

Students' Experience of Social Presence in an Online Structured Master's Programme

Surona Visagie, Martha Geiger, Chioma Ohajunwa and Rosemary Luger

Abstract

Social presence has six facets (presence, respect, connect, belong, identify and intimacy) that develop on a continuum. It positively impacts students' achievements in and satisfaction with virtual programmes. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a move from face-to-face and hybrid learning to virtual learning in many graduate programmes. This qualitative descriptive study explored the experience of social presence in a virtual structured master's programme. Data were collected via anonymised email feedback, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten purposively sampled participants. The data were analysed by means of thematic analysis and triangulation, member checking and inputs from a reference group supported trustworthiness. The six emerging themes showed that virtual presence and respect were experienced by all participants, while connecting, belonging and social identity were experienced in varying degrees. Intimacy was not achieved. Some participants developed connections that provided encouragement and stimulated a sense of knowing colleagues despite never having met in person. Others were reluctant to make themselves virtually visible. The example set by facilitators and the virtual contact week were important catalysts in the development of social presence. Synchronous tutorials, virtual office hours, small group work, and a

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: SURONA VISAGIE, email: suronav@sun.ac.za, MARTHA GEIGER, email: mgeiger@sun.ac.za, CHIOMA OHAJUNWA, email: Chioma@sun.ac.za and ROSEMARY LUGER, email: rluger@sun.ac.za, Stellenbosch University, South Africa
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social calendar could enhance social presence and strengthen virtual graduate programmes in the higher education environment.

Key words: social presence, online learning, graduate, virtual, distance learning

Résumé

La présence sociale comporte six facettes (présence, respect, connexion, appartenance, identification et intimité) qui se développent sur un continuum. Elle a un impact positif sur les résultats des étudiants et sur leur satisfaction à l'égard des programmes virtuels. La pandémie de COVID-19 a nécessité le passage de l'apprentissage en face à face et hybride à l'apprentissage virtuel dans de nombreux programmes d'études supérieures. Cette étude qualitative descriptive explore l'expérience de la présence sociale dans un programme de master virtuel structuré. Les données ont été collectées par le biais de courriels anonymes et des entretiens semi-structurés ont été menés avec dix participants sélectionnés à dessein. Les données ont été analysées au moyen d'une analyse thématique et d'une triangulation, la vérification des membres et les contributions d'un groupe de référence ont permis d'assurer la fiabilité des données. Les six thèmes émergents ont montré que tous les participants ont fait l'expérience de la présence virtuelle et du respect, tandis que la connexion, l'appartenance et l'identité sociale ont été vécues à des degrés divers. L'intimité n'a pas été atteinte. Certains participants ont noué des liens qui les ont encouragés et leur ont donné le sentiment de connaître leurs collègues, bien qu'ils ne se soient jamais rencontrés en personne. D'autres étaient réticents à se rendre virtuellement visibles. L'exemple donné par les animateurs et la semaine de contact virtuel ont été des catalyseurs importants dans le développement de la présence sociale. Les tutoriels synchrones, les heures de bureau virtuelles, le travail en petits groupes et un calendrier social pourraient améliorer la présence sociale et renforcer les programmes virtuels d'études supérieures dans l'environnement de l'enseignement supérieur.

Mots clés: présence sociale, apprentissage en ligne, diplômés, virtuel, apprentissage à distance

Introduction

Education is one of the cornerstones of a country's human resources (Andoh et al., 2020). The South African Draft National Plan for Higher Education thus emphasises the importance of education in the development of the country and its citizens. It further states that distance education (online or other formats) "has a crucial role to play in meeting the challenge to expand access, diversify the body of learners, and enhance quality, in a context of resource constraint" (RSA, 2001, p. 51).

Online graduate education programmes have become increasingly popular. The advantages of flexibility, self-paced learning, privacy, and cost and time saving are important in increasingly busy schedules (Joiner et al., 2021; Karaoulanis, 2017). Through these properties, online education increases access to graduate education and allows many who cannot enrol in conventional programmes an opportunity for further study. This promotes equity in graduate education (Andoh et al., 2020). However, online education suffers from high dropout rates. Therefore, educators need to implement strategies to support students in order to promote student retention and increased pass rates (Modise, 2020). The Community of Inquiry theory (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000) holds that the online teaching and learning experience depends on three fundamental elements: social, teaching and cognitive presence. Optimal online learning occurs if they interact.

Innovative educational strategies and information technology with dedicated platforms for online learning that allow real time and asynchronous engagement, interactive feedback, and tutorial functions support the growth of online education (Joiner et al., 2021). This process was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to limit face-to-face contact, as well as the subsequent travel restrictions (Rodrigues, 2020).

