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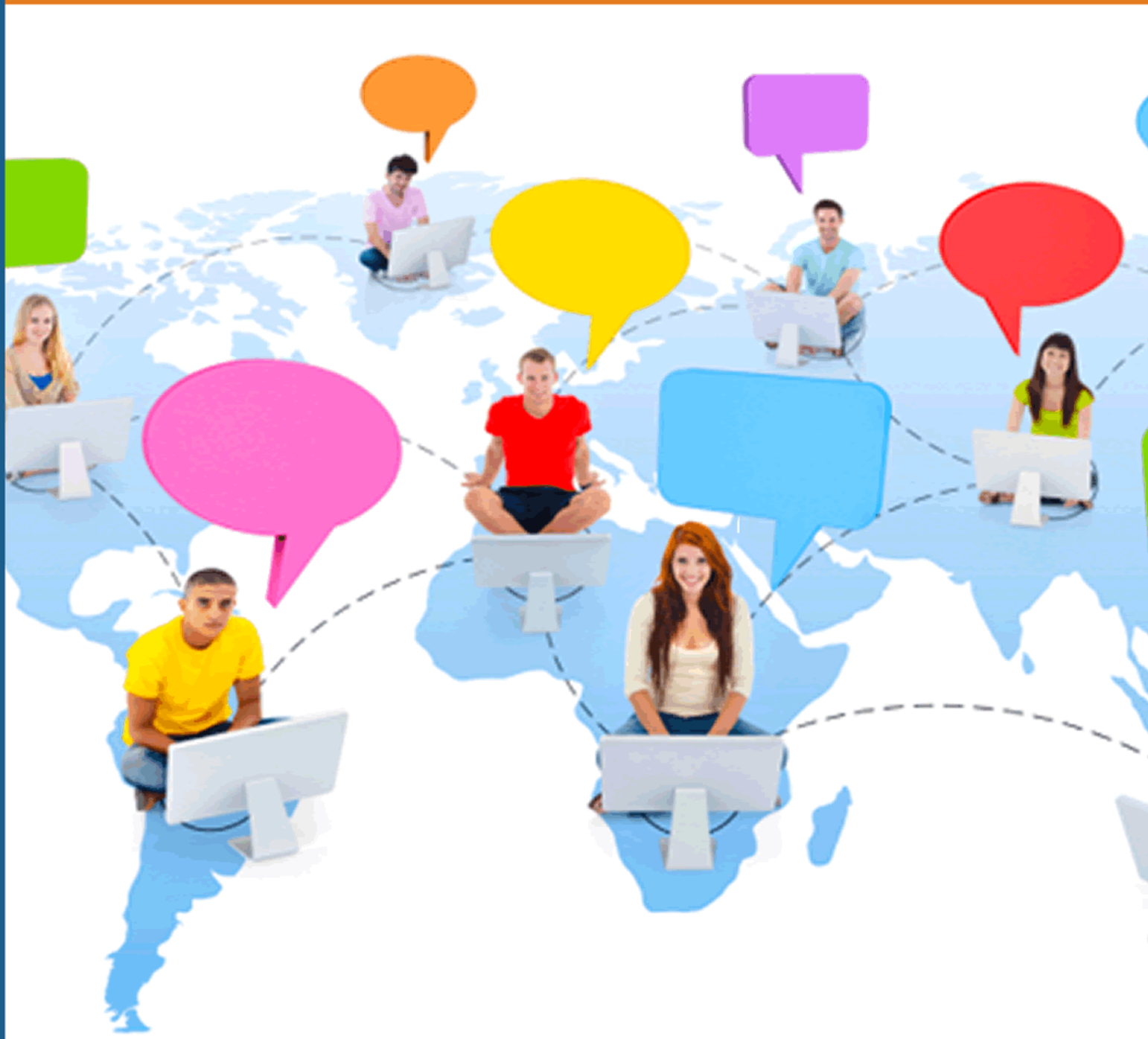
The Impact of Social Presence on Online Student Engagement



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The Impact of Social Presence on Online Student Engagement

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Abstract

Purpose: The main objective of this study was to explore the impact of social presence on online student engagement.

