

Revisiting Self-Determination Theory in the Prestige Economy of Science: Implications for Academic Motivation

Lukasz Sulkowski ^{1*}, Justyna Dziedzic ², Sylwia Przytula ³, Robert Seliga ⁴

¹ WSB University, Dabrowa Gornicza, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0002-1248-2743
e-mail: lsulkowski@wsb.edu.pl

² University of Social Sciences, Lodz, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0002-8292-0892
e-mail: jdziedzic@san.edu.pl

³ Wroclaw University of Science and Technology, Wroclaw, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0002-9602-241X
e-mail: sylwia.przytula@pwr.edu.pl

⁴ WSB University, Dabrowa Gornicza, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0003-3306-904X
e-mail: robert.seliga@wsb.edu.pl

* Corresponding author: Lukasz Sulkowski, lsulkowski@wsb.edu.pl

Abstract

Academic motivation has traditionally been analysed through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasises autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential psychological needs. However, in contemporary higher education, the economy of prestige plays an increasingly influential role in shaping academic behaviour, recognition, and career progression. This study addresses the gap in understanding how prestige influences the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in academic contexts. The main aim of the study is to expand the theoretical framework of SDT by integrating the concept of prestige as a critical factor influencing academic motivation. The study develops a conceptual model that integrates prestige into SDT and empirically examines its operation through qualitative interviews with Polish academics, thus addressing a gap in motivation theory and contextualising it within the prestige economy of higher education. This qualitative study employed an interpretative-symbolic paradigm and conducted in-depth interviews with 11 academics from diverse disciplines and institutions in Poland. The data were analysed using thematic coding and triangulated by multiple researchers to ensure validity. The participants were selected purposively to capture a range of experiences related to academic motivation, prestige, and institutional dynamics. The findings reveal that prestige functions simultaneously as an intrinsic and extrinsic motivator. It enhances recognition, provides access to resources, and strengthens perceived competence and relatedness. However, it can also limit autonomy and creativity when academics align their work with dominant prestige norms. The study also finds that prestige shapes collaboration patterns, affects gendered access to academic recognition, and influences identity formation among scholars. By incorporating prestige into the SDT model, this paper offers a novel conceptual expansion of motivation theory in academia. It highlights how symbolic capital intersects with psychological needs and reveals the socio-cultural forces shaping motivation in higher education. This framework has implications for research on academic identity, resilience, and organisational behaviour. The study suggests that academic institutions should develop policies that support autonomy and

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intrinsic motivation while acknowledging the role of prestige. Strategies to balance recognition structures with individual well-being and ethical conduct are essential to fostering sustainable academic environments. The findings also inform leadership and policy-making in higher education regarding career evaluation systems and research funding mechanisms.

Key words

self-determination theory, academic motivation, prestige economy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, higher education.

Introduction

SDT provides a thorough perspective on human motivation, highlighting the importance of inner and extrinsic incentives in influencing action. The research, described in Deci and Ryan's seminal 1985 paper, has gained widespread acceptance across diverse domains such as education, business, healthcare, and sports. SDT uncovers the factors that motivate individuals and guides them in creating situations that support their natural inclination towards personal development. According to Deci and Ryan's 2000 results, SDT distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, which arises from the enjoyment of the activity itself, and extrinsic motivation, which derives from the practical utility of the activity. Although intrinsic motivation is typically considered more persistent and desirable, SDT acknowledges that behaviours driven by extrinsic motivation can transform into self-determined actions through internalisation and integration.

The "economy of prestige" concept is a strong and well-established paradigm that is particularly relevant in several professional fields, particularly academics (Blackmore, 2015). The text elucidates the pursuit of recognition and esteem as rewards within particular domains. Bourdieu (1986) studied the symbolic capital subject in 80', while F. English conducted a similar study on it in 2005. In the academic sphere, prestige has a considerable impact. It influences decisions on research topics, the selection of publications, partnerships, and even teaching-related tasks. Academics compete for a few prestigious chances, such as tenured positions, financial resources, accolades, publications, and invitations to present at conferences or contribute to influential journals (Merton, 1973; Lamont, 2012; Kwiek, 2021). Prestige serves as both an inherent and external motivator in academic settings. The desire for prestige can be interpreted as a quest for individual gratification and intellectual recognition. Externally, it yields tangible benefits such as job advancement, increased opportunities for financial gain, and a more substantial presence in the academic domain (Zuckerman, 1977; Long, 2001). Specifically, this study develops and tests a conceptual model that incorporates prestige into SDT, while also providing a contextual application in Poland. In doing so, it identifies a theoretical gap in understanding how prestige interacts with autonomy, competence, and relatedness, offering both conceptual innovation and empirical validation.

