Exploring Online Adult Student Reasoning to Pursue a Practitioner Doctoral Degree

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The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe adult learners' reasons to pursue a doctorate degree. The framework focused on the Self-determination Theory. Data were collected via 45 semi-structured interviews. Researchers used Claude AI 3. 5 Sonnet (Artificial Intelligence) as a methodological tool to apply Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Five themes emerged consisting of Personal Growth and Fulfillment, Career Advancement and Development, Interpersonal Identity and Expectations, Societal Impact and Systemic Change, and Practical Considerations. Future research recommendations include providing professional development opportunities for faculty to support students with the ethical use of AI. The researchers acknowledge and document the use of both AI as a methodological tool and the researchers' analytical skills in manually cross-referencing the data to support the AI thematic analysis process.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Methodological Tool, Qualitative Data Analysis, Research Support

Introduction

Historically, individuals pursued a doctorate with the intention of entering a career in academia, but the context changed when academia became saturated with PhDs seeking research teaching degrees (Sarrico, 2022). The shift, which began in the late 1990s, attracted non-traditional adult students. Working adults began to seek other types of doctoral degrees which aimed to support career growth and advancement. Different in content from the research teaching focus, practitioner doctoral degrees could support employees to acquire advanced positions in business, science, and health care. Universities responded by offering online doctoral practitioner degrees in the fields of Education (EDD), Business Administration/Management (DBA/DM), and Health Administration (DHA). One aim of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2021) is to explore and inform how the global labor market can absorb the exuberance of laborers who have attained a doctorate. The OECD acknowledges the economy could benefit from more employees with higher level degrees and acknowledges a need for more information on how graduates are using degrees. Boud et al. (2018) reported qualitative research which indicated work-based professional doctorate learners positively influenced organizations through usable practices and products through new processes, networks, and relationships. Sarrico (2022) expressed a need for future research to discover why people pursue a doctoral education.

The researchers of this study wanted to examine student reasons for pursuing a doctorate degree in an online university which promotes practitioner degrees. The Self-determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2020) was the framework for the study, because the concepts within the theory provided an understanding of factors to facilitate or undermine motivation. One central research question guided the study: How do adult students describe their reasons for pursuing a practitioner doctorate degree in an online setting?

Literature Review

The understanding of doctoral learner motivation is increasingly important. Sarrico (2022) recommended future researchers discover why people pursue a doctoral education. Motivation, career opportunities, relational incentive, and field impact were key factors for some doctoral students to engage in doctoral degree pursuits according to studies completed in 2021-2023. Motivation can be explained as a reason for doctoral

pursuit in isolation but also as an underlying concept supporting other reasons. The following discussion includes explanations of these researchers' findings about doctoral pursuit reasons, and how theory is interconnected to the study findings.

Doctoral students' motivation was described with different descriptors. Ramirez et al. (2022) focused on exploring the motivation of graduate students in terms of hedonic and eudaimonic motivation through quantitative descriptive statistics. Graduate students were found to have high levels of both types of motivation. Hedonic motivation is defined as subjective well-being (Marino, 2017). Eudaimonic motivation is characterized by a person pursuing intrinsic goals including improvement of personal growth, relationships, community, and health in contrast to extrinsic goals such as wealth, fame, image and power (Heintzelman, 2018; Kashdan et al., 2008; Ryan et al., 2008). A phenomenological study by Chamadia and Qureshi (2021) reported self-actualization as one of the initial motivation factors for pursuing a doctorate. The participants' responses indicated the need for "acceptance, reverence, recognition, and self-esteem in society" (Chamadia & Qureshi, 2021, p. 409). Turner (2023) discovered a significant positive relationship between specific types of motivation and satisfaction among PhD students. Turner's purpose was to understand the types of motivation aligned with concepts of the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The concept of motivation overlaps with other reasons a student desires a higher education degree.

Doctoral students reported another reason for pursuing a doctorate degree was career opportunities. Dos Santos (2023) conducted a qualitative case study to discover motivation factors for female engineering students pursuing doctorate degrees in an American university. Career development was a significant motivator to obtaining a doctorate degree for Dos Santos' study participants. Chamadia and Qureshi (2021) discovered the most prominent motivation to achieve a doctorate degree was career advancement from the perspective of study participants. Turner (2022) reported participants perceived a doctorate degree was needed to achieve career promotion and financial advancement.

