An exploratory study of Generation Z students' social presence
preferences in formal online learning

by

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B.S., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1992
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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department Educational Leadership
College of Education

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic changed many aspects of our society, redefining social interactions and influencing how we work, learn, and communicate. Those influences affect the classroom, the role of online learning, and how teachers educate learners. In post-secondary schools today, the largest population of online learners are Generation Z (Gen Z) students; as such, academia must understand this unique group. In addition, the changes in technology and online learning require academia to understand how online learning is evolving to provide the most effective environment for Gen Z students.

This research examined the online social presence preferences of 12 female Gen Zers and how they made meaning of their experiences based on the technologies used in their formative years and those of today. This study was built on research showing that online learning and social presence are linked and can create an environment that promotes connections and learner satisfaction. The conceptual framework used constructivism and elements of the social presence theory to examine Gen Zers' social presence online. Using a basic qualitative research design, the study collected data using semi-structured open-ended interviews and concept mapping to discover when Gen Z students felt a social presence in their formal online courses.

The findings identified that technology helped the participants develop a social presence at a young age and continues to enhance their social presence today. Synchronous engagements, feedback from professors and peers, and small groups were all ways participants described how they developed a social presence in their online college courses.

Keywords:

Generation Z, Social Presence, Online Learning, Technology

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Acknowledgments

I began this journey when I retired from my first profession in 2020. I knew the trek of a Ph.D. would be hard work, but I wanted to prove to myself that I had the intellect to do it. Four years later, I did, but I was not alone. There were key players "in this thing called life" of a doc student that I would be remiss not to recognize.

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And finally, to my children, Bradley Jr. and Locarno. You are my inspiration. I always want to show you by example that nothing is impossible, and you can do anything if you put your mind to it and try. I hope I have shown you both never to accept the status quo and to constantly challenge yourselves spiritually, physically, emotionally, and intellectually. I love you both and thank you for constantly influencing me to be the best version of myself.

Dedication

My father always told me there was nothing I could not achieve, no mountain too high or race too long to showcase my talents. He was my inspiration: never to settle, always strive to go further, and "never quit." That advice has guided me well throughout my life. Dad, even though you are no longer physically here, you are always in my heart, and I will never quit and always try to make you proud…I hope this does. I love you and miss you.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Due to technological advancements and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and physical distancing requirements, all levels of education are moving to provide more online opportunities, and the online classroom is a new normal for many in academia (Lowenthal, 2020; Shahzad et al., 2021). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), the number of online college students continues to rise because of the aftereffects of COVID-19 and the flexibility online classes provide adult learners. However, research suggests that online courses have higher attrition rates than in-person instruction, and student retention is challenging as more and more students take virtual classes (Heyman, 2010; Lui et al., 2009). Because of the exponential evolution of online learning and the link to poor student retention (Lowenthal et al., 2009), adult educators must understand and embrace the online environment to help their students thrive in the virtual domain. Learning about the technologies that enable online instruction and the uniqueness of the learners comprising the student body is a way educators can enhance the online learning environment.

Background

In today's society, most adults use technology to make their lives easier and more comfortable. As an example, smartphones are abundant and help users make phone calls, check the weather, and search the World Wide Web at the touch of their fingertips. According to Harasim (2000), "the telecommunications and knowledge revolution enables greater and faster human communications" (p. 42), forever changing how individuals navigate their lives. Because technology permeates all aspects of society, the modality in how adults obtain and learn information has altered learning environments (Santos, 2011). According to Watted and Barak (2018), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are one example of technology that provides

opportunities for adults to participate in learning forums that, before the technology boom, would have otherwise been unavailable. Because much of adult learning is migrating from the formal classroom to the less traditional online environment, understanding student motivation by attracting and keeping virtual learners engaged is critical.

An integral part of the online learning environment includes the relationships built within the class and effective communication, which helps facilitate learning (Kehrwald, 2008). Those relationships encompass social presence, which is essential because it "connects individuals in an online learning environment" (Oztok & Brett, 2011, p. 2) and helps learners construct knowledge and make meaning with others. Picciano (2002) asserts that a positive social presence resulting from strong relationships within the virtual classroom can improve a student's perception of increased learning. Because of the effects of COVID-19 and subsequent growth within the online learning environment, adult educators who understand and foster a forum where social presence is enabled can improve students' perceptions of the quality of their online education (Shahzad et al., 2021) and reduce drop-out rates.

