



## Mediating effects of teacher enthusiasm and peer enthusiasm on students' interest in the college classroom



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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the mediating effects of students' perceptions of teacher enthusiasm and of peer enthusiasm on the relation between students' initial interest and their situational interest at the end of the semester. Students' motivation for affiliation with their teacher and with peers was also measured to allow for potential associations between these variables and the students' perceptions of teacher and peer enthusiasm. In path analysis, data from 455 undergraduates showed that perceptions of teacher enthusiasm and of peer enthusiasm had direct associations with two kinds of situational interest, both *hold* and *catch* interest. Also, the relations between initial interest and both *hold* and *catch* interest were mediated by perceptions of peer enthusiasm but not teacher enthusiasm. Students' affiliative motivation with the teacher and peers had direct effects on their perceptions of teacher and peer enthusiasm. This study contributes to clarifying the importance of contextual factors as well as students' own individual variables in understanding the mechanisms by which students' interest in a course develops and is maintained throughout the semester.

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### 0. Introduction

Any college course is likely to enroll students who are not interested in the course content and others who are very much intrigued by the course topic, and eager to learn. Another characteristic of college classrooms is that some may have very large enrollment (with over 100, even 500, students), allowing much less interaction between student and instructor and among peers, than other courses. The anonymity that students can sometimes feel in the college classroom can be mitigated or aggravated by whether they are genuinely interested in the material being presented. This interest can either be brought by a student into the classroom, or it can be triggered and enhanced by the social learning environment of the classroom, even to the point that a student can leave a course at the end of the semester with a more developed enduring interest in the topic.

Whether it is a K-12 classroom or a college classroom, the importance of interest on learning has been recognized for decades, as attested to by the number of researchers who have studied the role of interest in learning and academic achievement (Alexander,

Jetton, & Kulikowich, 1995; Alexander & Murphy, 1998; Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2006; Harp & Mayer, 1997; Renninger & Hidi, 2002). Although there have been several studies that have focused on personal factors that influence the interest students bring into a course, Harackiewicz et al. (2008) concluded a recent, and already much-cited, study by stating that more research was needed on classroom environmental factors associated with students' situational interest. Even though there have been some studies of the types of tasks and characteristics of activities that could, in the words of Mitchell (1993), "catch" and "hold" students' interest in the classroom (e.g., Schraw, Flowerday, & Lehman, 2001), there has been relatively less research on social aspects of college learning environments associated with student interest. For instance, we could find no research on how characteristics of one's teacher and classmates may influence one's interest throughout a semester, even though contextual support for interest has been acknowledged as an important contributor to interest development (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Other theorists such as Deci (1992) and Krapp (2002) have pointed to the critical role that interrelationships among persons, activities, and contexts can play in the development of interest by way of interpersonal experiences that could influence the quality of interactions between a person and an object of interest. Additionally, one's social group and the social norms in one's environment can influence the degree to which one values an object of interest.

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This was exactly the focus of the study we conducted. Compared to the amount of theoretical support for the importance of social and contextual factors on interest, there has been little empirical research on establishing the degree of influence different factors play in predicting interest development, particularly for college students. Nearly two decades ago, Mitchell (1993) mentioned that teachers may not have power over students' initial interest but can influence throughout instruction the continued interest of the students they are teaching. Thus, we selected teacher enthusiasm as one potential factor that may be associated with influencing student interest in a course because several studies showed that high levels of teacher enthusiasm seemed to exert a positive influence on students' motivation (Frenzel, Goetz, Ludtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009; Patrick, Hisley, & Kempler, 2000; Wild, Enzle, & Hawkins, 1992) as well as on students' learning (Brigham, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1992; McKinney, Robertson, Gilmore, Ford, & Larkins, 1984). However, the connection between teacher enthusiasm and student interest, particularly the more sophisticated understanding of interest reflected in the recent literature, had not been previously investigated.

Also, because the social environment in a course is as much about the other students taking a class as the teacher, we included peer enthusiasm as a factor. Along with teachers' influence on students' motivation and learning, there are findings that suggest the role that peers can play on individual students' motivation. One recent study reported a moderate correlation between peers' attitude toward learning and students' motivation to learn (Khamis, Dukmak, & Elhoweris, 2008). Also, Sage and Kinderman (1999) reported a positive association between individual students' engagement in class and the engagement level of their peers in the classroom, as well as an association between peer support and students' engagement and discipline problems at school.