Methodology: The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

Findings: The findings revealed that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to the impact of social presence on online student engagement. Preliminary empirical review revealed that the vital role of social presence in online education. It confirms that a strong sense of social presence fosters a connected and engaged online learning community, impacting both cognitive and affective aspects of student engagement. Effective course design, drawing upon theoretical frameworks, and intentional efforts by instructors contribute to enhancing social presence and, consequently, improving the overall online student engagement experience.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework and Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) may be used to anchor future studies on online student engagement. To enhance online student engagement in the context of the study, several key recommendations emerge. Educators should actively promote social interaction within online courses, provide clear expectations and guidelines, incorporate synchronous interactions, implement peer interaction and feedback mechanisms, leverage technology tools for social engagement, offer timely and supportive feedback, monitor and assess social presence, and invest in professional development opportunities for instructors. By following these recommendations, instructors and institutions can create a more interactive and engaging online learning environment, fostering a strong sense of social presence and ultimately improving the overall educational experience for online students.

Keywords: *Social Presence, Online Student Engagement, Online Education, Interaction, Learning Environment, Instructor Feedback*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Online student engagement refers to the active participation, interaction, and commitment of students in their online learning environments. It encompasses various aspects, such as participation in discussions, completion of assignments, attendance in virtual classes, and overall involvement in the learning process. Online education has become increasingly prevalent in the USA, with a growing number of students enrolling in online courses and programs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), during the 2018-2019 academic year, about 35.3% of all U.S. higher education students took at least one distance education course, demonstrating a significant trend towards online learning (NCES, 2020).

One example of online student engagement in the USA is the use of learning management systems (LMS) like Blackboard or Canvas. Students engage with course materials, submit assignments, participate in discussion boards, and take quizzes through these platforms. Picciano (2017) found that LMS usage is positively correlated with student engagement in online courses. The study examined online students in the USA, highlighting the pivotal role of these platforms in fostering engagement.

Another significant aspect of online student engagement is the interaction with instructors and peers through video conferencing tools. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual classrooms, with Zoom being one of the most widely used platforms. According to a report by HolonIQ (2020), the use of video conferencing for online learning in the USA increased by 300% during the pandemic. This interaction provides students with opportunities for real-time discussions, group projects, and enhanced engagement with course content. In terms of student demographics, online student engagement trends in the USA vary across age groups. Allen & Seaman (2017) indicated that, in 2016, the majority of online students were between the ages of 18 and 24, with a steady increase in older adults participating in online education. This shift in demographics has implications for understanding the diverse needs and engagement patterns of online students.

Moreover, the incorporation of multimedia elements in online courses contributes to student engagement. The use of multimedia, including videos, interactive simulations, and multimedia-rich content, significantly enhances student engagement in online learning environments. This trend aligns with the broader adoption of technology in education across the USA. Online student engagement is a multifaceted concept that plays a crucial role in the success of online education in the USA. The adoption of learning management systems, increased use of video conferencing, evolving demographics, and the integration of multimedia elements are some of the key trends shaping online student engagement. As online education continues to grow, understanding and fostering student engagement remain essential for promoting effective learning outcomes (Means, Bakia & Murphy, 2019)

In recent years, the UK has witnessed significant trends in online student engagement, with universities and institutions focusing on improving the digital learning environment to enhance student participation and success. According to Guri-Rosenblit (2018), online student engagement in the UK has seen substantial growth over the past decade. The shift towards online education, driven by factors such as technological advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic, has necessitated a closer look at student engagement. Universities in the UK have been investing in learning management systems (LMS) and other digital tools to facilitate engagement. For instance, the adoption of platforms like Moodle and Blackboard has allowed students to access course materials, submit assignments, and participate in discussions online, fostering a more interactive learning experience.

Furthermore, statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) indicate that there has been an increase in the number of students engaging with online resources and content. For example, in the academic year 2019/2020, approximately 87% of UK students accessed their course materials

online (HESA, 2021). This suggests a growing reliance on digital resources for learning, reflecting a trend towards increased online student engagement.

