

Past, Present, and Future of ERG Theory: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Despite nearly six decades of scholarly inquiry, Alderfer's (1969) Existence-Relatedness-Growth (ERG) theory has not been sufficiently synthesized in terms of its historical development and multidisciplinary applications. This structured literature review examines a body of representative studies was reviewed peer-reviewed articles published between 1969 and 2024 from Web of Science and Scopus, tracing the theory's evolution from a revision of Maslow's hierarchy to its applications in organisational behaviour, psychology, education, healthcare, and entrepreneurship. Key contributions include identification of theoretical advancements, empirical validations, methodological innovations, and enduring challenges such as cross-cultural adaptability and measurement consistency. Emerging research directions involve integrating ERG theory with cross-cultural management, digital transformation, and psychological capital. The paper proposes an integrative framework to guide future studies, offering insights for both scholarly inquiry and practical intervention in increasingly complex and diverse contexts. Findings reaffirm ERG theory's relevance, adaptability, and potential for innovation, while highlighting gaps that warrant further investigation through longitudinal, experimental, and context-sensitive approaches.

1. Introduction

It has been almost 60 years since Clayton P. Alderfer introduced the ERG theory, a framework that has significantly influenced research on human motivation and need satisfaction. Given the breadth of its applications and the evolving socio-economic context, it is both timely and necessary to conduct a comprehensive review of the theory's development and its prospective directions. This study draws upon a body of representative studies was reviewed peer-reviewed articles on ERG theory published between 1969 and 2024 in the Web of Science database, providing an integrative

synthesis of its conceptual evolution, empirical validation, and cross-disciplinary applications.

Within the fields of organisational behaviour and psychology, need-based theories have long been central to understanding individual motivation and behaviour (Steers et al., 2004; Kanfer & Chen, 2016; Deci et al., 2017). The ERG theory proposed by Alderfer (1969)—comprising Existence Needs, Relatedness Needs, and Growth Needs—offers a comprehensive model for categorising and explaining human needs. It extends earlier frameworks such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), McClelland's Achievement Needs Theory (McClelland, 1961), and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg, 1966), while introducing the concepts of need interaction and dynamic adjustment. These innovations have opened new perspectives for examining motivation and organisational behaviour (Alderfer, 1969; Caulton, 2012; He & Kenikasahmanworakhun, 2024).

The core premise of ERG theory lies in the multilevel and interdependent nature of human needs (Rothmann, 2008). According to Alderfer (1969; 1977), existence needs refer to physiological and safety requirements; relatedness needs pertain to interpersonal relationships and social connections; and growth needs involve self-development and fulfilment. In contrast to Maslow's strictly hierarchical model, ERG theory posits that multiple needs can be active simultaneously, and that the satisfaction of one need may influence or regulate the pursuit of others (Schmitt et al., 1978). This flexibility enables the theory to explain variations in motivation and behaviour across diverse contexts (Wiley, 1997).

Empirical research has demonstrated ERG theory's broad applicability and predictive power, particularly in organisational behaviour, employee motivation, and job satisfaction (Arnolds & Boshoff, 2002; Udechukwu & Mujtaba, 2007; Tay & Diener, 2011; Hajiali et al., 2022). For instance, while Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, ERG theory expands upon this by categorising needs in a way that accommodates dynamic interactions between factors. In contemporary contexts shaped by digital transformation, artificial intelligence (AI), and automation, ERG theory has been applied to explain how technological change reshapes employee needs and informs managerial strategies (Alderfer, 1969; Steers et al., 2004). Moreover, its relevance extends to cross-cultural management, organisational change, psychological capital, knowledge sharing, organisational respect, and individual autonomy (Wilcove, 1978; Tuzzolino & Armandi, 1981; Barachini, 2009; De Haan et al., 2014).

Despite its theoretical robustness and practical utility, significant research opportunities remain. In particular, integrating ERG theory into emerging domains—such as corporate social responsibility, social enterprise, environmental sustainability, and psychological capital—offers potential to deepen understanding of dynamic need structures in modern work and societal contexts (Diep et al., 2019). For example, examining how ERG theory can underpin strategies for enhancing employee well-being or achieving sustainability objectives represents a promising line of inquiry.

