



The relative impact of looks, income, warmth, and intelligence on female online dating preferences in Indian Community

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ABSTRACT. This phenomenological study examines the real-life experience of first-time online learners enrolled in a fully online master's program at a private, nonprofit University in Minnesota. Students encompassing different age groups and levels of experience with distance education and that had taken at least two online courses, with some nearing the end of their program, were recruited from various online programs to participate in a survey. A phenomenological examination of the interviews and focus group transcripts yielded comprehensive results in coding the prevalent category themes. The findings helped identify approaches to online education and the opportunities and challenges these participants faced in their online courses. These aspects were divided into themes that further illuminate the participants' real-life experiences. As a result, the analysis revealed the learners' appreciation for the flexibility that online learning brings into their lives. Furthermore, the researcher discovered that the participants were driven to improve their skills through the online learning environment by employing various resources.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has evolved over time and is now transitioning from traditional, face-to-face learning to online modes. With today's technological capabilities, online learning may reach a wider audience and match the effectiveness of face-to-face learning (Caruth and Caruth 2013). As a result, higher education must be prepared to offer online learning in the most effective ways. The expansion of online learning has resulted in increased research, literature, and businesses focused on meeting the demands of a fast-changing learning environment. The shift to online learning takes the classroom experience to an individual's home, expanding an institution's outreach to even the most isolated individuals. Mayadas, Miller, and Sener (2015) observed that the growth of online learning often happens in two stages: the first is the spread of access, and the second is the refinement of its usability.

Technology has been critical to advancements in online learning because it has the potential to enhance the learning experience by streamlining various aspects of a course and integrating online learning components. Power and Vaughan (2010) claim that online learning is ideal for graduate-level material in a master's program, although they acknowledge a dearth of research on the graduate-level population. The experience of master's level students in online learning is a valuable demographic to investigate since it will contribute to a better understanding of student experiences with online learning.

Learners look to instructors for guidance; thus, instructors must translate their pedagogical approaches into the online format to maintain effective learning tactics. Once a course is fully operational, instructors need to explain the requirements and model the behavior they expect from their online students. Instructors may communicate their expectations in several ways, whereas students perceive everything via their own subjective interpretations. Many assumptions can be made about online learning to fill the gaps of misunderstanding; the premises increase because of the numerous approaches that individual instructors take in teaching every course. Previous encounters in the classroom, online or face-to-face, factor into how students experience online learning. Generational differences can also influence how students understand their online classes and ultimately approach the coursework within them.

The two main stages of college or university education are undergraduate and graduate. The only prerequisite for undergraduate programs is a high school diploma or an equivalent, and the student's education consists mainly of major and elective courses. In contrast, graduate studies primarily consist of core courses, elective courses, and research projects. While undergraduate students must take several courses from many disciplines to understand their discipline comprehensively, graduate courses are typically more specialized, advanced, and research oriented. Graduate students are generally older, more experienced, motivated, and self-directed.

Additionally, graduate courses require greater creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking abilities than undergraduates. Typically, graduate courses are shorter, more intensive, and more modular than undergraduate courses and offer a more authentic and varied assessment. In this context, this research aimed to focus on currently enrolled master's students taking online courses for the first time in a program developed by both an instructor and designer, using semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups and examining student perspectives from a selected local university. Initially, the researcher planned to focus uniquely on students who had already chosen online programs by themselves. However, some participants in the study were switched from on-campus to online programs due to the COVID-15 pandemic.

Research assumptions are beyond the control of researchers but include aspects of the study that are integral to its purpose and will benefit from being brought to the forefront of attention. In this study, the researcher assumed that master's level students had distinct experiences, the gender of the students would not affect the outcomes, and participants would respond truthfully without feeling compelled to answer any questions. In the online environment, students can exercise some control over the content and how they interact with it. It was assumed that instructors would provide students with opportunities to experience various aspects of online learning and virtual classrooms.

This study aimed to add to the corpus of knowledge concerning the evolving environment of online learning in higher education. The findings add another layer of insight into how students perceive their online learning experience. Data extracted from the study demonstrated that instructors, program directors, and administrators can use this recently acquired knowledge to modify their methods and understanding of online education. At the same time, instructional designers will be able to position the instructor and course structure toward more engaging aspects of instructional strategy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review on online learning highlights factors influencing the student experience and how online learning is comprehended. The review includes first-time online learners' and master's level students' distinct experiences and aspects of presence and engagement, emotion, culture, constructivism, andragogy, and communities of practices (see Appendix A for further details on the breakdown of the themes and the presence of literature support).

Some of the literature reviews detail the perspectives of instructors (Richardson et al. 201G; VanSickle 2003; Yu and Brandenburg 200G), while much of it details learning from the student perspective (de los Santos and Zanca 2018; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004; Hunte 2012; Çakmak, Çebi, and

Kan 2014; Yu 2014). According to de los Santos and Zanca (2018), students select online options when they meet their needs and add value to their lives. They noted that institutions that provide online opportunities better meet the needs of current and prospective students. Knowing the factors that significantly impact student learning experiences is valuable for students, instructors, administrators, and instructional designers involved in the process (Richardson et al. 201G).

First Time Online Learners

First-time online learners face unique challenges in managing the many aspects of online courses (Yu 2014). Because learning is uniquely experienced and contributed to by both sides in each course, the challenges include critical challenges for teachers and students (Hunte 2012; VanSickle 2003; Yu 2014). First impressions can have a range of effects on students and instructors. Understanding how to use online resources puts students in an excellent position to succeed, but they will also need to feel at ease in their learning community (Hunte 2012). Additionally, first impressions create a precedent for teacher expectations because they demonstrate an instructor's approaches to online teaching and learning (Yu 2014).

Instructors And Online Learning

Richardson et al. (201G) discovered differences in how students learn and demonstrated the benefits of having teachers recognize this and adjust their behavior accordingly. The theory of social constructivism has its roots in Lev Vygotsky's (1578) social development theory; it is based on the premise that interactions with others are essential for knowledge creation and that interactions help students make sense of what is presented. The attitudes and interactions of each participant significantly affect the outcome of online learning. According to Schell and Janicki (2013), an online classroom environment based on a social constructivist paradigm promotes more learning by allowing students to not only make sense of content through interactions with others but also absorb knowledge and continue to deepen understanding on their own. The supportive nature of the environment entails expressing ideas in a community that supports learning, free thinking, and inter-student collaboration (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2001). Perceptions of transactional distance also significantly influence "the interaction of student, teacher, content, interface, and learning environment" (Yilmaz 2017). Rovai (2002) stressed that social presence and transactional distance are the main factors in developing a sense of community and knowledge-sharing behaviors. Çakmak, Çebi, and Kan (2014) asserted that social presence conceptualizes a student's sense of belonging in the online community as their propensity to greet others and use their name when speaking with them or use the phrase "we" when

addressing others in the group.

