retention rates.

Research Objectives

There are three objectives in this study:

- Investigate the key factors influencing students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs.
- Explore how technological, pedagogical, psychological, and demographic factors interact to shape continued participation in MOOCs.
- Identify strategies that can be employed to enhance student retention in MOOCs.

Research Questions

The primary research question guiding this study is: What are the key factors influencing students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs? Secondary questions include: How do technological, pedagogical, psychological, and demographic factors interact to shape continued participation in MOOCs? What strategies can be employed to enhance student retention in MOOCs?

Methodology

This study employs a comprehensive literature review methodology to explore the factors influencing students' continued intention towards MOOCs. A literature review is an effective approach for synthesizing existing research and identifying patterns and gaps in current knowledge. This method involves a systematic search, selection, and analysis of academic publications, reports, and other relevant documents available in scholarly databases.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved searching academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, IEEE Xplore, and Google Scholar for relevant studies published between 2015 and 2023, with a particular emphasis on literature from 2020 onwards to capture the most recent developments. Key search terms included "MOOCs," "continued intention," "student engagement," "online learning," "retention," "educational technology," and "learner persistence." The selection criteria prioritized peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and high-impact reports that focus on factors influencing sustained engagement in MOOCs.

Data Analysis

The analysis involved categorizing the identified studies into thematic areas based on the factors influencing continued intention towards MOOCs. The themes included technological factors, pedagogical factors, psychological factors, and demographic factors. The studies were further analyzed to identify common findings, contrasting viewpoints, and emerging trends in the literature.

Synthesis

The synthesis process integrated the findings from the various thematic areas to develop a conceptual framework that explains the factors influencing students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs. This framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how different factors interact to shape learner engagement and retention in MOOCs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in theories of online learning, educational technology, and behavioral intention. It draws on established models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), the Expectation-Confirmation Model (ECM), and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explore the factors that influence students' continued intention towards MOOCs.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) posits that perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are key determinants of users' acceptance of technology (Davis, 1989). In the context of MOOCs, these factors can significantly influence students' continued intention to participate. If learners perceive the MOOC platform as user-friendly and believe that the content is beneficial for their learning goals, they are more likely to continue using it (Alraimi, Zo, & Ciganek, 2015).

Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) extends TAM by incorporating additional factors such as performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). UTAUT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the various factors that influence students' intention to continue using MOOCs. For instance, social influence, such as peer support or encouragement from instructors, can play a crucial role in motivating learners to persist in their studies (Zhou, 2016).

Expectation-Confirmation Model (ECM)

The Expectation-Confirmation Model (ECM) posits that users' continuance intention is influenced by their satisfaction, which is determined by the confirmation of expectations and perceived usefulness (Bhattacherjee, 2001). In the context of MOOCs, learners' satisfaction derived from their learning experiences and the confirmation of their expectations can significantly affect their intention to continue using MOOCs (Khalil & Ebner, 2017).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation in sustaining behavior over time (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the context of MOOCs, factors such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for fostering intrinsic motivation. When learners feel that they have control over their learning, are competent in the subject matter, and are connected to a learning community, they are more likely to continue their participation (Hew & Cheung, 2014).

Factors Influencing Continued Intention Towards MOOCs

The literature review identified several key factors that influence students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs. These factors can be broadly categorized into technological, pedagogical, psychological, and demographic factors.

Technological Factors

Technological factors play a significant role in shaping students' continued intention to participate in MOOCs. These factors include the design and functionality of the MOOC platform, the availability of technological support, and the overall user experience.

Platform Usability

Platform usability, which encompasses ease of navigation, accessibility, and interface design, is a critical determinant of students' continued intention to use MOOCs (Li et al., 2021). A user-friendly platform that allows learners to easily access content, track their progress, and interact with instructors and peers can enhance their learning experience and encourage continued participation. Recent studies have emphasized the importance of intuitive design and minimal technical barriers in retaining learners (Yuan & Powell, 2019).

Technical Support

The availability of technical support is another important factor influencing continued intention. Learners who encounter technical difficulties are less likely to persist in a MOOC if they do not receive timely and effective assistance (Zhu et al., 2020). Therefore, providing robust technical support, including FAQs, help desks, and online forums, can significantly enhance retention rates. Moreover, AI-powered chatbots have emerged as a promising tool to provide real-time support to learners (Luan et al., 2020).