A third reason doctoral students desired the attainment of a doctoral degree involved relational incentives. Turner (2023) conducted a mixed methods study to investigate motivation (in context of SDT) and satisfaction of part time PhD students in the USA. The type of *integrated motivation* most frequently discussed by participants was in reference to role-modeling for family, because of participants' personal education values with a desire to see their children or extended family pursue similar goals (Turner, 2023). Also, Turner's participants reported motivation entailed a desire for self-worth and value in context of personal colleagues in university settings. Some of Turner's participants made comments about not getting the desired respect without the achievement of a doctorate degree.

Doctoral learners indicated field impact was a reason to pursue an advanced degree. Turner (2023) noted PhD students spoke about the relationship between personal doctoral programs and professional careers. The participants desired to use skills developed through the program to advance outcomes or solve problems within personal fields and expressed this as the greatest motivation for working on a doctorate.

The conceptual framework of this study was based on Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self Determination Theory (SDT). The theory is explained through a continuum with labels in sequential order: amotivation (lacking motivation), extrinsic motivation (with incremental degrees of these characteristics with specified labels), and intrinsic motivation. The incremental degrees of extrinsic motivation are external regulation (based on rewards and punishments), introjection (based on approval from self and others), identification (self-endorsement of goals), and integration (doing an activity because it is valuable) (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The theory provides a model to explain motivations are not always dichotomous (extrinsic vs. intrinsic), but motivation can be influenced by a combination of factors resulting in varying degrees of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Turner's (2023) study revealed the importance of understanding doctoral students' type of motivation based upon the SDT model; *integrated motivation* (the label farthest toward the intrinsic end of the SDT continuum) was the most common type of motivation for Turner's participants to pursue a doctorate degree. Findings suggested learners with *integrated motivation* act upon personal values, goals, and needs (Turner, 2023). Integrated motivation (or labeled as *integrated regulation*) is characterized by people doing activities because they are deemed worthwhile and have value to cause a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Ryan and Deci (2020) define intrinsic motivation as people engaging in activities because they are deemed enjoyable, even fun. The relatedness of SDT in this current study is to view participants' reasons for pursuing a doctorate in context of the SDT motivation types and pursuit of a practitioner doctoral degree.

Methods

This research consisted of a qualitative descriptive (QD) design. The research design was selected for flexibility and practical application focused on describing different experiences (Doyle et al., 2020). The QD study aligned with the goal of gaining insight to support the purpose and research question to generate data describing experiences from a subjective perspective (Kim et al., 2017). Doyle et al. (2020) advocated for

QD design for studies where the goal includes understanding participant experiences within a unique context. Doctoral learners earning practitioner degrees in an online environment is a unique context.

The interview process development included an expert panel, field tests, and pseudonym creation. An expert panel review and three field tests were conducted to refine the interview protocol. The population included a convenience sample of 45 participants who met the inclusion criteria of completing at least one doctoral course in the first phase of the program at an online institution in the southwest region of the United States. After completing the informed consent, participants answered demographic questions related to program start year, program phase, degree program, current class, expected or graduation year, gender identity, age, generation, employment, ethnicity/race, and family responsibilities. Confidentiality was maintained using pseudonyms. The pseudonym elements identified only gender and the numerical order in which participants were assigned to their interview time slots. For instance, PF1 represented the first female participant to be interviewed. PM6 indicated the sixth participant to be interviewed was a male. The gender identifier potentially provided researchers with information about differences between reasons to pursue a doctorate, which was not observed.

While the research focus was not to proport nor gather data about specific analysis strategies, the technology used enhances future discussions about educational practices and heightens the study's significance. Jafari and Keykha's (2024) noted the increased use of AI and admonished researchers to build on opportunities to influence innovative changes to enhance educational quality, considering the increasing importance of technology including AI. Researchers reported the value of ChatGPT as an AI tool to adapt learning, personalize feedback, support research, automate administrative tasks, and integrate creative assessments (Rasul et al., 2023). Accordingly, integrating AI can contribute to connecting content with enhanced engagement opportunities while encouraging critical and creative analysis. Specific to research support, although awareness of the potential pitfalls is vital, AI is useful in analyzing large-scale qualitative data, generating insightful information, and automating tasks such as coding (Anis & French, 2023; Dahal, 2024). For this qualitative study, the researchers defined large-scale as conducting 45 semi-structured individual interviews. AI offers opportunities to empower educators throughout the teaching, learning, and research process.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews via Zoom from 45 participants consisting of 33 female (73%) and 12 males (27%). After each interview, the transcripts were sent to participants for member checking to verify accuracy. The interview data were evaluated using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six phase thematic analysis approach, which consisted of becoming familiar with the data (phase 1), generating initial codes (phase 2), searching for themes (phase 3), reviewing themes (phase 4), defining themes (phase 5), and writing the report (phase 6).