To ensure methodological rigour, this review adopts a structured literature review approach. Relevant studies were identified through comprehensive searches of the Web of Science and Scopus databases using combinations of keywords such as “ERG theory”, “Existence Relatedness Growth”, “Alderfer”, “motivation”, and “need satisfaction”. The

search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1969 and 2024. Inclusion criteria required that studies explicitly address ERG theory either conceptually or empirically, while exclusion criteria removed non-peer-reviewed sources, non-English publications, and works where ERG theory was only tangentially mentioned without substantive analysis. Titles, abstracts, and full texts were screened in two stages to ensure relevance, yielding a final dataset articles. Although the PRISMA framework is traditionally used in health sciences, its principles of transparency and replicability guided the study selection process in this review. This methodological foundation strengthens the validity of the subsequent synthesis and supports the reliability of the conclusions drawn.

1.1 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive and integrative review of the development, empirical validation, and multidisciplinary applications of Alderfer's ERG theory. Specifically, this study seeks to: (1) trace the theoretical evolution of ERG theory since its inception; (2) synthesise empirical findings across organisational, psychological, educational, healthcare, and entrepreneurial contexts; and (3) identify methodological limitations and emerging research directions.

1.2 Research Questions

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How has ERG theory evolved conceptually and empirically over time?

RQ2: In what ways has ERG theory been applied across different disciplines and contexts?

RQ3: What methodological challenges and research gaps remain in existing ERG studies?

2. Method

This study adopts a structured literature review approach rather than a full systematic literature review. The aim of this approach is to provide a theoretically grounded and thematically organized overview of ERG theory and its applications, without claiming exhaustive or fully reproducible coverage of all existing studies.

The literature search was conducted using major academic databases, including Scopus and Web of Science, with Google Scholar used as a supplementary source to identify additional relevant publications. Searches were performed using combinations of keywords such as "ERG theory," "Alderfer's ERG," "motivation theory," "employee motivation," "need satisfaction," and "organizational behavior." These terms were applied to article titles, abstracts, and author-provided keywords to ensure relevance.

The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and academic books published in English that explicitly addressed ERG theory or closely related motivational constructs within organizational or social contexts. Studies were excluded if they were non-academic in nature, lacked a clear theoretical foundation, or referred to ERG theory only incidentally.

Based on this structured search and screening process, a body of representative studies was identified and reviewed. Rather than documenting each screening stage or providing a complete catalogue of retrieved publications, the selected literature was synthesized to highlight key themes, theoretical developments, and application domains of ERG theory, forming the basis for the subsequent analysis and discussion.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Foundation and Evolution of ERG Theory

ERG theory was first proposed by Clayton P. Alderfer in 1969 as a revision and extension of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, with the aim of providing a more accurate explanation of human motivation and needs. Alderfer streamlined Maslow's five levels of needs—Physiological, Safety, Social, Esteem, and Self-Actualisation—into three core categories: Existence needs, Relatedness needs, and Growth needs (Alderfer, 1969). This integration not only simplified the hierarchical structure but also emphasised the interactions among needs and the potential for dynamic changes, thereby enhancing the theory's applicability to complex and rapidly changing real-world situations.

A key innovation of ERG theory lies in the frustration–regression mechanism (Alderfer, 1969), which posits that when higher-level needs cannot be satisfied, individuals may revert to lower-level needs as a form of psychological compensation. This stands in contrast to Maslow's principle of “hierarchical satisfaction,” which assumes a fixed sequential fulfilment of needs. The frustration–regression concept provides a more flexible framework for understanding the dynamics of human needs, a view that has been widely endorsed and supported in subsequent research (Chang & Yuan, 2008; Boluk et al., 2017; Onedibe, 2019; Luo & Zhang, 2020; Provitera & Sayyadi, 2023; Aghimien et al., 2024).

