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STUDENT PERCEPTION OF FACULTY'S SOCIAL PRESENCE IN ONLINE
HEALTH SCIENCE COURSES

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MASTER OF SCIENCE IN NURSING

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We hereby approve this thesis

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For the School of Nursing

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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FACULTY'S SOCIAL PRESENCE IN ONLINE
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SAMANTHA J. MENCINI

ABSTRACT

With continued surges in enrollment in the various online health science programs, especially nursing programs, there is a great need for additional research to be conducted regarding how students perceive their professors' social presence in an online learning environment through the use of Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs). The objectives of this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study were to: 1) illustrate how students perceive their professors' social presence as used in various types of CMCs; 2) identify emotions which the students have experienced in response to their professor's CMCs; 3) unveil common themes regarding student perception of their professors' social presence; and 4) identify ways for professors to increase their social presence in the online learning environment per the recommendations of the students. Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) definition of *social presence* was provided to participants so they would understand the context of this term throughout the interview process. Colaizzi's (1978) method for phenomenological analysis was used to extract and analyze data. This study yielded four main themes, which include: *responsiveness and interactions; caring and supportiveness; emotions and feelings; and connectedness and cohesiveness*. Each of these four themes is interrelated and would allow for professors to increase their social presence when utilizing one or more of those modalities. Although

this study's findings were consistent with previous studies on social presence in the online learning environment, more research is needed to determine which CMCs are most meaningful to students in promoting professor social presence.

Keywords: descriptive phenomenology, social presence, professor, Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs), online health science courses, nursing, interaction

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The use of online learning environments to deliver higher-level education has evolved over the past 15 years. Between the years of 2000-2012, enrollment of college students under the age of 25 increased by 35 percent. For those aged 25 and over, enrollment rose by 41 percent (NCES, 2014). In 2014, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) (2015) conducted the *34th Annual Survey of Institutions* and found that there was a total enrollment of 320,074 students enrolled in the various nursing programs across the U.S. The results of this survey determined that within the population: 189, 729 students were enrolled in entry-level BSN programs; 113,788 were enrolled in Master's programs; 18,352 enrolled in DNP programs; and 5,290 enrolled in PhD programs (AACN, 2015). The same AACN survey identified that there were 679 RN-to-BSN programs, 214 RN-to-MSN, 269 DNP programs and 134 PhD/DNS programs being offered nationwide at that time, with 28 new RN-to-BSN and 31 new RN-to-MSN programs under development (Rosseter, 2015). In order to assist with the increase in enrollments, further promote professional growth among current Registered

Nurses (RNs) and attempts to combat the nursing educator shortage, many of these universities and colleges are offering their courses and programs entirely online (AACN, 2015).

Online nursing programs continue to gain popularity because they offer more flexibility than the typical classroom setting. Programs such as these allow for RNs in the workforce to continue working while completing their BSN and/or graduate-level coursework. Given the most recent data provided by the AACN regarding steady increases in enrollment and the anticipated growth of students enrolling in nursing programs, it is important for nursing educators to understand how their text-based communications or *Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs)* come across to their students (Rosseter, 2015b). Once educators understand how students perceive their CMCs, they can make adjustments to ensure that their communications are meaningful and promote student engagement.

The objectives of this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study include: illustrating or identifying how students perceive their professor's social presence in CMCs; the emotions evoked by those CMCs; unveil common themes of student perception; and find commonalities in student recommendations for professors to implement in order to increase their social presence in online courses. The intended goal of this study is that the findings will contribute additional knowledge regarding the social presence of professors in online courses. The theoretical framework for this study will be based upon Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) definition of *social presence*. The

researcher will use Colaizzi's (1978) method of phenomenological analysis to extract meaningful words and phrases and in completing data analysis.

1.1 Background

Although the concept of Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs) is not new in higher education for the delivery of educational programs via the internet, the use of these versatile mediums has been rapidly expanding within nursing education. There are several ways in which nursing educators and students communicate in online courses; these are called *Computer-Mediated Communications* or *CMCs*. CMCs are often text-based in an online learning environment and come in a variety of forms, such as: emails, learning modules, discussion threads and discussion responses. One of the current challenges nursing educators face in the online learning environment is the concept of social presence. *Social presence* is defined as the ability for participants to project their personal characteristics and come across as a "real person" through the use of CMCs (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000, p. 89).

