

The Quiet Driver: Academic Interest and Its Echo in Student Performance

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Abstract

This study examined the interplay between academic interest and academic performance among high school students in Uganda, with emphasis on the role of motivation in learning. The study was guided by Self-Determination and Expectancy–Value Theories. A quantitative correlational design was employed, involving 297 students selected through proportionate stratified random sampling. Academic interest was measured using a 19-item questionnaire, while academic performance was assessed using promotional grades. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson’s correlation, and simple linear regression. Results indicated generally high levels of academic interest among students. Significant positive relationships were observed between academic interest and performance in arts subjects ($r = .167, p < .01$) and overall academic achievement ($r = .138, p < .05$). However, no statistically significant relationship was observed between academic interest and science performance ($r = .102, p = .077$). The study concluded that academic interest contributes to overall academic performance, though its influence varies across subject areas. We recommend that educators adopt interest-enhancing strategies, particularly in science subjects, to improve student engagement and learning outcomes.

Keywords: Academic interest, self-regulated learning, academic achievement, Uganda

Introduction

In contemporary educational discussions, particularly among teachers, maintaining student motivation remains a ceaseless challenge, especially in efforts to improve academic performance and ensure fair learning outcomes. While explanations for academic success have traditionally emphasized learner cognitive aptitude, pedagogical quality, and socioeconomic background, a growing body of research underscores the critical role of motivational factors, particularly academic interest, as a subtle yet influential determinant of student achievement (Yazid & Ali, 2025; Zynuddin et al., 2023; Renninger & Hidi, 2015). Seen as a lasting tendency to engage with learning activities based on intrinsic satisfaction or personal relevance, academic interest often operates as a quiet yet consistent bedrock of learner-sustained academic engagement and success (Mappadang et al., 2022).

Grounded in well-established motivational frameworks, this study draws primarily on Self-Determination Theory (Razali, 2021; Deci, 2017) and expectancy-value theory (Amegah, 2024; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) to clarify how academic interest influences student performance. According to Self-Determination Theory [SDT], students are more likely to get involved in constructive academic tasks when learning activities meet their basic psychological needs (Li et al., 2025). In this framework, academic interest is regarded as a form of intrinsic motivation that reinforces learners’ cognitive engagement and persistence in learning activities. In contrast, Expectancy–Value Theory [EVT] views academic interest as a function of students’ anticipations for success and the value they attach to a learning task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2024; Gladstone et al., 2022). According to this theory, this explains why there

may be differences in students' subject-specific motivation and performance. For example, if a student aspires to pursue a particular profession, they are likely to be more motivated and invest greater effort in subjects perceived as relevant to achieving that goal, which in turn enhances their performance; conversely, lower relevance may result in reduced motivation and weaker academic outcomes.

While these theories provide a foundational explanation for the study, they are not without limitations, especially when applied to secondary school contexts in Uganda. First, Self-Determination Theory emphasizes learning environments that permit students' meaningful independent learning; however, this is far from reality, and it is unlikely in Uganda's context, which is highly exam-oriented and teacher-centered. In fact, the competition among schools for national ranking in performance has not only created an exam-oriented culture but also caused teachers to keep students occupied, both in school and even during holiday time, in what is termed 'holiday coaching.' With this exercise, learners have little or no space for independent learning or self-study. Similarly, Expectancy-Value Theory places much relevance on individual cognitive evaluations of task value and success expectancy, overlooking the realities on the ground, such as curriculum rigidity, sometimes limited instructional resources, and societal and family expectations that shape students' subject choices and cognitive engagement. Thus, it is prudent to acknowledge that these theories may not clearly capture the contextual constraints that preempt the development and expression of academic interest in real classroom settings.

Nonetheless, the aforementioned limitations do not undermine the value and applicability of these theoretical perspectives in the present study. Together, they provide complementary lenses for understanding both the internal motivational processes and the subject-specific patterns of engagement that characterize students' academic experiences. As previously noted, in this study, Self-Determination Theory informs the interpretation of academic interest as a sustained moti-

vational disposition, while expectancy-value theory offers insight into why students may portray varying motivation and performance across subjects. Therefore, by acknowledging both the strengths and limitations of these theories, the present study adopts a context-sensitive theoretical approach that strengthens the interpretation of the findings and enhances their relevance for instructional practice and policy formulation.

