

STUDENTS' SOCIAL PRESENCE IN ONLINE LEARNING

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"My prayer and my sacrifice and my life and my death belong to Allah, Lord of the worlds." (Al-Quran: 6:162)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify students' perceptions on social presence on online learning and to investigate students' actual social presence in online learning. Next, this study will also analyze the relationship of students' actual social presences perceived by students with students' perceptions on social presence and also its relationship with their academic performance. This study was carried out with 30 undergraduate students who enrolled in Authoring Language course. This study implemented quantitative approach with triangulation of data from questionnaire and students' online transcript in e-learning forum. Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS). As for the online transcript, it was analyzed through content analysis technique. The results of this study show that; social respect and social identity has been identified as the highest perceived social presence in online learning based on the students' perception, which then followed by open mind, social sharing and intimacy. Besides that, there is insignificant relationship between students' perceptions on social presence and their actual social presence. On the other hand, in the affective dimension, expression of emotion has been identified to have the most occurrences, while continuing a thread has been recognized as the most responses recorded for interactive dimension and salutation and greetings have been analyzed as the most occurred instances for cohesive dimension. Based on the perception, male students have been identified as perceiving social presence more than female, where there is insignificant relationship between gender difference and students' perception on social presence. However, social presence has significant relationship between both coursework and examination marks. Moreover, students used the responses of interactive dimension the most, cohesive had been averagely used and affective dimension had been recorded as the lowest usage across the entire six weeks of online discussions. In conclusion, by being aware and acknowledge the dimensions, indicators and responses, students and teacher would have higher percentage in making the interaction beneficial for learning.

Abstrak

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengenalpasti persepsi pelajar mengenai kehadiran sosial di dalam pembelajaran atas talian dan untuk mengkaji kehadiran sosial pelajar dalam pembelajaran dalam talian. Seterusnya, kajian ini juga akan menganalisis hubungan kehadiran sosial sebenar pelajar dalam pembelajaran atas talian dengan persepsi pelajar terhadap kehadiran sosial dan juga hubungan antara kehadiran sosial sebenar dengan prestasi akademik mereka. Kajian ini telah dijalankan dengan 30 pelajar ijazah pertama yang mendaftar kursus Bahasa Gubahan. Kajian ini dilaksanakan dengan menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan triangulasi data dari soal selidik dan transkrip pelajar dalam forum e-pembelajaran. Data kuantitatif daripada soal selidik dianalisis dengan menggunakan Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS). Bagi transkrip atas talian, ia dianalisis melalui teknik analisis kandungan. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan bahawa; *social respect* dan *social identity* telah menunjukkan kehadiran sosial tertinggi dalam pembelajaran atas talian berdasarkan persepsi pelajar, yang kemudiannya diikuti dengan *open mind*, *social sharing* dan *intimacy*. Di samping itu, tidak terdapat hubungan yang signifikan antara persepsi pelajar terhadap kehadiran sosial dengan kehadiran sosial sebenar mereka. Sebaliknya, dalam dimensi *affective*, ungkapan emosi telah dikenalpasti menunjukkan kehadiran tertinggi, manakala penyambungan perbincangan telah menunjukkan respon yang tertinggi untuk dimensi *interactive*; salam perkhabaran pula telah menunjukkan kemunculan tertinggi untuk dimensi *cohesive*. Berdasarkan persepsi ini, pelajar lelaki telah dikenalpasti memiliki kehadiran sosial yang lebih tinggi daripada pelajar perempuan, di mana tiada hubungan yang signifikan antara faktor jantina dan persepsi pelajar terhadap kehadiran sosial. Walau bagaimanapun, kehadiran sosial mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan antara kedua-dua markah kursus dan markah peperiksaan. Selain itu, para pelajar paling kerap menggunakan respon *interactive*, sederhana dalam menggunakan respon *cohesive* dan tidak kerap menggunakan respon *affective* dalam keseluruhan enam minggu perbincangan atas talian. Kesimpulannya, dengan menyedari dan memiliki pengetahuan tentang dimensi, petunjuk dan respon bagi kehadiran sosial, pelajar dan guru akan mempunyai potensi yang lebih tinggi dalam membuat interaksi berkesan untuk pembelajaran.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In the past decades, tremendous development of technology has taken place in worldwide from every aspect of society. Undoubtedly, it has provided great effect in educational field too. Hence, the demand for higher education has created great opportunities for technology to be excellently implemented in the teaching and learning process, specifically through online learning system. Stimulated by the evolving developments in technology, online learning system has been widely used as a platform for distance learning where the learning takes place up to the learner's availability. Thus, lots of studies have been done to provide solution and improvisation on the effectiveness of online learning (Hiltz *et.al*, 1999; Garrison, 2003; Shachar & Neumann, 2010).

