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**EXPLORING PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION STUDENTS'  
MOTIVATION IN COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING  
PARTICIPATION**

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**Abstract**

As the world has become globalised, socially diverse and dynamic, university students need to be equipped with wide-ranging knowledge, social and personal skills to survive. One of the ways to realise the need is by engaging with the community. Working with the community allows students to translate theory into practice and help them build their personal development; thus, this requires effort and motivation. As there is limited research on students' motivation for community service learning, this study intends to focus on motivational factors that contribute to their participation in community service learning in Malaysia. An open-ended survey question was used to determine 70 final semester professional communication undergraduates' motivation to participate in community service-learning at a Malaysian local university. To determine the motivational factors of the SULAM programme for the students, data were gathered through open-ended questions and analysed through thematic analysis. From the study, extrinsic and intrinsic motivations were apparent motivational orientations that motivated the students to participate in community service learning, and they were more extrinsically motivated. The results have provided insights into the participants' motivational drive when participating in community service-learning activities. The limitations and recommendations of the study were also discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

As the world has become globalised, socially diverse and dynamic, learning institutions have transformed traditional teaching and learning into a more comprehensive method that can suit students across disciplines. Students' academic and professional knowledge need to be supported with social and personal skills for them to survive in the real world. To fulfil the need, many higher institutions have come up with plans and methods to equip their students with real-world knowledge that can assist them in developing global-minded citizens (Shreeve, 2008). One of the plans inclusive of practical application, the concept of service-learning, has been introduced as part of experiential learning that aims to incorporate academic knowledge with practical skills. Service-learning can be defined as a form of real-world experiential learning that involves students implementing the theory that they have learned to meet the needs of the community in helping them deal with complicated and complex issues and problems that occur (Ministry of Education, 2015). Similarly, Lohman and Aitken (2002) described service learning as a typical experiential learning approach that extends pedagogical activities from classrooms to communities, allowing them to experience different ways of caring for others.

Even though service learning has become increasingly popular, previous studies have focused more on its impacts (Hassan et al., 2020; Lai & Hui, 2020) or investigated its practice and implementation (Mamat et al., 2019) or examined its challenges (Yusof et al., 2020). Limited interest has been dedicated to students' motivation to participate in service learning. Hence, this study explores the motivational factors that influence the participation of students in a language programme in service-learning activity. To further investigate the aspect of motivation in service-learning, this study involved undergraduate professional communication students who participated in language-related service-learning activities in two primary and one secondary government schools in the southern part of Malaysia. The reason for selecting professional communication students as the participants of this study is because the respondents provide the best information needed and they are the easiest for the researcher to access. The findings of this study contribute to the development of soft skills among students, which are seen as a necessary component of graduates and the skills of the twenty-first century. Besides that, it is also hoped that students develop academically and can transform personally and professionally.

### 1.1. Service-Learning Malaysia – University for Society (SULAM)

Service-learning SULAM, or the Malaysian University for Society uses both academic and extracurricular approaches to service and educational opportunities. SULAM is a ministry of education project that targets higher education's Shift 1 of the Malaysia Education Plan 2015–2025 and seeks to develop graduates that are well balance academically and socially. Students engage in an organized service activity that addresses the target community needs as part of a course-based with credit-bearing educational experience. They then reflect on their experiences and the service activity to achieve the desired learning outcomes, that give students a greater understanding of the society at large while helping them to improve their soft skills which in return is significantly important in the real world. Furthermore, one of SULAM's objectives is to plan educational standards and explore various opportunities which includes service learning at the national and international levels. As it concerns the practical approach,

SULAM is regarded as an experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes (Department of Higher Education, 2019).

SULAM has been implemented in Universiti Teknologi MARA since 2017. The objectives listed align with the SULAM by the Ministry of Education, which emphasise on improving students' soft skills and understanding of what they learn in class. Through the engagement with the community, students gain awareness of the issues within and they work to address the issues the community is facing. This process involves a rich and comprehensive learning curve as students transfer their knowledge to the community when they conduct the activities with the community. From identifying community issues to selecting target communities and planning the activities, students will utilise their soft skills while maintaining practical communication skills and practising their leadership abilities in conducting the activities. At the same time, students will be reminded to maintain professionalism and practise proper ethical values as they plan for the activities especially dealing with the target community. Most UiTM faculties utilise SULAM as a component of their evaluation to ensure that students will learn from planning relevant activities that require them to develop their soft skills. When it comes to language learners, the SULAM engagement is viewed as a part of the curriculum, and the steps and procedures will help learners to develop overall planning skills and teamwork abilities while at the same time encouraging the learners to communicate with the community effectively.

