REVIEW ARTICLE / DERLEME MAKALE

THE COURAGE-BASED MOTIVATION THEORY: COURAGE AS THE EXISTENTIAL CORE OF HUMAN MOTIVATION

CESARET TABANLI MOTİVASYON KURAMI: İNSAN MOTİVASYONUNUN VAROLUŞSAL ÖZÜ OLARAK CESARET

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Abstract

Although numerous theories have been proposed concerning motivation and human needs, motivation-related problems remain highly prevalent in everyday life. This situation indicates the insufficiency of existing motivation theories and highlights the fact that courage—the essential core of motivation—has not been adequately emphasized. The present study, through the development of the Courage-Based Motivation Theory, addresses this deficiency by placing courage at the very foundation of motivation and the process of need satisfaction. Based on the most well-known theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the study emphasizes that courage is the fundamental element in fulfilling needs at every level. Drawing upon Aristotle's Doctrine of the Golden Mean, it suggests that the proper use of courage lies between the extremes of cowardice and recklessness in the satisfaction of needs. Furthermore, it offers a more detailed examination of Maslow's highest level of need—self-actualization, which is particularly relevant to modern individuals. It is anticipated that the newly proposed Courage-Based Motivation Theory will guide future research in the field of motivation and help scholars better understand that courage lies at the core of human motivation, thereby preventing unnecessary theoretical and practical efforts.

Keywords: Courage, Courage-Based Motivation Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Actualization,

JEL Codes: M12, M54

Extended Abstract

This study is based on the idea that courage is the fundamental element at the core of human motivation. It can be argued that motivation devoid of courage remains limited to thought and intention and may fail to translate into action. Classical motivation theories, however, fail to address the legitimate role of courage in their approaches to the formation of human behavior, and this fundamental element in the motivational process has yet to be fully explored. A courage-based motivation theory was developed within the scope of this study to address this theoretical gap, presenting courage not simply as a virtue or personality trait but as the fundamental energy that drives individuals to act.

Courage is the fundamental force we need in the struggle with life, stemming from our existential qualities. Therefore, courage can be considered a driving force behind human motivation to sustain existence and fulfill fundamental needs.

Using Aristotle's golden mean approach, this study provides examples and explanations of the five levels of needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and particularly the 15 levels of self-actualization, from the extremes of cowardice and recklessness. The study aims to explain the significant impact that courage, the middle ground, plays in Maslow's theory and, consequently, its role as the fundamental driving force of motivation. The proposed model within the scope of this study, courage-based motivation theory, significantly differs from existing motivation theories by focusing specifically on the dimension or subject of acting by overcoming fear encountered in meeting human needs. It emphasizes not only

the different formulation of cognitive goals or needs but also the necessity of acting courageously by controlling or overcoming the risks and fear encountered in meeting each need. Therefore, it emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between motivation and courage. This new theory provides a more comprehensive and practical explanation of motivation, encompassing emotional, cognitive, and moral dimensions. In doing so, it has helped to better understand this issue, particularly through its relationship with the different types of courage used at different levels.

While the study demonstrates its theoretical basis through the use of different motivation theories, its fundamental theory is the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In this context, it explains how courage functions across different levels of human needs and how courage is the primary source of psychological energy in the motivation to meet these needs.

The Courage-Based theory of motivation is more suitable for practical application compared to existing motivation theories. It highlights courage, as the core of motivation, and emphasizes that attempting to motivate people without discovering and understanding this hidden courage do not yield effective results and will, in fact, be a waste of time. This approach, by encouraging action, is expected to significantly increase practical efficiency. Recognizing that courage is the fundamental factor in employee motivation, and understanding that encouragement is almost entirely the motivation itself, will enable leaders and managers to focus their energies on the right path to achieving the desired results in ethical decision-making, stress management, creative innovative management, and organizational commitment, especially in recent times.

In conclusion, this study aims to give a different direction to the motivation literature and to prevent unnecessary theoretical and practical losses by creating a new paradigm, that is, by creating a new approach to motivation, by focusing on the question of how and with what courage rather than focusing only on the question of why human behavior occurs.

Keywords: Courage, Courage-Based Motivation Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Actualization.

JEL Codes: M12, M54

1. INTRODUCTION

Our needs are the clearest proof that we are aliveer. We will continue to live as long as we meet our needs. But this isn't something that only happens to us; other living creatures also have to meet their needs to stay alive. The level of development influences the types of risks and concerns associated with meeting needs. Plants and animals encounter different dangers and fears as they strive to fulfil their basic requirements. As development advances, the amount of courage needed to meet these needs also changes and often intensifies. A similar comparison can be made between humans and animals, using the same perspective to examine how their needs and the challenges of meeting them evolve.

Some people might think that animals are braver than people when it comes to meeting their needs, but this isn't true. People are more evolved than animals. It may seem unreasonable to compare animals to us just to meet our basic needs, but the higher-level existential needs and traits that come with being human make this comparison meaningful. To live a meaningful life, people must be brave and confront their fears, and doing so demands a much greater degree of courage than what is required of animals. Only by facing these challenges can individuals truly meet their needs as human beings.

When we consider the journey of human development, it is evident that the process of meeting one's needs inherently involves overcoming perceived and experienced fear—which may manifest at varying intensities. Kierkegaard (1980) concisely described this condition as the individual's confrontation with the self, asserting that it is an inevitable part of discovering one's true self and freedom, and that only through only through the courage to face this confrontation can such self-discovery be achieved. Similarly, Paul Tillich (1952), in his renowned work The Courage to Be, equated courage with the will to affirm existence in the face of non-being, placing it at the very center of humanity's ontological affirmation of existence. In this context, courage is not merely a personality trait, virtue, or emotional state—it is a fundamental source of energy indispensable for the sustainability of human existence. Courage is the existential price of being human.

One of the most classical and foundational approaches to courage was articulated by Aristotle (2009) in the Nicomachean Ethics, where he defined courage as the golden mean between cowardice and recklessness, linking it to the basis of moral maturity and the consciousness of being human. Likewise, Nietzsche (1882) emphasized that life is only possible by loving its inherent dangers, and that courage is the most crucial factor in one's self-becoming and self-realization. Within this framework, courage requires individuals to step out of their comfort zones, take risks, and act with awareness of their potential—an attitude that closely aligns with Maslow's concept of self-actualization, the highest level in his hierarchy of needs.

Another prominent figure in the study of courage, Rollo May (1975), in his work "The Courage to Create", defined courage as the capacity to express one's creative potential despite the fear of failure and rejection. This perspective positions courage as the fundamental internal source of motivation, arguing that the degree to which a person demonstrates courage shapes their capacity to learn, to change, and—most importantly—to create. In this view, creativity becomes the very foundation of civilization and a key driver of its sustainability.

Nussbaum (2001) defines courage as "the harmonisation of emotions with virtue." This definition clarifies the complex nature of motivation by incorporating the cognitive, emotional, and moral aspects of courage. Courage is considered one of the most ancient human virtues, shaping both individual behavior and social systems (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Pury & Lopez, 2010). Courage has been associated with the willingness to take risks, face challenges, and act in the face of fear or anxiety (Avey et al. 2010). It has been viewed as the ability to endure pain or distress for the sake of a goal (Snyder, 2010). Courage has also been closely associated with moral and ethical behavior, including defending one's beliefs and values (Tangney, 1991). Courage is defined not as the absence of fear, but as the capacity to act despite fear. In this respect, it is considered a fundamental form of volitional energy that enables an individual's development in ethical, psychological, and creative dimensions (Rachman, 1990; Norton, 2015).

This study situates courage as the central psychological energy underlying human motivation and need fulfillment, integrating insights from existential, philosophical, and psychological perspectives to form a comprehensive and practically applicable Courage-Based Motivation Theory. The primary hypothesis of this study posits that motivation is the behavioural expression of courage. Courage serves as a volitional force that converts an individual's intention into action and maintains behaviour in the face of fear and uncertainty. External rewards or incentives may provide temporary motivation; however, the source of lasting motivation is encouragement, which serves as the internal support system that empowers an individual to align their actions with their intrinsic values. Courage transforms motivation from a mere idea into a tangible force for action; without courage, motivation remains only a concept. Accordingly, courage can be described as "motivation sustained despite fear." In the following sections of this research, we will examine this perspective in greater depth, drawing on Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a framework and focusing on how courage can shape an individual's life by empowering them with motivation as they progress from basic safety needs toward self-actualization.

This research seeks to elucidate the complex role of grit within Maslow's hierarchy of needs and establish the groundwork for a courage-oriented theory of motivation. The study aims to address the following essential enquiries: Is courage a fundamental prerequisite that instigates motivation to fulfil human needs, or does it serve as a psychological outcome that arises subsequent to need satisfaction? How do different kinds of courage fit into Maslow's levels of hierarchy? How do deficiencies or surpluses in courage influence Maslow's 5 level needs, particularly self-actualization? What distinguishes the Courage-Based Theory of Motivation (CBMT) from established motivation theories such as self-determination, expectancy, and goal setting? Additionally, how does it introduce a novel, comprehensive framework for elucidating motivation?