One of the most highlighted issues in online learning is interaction process that takes place between either students and students or students and teacher. As mentioned by Badrinathan and Gole (2011), in online learning, the teacher or the instructor is responsible in ensuring that the students interact with one another. The interaction will encourage the students to voice out their thought and respond towards others' idea thorough computer mediated communication (CMC).

Nonetheless, distance learning still has its own challenge. By having teacher and students in different places as promoted in distance learning, the students would have high probability to feel isolated and lack of social connection with others (Sung and Mayer, 2012). In this case, the aim of online learning in providing the best means of learning would be hindered. Therefore, in order to overcome this matter, online learning system have to accommodate the students especially with conducive learning environment with vast opportunities for them to engage socially with other students and the teacher. This is important to ensure students' satisfaction and excellent learning outcome from the learning process.

According to Cobb (2009), one of the keys to the success of online learning is through social presence. Social presence has great influence on “...*online interaction, user satisfaction, depth of online discussions, online language learning...and critical thinking...*” (Tu, 2002). Gunawaderna (1995) also adds that social presence is vital to have better instruction in online learning. In short, the element of social presence is believed to be helpful in motivating students to learn effectively as well as enhancing their satisfaction with the learning process especially through better interaction process. In addition, a study done by Shea, Pickett and Pelz (2005) also found the positive significant relationship between the teacher presence with students' perceived learning and behaviour. In other words, social presence of the teacher or instructor is also vital in determining the students engagement in the learning process.

Since social presence is likely related to feeling rather than reason (Sung and Meyer, 2012), the sense of connectedness among students would stimulate them to become more interactive in online learning. Hence, rather than trying to acquire the knowledge individually, students would have much experience in sharing and cooperating with their peers in the whole process of learning. Therefore, research on exploring students' social presence will provide new information to educators of students' connectedness in term of social. This is matter has also been revised by Walker (2007) as he mentioned that environment and activity that facilitate social connection would motivate students intrinsically.

1.2 Background of Problem

The educational community nowadays keeps on realizing and being aware on the benefits of online learning. By having more control towards each learner's learning pace, online learning has become popular choice among educator to implement for the betterment of teaching and learning process. Promoted as providing meaningful learning environment where learning is fostered and supported, online learning also provides a conducive learning environment for students to be actively engaged in the learning process (Jain, 2009). According to Richardson and Swan (2003), online learning also introduced as class with at least part of curriculum with information transmission and communication via Internet with or without the course instructor. In other words, with the use of internet as main necessity, online learning can now be excessively accessed by students anywhere and anytime as long as they are available.

Another advantageous characteristic of online learning is that, regardless of the time and location, students would have more freedom to learn at their own pace. Compared to traditional classroom, teachers have to provide average difficulty or proficiency level of learning material for the whole students. In other words, teachers would have to consider the various students' proficiency level as a teaching preparation. The similar scenario would also take place during the teaching and learning process itself. For students who have higher proficiency, they would have to be patient and wait for the weak students. Therefore, with online learning, students with diverse level of proficiency will have their own time management for learning without having to wait or to rush out. Thus, with online learning, students especially the non-native speakers will have ample time of theirs to organize their learning progress. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, online learning can be managed with or without the presence of teacher or instructor. Hence, the students can alter their role to be facilitator to their peers when the teacher is not available at the particular time (Simonson et.al, 2000). In this situation, the students will be more actively engaged with the learning and will lead to high participation among them.

