

## **Exploring Social Presence in Online Forums among Distance Learners**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the manifestation of social presence in online forums among the distance learners. Five learners who enrolled in the distance-learning programme in one of Malaysia's public universities were involved in this study. Data were collected from the learners' responses in the online forums and were analysed based on the Rourke et al. (2001) measurement of social presence, which comprises affective responses, interactive responses and cohesive responses. Document analysis revealed that interactive and cohesive responses were the most represented; no affective responses were found. This study suggests that the use of member profiles would help learners to get to know one another better and that instructors should play a significant role in establishing and maintaining the manifestation of social presence in distance learning environments. Further research needs to be conducted to identify the ways in which enhancing social presence could ensure a meaningful learning experience.

Keywords: social presence, affective response, interactive response, cohesive response

## **Introduction**

Distance learning has created a new learning environment that is more flexible in terms of time, place and learning method. It has been more effective and convenient as compared to conventional learning by providing opportunities for learners to further their education at a higher level. However, the main challenge in distance learning is that the instructors and learners are located in different places (Moore and Kearsley, 2005). As a result, learners found that distance learning environments make them feel isolated and that a lack of engagement and collaboration leads to less effective learning (Leh, 2001; Kear, 2010). Learners felt dominated by other learners and anxious about presenting their ideas in public (McConnell, 2006). These feelings are characteristics of a lack of social presence (Short, Williams and Christie, 1976).

Social presence is an important issue because it can affect learners' levels of participation, interactions and engagement in learning and can therefore influence their performance (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000; Halter, Kleiner and Hess, 2006; Kear, 2010). Richardson and Swan (2003) found that a high degree of social presence effects learners' perceived learning and increases their satisfaction in their online learning experience. Therefore, a sense of social presence would provide learners with a greater level of emotional satisfaction.

One of the factors that determines the success of distance learning environments is the feeling of social presence in online interactions (Rourke et al., 1999; Cui, 2013; Thayalan, Arumugam and Muthusamy, 2013). In distance learning, learners use multiple text-based asynchronous tools to communicate with one another. Problems tended to arise from the lack of body language, delays between messages and lack of visual and auditory cues among the distance learners (Rowntree, 1995; Kear, 2010).

Social presence in distance learning means that learners feel connected to their peers and perceive one another as 'real' people, even though they are connected in the online learning community. Mardziah (2004) defines social presence as the ability of learners to establish their physical and emotional presence. Social presence theory relates to whether the learners feel that they are interacting with real people when they are online (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997), even when the interaction occurs through

the communication technologies (Lombard and Ditton, 1997). Based on this theory, social presence plays an important role in the distance-learning environment.

Learners need to feel the presence of others in the group in addition to being a part of their group to ensure meaningful learning. Through the online learning process, they could build a sense of belonging, social-emotional bonding and good relationships with one another. In other words, social presence would increase learners' involvement, satisfaction and interactions in the distance-learning environment.

Many studies have been conducted on social presence in online forums, but not much has been performed in Malaysia. Krish, Maros and Siti Hamin (2012) noted that Malaysian learners were less open and often wary in stating their opinions due to the nature of their upbringing. Therefore, it is the intention of this study to explore the manifestation of social presence in online forums among the distance learners. This study focuses on the following questions:

1. How do the learners express themselves emotionally in online forums?
2. How do the learners communicate interactively with others using online forums?
3. How do the learners initiate group cohesiveness in online forums?

### **Social Presence Measurement**

This study used a social presence measurement adapted from Rourke et al. (2001). According to those authors, there are three types of communicative responses to measure social presence:

1. **Affective Response**  
Affective response refers to the expression of emotion, feeling and mood (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000). In online interactions, the capacity to express affective response is reduced because the use of body language, countenance and vocal intonations are limited (Rourke et al., 2001). In computer conferencing, affection can be expressed in many ways, such as the

use of emoticons, humour and self-disclosure to others (Kuehn, 1993; Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997).

## 2. Interactive Response

Interactive response refers to when people give their attention and are involved with the interactions (Shanthi and Thayalan, 2011), which include interpersonal encouragement and acceptance of one another. Interactive responses occur when learners reply to their friends' messages, quote the messages directly and refer explicitly to the content of messages.

## 3. Cohesive Response

Cohesive responses are activities that strengthen the commitment to a sense of community. Rourke et al. (2001) defined this category with three indicators: phatics and salutations, vocatives and addressing the group as 'we', 'our' or 'us'. Phatics refer to communications that share feelings of sociability rather than communicating just information or ideas. Vocatives refer to addressing learners by their names. The use of vocatives establishes closer ties between addressers and addressees (Eggs and Slade, 1997). The use of pronouns such as 'we' or 'us' to address group members increases feelings of closeness and association among the participants.