Contemporary research corroborates the approach delineated in this study, characterising courage as the impetus for motivation rather than its result (Mert et al. 2025; Sert et al. 2025; Maddi, 2006). Maddi's (2006) conceptualisation of "Hardiness" specifically emphasised the type of courage that empowers individuals to opt for growth rather than defence when confronted with stress and adversity. Malik, Conroy, and Turner (2020) correlated courage with Aristotle's (2009) notion of phronesis (practical wisdom), characterising it as the intrinsic fortitude that maintains motivation in ethical decision-making processes.

In this context, Aristotle's (2009) doctrine of the "Golden Mean" elucidates courage as a moderating virtue between cowardice (deficiency) and recklessness (excess), positing that any disruption of this equilibrium may result in behavioural and emotional imbalances within the individual (Dodson, 2023). Courage is recognised as a virtue in contemporary psychology and is also considered a critical personality trait associated with psychological resilience, moral determination, and creative self-determination (Bandura, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1985). This research establishes a conceptual linkage between Maslow's motivation theory and Aristotle's virtue ethics, reconceptualising courage as a comprehensive force that integrates the moral, cognitive, and emotional aspects of human motivation. In this context, the study presents a novel theoretical contribution to the literature through the introduction of Courage-Based Motivation Theory (CBMT). CBMT posits that courage is an existential force that empowers an individual to act in the face of fear, create meaning, and strive for objectives aligned with ethical principles. This viewpoint regards courage not solely as a personality characteristic or emotional reaction, but as the fundamental essence of motivation. Additionally, it is posited that courage serves as a regulatory variable in an individual's processes of internal equilibrium, quest for meaning, and self-actualization.

The subsequent sections of this article are organized to clarify the role of courage in motivational processes within a conceptual, theoretical, and analytical framework. The second section focuses on the relationship between Aristotle's (2009) concept of the Golden Mean and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The third section examines how courage is positioned within several established motivational theories. The fourth section correlates each of Maslow's 15 self-actualization characteristics with the psychological, moral, and creative dimensions of courage, evaluating them through the lenses of cowardice, recklessness, and equilibrium (the Golden Mean). The fifth section introduces the proposed Courage-Based Motivation Theory (CBMT) and highlights how it differs from existing motivational models in the literature. Finally, the theoretical and practical contributions of this research are discussed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Courage Embedded in Motivation

In particular, recent studies that treat courage as a measurable variable have demonstrated that workplace courage is closely linked to several fundamental organizational outcomes. Research conducted in the domains of happiness, life satisfaction, and individual well-being reveals strong associations between courage and life satisfaction, employee well-being, happiness, and emotional exhaustion (Koksal &

Mert, 2024; Santilli et al. 2024; Mohsin, 2024; Deeg & May, 2022; Mert et al. 2022). In terms of ethical behavior and moral identity, courage is closely related to moral identity, corporate social responsibility, and whistle-blowing (Wang et al. 2024b; Holmes and Howard, 2023; Mert and Koksal, 2023) and that courage strengthens relationships among coworkers, relational identity, and social support, while also promoting workplace spirituality and ethical leadership, organizational justice, and commitment (Kaltiainen et al. 2024; Srivastava and Gupta, 2022; Cheng et al. 2019; Koksal et al. 2022). From the perspective of leadership and organizational effectiveness, courage has a decisive impact on leadership-focused variables such as virtuous leadership, moral voice, authentic leadership, and leadership role modeling behaviors (Alshehri and Elsaied, 2022; Anita et al. 2021; Ogunfowora et al. 2021). Furthermore, courage supports team innovation and creativity and encourages organizational citizenship behaviors (Peralta et al. 2021; Howard and Holmes, 2020; Tkachenko et al. 2020). Courage is also associated with broader systemic outcomes such as fair employment, organizational ethics, and personal development (Namal et al. 2024; Deeg and May, 2022).

In this regard, courage has emerged as an important variable that often moderates or mediates the relationships among various organizational behavior variables. The significant influence of courage on behavioral outcomes compels us to recognize its responsibility and role within the motivation process. When we examine the variables associated with courage, we observe that they are closely linked to desired dependent outcomes, highlighting how courage drives motivation and inspiration throughout this process.

In particular, the importance of courage, as listed above and somewhat rediscovered in organizational behavioral literature, has been supported by empirical studies, demonstrating that motivation is not merely a goal-oriented cognitive process but a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing courage. A study by Mert et al. (2025) based on a detailed examination of courageous decisions made by business executives revealed the fundamental dimensions of courageous decisions. It was determined that courageous decision-making is influenced by fear, patience, perseverance, generosity, and a situation that exceeds the individual's capacity. These factors include the sense of satisfaction managers derive from demonstrating courageous behavior, as well as the ambiguity that arises when they perceive such behavior through a moral lens. The results of this research show that courage appears as the main driving force in the motivation of the individual to act and make decisions, especially under risk and uncertainty, and to show the necessary behavior. The study examined courage through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), conceptualising it as a motivational continuum that ranges from the perception of fear to the activation of a goal. In this context, courage is not merely a result of motivation, but rather the fundamental basis of motivation in making difficult and effective decisions that constitute motivation. This demonstrates that courage is the fundamental element affecting motivation in transforming moral intention into behavior. A qualitative study conducted by Sert vd. (2025) examined the relationship between lawyers' happiness, courage, and their evaluations of justice. It was determined that courage has a very strong relationship with the perception and meaning of happiness and justice. Therefore, it can be stated that justice and happiness have a very significant impact on an individual's motivation, and courage is the underlying motivation for those who will take action in this direction. In this study, lawyers see courage as a source of inner peace, meaning, and satisfaction. Therefore, the studies conducted by both Mert vd. (2025) and Sert vd. (2025) identify courage as the principal catalyst that activates moral energy in human behavior and transforms individuals' intentions into goal-directed action. This demonstrates unequivocally that courage is not merely a source of motivation, but its fundamental essence.

Courage is not merely a character trait; it is a way of thinking—and even a way of feeling—that enables individuals to seize opportunities under stress, foster personal growth, and act with integrity. In this context, Maddi (2006) characterises "hardiness" in his work "Hardiness: "The Courage to Grow from Stresses" can be understood as the integration of three essential attitudes: commitment, control, and

challenge. These three factors empower individuals when confronted with adversity, transforming challenges into opportunities and imbuing them with meaning. In this sense, courage serves as a motivational force that transforms a person from being defensive or passive into being proactive and purposeful. Maddi (2006) conceptualizes this capacity, achieved through existential courage, as both mathematically and psychologically comprehensive—an ability that transcends individual creativity and strength. According to Maddi, courage is not simply about confronting fear; it is an intrinsic energy that sustains personal growth even under conditions of stress.

Historically, courage has been closely associated with heroism and the assumption of responsibility despite fear, which is considered its moral foundation. Dodson (2023) argues that in eighteenth-century military literature, courage was not confined to being a military virtue but was also viewed as a psychological construct encompassing honor, duty, and emotional regulation. This interpretation broadens the notion of courage beyond physical courage. Dodson further notes that military theorists regarded courage as the ability to maintain integrity and composure when facing the fear of death, suggesting that courage strengthens both personal discipline and emotional responsibility. This understanding aligns closely with contemporary organizational behavior literature. Just as soldiers' discipline enables them to fulfill their duties in the presence of danger and fear, courage in today's workplaces is equally important—allowing employees to make ethical decisions and take principled action despite uncertainty or risk. Thus, courage functions as both a psychological motivator and an empowering mechanism that enables individuals to act consistently with their values (Mert, 2025).

Malik, Conroy, and Turner (2020) utilised Aristotle's notion of phronesis (practical wisdom) to analyse ethical decision-making in contemporary medicine, illustrating that courage and motivation are essential forces that initiate and perpetuate moral action. This perspective rests on the premise that motivation is not merely the outcome of the decision-making process but rather a continuous force that drives and sustains it from the outset.

Courage is a prominent psychological factor in modern management literature, influencing individual performance and organisational sustainability. Mert and Bayramoğlu's (2024) examination of Turkish literature illustrates that courage is pivotal not only to ethical decision-making but also to employee engagement, innovation, leadership, and entrepreneurial conduct. In the realm of entrepreneurship, courage is regarded as a fundamental factor elucidating the "why" and "how" of individual behaviour, facilitating risk-taking, the advocacy of innovative concepts, and resilience in the face of challenges (Namal et al. 2023). It has been observed that courageous leaders enhance job satisfaction and organisational engagement by cultivating an atmosphere of trust and psychological safety, thereby promoting a culture of innovation and sustainability. Bayramoğlu and Mert (2024) characterised courage as the "silent architect" of organisations, highlighting that the resolve to act despite risks while upholding ethical principles enhances both individual motivation and organisational sustainability. In this context, courage is regarded as a silent yet potent source of energy that fosters intrinsic motivation, independent of external rewards, and serves as the foundational psychological dynamic of ethical leadership, innovation, and enduring success.

Mert and Holiev's (2024) study, "Nursing Courage: A Systematic Literature Review," illustrates that courage is not merely an ethical virtue within the nursing profession but also a dynamic force that drives motivation. Mert and Holiev (2024) assert that courage enhances nurses' autonomy, enabling them to take initiative when confronted with ethical dilemmas, thereby functioning as a motivational mechanism that bolsters performance at both individual and organisational levels.

