

Original Research Paper

# Identity-Based Motivation: The Impact on Student Identity During COVID-19 at a Small Midwestern University

<sup>1</sup>Renee Ann Just and <sup>2</sup>Joel E. Lynch

<sup>1</sup>Peabody College of Education, Vanderbilt University, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology, Rockford University, USA

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Corresponding Author:

Renee Ann Just

Peabody College of Education,

Vanderbilt University,

USA

Email: renee.just@vanderbilt.edu

**Abstract:** The purpose of this research was to examine student identity amid COVID-19 and its impact on motivation to study. This research assessed the extent to which students were motivated to fully engage in classes after being moved to an online platform and their identity as university students. The student population assessed were students at a small Midwestern University in Illinois. Following the research on identity and student populations, the primary focus was the extent to which students' identity was impacted as a result of COVID-19 and the level they perceive it had on their motivation to study and engage in an online environment. A quantitative design was crafted and data collection was obtained through an online survey containing 7 demographic questions and 14 questions to get at identity and motivation. The results showed that identity appears to be a driving factor of student motivation.

**Keywords:** University student, Student Identity, Motivation, Identity-Based Motivation, COVID-19

## Introduction

This Midwestern University was founded in 1847 and situated in northern, Illinois; just 90 miles northwest of Chicago. Through the years it evolved from a Female Seminary to a college, a co-educational institution, and then onto a university that houses a College of Science, Math, and Nursing; the College of Social Sciences, Commerce and Education; and the College of Arts and Humanities.

The university offers approximately 80 majors and minors, has an overall enrollment of just over 1200 students hailing from 38 states and 13 countries and prides itself on personalized education and individual attention, and maintains a student-to-faculty ratio of 1:10.

## Literature

### Identity

The word "identity" has countless definitions, therefore, for this research project, the term is defined as a sense of sameness that is unwavering, an awareness of common characteristics, and a sense of belonging to one's group. As a part of the traditional

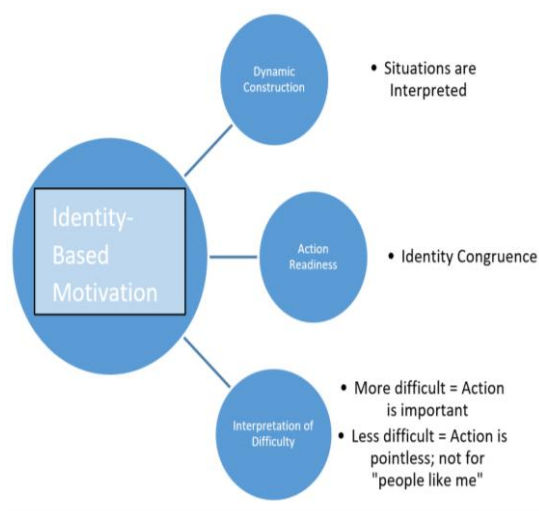
college experience, young adults pack up their belongings and relocate to a residence hall, often shared with another student, and begin their campus life experience. Connections on campus, while different for all, are vital to a successful college experience. The word connections can be subjective based on life experiences thus, we will use the term as described by Rovai (2002) that it is a sense of belonging and the process of creating bonding relationships. Understanding that connectedness is a construct that includes a student's sense of belonging, satisfaction, and integration with their institution; it is then natural to accept that these factors are directly related to the student's relationship with the institution.

Through their research, Leary (1990) and Swann (1990) indicate that the lack of a social connection for college students can increase depression and social anxiety. Additionally, Farrell *et al.* (2018) share results of their research on undergraduate students that any interaction between the student and university faculty or staff is a form of connectedness and that students feeling a higher level of connectedness identify with the institution at a higher rate resulting in better social and academic experiences.

## Theoretical Framework

Identity-Based Motivation (IBM) is the theoretical framework that is employed throughout this research. This framework rests on the assumption that one's identity matters because it imparts a foundation for meaning-making (Oyserman, 2015). When individuals consider their own identity, they generally know who they are and that understanding is an important factor in what they do.