This work employs a qualitative research methodology, conducting in-depth interviews to investigate the expanded model of SDT. The interviews were conducted with academics of diverse international origins from various disciplines affiliated with higher education institutions. The sample used for the interviews was carefully selected to include a wide range of participants.

1. Literature review

One of SDT's unique contributions to psychological, sociological, and management research is the integration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness demands into a cohesive theory of human motivation. Autonomy refers to the need for individuals to experience a sense of control over their actions and act with deliberate choice. According to SDT, people who make choices willingly have higher levels of motivation and engagement. On the other hand, when individuals feel compelled or pressured, their motivation and engagement decrease in quality (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence is feeling capable and confident in one's environment, achieved by successfully mastering and

overcoming appropriately challenging activities. The innate desire to effectively engage with one's surroundings and attain success is heightened by offering suitable challenges, positive feedback, and sufficient support (Vallerand, 1997).

Deci and Ryan propose that when extrinsic motivators are fully integrated into an individual's values and sense of self, they might transform into 'autonomous extrinsic motivations' that closely resemble intrinsic motivation regarding their quality and outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000). Niemiec and Ryan (2009) discovered that teaching approaches that promote autonomy positively correlate with student involvement and satisfaction, which improves academic achievement. A meta-analysis by Taylor et al. (2014) consolidated findings from multiple studies and concluded that autonomy-supportive teaching practices significantly enhance students' intrinsic motivation across various educational levels and disciplines.

Meeting the psychological needs outlined in SDT is associated with increased job satisfaction and decreased burnout among faculty members. Deci et al. (1991) found that university professors with high autonomy and competence exhibited higher motivation and job satisfaction. Additionally, studies (Jeno et al., 2018; Olsen & Mason, 2023) have shown that higher perceived autonomy among faculty members correlates with greater job satisfaction and a higher intent to remain in their positions.

SDT has also been used to understand the motivations behind academic research productivity. A study by Sheldon and Krieger (2007) applied SDT to explore how law school environments impacted the well-being and motivations of law professors, finding that those in supportive environments that nurtured autonomy and competence were happier and more productive. This aligns with research by Amabile et al. (1994), which found that scientists who felt their work supported their intrinsic needs were more likely to produce widely recognised research.

The universality of SDT's principles has been explored in different cultural contexts within academia. Chirkov et al. (2003) examined the applicability of SDT in non-Western settings and found that the basic psychological needs identified by SDT are indeed universal. However, the ways these needs are satisfied can vary significantly across cultures. This highlights the adaptability of SDT in understanding academic motivation globally.

Academic researchers often select projects more likely to result in publications in prestigious journals or attract attention from influential peers (Sulkowski, 2023; Przytula et al., 2023). Kieser and Leiner (2009) have examined the persistent gap between rigor and relevance in management research, arguing that this gap is inherently unbridgeable due to fundamental differences in the objectives and methodologies of academic research and practical management. Publications in high-ranking journals enhance a researcher's reputation and significantly affect their career prospects, such as tenure and promotion. Brembs et al. (2013) discuss how this pressure leads to strategic behaviours such as salami slicing (publishing minimal publishable units) and a preference for quantity over quality to maximize output and perceived prestige (Brembs et al., 2013). Furthermore, the role of personal branding in the reflexive construction of organizational identity highlights how scientists navigate their professional image within academic institutions (Dziedzic & Sulkowski, 2023).

While SDT explains motives arising from autonomy, competence, and relatedness, incorporating prestige provides a more comprehensive perspective. Prestige, typically attained through scholarly achievements and professional acknowledgements, is a substantial external incentive impacting professional paths, research prospects, and teaching responsibilities (Merton, 1973). The pursuit of prestige is motivated by the aspiration for personal acclaim and the advantages that such a position might bestow within the academic community.

Prestige has been analysed by economists and sociologists using the concept of "symbolic capital," a phrase coined by Bourdieu (1986) to refer to the resources individuals or groups possess regarding prestige, honour, and attention within a specific social context. Symbolic capital in academia is crucial in determining one's access to resources, shaping career chances, and influencing scholarly output and innovation (Lamont, 2009). English (2005) describes the concept of the economy of prestige,

which highlights how a competitive marketplace for prestigious posts and recognitions with limited availability shapes academic areas. This rivalry may incentivise researchers to align their research ideas or methodology with those more likely to achieve prestige rather than focusing on personal interests or addressing broader social needs (Hermanowicz, 1998).