Data Analysis

For the data analysis process–phase 1, researchers engaged in familiarization of the data, which required reading of the transcripts multiples times (Braun & Clarke, 2022). After phase 1, researchers used Claude AI 3. 5 Sonnet as a methodological tool to aid in initial coding and analysis of potential patterns. For this study, Claude AI 3. 5 Sonnet was selected after a member of the research team completed a professional development workshop wherein the tool was found to be user-friendly when exploring prompt outcomes. Specifically, Claude AI 3.5 Sonnet was used to augment the data analysis process and specifically support research opportunities. Mykhalko et al. (2024) determined Claude AI 3.5 Sonnet had the highest consistency in diagnostic performance when compared to ChatGPT 3.5, ChatGPT 4o, and Google Gemini. When augmenting the data analysis process, Hitch (2024) highlighted how AI can contribute to an efficient process when analyzing large datasets. The efficiency of evaluating codes and themes through AI supported the initial analysis of the 45 interview transcripts. The following prompts were applied after becoming familiar with the data and after submission of interview transcripts to Claude AI. Claude AI was told to "use Braun and Clark step 2 to generate initial codes across the data bases of …" In place of the ellipsis, the participant code names were inserted for all 45 participants. Additionally, Claude AI was prompted to "use Braun and Clark step 3 to reduce the initial codes to potential themes." Next, Claude AI was told to "Use Braun and Clark step 4 to review themes to check if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the full data set, generating a 'thematic map'." Lastly, Claude AI was engaged to "use Braun and Clark step 5 to define and name themes." For phase six, the researchers created their own report, because the Claude AI command of "use Braun and Clarke step 6 to create a scholarly report of the analysis" produced a noncomprehensive report. The combined approach of using AI and cross-referencing allowed the researchers to apply a rigorous, reliable, and transparent approach to validating data.

The emergence of AI was considered an efficient means to analyze a large data set of qualitative data about doctoral pursuits, but Christou (2023) and Dahal (2024) cautioned the use of AI without traditional data

analysis. While the main purpose of this paper was not to investigate and/or measure AI impacts on data analysis accuracy, the researchers followed Christou's guidance for maintaining control over the analysis process. To ensure rigor and reliable results, the researchers applied the 5-step guidance provided by Christou (2023) when using AI as a methodological tool. The 5-steps include focusing on becoming acquainted with the data generated, removing biased content along with ethical concerns, cross-referencing the information, controlling the analysis process, and demonstrating continued cognitive contribution by the researchers. The cross-referencing process was instrumental in ensuring the analysis in Braun and Clark's (2022) phases 2-5 aligned with the data familiarization in phase 1 and the scholarly report in phase 6. The researchers were cautious in checking for hallucinations, or false information, which were not observed. For instance, the researchers critically evaluated the codes generated and theme development throughout the thematic analysis process. When cross-referencing information, the researchers reviewed the transcripts to ensure code accuracy, checked for conflicting content within the data, determined participant quotes supporting the themes, and applied analysis skills in interpreting while identifying conclusions from the final themes.

Results

Participants described reasons for pursuing a doctorate degree. Themes from these descriptions identified commonalities of student experiences. Researchers prompted Claude AI to apply Braun and Clarke's (2022) phases to analyze interview transcripts. Claude AI completed Braun and Clark's phases to provide an initial summary wherein researchers reviewed the information generated to ensure an accurate analysis process. Phase 5 involved the defining and naming of themes. Researchers conducted a parallel analysis by engaging in phases 1, 3 and 4 while rereading transcripts to substantiate and determine if AI had accurately identified themes. Additional analysis from the researchers included identifying supporting participant statements and critically interpreting unique statements. The following discussion demonstrates Claude AI's response to evaluate data through Braun and Clarke's phase 5 (define and name themes) and researchers' cross-referencing of the interview transcripts.

Theme 1: Personal Growth and Fulfillment

This theme captures the participants' intrinsic motivation to pursue a doctorate for personal growth, challenge, and achievement.