## 1.2. Underpinning Theory

The theory of motivation was adopted as the underpinning theory for this study. Specifically, Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was applied because it helps explain why decisions are made and how actions are selected. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), being motivated is being moved to do something. Suppose a person who is not forced or feels no inspiration to do something is considered unmotivated. The two scholars further explained that there are different types of motivation based on the various reasons or goals that give rise to an action. SDT posits that there are two basic types of motivation -intrinsic and extrinsic-and that both play a significant role in determining who we are and how we act. Extrinsic motivation is the desire to act in certain ways based on external sources, resulting in external rewards. Contrarily, intrinsic motivation refers to internal purposes or motivations, such as our fundamental beliefs, passions, and moral principles, that drive us to behave in a certain way.

## 2. Research Method

Data presented in this study were gathered through an open-ended survey question distributed among professional communication undergraduates at a local public university in Malaysia. A purposive sampling (n=70) was used among final-year students enrolled in community engagement for a professional development course over 14 weeks of a semester. An open-ended survey question was used as it required the respondents to elaborate their responses in depth. The data collected were analysed using a thematic analysis where themes with a pattern in meanings throughout the data set were identified. Thematic analysis is a method for analysing qualitative data that is often used in many

different domains, including psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2006), healthcare (Braun & Clarke, 2014), sport and exercise (Braun et al., 2016), and many more (Boyatzis, 1998). As stated by Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis uses six stages to analyse the data: collecting and familiarising data, creating codes, grouping codes into themes, reviewing and revising themes, defining and naming themes and write-up. Before evaluating specific items after data collection, the first step is to get to know the data and obtain a comprehensive overview of all the data gathered. Transcription, reading, and rereading are necessary for this process, along with writing down the data's initial codes. The following phases entail creating initial coding for the data, which involves systematically noting noteworthy aspects across the whole data collection and compiling information pertinent to each code. After the data has been coded, the following stage is to organise the codes into themes. Any information relevant to the themes will then be retrieved, and the received data will be coded into potential subjects. Then, the topics are examined in connection to the coded extract and the complete data set to create a thematic map. The next phase in the thematic analysis is to define and identify the topic, which entails narrowing down the themes following the predetermined criteria and giving each theme a distinct name. The data gathered must be continuously analysed throughout this process. The final phase is generating the report based on the analysis done and will include identifying the relevant extract, discussing the study, and relating it to the research objective. The final opportunity for analysis is selecting appropriate excerpts, discussing the analysis, relating to the research objective and producing a report based on the analysis done.

### **3. Findings**

The data analysis revealed two motivational orientations that influence the participation of students in a language programme in service-learning activity. The orientations that emerged based on their responses to the open-ended question were identified as extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

#### **3.1. Extrinsic Motivation**

The primary motivation that drove them to participate in community service-learning was extrinsic. Their extrinsic motivation was divided into interpersonal skills development, academic recognition, and internal incentives. Extrinsic motivation is a type of motivation regulated by external rewards.

The first external motivational factor is interpersonal skills development which can be categorised as identified regulations. This extrinsic motivation culminates in integrated regulation in which an individual's behaviour is guided by internal causes and a desire to be self-aware. The motivation is partially internal, depending on one's conscious values and what is personally relevant to them. The participants' interpersonal skill development was more to pragmatic experience, and their aim to improve their social and communication skills was their motivational factor.