Cummings and Kiesler (2008) argue that cross-disciplinary collaboration can enhance innovation by integrating diverse perspectives, although challenges such as communication barriers and differing norms exist. Prestige plays a significant role in collaboration, as working with esteemed colleagues can increase the perceived value of research, visibility, and career opportunities (Walsh & Maloney, 2007).

Research shows that gender disparities exist in acquiring prestige, with women often facing more significant obstacles than men. Van den Brink and Benschop (2012) attribute these disparities to gender biases in academic evaluations, which influence career trajectories for female academics. Integrating SDT (SDT) with the economy of prestige illustrates how pursuing prestige can limit the freedom to choose research topics based on personal interests, shifting focus toward topics that yield higher status rewards (Vallerand, 1997). Relationships within academia often form based on intellectual compatibility and strategic prestige, with collaborations to enhance reputation (Willmott, 2011).

The expectation of attaining and sustaining a high status might result in stress, exhaustion, and possibly immoral actions such as manipulating data or engaging in excessive competition (Anderson et al., 2007). Future discussions and legislation regarding academic motives should consider these processes to foster a healthy balance between the quest for prestige and the development of intrinsic motivation.

Furthermore, integrating prestige into SDT helps to contextualize academic motivations within a broader socio-cultural framework. It acknowledges that academics do not operate in a vacuum but are influenced by their communities' broader values and recognition structures (Lamont, 2009). Prestige can enhance autonomy by allowing academics greater freedom to pursue their interests (Vallerand, 1997). However, the desire for recognition can also limit autonomy, making academics conform to mainstream topics and methodologies more likely to be rewarded, potentially stifling creativity and genuine scholarly inquiry (English, 2005).

Prestige directly influences perceptions of competence. Achievements that garner prestige, such as publishing in top journals or receiving prestigious awards, serve as public affirmations of an academic's competence. This external validation can enhance an individual's self-efficacy and motivation, encouraging further effort and engagement in their field (Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, this dynamic can also lead to a competence-pursuit imbalance where the external indicators of success (e.g., citation counts, impact factors) become the primary drivers of activity, overshadowing deeper, more intrinsic engagements with research topics (Merton, 1973).

Prestige impacts relatedness in that high-status individuals or groups often attract more collaboration opportunities, which can enhance feelings of connectedness and belonging within the academic community (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Nevertheless, an overemphasis on prestige can disrupt genuine collegial relationships, fostering competition over collaboration. This environment can undermine the supportive peer interactions essential for satisfying the need for relatedness, leading to isolation and alienation (Bourdieu, 1986). Given these interactions, prestige can be conceptualised as a fundamental principle in the academic world alongside autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the SDT framework (Figure 1).

The expanded model (Figure 1) acknowledges that while the traditional SDT needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, significantly influence motivation, the addition of prestige reflects a key external factor interacting with these needs. Prestige incorporates socio-cultural and institutional influences, offering a more holistic view of academic motivations (Lamont, 2009). Although intrinsic needs enhance well-being and motivation, the academic economy also relies on prestige, creating a balancing act between intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Academic institutions need to support

autonomy, competence, and relatedness while aligning these needs with prestige dynamics (Willmott, 2011).

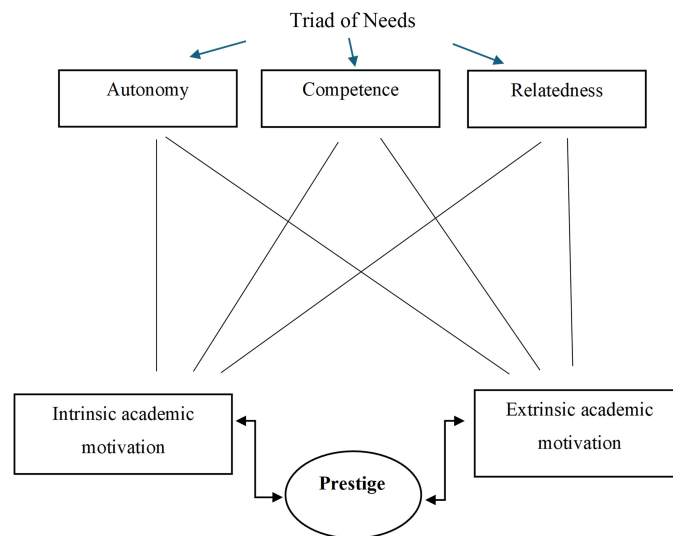


Figure 1. Prestige-Enhanced SDT Model for Academic Motivation.