Another noteworthy aspect of online student engagement in the UK is the use of virtual classrooms and webinars. Institutions have been leveraging platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams to deliver lectures and tutorials remotely. Jones, Healing, Kerr & Franklin (2017) highlighted that these virtual sessions have enabled students to actively participate in real-time discussions and collaborative activities. This form of engagement has become particularly significant in situations like the pandemic, where in-person learning was restricted. In addition to real-time interactions, asynchronous engagement methods, such as discussion forums and peer assessment, have gained prominence in the UK's online education landscape. Hewett & Brett (2018) revealed that asynchronous discussions allow students to engage with course content at their own pace and provide thoughtful contributions. These platforms also enable instructors to assess student understanding and facilitate peer learning.

To further enhance online student engagement, UK universities have been implementing data-driven strategies. For example, they analyze student data collected from LMS to identify at-risk students who may be disengaged. By intervening early and offering targeted support, institutions aim to improve overall engagement and retention rates (Wong, Greenhalgh, Pawson & Westhorp, 2019). Online student engagement in the UK has experienced significant growth and transformation in recent years. Universities have adopted various digital tools and strategies to facilitate active participation and interaction among students. The statistics from HESA indicate a substantial reliance on online resources for learning. Real-time and asynchronous engagement methods, along with data-driven interventions, are shaping the future of online education in the UK, with a focus on enhancing student engagement and success.

In Japan, online student engagement has been a subject of interest, especially as the country continues to adapt to the growing trend of online education. According to Nishikawa &Obari (2016), which examined online student engagement in Japanese universities, they found that 75% of students reported regularly participating in online discussions and 68% actively engaged with course materials. These statistics indicate a reasonably high level of online student engagement in the Japanese context, demonstrating that students are actively participating in various online activities.

Furthermore, the use of technology in Japanese online education has contributed to increased student engagement. For instance, Japan has seen a surge in the use of online learning platforms, such as iCeMS (Integrated Communication Education Management System), which provides a user-friendly interface for both students and instructors. These platforms offer features like discussion boards, video lectures, and interactive quizzes that facilitate student engagement. According to data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan, the number of universities and colleges adopting such online platforms has steadily increased by approximately 10% annually in recent years (MEXT, 2020).

Despite these positive trends, there are still challenges related to online student engagement in Japan. Tanaka (2019) highlighted issues of social isolation and a lack of active interaction among Japanese online learners. It found that while students may complete assignments and watch lectures, there is a need for greater emphasis on creating opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions and collaborative learning experiences to enhance engagement further.

To address these challenges and enhance online student engagement, Japanese institutions have been adopting innovative strategies. For example, the Japan Association for Educational Technology (JAET) has organized conferences and workshops focusing on best practices for online teaching and learning, with a particular emphasis on enhancing student engagement. These efforts aim to create a more interactive and participatory online learning environment (JAET, 2021). Online student

engagement is a critical component of successful online education, and its importance is recognized in Japan's evolving educational landscape. Statistics indicate that Japanese students are actively participating in online activities, but there is room for improvement in terms of fostering more extensive interaction and collaboration. As Japan continues to adapt to the online education trend, it is essential to address these challenges and implement innovative strategies to enhance online student engagement.

In Sub-Saharan countries, online student engagement has been evolving with the growth of e-learning opportunities, although challenges like limited access to technology and the internet persist. According to Mtebe & Raisamo (2018), online student engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa has been steadily increasing, driven by the expansion of online education programs. For instance, in Kenya, the eLearning Kenya Program has provided digital learning materials to primary and secondary schools, leading to an increased engagement with online resources among students (Mtebe & Raisamo, 2018). Similar initiatives have been observed in Nigeria, where the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has utilized online platforms to enhance student engagement and accessibility to higher education (Osin, 2018).

However, challenges such as limited access to the internet and technology devices have affected online student engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa. In South Africa, for instance, the digital divide remains a significant barrier to student engagement in online learning (Brown & Heyman, 2016). As of 2016, only 46.5% of the South African population had access to the internet (Brown & Heyman, 2016). This limited access can impede students' ability to fully engage with online coursework. To address these challenges and promote online student engagement, Sub-Saharan countries have been investing in expanding internet infrastructure. For instance, Nigeria's National Broadband Plan, launched in 2013, aimed to increase broadband penetration across the country, thus improving access to online educational resources (Osin, 2018). As of 2017, Nigeria had made significant progress in expanding broadband access, with a 21% increase in internet penetration (Osin, 2018). This improved access has the potential to positively impact online student engagement.