Interactions in the online learning environment frequently lack important nonverbal cues which are often times important during the teaching/learning process. This leaves nursing educators wondering how their students perceive their use of CMCs and how best to address the concept of social presence in an online learning environment. It is through the implementation of social presence techniques used in CMCs in the online learning environment that allows nursing educators to portray a sense of caring, promote connectedness and reveal elements of their genuine character just as they would in a face-to-face classroom (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000).

There are several other reasons as to why social presence in CMCs from the students' perspective need to be unveiled, these include: 1) continued surges in enrollment of students in nursing courses via the internet; 2) many RN-to-BSN, RN-to-MSN, MSN and PhD/DNP courses and programs are offered entirely online; and 3) schools of nursing are adding internet components to their traditional classroom setting to promote learning outside of the classroom (AACN, 2012). To assist in illustrating the students' perspectives and lived experience of social presence in CMCs, the definition of social presence as defined by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) will serve as the framework for this study.

1.2 Operational Definitions

1.2.1 Social Presence

For the purpose of this study, the researcher will use Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) definition of social presence is "the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as 'real' people (i.e., their full personality), through the medium of communication being used" (p. 89).

1.2.2 Computer-mediated communications (CMCs)

Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs) will be defined as "synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer conferencing, by which senders encode in text messages"; these are sent from the sender's device to the receiver's device (Walther, 1992, p. 52). Computer-mediated communications currently have many different ways of reaching the receiver. These include but are not limited to: email, discussion boards and responses, computer conferences, blogs and learning modules (Johnston, 2015). As

technology continues to evolve, students and professors have a variety of different devices which they can use to send their CMCs, some of these devices include: personal computers (PCs), iPad™, tablets, smart phones and laptops.

1.3 Identification of Research Problem

In a review of the literature, the researcher has identified that there is limited data available regarding social presence in Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs) for online health science educators, especially nursing educators. Educators within these fields need to have a better understanding of how their students perceive their social presence when using Computer-Mediated Communications in online learning environments. However, before professors can make adjustments in how they deliver their online course content, they need to have a deeper understanding of how their students perceive their social presence by how they express their CMCs.

1.4 Research Study Purpose

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study is to describe students' perceptions of how their professors have shown social presence through Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs).

1.5 Research Question

How do students enrolled in online health science courses perceive their professors' social presence in Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs)?

1.6 Study Objectives

- Illustrate how students perceive their professor's social presence as used within CMCs.

- Describe the emotions evoked by CMCs.
- Unveil common themes of student perception.
- Find themes in student recommendations in how health science professors can increase social presence in their online courses.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Social Presence

The theory of social presence, which will serve as the theoretical framework for this study, was originally studied by Short, Williams and Christie (1976) and was defined as: “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p. 65). However, a more current definition as provided by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) will serve as the framework - *social presence* is “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people (i.e. their full personality), through the medium of communication being used” (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000, p. 89).

Research in other disciplines, such as business management and computer technology, has shown that social presence as it applies to CMCs is now a central concept in online learning environments and often times serves as a key component in the theoretical framework for these types of networks (Benbunan-Fich, Hiltz, & Harasim, 2005; Lowenthal, 2010; Plante & Asselin, 2014). Although other disciplines have

conducted studies and made adjustments to how they show social presence in online communications, the phenomenon of social presence within the field of nursing education appears to still be in its infancy (Cobb, 2009 & 2011; Mayne & Wu, 2011; Plante & Asselin, 2014). According to the literature, research has shown that when faculty uses social presence in a purposeful manner during their CMCs, it promotes student success and satisfaction (Cobb, 2011; Mayne & Wu, 2011; Plante & Asselin, 2014).

Implementing elements of purposeful social presence in CMCs also assists with enhancing students' perceptions of community and connectedness; reducing feelings of isolation; contributing to overall success and satisfaction of the educational experience for students and educators; and increases student retention, interactions and the cognitive learning processes (Mayne & Wu, 2011).