Source: own study.

The following examples illustrate how the core principles of SDT, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, manifest in diverse academic settings and influence motivation, resilience, and the formation of identity. Building academic resilience through mentoring, collegial networks, and supportive institutional cultures fosters intrinsic motivation and adaptive capacity, particularly among early-career researchers facing a volatile higher education environment (Ross et al., 2023). The disrupted trajectories of female scholars, shaped by intersecting roles such as caregiving and minority status, further highlight the need for institutional policies that promote autonomy, equity, and intrinsic motivation across academic careers (Shorey et al., 2023). Similarly, the experience of professional vulnerability among Chinese academics, driven by performative pressures and institutional constraints, emphasises the importance of autonomy-supportive environments that enable reflective agency and preserve internal motivation (Gao & Yuan, 2024). Although toxic leadership can undermine mental health, academic staff may maintain their work engagement, illustrating the complex relationship between external control and intrinsic motivation (Klahn Acuña & Male, 2024). Research also shows that parenting style can enhance academic resilience by boosting self-efficacy and motivation, supporting the development of self-determined learners (Shengyao et al., 2024). Finally, academics transitioning into professional master's programmes often face identity tensions, yet their proactive engagement in workplace learning reflects efforts to sustain autonomy, competence, and relatedness in unfamiliar academic contexts (Li & Tao, 2025).

The research questions aimed to understand how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations influence academic work. Building on these unresolved debates, this study is guided by the following research questions: RQ1: How does pursuing prestige influence academics' motivations within the SDT framework? RQ2: How does academic prestige impact collaborative networks and institutional connections among academics? RQ3: How does the pursuit of prestige influence the autonomy of academics in their professional work and decision-making?

2. Methodology

This study adopted an interpretative-symbolic paradigm and a descriptive-explanatory methodology to explore the complex interplay between the traditional SDT needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and the additional prestige factor within academic settings. The study utilised a qualitative research approach to explore academics' motivational and emotional belief

patterns within the context of SDT and the prestige economy of science. The interview guide was designed based on the SDT framework (autonomy, competence, relatedness) and prior research on academic prestige (Blackmore, 2015; Bourdieu, 1986; Merton, 1973). Questions were semi-structured to allow comparability across interviews while leaving space for individual elaboration. The guide was reviewed by colleagues for content validity, and a pilot interview with one academic was conducted to refine clarity, sequencing, and wording.

The study involved eleven academics from both public and private higher education institutions in Poland. Participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity in academic rank, disciplinary background, and institutional context. The sample included scholars at various career stages, from early-career researchers to full professors, representing a broad spectrum of disciplines. This heterogeneity enabled a multidimensional perspective on academic motivations and the prestige economy within different organisational and epistemic environments.

The methodological rule of triangulation was applied in the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2024), which allowed for an intersubjective assessment of the cognitive value of the collected material. In particular, the following methods were employed: researcher triangulation (interviews conducted by two authors) and data triangulation at the individual level (information was collected from unrelated individuals).

Individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with eleven academics from public and private higher education institutions in Poland. Participants were purposively selected based on their research and teaching experience, as well as their diversity in age and discipline, to provide a broad range of perspectives on the study topic. The semi-structured interviews included pre-prepared questions that allowed flexibility, and the data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The sample included a range of positions, from PhD holders to full professors, across various disciplines, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of prestige's impact in different academic contexts. The interviews generated 13 hours of material, which were transcribed and coded by two researchers to ensure reliability. Ethical approval was obtained, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation. The coding scheme was developed to capture intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, providing a well-grounded interpretation of the data through the lens of SDT.

3. Research results

Existing quantitative research, such as the OECD and Nature's 2019 global PhD surveys, provides important contextual insights. According to a large-scale international survey, 84% of researchers reported being proud to work in the research community. Nevertheless, only 29% felt secure in pursuing an academic career, highlighting the growing tension between professional autonomy and systemic precarity (OECD, 2023). In an extensive 2020 survey of research culture, one in five early-career researchers (23%) reported feeling pressured by their supervisor to produce research results, highlighting project-related stress in academia (Wellcome Trust, 2020). Similarly, Nature's 2019 global PhD survey revealed that nearly three-quarters of doctoral students (74%) were satisfied with their decision to pursue a PhD – a sign of strong intrinsic motivation – even as over one-third had sought help for anxiety or depression related to their research (Woolston, 2019). Considering these challenges, this analysis focuses on three core categories: autonomy in academic work, scientific competence, and relationships within the academic community. It examines how these factors influence academics' motivations. It provides insights into the interplay between personal identity, structural frameworks, and interpersonal dynamics, revealing the diverse factors that drive academic engagement within the prestige economy.