According to Oyserman (2015), identity-based motivated behavior is predicted by three elements: Dynamic construction of identity cues, action-readiness, and interpretation of difficulty (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1:** IBM Elements

Individuals make sense of situations as they are occurring and assess them for action and identity cues. Individuals focus on who they are in a congruent manner, all while understanding that their identity can be fluid and may be impacted by personal circumstances and environmental cues (Oyserman, 2015). If an action feels identity-congruent, then the resulting behavior or action will not only feel right but the difficulty will also be interpreted as being more meaningful. Conversely, when behaviors or actions are identity-incongruent, then the difficulty will be interpreted as pointless or not for "people like me." Individuals place information in the context to make sense of it. A situation is assessed in the context of taking action and the information that is present in the environment will affect the decision to do so. Although there are many sources of motivation, identity may also be a motivational force.

Beyond the membership beliefs and identity, researchers argue that IBM is about more than simple membership; specifically, it encompasses action-readiness and procedural readiness. Action-readiness refers to how individuals behave in ways that people within their identity group seem to act; ways that feel right. Procedural readiness involves making sense of situations through the lens of an I/we (in-group) identity-congruent mindset (Oyserman, 2009; Lewis and Oyserman, 2016). Lewis and Oyserman (2016) further state that the three elements of identity-based motivation (dynamic construction, action-readiness, and interpretation of difficulty) act in tandem: One component activates the other.

Moreover, researchers claim that IBM links both cultural and societal identities and shapes the context that triggers goals, which motivates behavior (Klein *et al.*, 2015). Notably, Oyserman (2007) classifies identities as personal (those traits or characteristics not originating from a social group) or social (stemming from social connections or broader categories). In their research to test dynamic construction, Elmore and Oyserman (2012) randomly assigned middle-school students to interpret either graph depicting census information related to earnings or high school graduation rates in their state. To further dissect the graphs, some were delineated by gender. As the researchers predicted, in situations where boys examined graphs containing males, that information cued their interpretation baseline. Students displayed action-readiness after they read about the cost of a college education. The students began planning to study more and seek out opportunities for extra credit with the hope of increasing their grades, leading to financial rewards. Finally, to examine the interpretation of difficulty, students were split into two groups. Group "A" was provided an interpretation of difficulty as a means to understand that schoolwork was important and in turn Group "A" tended to work harder on their homework and developed a higher quality of writing skills (Oyserman, 2015).

## Methodology and Instrument

### Analysis

The results of this research were calculated and estimated using SPSS. The data were collected through an online survey platform of this Midwestern University students. The following section provides results calculated on face value as well as ANOVAs to demonstrate the relationship.

Based on the review of the literature there were two key questions guiding this research:

**Table 1:** Items on the dependent measure

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. How important is your identity as a college student relative to your overall self-concept?	1.81	0.87
2. How important is being able to attend class on-campus in person to your identity as a college student?	1.76	1.05
3. To what extent has the isolation as a result of COVID-19 impacted your studies?	1.69	1.02
4. To what extent has your motivation to study been impacted by COVID-19?	2.18	0.97
5. To what extent have your grades been adversely impacted as a result of reduced motivation?	1.14	1.05
6. To what extent has your motivation to attend class been impacted by COVID-19?	1.84	1.10
7. To what extent has your overall motivation been impacted as a result of COVID-19?	2.06	1.01
8. To what extent did COVID-19 cause you to adjust your identity as a college student so that it involves taking courses in the zoom or other online learning environments?	1.70	1.05
9. If you plan to receive the vaccine, to what extent do you anticipate it will improve your motivation to study?	0.69	0.83
10. If you plan to receive the vaccine, to what extent do you anticipate it will improve your motivation to socialize?	1.37	1.04
11. Has your feeling of “readiness” to engage as a student been impacted by COVID-19?	1.72	1.02
12. How has online learning impacted your identity as a college student?	1.39	0.96
13. Has your interpretation of difficulty in your schoolwork been impacted as a result of COVID-19?	1.64	1.02
14. Do you view your studies as being less important since the COVID-19 pandemic began compared to pre-pandemic times?	1.01	1.04

Note. Items were rated using a 4-point Likert-type response scale (0 = not at all, 1 = somewhat, 2 = noticeably, 3 = significantly)

1. To what extent has a student’s identity been adversely impacted by COVID-19?
2. To what extent has COVID-19 impacted students’ motivation to focus on their academics?