Context

In keeping with the move to online teaching and learning, a structured master's programme in Human Rehabilitation studies (the study programme) at a South African university transitioned from a blended programme (a semester online programme supported by 40 hours

of physical contact per module) to an entirely online programme. For close to 20 years, the programme focused on hybrid learning presented through a combination of face-to-face and online teaching and learning strategies. This route was inspired by a social justice ethos to accommodate a student body from diverse African settings that combined studies with full time employment and thus benefitted from the flexibility of an online programme. However, face-to-face contact weeks always played an important role in nurturing graduate attributes that are traditionally dependent on social interaction, including:

- Developing reflective practitioners
- Facilitating interaction and collaboration in multiple stakeholder environments
- Developing students that nurture and support one another
- Co-construction of knowledge

These activities must be fostered virtually and might be neglected if not consciously planned for and pursued. Furthermore, learning is enhanced through social interaction, which is limited during online teaching. Discussion forums and social media platforms can be used to facilitate contact, but these cannot replace the intimacy and immediacy of being in the same physical location (Sung and Mayer, 2012). Thus, online programmes must purposefully incorporate strategies that nurture interaction, develop social presence, and support students for optimal learning to occur (Volschenk et al., 2020).

Social Presence

Social presence is the extent to which people perceive one another as 'real', connected and belonging to the group during virtual interaction (Lowenthal and Snelson, 2017; Sung et al., 2012). It enhances students' achievements and their satisfaction with programmes, and facilitates a sense of community (Sung et al., 2012).

Kehrwald (2010) operationalised social presence and proposed a theoretical framework that formed the theoretical basis for social presence in the current study (Figure 1).

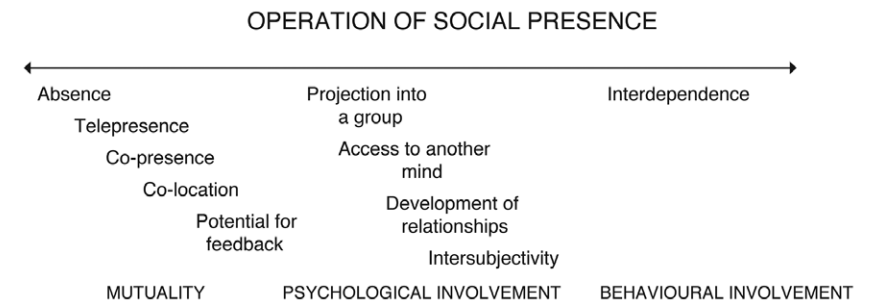


Figure 1: Continuum of social presence

Source: Kehrwald (2010)

As shown in Figure 1, social presence occurs on a continuum and there are different degrees of being present in an online space. Being socially present starts with logging in and increases incrementally through the level of active involvement and sharing during online interaction to a point where group members become dependent on one another for individual as well as group outputs and outcomes (Kehrwald, 2010); which, in the case of the programme under study, would be learning and co-construction of knowledge.

Building on Kehrwald's (2010) work, Sung and Mayer (2012), Lowenthal and Snelson (2017) and Lowenthal and Dunlap (2020) identified six facets of social presence, namely:

- Being present (Telepresence) starts with the action of logging in. However, as in a physical environment, without any engagement, one can log in but not be part of the proceedings. Online presence is enhanced by commenting, using emojis, asking questions, sharing, responding, and continuing a discussion thread. Thus, being present is dynamic and varies with the number and quality of engagements on the online platform. It also accumulates over time.
- Social respect (Mutuality): Cohesiveness and warmth must be developed in the online group. This is achieved by group members greeting one another whether verbally when the online space is shared synchronous in time, or in writing when

it is an asynchronous space. Respect is further shown in the way comments and questions are worded, the timeliness of responses and showing appreciation for others' contributions.

- Social sharing/connectedness (Projection into the group) occurs when group members believe that they share commonalities and demonstrate this by sharing information such as relevant references, personal experiences, values, and beliefs. During social sharing, group members cautiously start to show one another who they are, and humour and sharing anecdotes play an important role.
- Belonging (Access to another mind) is demonstrated by movement from individuals sharing a learning space to the formation of a cohesive group with shared goals that learns and develops knowledge together. Group members accommodate different viewpoints and show understanding and support for others' viewpoints by encouraging feedback, explorative questions, and indications of understanding.
- Social identity/being real (Development of relationships): Participants recognise one another's presence in the group by using given names and acknowledging aspects of one another's lives. Group members celebrate one another's successes, such as a high grade, while providing support during difficult times.
- Social intimacy (Behavioural involvement): Participants give of themselves to the group through affective responses such as self-disclosure, sharing personal anecdotes and emotions.