Mert's (2023c) research, "What is Courage?" "A Content Analysis of Courage Definitions" looks at 150 definitions of courage from different fields and shows that courage has many different sides and comes from different places of motivation. The research findings indicate that courage encompasses not only the ability to act in the face of fear but also a profound inner strength that sustains an individual's

commitment to act in alignment with their values. The study identifies risk-taking, perseverance, trust, honesty, and self-sacrifice as the most commonly referenced elements of courage; these elements intersect with the motivational processes that drive individuals towards significant objectives. Mert (2023b) underscores that courage is not solely a personality trait but also a psychological dynamic that governs an individual's energy for action, converting fear and channelling it towards significant objectives.

In modern psychological literature, courage is regarded not merely as a reaction to fear but as a fundamental motivational process influencing human behaviour. Mert's (2023b) states that individuals generally encounter negative emotions, including fear, anxiety, and indecision, prior to exhibiting courageous behaviour; conversely, these emotions predominantly evolve into positive feelings, such as relief, tranquilly, and contentment, thereafter. Courage is an intrinsic force that restructures emotional energy and improves subjective well-being. Mert's (2023a) in his study, "Perceptions of Courage: An In-depth Examination of Lay People's Attributions towards Courage," revealed that individuals associate courage with "taking risks to achieve a goal" and "the determination to do the right thing." The participants' identification of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk -the founder of modern Turkish Republic- as the bravest individual was regarded as a symbolic indication that knowledge, awareness, and a cohesive moral purpose can elevate courage into a profound catalyst for motivation. Consequently, courage is defined not as the suppression of fear, but as an emotional-psychological impetus that empowers individuals to pursue meaningful objectives and sustain motivation.

Mert (2021b, 2021c) conceptualises courage not merely as the absence of fear or an indicator of heroism, but as a consciousness-driven motivational process intertwined with knowledge, awareness, and the pursuit of meaning. "Understanding Courage" defines courage as "controlling fear to do the right thing," stressing that the will to act depends on how much a person knows and is aware of. This suggests the necessity for equilibrium between Aristotle's "conscious courage" and contemporary psychology's "goal-oriented motivation," with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's bravery regarded as an emblem of this conscious awareness. "Understanding Heroism," on the other hand, says that heroism is a more collective and transformative type of courage that combines intrinsic motivational elements like self-sacrifice, self-actualization, and conscious risk-taking with Aristotle's idea of "balance that avoids extremes" and turns them into social values. This perspective regards courage as the deliberate force propelling individual actions, with heroism as the collective manifestation of this force. Also, Mert (2021a) identifies components such as risk, fear, power, consciousness, necessity, decision-making, goals, conditions, morality, generosity, and choice, demonstrating that courage is not merely a response to threat but a deliberate orientation of the individual shaped by purpose, value, and awareness.

Mert's (2022a) highlights the increasing significance of courage in the business realm over the last thirty years, illustrating that this notion extends beyond ethical conduct and serves as a dynamic force integral to both individual and organisational motivation. A bibliometric analysis of 67 articles published in the Web of Science database indicated that courage intersects various disciplines, including management, psychology, health, philosophy, and anthropology, thus necessitating its consideration as a multidimensional motivational root structure. Köksal and Mert (2024) found that courage functions as a psychological resource that enables individuals to cope with unjust situations without becoming emotionally depleted, indicating that those who exhibit higher levels of courage are more resilient and able to maintain motivation even in the face of unfairness. Similarly, the research by Mert, Şen, and Alzghoul (2022) identified courage as a mediating variable in the relationship between organizational justice and happiness, demonstrating that a fair environment fosters courage, which in turn enhances happiness. Collectively, these findings suggest that courage—defined as the capacity to act despite fear—is a fundamental psychological force that helps individuals remain balanced, motivates ethical behavior, and sustains their drive in challenging circumstances.

Courage is not solely an individual disposition; it serves as an inherent motivator that enhances life satisfaction and the pursuit of meaning (Mert & Köksal, 2022b). Mert's (2010) research on "Terror Management Theory and Courage" illustrates that courage serves as a psychological buffer and transformative force when confronted with death awareness and fear, characterising it as an energy that empowers individuals to manage their fears and partake in ethical and creative endeavours. The idea of "courage's momentum effect," which came about in this context, says that a person's knowledge, skills, and emotional capital can only be turned into action through courage. This means that courage acts as a motivational multiplier. In his book "Managing Courage," Mert (2007) also declares that courage is the main thing that makes managers and employees act, and that fear is what makes this engine run. This method sees courage as the most important psychological force that gives meaning to what people do and turns fear into action.

2.2. Connecting Courage with Some Existing Motivation Theories

While classical motivation theories aim to explain the cognitive, emotional, and environmental components of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that guide an individual's behavior, the courage to act has often remained implicit in these theories but has not been systematically addressed.

When examining the seven fundamental motivation theories summarized in Table 1, a clear common denominator emerges: courage functions as a central mechanism that enhances an individual's goal orientation, determination, and autonomy, embodying the willpower required to convert intention into action.

Table 1. How Courage Operates within Foundational Theories of Motivation

Theory	The role of Courage
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs	All five levels rely on different forms of courage to be fulfilled. Self-actualization, in particular, requires the courage to transcend the boundaries of security and adaptability. As individuals progress upward, each higher level demands its own form of risk-taking (e.g., belonging → vulnerability, esteem → self-expression).
Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory	Courage reinforces intrinsic motivators such as achievement, recognition, and growth, whereas the fear of non-survivability functions as a hygiene factor that is regulated—and often neutralized—by courage.
Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan)	Courage supports an individual in acting according to their own values despite pressures (autonomy) and in striving to develop a skill despite the risk of failure (competence).
Expectancy Theory (Vroom)	The belief to be able to do what is aimed to do depends on self-confidence which is different form of courage. Courage enables an individual to perceive the meaning of their efforts; a person who believes they can face obstacles and uncertainty sees their efforts as valuable.
Goal-Setting Theory (Locke & Latham)	Courage determines an individual's willingness to set challenging goals and persevere after failure.
Achievement Motivation Theory (McClelland)	A high need for achievement often involves the courage to confront uncertainty and fear of evaluation.
Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura)	Courage is the emotional foundation of self-efficacy; the belief that "I can do it" is meaningless without the determination to "I have courage to try."

Source: Created by the author.

Classical motivational theories consistently highlight courage as the psychological force that enables individuals to move from safety toward growth. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970) illustrates that progressing from physiological needs to self-actualization requires repeatedly stepping beyond one's comfort zone—showing the courage to be emotionally vulnerable at the belongingness level, to assert oneself at the esteem level, and to stand apart from others at the self-actualization level. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959) similarly underscores courage as a catalyst that activates intrinsic motivators such as achievement, recognition, and growth by counterbalancing the fear of failure and empowering individuals to assume new, risk-laden responsibilities. In the same vein, Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000) argues that intrinsic needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness can only be fully realized when individuals possess the courage to uphold their values despite external pressure, persist through uncertainty, and engage authentically with others. Taken together, these perspectives reveal that courage forms the emotional foundation of self-determination and the essential force that sustains intrinsic motivation across motivational frameworks.

Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory asserts that an individual's motivation derives from the anticipation of effort, performance, and outcome; however, this expectation acquires significance solely when the individual cultivates a courageous conviction in their ability to surmount challenges. Grit fortifies an individual's conviction in the value of effort and invigorates the cognitive aspects of the motivational process. Locke and Latham's (2002) goal-setting theory posits that grit influences an individual's ability to establish challenging objectives and to maintain the motivation to persevere following failure. In this context, grit serves as a volitional force that encourages risk-taking and promotes perseverance in the face of failure. Likewise, McClelland's (1961) theory of achievement motivation posits that individuals with a pronounced need for achievement are inclined to undertake risky tasks, contingent upon their capacity to regulate their fear of evaluation and failure. Courage turns these threats into chances, which helps the person keep a growth mindset and become the emotional spark for success motivation.

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory says that a person's behaviour is mostly based on how much they believe in their own abilities. But this belief doesn't work unless they also have the will to "dare to try." Courage is what gives self-efficacy its emotional power, allowing a person to turn their potential into action when things get tough or dangerous.

This theoretical framework illustrates the multifaceted ways in which courage operates as a motivational force. However, the next section of this study focuses specifically on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory. As the most widely recognized and influential motivation model, Maslow's framework offers a simple yet profound structure for understanding human needs. Its familiar and intuitive design provides a valuable lens through which to examine how courage shapes and influences fundamental human instincts.

 In this case, one of the goals of this study is to explain where courage fits into Maslow's hierarchical structure as a changing factor that affects how motivation grows. The study will subsequently examine in depth how courage signifies the psychological threshold for progressing from one level of need to another, and how it creates equilibrium between fear, the pursuit of security, and the quest for meaning. Consequently, it will be contended that courage is not merely a virtue that arises at the level of self-actualization, but rather a fundamental psychological force that constitutes the existential foundation of all motivational processes.