Generations

How individuals develop social presence differs. According to Strauss and Howe (1991), political, economic, and environmental influences mold how each generational cohort develops a rapport with others, especially while learning. Consequently, it is necessary to understand the learning inclinations of students and the practices that best support their learning preferences (Knowles, 1990). Research shows that some generations are inherently different in terms of learning preferences based mainly on the technology available in their formative years (Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Twenge, 2006).

Older generations did not have access to the same technology at an early age as younger generations and learned in different environments. For example, Baby Boomers born between 1946 and 1964 grew up watching television or listening to the radio to learn about global events such as the landing on the moon or the war in Vietnam and then brought those experiences to social settings (Strauss & Howe, 1991, 1997). Conversely, the digital generations, including Millennials and Generation Zers, 20 to 40 years younger than baby boomers, were continuously connected through the internet and collectively experienced global events through social media in real time (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Howe and Strauss (2007) assert that technology created different life experiences for both generations, especially regarding how they develop social networks. Boomers attended rallies with large groups of people to show their convictions and beliefs, but today's younger generations assert their beliefs individually and online using social media platforms. Consequently, recognizing the generational uniqueness of each cohort can cultivate social presence environments appropriate to current classroom demographics and move beyond "old habits that made sense twenty years ago but no longer do" (Strauss & Howe, 1997, p. 307).

Generation Z

In 2021, 85% of college students in undergraduate programs were under the age of 25 and within one of the youngest generations, known as Generation Z (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; Hanson, 2021). According to Seemiller and Grace (2019), Generation Z, also known as Gen Zers or the IGeneration, comprises people born between 1995 and 2010 and is unique compared to previous generations, primarily because they are the first generation exposed to technology at a young age.

However, despite the many Gen Z students currently enrolled in college and studying online, generational studies lack research on Generation Z-specific social presence preferences (Seemiller et al., 2021). As previously mentioned, Gen Zers are unique based on their early exposure to technology, and those experiences may influence their social presence preferences in a virtual learning environment (Chicioreanu & Amza, 2018; Lai & Hong, 2015; Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Many Generation Z students had technology embedded in their lives from birth, yet current research fails to examine how the generation's greater comfort level with technology impacts how they socially connect in an online learning forum (Yu & Canton, 2020). By examining the influence of technology on Gen Zer's ability to develop connections virtually, research can help explore when and how the generation feels a social presence in online college courses.

Social presence is an intangible sense of being that sets the stage for learning in the online environment (Lowenthal, 2020). Online presence is naturally susceptible to discourse based upon the sometimes asynchronous and detached sense of connection in virtual learning modalities (Harasim, 2002; Lowenthal, 2010). Gen Zers desire interactions with their teachers and peers (Yu & Canton, 2020) in order to feel a social presence. Even in today's hybrid delivery methods of synchronous and asynchronous classroom engagement opportunities, social presence is more challenging to develop because of the potential differences among generations.

Regardless of which generation participates in virtual classes, social presence preferences are essential to understand because "literature suggests that social presence not only supports and facilitates the communicative actions of individuals but also potentially enables learning in online environments" (Oztok & Brett, 2011, p. 3). For example, Richardson and Swan (2003) determined in their research that students in online courses perceived higher learning outcomes when they had increased perceptions of social presence. The researchers conducted a correlational study with over

350 participants between the ages of 19 and 63 and found that activities increased online social presence when designed for both group and individual learners (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Though their study identified the ages of participants, it failed to explore if or how environmental influences like technology impacted perceptions of social presence (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Technology can alter how generations learn (Strauss & Howe, 1991) and impact learning outcomes. Gen Z students and the influence of technology matters because they "will continue to be the majority of traditional-aged college students through the class of 2032" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p. 193). Accordingly, it is necessary to understand the uniqueness of the young and digital-savvy group when it comes to online learning.

Social Presence Theory

The social presence theory (SPT) helps explore the "degree to which a person is perceived as a real person" (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997, p. 9) in an online environment. SPT continues to evolve as technology improves, and the method for measuring social presence has changed with the introduction of real-time and video capabilities in the online classroom (Oztok & Brett, 2011).