Problem

The Draft National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa states that distance education should not be uncritically introduced as the answer to the challenges faced by the sector, including, we would argue, those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It calls for assessment of distance education programmes to ensure that they contribute to education in South Africa and Africa (RSA, 2001). Students' learning needs must be met, they must fulfil the requirements of the programme, and they must be satisfied with it. Social presence plays a pivotal role in achieving these

requirements during online teaching and learning (Kim et al., 2016; Sung et al., 2012). While it has been fairly extensively studied, more research is required on students' experience of social presence and the strategies that can develop it (Lowenthal and Dunlap, 2020). Thus, our study posed the following questions: What were students' experiences of social presence while participating in the study programme and what strategies can be adopted to enhance social presence?

Methodology and Methods

This study adopted a post-positivist perspective and a naturalistic approach where understanding of social presence and strategies to enhance it was based on the meaning that participants ascribed to activities and interactions during the programme. We adopted an ontological position of relativism, arguing that people experience situations differently, that reality is subjective, and that there is no single reality or right answer. We believed that individual students would interpret social presence and their experiences of it in different ways based on their current and previous experiences. We further acknowledge that as researchers we played an active role in the social construction of knowledge during the research process (Bradshaw et al., 2017).

A qualitative descriptive design was employed that focussed on exploring participants' experiences and emotions over a short time span to develop practical recommendations to implement in future modules (Bradshaw et al., 2017). In 2021, module 1 of the programme consisted of an online contact week (40 hours) facilitated on the Microsoft Teams platform, followed by 15 weeks of online teaching and learning via the SUNlearn platform. Synchronous teaching strategies included PowerPoint lectures, group work, video clips, case studies, practical sessions on negotiating university platforms, and structured reflection sessions. Asynchronous learning was facilitated through self-directed learning, discussion forums, and small group work. Assessment was conducted through discussion forums and assignments. Facilitators were available via SUNlearn, email, WhatsApp, and phone.

Seventeen students enrolled in the study programme and maximum variation purposive sampling was used to select ten to participate in the

study. The participants differed with regard to gender, age, professional background, level of activity in online discussion groups, and achieved marks. Data saturation was achieved after ten interviews.

Data were collected by the primary author through virtual interviews on the Microsoft Teams platform, with the interviews guided by an interview schedule. Participants were asked to narrate their experiences of being socially connected to the group and their perceptions on the extent to which social presence was fostered during the programme. Additional data were extracted from anonymous written feedback after the contact week.

Deductive and inductive thematic analysis was employed. The broad concepts of social presence described by Sung et al. (2012), Lowenthal and Snelson (2017), Lowenthal and Dunlap (2020) and Kehrwald (2010) served as signposts for the analysis and thus the deductive component. Around each of these, themes were developed from the data in an inductive manner as described by Braun and Clark (2006).

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval (N21/02/010) and institutional permission. Participants benefitted from the study as strategies to enhance social presence were identified and implemented in subsequent modules of the study programme.

Trustworthiness

The power imbalance between the principal investigator, a facilitator in the module, and the participants threatened the credibility of the data, especially in terms of sharing unfavourable opinions. However, the data contain examples of positive and negative experiences. The range of experiences, together with purposive sampling, data saturation, triangulation of findings from the interviews and contact week feedback, member checking, and the support of a reference group during data analysis enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). During member checking all responded that a draft analysis of the findings reflected the diversity of experiences in the class.

Findings

The participants' demographic details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Details (developed by authors)

	Gender	Age	Home language	Profession*	> 70% in module	Online activity level: above / below group mean
P1	F	45	Seswati	SLT	No	Above
P2	M	30	English	PT	Yes	Above
P3	F	40	English	SLT	Yes	Below
P4	F	38	Afrikaans	OT	Yes	Above
P5	M	39	Afrikaans	SLT	Yes	Above
P6	F	32	English	OT	Yes	Below
P7	F	27	English	SLT	No	Below
P8	F	43	Tsepedi	PT	No	Below
P9	F	29	Afrikaans	MOP	No	Below
P10	F	27	English	MOP	No	Above

* SLT- Speech and language therapist; PT - Physiotherapist; OT- Occupational therapist; MOP – Medical orthotist/prosthetist

Six themes were derived from the data:

- Theme 1: Being there beyond the requirements of the programme
- Theme 2: Respect “a hundred percent received and given”
- Theme 3: Connecting; being there together
- Theme 4: Belonging to a space where knowledge is co-constructed; “I might not understand you, but I hear you”
- Theme 5: Social identity; being real
- Theme 6: “Online, for me it works”

Theme 1: Being there beyond the requirements of the programme

To a certain extent, virtual presence was mandated in the study programme by the module requirements with comments and responses in the discussions being graded. Students had to make a minimum of seven posts per discussion. However, the findings showed that they went beyond these requirements. The ten participants made a total of 1 662 posts, with a mean of 151 (118-215). The allocation of marks for

participation in discussions might have forced postings, with posts being made to earn good grades rather than to develop the topic under discussion.