Prior studies have consistently demonstrated that students with higher levels of academic interest are more likely to engage in self-regulated learning behaviors, maintain sustained effort, and achieve superior academic outcomes across subjects (Iriyanto et al., 2023; Wibrowski et al., 2016; Barron, 2008). Nonetheless, the manifestation of academic interest is not uniform across learners. Students tend to exhibit stronger interest in subjects aligned with their intrinsic goals, learning preferences, or perceived utility, leading to observable variations in engagement across disciplines (Ainley et al., 2002).

Surprisingly, despite this well-documented importance, many high school students show a notable lack of academic interest. In several cases, students displayed little self-initiative, lacked commitment to their studies, and had few, if any, personal learning goals. Instead of being self-driven, many students consider their education a duty to satisfy their parents or meet societal expectations. Indeed, thoughts such as "I do not want to disappoint my parents" demonstrate a disconnect from individual engagement with learning. This detachment is often evident in various indicators, such as frequent absenteeism, poor time management, habitual tardiness, and reluctance to complete academic tasks on time. In Uganda, these patterns are further exacerbated by an education system that focuses on exams and teacher-led instruction (albeit under the new curriculum), which prioritizes performance over genuine student engagement. Consequently, fostering intrinsic interest is often underemphasized, raising significant concerns about the sustainability of academic motivation and its

effects on student performance in such environments.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the relationship between academic interest and student performance among Senior Three learners in four secondary schools in Wakiso District, Uganda. Senior Three was deliberately selected because it is a crucial point in the academic trajectory. At this stage, students are generally accustomed to the secondary school environment but are not yet burdened by the intense pressure of national examinations. This period offers an important opportunity to study how learning interest develops and influences academic achievements. This study specifically sought to determine whether academic interest predicts performance and whether its impact differs between Arts and Science subjects.

By highlighting the delicate yet significant influence of academic interest on student outcomes, particularly in a Ugandan setting, this study aims to guide teaching practices, curriculum planning, and educational policies that are better tailored to the local context. It supplements the broader conversation on learner motivation by emphasizing that some of the most powerful drivers of academic success often function quietly beyond what grades and assessments reveal.

Literature Review

From Situational to Individual Academic Interest

Within educational psychology, a distinction is drawn between situational and individual academic interests. Although connected, these two are separate constructs that shape how students approach learning. On the one hand, individual interest is relatively stable and enduring, rooted in a personal attachment to a subject that sustains long-term engagement. In contrast, situational interest is short-lived and often sparked by external elements such as novelty, emotional appeal, or environmental conditions (Renninger et al., 2014, 2019; Schiefele, 2009).

Szymańska (2022) characterized individual interest as an emotionally charged and internalized focus on certain academic areas, associated with stronger positive emotions and consistent cognitive involvement. This perspective supports core theories linking interest to improved attention, enjoyment, and deeper learning (Berlyne, 1949; Silvia, 2006). For example, a student genuinely intrigued by environmental science may take part in extra projects or self-directed study, which reinforces both knowledge and academic satisfaction.

Building on this theoretical lens, Eccles and Wigfield (2002) and Tin (2016) distinguished between affective valences (such as enjoyment and excitement) and value-based valences (such as perceived importance or usefulness). This dual perspective reveals the complex nature of individual interest, blending emotional and evaluative aspects, and positioning it as a strong motivational driver (Kahu et al., 2017; Reeve, 2024). Since we want to understand how interest transforms from situational to individualized, Renninger and Hidi (2022) outline a developmental process in which interest grows from externally triggered curiosity to deeply internalized academic pursuits. Over time, learners may expand their focus from narrow areas, such as mathematics or literature, to broader domains, such as sports, music, or film. Some even cultivate a wider epistemic curiosity, reflected in their steady desire to explore and connect novel knowledge across multiple fields.

But how does it all start? The literature indicates that specific external stimuli may prompt situational interest, which tends to be temporary unless actively encouraged. In most cases, it is triggered by instructional strategies that introduce novelty, surprise, or personal relevance (Hidi & Renninger, 2019). Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. (2010) and Rajaram (2023) argue that teaching methods that emphasize relevance and emotional engagement are particularly effective in fostering situational interest, which can lead to the development of more enduring motivation. It is important to note that while individual interest arises from learners' intrinsic thoughts

and feelings, situational interest is primarily influenced by task features, peer interaction, or instructional design (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). However, Renninger and Hidi (2015, 2022) argue that the two are not mutually exclusive but exist along a continuum. Learners with existing individual interests are more responsive to situational cues, and conversely, ongoing exposure to meaningful academic experiences can help internalize interest into a stable personal trait.