2.3. Courage Embedded in All Levels of Maslow's Hierarchical Pyramid

Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs theory is regarded as one of the most extensive frameworks elucidating the motivational dynamics underlying human behaviour. Consequently, this study clarifies the relationship between motivation and courage. Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs theory posits that individuals undergo a developmental process commencing with fundamental physiological needs and

advancing through the stages of safety, belonging, esteem, and ultimately self-actualization. But this progress is only possible if these needs are met and the person is brave enough to face fear, uncertainty, and risk. So, courage should be seen as a psychological source that exists at all levels of Maslow's pyramid, not just the top.

At the level of satisfying the first stage of physiological needs, courage emerges almost instinctively within the human struggle for survival, functioning as a force oriented toward sustaining life. At this stage, an apprentice form of courage operates as a mechanism for confronting illnesses, life-sustaining challenges, or threats to physical continuity. It encompasses not only a biological reflex but also an existential form of resistance. Maddi (2006) describes this resistance as hardiness and defines courage as both an instrument of physical existence and a cognitive–emotional orientation.

At the security level, courage pertains to an individual's ability to sustain a sense of control in the face of perceived uncertainty and threat. Bandura's (1977) theory of "self-efficacy" exemplifies this concept: a person operates under the conviction of their own competence in perilous situations; nonetheless, it is courage that converts this conviction into action. In this context, courage changes the need for safety from a passive desire to protect oneself to an active awareness of how to do so.

Although the need for safety may initially be interpreted as a desire for protection, escape, or self-preservation—in other words, as the absence of courageous behavior—such an interpretation would be misleading. Courage plays a meaningful role even at this second level of Maslow's hierarchy. In today's context, meeting safety needs often demands greater courage than meeting physiological needs. As individuals progress up the hierarchy, they must act more decisively, behave more proactively, and take bolder steps; in highly competitive environments, ensuring one's safety increasingly requires initiative and bravery.

While modern welfare-state practices may provide individuals with support in securing shelter without requiring overt displays of courage, this assistance is neither universally available nor necessarily as adequate or satisfying as the safety environments achieved through one's own effort. The sense of fulfillment derived from shelter obtained passively can differ considerably from that achieved through proactive courage.

At this point, it becomes evident that humans possess aesthetic and cognitive capacities that differentiate them from other living beings, including the most advanced animals. For humans, the significance lies not only in whether a physiological or sheltering need is met but also in the degree to which it is met relative to others. For instance, shelter may be secured at a basic level through social security services or in a makeshift hut, yet it may also be fulfilled at a far higher level in a mansion or luxury villa, offering a deeper sense of safety and assurance.

Thus, it should be recognized that satisfaction in Maslow's hierarchy depends not only on individual fulfillment but also on comparative evaluation. For this reason, courage emerges as a far more influential factor at the lower levels of human needs than is commonly assumed.

Additionally, courage is linked to being emotionally open, being able to be vulnerable, and being able to build trusting relationships at the level of belonging and love. Brené Brown (2012) makes it clear in her work that love and belonging are only possible if someone is willing to be vulnerable. At this level, courage is the person's willingness to connect even if they might be rejected or let down. This makes emotional closeness a place to grow, not a place to feel safe.

From the moment humanity appeared on the stage of history, the necessity to work and to sustain life has shaped the way we satisfy our need for safety. Accordingly, fulfilling this need is directly connected to the trust we place in those with whom we live, work, and coexist. As previously discussed, such trust requires a willingness to be vulnerable to others. This vulnerability—an openness to the possibility of being hurt—constitutes a form of courage in itself.

Naturally, this should be understood within the broader components of courage. It must not take the form of blind or reckless daring, but rather a morally grounded courage that involves conscious risk assessment and deliberate, calculated judgment.

At the level of esteem, courage is the ability of a person to know their own worth, demand their rightful place, and stand up to authority when necessary. Herzberg's (1959) dual-factor theory posits that the efficacy of intrinsic motivators, such as success and recognition, is contingent upon the individual's ability to surmount their fear of failure. At this juncture, courage manifests as moral autonomy, empowering the individual to cultivate self-esteem independently of external validation.

The esteem-needs level becomes particularly visible within the organizational environments in which individuals function—such as workplaces, families, sports teams, and similar social structures. Achieving esteem in these settings naturally depends on competence, personality, managerial capacity, and leadership abilities. Within this framework, it is virtually impossible for an individual who lacks courage to earn the respect of others. Respect—closely tied to leadership—fundamentally requires courage.

Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to say that, across all contexts, courage is a common and indispensable trait of leaders. Being granted a respected position within one's environment is also deeply connected to values, and given that courage serves as both a precursor and a prerequisite for the emergence and continuation of other values, it becomes an essential element at this level of Maslow's hierarchy.

Courage is the most important psychological force that shapes a person's creativity, originality, and moral compass at the top of the pyramid of self-actualization. Maslow (1970) identified 15 traits in self-actualized people, and most of them are directly or indirectly linked to courage. These traits include seeing things as they are, being independent, being open to new ideas, having peak experiences, having a sense of humour, and being sensitive to ethics. Creative courage, specifically, refers to the individual's ability to act in accordance with their intrinsic truth, irrespective of societal norms or expectations (May, 1975). In this context, Aristotle's "Golden Mean" doctrine places courage as a virtue that strikes a balance between cowardice and recklessness. When this equilibrium is disturbed, the individual either stifles their potential by evading risk or participates in detrimental behavioural patterns due to excessive confidence (Dodson, 2023).

Although this study will later provide detailed explanations of the fifteen elements of self-actualization, it is important to emphasize here that the courage required at this highest level of Maslow's hierarchy is incomparable to that required at the lower levels—its magnitude and significance are far greater. As one ascends the hierarchy, courage—much like the submerged portion of an iceberg—becomes less visible on the surface yet grows deeper, denser, and more influential beneath it. This hidden strength may indeed represent one of the essential qualities that distinguishes human beings from other living creatures.

With progression to higher levels, commitment also intensifies, and commitment is closely intertwined with courage. This may explain Maslow's observation that only about 2% of society is capable of even beginning—let alone completing—the process of self-actualization. Importantly, this 2% refers merely to those who can enter the process, not necessarily to those who achieve full self-actualization.

Maslow also notes that this group most commonly appears not among scientists, clergy, or intellectuals, as one might assume, but among housewives. The underlying reason may lie in the nurturing roles women undertake, their embrace of motherhood and family, and their profound willingness to dedicate themselves to these responsibilities. Devotion finds its most powerful expression in motherhood. This phenomenon is not exclusive to humans; it is observable across many species. A normally cautious hen can become fiercely protective when defending her chicks.

Likewise, there is virtually no risk a human mother would not take for her child. Such devotion undeniably rests on a remarkably high level of courage. This example illustrates that self-actualization is deeply rooted in dedication—and that true dedication cannot exist without courage.

Consequently, courage fulfils a dual role within Maslow's hierarchical framework, functioning as both a catalyst for advancement and a balancing virtue. Courage is the mental barrier that people must cross in order to move from one level of need to another. It helps them get past the fear that stands in their way. On the other hand, not having enough courage keeps motivation at a level that is not very real, while having too much can make people take risks without thinking. So, courage is what gives motivation its emotional base and moral direction.

In the end, courage is an existential force that runs through all of Maslow's levels of needs. It allows the will to survive at the physiological level, a sense of control at the security level, emotional openness at the belonging level, self-worth at the esteem level, and creative originality at the self-actualization level. This multidimensional framework regards courage not only as a virtue but as the essential psychological force that underpins human motivation.

2.4. Types of Courage Corresponding to Maslow's Hierarchical Levels

Maslow's hierarchy of needs elucidates human motivation across five essential tiers, wherein the individual's ability to manage fear, risk, and uncertainty is pivotal at each tier. In this context, courage should not be viewed as a virtue exclusive to the higher-level "self-actualization" stage; rather, it should be viewed as a fundamental psychological energy that motivates human behavior at all levels. Mert (2024) identified 19 different types of courage in his comprehensive study. These include physical, moral, psychological, social, intellectual, creative, empathic, process, disciplinary, spiritual, vital, interpersonal, expressive, curiosity, natural, personal, praise, general, and emotional courage. These types of courage make up a multilayered motivational map that fits with Maslow's five levels of needs.

Maslow's physiological needs level pertains to the desire for survival; at this juncture, courage is expressed through physical, natural, and vital forms. Natural courage is the instinctive survival reflex, while physical courage is the ability to face direct life-threatening dangers. Vital courage, conversely, refers to an individual's ability to sustain life energy amidst illness, deprivation, or the imminent threat of death (Mert, 2024; Finfgeld, 1999).

The level of security indicates a person's quest for physical and psychological equilibrium. At this point, psychological, disciplined, and process courage help a person stay stable even when they are scared and unsure. Psychological courage refers to the capacity to face internal fears, whereas disciplined courage pertains to self-control and perseverance (Putman, 1997; Lassiter, 2017).

At the level of belonging and love needs, courage is about how willing a person is to take social risks and make connections with others. Courage in social, empathic, and interpersonal situations is the most important thing here. Social courage allows a person to make friends even if they are afraid of being rejected or left out; empathic courage means being open to understanding how others feel; and interpersonal courage means being honest when resolving a conflict (Tufan et al. 2024; May, 1975; Mert, 2024).