Finally, because we saw social and contextual factors as interacting inherently with individuals' own sociohistorical proclivities, we added a measure of *affiliative motivation* to capture individual differences in students' sensitivity to teacher and peer messages, in addition to using measures of teacher and peer enthusiasm that relied on the individual students' perceptions. We chose affiliative motivation because it has been reported as being associated with behavioral mimicry (Lakin & Chartrand, 2003) and described by Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, and Colangelo (2005) as the "social tuning of attitude" supporting the role of affiliative motivation as an underlying mechanism of convergence of attitudes. These findings pointed to the importance of affiliative motivation in understanding emotional transmission, and the effects of students' perceptions of teacher enthusiasm and peer enthusiasm. Thus, we saw affiliative motivation as potentially helpful in explaining why some students become more enthusiastic than others despite having the same teacher and the same classmates in the same course. In what follows, we review the literature on each of the key variables of our study.

## 1. Interest

Most commonly seen as a motivational variable, *interest* has been defined as "a psychological state of engaging or reengaging with particular content such as objects, events, or ideas over time" (Hidi & Renninger, 2006, p. 112). Since the early work of Hidi (1990), educational researchers have generally differentiated between two types of interest: situational and individual interest (e.g., Harackiewicz et al., 2008; Hidi, 2006).

*Situational interest* has been defined as "environmentally triggered, involve[ing] an affective reaction and focused attention" (Hidi, 2006, p. 72), echoing the words of Schiefele (1991) who described situational interest as "an emotional state brought about by situational stimuli" (p. 302). The definitions of situational interest highlight the importance of characteristics of the immediate

environment with which learners interact. Using qualitative and quantitative methodologies, Mitchell (1993) modeled situational interest as involving *catching* and *holding* interest, claiming that *catching interest* is related to at least two kinds of immediate stimulation, cognitive and sensory, whereas *holding interest* refers to empowering students to maintain interest by making the content of learning meaningful. In a recent model of how interest develops, Hidi and Renninger (2006) reiterated the importance of situational interest in the development of long-term individual interest, stimulated by environmental conditions and maintained by such factors as perceived value in the activity.

*Individual interest* has been defined as "a person's relatively enduring predisposition to reengage particular content over time as well as to the immediate psychological state when this predisposition has been activated" (Hidi & Renninger, 2006, p. 113). Mitchell (1993) identified individual interest as an interest that a person already possesses and brings to a context. As with situational interest, individual interest has been found to have a positive influence on learning processes such as attention, recognition, and recall (Renninger & Wozniak, 1985), and on academic motivation (Schiefele, 2001).

The most recent theoretical model of interest is Hidi and Renninger's (2006) *four-phase model of interest development* (see Fig. 1). In this model, situational and individual interest intertwine and evolve in consecutive phases labeled *triggered situational interest*, *maintained situational interest*, *emerging individual interest*, and *well-developed interest*, with each phase differentiated by the degree of influence of three components, affect, value, and cognitive processes. In early phases, affect is expected to play a relatively more important role whereas in later phases, perceived value and knowledge may be more important. Guided by Hidi and Renninger's model, Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. (2010) studied differences between triggered situational interest, maintained situational interest, and individual interest while validating measures of situational interest in academic domains. Linnenbrink-Garcia et al.'s findings indicated that triggered situational interest is different from maintained situational interest in terms of the types of affective reactions engendered because triggered situational interest includes affective reactions to the way instructors present the material whereas maintained situational interest includes affective reaction to the material itself. Also, these authors reported that maintained situational interest could be further divided into *value-related* and *feeling-related* maintained situational interest. Overall, Linnenbrink-Garcia et al.'s findings pointed to the importance of value and affect that could be stimulated by environmental factors in developing learners' situational interest.

Recognizing the importance of environmental factors on students' interest, Durik and Harackiewicz (2007) explored how conditions in a learning environment could influence learners' situational interest. In their study, they reported that arousing conditions such as bright colors and pictures meant to stimulate catch interest had positive effects on the task interest of learners with low individual interest whereas those with high individual interest were more influenced by manipulating the personal utility of a task, stimulating their hold interest. Overall, they reported that individuals who already had interest in a domain were more receptive to indicators of the value they may gain from the task. Similarly, Paige (2011) explored how environmental factors could influence students' interest in reading. He reported a significant association between extrinsic motivation for reading and oral reading proficiency, suggesting that struggling adolescent readers could benefit from a teacher's and classmates' modeling of engagement in reading. Our focus for this study of teacher enthusiasm involved exploring the degree of relation we could find between a potentially affect-arousing and valuing variable, students' perceptions of teacher's and peers' enthusiasm, and students' situational interest.

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