Nevertheless, there are still some studies as stated by Bullen (1998) argue that online learning lead to undesirable learning outcome because students could not interact face-to-face with other participants of the online learning. Stein and Wanstreet (2003) have also supported this argument. Based on their research findings, students find that they can hardly express emotion online especially in interrupting others in the learning process. For them, it is a major way of delivering your emotion by interrupting others, particularly in a discussion, which they believe could not be done in online learning forum. They are basically dissatisfied with the online learning environment since they cannot socially present themselves as much as they believe they could do when they are in traditional face-to-face courses. The inability of online learning to portray the real emotion of the online learning participant has also been an argument from another group of researchers. Stodel et.al (2006) found that the participants felt that the online course they enrolled was lack of humor and they hardly use emoticon to show their true feeling. Distance or online learning is labeled to be disadvantageous for students since they could not interact critically which result in failure to construct meaningful context through dialogue.

The finding in Bullen's study however is argued by Richardson and Swan (2003). They come out with an opinion that online learning can still provide an excellent interactive medium for students without the physical appearance of the students nor the instructors. This is supported with the study carried out by Rourke et.al in 2001. Their study show that the use of emoticons, humor or sarcasm and self-disclosure as part of affective codes in social presence could enhance the participants' social interactivity experience. In short, the findings by Bullen (1998) could actually refer to the lack of social presence between students and teacher or instructors in online learning, rather than the absence of their physical appearance.

The social aspect of learning has been the central issue discussed around online learning. Being engaged in social practice is considered as a fundamental process in learning (Wenger, 1998; Tu, 2001; Saenz, 2002; Lapadat, 2003; Sung & Mayer, 2012). Wenger added that learning requires those people involved in it to be socially competence. According to Bandura (1970), in social learning theory people learn by observing, imitate and modeling others. Thus, the learning takes place through a socialization process where students basically interact with other students or with their teacher. In other words, social interaction is a main factor that contributes towards learning. The findings from a study carried out by Muilenburg and Berge (2005) also portrays the agreement on the importance of having social interaction in online learning since social interaction has been identified as the most critical barriers in online learning. Cobb (2009) has strong belief that social interaction is needed to motivate students' in online learning environment. In online learning, the social interaction occurs in the environment is identified as social presence (Sung & Mayer, 2012).

To begin with, the interaction which takes place in online learning has been included in many studies before such as by Tu (2001), Tu (2002), Coob (2009), Sung and Mayer (2012) and Gunawaderna (1995). Most of the researchers' aims are to investigate the effect of social presence on students' interaction and its efficiency in ensuring the success of online learning program or system. Other than that, social interaction in computer-mediated communication has also proven to be positively influential towards students' perceived learning. Kui et.al (2013) found that students interact actively with one another in online learning by sharing and elaborating information.

With the importance of social presence in online learning, research to explain students' social presence in that medium is vital and should be done by researcher. By exploring social presence, educators will have more opportunity to design and develop the learning pedagogy to suit the students' needs to the optimum. Several researches on social presence of students in online learning had been conducted in the past years (Gunawaderna & Zittle, 1997; Rourke, Terry & Archer, 1999; Anderson et al., 2001; Stein & Wanstreet, 2003; Stodel et al., 2006; Sung & Meyer, 2012). However, the most of the researchers only explore the pattern and perception on social presence among students but did not identify the effects of social presence toward students' performance. If social interaction is important in learning, students' performance should increase when their social presence is high.

1.3 Statement of Problem

In online learning, interaction has been identified as an essential element especially in promoting effective learning process. Woods and Baker (2004) have also mentioned the importance of interaction in online learning by highlighting on its role in nurturing social engagement within each student and instructor in the online learning system. The students can be strongly motivated to contribute and perform more for learning when they are actively and socially engaged with their peers (Woods & Baker, 2004). Nevertheless, online learning system still has its own flaws. Previous researches have shown that in online learning, students might encounter problem from the aspect of lack of social engagement with other students or the instructor (Bullen, 1998). This argument has also been supported by Stein and Wanstreet (2003). Based on their research findings, students find that they can hardly express emotion online especially in interrupting others in the learning process. For them, it is a major way of delivering your emotion by interrupting others, particularly in a discussion, which they believe could not be done in online learning forum. They are basically dissatisfied with the online learning environment since they cannot socially present themselves as much as they believe they could do when they are in traditional face-to-face courses.