Interaction may involve how participants present themselves individually and how often they participate. Yilmaz (2017) and Yu (2014) both posited that perceptions of social presence significantly affect how an asynchronous learning community creates connections and ultimately interacts with each other. It is up to the instructor to create opportunities for students to connect (Lohr and Haley 2018). Establishing a social presence is critical early in a student's learning process (Lohr and Haley 2018). According to Richardson et al. (201G), instructors should view their presence as a vital component of the learning being experienced. It establishes expectations and includes engagement and participation. Further, Richardson et al. (201G) noted that instructors sometimes felt constrained by online courses provided by other instructors and wished for greater freedom in providing opportunities to establish and promote their presence in their own ways.

Graduate Level Online Learners

Through a cross-sectional study of math and science students pursuing master's degrees, Lee (2014) discovered that graduate-level online students thrive in an online classroom with structure; they need to feel connected to their learning environment, and they will perform better if they have access to supportive resources. While undergraduate education depends on some level of formal and hierarchical relationship between professors and students, graduate education has a more collaborative and mentoring connection. Being more specialized, it focuses on a specific field or discipline and involves more critical thinking, analysis, and research.

In terms of the factors most connected with student satisfaction in online courses, instructor feedback and communication were ranked the highest. According to Lee's (2014) research, discussion boards were highly significant to graduate students' online learning experiences and sense of fulfillment with online learning. Furthermore, Lee (2014) stated that reaching out to students and establishing opportunities for connection aided students in practicing interaction with one another. These connections were especially critical for students new to online learning, social media, and asynchronous digital interaction.

Andragogy

Adapting to online learning can be difficult for anyone, and one of the most significant challenges is students' failure to recognize and adjust their existing mental models (Merriam and Baumgartner 2007). It is, therefore, "essential to understanding the adult learning experience through the concept of andragogy" (Knowles 1580, 43). Merriam and Baumgartner (2007) illustrated the andragogy adult learning framework. They stated that Knowles (1580) developed the

concept of andragogy to distinguish it from the training people receive before becoming adults, often referred to as pedagogy. To align the learning process, intrinsic motivation and comprehension of the learning process itself are essential.

For a successful online learning experience, instructors must translate their andragogic approaches to the proper format and maintain effective strategies for accomplishing their learning objectives. Following a 2011 review of teacher development of online teaching, Khoo and Cowie (2011) conclude that instructors need to clearly share the objectives of their efforts and explain how things will play out, especially early on when elements of online learning approaches are still being absorbed. Modeling this behavior sets the stage for students and lets them see what may be expected of them.

Perception And Cognition

The role of emotion has been emphasized in students' engagement with learning. Hughes, Ventura, and Dando (2007) provided research that illustrates how a student's emotional state plays a critical role in how they interact with and contribute to the online classroom. They argued that understanding students' emotions would assist instructors in facilitating the learning process and helping students feel connected to their learning community.

In Illeris' (2002) *Three Dimensions of Learning*, cognition, emotion, and society are considered to be at the intersection of learning and life situations. According to Illeris (2002), each learner is unique, and the influences of each dimension have different effects on each person; he asserted that learning hinges on emotional functioning during the learning process. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2008) stated that emotions establish focus and influence both recollection and where individuals' immediate attention is applied. They concluded that emotions significantly impact students' engagement with the content and community of an online course. Pentaraki and Burkholder (2017) similarly examined the relationship that emotions have with behavioral and cognitive engagement, asserting that the role of emotion is underappreciated in current literature and needs further investigation. Considering a combination of feedback and individual and cultural backgrounds is crucial because communication is fundamental to most learning communities.

In *Dynamic Approach to Participation in Community Development*, McClusky (1970) stated that each learner has a set of resources and expectations that influence how the learning process unfolds. The nature of online learning can also benefit students since, in addition to the convenience aspect in terms of time and space, online learning can alleviate anxiety associated with social interaction.

Autonomy—Hierarchical Dynamics

As Yilmaz (2017) posited, different students thrive under different levels of autonomy. Students from diverse backgrounds will have varying levels of power

distance and interpret relationships differently. In a paper summarizing his findings on research in national and organizational cultures, Hofstede (1980) concludes that autonomy can be challenging to assess. Instructors may wish to apply pertinent models to understand students and their backgrounds. From their vantage point in the online learning process, instructors can identify opportunities to modify their approaches on an individual level to meet student needs best. Similarly, Zhang (2013) focused on Chinese students in the US and examined power distance and the influence that power distance has on learning in the online realm. Zhang's (2013) findings demonstrated that students with a substantial power distance learn well in asynchronous settings.

Community Of Practice

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) describe communities of practice as a group that shares a connection to a topic and works together to learn more about it and gain knowledge by interacting with others. A community of practice can take many forms and appear to individuals differently. However, they all share commonalities, such as a focus on knowledge, that foster an environment of support where students may feel more comfortable sharing, asking, and discussing (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002).

The research from Khoo and Cowie (2011) points to the role that authority and responsibility play in the collaborative environment. In designing learning activities, instructors strengthen learning communities by introducing opportunities to spread out the responsibilities for an assignment. According to Khoo and Cowie (2011), understanding communication in the online learning environment helps meet the expectations of each member of the learning community.

Online Learning Environment

Technology plays a significant part in the online learning experience (Hunte 2012; Çakmak, Çebi, and Kan 2014; Lee 2014; Yu 2014). On the surface, online learning offers an appeal through accessibility that brings in students who would otherwise be unwilling or unable to participate, providing an option for isolated people or those with a decline in mobility. One draw to online learning is that students can complete their coursework anytime.