Overall, the interplay between individual and situational interest is significant. Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. (2010) and Rajaram (2023) demonstrated that instructional methods emphasizing relevance, novelty, and challenge can stimulate situational interest, which may gradually evolve into a long-lasting personal interest. Harackiewicz et al. (2016) posited that students with established individual interests are especially responsive to situational cues, creating a reinforcing cycle that fosters both motivation and performance.

Therefore, from an instructional perspective, recognizing and addressing variability in students' baseline interest levels is essential. Effective teaching should aim to activate situational interest while fostering individual interest to promote ongoing academic engagement and long-term learning improvements.

Academic Interest as a Catalyst for Academic Achievement

We recognize that academic interest is a highly motivating factor that encourages student engagement, learning behaviors, and long-term academic success. The literature also links academic interest to improved retention of learning material and demonstrates its influence on students' academic trajectories and course-selection decisions (Schiefele, 2009; Wild, 2023). Building on the earlier distinction between situational and individual interest, it becomes clear that sustained academic achievement (specifically performance) is closely linked to the depth and quality of interest that students bring to the learning process. Individual interest, characterized by persistent and emotionally meaningful

engagement with the subject matter, is repeatedly linked to higher levels of academic persistence and performance (Renninger & Hidi, 2022; Schiefele, 2009). Singh et al. (2017) found that students with stronger motivational traits, particularly intrinsic interest, devote more time and effort to learning tasks, which in turn improves academic performance. This is plausible given that individual interest represents a deeply internalized and positively oriented mentality toward academic tasks that encourages sustained effort and resilience, especially in the face of challenges, and focused cognitive involvement (Schmidt & Rotgans, 2017).

This is further clarified by Eccles and Wigfield's (2002) expectancy-value model, which distinguishes feeling-related valences (e.g., enjoyment) from value-related ones (e.g., perceived usefulness). The model underscores the multifaceted nature of academic interest and shows how it supports sustained engagement, even in the face of academic challenges. Students who find their learning both enjoyable and meaningful are more likely to be resilient even in the face of difficulties, aim for a deeper understanding, and reach stronger academic outcomes (Reeve, 2024; Kahu et al., 2017).

Another reason academic interest may predict learner performance is that, beyond its cognitive and emotional components, it plays a central role in the development of self-regulated learning (Chen, 2002; Zimmerman, 2002). Learners with high intrinsic interest tend to apply metacognitive strategies, such as setting goals, self-monitoring, and strategic adjustment, which are hallmarks of self-regulated learning (Artino et al., 2022; Jung, 2025; Moussa, 2024). These regulatory practices not only strengthen immediate academic performance but also cultivate enduring learning skills that support academic development and adaptability (Ergen & Kanadlı, 2017). In support of this assessment, Zhou and Zhang (2025) argued that academic interest functions as a metacognitive force, encouraging students to extend beyond their current competencies and explore more advanced areas of understanding.

Building on this perspective, academic interest is a central driver of goal-directed academic behavior (Zimmerman, 2002). When students find learning personally meaningful and intrinsically satisfying, they are more inclined to invest sustained effort, persevere through challenges, and ultimately perform at higher levels (Akabay et al., 2024). However, contextual factors can influence the effects of interest on educational outcomes. McGuire (2025) warns that highly competitive academic settings may reduce the positive effects of interest by causing anxiety and weakening intrinsic motivation. Therefore, optimal learning environments should strike a balance between academic challenges and supportive spaces that foster exploration and personal relevance.

Recognizing the challenges of fully individualized teaching, Renninger and Hidi (2020) recommend adopting instructional approaches that deliberately stimulate students' situational interest. Hardway (2020) adds that carefully designed classroom activities, those that are novel, emotionally appealing, and intellectually demanding, can awaken interest even among learners who start unmotivated. Such experiences have the potential to strengthen persistence and improve achievement. Neurohr et al. (2024) highlight several qualities that characterize academic interest: its subject-specific nature, cognitive orientation, emotional involvement, personal relevance, and intrinsic drive. These elements shape how learners engage with tasks, allocate their mental resources, and expand their knowledge.