P3: I do think that sometimes the comments were given because it was a requirement. Students would sometimes say something that did not even relate to something I said because there was an understanding that the person would be marked on that.

WhatsApp groups were seemingly used for programme-related conversations rather than social sharing.

P9: That [WhatsApp group] is also very quiet and people just ask about assignments and due dates and words and those type of things. But it is not really social interactions.

The example set by the facilitators during and after the contact week in terms of being there and being available assisted participants to ease into the module and work on a virtual platform.

The lecturers established an 'esprit de corps' in the students from the outset of the contact week and re-enforced it in the next two days, despite not having the luxury of direct contact. (Anonymous contact week feedback)

P10: ...the lecturers assured us that they are going to be there the whole time...the fact that they are there at any time for us, that I really did appreciate...we knew there were people that we could turn to. That [facilitators] were really available to answer any of our questions.

The first requirement for social presence, being there, was thus established.

Theme 2: Respect "a hundred percent received and given" (P7)

Respect is one of the basic building blocks of healthy relationships and after being present forms the foundation on which further degrees of social presence can be built. Participants agreed unanimously that interactions were respectful. They used words like friendly, considerate, and polite to describe online communication.

P8: The respect is there. How people raise questions. How we respond to each other. It shows there is a huge lot of respect.

Virtual conversations among groups of people who do not know one another well but hold one another in high regard and seek to treat one another respectfully can become stilted. Such platforms cannot replace the informality and spontaneous nature of the spoken word. The sender must consider that words without tone of voice, body language and facial expressions can be interpreted in ways that were not intended.

P3: ...when it is in person you can provide other kinds of cues. You can convey your feelings or convey a message of not being judgemental or whatever via facial expression.

P9: ...if you can't see someone or speak face-to-face to somebody and you feel different from someone else...You really need to think and make sure that you don't overstep the line of someone feeling like they are attacked. It happened to me once where I replied [to] ... a comment in a discussion and then someone felt like they have been attacked because I thought different from what they thought.

Participants raised the possibility that, in order to ensure respect and not hurt feelings, some things were left unsaid, some opportunities were unexplored, and discussions were stilted, especially in the initial stages. They felt that being overly respectful might have stifled learning in some instances.

P3: I am thinking maybe even to the point that the politeness became a barrier. So, a question was asked, for example, during the contact week and people wanted to answer. Everyone is waiting for someone else to go first. Ja, it led to these long pauses...for me there were things sometimes that I wouldn't know how to address in a way that it would not be offensive. So, then I would not address it at all in the discussion group and comment on something else rather.

Therefore, respect did not always crystallise into connectedness and belonging.

Theme 3: Connecting, being there together

Social connection in the virtual space depends on individuals' ability to project themselves as real on the virtual platform. It also depends on the ability to construct others as present. The narratives of two participants show how a connection was achieved by one, and how it was desired but not achieved by the other. Through actively making herself visible and looking for others, P4 managed to build a small community among the larger student group that sees one another as real, is connected and has developed some level of intimacy. In contrast, P8 was too reserved to make herself visible, and while she craved connectedness with fellow students, did not experience any.

P4 commented:

For me it was very real...almost like I was speaking to someone next to me...After we finished the contact group I asked some of the people individually. And we formed this small little group...we have our monthly team meeting if we can get together. We try to call each other weekly at least to touch base...if you are available at the time. If you struggle with a question, pop a WhatsApp. If you are looking for a certain article that you can't find, then just ask a question. It's not very structured. It is very informal. We are just there for each other if we need each other...And then I just made individual contact with some of the other people as well. I keep contact with some of the people in the [bigger student] group that I have made a personal connection with by just chatting. I don't know these people from Adam. But it feels like I know them, I don't know how to explain that concept. I send a message to some of them. How's your kids or I know of some of them whose family members are sick or there was a birthday of this one's mother, and that makes it even more real ... These people that I interact with...it is not just a figment of my imagination or some words on a screen. So that's what's adding to this social experience or my connections with them is that we are actually connecting behind the class. Behind the master's programme. I am probably gonna jump on them

[when meeting face to face] ...like I have known this person for ever.