SPT was first formally defined by Short et al. (1976), who used the term to describe people's sense of connection when using communication media, including audio systems, videophones, conference television systems, and computer-mediated conferencing systems. These researchers tried to determine if social presence was perceived when using communication media compared to interacting face-to-face (Short et al., 1976). Short et al. (1976) examined numerous quantitative and qualitative studies using several theoretical approaches, and with further analysis, the researchers concluded that social presence varied based on the type of media used to facilitate interactions and was influenced by factors including proximity, eye contact, and facial expressions.

Next, in the 1990s, based on the need to provide global "unified educational access" (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 1996, p. 406), researchers further explored SPT and distance education to determine what technologies were tied to social presence and positively influenced learners' satisfaction. In their research, Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) expanded Short et al.'s examination of intimacy and immediacy to determine if physical and psychological distance influenced a learner's sense of social presence in distance education. Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) concluded in their study that despite Short et al.'s (1976) research findings, a learner's social presence is not solely developed based on the type of technology used during communication but rather the environment created within the distance education community.

The most recent evolution of research explores the social presence construct as technology explodes and online learning becomes more prevalent in adult education. Similar to Gunawardena and Zittle's (1997) research, Kehrwald (2008) proposes that social presence has less to do with the type of technology used in the learning environment and more with the "meaningful interactions" (p. 99) and relationships developed in the online community. Current studies examine asynchronous and synchronous modalities and contend that developing an environment that encourages interactions and a sense of community that provides a rich social presence improves overall learning (Aragon, 2003; Kehrwald, 2008; Lowenthal, 2010).

Problem Statement

Gen Zers are currently the largest population of college-aged students in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). A better understanding of generational influences and social presence preferences can help practitioners build a learning environment that accentuates generational experiences while fostering a presence where Gen Z students excel. Research

maintains that online instructors can support their students' uniqueness and foster a social presence through their teaching practices (Garrison, 2019).

Although interest in social presence continues to grow in industries like business and government (Van Doorn et al., 2017; Yasir et al., 2020), the analysis of social presence preferences for Gen Z online learners is lacking from current research. A recent study by Yu and Canton (2020) explores Millennial and Gen Z learning characteristics and social presence to determine if they preferred face-to-face, online, or hybrid learning environments. Although the researchers determined that Gen Z learners prefer a hybrid learning environment over others, they failed to examine the influences of technology and the development of social presence in a purely online classroom (Yu & Canton, 2020).

Previous research also demonstrates a positive correlation between social presence and students' perceived learning and course satisfaction (Garrison et al., 2010). However, current studies fail to explore social presence preferences for Gen Z students through the lens of generational experiences (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2020; Oztok & Brett, 2011). A gap in research is prevalent in examining Gen Z students' early exposure to technology and their current preferences in developing a sense of social being in online courses.

Purpose Statement

This research explored how Generation Z students made meaning of their experiences growing up with technology and their current social presence preferences in formal online courses. This study defined social presence as a learner's sense of belonging in the online community based upon the ability to feel part of a group within a trusting environment and building personal relationships to project a persona (Biocca et al., 2003; Garrison, 2011; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kehrwald, 2010). The definition of social presence drove this research to examine Gen Z

online learners' social presence preferences based on the influence of technology while growing up.

Research Questions

Two primary and five sub-research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. How do Gen Z students make meaning of their technology experiences in developing a social presence in a formal online learning environment?

   a) How do Gen Z participants describe their experiences with technologies in developing social presence during their primary through high school years?

   b) How do Gen Z participants describe their experiences with technologies they use today in developing a social presence in a formal online learning environment?

2. How do Gen Z students perceive social presence in a formal online learning environment?

   a) How do Gen Z participants perceive others in an online learning environment?

   b) How do Gen Z participants express emotions in an online learning environment?

   c) How do Gen Z participants perceive belonging in an online learning environment?