The situation undergo by the students portray the importance of effective interaction in an online learning. Besides that, interaction in online learning could also influence the students' satisfaction on online learning such as in the online course they are enrolling (Sanpson et.al, 2010). Lapadat (2002) also agreed that online learning should be satisfying to the students when it promotes "...interactivity, provide a safe environment..." This is supported with the statement given by Cobb (2009) regarding the essential of having social interaction among the online learning user as motivating students to learn well and become more satisfied with the learning itself.

Social aspect in online interaction is related to an important concept, which is known as social presence (Sung & Mayer, 2012). In traditional classroom environment, social presence indicates:

“Behaviors that create immediacy include both verbal and nonverbal actions such as gesturing, smiling, using humor and vocal variety, personalizing examples, addressing students by name, questioning, praising, initiating discussion, encouraging feedback, and avoiding tense body positions. (Aragon, 2003)”

In other words, social presence defines situation where interaction takes place in order to provide and deliver meaningful context to people in the same environment. From the citation above, it is shown that the presence of all students involve in a learning process is required for them to interact actively with one another.

Nevertheless, similar behaviours that signify social presence can also be found in online learning interaction. Compared to traditional classroom environment, students in online learning environment could also have interactive meaningful communication through the use of several types of responses such as Affective responses, Cohesive responses and Interactive responses (Rourke et.al, 2001). Furthermore, in computer conference, participants use emoticon to replace the nonverbal cues in written form (Gunawaderna & Zittle, 1997; Rourke, Terry & Archer, 1999; Swan, 2005; Whiteside, 2007). The use of these types of responses symbolizes the behavior of initiating social presence in online interaction. Indirectly, it shows that social presence is indeed an important concept for an interaction to be meaningful.

Therefore, not being in a same place at a same time physically does not mean that the learning would not achieve the learning outcome successfully. The main issue here is whether the students realize about social presence concept and do they fully utilize its concept in online learning to obtain the best learning outcome? These matters are considered as tough challenges for online learning practitioners to ensure that the learning undergo smooth and effective process. Both learner and instructors

need to have great awareness on their responsibilities and roles to sustain social presence in online learning (Whiteside, 2008).

According to Gunawaderna and Zittle (1997), to have high degree in social presence, the ability and capability of the people in online learning environment to transmit verbal and nonverbal cues such as "...facial expression, direction of gaze, posture, dress..." is vital. Therefore, as an instructor or teacher who normally initiates the learning, he or she has to be alert with all sorts of social presence coding as introduced by Rourke et.al (2001). The instructor need to ensure that the students in the online learning have knowledge regarding social presence, thus, gain the element of "...warm, personal, sensitive, and sociable..." throughout the whole online learning activities especially the interaction with other students and also with the instructor (Saenz, 2002). Nyachae (2011) extended the explanation by mentioning on the importance of having the feel of community in order to create social presence in online learning, particularly in distance education course.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the utilization of social presence coding by students based on their perceptions on social presence as well as their learning behavior in online learning and its relationship towards their performance. Based on a study done Richardson and Swan (2003), they managed to find strong correlations between students' social presence and their perceived learning and performance. These findings were then reasoned out to be affected by the teacher's presence too. Thus, the exact relationship between students' social presence and their performance is still ought to be identified.

1.4 Objective of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- i. To identify students' perceptions on social presence in online learning.
- ii. To investigate dominant students' social presence in online learning.
- iii. To analyze the relationship of students' perception on social presence with their actual online learning behavior.
- iv. To identify students' perception on social presence regarding to gender difference.
- v. To identify the relationship between social presence and learner's academic performance.
- vi. To analyze students' social presence across time.