Ad.1. Autonomy in academic work

a) Academic identity versus organizational identity

Discussions around academics' essence touch on the balance between their individual identity and the identity conferred by their institution. This balance influences their scientific endeavours and public perception, encouraging them to focus on seeking and communicating academic values.

"Evaluating through the lens of organizational identity is significantly easier for some academics." [MPLS]. The central concern is harmonizing academic and organizational identities. The equilibrium between them is crucial for ensuring autonomy, as it significantly impacts how academics perceive and conduct their work.

b) Pursuit of autonomy and self-realization

The intrinsic motivations driving academics include a strong desire for autonomy and self-realization. By choosing academia over other professions, they admit they get intellectual freedom and seek personal fulfilment and recognition that transcends financial rewards. "The accumulated knowledge and experience expand capabilities, allowing one to effectively perform tasks that others, without the necessary knowledge, cannot handle." [MPUSZ]. This sentiment is further reinforced by the notion that accumulated knowledge and experience expand one's development capabilities.

c) Socio-cultural dynamics of academic autonomy

The social, cultural, and structural contexts within which academics operate profoundly influence their professional trajectories and the assessment of their autonomy. Between 2013 and 2023, the EU significantly increased its R&D spending, from 2.08% to 2.22% of GDP, amounting to €381 billion in 2023 alone. Notably, most of this growth was driven by the business sector, whose share rose from 1.33% to 1.47% of GDP (Eurostat, 2024). While this suggests heightened investment in knowledge economies, it also reflects the increasing structural dependency of academic research on market-driven priorities. For researchers, this evolving funding landscape intensifies the tension between pursuing autonomy and the institutional pressure to align with performance-based, externally funded models of knowledge production. "The 'ivory tower academics' concept described someone working in isolation, which used to be acceptable, even if it had a negative connotation. However, today, such an image of an academic who works in isolation and writes their papers is entirely impossible." [FPPW]. The socio-cultural contexts within which academics operate influence their professional trajectories and the assessment of their autonomy. This is evident in the imposition of specific ideological and worldview frameworks in project-based work, where individuals either conform or risk becoming marginalised within the system.

d) Importance of academic institutions and personal engagement

The prestige of HEIs significantly influences the individual standing of academics. However, personal engagement and active contribution are essential for building and sustaining one's academic reputation within the scientific community. "I identify as a professor of a discipline and a university professor. In the business context, this would be akin to employer branding, where the academic culture and traditions of the university are emphasised." [MPLS]. The reputation of esteemed academic institutions significantly enhances the individual standing of scholars. Personal engagement, active contribution, and a steadfast commitment to the institution's values are vital for sustaining and improving one's academic reputation. Academics must align their identity with the ethos of their institutions to maximise their prestige.

Ad.2. Scientific competence

a) Structure and evaluation of academic careers

The framework and evaluation systems within academia are crucial in shaping academics' careers and determining publication outcomes. These systems frequently revolve around project-based work and specific ideological frameworks that they must navigate. This structure is crucial for evaluating academic achievements, publication activities, and adherence to institutional standards. "When it comes to evaluation, I have personally conformed to the prevailing rules at the university. I accept the necessity of evaluating academic achievements, scientific qualities, and publication activities. I do not have much choice as I work at a public university." [FPPW]. The structures and evaluation criteria of academic institutions significantly shape academic careers. Evaluation processes, such as point systems and publication requirements, are designed to provide transparency, but they can also impose constraints that academics must navigate. In many countries, PhD education has expanded rapidly, often supported by performance-based funding formulas that reward universities for the number of

doctorates awarded. The growing number of PhDs awarded—such as a 37% increase in the United States since 2003, a 61% increase in the French-speaking Community of Belgium between 2000 and 2017, and a 260% increase in the Netherlands over the past 30 years—indicates a rising influx of researchers into the academic labor market. In France, for example, the ratio of doctorates awarded to available university and public research positions is approximately 10:1, highlighting a structural imbalance (OECD, 2023). This trend leads to a steady flow of highly qualified individuals competing for an increasing number of short-term academic positions, thereby shaping career trajectories and influencing motivational dynamics in academia.