In sharp contrast, P8 recounted:

Sometimes it is a little bit difficult, especially when we are doing our discussions on SUNlearn...It is like you are talking to a name. You don't have a face in your mind to put it to the name. You are busy communicating with a person, but you don't even remember how they look like on the class photo. Sometimes you don't need help in the sense of, 'Tell me where can I find information?'

Just, just to hear that we are all struggling with time. There is just too much work, there is family, there is your real job, there is schoolwork. Just to hear someone concurring with you. Saying, 'You know what, we will push. Let's push.' Encouraging each other. In a virtual set up this is not there and sometimes that's what we need especially. For me it is a little bit difficult. I want to have that kind of contact or that kind of relationship. I have to go to the group info and then look at the names like Ahh, Ok, Maybe I can ask this one, take the number and then maybe WhatsApp them on the side and say, 'Hi it's [name], I am in class with you. I was just wondering can I ask' and you're thinking, 'Whoa; what will this person say?'

Like (laugh) You don't know me we are just classmates.' Something like that. So, it's, um it's extremely difficult for me. Because I am a little bit reserved and I always struggle to make relationships with people. So, when I have not even seen them it is really difficult. Sigh. I really don't think, I don't think there is any closeness growing [in] ... the group. And I feel very isolated. I feel like I am alone. But I still don't have that courage to ask.

For some, insufficient connection with fellow students extended to their connection with facilitators.

P1: ...This platform was not really...addressing all my needs as much as I would have wanted it... SUNlearn, right now, feels still quite far from how I would want to experience the interaction with my facilitator. There are limitations...I am a person who observes a lot and the lack of that and of being able to have my teacher present...I needed a presence of my facilitator so that I could ask questions. I also knew that we could ask, but up to a certain degree. And we could not really isolate a lecturer on the side and say, 'This is my thinking about this assignment initially ... I pulled out this information. Is this relevant enough? Is this relevant to this topic?' And so that really, I felt to some degree a bit disappointed from that angle.

Some participants were comfortable with solitude and working on their own. Others yearned for more interaction.

P9: I am very private. So, it is not something that really bothers me. I normally [do] not share a lot of what I am doing, so it does not bother me.

P2: So, social presence wise I would just conclude and say I do feel pretty much alone. I did not feel like there was a lot of social support. Which was not a problem for me. I felt alone. But I love being alone. But that does not help anyone else.

Online contact sessions, tutorials at specific times during the module, and debriefing sessions were suggested as ways to enhance contact and connections.

P2: You know even if it is just once a month on a Friday afternoon we all come together as a Zoom class and just bring in any challenges or any discussions that we need to ask. Or we can even throw in an article or two...once or twice a month.

P1: There was that opportunity [provided by one facilitator] to actually before you move on to another section of the module to speak about anything you want to talk about...That was quite nice...there is an opportunity to ask questions...I felt that

opportunity gave me the confidence that, OK, I have someone to go to if I have questions.

Small social touches might help to build interpersonal connections.

P2: Little things like birthdays...Whenever it is someone's birthday...it comes up and everyone has an opportunity to just remember that we are all people with lives. Little things I think go a long way.

Theme 4: Belonging to a space where knowledge is co-constructed; "I might not understand you, but I hear you" (P4)

In graduate programmes, knowledge should be developed as much as taught. Students and facilitators have relevant experiences and knowledge that should be shared, explored, validated, and absorbed into the larger body of knowledge for all to tap into.

P2: While we are doing an individual master's, there needs to be a collective framework so that we can all collaborate for further growth.

For knowledge to be co-constructed, people must feel safe enough to share, encourage and explore. Group members should not fear being ridiculed, ignored, or attacked.

P4: We all want to be heard. We all want to be validated...we want each other to be comfortable...So it's to create safe space where everybody is respected.

The experience of belonging to the group and the confidence to share in it varied among participants. Some felt that the space allowed and even encouraged the sharing of different viewpoints. They described support for one another's views, and a non-judgemental environment.

P1: ...never in that platform [SUNlearn] do I ever feel judgement. It really is transparent and there are opportunities for trust in it. So, I think we trust each other enough to actually share, support and encourage each other.

P8: I think there was a kind of working together approach [in discussion groups]. Because I'll post something and then my fellow student will ask like, 'What exactly do you mean? Do you mind elaborating further or give an example?' When we were asking each other questions, for me it was like you know what, maybe you need to look further into it...for example after reading someone else's post I'll go and I'll get that article and then read further. Maybe an article that I wouldn't [have] thought of taking it out or searching for it. So it was, ... we learn [more] and help ... each other. Learning from my peers. Also the manner, the way of writing, ja. You will see someone. How they present their topic. How they go about it and how they support their arguments with literature...this is another angle that I could have looked at this topic. So, that for me was a growing point, because I will see, oh, actually you should be presenting your topic like this. Even when follow up questions come, I know how I can answer this. I know just from looking at the way that other students are doing it.

