

## Latino/a cultural perspectives of social presence: a case study

Courtney Plotts\*

Southeastern University, Florida, USA

### KEYWORDS

Latino/a students  
Online learning  
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### ABSTRACT

Many Latino/a students select online learning as a viable option for completing a college degree. Yet, Latino/a perspectives regarding online social presence is unknown. This study explored Latino/a students' perceptions of social presence in online courses as related to their culture perspectives of interpersonal communication, values, norms and social behavior. Data collection semi-structured interviews. Interview recordings were transcribed. Relevant themes emerged. The findings of this study showed that participants used culturally specific attributes to build, create, and maintain social presence in the online learning environments. Further research is needed to understand the extent of cultural influences on building social presence.

### Introduction

Social presence is a psychological construct associated with authenticity, caring, communication, and socialization found in online environments (Garrison, Archer, & Anderson, 2000; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Short, Williams, Christie, 1976). Culture influences social presence (Houtman, Makos, & Meacock, 2014). One factor of culture is ethnicity (Jayatilleke & Gunawardena, 2014). Written and spoken language are conduits of culture (Luyt, 2013). Ethnic groups are "a group of people sharing the same inclination or vantage point when experiencing the construction or deconstruction of a social or psychological experience" (Gingrich & Smith, 2014, p. 104). Additionally, interpersonal communication (Jayatilleke & Gunawardena, 2014), values (Jayatilleke & Gunawardena, 2014), cultural norms (Wright, 2015), self-identity (Altugan, 2015; Van de Vijver, Blommaert, Gkoumasi, & Stogianni, 2015), and social behavior (Jayatilleke & Gunawardena, 2014), vary among ethnicities residing in the same county or belonging to the same ethnic group (Gingrich & Smith, 2014).

Cultural inclusivity creates a sense of community and belongingness among different ethnic groups (Hoshiar, Dunlap, Li, & Friedel, 2014), while cultural exclusivity leads to feelings of isolation and depression (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). Cultural belongingness is associated with academic achievement (Jury, Smedding, Court, & Darnon, 2014). Yet cultural aspects of social presence from a Latino/a cultural perspective have been all but explored. Lastly, social presence is a conduit used to acculturate in online spaces (Brailias et al., 2015).

### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore Latino/a perceptions of social presence in online courses as related to Latino/a culture perceptions of cultural values. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and examine students' perceptions and experiences with social

\* Corresponding author. E-mail address: courtneyplottspd@gmail.com

presence from a Latino/a cultural perspective. Student responses would serve as implications for faculty in order to support diversity and student success in online environments.

Q1. How do Latino/a students use cultural values to experiences social presence in the online courses?

Q2. How do Latino/a students use social behavior to experience social presence online courses?

This study's findings and discussion will assist educators and other stakeholders in understanding strategies of student engagement that can address issues of diversity and student retention issues in online learning.

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## Literature Review

Acculturation is the psychological and cultural change occurring when two or more ethnic groups engage in sustained contact with one another (Capielo, Delgado-Romero, & Stewart, 2015). The process of acculturation may influence creating social presence that is recognizable to diverse ethnic groups. Members of ethnic minority groups frequently experience acculturation (Badea, Er-rafiy, Chekroun, Legál, & Gosling, 2013). Acculturation is associated with the academic and social success of Latino/a students (Aguinga & Gloria, 2015; Carss Tamata, & Beryl, 2015; Crisp et al., 2015; Petty, 2014). Successful experiences of acculturation for Latino/a students includes recognition and inclusion of Latino/a cultural and ethnic attributes within teaching and learning process (Booker, Merriweather, & Campbell-Whatley, 2015). Additionally, acculturation influences the collaborative learning experiences in online environments (Brailas, Koskinas, Dafermos, & Alexias, 2015).

To understand the experience of acculturation, the difference between ethnic culture of origin and ethnic host culture (Badea et al., 2013) must be explained. The culture of origin refers to ethnic cultures and experiences occurring from birth until the point of exposure to the host culture (Benadallah & Jlibert, 2013). The host culture is a novel culture consisting of new ethnic groups and new values, beliefs, and norms often differing vastly from the culture of origin (Benadallah & Jlibert, 2013). Acculturation can occur directly or indirectly (López-Rodríguez & Zagefka, 2015; Park, Song, & Lee, 2014). Direct acculturation includes direct social connectivity and interaction with one or more individuals from a different ethnic group (López-Rodríguez & Zagefka, 2015). Indirect acculturation is the exposure to external attributes within an environment associated with the culture (Park et al., 2014). Examples include mediums like social media and video media (Park et al., 2014). Indirect and direct acculturation can occur simultaneously or separately (Park et al., 2014).