b) Exclusivity and equal opportunities in science

In scientific competence, ongoing discourse centres on upholding rigorous intellectual standards and fostering equitable developmental opportunities for all researchers. This equilibrium is pivotal in cultivating a competitive yet inclusive academic milieu and profoundly influences academics' motivational dynamics. "There should be equality of opportunity, meaning it should be elite but also egalitarian in providing development opportunities." [MPLS]. Maintaining rigorous intellectual standards remains essential, and ensuring equal development opportunities for all researchers is equally necessary. This approach fosters a competitive but inclusive academic environment.

c) Experience and professional development of academics

Integrating lifelong learning and interpersonal academic relationships drives professional advancement in science. These elements shape an academic's development. "I recognise a snowball effect in the early stages—rigorously writing, attending numerous classes, and completing a doctorate. Later, one begins to weigh the pros and cons, deciding what is valuable and can be cut. This maturity comes with time." [FPUWR]. Academics' professional development reflects an iterative growth process from engagement to mature decision-making based on experience and critical evaluation.

d) Public image of academics and its impact on prestige

The public perception of academics, their communicative abilities, and the significance of publications and public appearances are pivotal in cultivating prestige. "Academic work is primarily about sharing our research findings with our peers. Often, these studies are interdisciplinary, allowing academics from different fields to access them." [FPPW]. Academics believe they must possess excellent knowledge and the ability to communicate it effectively, as this affects their prestige. "The race among researchers has been ongoing for centuries. The process has evolved with networking, altering the pace, scale, and recognition." [MPLS]. Expertise and communication skills are essential for academics as they enhance their professional standing.

Ad. 3. Relationships of the academic community

a) Connections between lecturers and students

Relationships with students are crucial for shaping academic and personal development. Effective mentoring and personal interactions influence educational experiences and the development of motivation for teaching. "I represent the part of higher education that places excellent hope in teaching. Sometimes a single sentence said during a class can be so significant, opening up new thoughts or helping students, that the rest of the class becomes irrelevant." [MPULSF]. Academics engage in various activities throughout their careers, including writing, teaching classes, and pursuing advanced degrees. They gain the maturity to evaluate and refine their actions, focusing on what is most valuable. The key to this process is a service-oriented approach to instruction, with the reflective evaluation of their teaching methods and acceptance of student feedback to improve themselves as educators.

b) Elitism and the role of elites in science

Intellectual, academic elites are recognised as pivotal in maintaining the integrity and prestige of scientific endeavours and inspiring the broader academic culture. "Every society should have social elites for structural and functional reasons. These elites used to form a part of social capital, a goal as important as a strong economy. Well-educated elites with both pragmatic and substantive competencies and ethical ones are crucial, and such ethical competencies are sorely lacking today."

[FPPW]. Intellectual elites in the academic community are essential to setting high ethical standards. Their influence is crucial in maintaining the integrity and prestige of the scholarly enterprise, thereby inspiring a broader academic culture. These elites serve as role models and custodians of intellectual capital, contributing to society's structural and functional needs.

c) Collaboration and institutional connections

Institutional affiliations and international collaborations are crucial for fostering a sense of community and relatedness among academics. Leydesdorff et al. (2017) demonstrate that international cooperation has a positive and statistically significant impact on citation rates. In contrast, the impact of public funding proves to be statistically insignificant. Moreover, openness and international cooperation are strongly correlated with higher citation visibility, according to an OECD (2023) report. These connections facilitate emotional and social support, driving effective partnerships and collaborative research. Connections between academics foster emotional and social bonds, enhancing the effectiveness of partnerships and collaborative research. Positive relationships and comfortable environments drive successful scientific collaborations and generate new research ideas.

d) Ethics, relationships and prestige

Ethical conduct, guided by academic values, and the development of ethical competence are vital to building and maintaining the prestige of academics. Their integrity and ethical behaviour are a cornerstone of their professional reputation. Adherence to high ethical standards is crucial to maintaining the integrity and prestige of the scientific community. The emphasis on respect for knowledge, diversity, and personal culture is essential to promoting the values that distinguish the intellectual elite.

4. Discussion

Integrating prestige into SDT shows how academic prestige affects intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, particularly autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While fulfilling the need for independence enhances motivation, prestige can restrict it by pressuring academics to align with recognised topics. However, it can also provide greater freedom through improved recognition and funding opportunities (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vallerand, 1997; Schmidt & Langberg, 2007).

Prestigious achievements, such as high-impact publications, significant grants, and esteemed awards, serve as external validation of an academic's skills and expertise, significantly boosting self-confidence and perceived competence, thereby enhancing their motivation to engage further in their field (González-Sauri & Rossello, 2023). However, this focus on external validation might also drive academics to prioritise outcomes more likely to accrue prestige rather than engaging deeply with research for personal and professional growth, potentially leading to a misalignment of intrinsic motivation and actual activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Also, Kotera et al. (2021) noticed that pursuing prestigious "external experiences" is distinct from true intrinsic motivation stemming from authentic personal interests.