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Participants were 111 (72.73% female, 25.45% male, 1.82% non-binary) undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at a Midwestern liberal arts university. Of those participating in the study, 65.45% identified as White/Caucasian, 17.27% Hispanic/LatinX, 8.18% Black/African, 4.55% Asian, 2.73% Middle Eastern, and 1.82% reported “other” as their race. The mean age of participants was 23.43 years (*SD* = 5.57). Additionally, 75.23% reported being personally affected by COVID-19 and 69.72% reported intent to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Additionally, 9.20% identified as freshman, 8.30% sophomore, 47.70% junior, 33.00% senior and 1.80% not reporting class standing. Meanwhile, 21.30% reported living on campus and 47.70% were first-generation college students.

### *Measures and Procedure*

Data were collected via the survey sparrow online administration platform. After completion of the electronic informed consent, a survey designed by the researchers was used to measure the relationship between being enrolled in college courses during the COVID-19 pandemic and motivation to engage in behaviors associated with one’s college student identity. It consisted of 14 items to which respondents used a 4-point Likert-type scale to respond (0 = not at all, 3 = significantly). Sample items include "How important is your identity of being a college student relative to your overall self-concept?", "How important

is being able to attend class on-campus in person to your identity as a college student?", "To what extent has the isolation as a result of COVID-19 impacted your studies?", "To what extent has your motivation to study been impacted by COVID-19?" and “To what extent has your motivation to attend class been impacted by COVID-19?” Total scores on the survey range from 0 to 42. A higher score indicates being a college student during the COVID-19 pandemic had a greater impact on one’s college student identity and motivation to perform behaviors associated with being a college student. A reliability analysis indicated the survey to be highly reliable ( $\alpha = 0.99$ ). Table 1 for a list of the survey items and descriptive statistics for each. Participants also responded to a series of demographic items. The procedure ended with a debriefing to provide participants with additional information about the study.

### **Results and Discussion**

A total of 111 participants provided data, while one participant’s responses were excluded due to an incomplete session. Thus, 110 participants supplied data used in the following analyses. Each participant was given a total score on the survey by summing responses to the 14 survey items that utilized the 4-point Likert-type response scale. This index is an overall measure of the association between being a college student during the COVID-19 pandemic and its relationship to motivation to perform behaviors that are part of one’s identity as a college student. Scores can range from 0 to 42. Results of an initial descriptive analysis indicate a moderate association between the COVID-19 pandemic and students' self-reported identity and motivation to perform behaviors associated with being a college student (*M* = 21.99,

SD = 8.83). Furthermore, there appears to be a weak yet statistically significant negative correlation between participant age and their total score on the survey,  $r(N = 109) = -0.23, p = 0.01$ .

Analyses using one-way ANOVAs were used to make comparisons between groups present in the sample using participants' total scores as the dependent measure. The choice to use the same approach across all inferential analyses was based on the desire to remain consistent throughout the process. Table 2 for the results of all comparisons. Participants who reported being personally affected by COVID-19 indicated a greater association between their identity of being a student during the pandemic and their motivation to perform behaviors typical of college students being affected ( $M = 23.53, SD = 8.01$ ) compared to participants who reported not being personally affected by COVID-19 ( $M = 17.52, SD = 9.86$ ). A one-way ANOVA indicated this means a difference to be statistically significant,  $F(1) = 10.16, p = 0.002$ . This result suggests that those who reported being personally affected by COVID-19 also reported a greater impact of being a college student during the COVID-19 pandemic on their identity and motivation to perform student-related behaviors compared to those not personally affected by COVID-19 (Fig. 1).

Participants were also surveyed as to whether they intended to receive the COVID-19 vaccine when eligible. Those who reported an intent to receive the vaccine also scored higher on the identity and motivation survey ( $M = 23.23, SD = 8.69$ ) compared to those who reported not intending to receive the vaccine ( $M = 18.95, SD = 8.60$ ). This mean difference was found to be statistically significant,  $F(1) = 5.62, p = 0.02$ . The result suggests that those who reported intending to receive the vaccine also reported a greater impact of being a college student during the COVID-19 pandemic on their identity and motivation to perform student-related behaviors compared to those not intending to receive the vaccine (Fig. 2 and 3).