Research from Fayer (2014) showed that communicating with students in a timely manner and offering relevant feedback are the most crucial components of learning in an asynchronous environment. The next most important theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was that of instructor feedback. It shares pertinent information and helps people in the learning community connect with instructors by providing them with another opportunity. Similar to the component of instructor support is a student's confidence in their

instructor's knowledge and ability. This value ranked fourth in Fayer's (2014) research and worked to tie everyone together. According to Fayer (2014), personalized feedback creates connections between students and instructors as well as between students. Feedback feeds into their confidence in the instructor, themselves, and each other.

Summary

The online learning experience is evolving rapidly, and research on designing efficient and effective e-learning methodologies stresses the need for a flexible infrastructure (Parlakkilic 2015). Stakeholders in online learning should understand that flexibility in online learning platforms enhances the ability to scale the system toward future changes.

The research on various aspects of the topic is expanding, but there is still a lack of research that captures master's level students' initial experiences learning online. This study aims to illuminate a subjective area of individual inquiry by evaluating the personal experiences of online students taking their first online courses. Reviewing the online learning literature reveals the general qualities of student experiences and sheds light on individual learners' viewpoints. Each participant's personal snapshot for this study may contribute to a better evaluation of student experiences with online learning. Examining commonalities and individuation may help connect the dots.

METHODOLOGY

The following section outlines the methodology of this research project and details the approach used to identify and record student experiences online. Participants of this study were adult learners currently enrolled in master's level online courses at a private university in Minnesota. They had no prior experience with online learning before starting their master's degree. A qualitative investigation of these students' experiences used a phenomenological approach to analyze their experiences. Interviews and focus groups were used to collect personal experiences. Their meaning was derived from descriptions of real-life events. Transcriptions of interviews and focus groups were analyzed to identify common themes among participants (see Appendix C for interview and focus group guide questions).

Description Of The Research Design

This phenomenological study was designed to understand further how master's level students experience online learning. Based on the work of Hursell and others, Moustakas (1994) explains at length that there is a relationship between

outward perceptions and internal interpretations, demonstrating with examples in various fields such as health care, psychology, and gender studies that a qualitative approach allows for a deeper investigation into the multiple aspects that make up the student experience of engaging with online courses.

The choice of a qualitative approach provided an ideal environment for participants to share their lived experiences authentically. Students participated in a focus group (maximum of five participants) or semi-structured individual interviews with the researcher to discuss their online learning experiences. Their responses included their feelings about their online courses and how they perceive the learning environment. Responses included discussion about interactions, engagement, and communication with other students and their instructors. Participant responses to the researcher's discussion prompts were identified and coded; accordingly, these results were organized into themes and analyzed.

Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological research describes the lived experiences of an individual or a group of people who have encountered a particular phenomenon. It seeks to comprehend how individuals view and interpret reality. According to Moustakas (1954), the goal of phenomenology is to provide a clear framework for comprehending lived reality as it is experienced in each particular case. Key to this idea is the freeing of individuals from the tendency to judge from what is known and interpret through the bias that has come from previous experiences and interpretations. Using a framework of steps to suspend and prevent presuppositions and judgments, the researcher aimed to collect data without imparting the influence that these have on interpretation.

Phenomenological Research In Online Education

Online interaction tends to be more deliberate. By analyzing how these processes play out in online learning through first-person experience, Symeonides and Childs (2015) asserted that researchers learn what students prioritize as most significant and valuable while illustrating how communication can work both for and against an instructor's efforts.

The researcher selected a community of inquiry framework to explore first-time online learners' experience in relation to the quality and effectiveness of their online learning environment; identify the opportunities and challenges that online learning presents for higher education, in particular in graduate student programs; and learn how to improve student's learning outcomes and satisfaction. The framework recommends mapping data collection, analysis, and interpretation and comparing and contrasting results with other research using the same methodology. The framework is founded on a social constructivist paradigm,

which holds that reality is arbitrary and collaboratively formed by its participants. The paradigm does not take into consideration the complexity and diversity of online learners, including their varied cultural origins, preferred learning methods, and motivations.

Aware of its limitations in using valid and reliable instruments and methods, we employed a mixed method to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of our findings. Mixed methods collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data to capture the diversity and richness of students' opinions and activities. Combining quantitative and qualitative investigation elements to address our research topic allowed us to obtain a more comprehensive picture than a single quantitative or qualitative investigation. We outlined a survey strategy to collect.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The survey focused on adult learners enrolled in one of the fifteen fully online master's degree programs at the selected university. At the time of the interview or focus group, each participant was a fully enrolled student in an online master's-level course and had completed at least two online courses in the program. Before beginning their master's programs, none of the participants had taken any online courses. All had been enrolled in the Engage learning management system (LMS), which utilized an online program manager (OPM), and efforts were made to maintain diversity among online programs.

Interviews and focus groups were held until saturation of data was achieved. A total of eighteen students were recruited to partake in the research, and seventeen of them participated. Five students were enrolled in programs in the School of Health and Human Services, seven in the School of Business and Technology, and five in the School of Education.

Sampling Method

The study aimed for maximal variance by purposefully selecting participants from a pool of volunteers enrolled in the university's online programs. Sharing the research proposal with the program directors of online master's degrees was the first step in securing participants.

Invitations to participate were sent via email. Each dean of the university's three graduate schools received information about the research, gave their approval, and agreed to proceed. The Vice Provost for Faculties and Academic Affairs granted permission to survey students.

Sample Size

The sample size for this study was set at twenty-five, with at least five students

from each graduate school participating in the interviews and two different groups of study participants participating in the focus groups. After interviewing nine to twelve students and conducting online or face-to-face focus group talks with two to three sessions of research participants, the researcher expected to reach saturation and ended up recruiting and interviewing eighteen students in total with two separate focus groups, including three to five participants each. Nine of the ten scheduled individual interviews were carried out. The researcher aimed to get a fair amount of data from each respondent and kept individual interviews to 45–60 minutes and focus groups to 50 minutes.

Hierarchical Dynamics

The study's design considered power dynamics between participant and researcher roles, as Karnieli-Miller et al. (2005) advised. Synchronously meeting with each participant on Zoom helped alleviate the issue of power dynamics by allowing all data to be collected from the location of each participant's choosing. In addition, the researcher ensured that participants understood what was happening and what they were doing to help develop trust throughout the process.

Quantitative data on online learners' demographics, preferences, attitudes, and behaviors.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Interviews and focus groups are standard methods for gathering phenomenological data (Moustakas 1994; Felix 2011; Walls and Hall 2018). Each interview or focus group was held in a dedicated Zoom meeting room at a time convenient for the participants. When the time was agreed upon, the participant received an email with a link to the Zoom meeting room and a reminder of the date and time. With the assent of each participant (see Appendix B for the research participation consent form), interviews and focus groups were recorded and stored before being transcribed for a thorough analysis with relevant coding.