Academics with high prestige are often sought after for collaborations, enhancing their sense of belonging and connectedness within the academic community. Also, Bozeman and Gaughan (2011) found that prestige is positively associated with faculty members' sense of professional connectedness and integration within their institution. However, an excessive focus on prestige can engender competitive rather than collaborative relationships, potentially undermining the genuine connections that foster a supportive academic environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Incorporating prestige into SDT reveals that academic motivations are influenced not only by fulfilling basic psychological needs but also by prestige-related rewards. Prestige can reinforce socioeconomic advantages, with scholars from higher socioeconomic backgrounds more likely to attend prestigious universities (Morgan et al., 2022), which explains why academics may pursue prestigious outcomes even if they do not align with their intrinsic needs (Lamont, 2009). This revised

framework provides a nuanced understanding of how prestige can lead academics to compromise autonomy or relatedness.

Conclusions

In contemporary academia, the pursuit of knowledge is closely entwined with the pursuit of prestige. Scholars are driven not only by intrinsic curiosity and a passion for discovery but also by the desire for recognition, influence, and status within the scientific community. This dynamic interplay between fundamental psychological motivations and the reward of prestige forms the backdrop of the present study. We set out to examine this interplay through the lens of SDT (SDT), a framework that traditionally emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the key needs fuelling motivation. By revisiting SDT in the context of the prestige economy of science, our goal was to understand how the quest for prestige affects academic motivation in practical and profound ways. The Polish academic context provided a compelling setting for this inquiry, as Poland's universities and researchers increasingly navigate both global benchmarks and local expectations of excellence. Within this setting, our study asked how prestige interweaves with academics' sense of autonomy, their drive for competence, and the bonds of collegial relatedness.

To pursue these questions, we adopted a qualitative, interpretative approach, conducting in-depth interviews with eleven Polish academics from diverse disciplines and career stages. This method allowed us to gather rich, nuanced accounts of personal experience with prestige in academic life. Our analysis of the interview data, supported by thematic coding and cross-examination among researchers, uncovered several key patterns. The findings reveal that prestige plays a nuanced dual role in academic motivation. On one hand, the attainment of prestigious milestones, such as publishing in high-impact journals, winning respected awards, or securing positions at elite institutions, bolsters an academic's sense of competence by affirming their expertise, and it strengthens relatedness by opening doors to influential professional networks and collaborations. Prestige, in this positive light, provides validation and can energize scholars, reinforcing their connection to the academic community. On the other hand, the pull of prestige can come at the expense of autonomy. Many participants voiced that the pressure to align with prestige-driven norms, focusing on topics, methods, or outcomes most likely to win recognition, sometimes constrained their freedom to pursue personally meaningful or innovative lines of inquiry. In short, while prestige can validate and motivate by providing symbolic and tangible rewards, it can also subtly redirect academic effort away from intrinsic interests, creating tensions between what is academically rewarding and what is personally fulfilling. Notably, our interviews also hinted that these effects are not uniform: for instance, prestige considerations often influence how scholars choose collaborators or mentors, and some respondents observed that traditional prestige systems can unintentionally reinforce inequalities (such as gender disparities in recognition and opportunities). These insights underscore that prestige's influence is complex, capable of both elevating academic work and introducing new challenges to intellectual autonomy and equity.

The foremost theoretical contribution of this study is the proposal of a prestige-augmented SDT model that explicitly integrates the concept of prestige (as a form of symbolic capital) with the core psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This integration represents a novel expansion of SDT, extending its explanatory power by accounting for socio-cultural forces that drive academic behaviour. In traditional SDT, motivation is understood largely in terms of internal needs and values versus external incentives; our expanded model demonstrates that prestige blurs the line between these categories. Prestige can function simultaneously as an intrinsic motivator (deeply internalized as part of one's identity and values, where recognition is personally gratifying) and as an extrinsic incentive (external rewards and status). By incorporating prestige into the motivational framework, we highlight how symbolic rewards and status considerations intersect with basic psychological needs. This enriched perspective advances theory by revealing a more holistic picture of academic motivation—one that acknowledges not just the psychological, but also the sociological