However, the opposite was also experienced. Some participants felt a competitive edge to the comments and questions and felt that some of their fellow students were using the platform to criticise, show superior knowledge, and enforce their opinion instead of collaborating to enhance learning.

P7: In my own discussions I have never felt criticised...But in some of the other posts I feel like there was a note of criticism.

P2: Everyone wants to shine in some way. Or perform... it becomes sort of this, this gladiator contest. They are just trying to prove a point on some level (sigh)... Rather than collaborating ...I think it was particular with a couple of students that I felt that there was this little like threatening (laugh) sort of intimidating thing.....the way in which the discussions were worded, and it just felt very finger pointy in a sense. I'd rather disprove someone than collaborate with each other and said 'yes, I believe that you are correct and let us add to that...'

Facilitators have an important role to play in this regard. They should set the tone and their communication should show that there is room for different viewpoints. They should also offer encouraging feedback, ask explorative questions, and if need be gently nudge the student in a different direction. It seems that facilitators managed to achieve this in the current programme.

P4: I have honestly never experienced a relationship with my facilitators in this type of way. Even though we are miles apart and we are online. But I feel very comfortable with sharing my thoughts with you. I feel very comfortable with popping you a message or an email...You guys have just been really amazing and compassionate and understanding of our learning process. I felt you guys [facilitators] were very supportive...I felt you always tried to ask it in a very sensitive, compassionate way while also trying to stimulate my thinking in a sense. I have never felt judged by any of the facilitators. I have never felt like when I sent an email that, oh shoot, why did I say that or why, why did I ask that? I never felt that I was asking dumb questions.

However, not all felt free to access facilitators. They acknowledged that the invitation was made but were hesitant and required an additional nudge which was not forthcoming.

P6: It [whether she would contact lecturers and ask] depends on the question. It depends on the content of the work. I was not sure if I could ask. I was more hesitant to ask. Like if it was a quick question regarding the assignment or just a one sentence question then I would ask via WhatsApp. However, when it was a more complex issue...I am just thinking that sometimes to ask is cool, but not too much and that we must go and figure out ourselves. Ja, do research.

These participants were reluctant to take the first step by asking for an explanation. Some would have liked a more structured opportunity for contact instead of having to initiate the process via a social media request.

P1: There was one assignment where I felt I needed to have a vigorous conversation...on how I interpreted that assignment versus how the comments were made for that assignment. This is where I am finding the barrier in participation for myself is that I do not know what platforms to use to actually engage my facilitator. An email is, is really for me it is not the best. Because emails can be sent back and forth. An interaction like this, the interview, is maybe a better option in this time and age. I really miss opportunities like this for myself and this may not change my mark, but what it does for me, it allows me opportunities to get deeper in how I put my thought processes into assignments...the human interaction is not there for me...the necessary questions and for myself to understand myself better and self-reflect and where I did go wrong, where I thought I was right...I was not sure to what degree I could ask for the opportunity [for face time]. The email was almost like I could and, yes, it is mentioned call me or something like that, let me know if you have questions. You made the invitation. I was too scared to formalise that. Did it mean was I questioning you in your analysis...I assumed that we only had these opportunities like your like around weekly uh week sessions um and then anything else is you can email me, you can send me a WhatsApp. That kind of thing, ja...Had I felt initially that the, you know, opportunities to really engage with our facilitators could be, literally be in any form, I think maybe I would have been better at not being too nervous to ask, ja.

Another participant pointed out that they were graduate students and should take some responsibility in contacting facilitators.

P5: It is good to know that that invitation [to contact facilitators] is out there...if something is not clear to me then I am going to ask. I don't know how else you can make the invitation more inviting. I mean we are students, and it is post grad students. So, by now you either ask or you gonna have to just suck it up, you know. If you don't ask you are not going to get a response.

Theme 5: Social identity; Being real

Subtheme: "It's actual people"

The experience of social identity covered a wide spectrum. Some participants found fellow students real and could ascribe styles and personalities to them through reading their posts. They even developed feelings of friendship.

P6: So, initially I just saw the name. I was not sure to who I am talking. And then after a while, the first discussion, I started to get to know different people and...I got to see how they comment.

P3: I never thought I would get to know people virtually like I have or feel a connection to people that I have only met virtually.

P10: I could actually put a face to the discussions and even the accents or the way someone spoke. I could still like you know 'hear' that in the writing in the discussions. So, if I could remember the way she spoke, it is almost like she is speaking to me in her own voice in the discussions.

The online contact week played an important role in establishing some social identify between group members.