**Table 1** Social presence measurement

Category	Indicators	Definition	Example
Affective	Expression of emotions	Conventional or unconventional expressions of emotion, including repeated punctuation, conspicuous capitalisation and use of emoticons	"I can't stand with it...!!" "Anyone out there?"
	Use of humour	Teasing, cajoling, irony, understatement, satire	"Cheers...! We will look older if we think to hard about so many things."

*continued on next page*

**Table 1** (*continued*)

Category	Indicators	Definition	Example
	Self-disclosure	Sharing life outside of class, or expressing infirmity	"I have a big responsibility to handle as a wife, mom, worker and of course as a part time student."
Interactive	Continuing a thread	Using Reply to continue another's thread	Subject: Re
	Quoting from others' messages	Using the feature to quote the content of the message or using the copy and paste feature on selected messages	"James said that..."
	Referring explicitly to others' messages	Direct references to others' posts	"You have talked about Moore's distinction between ..."
	Asking questions	Learners asking questions to others	"How do I solve this problem?"
	Complimenting expressing appreciation	Praising people or the content of messages	"I really like your explanation."
	Expressing agreement	Expressing agreement with people or their content	"Yeah, I really agree with you."
Cohesive	Vocatives	Addressing someone by name	"I think Sarah is right."
	Addresses or refers to the group using inclusive pronouns	Addressing member of group as 'we,' 'us,' 'our'	"We should do something..."
	Phatics, salutations	Communication which serves a purely social function; salutation, closures	"Hi everyone."

Source: Rourke et al. (2001)

## **Methodology**

A case study approach was used in this qualitative study; a content analysis technique was chosen to analyse the data. The content analysis technique was selected as the primary approach for exploring the manifestation of social presence because it allowed the researchers to determine usage patterns and trends from the online forum responses (Ubon, 2005). This technique has been chosen by many researchers in online learning to examine learners' social presence in online contexts (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000; Rourke et al., 2001).

The five participants involved in the study were selected from 40 learners enrolled in a distance-learning programme in a public university in Malaysia. Cecilia, Jee, Lee, Ong and Wong (not real names) were semester four undergraduates taking the same subject and course. The convenience sampling technique was chosen and utilised due to the willingness, availability, time, location and ease of access for the learners to participate in the study.

Data were collected from the learners' responses in the online forums, which is the Learning Management System (LMS). Distance learners used the online learning tool as their communication medium to interact with lecturers and friends, in addition to the face-to-face learning mode which was held twice in a semester. The researchers used the online medium to collect data because all learners had equal access to the LMS. The learners were required to participate in online forums in the LMS, which contributed 5% to their examination marks. The lecturer posed three questions throughout the semester. Each learner had to respond to each question and was also required to respond to other learners.

The researchers collected and coded all the responses posted by the five participants as the major source of information to explore the manifestation of social presence in the distance-learning environment. Each response from the online forum was reviewed and coded by two coders according to the social presence measurement adapted from Rourke et al. (2001). The coded responses were randomly selected and revised by the second coder. The coders discussed the findings to check the reliability according to the research questions and the indicators in each category. Finally, the coded responses were imported to the ATLAS.ti software for qualitative analysis.

## Findings

The themes in this study fall into three categories: affective, interactive and cohesive. Below are examples of learners' responses in the online forums. The researchers assigned numbers to each coded message according to the number of indicators in the instrument, but the numbers were not ranked.

Examples of online forum and coded messages

**Re: Meaning of Reflection [4]**

**Posted By : CECILIA**

**Reply To : CAROLINE**

(Hi,) [12]

I agree [9] that **the practice of reflection after teaching and learning process is very important for all teachers to assess themselves [5]**

**Re : Re : Forum 1 Answer [4]**

**Posted By : LING**

**Reply To : NOMMEE**

**Hi and 1 Malaysia [12] Nomme [10]. Thank you for your views [8].** Personally, I can say that most of the teachers do not do reflection after teaching and learning process. So, do not be surprised if **we [11] see the teachers only refer to the text books to deliver content or just finish up the syllabus without looking at the acquisition of knowledge and the ability of learners [6].**

*Indicators: [4] Continuing a thread [5] Quoting from others messages [9] Asking questions*

*Indicators: [4] Continuing a thread [6] Referring explicitly to others' messages [8] Complimenting expressing appreciation [10] Vocatives [11] Addresses refers to the group using inclusive pronouns [12] Phatics, salutations*

Of the 202 coded messages, 112 (55.5%) were coded as interactive responses and 90 (44.5%) as cohesive responses. No affective responses were found in the online forum. The following results were categorised and displayed according to each category and indicator.