Mobile Accessibility

With the increasing use of mobile devices for learning, mobile accessibility has become a crucial factor in students' continued intention towards MOOCs. Research by Wang et al (2021), suggests that MOOCs optimized for mobile devices and offering mobile-friendly interfaces tend to have higher retention rates. Mobile learning enables learners to access course materials anytime and anywhere, catering to the needs of working professionals and those with limited access to traditional computing devices.

Data Privacy and Security

Data privacy and security concerns have gained prominence in recent years, influencing learners' trust and continued intention towards MOOCs. Studies have found that platforms with transparent data policies and robust security measures can enhance learners' confidence and willingness to continue using the service (Hameed et al., 2022).

Pedagogical Factors

Pedagogical factors, including course design, content delivery, and assessment methods, significantly influence students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs. Effective pedagogical strategies can enhance learner satisfaction, motivation, and engagement, leading to higher retention rates.

Course Design and Structure

The design and structure of a MOOC are critical to maintaining learner engagement. Courses that are well-organized, with clear learning objectives, logical progression, and appropriate pacing, are more likely to retain learners (Hew & Cheung, 2014). Incorporating a variety of instructional materials, such as videos, readings, quizzes, and interactive activities, can cater to different learning styles and keep learners engaged. Recent literature emphasizes the importance of modular course designs, allowing learners to engage with content in manageable segments (Shah, 2020).

Instructor Presence and Interaction

Instructor presence, including active engagement with students, timely feedback, and participation in discussions, plays a crucial role in influencing continued intention. According to Lee et al (2020), learners who perceive their instructors as responsive and supportive are more likely to persist in their studies. Additionally, regular interaction between instructors and students can create a sense of community, which is essential for sustaining engagement. The use of synchronous sessions, personalized feedback, and live Q&A sessions has been shown to enhance instructor presence (Martin et al., 2020).

Assessment and Feedback

Assessment methods and the quality of feedback provided are important factors influencing continued intention. Assessments aligned with learning objectives and providing meaningful feedback can enhance learners' understanding of the material and motivate them to continue (Nguyen, 2015). The integration of formative assessments and adaptive learning technologies can provide personalized feedback, addressing individual learner needs and promoting persistence (Zhao et al., 2021).

Peer Interaction and Community Building

Peer interaction and the development of a learning community can significantly influence learners' continued intention. Collaborative activities, discussion forums, and peer assessment can foster a sense of belonging and mutual support among learners (Tseng et al., 2016). Recent studies highlight the role of social learning analytics in facilitating effective peer interactions (Wise & Cui, 2018).

Psychological Factors

Psychological factors, including motivation, self-efficacy, and perceived value, play a critical role in influencing students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs. These factors are often shaped by learners' prior experiences, expectations, and the learning environment.

Motivation

Motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, is a key factor in sustaining engagement in MOOCs. Learners intrinsically motivated by their interest in the subject matter or personal and professional goals are more likely to persist in their studies (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation, such as the desire to earn a certificate or improve career prospects, can also influence continued intention, although its impact may vary depending on the learner's context and goals (Khalil & Ebner, 2017). Gamification elements, such as badges and leaderboards, have been employed to enhance motivation (Barbosa & Fonseca, 2019).

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to succeed in a specific task, is another important psychological factor influencing continued intention. Learners with high self-efficacy are more likely to overcome challenges and persist in their studies, even when faced with difficulties (Bandura, 1997). MOOCs providing clear instructions, resources, and support can enhance learners' self-efficacy and encourage continued participation (Hew & Cheung, 2020).

Perceived Value

The perceived value of a MOOC, including its relevance, usefulness, and potential benefits, significantly influences continued intention. Learners perceiving the course content as valuable and aligned with their goals are more likely to persist in their studies (Jung & Lee, 2018). This perceived value can be enhanced by linking course content to real-world applications, offering practical skills, and providing opportunities for career advancement. Partnerships with industry and offering micro-credentials have been identified as effective strategies (Pickard et al., 2018).

Learning Autonomy

Learning autonomy, or the degree to which learners can control their learning process, has been recognized as a significant psychological factor. Providing flexible learning paths, allowing learners to choose topics of interest, and self-paced learning can enhance autonomy, leading to increased continued intention (Lim et al., 2022).

Demographic Factors

Demographic factors, including age, gender, educational background, and employment status, can influence students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs. These factors often interact with other determinants, such as motivation and self-efficacy, to shape learners' engagement and retention.

