

College Students' Perception on Social Presence in Online Course Discussions

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Abstract: As the Chinese priority in higher education shifts from the quantity of to the quality of instruction, some new challenges about distance education rise before our eyes, accompanied by its explicit advantages such as the flexibility in time and space, the reduction of resource waste and the safety control during COVID-19. The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand the perception of social presence for Chinese students under online discussion context. The aim was to explore the significance of presence in college students' online course discussions and to produce knowledge that would fill the gaps of Chinese distance education. Course design, interaction, Chinese teaching and learning, intimacy and immediacy influenced social presence during online discussions.

1. Introduction

As the Chinese priority in higher education shifts from the quantity of enrollment to the quality of instruction, some new challenges about distance education rise before our eyes, accompanied by its explicit advantages such as the flexibility in time and space, the reduction of resource waste and the safety control during COVID-19. Aiming at new challenges, some educators concern that “the mediated nature of online learning might prevent students from developing a sense of belonging with other students, instructors, programs of study and educational institutions” [1][2]. To understand students' perception of sense of belonging well, a special concept would be utilized as the criteria. Social presence, a concept which was decided by the degree of students' perception of the connection with one another as ‘real people’ during distance education would be applied in the current study. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to examine undergraduate students' perception on social presence in online course discussions so as to understand its importance and explore solutions for instructors to confront this new challenge.

2. Methodology

A qualitative study design was used and the data were collected with virtual semi-structured interviews, focusing on social presence, interaction among peers, interaction between students and the instructor, the use of paralanguage as outlined by Swan and Shih [2] description of social presence. The interviewees were Chinese college students, to be taking online courses from home

and to be able to communicate verbally in English. Convenient sample was used, in which interviewees were selected based on their convenience, availability and the limitation of the special situation (covid-19). Four Chinese female undergraduate students took part in the interviews through a Zoom meeting from the participants' residence. Each interview lasted 60-70 minutes and every participant was interviewed twice in August and October of 2019.

Inductive content analysis was used. There were 40 transcribed A4 pages of interview data. There are three main phases in content analysis: preparation, organizing and reporting. In preparation phase, utterance became the unit of analysis, it could be a word or a theme, a sentence or even a part of sentence [3][4]. Before choosing the unit of analysis, making decisions on what to analyze in detail and how to conduct sampling are vital factors and the sample should be representative of the universe from a bulk of information [3]. In organizing phase, the qualitative data was analyzed by three stages. In the first stage, the data were reduced by coding the utterances concerning the social presence in online course discussions. In the second stage, the data was categorized by combining statements that belonged together in an obvious way. This resulted in sub-categories descriptive of the social presence. In the third stage, the data led me to move into the abstraction by generating the subcategories with similar contents into generic categories descriptive of social presence. Next, the data were further combined into four main categories: course design, the significance of interaction with people, Chinese teaching and learning style and intimacy/immediacy. The process of data analysis was given in table 1-3.

Table 1 Stage 1 and 2: Coding the Utterances Concerning the Social Presence and Combining the Statements

Utterances	Coded utterances	Sub-category
I am still quite nervous when I have to speak English because there is no English training environment. Since we are not in an English environment and our listening skills are relatively weak, the teacher will ask us to practice more to consolidate it.	Being nervous to speak English due to lack of language context and the weakness of listening skills.	Being challenging for Chinese students to learn English as a foreign language

Table 2 Stage 3: Combining the Sub-Categories with Similar Contents into Generic Categories

Sub-category	Generic category
Being challenging for Chinese students to learn English as a foreign language.	communicative tool
Speed is one of the challenging factors for non-native English learner to take courses.	
Being an advantage for foreign teachers who could speak Chinese fluently because it is good for developing teacher-student relationship.	