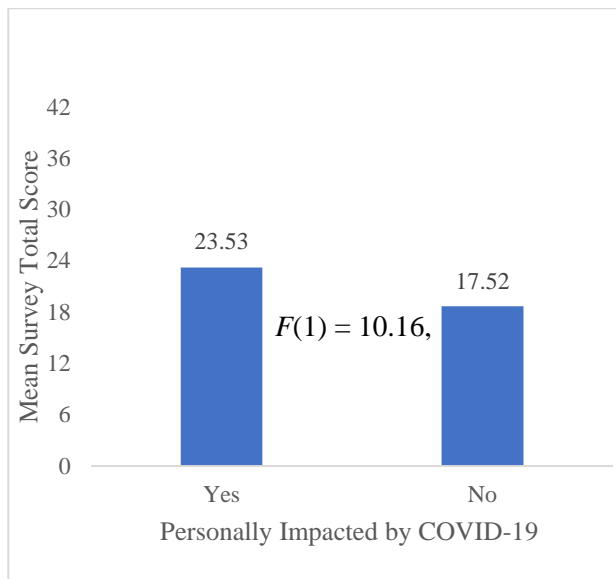
### COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic epicenter was in China and on March 11<sup>th</sup> of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General declared it a pandemic in his briefing to the media (WHO, 2020). With this declaration, practically the entire world found itself in a lockdown, akin to house arrest. This was a historic announcement, as it was the first time a coronavirus was categorized as a pandemic.

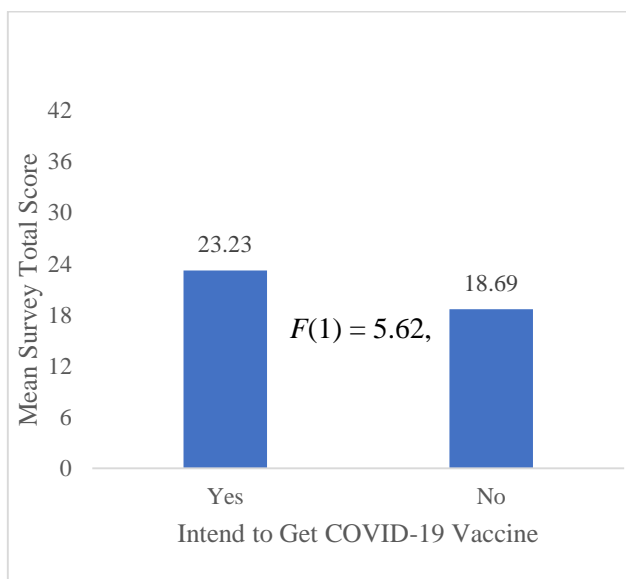
**Table 2:** Mean comparisons to examine the experience of college students during the covid-19 pandemic and students' identity and motivation

Comparison variable	Means compared	Test statistic	p-value
1. Personally impacted by COVID-19	Yes = 23.53 No = 17.52	F (1) = 10.16	0.002
2. Intend to get vaccinated	Yes = 23.23 No = 18.69	F (1) = 5.62	0.02
3. Forced to take online courses	Yes = 22.41 No = 17.95	F (1) = 2.11	0.15
4. Gender	Male = 22.46 Female = 21.86 Non-binary = 20.50	F (2) = 0.07	0.93
5. Race	Asian = 25.00 Black/African = 22.78 White/Caucasian = 20.71 Hispanic/Latinx = 25.74 Middle Eastern = 22.33 Other = 21.00	F (5) = 1.13	0.35
6. Year in school	Freshman = 22.21 Sophomore = 26.67 Junior = 23.06 Senior = 19.67	F (3) = 2.01	0.12
7. Living situation	On Campus = 23.05 Off Campus = 21.57	F (1) = 0.51	0.48
8. First generation college student	Yes = 21.55 No = 22.35	F (1) = 0.50	0.66
9. Forced to take online courses	Yes = 22.41 No = 17.95	F (1) = 2.11	0.15

Note. The total score on the survey measuring college student identity and motivation to perform student-related behaviors was used as the dependent measure in each comparison. Scores can range from 0 to 42. A higher score indicates being a college student during the COVID-19 pandemic had a greater impact on one's college student identity and motivation to perform behaviors associated with being a college student



**Fig. 2:** Result of one-way ANOVA comparing mean survey outcomes for those who were personally impacted by COVID-19 with those who were not personally impacted by it



**Fig. 3:** Result of one-way ANOVA comparing mean survey outcomes for those who intend to get the COVID-19 vaccine with those who do not

Our analysis was limited to one academic year from August 2020 through May 2021. During this time, the COVID-19 pandemic forced faculty and students into an online teaching and learning environment. There was general information known about COVID-19; however, there were still many questions about the efficacy of the vaccination and its impact on the ability to contract COVID-19 and the severity of illness as a result.