Data Analysis Procedures

To conduct an effective phenomenological analysis of the collected data, the researcher followed Moustakas' (1994) detailed steps outline, including a full description of the phenomenon's experience and the significance of the statement in relation to the experience. These steps were further examined to create thematic categories and themes. The software program MAXQDA was used to store and analyze the data and identify key terms and codes.

Instrument

The researcher was the instrument in this study, and interviews and focus groups were the key data-gathering points. As the transcriptions were read, the researcher evaluated his personal feelings to let preconceptions about the individual or topic go and maintained a detailed bridling journal utilized during the data-gathering and analysis phases. The act of bracketing helped put aside the researcher's biases and prejudgments, which Moustakas (1994, 85) compares to "cleaning one's mind."

To ensure consistency, the same protocol and procedures were followed with each participant. Data from participants' demographics were collected and analyzed, including age, gender, online learning experience, occupation, and the online learning program in which they were currently enrolled. Clarification was utilized during the interview to ensure the validity of their statements.

Validity And Reliability

The Oxford English Dictionary (2005) defines validity as "the state of being logical and true." According to Freeman et al. (2007 as referenced in Vagle 2018), the word primarily refers to a study's relevance, confirmability, reliability, and trustworthiness. The interview and focus group questions were created after thoroughly reviewing relevant literature. The recorded individual interviews were triangulated by including members checking the material so that interview subjects could review their transcription. Each participant stakeholder's feedback was considered. Before the interview questions were utilized with participants during interviews or focus groups, they were vetted by a panel of online learning. An objective mindset and reflexive analysis were employed throughout the investigation to account for biases, especially during analysis. The data were open-coded into categories, and a second coder improved reliability by reviewing the transcripts and coding the data. Three subject matter experts assessed the interview questions to improve the validity of the findings and ensure that they met a high-quality standard to support the study's objectives.

Threats To Internal Validity

Pereira (2012) stressed the need to align methodological approaches with the experiential realities that phenomenological researchers attempt to capture. The researcher asked student participants to recall memories from their past and current experiences to understand better the historical context or variables of each student's past and present lives.

Steps protecting the participant were integrated into the design to increase trust, develop respect, and ensure validity (Pereira 2012). For example, participants were informed that they would voluntarily contribute to this project

on their own accord. Refusing to answer a question or leaving the study was an option for participants at any time during the research and for any question. Noteworthy, the ability to participate in this study from the comfort of wherever each individual chose may have helped to lessen the impact that could have arisen from recalling negative experiences. It increased the credibility of the data collected and illuminated the topic more effectively.

Efforts were made to ensure that participants were chosen from various departments and areas of study. Validity was enhanced through member-checking transcripts with each participant. The bracketing of thoughts and judgments and keeping a bridling journal also contributed to validity. The integrity of the data collection also benefited from the interview locations that were decided upon by each participant.

Ethical Issues

The lead researcher ensured that ethical standards were followed during this investigation. Potential issues were identified and taken into account in the research design. A framework for considering these variables ensured that ethical norms were constantly met. The framework defined the key aspects unique to the study and kept them at the forefront of attention. The research took into account his own beliefs and participant safety, privacy, and confidentiality.

Participant Safety

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) process ensured that an external framework of standards was applied to the study to protect participants. The research subjects were verbally reminded of their rights at the beginning of the interview. They reviewed and signed a document highlighting their freedom to leave or refuse to answer any questions during the entire study process. Participant safety was designed into the study as a framework of internal standards. Cultural considerations and timing of meetings with prayer or holidays were accounted for as necessary.

RESULTS

One purpose of the study was to collect data about the learning experiences of students taking online classes for the first time pursuing their master's degree. As outlined in the previous section, each participant was enrolled in online master's degree programs and had not taken online classes before enrolling in their respective master's level programs. Participants enrolled in online programs on the same LMS utilized an OPM for facilitating online courses.

Demographics of the Participants

Three distinct schools of the university offer master's level online programs. These include the School of Health and Human Services, School of Business and Technology, and School of Education. Five students were enrolled in programs offered by the School of Health and Human Services, seven students were enrolled in the School of Business and Technology programs, and five students were enrolled in programs offered by the School of Education.(see Table 1).

Table 1: Background of the Study Participants

Participant	Label	Gender	Age	Graduate School	Type of Degree	Number of Courses
1	Participant A	Female	25–35	Health and Human Services	Master's	2 online classes
2	Participant B	Female	25–35	Health and Human Services	Master's	6 online classes
3	Participant C	Male	25–35	Business and Technology	Master's	4 online classes
4	Participant D	Female	45–55	Education	Master's	11 online classes
5	Participant E	Male	25–35	Business and Technology	Master's	4 online classes
6	Participant F	Male	25–35	Education	Master's	2 online courses
7	Participant G	Male	25–35	Business and Technology	Master's	2 online classes
8	Participant H	Male	35–45	Business and Technology	Master's	10 online classes
5	Participant I	Female	25–35	Health and Human Services	Master's	2 online classes
10	Participant J	Female	25–35	Education	Master's	2 online classes
11	Participant K	Male	25–35	Business and Technology	Master's	4 online classes
12	Participant L	Female	25–35	Health and Human Services	Master's	2 online classes
13	Participant M	Male	25–35	Business and Technology	Master's	8 online classes
14	Participant N	Female	25–35	Education	Master's	2 online classes
15	Participant O	Female	35–45	Health and Human Services	Master's	4 online classes
16	Participant P	Female	45–55	Business and Technology	Master's	12 online classes
17	Participant Q	Female	25–35	Education	Master's	6 online classes

Participants were enrolled in at least two online classes, but many had taken more; some had been enrolled for one to two and a half years. Individual interview participants shared their experiences for 45–60 minutes each, whereas focus group participants contributed an average of 75–90 minutes altogether. The study included nine females and six males.

Presentation of Findings

The findings were articulated around the learners' lived experiences in online programs, themes identified through data analysis, and the benefits and drawbacks of the programs as reported by the learners. The researcher analyzed the qualitative data to find themes that could address the research question and study objectives. To further address the research question, the researcher organized the data into four thematic categories: (1) flexibility and independence in online learning, (2) engagement experiences in online learning, (3) adapting to online learning, and (4) opportunities and challenges faced in online learning.

