# Cultural Factors Affecting Lifelong Learners' Motivation to Complete MOOCs

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*Retention has been considered a major issue in MOOCs. Although many studies have examined factors affecting the learners' motivation to complete, there is still a need to examine these factors in different cultural and contextual circumstances. This study is intended to explore the factors affecting the learners' motivations to complete MOOCs on a country-specific platform, AKADEMA, and to compare these factors as well as the participants' characteristics with the literature. An online survey helped the researcher collect data. Instructor-learner interaction, instructor feedback, and course attendance were found to be the factors with the lowest mean scores, while perceived effectiveness had the highest mean score. Course content, technology, and instructor support were the factors that were most closely related to perceived effectiveness. Instructor-learner interaction and technology were the factors that were most closely related to course attendance.*

## Introduction

Studies have pointed out the low retention rate as a significant issue regarding MOOCs. A handful of studies (e.g., Bayeck & Choi, 2018) focused on cultural aspects of MOOCs, mainly comparing some characteristics (age, gender, education, engagement) of MOOC participants from different regions or countries or emphasizing MOOC design. But the literature does not really provide a study that directly examines the factors that affect MOOC participants' motivation. This study, therefore, is intended to examine these factors on a country-specific MOOC platform to contribute to the literature on motivational factors affecting MOOC completion. The AKADEMA platform of Anadolu University, Turkey, was chosen to conduct this study. AKADEMA was first launched in 2015 with seven courses, aimed at presenting a learning environment and materials to everyone of all ages and backgrounds and offering a structured learning experience that will support lifelong learning. In 2023, AKADEMA will continue to operate with 135 courses in 14 different categories. The courses are MOOC-type, but a number of them offer interaction opportunities with real instructors (guided study strategy); others require self-paced study. The courses are completely free of charge and open to everyone who wants to have a real course experience. They mainly consist of videos (introduction, mini-lecture, presentation, demonstration, etc.), readings, interactive multimedia learning materials embedded into learning activities (tasks) the learners should complete, as well as weekly assignments, discussions, and quizzes.

The main goal of this study was to explore the factors affecting the learners' motivations to complete MOOCs on a country-specific platform, targeting the Turkish people and those who have Turkish language skills all around the world, and to compare these factors as well as the participants' characteristics with the literature. Specifically, it was intended to see if there were any cultural or contextual differences. To do so, the answers to the following questions were sought in the study:

1. What are the general characteristics (age, gender, education, and previous MOOC experience) of MOOC participants?
2. What kind of interactions exist between the factors affecting motivation, perceived effectiveness, and course attendance?
3. What kind of interactions exist between the general characteristics of MOOC participants and the factors?

This study was a cross-sectional descriptive study in which an online survey was used to collect the learners' self-reported data. The survey consisted of questions about the learners' demographics and other related characteristics, such as previous MOOC experience, and a five-point Likert-type scale with 32 items. This scale was developed to identify the factors affecting the participants' perceptions of courses and, at the same time, provide insight about the factors affecting course completion. Items of the scale were adapted from two earlier studies about the effectiveness of online courses by Peltier et al. (2003) and Eom et al. (2016). After the scale was developed, three experts in open and distance learning and five lifelong learners who had similar characteristics as the possible participants of the study examined it in terms of content, construct, and face validity. The instrument was finalized, and a consent notice was included on the cover page. It was then posted on the AKADEMA platform and kept open for a total of three months. During this period, slightly over a thousand responses were collected, but a total of 719 were included in the analysis due to missing data and duplications. Of the participants who responded, 48.3% were female, mainly generation Y (47.2%); many of them had high school educations or less (39.2%); and inexperienced learners predominated both in enrolment (63.7%) and in completing AKADEMA courses (81.4%).