*"I am driven by a desire to use my skills for the greater good, connect with like-minded individuals, and have fun while doing it." (Student 14, 2022)*

"I somehow like meeting and interacting with new people as it would expand my experience in life. I would also have more knowledge and awareness about the various kinds of people that exist." (Student 43, 2022)

"To help and improve my communication skills." (Student 28, 2022)

"To help people acknowledge new things and to improve my communication skill." (Student 33, 2022)

Based on the responses, improving their social and communication skills was the main reason they participated in community service learning because they transfer their knowledge that they learned in class when they communicate with the community. The finding supports the results of Hassan et al. (2020), who conducted a study on the impacts of service-learning activities and found that the participants' communication skills were improved and enhanced. Besides, their practical and soft skills were increased and improved after they involved in the service-learning activities. Further, getting to know the different kinds of people also contribute to the reason why they are inclined to participate in community service learning.

The second external motivational factor is academic recognition which considers external recognition. For example, the participants revealed that they were motivated by acknowledgement by their lecturers and the targeted community upon completing their service-learning activity.

*"Given a certificate that has value in it". (Student 19, 2022)*

Another external reward, as reported by the participants, was the awarded marks after the required task fulfilment.

*"Marks". (Student 53, 2022)*

As can be seen from the responses, the participants feel appreciated when they receive acknowledgement from their lecturers and from the target community, thus, this academic recognition also contributes to the reason why they were motivated to participate.

The third external motivational factor is internal incentives. These incentives are considered introjected incentives because these participants were more inclined to receive tangible outcomes such as monetary and food rewards.

*"Money". (Student 11, 2022)*

*"If there is food". (Student 27, 2022)*

Based on SDT, the introjected motivation motivates individuals to nurture positive outcomes through hard rewards e.g. financial rewards or other substantial benefits in doing voluntary community activities (Chaman et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

### **3.2. Intrinsic Motivation**

The second motivation highlighted by the students is intrinsic. Their intrinsic motivation was solely based on altruism. Altruism is an intrinsic regulation where the participants are self-motivated and self-determined Li et al. (2019) asserted that altruism is a type of behaviour that benefits others at the expense of oneself. Their interest, the enjoyment that drove them, and satisfaction were based on the

behaviour or activity that they had engaged in. For example, the participants acknowledged that their internal motivation is due to wanting to help others, acquiring experience and a sense of satisfaction.

*“The thought of helping others is heart-warming”. - (Student 1, 2022)*

*“The thought of helping others alone, even though small or big actions, motivates me to participate in community service”. (Student 36, 2022)*

*“The urge to help people for those who are in need”. (Student 10, 2022)*

*“To help other people ease their journey in life”. (Student 52, 2022)*

*“The experience that I would gain from the activity”. (Student 22, 2022)*

*“To gain more experience and meet new people from various backgrounds”. (Student 34, 2022)*

*“The experience that I will gain when participating a community service”. (Student 61, 2022)*

*“The satisfaction feeling after helping the community”. (Student 45, 2022)*

*“To see people of the community happy when we volunteered to do a community service for them”. (Student 44, 2022)*

*“Knowing that it could benefit the people in need”. (Student 38, 2022)*

From the responses, the participants offered reasons for engaging with the community as it reflects a greater focus on others, rather than on the benefit that they gain. They felt a strong sense of responsibility to give back to the community as the idea of helping others and to see the community benefited from the activities make them feel satisfied. The finding echoes the results of Mekonen and Adarkwah's (2021) study, which found from their emerged themes that international students participated in pandemic volunteer activities for intrinsic and altruistic motives. Respondents in that study stated that assisting others, including their colleagues nurtured positive feelings in them. In the same vein, this finding also supports the result of a study conducted among professors in conducting community service where respondents expressed that they were motivated by the personal satisfaction which they derived from engaging in community development (Adekalu et al., 2018).

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore professional communication undergraduates' motivational factors when participating in community service-learning activities. Based on the analysis, the students' motivational drive was more extrinsically inclined than intrinsic. They viewed extrinsic-based rewards to be more appealing and motivating.

Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (2000) highlighted that being motivated by either extrinsic or intrinsic orientation also meant being driven to accomplish any desired task. Thus, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are powerful drives shaping an individual's personality and thinking.

This study succeeded in revealing motivational factors that drive the participants when participating in service-learning activities; however, several limitations should also be mentioned. The current study did not include other potential contributing factors that tend to obtain more information in this research setting, such as academic background, gender and age, due to the small sample for this purpose. As for recommendations for future studies, further analysis of their motivational factors can be done by conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews to explore more on the participants' motivational factors when conducting service-learning activities.

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