In conclusion, both situational and individual forms of academic interest are central to driving students' success. As observed, academic interest sharpens students' focus, boosts participation, sustains effort, and equips learners to cope with demanding academic challenges. Therefore, cultivating interest should be a priority in instructional design, with particular emphasis on strategies that connect learning to students' lives, highlight its relevance, and create experiences that are both emotionally and cognitively engaging.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between students' academic interest and academic performance in secondary schools without manipulating variables. A correlational approach was deemed appropriate because this study sought to establish associations between variables rather than determine causal effects. The target population comprised Senior Three (S.3) students from four purposively selected secondary schools in Wakiso District, Uganda. This grade level was selected because of its transitional position in secondary education, where students exhibit relatively stable academic behaviors and subject preferences but are not constrained by national examination pressures. The total population consisted of 1,376 students, from which a sample of 297 participants was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table. A proportionate stratified random sampling technique was employed, with each school constituting a stratum, followed by simple random sampling to ensure representativeness and reduce the sampling bias. The four schools were selected based on their consistent academic performance and capacity to provide meaningful variation in students' academic interest and achievement.

Data were collected using a structured and standardized questionnaire comprising three sections: demographic characteristics; academic interest, measured using a 19-item scale adapted from Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. (2010); and academic performance, operationalized using students' promotional grades. Academic interest items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, allowing the construct to be treated as a continuous variable for statistical analysis. Content validity was established through expert review, yielding a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.926, while the internal consistency reliability of the Academic Interest Scale was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.821$). Data were screened, coded, and analyzed using SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics were

used to summarize the participants' demographic characteristics and the distribution of key study variables. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was first used to examine the strength and direction of the linear relationship between academic interest and academic performance, providing a solid framework for understanding how academic interest influences achievement in secondary education. This was consistent with the study's correlational design and the continuous nature of the variables. To further assess the predictive contribution of academic interest, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which variations in academic interest explained the variance in academic performance. The combined use of correlation and regression was deemed appropriate because this study sought to establish relational and predictive associations rather than compare group means. The two analyses provided an empirically sound and theoretically

aligned analytical framework for addressing the study's research questions and responding to its objectives.

Results

This study examined students' levels of academic interest and how this interest relates to their academic performance. The analysis emphasized descriptive statistics, highlighting the frequency of students' self-reported interest in learning, followed by a correlational analysis to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between academic interest and academic performance. Tables 1 and 2 display the findings, offering insights into students' motivational attitudes and their impact on performance outcomes.

Table 1: *Frequencies of respondents' interest levels in academics*

SN	How often do you experience or feel the following?	Never		Rarely+ Sometimes		Frequently + Always	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Having high interest in Learning	6	1.7	131	37.2	213	60.5
2	Being always attentive in class			164	46.6	188	53.4
3	Class work intellectually challenges you but you persist	12	3.4	158	44.9	175	49.7
4	Fully focused on your studies			93	26.4	257	73
5	Give up some of your spare time to learn new things	11	3.1	182	51.7	156	44.3
6	While reading, it sometimes happens that you do not notice the time passing.	26	7.4	147	41.7	173	49.2
7	Studying is one of the things that is important to you personally	3	0.9	50	14.2	296	84.1
8	Enjoy and love concentrating on your studies	3	0.9	105	29.8	244	69.3
9	Hate learning or studying anything	194	55.1	137	38.9	19	5.4
10	I do not mind working long hours on interesting subjects.	32	9.1	110	31.3	205	58.2
11	Don't find school interesting	89	25.3	210	59.7	48	13.7
12	Being in class is interesting	26	7.4	197	56	127	36.1
13	what you are learning is important	6	1.7	74	21	269	76.4
14	Working at school is interesting.	51	14.5	180	51.2	115	32.7
15	Want to learn as much as possible	11	3.1	108	30.1	230	65.3
16	Classes really seem to drag on for long	18	5.1	206	58.5	124	35.2
17	What you are studying is useful for you to know	5	1.4	84	23.8	262	74.4
18	When in class your teachers do things that grab your attention	25	7.1	177	50.2	146	41.5
19	Lessons are entertaining	25	7.1	221	62.8	102	29.1

The results showed that most respondents had high levels of academic interest and intrinsic motivation. The majority of students reported often or always having a strong interest in learning (60.5%) and staying fully engaged in their studies (73%), with many indicating that studying was personally meaningful (84.1%). Additionally, many acknowledged that what they were learning was important (76.4%) and valuable for their future (74.4%), and that they wanted to learn as much as possible (65.3%). These findings suggest that academic engagement is closely tied to personal goals and the value that students place on education.