economy in which academics operate. It sheds light on why highly capable and autonomous scholars might still chase external marks of distinction, and conversely, how the structure of prestige in academia can affect one's sense of competence and belonging. In sum, the study offers a fresh theoretical lens for understanding academic motivation, bridging SDT with the prestige economy of science and opening up new lines of inquiry about how esteem and reputation intertwine with the motivational processes of academics. Beyond theoretical insights, our findings carry practical implications for higher education policy and academic leadership. University administrators, research funders, and department leaders should be cognizant of the double-edged nature of prestige in academic life. On one side, carefully designed recognition and reward systems can harness the positive power of prestige: acknowledging excellent work, fostering healthy competition, and building vibrant scholarly communities. For example, transparent and fair criteria for promotions, awards, and grants can validate genuine achievement and enhance academics' feelings of competence and relatedness. On the other side, policymakers and leaders must guard against incentive structures that inadvertently stifle autonomy or encourage perverse outcomes. If too much emphasis is placed on a narrow set of prestige indicators—such as only counting publications in a few top-tier journals or obsessing over university rankings—academics may feel pressured to “play it safe” or conform to established prestige norms, potentially at the cost of creativity and intellectual risk-taking. To counterbalance this, institutions should develop policies that support intrinsic motivation and intellectual diversity. This could include broadening the definition of academic success beyond traditional prestige metrics: valuing impactful teaching, openscience practices, interdisciplinary collaboration, or contributions to society that may not come with immediate accolades. Academic leadership should also promote a culture of equity and inclusion in the prestige economy. Our study's participants pointed out that access to prestige is not always equal, factors like gender, age, or institutional resources can influence who reaps the rewards. Thus, leaders should strive to create mentorship programs, funding opportunities, and evaluation processes that level the playing field, ensuring that talented researchers from all backgrounds have pathways to earn recognition. In practical terms, the lesson is clear: higher education institutions need to strike a balance by celebrating excellence and encouraging ambition, while also safeguarding the autonomy of scholars and the ethical, collaborative spirit of research.

While this study offers important insights, it is not without limitations. First, the research was conducted with a relatively small sample of academics (eleven interviewees) and is confined to a single national context – Poland. The qualitative, in-depth approach allowed us to explore experiences and perceptions in detail, but it also means that our findings may not be readily generalizable to all academics or to other countries' higher education systems. The Polish academic environment has its own historical, cultural, and organizational nuances; for instance, local funding structures, evaluation criteria, and academic traditions could shape how prestige is experienced. Readers should therefore be cautious in extending our conclusions to different settings without further evidence. Second, as a qualitative study relying on self-reported experiences, there is the possibility of bias in what participants chose to share or emphasize. We mitigated this through careful triangulation and by selecting a diverse sample, but some dimensions of the prestige-motivation interplay might remain underexplored or differ in other contexts. Additionally, our focus on the university sector in a specific period offers a snapshot in time. Academic norms and policies evolve what holds true in the current prestige climate may shift with new generations of scholars or changes in the academic labour market. In light of these factors, the contributions of this work should be viewed as exploratory and hypothesis-generating. They map out a conceptual territory that future research can further chart, rather than a definitive, one-size-fits-all model for all of academia.

Building on the foundation laid here, we see several avenues for future research. Empirical studies with larger and more varied samples are needed to test the prestige-augmented SDT model across different contexts. Quantitative research, for example, could measure the impact of prestige-related factors (like institutional reputation or citation-based metrics of individual prestige) on indicators of

motivation, performance, or well-being among academics in multiple countries. Such studies would help determine whether the dynamics observed in Poland occur similarly elsewhere or if cultural and systemic differences alter the prestige-motivation relationship. Cross-national comparisons, perhaps between Polish academics and those in Western European or North American systems, could be particularly illuminating. It would also be valuable to examine different academic disciplines and career stages in future work. The role of prestige might be more pronounced in research-intensive fields or at certain career points (for instance, during the race for tenure vs. later in a career); thus, comparative studies across fields (natural sciences, social sciences, humanities) or longitudinal studies following academics over time could yield deeper insights. Further qualitative research in other national contexts—especially in emerging higher education systems or under-represented regions—would also extend the understanding of how local prestige economies operate. Finally, an important direction for future inquiry is the development and testing of interventions or policy changes inspired by our findings. Researchers could experiment with new incentive structures or support programs at universities to see if tweaking the prestige economy (for example, by recognizing team science, community engagement, or open-access publishing) can maintain high motivation and performance while reducing negative pressures. Such practical experiments, coupled with continued theoretical refinement, will ultimately help academic communities worldwide to foster an environment where the healthy pursuit of prestige aligns with, rather than undermines, the intrinsic joy of scholarly work.

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