2.2 Computer-mediated communications (CMCs)

Computer-mediated Communications (CMCs) are the text-based messages in which human interaction occurs through at least one telecommunication system, such as in an online learning environment (Janssen, 2014). CMCs come in a variety of formats in online learning environments but most often show up in the form of e-mails, discussion threads and learning modules. CMCs in the online learning environment can be synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous online learning environments require all learners and the educator to be online simultaneously; whereas in an asynchronous online learning environment simultaneous login is not required. Asynchronous environments are much more flexible and allow both students and the educator to login during times which

are convenient for them – these types of courses often attract nurses to enroll in them since they can complete coursework around their work and home life (Janssen, 2014).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

This study was a descriptive phenomenological qualitative study. Participants were individually interviewed and audio-recorded for data collection. The collection of data for this study took place at a site of the participant's choice or via telephone for each individual interview. The site chosen by the participant was one that the participant was comfortable with and allowed for little to no distractions. The researcher traveled to meet with the participants to collect data. Each participant was interviewed once, for an estimated time frame of 15-30 minutes or longer if necessary – the researcher allowed the participant to continue to ensure she captured the essence of those participants' perceptions. The interviewing process continued until the researcher found recurrent themes, thus reaching data saturation.

3.2 Sample

The population was a sample of convenience of students enrolled in various online health science courses through Cleveland State University (CSU). Students enrolled at CSU in the following types of programs were considered for participation: RN-to-BSN, Masters of Science in Nursing (MSN), Masters of Science in Health Sciences (MSHS), Masters of Public Health (MPH), Masters of Occupational Therapy (MOT), Doctorates of Physical Therapy (DPT), Physician Assistant (PA), Speech Pathology and Audiology or Gerontology Studies. Following IRB approval, professors of the various health science courses at CSU were sent a recruitment email (Appendix A) with the request to assist the researcher with recruiting participants by forwarding the recruitment email to the students' CSU email or via the BlackBoard™ course messaging system. BlackBoard™ is the online learning management system that CSU uses for their online courses.

Students enrolled within the various online health science courses were invited to participate as long as they met the following inclusion criteria:

- enrollment in at least one online course for one of the following undergraduate or graduate programs at Cleveland State University: RN-to-BSN, Masters of Science in Nursing (MSN), Masters of Science in Health Sciences (MSHS), Masters of Public Health (MPH), Masters of Occupational Therapy (MOT), Doctorates of Physical Therapy (DPT), Physician Assistant (PA), Speech Pathology and Audiology or Gerontology Studies;
- participant must have had at least one online course within the past 18 months;
- participants may be male or female;

- any nationality/culture/race/gender identification or ethnic group.

Exclusionary criteria included: those not actively pursuing one of the inclusion criteria courses of study or programs and those who had not taken an online health science course within the past 18 months.

3.3 Data Collection

To collect data, the researcher conducted and audio recorded individual interviews with participants either in person or via telephone using an Olympus brand digital audio recorder. Using the demographic collection form (Appendix A), participants were asked to identify the following: age; gender; ethnicity/race; years of college experience; highest level of education; which health science program they were enrolled in; and how many online courses they had taken. Participants were provided with two definitions: 1) Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) definition of social presence; and 2) Computer-Mediated Communications as listed within the *Interview Script and Question Guide* (Appendix C). The researcher assessed for the participants' understanding of those definitions before proceeding with the interview questions. If participants state that they did not understand those definitions, the researcher reviewed and clarified the definitions with the participant until he/she was able to state understanding of the definitions. The data collection continued with an interview consisting of five open-ended questions, as follows:

- 1) Thinking back on your online courses, what words, phrases, sentences or greetings did your professor(s) use that made you feel that they were socially present in the course?

- 2) Are there others way that your professors showed social presence through their computer-mediated communications?
- 3) When your professor used those types of communications, how did they make you feel?
- 4) Is there something you wish that all professors would do in order to increase their social presence in the online learning environment? Why?
- 5) Is there anything else you would like to add about professor social presence and their computer-mediated communications?