# Findings and Conclusions

Overall, this study has revealed some supporting and some challenging results compared to the ones in the literature. First, more male participants were enrolled in the MOOCs than females. A similar supporting result was explored for age groups: A great deal of the participants in the study were from either the Y or Z generations. One of the areas where the results of this study did not support the literature was the educational level of the participants. Previous studies (e.g., Alcorn, Christensen, & Emanuel, 2014) have suggested that MOOCs are preferred by educated learners. However, AKADEMA participants were mostly at high school or lower educational levels. This was related to the country's educational system. Education is considered one of the major ways of getting a secure job, and so there is a high demand for education at all levels, but especially in those areas directly related to specific occupations, such as teacher education, engineering, medical schools, etc. However, this high demand makes access to higher education very competitive. Those who, for different reasons, including this competitive structure, cannot get into a higher education program, as well as those university graduates who could not get a job, look for short ways to improve their skills and get some sort of certificate to be able to get a job. Courses or programs that lead to a certificate are becoming popular among these groups. In light of this elaboration, one can easily interpret the interest of the Turkish high school or lesser educational level holders in the AKADEMA MOOCs and their preference to get a formal certificate at the end of the courses as meaningful.

Another interesting result was about the previous MOOC experiences. In the study, those who enrolled in none or only one MOOC prior to the time of the study were considered inexperienced MOOC participants, and this group outnumbered the experienced ones in course enrollment and completion. In other words, the inexperienced group took more courses in AKADEMA, and a greater number of these group members completed their courses compared to the experienced ones. This result wasn't also supporting the literature that pointed out the experienced participants likelihood to complete MOOCs more than inexperienced ones. The interest of the inexperienced learners might be related to the high unemployment rate among young adults in Turkey and the increasing importance of certificates for employment, as indicated before.

The factors with the highest mean scores were perceived effectiveness and course content. The correlation analysis determined that the factors of course content, technology, and instructor support had the strongest relationship with perceived effectiveness. The factors that had the strongest relationship with course attendance were instructor-learner interaction and technology. Studies in the relevant literature have also found that course content and perceived effectiveness significantly affect the attendance and completion of MOOCs (Hone & El Said, 2016). As reported by Watson et al. (2016), learners' opinions about course contents determine their satisfaction with and their intent to enroll in MOOCs. Designing appealing courses that meet learner needs and boost their motivation should be considered a requirement for quality MOOCs.

The results showed that the participants didn't find learner-learner interaction sufficient and that the courses did not provide adequate opportunities to interact with other learners. Studies in the relevant literature (Bezerra & Silva, 2017) have noted the interaction between learners as an important determinant of completing MOOCs and an unsatisfying peer interaction as one of the causes of dropouts in MOOCs. Communication tools such as video and audio conferences or text-based chat should be used to enhance interaction between learners in MOOCs and reduce their sense of isolation. On the other hand, the weak correlation between learner-to-learner interaction and course attendance in this study might be related to cultural differences. The education system at all levels is quite competitive and forces people to engage in individual learning in Turkey. This characteristic might be affected by the participants' preferences and perceptions.

The participants also expressed unsatisfactory feedback from the instructors. Alraimi et al. (2015) emphasized that instructor feedback is an important element that increases participants' motivation. None and El Said (2016), in their study, put forward the idea that interacting with the instructor is decisive for MOOC completion. The studies concluded that effective feedback positively affects learners' perceptions regarding course attendance, reinforces their learning, and contributes to the retention of learning. Discussion platforms, wikis, and other social media tools can be used to facilitate instructor-learner interaction. So, the AKADEMA instructors and designers should work on offering meaningful and timely feedback in the courses. Another consistent result in the literature was about gender and technology. Although males and females used the technology differently, the female learners found the course content interactive and facilitated their learning. Similar results were also observed in previous studies (e.g., Shao & Chen, 2020) that expressed how males and females behave differently in technology use.

Participation and completion rates in MOOCs are affected by learners' general characteristics and some factors related to the MOOC design and delivery. MOOCs should be designed in a holistic and systematic way that considers all points related to learners, instructors, content, and technology. It is critical to produce quality content that is interesting to learners by taking their needs into consideration. To do so, the interaction must be used to increase the quality of learning and provide learner satisfaction. In this study, instructor feedback was the major factor that affected the participants' attitudes positively. Using interactive e-course materials can sustain learners' motivation. Discussion forums can also enhance interaction between learners. They should be included in MOOC designs so that instructors can provide feedback, learners can address their ideas and questions to instructors, and learners can interact socially with each other. Few studies have discussed the reasons for participants' enrollment in and drop-out of MOOCs. These studies should be supported by qualitative studies. Further studies should also be conducted to investigate the cultural characteristics of participants and their effects on attitudes and achievement, as well as how to design courses that respect cultural differences.

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