**Table 2** Frequency of coded messages

CATEGORY	INDICATOR	FREQUENCY
Affective	1. Expression of emotions	0
	2. Use of humour	0
	3. Self-disclosure	0
<b>Total Affective Responses</b>		<b>0</b>
Interactive	4. Continuing a thread	51
	5. Quoting from others' messages	6
	6. Referring explicitly to others' messages	16
	7. Asking questions	5
	8. Complimenting expressing appreciation	9
	9. Expressing agreement	25
<b>Total Interactive Responses</b>		<b>112</b>
Cohesive	10. Vocatives	33
	11. Addresses or refers to the group using inclusive pronouns	13
	12. Phatics, salutations	44
<b>Total Cohesive Responses</b>		<b>90</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>202</b>

The top three indicators most used across the study were 'Continuing a thread' (Interactive Response) followed by 'Phatics and Salutations' (Cohesive Response) and then 'Vocatives' (Cohesive Response). Learners were required to start a new thread to answer the questions posted by the lecturer, and they were also encouraged to reply to their friends' threads and discuss the responses. Learners initiated phatics and salutations by greeting one another and saying thank you at the end of their responses. Learners also addressed one another by mentioning their friends' names, but most of the time they referred to their friends as '*cikgu*' to show their

intimacy with one another. Furthermore, the learners' names would appear automatically when they clicked the 'Reply' button.

*\*[Q1] Question 1/ [Q2] Question 2/ [Q3] Question 3*

### **Interactive Responses**

Learners were found to be interactively responsive in the online forums. One hundred twelve messages were coded as interactive responses.

### **Indicator 4: Continuing a Thread**

Replying to a thread is a basic component in text-based interactions. In this study, the five participants' responses to their friends' threads were counted and then coded under the continuing thread indicator. There were 51 threads replied to by the learners. On average, each learner replied ten times to the three questions posted by the lecturer throughout the semester. See Examples 1 and 2.

Example 1

**Re:** Microteaching [Q2: Cecelia]

Example 2

**Re:** Forum 1 [Q1: Ong]

### **Indicator 5: Quoting Others' Messages**

The participants were also quoting other learners' points of view. This behaviour shows that the learners acknowledged the views given by earlier learners when they agreed or disagreed with the opinions, as shown in Examples 3 and 4.

Example 3

**Reflections can help to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning and also to improve the quality of teaching and learning.** [Q1: Learner A]

**Reflections are not only to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning, but they can also be used to plan,**

**improve or to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the future.** [Q1: Wong]

Example 4

**Reflections are important to be implemented as self-assessments to teachers or to examine their own strengths and weaknesses as well as to ensure the learning objectives are achieved.** [Q1: Learner B]

**I agree that reflections are very important to be implemented by teachers to assess their strengths and weaknesses in teaching.** [Q1: Cecilia]

In these examples, Wong and Cecilia quoted the views given by Learner A and B in order to state their respective points of view.

#### **Indicator 6: Referring Explicitly to Others' Messages**

Findings indicated that a large number of learners in this study referred explicitly to the content of the messages by not quoting them directly, as shown in Examples 5 and 6.

Example 5

Besides, by doing reflections, teachers can change their teaching practices. **They can also review and determine the alternatives for decision making to solve problems in teaching.**

[Q1: Learner C]

Yes, I agree with you. **Reflections can help teachers to see problems in the teaching and learning process from different aspects. Teachers can also identify the source of the problems and what actions can be taken to solve the problems,** and they can know their strengths and weaknesses in teaching. [Q1: Ong]

Example 6

For me, I like to use **demonstration skills, especially when teaching preschool learners** [Q2: Learner D]

**Demonstration skills are suitable for preschool learners.** With demonstrations, learners would be able to see with their eyes... [Q2: Wong]

Ong's and Wong's views were referred to explicitly by Learners C and D by not directly quoting the earlier responses. In doing so, they acknowledged the views given by the earlier learners, which subsequently enabled them to give alternative points of view.

### **Indicator 7: Asking Questions**

Findings indicated that learners in this study did not like to ask questions; only a few questions were coded throughout the analysis. See Examples 7 and 8.

Example 7

**What is your opinion?** [Q2: Jee]

Example 8

**What is the role of reflections in teaching and learning?**

[Q1: Ling]

Learners asked questions to find out what they did not know, to gather information and to request assistance, clarifications or to obtain positive input.

### **Indicator 8: Complimenting and Expressing Appreciations**

The learners were found to express appreciation for their friends' views in the online forums. Therefore, the learners who gave the earlier opinions felt appreciated and would maintain their relationships despite having different points of view. As seen in Examples 9 and 10 below, Ling and Wong said 'Thank You' to the responses given by earlier learners.