P7: I think personally for me [online] contact week made the start of things less intimidating. It took a little bit of the pressure off. We got to know people more because you could literally just sit and listen. And I think that helped build relationships with the rest of the people in the class as well. I got to know people's personalities and things that they are passionate about...One should definitely not do it without a contact week. I think without the contact week I would have been lost.

P10: We had that interaction session where we speak about something about ourselves. That sort of gave us the idea that, oh, it is not just online...It is actual people and you learned

about them. And then as we went on in that week, we were given activities to sort of interact with them. And I feel that sort of made it a lot nicer. Because it felt like we, even though we were not in a classroom, we were still in a classroom, and we could connect to each other. We could talk. We could joke. And learn more from each other. Besides just learning about each other.

Working in small breakaway groups on the online platform was seen as an important strategy that helped students to get to know one another.

Some more interactive sessions would have been nice, compared to the conventional 'sit and listen' slide show. (Anonymous contact week feedback)

Subtheme: "It really just felt like a name on a screen"

As alluded to by P8 under theme 3, others could not put a face to a name.

P2: It really just felt like a name on a screen. You could not remember sort of anyone's personality, their jobs, their...It was quite challenging.

While virtual icebreakers have some value, they fail to involve all the senses and whole class experiences. It is limited to one person explaining him/herself. One can only hear it. Even then, the one sense one would expect to be fully engaged was not always easy:

Network problems my side, could not be fully included and issuing headsets (to improve audio quality and nullify the effect of bad acoustic environments) for the presenters would be a worthy investment. (Anonymous contact week feedback)

P6: ...when the line was very bad...for me it [online contact sessions] was very difficult to follow. And with different accents, it was very difficult for me to understand.

One cannot see body postures, but only a face (that may be distorted depending on connectivity). However, one cannot make eye contact. If one responds with a smile or nod, the person sharing is not aware

of this. The additional action of sending an emoticon through the chat function is required. More reticent colleagues will not do that and even when done it is not processed in the same subconscious manner as body language. Others' reactions to the information is not the same as in a classroom.

P1: The liveliness you offer in person got uhm (thoughtful as she speaks) decreased, decreased.

Theme 6: "Online for me it works"

Despite the challenges regarding social presence, the participants agreed that the structure of the programme suited their needs and lifestyles better than a face-to-face programme would have and that it did not detract from their learning.

P4: I don't feel like it has affected my learning in anyway or to the detriment...I don't feel like I have missed out on anything.

P1: ...this journey, experience wise, it is amazing how it actually has started to impact my work in a positive way. In how I view disability and how I view my patients' experiences and how I view myself as an academic learner. Separate to being a clinician...I cannot explain the positiveness of this journey.

One participant with a hearing impairment was especially positive about this way of learning.

P6: Online discussions are for me easier than person to person... easier for me to read and think about it [content] and come back and reply. And it was also easier than if it was discussions in a class. In a class it is talking, and I am still trying to figure out what the person says. I first have to understand what they are saying before I comment. In a discussion like that I get lost. So, for me it easier to do it online...It also gives me an opportunity to contribute. Whereas if it was in person, I think it will be difficult for me to contribute, because of my hearing. So, I would say there is enhanced learning with the discussion. I am

just thinking about contact week. When we ... [were] breaking up into groups, [that] was different than if it was in person. Because sometimes in person it is not good for me to divide in groups. It is so noisy...I can't hear what my group says. Because there are other groups happening. Online, I was able to hear clearly and there is no noise. Background noise. I find online for me it works. It works for me.

The advantages of an online programme identified by the participants included its wider geographical reach and being able to work at one's own pace in one's own time. It was also noted that, while communication was different, it was dynamic.

P5: The communication was often a lot more dynamic than you'd maybe have when you did not do it computer based. Like we'd be able to give comments and ask questions while someone was busy giving a lecture. I mean you could have a conversation in real time while someone is actually busy with a point, without interrupting them. So, I think the communication was often a lot faster and a lot more dynamic. I feel the communication was very, was good...it did not feel like you were missing out. It actually felt enhanced.

Furthermore, the platform could prevent prejudices from coming to the fore.

P5: In a way it also felt like certain prejudices sort of got left at the door...sometimes inevitably, what a person looks like, or the way they talk affects the way that you sometimes perceive their inputs...you have a clean slate. So, you got to know them on an academic level, you were just focussing on their perceptions and their interpretations. I felt like I was a lot more neutral. There was a lot less prejudices and preconceived perceptions of whoever is typing that.