Participants were asked to elaborate upon what they meant if the researcher was unclear about the participants' meanings to their responses to the interview questions. Throughout the interview process, the researcher wrote field notes on individual copies of the *Interview Script and Question Guide* (Appendix C) to supplement the recordings regarding keywords, statements and nonverbal cues. Upon completion of the interview, the researcher briefly reviewed the field notes with the participant to ensure that the essence of their thoughts and feelings were captured. The researcher transferred the audio files from the Olympus digital audio recorder to a password encrypted PNY brand USB flash drive to ensure participant confidentiality and security of content. The content on the Olympus digital recorder was deleted after the researcher verified that the files were appropriately transferred and saved to the USB flash drive. The password encrypted USB flash drive will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet in the locked of Dr. Maureen M. Mitchell, assistant professor at Cleveland State University. This office is located on the CSU campus at 2121 Euclid Avenue – Julka Hall Room 231 in Cleveland, Ohio.

Upon completion of this study all data will be securely stored within Dr. Mitchell's office for the University's minimum requirement of three years. After the three year minimum, all paper data will be destroyed by being shredded and the USB flash drive files will be permanently deleted.

3.4 Bracketing

The researcher used the process of bracketing to decrease the risk of researcher bias. Bracketing is a tool or technique which qualitative researchers use to assist in decreasing the likelihood of their personal thoughts, beliefs or presumptions from affecting the findings about a phenomenon (Ahern, 1999). The researcher used a bracketing journal to write down feelings and thoughts prior to and throughout the study to decrease the likelihood of imposing personal thoughts and feelings on the interpretation of the data. Some additional uses of the bracketing journal included: recognizing and identifying feelings which lacked neutrality; reframing when writing or mental block occurred while interpreting data; and acknowledging and clarifying the researcher's personal values (Ahern, 1999). Examples of the researcher's bracketing journal can be found in Appendix D.

3.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation Using Colaizzi's Method

Data analysis was done by using Colaizzi's (1978) process for phenomenological data analysis which consists of seven steps:

1. Each transcript will be read and re-read in order to obtain a general sense about the content of the interviews for each individual participant.

2. Extract statements, phrases and key words from each of the transcripts which pertain to the phenomenon being studied. These extracted data should be recorded on a separate piece of paper or Word document – repetitious phrases should be eliminated.
3. Formulate meanings for each significant statement, phrase or key term based on creative insight which Colaizzi describes as the attempt to discover hidden meanings through intuition and creativity.
4. Organize the formulated meanings into clusters so that common themes can emerge.
5. Combine all of the findings from the analysis thus far into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon being studied.
6. Tighten up the exhaustive description into a statement which identifies a fundamental structure.
7. The final step is to validate the results found from the data. This will be done by contacting the participants to share the results and ensure that their feelings and perceptions were accurately captured (Beck, 2006; Colaizzi, 1978).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participants were advised within the informed consent that they were no more at risk throughout this study than they would be in their everyday life activities. They were also made aware that there are no direct benefits to themselves as participants in this study. The researcher notified the participants within the informed consent that if the study yields results which add to the current knowledge regarding nursing educator

social presence in online courses that future nursing students could benefit from the outcomes of this study. Upon full review of the informed consent and ensuring that the participants understood the criteria listed within the informed consent, they each signed two copies of a single consent form prior to participating in the study. The informed consent form included the following: purpose of this study; risks versus benefits; requirements of the participant; how participant confidentiality will take place; and whether or not the participant agrees to be audio recorded for the study (Appendix A).

3.7 Confidentiality

In accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and to ensure privacy and confidentiality of the participants, the researcher requested the assistance of the professors within the School of Nursing and School of Health Sciences in recruiting participants for this study by forwarding a recruitment email to their students via the BlackBoard™ course messaging system. To further ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, all personal identifiers were removed from the data. The researcher implemented a coding process which assigned all data an alphanumeric code (ex. A326) to each individual set of data per participant. These codes only have meaning to the researcher and will allow for the maintenance of confidentiality. Transcription of the data was completed by the researcher to limit access to the data. The only person who may potentially view the data collected would be the researcher's Thesis Committee Chair, Dr. Maureen M. Mitchell, who served as Primary Investigator (PI) under IRB requirements. All of the researcher's recorded data, field notes and written notes or reflections recorded in the researcher's bracketing journal will be stored in a

locked filing cabinet behind the locked office door of Dr. Maureen M. Mitchell, associate professor at Cleveland State University, Julka Hall room 231 located at 2121 Euclid Avenue in Cleveland, Ohio to further protect the participants' confidentiality. Dr. Mitchell's locked office is behind a locked door which requires security clearance and a valid ID badge to access. Upon completion of this study all data will remain securely stored for the minimum requirement of three years.