Example 9

**Thank you** for your additional views on microteaching. [Q2: Ling]

Example 10

**Thank you** for your opinion [Q3: Wong]

### Indicator 9: Expressing Agreement

The learners supported one another in the online forums. A majority of the learners expressed their agreement with the previous views given by their friends first before giving their own points of view, as shown in Examples 11 and 12.

Example 11

Yes, I **really agree** with your explanations. [Q2: Ong]

Example 12

I **agree** with your opinion, but I want to add some definition about reflection through my reading from a book entitled *Pedagogi II: Pelaksanaan Pengajaran* written by Ee Ah Meng said that reflection is a technique of making careful consideration to all the actions performed by an individual. [Q1: Ling]

The learners used the term ‘I agree’ to indicate that they agreed with the opinions and accepted their friends’ explanations before giving their own points of view.

### Cohesive Responses

The learners were found to be cohesively responsive in the online forums. Ninety messages were coded as cohesive responses.

### Indicator 10: Vocatives

The learners also addressed or referred to their friends by name when they replied to their friends’ threads, as shown in Examples 13 and 14.

Example 13

I strongly agree with **Deng’s** arguments [Q1: Jee]

Example 14

Hi and I Malaysia **Nomme!** [Q1: Ling]

Jee and Ling mentioned their friends’ names, ‘Deng’ and ‘Nomme,’ respectively, to create awareness that they were accepted as part of the

group. In doing so, their relationships became closer as well. Most of the time, however, the learners enjoyed referring to their friends as ‘*cikgu*,’ as all of them were school teachers.

### **Indicator 11: Addressing or Referring to the Group Using Inclusive Pronouns**

Throughout the forums, learners used pronouns such as ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ to address one another, which enhanced the feeling of association and closeness with each other. See Examples 14 and 15.

#### Example 15

Due to the limited time for induction set, **we** have to plan it properly to make sure the learning objectives are achieved.

[Q2: Wong]

#### Example 16

But don't worry; as long as **we** try, he will bless **us**. [Q2: Ling]

### **Indicator 12: Phatics and Salutations**

A large number of the coded messages indicated that learners used greetings such as ‘Hi’ and ‘Hello’ before starting their responses and ‘Goodbye’ at the end their responses, as shown in Examples 17 and 18.

#### Example 17

**Hello and good morning** friends [Q1: Ling]

#### Example 18

**Hi**. [Q1: Jee]

The use of phatics and salutations in the online forums portrayed a friendly mood among the learners and therefore enhanced their social presence.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study revealed the manifestations of social presence among the distance learners in online forums. The document analysis showed that of

the three different categories of social presence, interactive indicators were utilised the most, followed by cohesive indicators; no affective indicators were utilised in this study. In other words, learners were found to be interactively and cohesively responsive rather than affectively responsive. Hughes, Ventura and Dando (2007), Cobb (2009), Shanti and Thayalan (2011) and Lowenthal (2012) reported similar findings in their studies, while Swan (2003) found that affective responses were used most in her study.

In a learning process, learners should have more affective responses, which contribute to the learners' level of motivation and satisfaction towards distance learning courses (Shanthi and Thayalan, 2009; 2011). Throughout this study, the researchers found a bland relationship between the learners, referring to a lack of emotional expressions, feelings and overt moods. Learners seemed not to openly share their problems with one another. Even though they were communicating with one another in the text-based interactions, their body language, countenance expressions and vocal intonations were limited, although affective responses can be expressed in many ways, such as through the use of emoticons, humour and self-disclosures (Kuehn, 1993; Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997).

Many practitioners of online communication advocate the use of member profiles so that members can get to know and learn from one another better (Barab, MaKinster and Scheckler, 2003; Kear, 2010). The learners could set up a virtual community in a way that allows them to get to know one another better. This community could include general introductions, family photos, hobbies, biographies, resumes and other personal data. Social presence in online interactions can be enhanced when learners share their personal information with one another (Shanthi and Thayalan, 2011).

Lecturers should also play a significant role in establishing social presence in distance learning environments. Although the learners are adults, lecturers should more actively monitor the learners' responses. By doing so, the lecturers can clarify issues raised by learners and conclude the discussions by summarising the learners' responses with positive reinforcement and good advice. In his study, Wang (2005) indicated that lecturers should pay more attention to the social and affective dimensions during the design and teaching of online courses rather than focusing on course materials and technology-based templates.

It will be beneficial to conduct further studies using semi-structured interviews to explore in-depth information on the manifestation of social presence and to determine ways of enhancing it to ensure that meaningful learning is achieved. The results from this study can serve as a starting point for further exploration on how the manifestations of social presence in online learning could connect with the real learning environment. This study concludes that having great social presence online would create a warm, collegial and approachable learning environment for distance learners as well as their instructors.

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