Furthermore, many respondents (69.3%) reported enjoying focusing on their studies and were willing to spend time learning new things, even if it was outside regular study hours (44.3%). Approximately half of the students also reported experiencing a state of flow while studying, such as losing track of time while reading (49.2%) and being intellectually challenged by their classwork yet continuing to work (49.7%). These responses highlight strong signs of self-regulation and perseverance among students.

However, some concerns have arisen regarding classroom engagement. While 53.4%

reported always paying attention in class, a significant 46.6% reported doing so only rarely or sometimes. Similarly, only 41.5% of students felt that teachers often got their attention, and only 39% found lessons entertaining. Additionally, 23.7% admitted they usually or always find school dull, and 5.4% said they hate studying. These patterns suggest that although students are inherently motivated, their engagement may be limited by classroom dynamics and teaching methods.

In summary, the findings indicate a largely positive academic outlook among students, characterized by strong interest, personal dedication, and intellectual engagement. However, there is still a need to enhance teaching techniques and classroom experiences to sustain and nurture this motivation, especially among the small number of students who show signs of disengagement or disinterest.

Pearson correlation results for interest and academic performance

Table 2 is the presentation of Pearson's correlation matrix for interest and academic performance

Table 2: *Correlation Matrix for Interest and Academic Performance*

		I	A. P	S. P	O. P
Interest (I)	Pearson Correlation	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)				
	N	305			
Arts performance (A.P)	Pearson Correlation	.167**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004			
	N	297	344		
Science Performance (S.P)	Pearson Correlation	.102	.687**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.077	.000		
	N	304	344	351	
Overall Performance (O.P)	Pearson Correlation	.138*	.879**	.950**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017	.000	.000	
	N	297	344	344	344

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 (2-tailed)

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 (2-tailed)

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant link between academic interest and students' overall academic performance ($r = 0.138$, $p = 0.017$). Although small, this finding supports the idea that academic interest is a general motivational factor across various disciplines. This is because when students perceive learning as personally meaningful and aligned with their goals and values, their interests can positively impact academic outcomes across various subject areas.

Interestingly, when the analysis was conducted along different academic performance areas, the correlation matrix still showed strong and statistically significant relationships. In the arts, the correlation was small but still statistically significant ($r = .167$, $p = .004$), indicating that students with higher levels of intrinsic interest generally performed better. These findings support theories that highlight the motivational importance of interest in increasing learners' sustained emotional and academic involvement through deeper thinking. One possible explanation for this is that arts education often encourages autonomy, creativity, and self-expression. Therefore, student interest may be especially influential in motivating learning in such environments.

In contrast, the link between academic interest and science performance, although still positive ($r = .102$), was not statistically significant ($p = .077$). This suggests that while students' interest in science might influence their academic results, other factors, such as prior knowledge, instructional methods, or the use of metacognitive strategies, could have a stronger impact.

This perhaps could actually be a result of the highly structured, goal-driven design of science curricula, which likely requires more than just intrinsic motivation, highlighting the importance of instructional approaches that combine both cognitive and motivational support

Overall, these results confirm that academic interest plays a significant motivational role in enhancing students' academic performance, particularly in learning environments that emphasize personal relevance and independence. However, the varying strength of correlations across different subjects indicates that the impact of interest is not uniform; it appears stronger in areas such as the arts, where learning tends to be more open-ended, and weaker in highly structured fields such as science, which may depend more on prior knowledge and strategic learning.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of cultivating academic interest through instructional strategies that prioritize relevance, student choice, and suitable challenges. Because interest often progresses from brief situational engagement to long-term personal involvement, teaching methods should intentionally support this development, especially in subjects where students might struggle to find natural motivation (or a bias toward certain subjects). Although academic interest is not a cure-all, it remains a vital and flexible tool for pursuing academic success across various educational environments.