In addition to infrastructure improvements, Sub-Saharan countries have also been exploring innovative approaches to enhance online student engagement. Mobile learning, for example, has gained traction in the region due to the widespread availability of mobile phones. In Ghana, mobile learning initiatives have been implemented to engage students in remote areas (Adu-Adu, Marfo & Agyekum, 2018). These initiatives leverage the ubiquity of mobile devices to provide educational content and support engagement. Online student engagement in Sub-Saharan countries is influenced by factors such as access to technology, infrastructure development, and innovative approaches to e-learning. While challenges related to limited internet access persist, there is a growing trend toward improving these conditions to promote greater online student engagement. Initiatives like expanding internet infrastructure and leveraging mobile learning have the potential to enhance the educational experiences of students in the region.

Social presence is a crucial concept in the context of online education, emphasizing the extent to which learners perceive themselves as active and connected participants in the virtual learning environment (Richardson & Swan, 2013). It encompasses both cognitive and affective dimensions, highlighting the feeling of being part of a community of learners. Social presence is of paramount importance due to its significant impact on online student engagement. According to Maeda, Lv, & Caskurlu (2018), the presence of a strong social dimension in online courses positively influences students' engagement, satisfaction, and learning outcomes. Social presence plays a pivotal role in creating a sense of belonging and community among online learners. When students feel socially present, they are more likely to identify with their peers and the course content (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). This sense of belonging and community is essential for online student engagement as it provides the

emotional and psychological support that encourages active participation and commitment to the learning process (Lowenthal, Dunlap, & Snelson, 2017).

Social presence significantly influences communication and interaction within online learning environments. As outlined in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), social presence is one of the essential elements contributing to meaningful online interactions. When students perceive a high level of social presence, they are more inclined to engage actively in discussions, collaborative projects, and peer-to-peer interactions (Garrison, 2017). These interactions, in turn, facilitate the exchange of ideas and perspectives, enriching the learning experience and promoting student engagement.

Transactional Distance Theory, developed by Moore (1997), underscores the psychological and communication gap that can exist in distance education. Social presence serves as a bridge to narrow this transactional distance. When students feel socially connected to their instructors and peers, they are less likely to experience transactional distance, resulting in a more engaged and participative approach to learning (Anderson, 2014). This reduction in transactional distance contributes to a more effective and engaging online learning experience.

Another significant impact of social presence is the establishment of trust and the facilitation of collaboration among online learners. Trust is a fundamental component of effective online interactions, as outlined by Shea, Li, Swan & Pickett (2016). A strong sense of social presence promotes trust among students, leading to increased collaboration on group projects and assignments. Collaborative learning experiences, in turn, contribute to higher levels of engagement and a deeper understanding of course material (Jung, Choi, Lim, & Leem, 2020). Instructor presence is another vital aspect of online education. Social presence influences students' perceptions of their instructors and the level of support they provide (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). Students who perceive a strong social presence from their instructors are more likely to seek help when needed and engage in active communication with them. This positive interaction between students and instructors, facilitated by social presence, can lead to improved feedback, guidance, and support, ultimately enhancing online student engagement (Maeda, Lv & Caskurlu, 2018).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Online education has seen a substantial increase in recent years, with millions of students worldwide opting for virtual learning environments. However, despite the widespread adoption of online education, there remains a persistent issue related to student engagement. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020), the online higher education enrollment rate has continued to rise, reaching 36.6% of all higher education enrollments in the United States. While this trend suggests a growing reliance on online education, concerns persist regarding the effectiveness of online learning and the level of student engagement in this format (NCES, 2020). The existing literature highlights the potential impact of social presence on student engagement in online courses, but there is a gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which social presence influences engagement, and how this understanding can be harnessed to improve online learning experiences. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the intricate relationship between social presence and online student engagement. This research endeavors to benefit various stakeholders within the realm of online education. First and foremost, educators and instructional designers stand to gain valuable insights from the study's findings. Understanding the nuanced impact of social presence on online student engagement will enable them to design more effective and engaging online courses. Additionally, institutions offering online education programs will benefit by being able to tailor their strategies to enhance student engagement and satisfaction, which can lead to improved retention rates and program success. Furthermore, students themselves are integral beneficiaries, as a deeper