Over the decades, multiple scholars have extended and empirically validated ERG theory. Schwab & Cummings (1970) systematically examined its structure, confirming both the validity of the need classifications and their relationships with job satisfaction, thereby demonstrating the theory's explanatory power across different organisational contexts. Wanous & Zwany (1977) further substantiated the frustration–regression mechanism through empirical analysis, confirming the flexibility and substitutability of need satisfaction. Schmitt et al. (1978) found that existence, relatedness, and growth needs significantly influence work perceptions. Moreover, Lee & Chen (2018) reported that when employees' needs are met, they tend to view corporate social responsibility (CSR) more favourably, which in turn enhances job satisfaction and retention intentions. In the context of Korean expatriate labourers, Kim et al. (2015) demonstrated that ERG theory offers a useful framework for understanding the diverse needs of workers, thereby supporting the development of more comprehensive labour management strategies.

Arnolds & Boshoff (2002) study of the South African manufacturing sector highlighted ERG theory's distinctive suitability for explaining employee motivation and for informing targeted management strategies. They observed that when existence and relatedness needs are unmet, employees often seek psychological balance through the fulfilment of growth needs, thereby enriching the theory's applicability in diverse organisational environments.

More recently, Caulton (2012) conducted a systematic literature review of ERG theory, emphasising its potential in cross-cultural research. Due to its flexibility and

generalisability, ERG theory adapts more effectively to varying cultural contexts compared with other need-based models. This observation was corroborated by Mdhlalose (2024) cross-cultural study, which found ERG theory effective in explaining differences in work motivation between Korean and German employees, thus validating its cross-cultural applicability.

The theory has also been linked to well-being research. Tay & Diener (2011) showed that ERG theory's flexibility makes it well-suited for explaining the relationship between need fulfilment and subjective well-being across cultures. Prasad (2017) further identified that ERG needs are associated with multiple components of work-life balance, with generational differences in coping strategies—specifically, Generation Y's tendency to avoid long-term family commitments.

The application of ERG theory has continued to diversify. Hajiali et al. (2022) revealed that NGO workers often prioritise relatedness and growth needs over existence needs, suggesting that motivations in non-profit settings are more complex than in traditional employment contexts. Similarly, Udechukwu & Mujtaba (2007) argued that humans' innate social needs shape workplace behaviours and decision-making, making ERG theory a valuable framework for understanding both personal and social drivers of employee retention.

In summary, the conceptual foundations of ERG theory have been continually refined since Alderfer's original proposition. Its flexibility, adaptability, and explanatory power have led to widespread use across disciplines and cultural contexts (Latham & Pinder, 2005). Looking ahead, further research should explore ERG theory's relevance in emerging fields and focus on developing more nuanced measures of work and acculturation, thereby extending the theoretical framework to meet the demands of modern, complex, and dynamic social environments (Locke, 1968; MacDonald, 2002; Li, 2011).

3.2. Application and Research of ERG Theory in Different Fields

Since its inception, ERG theory has demonstrated exceptional flexibility and explanatory power, enabling its application across multiple academic disciplines and practical domains. Its cross-field adaptability provides scholars with a multidimensional framework for analysing motivational mechanisms under diverse contextual conditions. ERG theory has rapidly expanded into multiple academic fields and practice settings since its inception due to its unique flexibility and explanatory power. Its cross-field applicability provides researchers with a multidimensional theoretical framework that enables them to effectively analyse and understand motivational mechanisms in different contexts.

In the field of organisational behaviour, ERG theory has been widely used to explore the relationship between employee motivation and job performance. Arnolds & Boshoff (2002) showed that employees are more inclined to fall back on the satisfaction of relational needs when they are unable to satisfy their growth needs, a finding that provides an important basis for understanding employees' career choices and career development.

Research in the field of pedagogy has also drawn heavily on ERG theory in order to analyse the related needs of students. In a study by Scherf (1976), it was found that MBA students

expressed high desires for more items to satisfy their survival needs in both highly and lowly satisfied relational need conditions, while financial desires dropped to a minimum at moderate levels of relational need satisfaction, and in a study of clinical medical students this was also demonstrated (Wang et al., 2021). When ERG theory was applied to the funding of poor students in colleges and universities, it was found that survival and relational development influenced the development of poor students in colleges and universities (Sun & Li, 2024). ERG theory provides a lens for exploring the deeper causes of poor rural teacher mobility, including rural teachers' pursuit of survival needs, relational needs, and growth needs (Luo & Zhang, 2020). In research on university teachers, it was found that ERG demand satisfaction significantly negatively predicts job burnout, and job satisfaction mediates this relationship (Yang & Ling 2023).