Each thematic category was addressed in length, along with the underlying

topics grouped under these categories and the verbatim responses of participants. Table 2 shows the breakdown of themes in response to the study's four thematic categories.

Table 2: Themes Addressing All Five Thematic Categories

Thematic Category	Themes	Number of References	Percentage of References
Flexibility and Independence in Online Learning	Acknowledging the flexibility of online learning, leading to improved time management	14	83%
	Missing personal and face-to-face interactions inside the classroom	5	53%
	Developing the ability to learn independently	7	41%
Engagement Experiences with Online Learning	Experiencing limited learning and development due to the lack of personal interactions with instructors and peers	17	100%
	Developing positive and helpful engagements with instructors	14	83%
	Building positive rapport with peers through previous group activities (both face-to-face and online) and maximizing such relationships	14	83%
	Developing the competence to use new online learning technologies	5	53%
Adapting to Online Learning	Learning to adjust and seek alternative ways to search for information and fulfill their academic responsibilities	17	100%
	Appreciating the flexibility and convenience that online learning brings them	15	88%
	Learning to embrace the new set-up and the changes brought by online learning	8	47%
	Feeling anxious during the initial online learning implementation with the lack of familiarity with the new setting	6	35%
Opportunities and Challenges Faced in Online Learning	Learning relevant skills that are applicable in real-life settings	12	71%
	Maximizing today's technological tools to their advantage	11	65%
	Fulfilling both personal and academic responsibilities	7	41%
	Lacking proper internet access	3	18%
	Requiring effective time management skills and abilities	3	18%

Flexibility And Independence In Online Learning

The first thematic category of the research evaluated the participants' flexibility and independence in online learning. The experiences and opinions of the interviewees differed, revealing both positive and negative assessments. Most participants appreciated the flexibility of online learning, which led to better time management. Despite the advantages of online learning, nine participants stated

that they missed the personal and face-to-face interactions that occur in the classroom. Seven individuals also mentioned how their ability to learn independently has improved, making them more responsible and resourceful.

Table 3 illustrates themes from the study's first thematic category. It should be noted that the percentages of references to each theme in the following tables do not equal 100 percent. Some respondents mentioned one or more of the themes but not all of them. Four of the nine in-depth interview participants mentioned that they valued the flexibility of online learning. Flexibility was critical for those who worked, had families, competed in sports, and tried to meet their academic obligations. Furthermore, students were not required to factor in hours of travel time and could stop and start their studies whenever they wanted. They could work at their own pace, at their preferred time, and in their preferred location.

Table 3: Themes Addressing Thematic Category 1

Thematic Category 1	Themes	Number of References	Percentage of References
Flexibility and Independence in Online Learning	Acknowledging the flexibility of online learning, leading to improved time management	14	83%
	Missing personal and face-to-face interactions inside the classroom	5	53%
	Developing the ability to learn independently	7	41%

While the COVID-15 pandemic brought new challenges in people's lives, it also provided opportunities to learn in new ways. Online learning was well designed to fit busy schedules and competing needs. Participants also felt that online learning allowed them to learn at their own pace and complete projects independently. Three participants said it saved them a lot of time (especially commuting time), which was often significant if they came from out of town. Two other participants claimed that they worked full-time; therefore, online classes were their best option. Participants also found a balance between home, work, and study life that they would not have found if they had taken face-to-face classes.

Nine participants mentioned missing traditional or face-to-face classes as the most common negative feedback factor. According to these participants, face-to-face classes were superior for absorbing content, listening, seeing, and then reading, which helped students retain concepts.

Seven interviewed participants mentioned that the online experience helped develop their self-learning skills. While professors and instructors emphasized that students could jump in when they wanted to and ask for help in most parts, participants found themselves taking ownership of their learning goals.

Two participants mentioned that they were able to learn to use an array of online tools. Participants also felt that online learning was self-guided and required a lot of individual work, often with very little interaction from professors

and other students. Online education requires self-motivation, discipline, and determination.

Engagement Experiences With Online Learning

When participants were questioned about their engagement with online learning, they almost uniformly mentioned engagement in terms of their instructors, peers, and technology. The level of experience each online instructor had with teaching online was unknown but may have impacted participant experience. Table 4 contains the breakdown of the themes in response to the second thematic category. The majority of the seventeen participants taking part in the interviews and focus groups felt there needed to be more contact with peers. Participants believed online learning did not allow for the natural connection built during face-to-face classes. Furthermore, in many online classes, the primary mode of communication was responding to limited-scope discussion topics.

Table 4: Themes Addressing Thematic Category 2

Thematic Category 2	Themes	Number of References	Percentage of References
Engagement Experiences with Online Learning	Experiencing limited learning and development due to the lack of personal interactions with instructors and peers	17	100%
	Developing positive and helpful engagements with instructors	14	83%
	Building positive rapport with peers through previous group activities (both face-to-face and online) and maximizing such relationships	14	83%
	Developing the competence to use new online learning technologies	5	53%

However, data research found that discussion posts were one of the most effective means of stimulating discussion, as it helped them with interacting with online classmates and receiving feedback from peers on how the course was going for them and where they needed assistance. According to several participants, the face-to-face and hybrid sessions were more participatory, resulting in more communication and a better learning experience; simple contact can make a difference in students' performance.

Out of the seventeen participants who took part in the in-depth interviews and focus discussion groups, eleven mentioned the positive experience of engagement with instructors. Most participants found their instructors to be positive and flexible in their interactions with students. Many students stated that their instructors were quick to provide the required resources and quality feedback once they asked for help—emailing, messaging, and even calling them to help. Instructors who were able to hold classes over Zoom were able to do a better job

of helping students engage with their course material. Effective online learning necessitates a one-of-a-kind skill for the instructor and student to succeed.

The third theme in the second thematic category involves engagement through group work or peer evaluation and how such activities permitted the participants to have a better online learning experience. Participants who were lucky enough to have taken part in group work or a chance at peer evaluation felt that these activities helped them build a natural rapport or relationship with other participants. They also pointed out that online study allowed for a greater scope and deeper research in the student's preferred areas.