Table 3 Stage 4: Combining the Generic Categories into Main Categories

Generic category	Main category
communicative tool	course design
situated discussion setting	
effective icebreaker	
reciprocal communication and opportune replies	
course reflection	
sense of community	the significance of interaction with people
interactive communication with instructors	
joint class communication among peers	
keep harmonious relationship	Chinese teaching and learning style
authority	
the way to avoid losing face	
paralanguage	intimacy/immediacy
direct countenance	
the use of camera	

3. Results

3.1 How Did Intimacy and Immediacy Influence Social Presence ?

The use of camera and the direct countenance led to the change of intimacy. The freshmen were unwilling to open the camera as it would bring them sense of awkwardness. However, the degree of embarrassment would be decreased if only remained their voice during online discussions, as one student described: *Perhaps keeping voice is more conducive to emotional communication. There was a class before that the teacher asked us to turn on the camera when we were connected to the microphone, which caused us to speak implicitly, and we felt very nervous. Then one day he said that we will not turn on the camera today when we were answering questions. Students who were invited to answer questions performed in a very natural way.*

The main factor which referred to immediacy in online discussions was the use of paralinguistic. Emoticons, as a new function in Zoom was rare to see in both the synchronous and asynchronous online discussions. Nevertheless, prevalence was shown in personal interaction with instructors in other social apps like QQ.

3.2 What's the Significance of Interaction with People to Social Presence ?

As an alternative way of traditional face-to-face discussions, three perspectives contributed to students' interaction with people. The first one was sense of community, as one mentioned: *This kind of discussion mode has changed the minds of those who are not willing to participate in the discussion. I am one of those people. I will post it actively and diligently on discussion board. At that time, the pressure will be reduced a lot.* Asynchronous discussions could enhance sense of participation by providing more chances for every student, especially those who didn't have the initiative to answer questions in face-to-face discussions.

The second and the third perspectives were related to discussion board which provided a good place for students to interact with their instructors and peers on academic improvement. For instance, as one student stated: *The words in the discussion board may be some comments or some suggestions for you to modify the answers from the instructor.* Moreover, noticed that the interaction with peers not only limited among classmates but also among students from other classes.

3.3 How Did Course Design Link to Social Presence?

Excavating the influencing factors in course design which linked to social presence, the participants described: (a) Using English as a second language to communicate was challenging for most of students and a student pointed out a reason: *I am still quite nervous when I have to speak English because there is no English training environment;* (b) Instructors made situated discussion settings for students. The topics about the current situation and the allowance for students to have open-ended answers left a deep impression on them. An interviewee depicted: *I thought (the most impressive topic) was a scenario question about the epidemic. There were really many views during that discussion;* (c) Conducting icebreakers based on some functions in apps was helpful to draw the distance between students and the instructor, one participant shared: *There is a random grouping function in the zoom software. For example, giving you a topic for you to discuss about how foreign children entered the icebreaking game;* (d) Allowing students to see other students' posts which promoted the reciprocal communication and opportune replies, as one described: *The same ideas which provides me with kindred spirit. Different idea endows me with new angles of views;* (e) Providing publicly evaluation on the discussion board was beneficial to course reflection, as one student said: *I think it might be better to make publicly evaluations. We all learned from each other.*

3.4 How Did Chinese Teaching and Learning Style Influence Social Presence?

The main Chinese teaching and learning style referred to social presence included: (a) preferring to reply in a euphemistical and harmonious way, to start a new thread and even to decide whether to close the camera, one student identified the motivation: *Everyone turned the camera and the microphone off, it would be very strange if I turned it on. Sometimes if you say that you are too maverick, then others will say that I want to show off, or that I am willing to earn that credit;* (b) displaying instructors' authority in a cooperative mode, as one perceived: *I feel that the current teaching model has changed, from being led by the teacher to being participated by both teachers and students;* (c) getting adequate preparation in order to enhance confidence and avoid losing face in front of peers, as one interviewee shed light on her mental activities: *I am afraid of making mistakes in front of my classmates as I don't want to lose face. I prepared the manuscript, and then after I read it and memorized it, I would be confident in class.*

4. Discussion

4.1 Intimacy and Immediacy

According to previous research findings, facial expression was regarded as one of the factors which contributed to social presence [5]. However, the current study showed that college students regarded online discussions as an alternative approach of face-to-face discussions and it was still a feasible learning way without facial expressions. That also echoed the phenomenon that majority of students preferred to shut the camera during online discussions so as to avoid the sense of awkwardness. Some reasons behind this phenomenon were: (a) As freshmen, their sense of restraint and unfamiliarity still remained; (b) As novices to utilize various apps to take online courses, they were still in adaptive phrase.