Table 3: *Simple Linear Regression of Academic Interest on Academic Performance*

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	Adjusted R square
		B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	459.297	28.178		16.300	.000	
	Interest	.923	.644	.105	1.432	.153	.011

a. Dependent Variable: overall performance

b. Predictors: (constant), Academic interest

To determine the predictive power of academic interest on performance, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted. Accordingly, the table presents the results of a simple linear regression analysis examining whether academic interest independently predicts academic performance among secondary school students. The results indicate that academic interest has a positive but statistically nonsignificant effect on academic performance ($\beta = .105$, $t = 1.432$, $p = .153$). This suggests that while higher levels of academic interest were associated with higher academic performance, the relationship was not strong enough to reach statistical significance when academic interest was isolated, as evidenced by the adjusted R-squared. The model explained approximately 1.1% of the variance in academic performance (Adjusted $R^2 = .011$), indicating that academic interest alone accounts for a relatively small proportion of the differences in students' performance. This finding implies that academic performance is influenced by multiple factors beyond one's academic interest, including learners' cognitive abilities or skills, school instructional practices, assessment demands, and other motivational or contextual variables not considered in the present study.

Nevertheless, it is worth appreciating that the positive direction of the relationship is theoretically meaningful. Consistent with self-determination theory, academic interest reflects intrinsic motivation and personal relevance, which are foundational for sustained engagement in learning activities. However, the non-significant effect suggests that interest, without accompanying students' behavioral or regulatory mechanisms, may not be sufficient to realize measurable gains in learners' performance, particularly in structured and examination-oriented educational contexts.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between academic interest and academic performance among secondary school students. The findings confirm that academic interest is a multidimensional motivational construct that supports

learning outcomes, consistent with the wealth of literature in educational psychology (Renninger & Hidi, 2022; Schiefele, 2009). Specifically, when interpreted through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci, 2017; Razali, 2021), the results suggest that academic interest reflects the extent to which learning activities satisfy students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, the regression results indicate that while academic interest contributes positively to performance, its independent predictive strength is modest, implying that interest alone may not be sufficient to produce substantial performance gains without supportive contextual conditions.

The observed statistically significant positive correlation between academic interest and performance in arts subjects ($r = .167$, $p = .004$) provides empirical support for both Self-Determination Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory. From an SDT perspective, arts subjects often afford greater opportunities for autonomy, emotional expression, and personal meaning, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation and deeper engagement. This aligns with expectancy-value assumptions that students are more motivated and perform better when they attach high intrinsic and attainment value to learning tasks (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). The emotionally rich and personally expressive nature of the arts facilitates the gradual development of interest from situational engagement to enduring personal interest (Renninger & Hidi, 2022). Such environments naturally support affective involvement, identity exploration, and epistemic curiosity, which strengthen motivation and persistence (Berlyne, 1949; Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2010; Neurohr et al., 2024; Silvia, 2006; Szymańska, 2022).

In contrast, although academic interest was positively associated with performance in science subjects ($r = .102$), this relationship did not reach statistical significance ($p = .077$), which is consistent with the regression findings. Expectancy-Value Theory helps explain this outcome by emphasizing that interest may be constrained in domains where perceived task difficulty is great and the expectancy for

success is uncertain (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Science learning often demands strong prior knowledge, sustained cognitive regulation, and mastery of abstract concepts, which may limit the extent to which interest translates into measurable performance (Barron, 2008). From an SDT perspective, highly structured, examination-driven science classrooms may restrict autonomy and undermine intrinsic motivation, thereby weakening the direct effect of interest on students' achievement (McGuire, 2025). Without pedagogical practices that support inquiry, relevance, and competence building, academic interest may remain insufficient to offset high cognitive demands. Indeed, Renninger and Hidi (2020) and Hardway (2020) assert that unless educators deliberately incorporate emotionally engaging content, real-world applications, or inquiry-based learning, students may find it difficult to maintain intrinsic motivation, even if they initially show interest. This is consistent with Jung's (2025) assertion that interest must be paired with self-regulated learning strategies, such as goal-setting and metacognitive reflection, to translate into better performance, especially in content-heavy subjects.