Adapting To Online Learning

Five participants stated that they would choose online learning for the flexibility that it offered them. Moreover, most noted the benefits of online learning, especially during the COVID-15 pandemic. Because they had to take online courses, participants learned to utilize a wide range of online tools such as Black board, Engage, Tableau, Voice Thread, and Flipgrid.

This theme included discussions of how the feelings associated with online technology have been positive. Participants were initially uncertain how they would take to the new way of learning. However, most participants noted that they embraced online learning and saw it as an opportunity to learn, challenge, and grow as they went forward. The relatively easy adaptation to technology, helpful instructors and professors, and the professional atmosphere of the class helped them settle into the new learning system.

Table 5: Themes Addressing Thematic Category 3

Thematic Category 3	Themes	Number of References	Percentage of References
Adapting to Online Learning	Learning to adjust and seek alternative ways to search for information and fulfill their academic responsibilities	17	100%
	Appreciating the flexibility and convenience that online learning brings them	15	88%
	Learning to embrace the new set-up and the changes brought by online learning	8	47%
	Feeling anxious during the initial online learning implementation with the lack of familiarity with the new setting	6	35%

However, as Table 5 indicates, six participants initially reported a sense of anxiety in terms of their online learning process. Participants felt anxious as they entered a new learning system; they wanted to keep their grades up and questioned whether they deserved the grades they were getting. Students also

dealt with self-teaching and interpreting the material independently while lacking face-to-face contact with other participants and their course instructors.

Opportunities And Challenges In Online Learning

When participants were asked about the opportunities and challenges that online learning presented, most noted various opportunities and challenges associated with online learning. Five themes were generated from this analysis of the interviews.

Table G displays themes addressing the final thematic category of the research study. Most interviewed participants highlighted the skills they gained through the online-learning setting. Participants noted how the concepts taught were relevant in the real world. They felt that their online learning and the concepts taught positively contributed to their professional life in terms of communication, data analysis, or digital expertise and helped them find new job opportunities.

Table G: Themes Addressing Thematic Category 4

Thematic Category 4	Themes	Number of References	Percentage of References
Opportunities and Challenges in Online Learning	Learning relevant skills that are applicable in real-life settings	12	71%
	Maximizing today's technological tools to their advantage	11	65%
	Fulfilling both personal and academic responsibilities	7	41%
	Lacking proper internet access	3	18%
	Requiring effective time management skills and abilities	3	18%

Three participants discussed how online learning helped and prepared them for the real world. According to the participants, online learning equipped them with the competence and confidence to complete tasks independently; these skills are crucial in real life and daily encounters.

The second theme in the fourth thematic category references how participants could maximize the benefits of today's technological tools and instruments to their advantage. Six participants felt that online learning provided them with a significant opportunity to learn various online technologies (as mentioned in the previous thematic category). Other participants emphasized how online learning provided an opportunity to self-learn. Students had to learn to adapt to various online technologies, self-interpret their course content, and carry out independent research and study in areas of their liking. Online learning also taught them self-discipline, time management, the importance of hard work, and the unlimited opportunities that online learning brings to students.

Only three participants shared issues related to the lack of access to internet facilities, quality of bandwidth connection, and challenges to connect, particularly during the lockdown period of the pandemic. Another challenge cited by three participants was that online learning required time management skills. The

participants shared that online learning entailed many activities and requirements, making it difficult for some students with other responsibilities.

Summary

Each of the seventeen participants had the opportunity to share their unique experiences in online learning. These experiences led to a variety of thematic categories and themes. These themes were distilled into what was most apparent and structured after each student's overall experience, their perceptions of engagement, the clear opportunities or challenges, and the differences between what each student had experienced in the past and present in terms of face-to-face versus online learning. Every participant stated that they faced challenges in online learning to adjust and seek alternative ways to search for information and fulfill their academic responsibilities. Another aspect that all seventeen participants brought up was the limited learning and development that occurred due to the lack of personal interactions with instructors and peers.

On a more positive note, 88 percent of participants in this study declared that the flexibility of online learning offered a level of convenience that was important in many aspects of their lives. The insights and examples from the seventeen participants provided data that instructors, administrators, instructional designers, and other students can use to address their online learning challenges and opportunities.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTION

The phenomenological analysis revealed that online learning experiences are mainly centered on acknowledging the flexibility of online learning, leading to improved time management while missing personal and face-to-face interactions inside the classroom. We were able to get a more complete picture from our mixed-method research than from a single quantitative or qualitative inquiry. The participants indicated that they had favorable online learning experiences that could be summarized in their appreciation of their enhanced work-life balance as a result of the comfort and convenience of online learning. Although they mentioned limited learning and development experience owing to a lack of personal interactions with instructors and peers in face-to-face interaction, most emphasized that online learning enabled positive and helpful engagements with instructors and taught them how they could maximize their past relationships and connections with their peers.