Researchers cross-referenced the interview transcripts and noted the following support for theme one through interviewee comments. Participants used phrases to support the theme, *Personal Growth and Fulfillment*, which aligned with intrinsic motivation. Doctoral students used words such as *lifelong learner*, *personal accomplishment*, *personal development*, and *achiever* to describe reasons for pursuing a doctorate degree. PF18 explained the pursuit of a doctorate degree was to "further my education and just be involved in life as an adult learner to expand my own knowledge base." PF21 described the reason for beginning the doctoral journey was:

> *…because it's personal. This is actually a personal accomplishment. This is not about work. This is not …. to excel in my professional career. This is a personal accomplishment to say that you know what? Just keep pushing yourself and pushing yourself and creating different versions and improved versions, better versions of yourself.*

PF46 stated, "So for me it is making sure that I could find value in myself, too." PM11 mentioned, "I just want to do it for myself to be able to have it to be able to say, I've done this Like, I achieved this." PF48 stated, "I just love school…So this has always been a lifelong ambition for me…" Seeking to change her current career as a nurse for 18 years, PF 32 decided she wanted to learn the business side of medical care and replied, "And so, I am taking this degree program in business administration, and finding it's really been beneficial in explaining all the complex moving parts of the financial aspect of health care. And that is just something that we just didn't get exposed to during nursing school." Participants' responses aligned with *Personal Growth and Fulfillment* was the most highly supported theme. Twenty-nine of the 45 participants (64%) commented on some form of personal growth and fulfillment as a reason for pursuing a doctorate. The cross-referencing affirmed Claude AI's ability to describe themes appropriately from interview transcripts.

Theme 2: Career Advancement and Development

This theme focuses on the participants' aspirations to enhance their careers through doctoral education.

The cross-referencing process revealed interviewees described *Career Advancement and Development*. Participant comments aligned with extrinsic categories of the SDT continuum of external regulation, introjection, and identification. Participants' desire to teach at the university level and achieve job promotions was mentioned. Participants PF14, PF18, PF34, PF48, PM55, and PM10 made adamant comments describing a desire to teach at a university level after achieving a doctorate degree. PF54 stated, "I knew that was part of my long-term goal as I wanted to be able to teach because I saw the impact that education had on my own life and

the trajectory of my path changed drastically." PF57 stated, "I feel like people won't listen to me until I become a doctor, cause you're the expert." PF49 stated, "You make a difference when you have a certain title behind or in front of your name." PF4 added "A doctorate degree will give me that special stage because no one is going to respect me just as a teacher. I will have the label of expert in my field. So that's when I decided I'm going to go for it." *Career Advancement and Development* was a concept reported by 25 of the 45 participants (55%) concerning a reason to pursue a doctorate degree; therefore, Claude AI's ability to describe themes appropriately from interview transcripts was verified because of the researchers' parallel analysis.

Theme 3: Interpersonal Identity and Expectations

This theme explores the influence of family, friends, and colleagues on the participants' decision to pursue a doctorate.

Researchers cross-referenced data and identified statements to support the theme, *Interpersonal Identity and Expectations*, which included stories of influences of deceased loved ones, provoking associates, impressionable children, and inspiring mentors. The extrinsic motivation categories of introjection and identification from the SDT model were evidenced. PF17 and PF18 spoke of loved ones speaking supportive words of encouragement to interviewees to achieve a doctorate degree prior to passing away. PF 24 spoke of a daughter turning 17 years old and a conversation about the mother pursuing a doctorate degree. PF 24 said, "Her first words to me, last year, were to just do it!" PF 25 spoke of sorority sisters as degreed individuals with doctorate degrees and a self-sense of being a "slacker." A sorority sister offered to read PF25's doctoral papers, when the papers were available, for coherency, which encouraged PF25 to pursue a doctorate degree. PF 25 stated the pursuit of the degree was a "product of my environment", and the environment was mentoring sorority affiliates. PM 41 added "My Dad didn't go to college, So I remember that day when I first started college and my Dad dropped me off. He said when [I] drop you off, don't let me down. I want you to make me proud. I knew that was what I had to do. I had to make my Dad proud." PF14 discussed being motivated by working around lifelong learners. PF14's comment was an example of a participant's perception of gaining respect from others based upon doctorate degree achievement. Twenty-three of the 45 participants (51%) made comments related to *Interpersonal Identity and Expectations,* which affirmed researcher cross-referencing.

Theme 4: Societal Impact and Systemic Change

This theme encompasses the participants' desire to make a positive difference in society through their doctoral education.