understanding of the relationship between social presence and engagement can empower them to take a more active role in their online learning experiences. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on optimizing online education, aligning it with the evolving needs and preferences of contemporary learners.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Social Cognitive Theory, developed by renowned psychologist Albert Bandura, is a foundational theory in the field of psychology. At its core, SCT emphasizes the critical role of social interactions and observational learning in shaping human behavior. Bandura's theory posits that individuals learn not only from their direct experiences but also by observing the behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes of others in their social environment. This process is known as social modeling. In the context of "The Impact of Social Presence on Online Student Engagement," SCT becomes highly relevant as it highlights the importance of social modeling and peer influence on student engagement. Bandura's SCT suggests that students participating in online courses can be significantly influenced by the behavior and engagement of their peers. When learners observe their fellow students actively participating, contributing valuable insights, and engaging in meaningful interactions within the virtual classroom, they are more likely to model these behaviors, resulting in increased engagement. Conversely, if students perceive a lack of social presence and minimal interaction among their peers, they may exhibit reduced motivation and engagement. Thus, SCT emphasizes that creating opportunities for students to observe and interact with their peers can enhance social presence and, consequently, online student engagement.

2.1.2 Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework

The Community of Inquiry framework, developed by D. Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, and Walter Archer in 2000, provides a structured model for understanding the essential elements of successful online learning experiences. CoI posits that meaningful learning in online environments results from the interaction of three essential presences: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. In the context of this research, we focus on the role of social presence within the CoI framework. Social presence, as defined by CoI, is central to the theory and refers to the degree to which learners perceive themselves as part of a community of learners and can interact effectively with their peers. A strong social presence fosters a sense of belonging, encourages active participation, and creates a supportive learning environment, all of which are critical factors in student engagement. When students feel socially present in the online classroom, they are more likely to engage actively with their peers, participate in discussions, collaborate on projects, and seek help when needed. The CoI framework suggests that social presence is not an isolated concept but rather an integral component of the broader online learning experience. By examining the various components of the CoI framework, research can explore how social presence, as one of the key dimensions, specifically impacts online student engagement, shedding light on the complex interplay between cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence.

2.1.3 Transactional Distance Theory (TDT)

Transactional Distance Theory (TDT), developed by Michael G. Moore, is a theory that specifically addresses the dynamics of distance education, including online learning. TDT is based on the concept of "transactional distance," which refers to the psychological and communication gap between learners and instructors in a distance education context. The theory suggests that as the transactional distance between learners and instructors increases, the level of learner autonomy becomes crucial in

determining the quality of the learning experience. Social presence is a key factor in reducing transactional distance. When students in online courses perceive a high degree of social presence, they are more likely to experience a sense of connection with their instructors and fellow learners. This connection can bridge the psychological and communication gaps that typically exist in online learning environments. By facilitating interaction, collaboration, and interpersonal communication, social presence can create a more personal and interactive learning environment, ultimately influencing the transactional distance and, consequently, the level of engagement among online learners. Transactional Distance Theory, in the context of this research topic, offers valuable insights into the relationship between social presence and online student engagement by emphasizing the importance of reducing transactional distance to create a more engaging and effective online learning experience.

2.2 Empirical Review

Miao & Ma (2022) explored the correlation of online interaction, self-regulation learning and social presence on learning engagement in online environments among 334 undergraduate students in a Chinese university. The methodology involved a questionnaire survey and structural equation modeling. The findings indicated that online interaction affected social presence and indirectly affected learning engagement through social presence. In addition, social presence affected learning engagement, self-regulation affected social presence, and social presence also mediated the relationship between self-regulation and learning engagement. The recommendations suggested that instructors should design and offer instructional strategies to enhance online interaction, self-regulation and social presence to promote learning engagement in online learning environments.

Samad, Nilashi & Ibrahim (2019) investigated the impact of social networking sites on students' social wellbeing and academic performance. The methodology involved a comprehensive literature review and a survey of 200 female students from a major research university in Malaysia. The data analysis used Decision Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory technique to find the causal relationships among the factors, their effect size and their importance levels. The findings revealed that there was a positive relationship between social presence, students' social wellbeing and their academic performance. The recommendations suggested that educators should integrate social networking sites into their teaching practices to enhance students' social presence, wellbeing and performance.