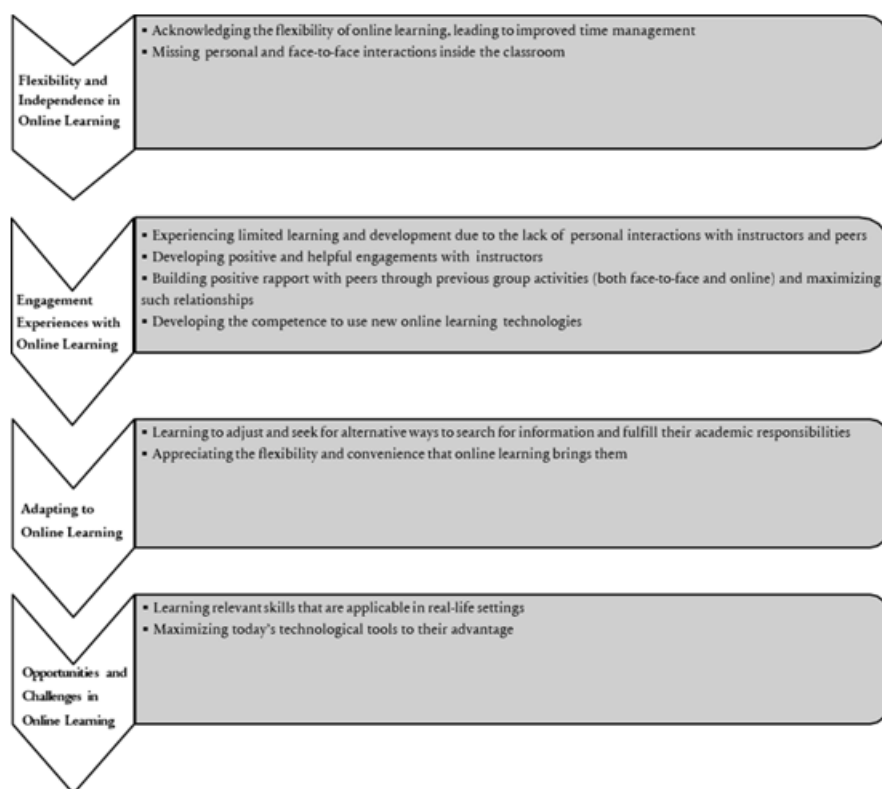


Figure 1: Final Study Themes

Themes in the second thematic area revealed that participants placed a high value on personal and online connections with their peers, stating that such interactions aided them in meeting their academic goals and expectations. Participants were also asked about their experiences with face-to-face versus online learning. The majority mentioned how they learned to adapt and explore alternate ways to search for information and meet their academic responsibilities. They learned to be more resourceful in accessing and gaining knowledge about their subjects and courses. Eventually, several participants acknowledged that they had developed the competence to use new online learning technologies and emphasized that they learned how to use today's digital tools to their advantage. Figure 1 depicts a breakdown of the primary themes identified through phenomenological analysis of the interviews based on the study's four thematic categories. specialists.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS IN RELATION TO THE LITERATURE

Recommendations For Future Study

Explanatory logic tries to find the best explanation for a given observation. To detect patterns and trends based on the survey we performed among graduate

students, we used abductive reasoning to analyze our findings. We evaluated the results based on the data that was available. As a result, we were able to examine and validate our hypotheses with a modicum of precision, clarity, and thoroughness.

Alternative strategies outside the purview of this article include conducting a mixed- methods study using a variety of qualitative methodologies, such as grounded theory, or combining phenomenology and grounded theory in a more extensive study on graduate and undergraduate online students. They might make it easier to comprehend how students, teachers, and other participants in online learning perceive and experience things. Further insights and suggestions on the topic under study could be drawn from other findings.

Quantitative methodology may open a larger investigation of the academic body and statistical studies of specific experiences relating to thematic groups or themes. Future studies may examine the diverse experiences of students from other age groups or academic programs. Based on this, quantitative analysis and testing would show statistical inconsistencies that might not have been seen in a survey of graduate students exclusively.

Another suggestion is to investigate the distinctive experiences of online students learning in courses not designed in their native tongue. Examining how online learning provides opportunities or challenges to this group of students would be beneficial.

Our study supported Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, predicated on the idea that social interactions are crucial for knowledge formation. Later, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) emphasized that an online learning environment based on the social constructivist paradigm encourages more learning by allowing students to both take in information and continue to develop their understanding on their own.

Importantly, their research supports and strengthens the conclusions of Richardson et al. (2016) and Redmond et al. (2018), which suggested that teachers should consider their presence to be an essential part of the learning process. Instructor feedback and communication were regarded as the two aspects most frequently associated with the responses that we obtained from the individuals we surveyed.

The information we gathered from our in-depth survey by highlighting the perceptions and wishes of the students will add to the body of knowledge available to researchers and all investigating this dynamic learning environment due to the fast-changing nature of the technology being employed. As a result, this report suggests that future researchers may want to expand their research on the lived experiences of various types of learners, educators, and other stakeholders in online learning. Their findings will expand the literature on this topic based on primary users' perceptions and actual experiences. By focusing on specific categories of learners and educators, the literature may provide more targeted data that can assist instructors in determining how to manage their online

classrooms best. It will impact how they relate to the material, communicate with their students, and provide the best tools and resources to the students. Meanwhile, the learners' views and experiences may provide up-to-date information about their needs, preferences, and requirements. The needs of students and the learning environments are fluid, and these ever-changing needs and capabilities are well worth being regularly reevaluated to benefit the quality of learning and enhance the learners' development and achievement.

Essence Of The Study

The lived experience of online learning is significantly impacted by student attitudes and life circumstances aligned with how their online courses are developed and taught. Students' attitude toward online education substantially influences how they experience online classes. It is the culmination of past and present experiences that influence current attitudes.

The analysis of these experiences uncovered a critical element related to the students and their interpretations of online learning. It showed that online learning has the potential to provide more flexibility and independence during the learning process than traditional methods and create an environment where students may participate constructively if properly guided to co-opt this new environment.

All of the highlighted variables align to create the online learning experience of each class and how each student ultimately experiences it. Considering each aspect will allow all stakeholders to put forth their efforts in the most appropriate way, and it will also promote a learning experience that unfolds for students in a more optimized manner.

CONCLUSION

This survey successfully generated relevant themes that specifically address the online experience of master's students at a private institution. From the phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the survey substantiated students' appreciation of the flexibility of online learning. Another significant finding was the importance of interaction and personal relationships for the students in their learning process. Selecting a mixed method of inquiry for phenomenological research and creating a survey to allow the collection of quantitative and qualitative data on the online learners' demographics, preferences, attitudes, and behaviors performed exceptionally well in gaining access to meaningful information for our research.

Due to the onset of the pandemic, some students participating in this study enrolled in face-to-face classes and were moved into fully online learning environments. It created a unique subset of participants that illustrated how the benefits and drawbacks of online learning impacted both their lives and

preferences. Although some preferred face-to-face learning, this allowed them to experience the online approach and helped shape their perspectives toward this methodology. This research uncovered how these attitudes could change toward online learning and that, although some students prefer face-to-face learning, experiencing the online approach helped them better understand themselves and the learning process. Through online learning, student participants shared that they were able to activate their resourcefulness and adapt to a new environment by applying creative ways to meet their online needs and requirements. They also realized the value of online learning with its applicability to the different realities of the world, real-life settings, and lived experiences.

The researcher discovered confirmation that the selection of a graduate level of education—promoting critical thinking, analysis, and research abilities—was instrumental in the survey’s implementation. Additionally, graduate education’s collaborative and mentoring nature allowed for a direct proactive conversation between the investigator and the students. The results may not have been as clearly validated in an undergraduate educational environment due to the more formal and hierarchical relationship between professors and students. While representative of only a segment of the larger educational landscape, the information in this study is a direct encouragement to continue addressing the concerns that some people still have about this method of knowledge transfer. The survey results may help improve infrastructure, create a more motivating learning environment, and structure courses more effectively.