Esteem is connected to a person's wish to feel important, recognised, and successful. At this point, moral, expressive, praise, and personal courage are all important. Moral courage entails adherence to ethical principles; expressive courage involves the open articulation of thoughts and emotions; praise courage signifies the acknowledgement of others' accomplishments; and personal courage reflects an individual's capacity to safeguard self-esteem and sustain self-confidence (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007; Mert, 2024).

Finally, the self-actualization level is the point at which a person shows their full potential. At this level, intellectual, creative, spiritual, curiosity, and general courage represent the individual's search for meaning and originality. Intellectual courage signifies the resolve to challenge stereotypes in the quest for knowledge; creative courage embodies the capacity for innovation and original thought; spiritual courage denotes the ability to confront existential enquiries; and the courage of curiosity reflects the eagerness to learn (Mert, 2024; May, 1975).

In this context, each type of courage aligns with a tier in Maslow's hierarchy and functions as the "emotional fuel" that propels human motivation. So, courage can be thought of as more than just a good quality; it can also be thought of as an internal mechanism that helps people meet their needs.

Relating different types of courage to the various levels of needs within Maslow's hierarchy demonstrates that each level requires a distinct form of courage. As suggested earlier through the iceberg analogy, the types of courage that are more difficult to observe, define, or articulate—those lying beneath the surface and constituting the larger unseen mass—are more closely connected to higher-level needs. In other words, these advanced needs depend fundamentally on the motivational strength and grounding provided by these deeper, less visible forms of courage.

Naturally, the relationships outlined in Table 2 represent only an initial framework. The connection between the types of courage and the levels of human needs warrants further, more comprehensive research and discussion. Nonetheless, as emphasized throughout this study, courage should not be treated as a single, uniform construct; rather, it manifests in multiple forms, each of which must be considered in the understanding and fulfillment of human needs.

Table 2. Courage Across the Levels of Maslow's Hierarchical Pyramid

Maslow's Level	Types of Courage	Explanation
Physiological Needs (Survival)	Physical Courage, Vital Courage, Natural Courage	At this level, courage is the emotional and physical expression of the will to survive. Physical courage represents the ability to maintain bodily integrity in the face of dangerous or painful conditions. Vital courage is the ability to preserve life energy in situations such as severe illness, hunger, disaster, or the threat of death. Natural courage, on the other hand, is the instinctive "survival instinct" combined with consciousness. This type of courage protects one's biological existence while reinforcing the desire to hold on to life (Maddi, 2006; Mert, 2024).
Safety Needs (Stability and Control)	Psychological Courage, Disciplined Courage, Process Courage	At this stage, courage reflects an individual's ability to maintain psychological balance under uncertainty and threat. Psychological courage involves confronting inner fears and maintaining emotional stability; disciplined courage refers to self-control and willpower to maintain security. Process courage, on the other hand, enables an individual to pursue long-term goals with determination and to persevere despite fears of error and failure. This type of courage transforms Maslow's need for security from passive protection to active self-defense (Bandura, 1977; Mert, 2024).
Belonging and Love Needs (Connection and Acceptance)	Social Courage, Empathic Courage, Interpersonal Courage	At the level of belonging, courage encompasses emotional openness and relational risk. Social courage represents an individual's willingness to build relationships despite the possibility of rejection or exclusion. Empathic courage involves vulnerability and emotional empathy to understand the suffering of others. Interpersonal courage, on the other hand, refers to honesty, open communication, and constructive conflict resolution in relationships. These forms of courage lead to meeting needs for love and affiliation, even at the cost of emotional risk, thus strengthening secure attachment and psychological resilience (Brown, 2012; Mert, 2024).
Esteem Needs (Value and Recognition)	Moral Courage, Expressive Courage, Praise Courage, Personal Courage	At the respect level, courage is an individual's way of defending their self-worth and identity. Moral courage is the will to adhere to ethical values in the face of injustice or oppression. Expressive courage allows an individual to express their thoughts, feelings, or ideas despite fear of criticism. Praise courage is the ability to appreciate both themselves and others; in this respect, it strengthens mature self-esteem, not narcissism. Personal courage, on the other hand, refers to an individual's ability to pursue their goals while maintaining self-confidence and to learn from mistakes without shame (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007; Mert, 2024).
Self-Actualization	Intellectual Courage, Creative Courage, Spiritual Courage, Curiosity Courage, General Courage	In the self-actualization stage, courage is central to an individual's will to manifest their potential. Intellectual courage is the power to challenge stereotypes by leaving their comfort zone regarding knowledge and truth. Creative courage involves taking risks in innovative thinking, artistic expression, and original problem-solving behaviors. Spiritual courage enables them to confront the unknown while contemplating the meaning of life, death, and values. The courage of curiosity fosters an individual's cognitive development by prioritizing the desire to learn over fear. Finally, general courage is the combination of all these types and enables an individual to achieve holistic self-awareness (May, 1975; Mert, 2024).

Source: Created by the author.

2.5. The Balance Point of Courage in the Golden Mean Approach: The Fine Line Between Cowardice and Recklessness

Aristotle's idea of the Golden Mean says that courage is a balanced virtue that falls between cowardice and recklessness. Cowardice is when someone avoids taking risks because they are scared, anxious, or don't believe in themselves. They also miss out on chances and put off things that need to be done in life. This condition signifies not merely behavioural passivity but also a manifestation of existential withdrawal. When taken too far, the person can't reach their full potential, has trouble making decisions, and always stays in their comfort zone. On the other hand, recklessness is when a person doesn't care about risks, limits, or other people's rights. At this level, a person acts without thinking, putting their own safety or the safety of others at risk, and they do things on a whim, driven by impulses they can't control. Both extremes cause mental instability; one makes people passive and the other makes them act on impulse in a harmful way. So, courage should be thought of as a moral and conscious action that keeps fear in check and stops people from acting on impulse.

Socrates and several other philosophers have argued that animals, too, possess courage. Yet what distinguishes humans from animals is the broader and more complex range through which we express and interpret courageous behavior. Aristotle's notion of the Golden Mean reflects this reality, making it inevitable to question whether our courage resides at the optimal midpoint between its two extremes—cowardice and recklessness.

A shift toward either extreme disrupts the essential components of courage—its defining qualities—and distances the resulting behavior from what genuine courage entails. As emphasized throughout this study, the central role of courage in satisfying human needs and in shaping courage-based motivation highlights the importance of scrutinizing behaviors that drift toward either extreme or depart from this golden middle point.

At each level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this idea of balance shows up in different ways. Courage signifies the determination to endure at the physiological level. At this level, cowardice shows up as being too careful or avoiding things that are necessary for life; the person tends to avoid doing things by making the risks seem bigger than they are. For instance, ignoring health issues, being too protective, or becoming passive because you don't have enough energy are all examples of this. On the other hand, being reckless means ignoring signs like hunger, thirst, and tiredness, which puts their health at risk and puts them in danger. Physical courage, which is in the middle of these two extremes, lets a person consciously control their instinct to protect life.

 When it comes to security, cowardice usually shows up as someone who avoids uncertainty and change and relies too much on their safe place. People like this are always looking for protection from financial, social, or emotional harm. They would rather stay the same than take risks. At this level, cowardice can mean relying too much on safety, being obsessed with control, or needing approval. Recklessness, on the other hand, shows itself when people don't care about safety limits, break rules, or take risks that aren't necessary. This imbalance makes the person act out of control, and they may even show antisocial behaviour or have sudden outbursts. At this point, healthy courage means being able to stay stable even when things are uncertain, move forward with self-control, and do things even when you're scared.

Courage is linked to being emotionally open, close to others, and wanting to connect with others at the level of needing love and belonging. Cowardice shows up as avoiding social situations, being afraid of being turned down, or not being emotionally involved. This situation makes social anxiety, a shy personality, and feelings of loneliness worse. On the other hand, being reckless means crossing other people's boundaries, making relationships that are manipulative, or acting too dependent. On the other hand, healthy courage means being able to set limits while also being open about your feelings and

balancing empathy with honesty. This balance makes sure that the needs for love and belonging are met in a way that lasts.

At the level of respect and self-confidence, cowardice shows up as someone who doesn't think highly of themselves, avoids success, and has low self-esteem. These people often don't want to show off their skills, stay away from social comparisons, and show signs of depression. On the other hand, recklessness is the opposite. It shows up as being too sure of yourself, being rude to others, and putting them down. These people have too much self-confidence and show authoritarian, narcissistic, or manipulative traits. At this level, the Golden Mean is the balance between self-esteem and humility. A person respects others while also believing in themselves.

The self-actualization level is where courage reaches its highest point. At this point, cowardice shows up as someone not using their full potential, not taking creative risks, and not sharing their own ideas. This is connected to not having enough confidence in yourself and having a passive personality. On the other hand, being reckless means promoting yourself too much, trying to get too much attention, or not respecting other people's boundaries. These extremes may occasionally correlate with impulsive behavioural disorders or manic episodes. At this level, balance is achieved by the individual's capacity to articulate their creativity through deliberate risk-taking while upholding ethical boundaries in their self-expression.