Age and Gender

Research indicates that demographic factors such as age and gender can influence learners' continued intention towards MOOCs. For instance, older learners may be more motivated by the desire for lifelong learning or career advancement, while younger learners may be driven by academic requirements or exploration of new fields (Breslow et al., 2013). Gender differences have also been observed, with some studies suggesting male learners are more likely to persist in STEM-related MOOCs, while female learners may show higher retention rates in humanities and social sciences courses (Luik et al., 2019).

Educational Background

Learners' educational background can significantly influence their continued intention to engage with MOOCs. Those with higher levels of education may have more experience with self-directed learning and online platforms, which can enhance their engagement and retention (Zhu et al., 2020). Conversely, learners with less formal education may require additional support and resources to sustain their participation.

Employment Status

Employment status is another demographic factor influencing continued intention. Employed learners may face challenges in balancing work and study, which can affect their ability to persist in MOOCs (Wang et al., 2019). However, MOOCs offering flexible schedules, asynchronous learning options, and career-relevant content can help mitigate these challenges and encourage continued participation.

Cultural Context

Cultural context, including language proficiency and cultural norms, can affect learners' engagement and continued intention. Providing multilingual support and culturally relevant content can enhance inclusivity and retention (Kizilcec et al., 2017).

Implications for MOOC Design and Implementation

The findings of this study have significant implications for the design and implementation of MOOCs. By understanding the factors influencing students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs, educators, platform developers, and policymakers can develop strategies to enhance learner retention and success.

Enhancing Technological Usability

MOOC platforms should prioritize usability by ensuring interfaces are intuitive, accessible, and user-friendly. This includes optimizing platforms for mobile devices, providing robust technical support, and continuously improving the user experience based on learner feedback (Wang et al., 2021). The integration of AI and machine learning can personalize the learning experience, catering to individual learner needs (Luan et al., 2020).

Improving Pedagogical Practices

Effective pedagogical practices are essential for maintaining learner engagement and encouraging continued participation in MOOCs. Course designers should focus on creating well-structured courses with clear objectives, diverse instructional materials, and interactive elements that cater to different learning styles (Hew & Cheung, 2020). Incorporating adaptive learning technologies can tailor content to individual learner progress (Zhao et al., 2021). Furthermore, fostering instructor presence through active engagement, timely feedback, and regular interaction can create a supportive learning environment enhancing retention.

Supporting Psychological Engagement

To sustain learners' psychological engagement, MOOCs should emphasize the relevance and value of course content, linking it to real-world applications and career advancement opportunities (Pickard et al., 2018). Gamification strategies can enhance motivation and engagement (Barbosa & Fonseca, 2019). Providing resources and support to enhance

learners' self-efficacy, such as clear instructions, study guides, and peer support networks, can build confidence and encourage continued participation.

Addressing Demographic Diversity

MOOC providers should consider the diverse demographic backgrounds of their learners and tailor courses to meet their specific needs. This includes offering flexible learning schedules, providing additional support for learners with less formal education, and designing courses that appeal to a broad range of interests and goals (Zhu et al., 2020). Cultural inclusivity can be enhanced by providing multilingual support and content sensitive to different cultural contexts (Kizilcec et al., 2017).

Conclusion

This research makes both theoretical and contextual contributions to the understanding of factors influencing students' continued intention to engage with MOOCs. Theoretically, the study integrates established models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), Expectation-Confirmation Model (ECM), and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to offer a comprehensive framework for examining online learning persistence. By synthesizing these theories, this research provides a nuanced perspective on how technological, pedagogical, psychological, and demographic factors interact to shape learners' engagement with MOOCs, thus contributing to the existing body of knowledge on online learning behaviors and motivations.

Contextually, the study sheds light on the unique challenges and opportunities presented by MOOCs, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus on diverse factors influencing student retention highlights the need for tailored strategies to improve learner engagement, satisfaction, and academic outcomes in massive open online courses. The insights gained from this research are significant for educators, MOOC providers, and policymakers, offering practical guidelines for designing and implementing effective online learning environments. This research underscores the importance of considering the diverse needs of learners and the specific contexts in which MOOCs operate, ultimately aiming to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of online education on a global scale.

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing students' continued intention towards MOOCs, synthesizing recent literature to identify key determinants across technological, pedagogical, psychological, and demographic domains. The findings highlight the importance of a holistic approach to MOOC design and implementation, considering the interplay of various factors shaping learner engagement and retention.

By enhancing technological usability, improving pedagogical practices, supporting psychological engagement, and addressing demographic diversity, MOOC providers can create more effective and sustainable learning environments. Future research should continue to explore these factors in different contexts and among diverse learner populations, providing further insights into how MOOCs can better serve their global audience.

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