Research in the field of psychology has further extended the application of ERG theory. Tay & Diener (2011) examined the relationship between need fulfilment and global well-being, suggesting variability in need fulfilment across cultures and highlighting the strengths of ERG theory in explaining subjective well-being. Li et al. (2014) combined with expectancy theory and found that job satisfaction is related to the degree of need fulfilment in ERG theory, especially when workplace characteristics satisfy individuals' ERG needs.

In the field of consumer behaviour, in a study on the underlying motives and psychological factors behind users' impulse to post online reviews, it was found that users' need for presence and growth had a significantly higher impact on intrinsic motivation than on extrinsic motivation, that the need for relevance had a significantly higher impact on extrinsic motivation than on intrinsic motivation, and that the need for presence, relevance, and growth had a significant and direct impact on the impulse to post online reviews (Yu & Hsu, 2022), the rapid development of platform economy and digital economy affects the purchase desire of silver consumers, and the social features and intelligent recommendation system of platforms can enhance the presence, relevance and growth needs of silver consumers (Yin et al., 2023).

ERG theory has also shown strong adaptability in cross-cultural management research. Kim et al.(2015) cross-cultural comparative study showed that ERG theory can effectively explain the differences in employees' motivation across cultures, providing strong theoretical support for international management practices. Kian et al. (2014) further introduced cultural needs into the ERG framework, where employees of different generations have differences in motivation and work attitudes, which affect their values, structures, policies and culture. Zhu & Warner (2019) also examined the generality and applicability of motivation theories in China. Yang (2011) combined the ERG theory with Chinese Confucianism, ERG theory may not be fully applicable to Chinese employees, who may be influenced by Confucianism and have different work values.

ERG theory has also been widely used in the study of emerging employment forms. The fulfilment of growth needs in non-traditional work forms has a significant impact on the career stability of employees. They suggested that the path of ERG needs satisfaction in emerging employment forms is significantly different from traditional work forms, which provides a theoretical basis for management and motivation strategies for emerging workers (Rafferty & Jelley, 2018; Frisk, 2020; Odetunde & Chidi, 2021).

In the fields of health psychology and medicine, ERG theory offers new perspectives for understanding patients' motivation for recovery and treatment adherence. Satisfaction of

existential needs significantly improves patients' quality of life, while relational needs mediate the relationship between social support and treatment adherence. This finding further expands the application of ERG theory in mental health research (Tay & Diener, 2011; Diener et al., 2013). Yin & Zeng (2020), in a study of the psychological needs of caregivers during the Neococcal Pneumonia outbreak, found that existential needs were predominantly in the form of health and safety needs, which were particularly important during the epidemic. Research with young healthcare workers has shown that their existential needs are mainly expressed in the job itself and in remuneration. Büssing et al. (2013), when studying the unmet psychiatric needs of patients suffering from chronic pain disorders and cancer, found that the patients mainly expressed safety needs (inner peace) and generative relevance needs at the personal level, which is in line with the ERG model of existential and correlational needs. Hills & Kitchen (2007), in their study of the field of physiotherapy, found that patients were more likely to experience satisfaction when their basic needs (e.g., physiological and safety needs) were met. In addition, when patients' social and psychological needs (which correspond to the relevance and growth needs in ERG theory) were met, they were also satisfied.

In recent years, the application of ERG theory in the field of entrepreneurship research has increased. By examining the structure of entrepreneurs' needs, it was found that growth needs play a crucial role in the formation of entrepreneurial intentions, while relational needs positively influence the establishment and maintenance of entrepreneurial networks, and such studies provide new theoretical perspectives for understanding the motivational and behavioural patterns of entrepreneurs (Kisker, 2016; Ismail et al., 2017; Kanapathipillai et al., 2024; He & Kenikasahmanworakhun, 2024).