Based on the results about immediacy, the current study found that emoticons were more likely to appear in synchronous online discussions rather than asynchronous one like the discussion board which differed from Rice and Love's results that over 30% of information belonged to socioemotional content in computer-mediated network [6]. Students dared not use emoticons in discussion board publicly because they assumed that the instructor would see it as a non-serious behavior. Furthermore, although emoticons could be found easily during synchronous discussions, students usually applied them in other social apps. One reason was the unfamiliarity of functions in learning apps, especially the new ones. For example, the Zoom company published the new function "emoticons" this summer but none of the participants ever heard that. In contrast, due to the familiarity and the dependency to other daily social apps, both of students and instructors deemed apps like QQ as communicative aids spontaneously.

4.2 Significance of Interaction with People

According to research findings, the effectiveness of social presence had positive relationship with learners' satisfaction among U.S. graduate students [7]. Another research connected the definition of social presence with sense of community and found that the level of social presence had nothing to do with academic performance [8]. The present study focused on understanding the significance of interaction with people to social presence and figuring out the underlying factors which conduce to academic performance in Chinese undergraduate students. Asynchronous discussions enhanced students' sense of community by providing them with more opportunities, especially to those who showed lack of initiative to answer questions. Besides, it's a reciprocal process to discuss the connection between social presence and academic performance because the

degree of social presence would be boosted if students would get bonus points and then their regular academic performance would be improved.

4.3 Course Design

From the perspective of interactivity, the instructor offered chances for students to learn from each other before submitting their own answers. However, it caused negative effect as well, as one student mentioned: *Since you can see the answers of other students before answering, a shortcut is provided for some students.* How to keep the balance of fairness and interactivity is still a puzzle. From the perspective of online communication which referred to the use of English as a second language, the current study found that majority of the participants deemed it as a challenging thing which influenced their learning quality negatively. In contrast, it became an advantage for foreign teachers to use Chinese as a second language to communicate with students which reduced the level of communicative difficulty and developed the student-teacher relationship. From the aspect of social context which appertained to situated discussion setting, the interviewees reached a consensus that they were keen on the discussion topics which allowed them to express their various opinions freely based on the present situation. Open-ended and scenario topics became two cores which instructors could refer when designing courses. Besides, some new factors were expanded during the study and the following findings could help instructors to improve their course design as well: (a) Publicly evaluation was preferred by participants as it created the condition for mutual learning; (b) As considering students' sense of freshness to participate in discussions, taking some functions of apps like random grouping function in Zoom into account in course design was a good choice.

4.4 Chinese Teaching and Learning Style

In terms of Chinese teaching and learning style which impacted the degree of social presence, keeping more euphemistical and harmonious ways to reply, to start a new thread and even to decide whether to close the camera was an obvious trend among college students. As a previous study mentioned that Chinese culture showed a tendency for collective views rather than individualism [9].

Zhan, Moodie and Wang pointed out another important feature about the traditional teaching style which came from Confucian views of power distance and respect-instructors' high authority [10]. Based on the results, the traditional teaching approach changed slightly, young teachers were more likely to apply collaborative instructions. Moreover, instructors' authority would not bring absolute obedience and the current college students pay more attention to attractiveness of teaching content.

According to the precious research finding that Chinese students were educated based on strong long-term orientation which led them always displayed serious concerns about losing face in case they made a mistake [9]. Based on the current study, the students chose to get full preparation in order to enhance confidence and avoid losing face in front of peers. Future researchers could try to explore more approaches that students used so as to assist instructors to understand students better.

4.5 Limitations

There were two aspects of limitations which remained to be continue working on for future researchers: (a) Though I selected four undergraduate students as my participants, they were only from two majors, the quantity of participants and the diversity of majors may cause different results and (b) More elements of Chinese teaching and learning style related to social presence could be

further excavated like Chinese book-centered one which echoed what one participant mentioned that the different type settings between students book and teacher's book caused great confusion during online discussions.

5. Conclusion

The current study filled in some gaps of Chinese distance education by interviewing college students' perception of social presence in online course discussions from four realms: intimacy/immediacy, the significance of interaction with people, course design and Chinese teaching and learning style. Some useful results could be applied into daily instructions. Firstly, using paralinguistic like emoticons and the camera in a feasible way. Secondly, online courses discussion couldn't be successful without the interaction with people. Thirdly, every link is important to students' sense of social presence, from beginning to the end. At last, knowing about the traditional Chinese teaching and learning style and its change in the current society are helpful for instructors to understand students better.

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