O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty (2020) explored online student engagement experiences in a higher education institution in Australia. The methodology involved a case study approach, following 24 online students over one academic year using interviews, surveys and learning analytics data. The findings revealed that online student engagement was a complex and dynamic phenomenon that involved a balancing act between personal, academic and professional commitments. The study also identified four types of online student engagement: passive engagement, active engagement, collaborative engagement and disengagement. The recommendations suggested that educators should provide flexible and supportive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs and preferences of online students.

Vohra (2020) explored how social presence on Twitter can impact student engagement and learning in a Grade 8 mathematics classroom during an instructional unit on data management and probability. The study used a qualitative case study design and collected data from interviews, observations, and tweets. The results indicated that Twitter is a valuable tool for the teaching and learning of mathematical concepts, as it fosters affective, interactive, and cohesive social presence among students and teachers.

Miao & Ma (2022) examined the correlation of online interaction, self-regulation, and social presence on learning engagement in online environments in higher education. The study used a quantitative survey design and collected data from 334 undergraduate students in a Chinese university. The results

showed that online interaction affected social presence and indirectly affected learning engagement through social presence. In addition, social presence affected learning engagement, self-regulation affected social presence, and social presence mediated the relationship between self-regulation and learning engagement.

Dwivedi, Hughes, Coombs, Constantiou, Duan, Edwards & Ramanathan (2019) investigated the impact of social presence on cognitive and affective learning outcomes in online environments. The study used a quasi-experimental design and collected data from 120 postgraduate students in a UK university. The results revealed that social presence had a positive effect on cognitive learning outcomes (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use) and affective learning outcomes (satisfaction and attitude). The study also confirmed the validity of the technology acceptance model in online learning contexts.

Dixson (2015) developed and validated a scale to measure student engagement in the online course. The study used a mixed-methods design and collected data from 186 undergraduate students in a US university. The results indicated that the Online Student Engagement scale (OSE) had four factors: skills engagement, emotional engagement, participation/interaction engagement, and performance engagement. The scale demonstrated good reliability and validity for assessing student engagement in the online course.

Finn & Zimmer (2012) reviewed the literature on student engagement and provide a conceptual framework for understanding its dimensions, indicators, antecedents, and outcomes. The chapter defined student engagement as a multidimensional construct that includes behavioral engagement (participation, effort, persistence), emotional engagement (interest, enjoyment, belonging), cognitive engagement (investment, strategy use, self-regulation), and agentic engagement (initiative, contribution, leadership). The chapter also discussed the factors that influence student engagement at the individual, classroom, school, family, and community levels.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

4.0 FINDINGS

This study presented both a contextual and methodological gap. A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Samad, Nilashi & Ibrahim (2019) investigated the impact of social networking sites on students' social wellbeing and academic performance. The methodology involved a comprehensive literature review and a survey of 200 female students from a major research university in Malaysia. The data analysis used Decision Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory technique to find the causal relationships among the factors, their effect size and their importance levels. The findings revealed that there was a positive relationship between social presence, students' social wellbeing and their academic performance. The recommendations suggested that educators should integrate social networking sites into their teaching practices to enhance students' social presence, wellbeing and performance. On the other hand, the current study focused on the impact of social presence on online student engagement.

Secondly, a methodological gap also presents itself, for example, in their study on the impact of social networking sites on students' social wellbeing and academic performance, Samad, Nilashi & Ibrahim

(2019) conducted comprehensive literature review and a survey of 200 female students from a major research university in Malaysia. Whereas, this current study adopted a desktop research method.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the relationship between social presence and the level of engagement among students in online learning environments. Through a thorough examination of relevant theories, empirical research, and the experiences of online learners, several key conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, the study has affirmed the significance of social presence in online education. It is evident that when students perceive a high degree of social presence in their online courses, they are more likely to feel connected to their peers and instructors, fostering a sense of belonging and community. This, in turn, encourages active participation, collaboration, and open communication, all of which are essential components of online student engagement. The findings emphasize that creating a strong social presence within online courses is pivotal for enhancing student engagement.