Overall, the cross-disciplinary application of ERG theory not only validates the broad applicability of its theory, but also promotes research progress in different disciplinary fields. With the continuous development of society and technology, the application of ERG theory in emerging fields is promising, and future research should continue to deepen and expand this theoretical framework in order to respond to more complex and diverse demand structures (Cunningham, 2016).

Across these diverse domains, ERG theory has proven to be a versatile and powerful analytical tool. Its capacity to account for multiple, interacting needs allows it to capture complex motivational patterns in varied socio-cultural and organisational contexts. As society and technology evolve, further application of ERG theory in emerging fields promises to enrich both theoretical development and practical interventions.

4. Empirical Studies and Measurement of ERG Theory

Since its introduction, ERG theory has been supported by a broad range of empirical studies, which have tested its assumptions, explored the relationships between need satisfaction and behavioural outcomes, and refined measurement approaches. The accumulation of empirical evidence has not only validated the theory's conceptual foundations but also expanded its applicability across different organisational and cultural settings.

4.1. Early Empirical Validation

Initial studies focused on confirming the independence and interaction of the three core needs. Alderfer (1969) provided the first empirical support through an organisational

survey, establishing the distinctiveness of existence, relatedness, and growth needs, as well as their interrelationships. Schwab & Cummings (1970) reinforced these findings by demonstrating significant associations between ERG needs, job satisfaction, and job performance across a large sample.

4.2. Methodological Diversification

With the advancement of analytical techniques, empirical studies have adopted diverse methodologies to examine ERG theory. Arnolds & Boshoff (2002) applied multiple regression analysis in the South African manufacturing sector, confirming the influence of existence and relatedness needs on employee motivation and highlighting the dynamic interplay between need satisfaction and performance. Their use of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) improved precision in estimating relationships among variables. Caulton (2012) evaluated existing measurement tools, identifying limitations in cultural adaptability and situational sensitivity, and recommended the adoption of diversified measurement strategies for broader applicability.

4.3. Context-Specific Applications

Subsequent research has validated ERG theory in diverse occupational contexts. Wilcove (1978) introduced two new relational constructs—organisational respect and respect for superiors—which were empirically confirmed in naval personnel. Yin & Zeng (2020) identified interpersonal, humanistic, and family-related needs among nursing staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating the prominence of existence needs in crisis conditions. From the perspective of tourism, although there is a risk of COVID-19 infection, the research results reveal people's desire for tourism (Lee et al., 2022). Che et al. (2022) found strong links between relationship need fulfilment, work engagement, and work well-being among knowledge workers in Chinese higher education institutions. Wang et al. (2023) observed that clinical medical students prioritised existence and growth needs over relatedness needs, suggesting context-specific variations in motivational priorities.

4.4. Novel Measurement Instruments

Efforts to refine ERG measurement have led to the development of specialised tools. Poulou & Norwich (2019) created a scale to measure existence, relatedness, and growth needs in adolescents, validating it through educational research. Rhee & Kim (2023), in the context of eSports, identified differential impacts of the three needs on participation and viewing behaviours, suggesting that ERG-based measures can effectively capture motivations in digital leisure contexts.

4.5. Gaps and Future Directions in Measurement

Despite methodological progress, gaps remain. Many studies rely on cross-sectional survey designs, limiting causal inference. Cultural biases in scale construction have been noted, indicating the need for instruments with greater cross-cultural validity. Additionally, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches remain underutilised, suggesting opportunities for richer, context-sensitive understanding of need fulfilment processes.

4.6 Synthesis

We have discussed the general viewpoints of many articles on ERG research methods, as shown in Table . Empirical studies have progressively enriched ERG theory's evidence base while exposing limitations in measurement. Advances in psychometric design, such as context-specific subdimensions and cross-cultural adaptations, have improved validity. Nonetheless, future research should integrate longitudinal designs, experimental approaches, and culturally adaptable tools to enhance the robustness and generalisability of ERG measurement.