CHAPTER IV

BUDGET

This study had a budget of \$500 of the researcher's personal funds. The \$500 budget included the purchase of an Olympus VN-722PC audio recorder and microphone, a parking pass to park at the University, PNY 8GB USB flash drive and gas for traveling to meet with participants who elected to meet in person for their interviews. The researcher kept this study below the \$500 budget, spending a total of \$478. The researcher did not request nor require outside funding to carry out and complete this study.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

5.1 Statistical Analysis of Demographic Data

Statistical analysis of the demographic data of the seven participants in this study was completed using the SPSS v24 software (Table 1). All seven of the participants in this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study were enrolled in online nursing programs at CSU. Two participants were pursuing a RN-to-BSN degree and five were pursuing a MSN. All seven participants were females with the age range of 25-63 and a mean of 41.7 years. Six of the seven participants identified themselves as Caucasian and one identified herself as an Asian-American. Participants identified their years of college experience as between 4-17 years - the mean was 7.5 years. Two participants indicated that a Master's degree was their highest level of education. Four indicated that a Bachelor's degree was the highest level of education thus far; and one participant identified as 'other' and indicated that she had two Bachelor's degrees, a BSN and Bachelor's of Science in Biology. Each participant was asked to provide the number of

online courses each had taken; the lowest was three online courses and the highest was 14 and resulted in a mean of 8.8 online courses for the group.

Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics of Demographics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	7	25.00	63.00	41.7143	14.31449
Gender	7	1.00	1.00	1.0000	.00000
EthnicityRace	7	3.00	4.00	3.8571	.37796
YearsCollExp	7	4.00	17.00	7.5714	4.42934
HighestEdu	7	2.00	5.00	2.7143	1.11270
ProgramEnrolledIn	7	1.00	2.00	1.7143	.48795
NumberOnlineCourses	7	3.00	14.00	8.8571	3.71612
Valid N (listwise)	7				

Table 1 - Descriptive analysis statistical results of demographic data by SPSS v24.

Code Book Key for Descriptive Statistics

- **Age** – entered in numerical value (ex. 25 = 25 years old, 63 = 63 years old);
- **Gender** – 1 = female, 2 = male;
- **EthnicityRace** – 1 = African American, 2 = American Indian, 3 = Asian American, 4 = Caucasian, 5 = Hispanic, 6 = Multi-racial, 7 = Pacific Islander, 8 = Other;
- **YearsCollExp** – entered in numerical value (ex. 1 = one year, 12 = 12 years);
- **HighestEdu** – 1 = Associates degree, 2 = Bachelors degree, 3 = Masters degree, 4 = Doctorate degree, 5 = Other;
- **ProgramEnrolledIn** – 1 = RN-to-BSN, 2 = MSN, 3 = Health Sciences, 4 = Public Health, 5 = MSHS, 6 = MPH, 7 = MOT, 8 = DPT, 9 = PA, 10 = Speech Pathology and Audiology, 11 = Gerontology Studies;
- **NumberOnlineCourses** – entered in numerical order (ex. 1 = one course, 9 = 9 courses)

5.2 Identification of Themes

There were a variety of themes that were identified during the extraction and analysis processes using Colaizzi’s (1978) method for phenomenological analysis. Four main themes emerged through exhaustive analysis of the data, these include:

responsiveness and interactions; caring and supportiveness; emotions and feelings; and connectedness and cohesiveness (refer to Table 2). Each of these four themes has been identified as being interrelated by the researcher.

Table 2 – Categorization of Extracted Terms, Phrases and Themes

Responsiveness and Interactions	Caring and Supportiveness	Emotions and Feelings	Connectedness and Cohesiveness
Introductions Thoughtful emails Greetings (hello, dear, etc.) Feedback Sharing Experiences Clarification of expectations Conferences/Meetings	Thoughtful Positivity Encouragement Offering help Going “above and beyond”	Appreciative Overwhelmed Frustrated Devastated Confused Pleased Comfortable with program	Referred to as ‘Colleague’ Team-like Asynchronous vs. Synchronous “Equal” “Together” Availability/Accessibility – “it’s like they’re there 24/7”

Table 2 – Categorization of the extracted words, phrases and themes throughout the transcriptions were noted and ultimately categorized into one of the four main themes of this study.