Secondly, the study highlights the multifaceted nature of online student engagement. Engagement encompasses not only cognitive aspects, such as active participation and interaction with course content, but also affective elements related to motivation, satisfaction, and a sense of ownership in the learning process. Social presence plays a vital role in addressing these facets of engagement. When students feel socially present and supported in the virtual classroom, they are more likely to exhibit both cognitive and affective engagement behaviors, resulting in a more holistic and meaningful learning experience.

Furthermore, the study underscores the interplay between social presence and the design of online courses. Effective course design, including the choice of communication tools, the structure of discussion forums, and the organization of group activities, can significantly impact the level of social presence experienced by students. Instructors and course designers play a pivotal role in fostering social presence by creating opportunities for meaningful interactions and building a supportive online learning community. Therefore, the study's findings emphasize the importance of intentional course design in promoting social presence and, consequently, online student engagement.

Additionally, the study acknowledges the relevance of theoretical frameworks such as Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, and Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) in understanding the dynamics of social presence and engagement in online education. These theories provide valuable lenses through which researchers and educators can examine and optimize the social presence within online courses. By drawing upon these theoretical foundations, educators can develop strategies and interventions that enhance social presence, ultimately leading to increased online student engagement.

In conclusion, the study on "the impact of social presence on online student engagement" has illuminated the crucial role that social presence plays in shaping the engagement levels of online learners. It has reaffirmed the importance of creating a supportive and connected online learning environment, fostering a sense of community, and employing effective course design strategies. The study's findings underscore that enhancing social presence is a multifaceted endeavor that can lead to more meaningful and holistic online student engagement, ultimately contributing to improve learning outcomes in the realm of online education.

5.2 Recommendations

Promote Social Interaction in Online Courses: The study underscores the significance of social presence in fostering online student engagement. To leverage this, educators should actively encourage

social interaction within online courses. They can create discussion forums, group projects, and peer feedback activities that promote collaboration and communication among students. Instructors should also lead by example by participating in discussions and providing timely feedback to enhance the sense of community and social presence in the virtual classroom.

Provide Clear Expectations and Guidelines: Clarity in course expectations and guidelines can contribute to a positive online learning environment. Instructors should clearly communicate their expectations regarding participation, communication, and interaction in the course. Providing a well-structured syllabus and guidelines for online etiquette can help students understand how to engage effectively in the online environment, leading to increased social presence and engagement.

Incorporate Synchronous Interactions: While asynchronous learning has its advantages, incorporating synchronous interactions through webinars, video conferencing, or real-time chat sessions can enhance social presence. These live interactions provide students with a more immediate sense of connection and can foster engagement. Educators should carefully schedule and facilitate synchronous activities to ensure they complement the asynchronous components of the course.

Implement Peer Interaction and Feedback: Peer interaction and peer feedback mechanisms can significantly enhance social presence and student engagement. Instructors can design activities that require students to work collaboratively and provide constructive feedback to their peers. Peer review assignments, group projects, and discussion board activities can all serve as opportunities for students to interact and engage with one another.

Utilize Technology for Social Engagement: Leveraging technology tools and platforms designed to enhance social interaction can be beneficial. Social media, dedicated discussion boards, and video conferencing software can facilitate student-student and student-instructor interactions. Instructors should provide training and guidance on the effective use of these tools to create a more social and engaging online learning environment.

Provide Timely and Supportive Feedback: Feedback plays a crucial role in online student engagement. Instructors should aim to provide timely and constructive feedback on assignments and discussions. Acknowledging and addressing students' contributions can reinforce their sense of social presence and encourage continued engagement. Moreover, instructors can personalize feedback to create a more supportive and connected learning environment.

Monitor and Assess Social Presence: Regularly monitoring and assessing the level of social presence within an online course is essential. Instructors can use surveys, self-assessments, or qualitative feedback to gauge how students perceive the social environment. This feedback can help identify areas where improvements are needed and guide adjustments to instructional strategies and course design.

Professional Development for Instructors: Institutions should invest in professional development opportunities for instructors to enhance their skills in creating a social and engaging online learning environment. Training programs can help instructors better understand the dynamics of social presence and develop strategies to effectively facilitate online courses that promote engagement.

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