Individuals face barriers to the acculturative process (Aguinga & Gloria, 2015). These barriers occur because of a cultural disconnect between the culture of origin and the host culture (Benabdallah & Joilbert, 2013). Perceptions and attitudes regarding the new culture and resistance to changing cultural norms act as barriers to the acculturation process (Booker et al., 2015). These barriers make it significantly more difficult for individuals to acculturate (Brailas et al., 2015). The online learning environment presents many of the same barriers to Latino/a students who attempt acculturation (Johnson & Cuellar-Mejia, 2014). Researchers applied this concept to online teaching and learning experiences (Anathanarayanan, 2014).

The first barrier to acculturation in the classroom is the lack of cultural competence among faculty members (Booker et al., 2015). Faculty must recognize and validate various ethnic cultures within the learning environment (Aronson & Laughter, 2015), and use socialization and collaborative learning experiences (Fraise & Brooks, 2015), to build successful learning outcomes. However, Soper and Ukot (2016), noted that cultural competency is not developed automatically but through consistent and long-standing social interactions between different ethnic groups. In order for one to acculturate within a learning environment successfully, the instructor must possess the ability to recognize cultural attributes and disconnects between the host culture, cultural of origin, and academic culture. Culturally responsive teaching practices were associated with minimizing faculty resistance to traditional cultural training experiences and improving positive psychological and academic outcomes of Latino/a learners (Booker et al., 2015).

The second of these barriers is the limited consideration for multicultural teaching and learning perspectives (Booker et al., 2015). The limited levels of cultural competency among faculty create barriers to acculturation because Latino/a students are not able to recognize cultural similarities within the learning environment which allow them to explore collaborative or contextual learning experiences (Booker et al., 2015; Johnson-Ahorlu & Cuellar, 2014) thus, creating a void in culturally relevant materials and learning experiences.

The third barrier is faculty resistance to cultural training (Booker et al., 2015). Faculty members were found to demonstrate continual resistance to addressing ethnocentric constructs related to teaching and learning practices (Shelton & Barns, 2015). Yet, cultural competency eases acculturation for diverse populations (Booker et al., 2015). Culturally competent faculty members provided significantly more socio-cultural cues required for socialization and acculturation (Booker et al., 2015). Online instructors need to increase cultural competency training experiences significantly to include ethnic consideration in online learning teaching practices (Dzumbinski, 2014) because these experiences increase positive academic and psychological outcomes

for ethnically diverse student populations (Kennedy Wheeler, & Bennett, 2014). However, many faculty are resistant to acknowledge the need for cultural competency training (Booker et al., 2015; Shelton & Barns, 2016) thus leaving a deficit in creating culturally relevant learning experiences for Latino/a students.

The fourth barrier to acculturation is writing proficiency (Luyt, 2013). The online learning environment is associated with its own cultural attributes (Gaytan, 2013). Online learning experiences include a culture that places significant value on one's literacy levels and writing ability (Luyt, 2013). This includes proper syntax, grammar, and sentence structure (Luyt, 2013). Latino/a students often struggle with proficiency in both literacy and written language (Johnson-Ahorlu & Cuella & 2013). These deficits make acculturation in online learning significantly more difficult because online learning and socialization requires high levels of literacy and writing proficiency in order to be successful (Luyt, 2013). This may result in confusion for Latino/a students when attempting to understand participation requirements, engage in communication dialogue, or access online learning and social presence. Luyt (2013) suggests that written and spoken forms of communication serve as a tool of power to marginalize students in online environments.

This occurs because individuals possessing high levels of writing proficiency use it as a tool to exclude other points of view that do not align with their socio-cultural attributes (Luyt, 2013). Moreover, Luyt (2013) posited that many Latino/a students require literacy and writing remediation compared to their European counterparts and are unable to present written communication to the expectations of the European American academic framework. Thus, this creates a tool that limits paths to acculturation (Luyt, 2013) because the written communication is a conduit of socialization required for online acculturation (Brailas et al., 2015).

A fifth barrier to acculturation in online courses is time. Acculturation occurs over extensive periods of time (Bai, 2016). Many online courses are designed with five, six, and eight week durations (Freeman, 2015) possibly making full acculturation in the online learning environment, as well as effective collaboration, significantly more challenging because individuals of different ethnic minority groups require significant amounts of time to acculturate (Fialkowski, Ettienne, Shvetsov, Rivera, Van Loan, Savaino, & Boushey, 2015). Time limits may force students to attempt to acculturate when they are not ready to do so.