Discussion

An individual is not simply present or absent but is present in degrees with increasing involvement. Like being present in person, online social

presence covers a spectrum from being there, but sitting quietly in a corner, to being behaviourally and emotionally engaged. People must be there together to achieve two-way communication, salient interpersonal relationships, and emotional closeness. Individuals must make themselves known to the group and acknowledge others (Kehrwald, 2010). This study explored students' experience of social presence while participating in the study programme with a view to identifying strategies that can enhance social presence. All the current participants were present, as shown by the number of discussion posts, among other things. However, only some projected themselves into the group, developed co-presence and sought more social presence than what they had. Weidlich et al. (2022) also found that people usually required higher levels of social presence than what they experienced during online learning. However, it seems that the structure of the programme assisted the current participants to experience higher levels of social presence than those in the self-paced academic writing programme described by Vrieling-Teunter et al. (2022).

Due to different personalities and social and physical needs as well as diverse learning styles, the level of social presence that a person requires and feels comfortable with differs (Lowenthal and Dunlap, 2020; Weidlich et al., 2022). As the results show, some prefer working individually and might find that activities that facilitate social presence irritate them and detract from their learning experience (Weidlich et al., 2022). Others felt lonely, missed support from peers and were anxious about engaging with the group to the point where they found it difficult to ask for or share information.

The nature of online communication is also important in fostering social presence (Lowenthal and Dunlap, 2020). Our findings showed that communication was respectful. Mutual respect is an important component of social presence (Sung and Mayer, 2012). Interaction can be surmised to some extent as the findings showed evidence of acknowledgement, collaboration, and disagreement. However, learning opportunities were lost as a result of refraining from asking for clarity or disagreeing on contentious points. Insufficient connection and bonding among the student group might have meant that they were not always

sure how to negotiate the space between respect and confronting difficult issues (Grech, 2021).

Kehrwald (2010) found that social presence increased as the study participants developed an understanding of one another's ways of doing, thinking, temperaments, emotions, and intentions during virtual interaction. However, the current study found little evidence of affective communication (Lowenthal and Dunlap, 2020). Furthermore, some participants' learning might have suffered due to a lack of social presence as Grech (2021) showed that an emotional connection with fellow students assisted active participation and collaborative learning.

Wang et al. (2019) established that facilitator presence facilitates social presence among students. Sung and Mayer (2012) also noted that facilitators need to model respect, sharing personal information, addressing people by name, and maintaining an open mind. The current study's findings showed that lecturers modelled being present online and were available to students. At the same time, Wang et al. (2019) warned that too much facilitator involvement during asynchronous online discussion decreases learning. It can be argued that the high level of student engagement during online discussions in the current study meant that lecturers did not stifle interaction among students.

In addition, some study participants expressed a need for more contact with lecturers. Thus, it is important that facilitator presence is also established outside of the asynchronous student discussion forums. Participants suggested synchronous virtual tutorials, recognising events like birthdays, structured one-on-one access to facilitators at specific times during the module, and debriefing sessions. These proposals are supported by previous research (Karaoulanis, 2017; Joiner et al., 2021; Modise, 2020). Sung and Mayer (2012) indicated that providing individual feedback and a virtual open-door policy and/or virtual office hours can also be helpful (Joiner et al., 2021; Modise, 2020).

Furthermore, small group work significantly enhances the experience of social presence (Akcaoglu and Lee, 2016). As shown by our findings and supported by the literature (Joiner et al., 2021), small groups bring diversity and different perspectives to the learning experience. However,

different realities were experienced, with some students feeling criticised and that the discussions became a competition where individuals wanted to shine and showcase their knowledge rather than work with others to construct knowledge and ensure communal growth. Kehrwald (2010) also described this phenomenon and labelled it 'negative social presence' as these actions lead to disengagement of other group members.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be concluded that the participants' realities regarding social presence ranged from responding to the requirements of tasks and assignments, but experiencing isolation and loneliness, to interdependence and being involved in one another's lives. They had varying and opposing experiences of mutuality and belonging. Emotionally, participants expressed different degrees of satisfaction with the social presence they experienced based on their personal learning styles, support, and physical needs. They suggested strategies that might enhance social presence for future student cohorts that align with previous research on the topic. Structured opportunities to facilitate social presence should be embedded in online programmes. More specifically:

- Direct access to tutors via email, 'virtual office hours' or another communication portal is essential. Invitations to and the structure of these communication channels should leave students in no doubt about the rules of engagement and the sincerity of the invitation.
- Synchronous sessions such as tutorials could enhance the experience of social presence, but should be carefully balanced with flexibility.
- Frequent small group activities should be organised.
- Sharing volunteered information and photos on the learning platform and/or a social calendar with information on birthdays and other special occasions should be encouraged.

Future studies could include larger samples and quantify the level of desired and experienced social presence.

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