The seating purpose of this project was to help stakeholders better understand the changing aspects of online classes and student learning. The researcher hopes that the themes can serve as answers, recommendations, and guides that researchers, scholars, and stakeholders can use to enhance online students’ learning experiences and quality of education. Further, aside from the students, the results could assist the instructors in comprehending the gravity of their roles in the online learning process and influence the eventual outcomes of their efforts.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX A

Breakdown of Themes and the Presence of Literature Support

Thematic Category	Themes	Supported by the Literature (Including the Researchers' Names)
Flexibility and Independence in Online Learning	Acknowledging the flexibility of online learning, leading to improved time management	(<u>Parlakkilic</u> 2015; <u>Andrews and Tynan</u> 2012; <u>Berry and Hughes</u> 2015)
	Missing personal and face-to-face interactions inside the classroom	(<u>Su et al.</u> 2005)
	Developing the ability to learn independently	(<u>Kim et al.</u> 2014; <u>Bączek et al.</u> 2021)
Engagement Experiences with Online Learning	Experiencing limited learning and development due to the lack of personal interactions with instructors and peers	(<u>Kear et al.</u> 201G; <u>Vygotsky</u> 1578; <u>Redmond et al.</u> 2018)
	Developing positive and helpful engagements with instructors	(<u>Kear et al.</u> 201G; <u>Lohr and Haley</u> 2018; <u>Vygotsky</u> 1578)
	Building positive rapport with peers through previous group activities (both face-to-face and online) and maximizing such relationships	(<u>Vygotsky</u> 1578)
	Developing the competence to use new online learning technologies	(<u>Andrews and Tynan</u> 2012)
Adapting to Online Learning	Learning to adjust and seek alternative ways to search for information and fulfill their academic responsibilities	(<u>Andrews and Tynan</u> 2012; <u>Hunte</u> 2012; <u>Çakmak, Cebi, and Kan</u> 2014)
	Appreciating the flexibility and convenience that online learning brings them	(<u>Parlakkilic</u> 2015; <u>Berry and Hughes</u> 2015)
Opportunities and Challenges Faced in Online Learning	Learning relevant skills that are applicable in real-life settings	(<u>Schell and Janicki</u> 2013)
	Maximizing today's technological tools to their advantage	(<u>Parlakkilic</u> 2015)

APPENDIX B

Research Participation Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study about the experiences of engaging with your online courses. This research study is being conducted by Charles Eltona, under the supervision of Dr. Amanuel Teklemariam, Ed.D., Associate Professor. The study will be used to fulfill a requirement for completion of a degree in Doctor of Education at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

What is this study about?

The purpose of this research study is to examine student experiences in online learning. A Phenomenological Study of First Time Online Learners at the Graduate Level at a Private University in Minnesota. To accomplish this, students that are enrolled in an online program and have taken more than two courses are being asked to participate in this study.

Why am I being asked to participate in this study?

You are being asked to participate because you are enrolled in an online Master's program at this University.

What will I be asked to do if I participate?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview or focus group through Zoom, which can be accessed through a smartphone or computer. The interview or focus group will ask you about your experiences with your online courses. The questions will be open-ended and will relate to the online learning experience.

What are the risks and the benefits of participating in this study?

Participation in this study does not involve risks beyond those associated with normal day- to-day living. You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may contribute information that will support and enhance the relationships of future leaders by understanding online learning and the experiences of students. Risks may include the uncomfortable feelings that may arise from reflecting upon past learning experiences and the relationships that were formed with others. This may also be a benefit, as reflecting upon past experiences may forge a deeper understanding of what took place and an appreciation for this process.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study? Are there any costs to participate? Participation in this study will not cost you anything, except for your time, and you will not be compensated to be in this study.

What kind of information about me will be collected, and what will happen to that information?

The data collected will be the responses from the interview that will be audio recorded and later transcribed for research purposes.

I give my consent to have this interview recorded:

Signature of Participant:

Pseudonyms for both participants and institutions will be used to keep confidentiality. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant or an institution. Research records will be stored securely, and only researchers will have access to the records. The original data will be destroyed five years after the study has been completed.

What if I do not want to participate in this study?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. Also, during the interview, you do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer.

Will I find out about the results of this study?

If so desired, the final results of this study will be shared with participants and institutions. Once the study is completed the results will be sent electronically to any participant wishing to receive a copy.

Who do I contact if I have concerns or questions?

Please review this consent form carefully before making a decision about whether or not to participate in the research study. We will be happy to answer any questions you may have about this study or your participation in it. If you have further questions, you may contact the researcher. You may also contact the program director. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University SGPP Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Statement of Consent: I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature indicates

that I have received a copy of this consent form and consent to participation in this study. Print the Name of the Participant:

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Printed Name of the Principal Investigator:

Signature of Investigator:

Date:

Participant, please make sure to in regards to sign "page two" of this document to give consent for the audio recording of the interview.

APPENDIX C

Interview and Focus Group Guide Questions

Participant's Label:

Date:

Age Range:

Gender:

Amount of experience with online learning:

Occupation:

Online Program Enrolled In:

Interview Questions

1. What has your experience been like in the online learning approach?

Possible probing questions:

- Did you have experience with online learning before graduate school?
- Would you say your experiences have been positive or negative?

2. How has the online learning experience made you feel?

Possible probing questions:

- Do you feel that you engage with the material/contents of the lesson in an online setting?
- Describe your feeling been engaged with classmates,
- instructors, and the technology used.

3. What challenges or opportunities does online learning provide for you in pursuit of your master's degree?

Possible probing questions:

- How were you prepared for these challenges?
- What may have helped you face these challenges to online learning?

4. Can you describe your experiences with your peers and instructors in online learning? How have you connected with your peers during online courses?

5. Can you share a memorable experience?

Possible probing questions:

- Have you felt more engaged with your peers in online learning or face-to-face?

- How about with your instructors? What do you prefer, online or face-to-face? Why do you suppose this is?

6. How have the learning experiences played out for you in your online learning environments?

Possible probing questions:

- How did you engage with the learning materials?

- How did you feel what you have learned is preparing you for the job market effectively?

7. Is there anything else you can add about your online learning experience that we did not talk about at all today?

Possible probing questions:

- Do you recommend online learning to others that may be considering this approach?

- Can you tell me why you feel this way?