The final barrier to acculturation is one's ability to access to traditional types of student services when completing online courses (Barr, 2014). Multiple researchers have found interventions associated with student service departments are significant factors in the academic success of Latino/a students (Barr, 2014; Ecklund, 2013) 2014; Stebleton et al., 2014). These services include mentoring from individuals with similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Ecklund, 2013), culturally relevant clubs and events (Ecklund, 2013; Stebleton et al., 2014), and mental health services (Stebleton et al., 2014). Additionally, Latino/a students have benefited from such services because they provide pathways to social learning (Jenkins et al., 2013), student retention, and mentoring (Eckland, 2013). However, many of these services are not available in online learning environments (Barr, 2014). Online learning environments do not possess the infrastructure to provide high quality student service experiences in an online environment that will lead to positive outcomes (Zhao, Sullivan, Mellenius, 2014). The absence of infrastructure significantly reduces one's ability to acculturate (Barr, 2014) because it limits the social exchanges of student outreach (Barr, 2014). Furthermore, Barr (2014) posited that online instructors needed to address the psycho-cultural aspects of student life in online environments because of the deficit in student services available in online environments.

Theoretically, the phenomenon of social presence should assist with decreasing acculturative stress because researchers have found that social support and a sense of caring online environments has positive psychological outcomes for students (Plante & Asselin, 2014). However, there are studies that suggest that social presence may contribute to increasing acculturative stress in online learning experiences (Stepanyan et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2014). Because Luyt (2013) suggests that written language via interpersonal communication is often a tool to marginalize individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds the construction and use of language associated with online expectations of building and attaining social presence may place Latino/a students a significant academic and psychological disadvantage to experience successes in online learning.

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## Methodology

Qualitative research methodology was used for this study. This qualitative case study was used to explore Latino/a perceptions of social presence via social behavior and culture norms. Previous researchers of social presence included qualitative inquiry, but none have specifically focused on Latino/a cultural perspectives. A case study design aligns with the research questions in this study and fulfilled the purpose of this research. Participants were recruited from a college in the Northeast part of the United States. Seven (7) students were identified and selected for this study. Participants completed the Phinney's (1992) Multiple Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM). Those who scored between 3.0-4.0, which reflected a high level of Latino/a ethnic identity and had successfully completed one or more online courses were selected to completed an interview. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from participants about their perceptions of social presence through the lens of Latino/a culture. Participants were interviewed. Recordings of those interviews were transcribed and coded for meaning and themes.

## Findings

The major findings from this study will be presented in this section, followed by a discussion of each finding. Participants provided significant insight into culturally relevant factors that influence their ability to perceive and build social presence using Latino/a cultural lens.

Table 1

*Themes identified from semi-structured interviews*

Research Questions	Major Themes	Sub-Themes
<b>How do Latino/a students' perceptions of cultural norms to perceive experience social presence in online courses?</b>	Violation of cultural norms negatively influences communication with online instructors and mental health of and Latino/a students.	Anxiety Guilt Delay
<b>What are Latino/a students' perceptions of social behavior to experience social presence online courses?</b>	Cultural norms and values influence discussion response selection and purpose.	Translation Motivation Altruism

## Discussion and Conclusion

According to Albeg and Castro-Olivo (2014) Latino/a students experience higher levels of depression and anxiety than their peers. Anxiety and depression begins in middle school (Albeg & Castro, 2014) continues through college (Menon & Harter, 2012). This is often associated with acculturation experiences. The same true for participants in this study who reflected on their online experiences. Latino/a cultural norms differ from the norms associated with online learning experiences (Castillo et al., 2015).

### **Violation of cultural norms negatively influences communication with online instructors and mental health of Latino/a students**

Participants reported various obligations that did not allow for scheduling that aligned with meaningful communication and connection with online instructors. Participants used words like "hectic" "long" "overnight" and "crazy" to describe management of all their obligations (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes & Klingsmith, 2014). Moreover, participants struggled to understand the cultural appropriateness of "after hours" communication with online instructors. Many participants noted that instructors' written correspondence included statements such as "email me anytime" or "don't hesitate to reach out". However, this did not seem appropriate in the cultural norms of Latino/a students. Sending emails late at night or after hours produced worry and concern for Latino/a participants. Participants reported that late communication may violate cultural norms (Sollitto, Johnson, & Meyers, 2013). A Latina participant reported waves of anxiety while waiting for the instructor's response while others sited additional concerns:

*Because I really felt anxious to write the email to them because I was worried it was going to wake them up or something. Because I thought to myself, maybe they are asleep now or maybe it is their resting time. But, I really need to get this done and my question answered. Latina 2.*

*My schedule is so hectic, I work on my school work late at night. People probably think I wait until the last minute to do stuff. That is just when my house is quiet. Latino Male, 3.*