A lack of courage (cowardice) is linked to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem; it stops people from taking advantage of opportunities and makes them live a passive and avoidant lifestyle. On the other hand, recklessness (too much courage) is linked to impulsivity, antisocial, or narcissistic traits, and it raises risks for both individuals and society. The Golden Mean between these two extremes is very important for healthy mental growth. Balanced courage empowers individuals to consciously, ethically, and sustainably fulfil their needs at each of Maslow's levels. So, courage is not just a good thing; it is a basic principle of balance that affects a person's mental health, motivation, and sense of purpose.

2.6. The Courage Dimension of Self-Actualization

Maslow's self-actualization, the highest level of need, is the ability of a person to reach their full potential, find meaning in their life, and connect with others. But getting to this point isn't just a mental process; it's also an existential battle that takes a lot of courage. Courage is the psychological equilibrium that empowers individuals to act in spite of their fears, acknowledge their limitations, and realise their potential without excess. Aristotle's "Golden Mean" says that being cowardly or reckless, which are the two extremes of courage, can stop a person from growing and developing. Cowardice is when you don't take advantage of your potential or the chances that life gives you. Recklessness is when you take risks without thinking about them, go overboard, or get too emotional.

1. More Accurate Perception of Reality: Accurately perceiving and accepting reality is closely tied to courage. Individuals may avoid confronting reality because facing fears or acknowledging unpleasant truths can threaten their sense of security. This avoidance can manifest in various ways—for example, accepting a terminal diagnosis requires considerable courage. Perceiving reality correctly also involves positioning oneself accurately within it. In Aristotle's terms, courage lies between cowardice and recklessness. Underestimating risks reflects recklessness, while exaggerating threats signals cowardice. Therefore, sound judgment and appropriate courage are essential for a clear perception of reality.

2. Tolerance of Ambiguity: Uncertainty tests a person's ability to handle life. When someone doesn't have courage, they are afraid of the unknown, don't want to try new things, and worry about losing control. This can make people think in rigid ways and be afraid of social situations. On the other hand, recklessness shows itself in taking risks without thinking ahead and doing things without thinking

about the consequences. On the other hand, balanced courage means being okay with not knowing what will happen, being open to change, and taking risks on purpose.

3. Self-Acceptance: Being authentic in social interactions and toward oneself also reflects courage. Seeing oneself as weaker or stronger than one truly is indicates a deviation toward cowardice or recklessness. Presenting oneself differently than one truly is often stems from fear—typically the fear of losing something. Such fear may manifest in social relationships as efforts to appear unlike one's genuine self.

4. Naturalness and Sincerity: A person's ability to take off their social masks is linked to how natural they are. A coward makes up a fake identity because they are afraid of what other people will think of them. This makes people anxious in social situations and obsessed with fitting in. On the other hand, being reckless means saying everything that comes to mind without thinking it through, which is rude. Being honest is a sign of real courage. A person shows who they are by being open but not too much. Despite being social beings, humans differ from one another significantly, and it is nearly impossible for everyone to attribute the same meaning to the same experiences. Recognizing and accepting one's individuality sometimes requires solitude. Being alone in a crowd, in the sense of turning inward and listening to one's conscience, also demands courage.

5. A Sense of Duty (Problem-Centeredness): Approaching problems as opportunities for growth rather than as threats requires self-confidence and courage. Courageous individuals treat challenges as developmental experiences and aim to create value by solving issues that benefit both themselves and society. A sense of duty is the ability to set important goals in life. A cowardly person shies away from problems, puts things off, and lives a passive life. On the other hand, a careless person takes on too much, does things without thinking, and ends up burned out. Balanced courage means being able to take responsibility with determination when things get tough, but also knowing when to stop.

6. Inner Autonomy: Closely associated with privacy, autonomy involves originality in decisions and the courage to assume responsibility for them. High self-awareness and an autonomous stance toward life's purposes and obligations reflect existential courage.

7. Appreciation: Being able to see the beauty in life is a sign that you are at peace with yourself. When someone is cowardly, they can't see the good things because they only see the bad things. When someone is reckless, they don't accept reality and act like everything will be fine. The courage of balance means being able to see both the good and bad things in life and still be thankful. In therapy settings, clients often display this characteristic: the ability to experience life as continuously renewed, even during adverse events. Maintaining this sense of vitality and satisfaction—even in the face of difficulties— requires embracing life with courage. This applies not only to negative experiences but also to positive ones, where ethical and moral restraint likewise demands courage.

8. Peak Experiences: Among Maslow's characteristics of self-actualization, peak experiences are perhaps the most clearly linked to courage. Experiencing deep and intense moments requires bold decisions, calculated risks, perseverance, and a willingness to face danger. As shown in Mert vd. (2025), courage involves persistence despite fear and the capacity to act beyond oneself—qualities essential for profound peak experiences.

9. Love of Humanity: To love humanity, you need to be brave and have empathy. When someone is cowardly, they stay away from people and don't want to connect with them emotionally. Recklessness, on the other hand, is when you care too much about others and try to help everyone. This can lead to crossing boundaries and getting burned out. Courage that is balanced lets you love others while still keeping your own limits. In research by Mert (2010) examining Terror Management Theory and courage, courage was found to serve as a buffer against mortality salience, preventing excessive in-group attachment and out-group exclusion. Thus, courage plays a fundamental role in transcending cultural limitations, a key aspect of Maslow's self-actualization.

10. Profound Relationships: Research on social courage shows that it influences many organizational variables and often plays a moderating or mediating role. Social courage involves expressing the truth, being candid, and acting ethically despite others' criticism or negative reactions. This quality enables individuals to build deep, healthy, and sincere relationships.

11. Democratic Character: Democracy requires tolerance, respect for others' rights and views, and the courage to stand up for one's own rights. Courage is associated with freedom, whereas cowardice accompanies the surrender of freedom. Thus, individuals and societies lacking courage cannot sustain a democratic character.

12. Creativity: Self-actualization is inherently linked to creativity. As May (1975) emphasized, the foundation of creativity is the courage to create. Engaging in creative behavior and sustaining motivation for it is only possible through courage. Creativity is the ability to be brave enough to try new things. A coward doesn't want to share their thoughts or make mistakes. A careless person, on the other hand, makes things without thinking about what will happen. Balanced courage enables the articulation of novel concepts with deliberate risk; this is the convergence of originality and accountability.

13. Moral Orientation: Living ethically and in harmony with moral principles is impossible without courage. As Churchill and many thinkers have noted, courage is the guardian of all other virtues; without it, no other virtue can truly manifest. Moral orientation is the ability of a person to act in line with their beliefs. A cowardly person stays quiet when they see something wrong, even though they know it's wrong. A careless person, on the other hand, angrily forces the truth on others, which leads to a harmful attitude of "rightness." Balanced courage lets you stand up for what is right while still being reasonable.

14. Sense of Humour: Both producing and receiving humor require courage. Making a joke or telling a story implies a degree of ease and self-confidence. Accepting humor with tolerance also reflects self-assurance. Conversely, a fearful or insecure individual is easily offended and reluctant to engage with humor. Having a sense of humour can help you get through tough times. A coward takes life too seriously and thinks that laughing makes them weak. A careless person, on the other hand, uses humour that makes fun of and hurts other people. The courage of balance is a kind of humour that is respectful and shows empathy.

15. Integration with Life: The highest level of self-actualization is being in harmony with life. A cowardly person stays away from the pain and uncertainty of life, which makes them emotionally dull and passive. On the other hand, a careless person doesn't care about life and does things that are too dangerous. The courage of balance allows one to embrace both the joys and sorrows of life while respecting the integrity of existence.

In this context, fifteen characteristics from Maslow's self-actualization level are evaluated, each linked to a distinct type of grit, and the psychological effects of inadequate or excessive manifestations of these traits are examined through the lens of the Golden Mean. The table below gives a clear overview of these relationships.

Table 3. Courage Across the Highest Level Need of Maslow's Hierarchical Pyramid (Self-Actualization)

Maslow's Characteristic	Deficiency (Cowardice)	Golden Mean (Balanced Courage)	Excess (Recklessness)
Accurate perception of reality	Avoiding truths, self-deception; anxiety and cognitive distortion	Seeing reality objectively and expressing it with empathy	Expressing truths harshly; loss of empathy and sensitivity
Tolerance of ambiguity	Avoiding the unknown, fear of change, rigidity	Embracing uncertainty and openness to new experiences	Taking risks impulsively; acting without reflection
Self-acceptance	Rejecting flaws, excessive self-criticism, low self-esteem	Accepting oneself while remaining open to growth	Ignoring faults, irresponsibility, narcissistic tendencies
Spontaneity and authenticity	Wearing masks, inauthentic behavior, fear of exposure	Being sincere, transparent, and measured	Over-disclosure, bluntness, or socially inappropriate honesty
Sense of purpose (problem-centeredness)	Avoiding challenges, passivity, lack of initiative	Facing difficulties with determination and persistence	Overcommitting or acting without planning; burnout risk
Tolerance of ambiguity	Dependence on approval, conformity, submissiveness	Making independent choices guided by internal values	Disregarding others' perspectives; arrogant independence
Autonomy	Inability to notice beauty or goodness; pessimism	Cultivating gratitude with realistic awareness	A pattern of reality-avoidance manifested through naïve optimism or escapist fantasy.
Appreciation	Avoiding intense emotions and deep experiences	Experiencing life's intensity with mindfulness	Pursuing extreme experiences recklessly; addiction tendencies
Peak experiences	Avoiding people; lack of empathy or compassion	Showing care and empathy with clear boundaries	Over-involvement or self-sacrificial behavior
Humanitarianism	Fear of intimacy, emotional avoidance	Building open, trust-based connections	Blind attachment, dependency, or boundary violations
Profound relationships	Silence in the face of differing opinions; excessive conformity	Expressing personal views while respecting diversity	Imposing one's views; authoritarian tendencies
Democratic character	Suppressing ideas, fear of failure or experimentation	Creating through conscious risk-taking and openness	Producing impulsively, ignoring risks or consequences
Creativity	Remaining silent in the face of injustice	Standing for truth in a measured and ethical way	Forcing one's moral stance aggressively or destructively
Moral orientation	Inability to laugh at life; excessive seriousness	Using humor with empathy and kindness	Insensitive, mocking, or aggressive humor
Sense of humor	Avoiding pain and emotional depth; detachment	Accepting both joy and suffering as parts of life	Careless or thrill-seeking lifestyle; neglect of responsibility
Integration with life	Avoiding truths, self-deception; anxiety and cognitive distortion	Seeing reality objectively and expressing it with empathy	Expressing truths harshly; loss of empathy and sensitivity

Source: Created by the author.