Research Design

This study used a basic qualitative design, a common methodology in adult education research that facilitates a framework allowing researchers to respond to questions based on participants' experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roulston, 2018). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research gained notoriety in the last 20 years because it assists in determining how or why something is based on the researcher's ability to interact with study participants through personal communications, specifically in the interview process. Basic qualitative research helped explain Gen Z students' social presence preferences, and

more importantly, it allowed the researcher to hear the experiences concerning participants' use of technology growing up and its significance on their preferences today.

Population

According to research, genders perceive social presence uniquely. Richardson and Swan (2003) suggest that females perceive higher levels of social presence than males and that "gender could account for 5% of the variability" (p. 79) when examining social presence. As such, this study used female participants because, as described by Wempe (2022), females appear to be more connected in an online learning environment than male learners and may provide a more in-depth examination of technology experiences and the development of social presence.

Participants in the study met the following criteria: they were females who were enrolled (or completed) an online course with both synchronous and asynchronous delivery elements at undergraduate colleges within the U.S. in the last 24 months, were in the Generation Z cohort between the ages of 18 and 28, and had previously completed a face-to-face college course. Participation in the research was criterion-based and used the network selection process, also known as snowballing selection (DeMarrais, 2014; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Network selection is primarily used when participants have a unique set of criteria and allows "the researcher to use personal contacts to locate…potential participants for the study" (DeMarrais, 2014, p. 60). Using personal contacts, the researcher identified the initial participants and then used the snowballing technique to identify further participants until data saturation was achieved. Creswell and Creswell (2018) prescribe that the sample size depends upon the type of research. In the case of this research and snowballing approach, 12 participants resulted in data saturation and insight into Gen Z online students and their social presence preferences.

Data Collection

Basic qualitative studies use multiple types of data collection to aid in data analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, Saldaña (2016) recommends that qualitative studies collect from as many sources as possible, including documentation and interviews, to develop holistic and comprehensive conclusions. This research used three data collection methods: initial participant interviews, concept mapping, and follow-up interviews.

The study used the semi-structured, in-depth, and open-ended interview method frequently used by researchers in the social sciences to explore the research questions and apply context within the study (Bhattacharya, 2017). Once the initial interview concluded, the researcher reviewed and engaged in a concept map exercise, allowing the researcher to verify "shared meaning" (Yelich Biniecki & Conceicao, 2016, p. 52) with the participants concerning the influence of technology and social presence preferences. Finally, follow-up interviews allowed for probing and additional questions after the initial interview and concept map sessions. Together with the concept maps and transcriptions of the initial and follow-up interviews, the researcher used various data sets to triangulate information and strengthen credibility (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

The descriptive coding process described by Saldaña (2016) assisted in data analysis. As such, coding occurred throughout the research using inductive coding, where the researcher coded in two distinct iterations. The first iteration of coding used inductive coding to identify unique codes based on short phrases found throughout the data. During the second iteration of coding, the researcher narrowed codes by combining related words or phrases and omitting codes with only

limited references. The researcher developed categories to compartmentalize standard codes and then analyzed the categories to create themes that provided meaning and assisted in answering the research questions (Saldaña, 2016). Through the descriptive coding process, developed themes helped answer the research questions and provide insights concerning Generation Z students' social presence preferences when learning online.

Subjectivity Statement

Subjectivity influences all qualitative research, and as Peshkin (1988) emphasizes, scholars must recognize and then identify personal positions that intercede with their studies. My interest in social presence among Generation Z students stemmed from two premises. First, the assumptions about the young generation tend to be grossly inaccurate and biased. Specifically, my encounters with senior community leaders demonstrated older generations' propensity to apply negative stereotypes in describing Generation Z learners, specifically in their perceived reliance on technology. In addition, my current profession in teaching Gen Z students online also lent itself to personal experiences that may have influenced the research. Because of my daily interactions with the younger generations, I am privy to watching how they make meaning and develop social structures in online classes. I have had frequent exposure to the generation that this study examines, which has molded my beliefs and assumptions about Gen Zers.

According to Bhattacharya (2017), positionality shapes one's approach and outlook on research, and identification of such is required to ensure complete transparency and understanding of the researcher's negotiation of any discourse within the study. My positionality was founded mainly upon my role as a parent who raised two Gen Z children. While my children were growing up, I recalled both of them developing a social presence by using technology at a young age, and their abilities fascinated me. Even more interesting was that they were unaware of their unique

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