All participants reported time of communication as a potential concern completing assignments. Discussions around time of correspondence led to agitation and frustration for participants. Additionally, six out of seven Latino/a saddened when discussing the limited access to their instructor. Participants perceived that face-to-face settings had more instructor access. Furthermore, participants added that due to the additional obligation in their lives (Jenkins et al., 2013) their counterparts had more immediate access to online instructors because it was perceived some peers had more leisure time. Moreover, five of the seven participants reported that instructors seemed to only care about the time it took to complete their work in the online course and

not any of the other factors that were in their lives that sometimes prevented the completion of work. Additionally, Latino/a participants reported this as a potential concern when completing assignments around their work schedules and family life (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014).

#### **Cultural norms and values influence discussion response selection and purpose**

Social behaviors vary across culture (Freeman & Huang, 2014). Latino/a participants reported specific patterns of social behavior. All seven Latino/a participants reported that helping others in the forum through the use of the Spanish language was something that connected them to other people of the same ethnic origin. The participants reported that their own culture supported this behavior. More specifically, participants felt obligated to help women who they perceived to have had a language barrier. Participants reported their experience with their own mothers' immigration and acculturation experiences were the main factor that supported this type of out-reach. This finding was supported by the research of Freeman and & Huang (2014), that suggested that diversity was a strength of collaboration and necessary for successful collaborative experiences for online and face-to-face learning experiences. More specifically, participants highlighted their mothers' experiences included barriers to spoken and written language. Additionally, Latino/a participants socialized and supported students who returned to school because of these experiences:

*In my class, we had discussions every week so we talked to teacher. But we were forced to put pictures too; so, you could tell who it was. Also, my university had other universities with it so their students were also allowed to do online. A lot of them that were online were older Hispanics and you could tell by the way they write that it wasn't proper English. Latina 2.*

*So, I would respond to them because I was like hey... you are trying...Because I felt bad because other people wouldn't reply to them and you had to reply so, I thought of my mom. So, because of my mom I know what that struggle looks like. So, I was like yes.... you are trying..... so I would try to be their motivational person and respond to them. Latina, 4.*

*Every discussion had your picture and then it had small... so I would go through and see who didn't have reply's. Most of the people who came from the community program did not have responses. If I found the one's that did not have responses, I would go through and boost them with motivation a little bit because those people are more familiar to me. They reminded me of my mom and my abuelita. Latino, 3.*

*Like instructors still don't get it. Like I have to help my mom. She has done so much for me. Like this semester she needed my help with money. So I helped her. I gave her 500.00 dollars because she was short on bills. If my mom was in an online class, I would hope that the teacher would understand and help her out with her work and her deadlines. She would really probably struggle with learning and work. Latino male, 5.*

Moreover, Latino/a participants reported they did not often trust the process of online learning or their relationship with the instructor because of the lack of face-to-face interaction. All but one of the participants met the online instructor face-to-face prior to taking the course. Although most participants would have preferred to meet the instructor it did not prevent them from signing up for or being successful in their online learning experiences.

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### **Limitations**

There were limitations in this research study influenced study outcomes. For instance, this study occurred at one college located in the Northeastern part of the United States. This study did not include any other colleges and or universities. Additionally, regional and local culture may have influenced participants' responses differently when compared to similar participants in a different geographical region of the United States. Furthermore, none of the faculty members were reported to be bilingual in Spanish. It is unknown how participant responses would vary if the instructor was able to provide written and verbal interpersonal communication in Spanish.

Another limitation was the sample size. Although Yin (2010), suggested that qualitative sample size should remain small to find meaning in participant experiences, small population samples may not capture a wide enough range of the cultural norms and attributes associated with social presence and its related psychological factors. This study did not focus on the ethnic points of view of ethnic groups found within the Latino culture. Recommendations for future study includes replication of this study ethnic groups within the Latino/a ethnic groups including individuals that derive from other ethnic groups within the Latino culture.

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### **Conclusion**

Diversity is an important factor in higher education culture. Yet, diversity in online spaces and its implications is often ignored. Acculturation is a barrier to successful online learning experiences. Yet, Latino/a cultural perspectives were formerly unknown. This research demonstrated that Latino/a culture influences online motivations and behaviors used to build social presence. Understanding other aspects of Latino/a culture and its use to perceive social presence may be a critical factor in student success in online spaces. Participants' responses can help online stakeholders understand cultural dimensions

of social presence that are often ignored. Understanding the cultural framework of social presence from the Latino/a perspective can contribute to the quality of online learning experiences for Latino/a students attending school in the United States.

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