Maslow's self-actualization traits serve as indicators that measure not only an individual's cognitive and emotional maturity but also their capacity for courage. These fifteen characteristics clearly illustrate how various forms of courage—moral, psychological, creative, and intellectual—sustain and elevate higher-level motivations in life. Insufficient courage can render an individual passive, fearful, and withdrawn, whereas excessive courage may manifest as impulsive, reckless, or even destructive behavior.

Aristotle's understanding of the "Golden Mean" is the fundamental principle that establishes balance at this level of development. True courage is not the denial of fear; it is the power to act consciously despite it. Therefore, at the level of self-actualization, courage is positioned as a moral virtue of balance, enabling an individual to fulfill their potential, live consistently with their values, and achieve existential integrity.

3. COURAGE-BASED MOTIVATION THEORY (CBMT)

Within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is reasonable to say that the courage required by humans to meet their needs has evolved throughout history. All five levels of needs remain relevant today just as they were for our earliest ancestors; however, the type and degree of courage required to satisfy these needs have shifted significantly. In hunter-gatherer societies, courage was primarily directed toward meeting lower-level needs such as physiological survival and safety—domains that demanded intense physical bravery. In contrast, in contemporary societies—where social institutions, technological systems, and organizational structures are far more advanced—meeting basic physiological and safety needs generally requires far less courage than it once did.

Yet, at higher levels of the hierarchy, the nature of courage appears to have transformed. From the perspective of the Courage-Based Motivation Theory (CBMT), the form of courage needed to attain self-actualization in hunter-gatherer contexts was likely less pronounced than it is today. Modern individuals must confront deeper existential fears—such as social rejection, failure, moral isolation, and the pressure to define an authentic self—in order to realize self-actualization. Thus, while lower-level needs have become easier to satisfy, the courage required to meet higher-level psychological and existential needs has likely intensified in contemporary life.

Of course, the evaluations presented here must ultimately be tested and validated through empirical research conducted by anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists using diverse methodological approaches. My central argument is that the fundamental motivation behind fulfilling human needs is rooted in courage. Although modern individuals may not need to display the same level of physical bravery that our ancestors demonstrated when meeting lower-level needs, I contend that the overall amount of courage required to satisfy human needs has not diminished. In fact, within today's highly organized and interconnected societies, higher-level needs such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualization often demand even greater psychological and moral courage.

It is also essential to highlight that the mysterious, complex, and deeply paradoxical nature of courage significantly shapes this theoretical perspective. The ambiguous essence of courage—its ability to operate as both a constructive and destructive force—reveals itself within the motivational dynamics of need fulfillment. For example, the courage displayed by an individual who joins an extremist group to satisfy a distorted sense of belonging, or the courage involved in committing an act of self-destruction in pursuit of a misguided form of self-actualization, represents a morally problematic yet psychologically observable manifestation of courage. From an ethical standpoint, such behaviors are unequivocally wrong; however, from a behavioral and motivational perspective, they still illustrate that courage—as an existential energy—can emerge in both morally right and morally misguided directions, depending on the individual's value system and worldview.

The purpose of this example is not to legitimize or justify such actions, but to show that understanding courage-based motivation requires a clear and precise understanding of what courage is—and how it can be directed toward either constructive or destructive ends. Without such clarity, any application of this theoretical framework would remain incomplete.

Mert and colleagues' (2005) research supports this interpretation by identifying several core components that determine whether an act of courage can be considered moral. These components include the presence of fear, an element of generosity, and perseverance. In the example discussed, although these elements may appear to be present at a superficial level, the moral legitimacy of courage requires more than the actor's subjective conviction—it also necessitates validation from external moral stakeholders, namely society and humanity as a whole. Therefore, actions that violate widely shared moral standards cannot be regarded as authentic courage but rather as distorted or corrupted expressions of it.

From this perspective, attempting to understand the theory of courage-based motivation without first grasping the essence, moral boundaries, and evaluative criteria of courage would be incomplete. Consequently, this study is grounded in—and shaped by—the author's prior research on courage, which has informed both the theoretical foundation and the motivational reasoning underlying the development of this model.

• The fundamental assumptions of this theory can be summarized as follows:

• The core of motivation is rooted in courage.

• Courage is necessary for the fulfillment of human needs. This courage may be demonstrated directly by the individual or indirectly by those who enable the satisfaction of that need.

• No need is fulfilled without a cost—this cost is either borne personally or by others who create the conditions for its fulfillment.

• The moral and motivational adequacy of actions taken to satisfy needs should be assessed through the courage exhibited during the process.

• A deficiency of courage leads inevitably to diminished motivation.

• Motivation without courage remains merely an aspiration; the realization of any aspiration requires courage-driven action.

• The inherent risk embedded in courage—stepping beyond one's comfort zone—is equally present in the generosity and perseverance that accompany both motivational processes and their enactment.

• Courage must not be reduced to a single form. Different types of courage align with different levels of human needs. Accordingly, this theory emphasizes that human courage extends far beyond physical bravery, encompassing psychological, moral, social, and intellectual dimensions that collectively sustain motivation across all levels of human existence.

The Courage-Based Motivation Theory (CBMT), based on this research, posits that courage is the fundamental psychological force influencing human behaviour. Current motivation theories elucidate the reasons and mechanisms behind human motivation via cognitive and behavioural frameworks, including need satisfaction (Maslow), expectancy (Vroom), self-determination (Deci & Ryan), and achievement motivation (McClelland). Nevertheless, these methodologies neglect the emotional impetus that compels individuals to act amidst fear, uncertainty, and risk. CBMT seeks to fill this void by establishing courage as the foremost driving force. This theory posits that courage transcends mere virtue; it constitutes an existential force that empowers an individual to sustain their capacity for action amidst fear and uncertainty.

Courage is what gives us the emotional strength we need to get motivated. People are motivated when they know what they need and are willing to take risks to get it. According to CBMT, motivation comes about when "intention" and "courage" come together. In other words, just being aware of something isn't enough to turn motivation into action; only courage can do that. So, courage is a powerful force that starts, keeps, and changes motivation.

This concept analyses Maslow's hierarchy of needs from an emotional perspective. Maslow's hierarchy elucidates the progression of individuals from physiological needs to self-actualization; however, any advancement necessitates departing from the domain of security and venturing into the unknown. Courage-Based Motivation Theory (CBMT) posits that psychological energy facilitates this transition. People need more than just physical and mental courage to survive at the physiological and safety levels; they also need moral, intellectual, and creative courage to feel like they belong, to be respected, and to reach their full potential. Courage serves as a "transitional energy" between needs, functioning as an internal catalyst that drives an individual from stagnation to advancement. CBMT also uses Aristotle's "Golden Mean" idea as a model for how to keep your mind balanced. Courage is the middle ground between being too afraid (deficiency) and being too reckless (excess). When this balance is broken, a person's motivation can go to two extremes: not having enough courage makes them compliant, too careful, and afraid of taking risks, while having too much courage can lead to bad things like taking too many risks, acting on impulse, and burning out. The Golden Mean approach says that true motivation comes from having a healthy relationship with fear, not from not having fear. CBMT says that courage is a kind of mindfulness-based energy that lets you do things while keeping your emotions in check.

This theory diverges from earlier motivation theories on both structural and philosophical dimensions. Maslow's theory emphasises the hierarchy of needs, while CBMT examines the emotional mechanisms that elucidate the "transitional moments" between these levels. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory underscores an individual's autonomy and competence; however, CBMT asserts that such autonomy and competence can only be attained through courage. While Vroom's Expectancy Theory regards the significance of an individual's effort as a cognitive process, CBMT explains it in terms of emotional courage. McClelland's accomplishments Motivation Theory stresses a strong desire to succeed, but CBMT says that courage keeps that desire alive. CBMT, similar to Frankl's Theory of Meaning, views the generation of meaning as an inherent outcome of courage rather than as a motivating factor.