Researchers' cross-referencing revealed interviewees discussed *Societal Impact and Systemic Change* through the obtainment of a doctorate degree in context of becoming a youth advocate, bringing about change, and helping others. Participant comments aligned with extrinsic categories of the SDT model of identification and integrated. PF14 described a reason for earning a doctorate degree as "so I can help work with our youth and get some programs started and advocate to make a difference." PF20 made similar comments about advocating for children in foster care through research insights. PF34 and PF40 described desires to do research about school administrators with the purpose of bringing change to educational institutions. PM35 discussed the purpose of education was to place individuals in positions to "help others and help the world." PF12 said she aspired to be a reading specialist to honor her grandparents who both were illiterate yet inspired her to continue her education. Her dream was "to one day get a foundation started in my grandparents' memory." Seventeen of the 45 participants (37%) discussed reasons for pursuing a doctorate with comments related to *Societal Impact and Systemic Change*, which affirmed Claude AI's interpretation of data. However, Claude AI listed the themes in descending order which matched researchers' analysis based upon the number of responses, until theme 4. For the purposes of this report, the researchers did not reorder theme 4 after theme 5 to represent descending order in the amount of participant support for each theme.

Theme 5: Practical Considerations

This theme covers the practical factors that influenced the participants' decision to pursue a doctorate including timing affordability, available funding, and educational path progression.

Interview cross-referencing affirmed transcript content matched the formation of theme 5. Participants' comments to support the theme, *Practical Considerations*, were contextualized with personal stories. Participant motivation appeared to be categorized as external regulation on the SDT continuum. PF20 told of surviving breast cancer and beginning a new career role, and afterwards hearing a voice in her head saying the time was right to move on to pursue a doctorate degree. Timing in a person's life was a repeated concept. PF1 stated, "I remember sitting at home, and I thought at my age, late fifties at the time, if I don't do it now, I'm never doing this." PF25 explained the circumstances of the pandemic with being at home was the "perfect opportunity" to do doctoral work while still working full time. PM11 discussed the hardships of completing the payments for a masters' degree: "I spent the next 10 years dedicated to paying off every single

bit……including student loans." PM11 continued to explain excitement when discovering a current employer offered tuition assistance for a doctorate degree. Multiple participants discussed the timing of the educational progression in context of life events and financial circumstances as practical reasons for pursuing a doctorate degree. PF48 stated the employer, "decided that they were gonna start paying for doctoral program. So like, right when they announced that I started..." Twenty-three of the 45 participants (51%) discussed reasons for pursuing a doctorate with comments related to *Practical Considerations*.

Discussion and Conclusion

The following is a summary of findings, recommendations, supporting literature, and implications of understanding why adult students are pursuing practitioner doctoral degrees. Claude AI was used to identify 5 themes from 45 participant interview transcripts. All themes were cross-referenced within each of the 45 participants' transcripts. Individual participant responses were used to exemplify the content of the theme. Students were pursuing a practitioner doctorate for reasons which included enhanced subject area knowledge, self- improvement and career advancement in their respective fields as opposed to seeking a PHD for higher education advancement in research. The findings are consistent with Self-determination Theory as portrayed by the participants' motivation to develop higher skill levels enabling better opportunities for professional development and job advancement.

The ethical principles of research using human subjects, beneficence, respect and justice, guided this research. All students in the doctoral program were invited to participate in the study. Students were asked to acknowledge and agree to a video and audio recording. Participants were given the option of stopping the interview. Of the original respondents, 45 signed the informed consent which ensured confidentiality. Beyond the ethics applied in participant treatment, strict ethical behavior using Claude AI was followed. The legitimacy of the AI analysis was backed by reading and instructing Claude AI to follow each of Braun and Clarke's (2022) phases for thematic analysis. The speed and accurate thematic analysis by Claude were accomplished in minutes by uploading the transcripts at one time. Accordingly, understanding the use of AI in ensuring effective and ethical application is vital for future research (Hitch, 2024). Emphasis on data accuracy and the ethical use of AI was consistently documented throughout the study.

The study contained important implications for future research. Claude AI can be used as a reputable means for thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2022) phases with a recommendation is to manually cross-reference data for accuracy and content validity. This study builds on the recommendation by Christou (2023) and Dahal (2024) to continue exploring and understanding AI research-related outcomes. A recommendation to follow the data analysis procedures used in this study will affirm data replicability.

In summary, the research question: How do students describe their reasons for pursuing a doctorate degree? was answered. Many students reported intrinsic reasons to pursue a doctorate degree: *Personal Growth and Fulfillment*. Others expressed reasons linked to different types of extrinsic motivation: *Career Advancement and Development*, *Interpersonal Identity and Expectations*, *Societal Impact and Systemic Change*, and *Practical Considerations*. Results indicated, regardless of what factors influenced participants to begin a doctoral program, all expressed a strong sense of self-determination aligned with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). No matter what factors students attributed to their pursuit of a doctorate, self- determination to succeed underscored each student's personal description.

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