By the time data was collected, online learning was no longer a questionable mode of education, innovative, or

the exception. Institutions worldwide were forced to transition online in a frantic manner wherein many instances' educators had never taught in an online format and many students never experienced online learning until now. In February 2021, the Pew Research Center released data collected indicating that 69% of adults in the United States intended to receive the COVID-19 vaccine; however, this data did not include population subgroups of which young adults are a part. In a recent global review, Khubchandani *et al.* (2022) cite numerous reasons and

points of refusal of college students to elect not to be vaccinated. Some examples include safety, side effects, low trust in government, conspiracy theory, cultural factors, health literacy, lower perceived risk of contracting COVID-19, and a lack of confidence in the vaccine. In part, this information contradicts the findings in this research, as 69.72% of students surveyed intend to get the vaccine.

The researchers intend to reproduce this research, deploy the survey in April of 2022 and compare the findings one year later. At that point, it is hopeful for additional research connecting COVID-19, college students, motivation and identity will be available to understand better the impact of this pandemic and its far-reaching impact.

## Conclusion

Two research questions were used to guide this research. The first research question was: To what extent has a student's identity been adversely impacted by COVID-19? Participants who reported being personally affected by COVID-19 indicated a greater association between their identity of being a student during the pandemic and their motivation to perform behaviors typical of college students being affected compared to participants who reported not being personally affected by COVID-19. This suggests that those who reported being personally affected by COVID-19 also reported a greater impact of being a college student during the COVID-19 pandemic on their identity and motivation to perform student-related behaviors compared to those not personally affected by COVID-19.

The second research question was: To what extent has COVID-19 impacted students' motivation to focus on their academics? Results of an initial descriptive analysis indicate a moderate association between the COVID-19 pandemic and students' self-reported identity and motivation to perform behaviors associated with being a college student.

### Limitations

1. A potential limitation lies in the population that was sampled. It is possible that the respondents were not representative of the whole population of this Midwestern university
2. COVID-19 may have influenced an individual's desire to spend more time online given that society has essentially been Internet and homebound, which may have impacted the overall *N*

### In Summary

COVID-19 has impacted every industry, individual, and community and is not limited to Higher Education or students at this Midwestern University. Both the literature

and results of this research show that an individual's identity is a component of their actions and influences their decision-making. When students feel the motivational pull toward identity congruent actions it further builds their identity as a student and further, spurs the motivation to tend to their academic duties. In this case, that pull was absent and adversely impacted the student's identity.

Despite the limitations of a small population sampled this research is valuable as it provides insight into what motivates students. To further examine IBM and students at the Midwestern University, the researchers intend to follow up with the same survey process over the next two academic years to compare changes.

## Acknowledgment

The authors wish to acknowledge and thank all the students who participated in this research.

## Author's Contributions

Each author contributed to the literature review, data collection, analysis, and summary.

## Ethics

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest and no funding to declare. No part of this manuscript is being considered in whole or in part elsewhere. The researchers received IRB approval from the Midwestern University.

### Potential Risk to Participants

There is no perceived harm to participants seeing as all participants will remain anonymous and data will be stored securely. Participants can cease participation at any time by simply closing their browser. There is no use of deception in this study.

### Expected Benefits

It is expected that the analysis of the data collected will provide lasting insight into the identity and motivation of the Midwestern University students as well as students in similar institutions. Additionally, the results will benefit theoretical knowledge and understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on students.

### Safeguarding Participants' Identity

All information provided by participants will stay confidential. No personal names, birth dates, or other types of personal identifiers will be obtained. The only identifiable information that will be asked are demographics as an academic level of all participants. The

data will be encrypted and cloud computed to store all the information. Data will be retained for five years and then electronically destroyed.

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