The statistically significant relationship between academic interest and overall academic performance ($r = .138$, $p = .017$) underscores the broader motivational relevance of interest in supporting general academic success, even though the regression analysis revealed that it explains a relatively small proportion of the variance in performance. This finding is theoretically coherent with the expectancy-value framework, which suggests that achievement is influenced by multiple interacting motivational and cognitive factors rather than a single determinant (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). In particular, when students perceive learning as both enjoyable and meaningful, they are more likely to put in effort, persevere through challenges, and engage in deeper learning, although this must be supported by institutional instructional structures and opportunities for success to yield strong performance outcomes (Kahu et al., 2017; Reeve, 2024). Thus, the current findings

support prior research, which demonstrates that academic interest functions as an important motivational driver of achievement because it encourages both students' cognitive investment and emotional resilience (Schmidt & Rotgans, 2017; Schiefele, 2009).

The strong correlations observed between overall academic performance and subject-specific achievement, particularly in science ($r = .950$) and arts ($r = .879$), highlight broader systemic and structural influences within secondary education. These patterns may indicate that institutions, and in the case of Uganda, the government and society, focus on certain subjects, notably science, because of their perceived importance for economic and career prospects. However, as Renninger and Hidi (2015) point out, such systemic pressures can diminish the development of authentic academic interest, particularly when students face competitive and high-stakes assessments. McGuire (2025) warns that these conditions can reduce intrinsic motivation and increase anxiety, thereby weakening the positive impact of interest on academic success.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings support calls for instructional approaches that deliberately activate situational interest and scaffold it toward developing individual interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2019; Zhou & Zhang, 2025). As Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. (2010) argue, classroom strategies or practices that promote or incorporate novelty, emotional relevance, autonomy, and intellectual challenge are most effective in triggering engagement and are more likely to enhance perceived task value and support learners' psychological needs. Over time, such strategies may foster metacognitive awareness and help learners become self-regulated, interest-driven students with sustained academic efforts and achievements (Artino et al., 2022). Neurohr et al. (2024) emphasize that academic interest is characterized by content-specificity, cognitive orientation, affective engagement, personal relevance, and intrinsic motivation, all of which are essential for deep learning and academic achievement.

Overall, the study emphasizes that academic interest, whether situational or personal, is a key motivational factor in academic performance, although its direct predictive influence is modest when considered independently. Interpreted through the lens of self-determination theory and expectancy–value theory, the findings suggest that interest is most effective when supported by learning environments that foster autonomy, competence, perceived value, and realistic expectations of success. Consequently, promoting academic interest should remain a central goal of instructional design, complemented by pedagogical and curricular structures that enable motivation to translate into measurable academic outcomes (Renninger & Hidi, 2020; Silvia, 2006). Future interventions should consider the interaction between interest, curriculum structure, and cognitive demand to enhance learning experiences and results.

Conclusion

This study confirms that academic interest is a modest but statistically significant predictor of student performance, with its influence being more visible in the arts than in the sciences. Beyond improving grades, interest strengthens motivation, persistence, and deeper engagement with learning tasks, making it an essential factor in shaping long-term academic growth. The findings further reveal that the impact of interest is not uniform, as it varies with subject characteristics and is strongly influenced by teaching practices and the classroom environment. In systems where instruction is predominantly exam-focused and teacher-centered, opportunities to cultivate sustained interest are often limited, reducing its potential benefits. Recognizing this, the study highlights the importance of elevating academic interest as a central pedagogical priority. By designing lessons that are relevant, interactive, and student-centered, educators can transform curiosity into lasting motivation, creating resilient learners who are not only prepared for examinations but are also equipped for lifelong learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study suggests the following practice-based and research-oriented recommendations:

1. Educators should adopt student-centered approaches that connect learning with students' goals and motivations. Methods such as inquiry-based tasks, real-world problem solving, and collaborative projects can turn short-term curiosity into lasting interest, while professional development should train teachers to sustain engagement across diverse learners.
2. Schools should invest in teacher training programs that build the capacity to design lessons that are both emotionally engaging and cognitively demanding while also addressing the varied motivational needs of students.
3. Schools should integrate continuous interest-based assessments, not just exam scores, to monitor how students' motivation and engagement evolve. Such evaluations can guide teachers in adjusting their methods to nurture both situational and long-term academic interest.
4. Policymakers should create supportive learning environments by reducing excessive exam pressure and encouraging curricula that balance content mastery and curiosity-driven exploration. This shift would allow interest to thrive as both a motivational tool and a foundation for sustained academic achievement.
5. Future research should explore how academic interest develops across subjects and interacts with self-regulation and learning environments, with longitudinal studies offering insights into how situational interest transforms into long-term academic motivation.

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