Table 1: Summary of ERG Theory Measurement Approaches in Empirical Studies

Author(s) & Year	Context/Population	Dimensions Measured	Method/Instrument	Notable Findings
Alderfer (1969)	Organisational employees	Existence, Relatedness, Growth	Organisational survey (custom items)	Confirmed independence and interaction of needs
Schwab & Cummings (1970)	Mixed organisational contexts	All three ERG needs	Questionnaire-based scale	ERG needs significantly correlated with job satisfaction and performance
Arnolds & Boshoff (2002)	South African manufacturing sector	Existence, Relatedness, Growth	SEM-based survey	Growth needs partly substitute when other needs unmet
Wilcove (1978)	U.S. Navy personnel	Relational subdimensions	Custom relational needs scale	Introduced "organisational respect" and "respect for superiors"
Poulou & Norwich (2019)	Adolescent students	Existence, Relatedness, Growth	Newly developed ERG needs scale	Validated ERG framework in educational psychology
Che et al.,(2022)	Chinese knowledge workers in higher education	Relationship needs	Standardised questionnaire	Relationship needs strongly linked to engagement and well-being
Yin & Zeng (2020)	Nursing staff during COVID-19	Interpersonal, family, humanistic	Qualitative survey + ERG categorisation	Existence needs, particularly safety, were most salient
Wang et al. (2021)	Clinical medical students	Existence, Relatedness, Growth	Questionnaire	Students valued existence and growth needs over relatedness

Author(s) & Year	Context/Population	Dimensions Measured	Method/Instrument	Notable Findings
Rhee & Kim (2023)	eSports players and spectators	Existence, Relatedness, Growth	ERG-based motivation scale	Needs had varying influence on participation vs. viewing behaviour

5. Conclusion

This study set out to synthesise and critically examine the development and application of ERG theory across a broad range of research domains. Drawing on a structured review of representative theoretical and empirical studies, the findings confirm that ERG theory has retained its analytical relevance since its inception, offering a flexible and context-sensitive framework for understanding human motivation in organisational and social settings.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that ERG theory's core strength lies in its dynamic treatment of human needs. By allowing the coexistence and interaction of existence, relatedness, and growth needs, the theory provides a more nuanced explanation of motivational processes than hierarchical models. This feature enables ERG theory to account for variations in individual behaviour across cultures, organisational structures, and situational conditions, particularly in environments characterised by uncertainty and change.

Importantly, the synthesis highlights the theory's continued adaptability to contemporary challenges, including technological transformation, evolving work arrangements, and increasing attention to well-being and sustainability. Rather than diminishing its relevance, these developments appear to reinforce the value of ERG theory as an integrative lens that can accommodate emerging forms of work and complex motivational patterns.

Overall, this review consolidates ERG theory's theoretical foundations while identifying areas where further conceptual refinement and empirical investigation are warranted. By clarifying key themes, applications, and gaps in the existing literature, the study provides a platform for future research to extend ERG theory in ways that respond to the changing nature of work and society.

The reviewed literature indicates that ERG theory effectively explains motivational processes across organizational, psychological, educational, healthcare, and entrepreneurial contexts. Empirical studies consistently support the theory's core proposition that existence, relatedness, and growth needs can operate simultaneously rather than sequentially, allowing individuals to compensate for unmet needs in one domain by intensifying efforts in another.

Across multiple settings, growth needs frequently emerge as a compensatory mechanism when existence or relatedness needs are constrained, particularly in high-pressure or resource-limited environments. In addition, recent studies suggest that technological transformation, remote work arrangements, and digitally mediated interactions are reshaping how needs are perceived and prioritised. The findings also reveal persistent

challenges related to measurement consistency and cultural sensitivity, indicating the need for refinement of ERG-based instruments.

The discussion affirms the robustness and adaptability of ERG theory as a motivational framework capable of integrating insights from related theories while remaining sensitive to contextual change. Compared with hierarchical need models, ERG theory offers a more flexible and dynamic explanation of motivation, particularly in environments where individuals face overlapping demands and constraints.

The review also highlights the theory's capacity to engage with contemporary research themes, including digital transformation, sustainability, and employee well-being. While ERG theory is a mature framework, the diversity of its applications demonstrates that it retains significant potential for theoretical extension and empirical innovation when applied thoughtfully to new contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

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