1.5 Research Question

- i. What are the students' perceptions on social presence in online learning?
- ii. What are the dominant students' social presences in online learning?
- iii. What is the relationship of students' perception on social presence with their actual online learning behavior?
- iv. What are the students' perceptions on social presence regarding to gender difference?
- v. What is the relationship between social presence and learner's academic performance?
- vi. What are learner's social presence across time?

1.6 Scope of the study

The scope of this study will be a class of students from Bachelor in Science with Education program. They are undergraduate students from a local university in Malaysia. The participants are actively involved in online learning forum managed in the e-learning which is the official online web learning for that university students. All of the respondents came from the same academic course and enrolling in the same subject, which is Authoring Language. This subject requires them to participate in the e-learning forum actively. Moreover, all of the respondents are acknowledged for having prior knowledge in participating in online forum. The participants will be required to answer questionnaire as well as being interactive in responding towards the online forum. Since the main objective of this study is to explore students' social presence, thus, there is no activity mainly to inculcate social presence.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study will benefit certain parties such as students and teachers or instructor of any online learning coursework, as well as the higher institution.

1.7.1 Students

The applications of CMC serve students with better opportunity for more liberalized method or technique for learning especially through online learning environment. The awareness on social presence in online interaction will become beneficial for students to utilize the social presence dimensions in a more interactive and meaningful interaction with other students and the teacher. The knowledge on social presence will provide students with a platform of online interaction where they can be socially engaged with the whole learning process. There will be higher possibility for the students to be satisfied with online learning with social presence (Cobb, 2009). Thus, the effectiveness of online learning program can be seen from the success of achieving students' learning outcome.

1.7.2 Teachers or Instructors

As for the teacher or instructor, they will be more aware towards their role in preparing an interactive learning environment where students can feel socially connected with one another. It is undoubtedly important for the teacher to play his or her role efficiently especially when the students start inactively participating in online learning. With the knowledge on social presence, teacher will be more aware on the function of each social presence dimension according to the required situation that students come across. Even in the Social Presence Model by White (2007), the element of Instructor Involvement is listed as part of the necessary characteristic in nurturing social presence in effective online learning, increase sense of community, and in turn increase interaction among students.

1.7.3 Higher Institutions

The result of this study will elucidate the importance of requiring knowledge on social presence, specifically social presence in online learning. From the result of the questionnaire, we may obtain the information on the students' awareness of social presence. Meanwhile, the online transcript will show the actual social presence occur during the online discussion. This research will be significant to the higher institution from the aspect of providing and developing the best online learning platform by considering the implementation of the best lesson plan that promotes social presence in the interaction of the participants.

1.8 Definition of the Term

A few specific definitions have been used to explain the meaning for better understanding of the study.

1.8.1 Online Learning

Online learning Online has been defined as class with at least part of curriculum with information transmission and communication via Internet with or without the course instructor (Richardson & Swan, 2003). It also allows students to participate whenever and wherever they are available with internet connection. In this study, online learning is referred to the e-learning which is the official online web learning for the university students.

1.8.2 Social Presence

Social presence is defined as the degree of salience of the other person in the (mediated) interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships. This is interpreted as the degree to which a person is perceived as “real” in mediated communication (Short et.al, 1976). In short, social presence is related to the feeling of interacting with real people in through online medium communication (Sung & Mayer, 2012). The social presence dimensions implemented in this study are; Social Respect, Social Sharing, Intimacy, Open mind, Social Identity, Affective, Interactive and Cohesive.

1.8.3 Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)

Computer-mediated Communication is the process of interacting or communicating via computer system especially with the use of internet. Several examples of CMC are email, bulletin board, and real-time discussion. In this study, CMC is referring to the online forum in the e-learning.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter focuses on online learning, specifically with social presence. Online learning has been implemented as CMC system in UTM e-learning. Thus, it is a medium where discussion, information sharing and transfer occurs for UTM students especially in the Forum section. The theoretical framework used is social presence model which highlights five important elements in nurturing social presence in online learning. The problem regarding this study is strongly related to the awareness of social presence among students and instructor in online learning. In Chapter 2, there will be further extended explanation on previous research on social presence in online learning or CMC .

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