CBMT goes through a cycle of fear, bravery, motivation, action, satisfaction, and then more encouragement. The first step in this process is for the person to accept and change their fears and doubts. Courage is the deliberate acceptance and conversion of fear into action. This change naturally leads to motivation, and courage is shown through action. The satisfaction derived from action initiates a new cycle of courage. This cycle creates a self-reinforcing energy revolution that happens as the person grows.

CBMT's psychological contribution is to underscore the emotional foundation of motivation. Traditional models of motivation often employ cognitive, behavioural, or contextual factors for elucidation, whereas CBMT identifies emotional awareness and volitional energy as its fundamental components. Courage enables individuals to confront their fears instead of suppressing them, fostering internal coherence, a sense of purpose, and psychological resilience. CBMT not only helps people reach their goals, but it also helps them reach self-actualization.

CBMT has significant practical ramifications in corporate environments, including leadership, innovation, ethical decision-making, and crisis management. Brave leaders get their coworkers to do things even when they're scared, which increases commitment to the organisation, a culture of learning, and creativity. Courage also makes employees feel more psychologically safe, which is the first step towards long-term intrinsic motivation. Consequently, CBMT is regarded as an essential element of

personal and organisational performance, ethical disposition, and capacity for innovation.

Courage-Based Motivation Theory posits that motivation transcends a mere cognitive process directing individuals towards a goal; it also constitutes a means of affirming one's existence through action amidst fear. This theory posits that courage serves as the "hidden engine" of human behaviour, asserting that motivation is shaped not solely by objectives but also by an existential framework of meaning. So, CBMT offers a new way to think about motivation that brings together psychological resilience, moral behaviour, and self-actualization. In this perspective, courage is not the antithesis of fear; instead, it is a creative force that equilibrates an individual's potential. Consequently, CBMT is a holistic and transformative framework that presents a novel perspective on human behaviour at both theoretical and practical dimensions.

4. DISCUSSION

Some people say that fear and courage are the two main things that drive people to do things. For humans to flourish and lead significant lives, they must perpetually confront uncertainty and accept risks. Kierkegaard's (1980) depiction of anxiety as the "vertigo of freedom" and Tillich's (1952) notion of "the courage to affirm existence despite nothingness" position courage at the core of existence. This viewpoint regards courage not solely as an emotion or virtue, but as a formidable impetus that propels the human pursuit of self-transcendence. This study amalgamates philosophical frameworks with psychological science to reconceptualise courage as the core essence of human motivation, introducing the Courage-Based Theory of Motivation (CTMT), which presents a novel, comprehensive perspective on current motivational theories.

CTMT sees courage as an emotional and moral force that drives behaviour, unlike traditional models that explain motivation through cognitive expectations or external rewards. In this context, courage denotes an individual's ability to act in the face of fear, functioning as both the foundation and catalyst of motivation. Studies indicate that every level in Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs model, ranging from security and belonging to esteem and self-actualization, is directly correlated with an individual's level of courage. Courage is the ability to deal with uncertainty when it comes to security. At the level of self-actualization, it turns into artistic, moral, and intellectual courage. CTMT characterises the human developmental process as a motivational journey, transitioning from fear to courage and from mere survival to the quest for meaning.

Studies have shown that courage, which is a mental expression of Aristotle's "Golden Mean," acts as a balance between two extremes. When you don't have enough courage, you become passive and limit your potential. When you have too much courage, you take risks and act on impulse. CTMT asserts that "balanced courage" preserves intrinsic motivation by concurrently engaging an individual's ethical, cognitive, and emotional attributes. This idea builds on Maslow's hierarchy of needs by saying that human behaviour is a process of change that is driven by courage, not just the meeting of needs.

4.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study presents a distinctive integrative model by situating the concept of courage at the confluence of psychology, motivation, and virtue ethics literature. Although the existing literature typically regards courage as a moral virtue, a personal characteristic, or an element of ethical decision-making, this study conceptualises courage as the essential dynamic of motivation. This perspective characterises courage not solely as the absence of fear but also as the fundamental essence of the impetus to act. Consequently, the study formulates the courage-centered model of intrinsic motivation, differentiating it from behaviourist frameworks that elucidate motivation via extrinsic incentives.

Another theoretical contribution is the unprecedented integration of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Aristotle's Golden Mean principle in the context of courage. This synthesis permits the interpretation of

human behaviour as a quest for equilibrium between two polar tendencies—cowardice and recklessness. Viewing courage as this equilibrium reinterprets the notions of optimal risk-taking and psychological flexibility within an individual's developmental trajectory.

Moreover, the study addresses a deficiency in the literature by methodically examining the correlation between courage and 15 Maslow traits at the self-actualization level. This analysis elucidates the interplay of courage with its moral, psychological, creative, and intellectual dimensions, and proposes a theoretical typology for the multidimensional structure of courage. Consequently, the research establishes a novel research axis for forthcoming studies, designated as the "motivational ecology of courage."

The basic idea behind CBMT is that "Motivation is the behavioural expression of courage." Without courage, motivation stays at the level of abstract intention. Courage is what turns that intention into action. This view goes into detail about how each of Maslow's 15 self-actualization traits is connected to courage. Each characteristic, including accurate perception of reality, tolerance of ambiguity, autonomy, creativity, moral orientation, and a sense of humour, is interconnected with manifestations of courage maintained in the presence of fear and risk. CBMT defines courage as the "motivational catalyst" that helps people reach their full potential.

4.2. Contributions to the Practice

This research directly influences leadership, business conduct, training, and consultancy. The findings indicate that people and employees require help through both extrinsic rewards and courage-based psychological therapies to enhance their performance. The study presents the Courage-Based Motivation Theory, an innovative conceptual framework applicable in organizations.

From a leadership perspective, the significant influence of courage on decision-making, change management, and conduct in the presence of ethical dilemmas is a crucial area of interest for managers. Courage involves not only embracing risks in crises but also upholding ethical principles, fostering transparent communication, and cultivating trust under uncertainty. The study advocates for the use of "moral and psychological courage" elements in leadership development programs. Courage and encouragement will also manifest themselves in motivation, which is one of a manager's most important duties and core aspects of their role (Mert et al. 2011; Mert, 2011; Mert & Aydemir, 2019).

Research in education and personal development indicates that courage-centric learning methodologies can assist students and individuals in achieving their maximum potential. Perceiving courage as an acquirable behavior instead of a cognitive ability signifies a pivotal transformation in educational psychology and counseling methodologies. CBMT, in its practical application, offers a novel viewpoint, particularly in the fields of leadership, organizational behavior, education, and psychology. Courageous leadership encompasses risk-taking, ethical decision-making, managing resistance during change, and cultivating a culture of trust. In this context, CBMT asserts that courage must be cultivated in conjunction with cognitive competencies in leadership development. Courage is seen as an essential psychological trait in education and human development, enabling individuals to remain motivated to study, surmount their fear of failure, and foster inventive ideas. In counseling and treatment, CBMT provides a framework for understanding anxiety, burnout, and harmful behavioral patterns in individuals who struggle to maintain a balance between fearfulness and recklessness.

4.3. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this study proposes a holistic theoretical framework that positions courage as the existential core of human motivation, it also has some limitations. First, Courage-Based Motivation Theory (CBMT) is designed as a conceptual model, and its empirical validation is currently limited. Therefore, future research should test CBMT's predictions in diverse cultural, organizational, and individual contexts

to assess the model's validity and generalizability. Furthermore, the study theoretically explains the role of courage based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs; however, the interaction of courage at these levels has not yet been measured with quantitative scales. This highlights the importance of developing psychometric measurement tools (e.g., a courage-based motivation scale) in the future.

Another limitation of the study is that the analyses are largely based on existing literature reviews, and causal relationships are not supported by empirical data. Future studies are recommended to test the interactions between variables in the CBMT model (e.g., courage, self-determination, ethical decision-making, innovation) using advanced statistical methods such as structural equation modeling (SEM). Furthermore, examining the effects of courage on motivation across different cultural contexts will be important to test the model's universal validity. In particular, the perception of courage and its impact on motivational processes can be comparatively studied between Eastern and Western cultures.

Finally, empirically examining the practical implications of CBMT in applied fields such as organizational behavior, leadership development, educational psychology, and psychotherapy will add an applied dimension to the model's theoretical contribution. In this context, it is recommended that future research consider grit not merely as an individual trait but as a dynamic element shaped by organizational climate and cultural values. Thus, CBMT will become a comprehensive paradigm that not only provides a theoretical explanation of motivation but also explains the functional role of grit in the transformation processes of individuals and organizations.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a fresh perspective on classic motivation theories and virtue ethics by emphasizing courage as the cornerstone of human motivation. It offers a theoretical framework to substantiate the notion that "courage is the foundation of motivation." It renders courage a quantifiable and cultivable factor in leadership, education, and psychological healing processes. This study introduces a novel paradigm asserting that courage is fundamental to motivation.

This study presents the Courage-Based Motivation Theory (CBMT), a comprehensive framework that redefines motivation. This theory posits courage as a primary motivator rather than a result, offering an innovative theoretical framework for elucidating human behavior that integrates emotional, cognitive, and moral dimensions. In motivation research, CBMT addresses the inquiry "why do we take action?" with the response "because we dare," proposing courage as a crucial concept for understanding human existential energy.

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