5.2.1 Responsiveness and Interactions

The theme of *responsiveness and interactions* was the dominating theme within this study because of the importance of interactions and responsiveness in the online environment. Within the theme of responsiveness and interactions, participants alluded to how profound of an impact the interactions and exchanges between the professor and student can be. The participants reported that the interactions and exchanges between students and professors were predominantly via CMCs such as: introductions/greetings, emails, discussion posts and feedback on their assignments. Participants in this study perceived their professors’ presence to be greater when their professors were more interactive throughout the discussion posts; responded quickly to inquiries within a 24-48 hour timeframe; provided clarification about expectations for the course and assignments; and provided caring words of support and encouragement. As an example, *Participant M*

stated that she felt that her professor's "presence is everywhere...kind of like a 24/7 job" because her professor had been "very involved in the discussion posts" where she appeared to be "involved...jumping in...like all over the place" (lines 59-66, 91-96).

Although majority of the feedback from the participants was positive, there were times when the participants reported feeling overwhelmed, confused or frustrated related to a lack of professor presence as evidenced by decreased responsiveness and instructions or expectations not being clear. *Participant K* described how a lag in response time often led to frustration for her and her classmates, especially when clarification was needed and they were "asking for a response and just not getting any" because in an online environment "there is not the responsiveness of life" (lines 69-72). *Participant M* and *Participant S* described that they often held a negative perception of their professor when their feedback or interactions "come across as very critical" or they perceived their professors as being "so meticulous by picking apart" their course work – "it can be very devastating" (line 67; line 65, line 67).

Participant C described her experiences as mostly positive and found her professors' feedback and interactions through CMCs to be constructive. She explained that often the responses/feedback she would receive would "veer me in a specific direction" causing "me to think on my own" by prompting her to think broader about the topic or assignment at hand (lines 80-81 & 85-86). *Participant J's* experiences were similar to those of *Participant C* as she discussed how her instructors always provided "feedback within like the grade" which showed her and her classmates that her professors "took the time to read it, gave us feedback as to what our grade was, what could be

changed” (lines 32-33). The experiences of these participants, regardless of whether they were negative or positive, support the presupposition that the way professors show social presence in their CMCs is crucial in the way their students perceive the interactions/exchanges.

5.2.2 Caring and Supportiveness

Participants described how both *caring and supportiveness* were an important part of their online learning by stating that encouragement, motivational inspirations and the perception of communicating empathy and support from the professor was greatly appreciated. *Participant H* provided examples of how her professors have shown social presence which portrayed a sense of caring and supportiveness; these included sending positive and encouraging emails which included words or phrases, such as: “we’re in this together”, “remember to take care...while in this program” and other “little boosts of encouragement” (lines 52, 61-62 & 81). *Participants K, M and R* discussed how they perceived their professor(s) as understanding and empathetic because their CMCs indicated that they valued and supported the participants’ points of view both as a “person and student” (line 64; lines 119-120; lines 55-56).

Participants stated they were appreciative of receiving emails which included words that served as mindful “boosts of encouragement” which provided them “with the motivation to keep working hard” (*Participant H*, line 81; *Participant S*, line 68). Several participants reported that these CMCs made a huge difference in the perceptions of their professors, “especially when it is unexpected to receive an email like that” - it made them feel that their professors truly cared about them and wanted them to be successful in the

course or program. Overall, the participants reported that their professors were able to adequately show social presence and many aspects of their true personality by sending CMCs which were written in an empathetic manner, portraying that their professor is “human and has a life...outside of this as well” and “that they really care...so they have sympathy and empathy for us” (Participant H, line 53; Participant S, lines 49-50).

5.2.3 Emotions and Feelings

Each participant discussed scenarios where their *emotions and feelings* ranged anywhere from feeling ‘valued and supported’ to being ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘frustrated’. Several participants stated that they often felt overwhelmed throughout their online courses due to trying to balance work, school and home life. *Participant J* succinctly described her experiences of feeling confused and overwhelmed by the online learning environment:

the online environment is so hard for me as a student...I really had to push myself and become more focused...like be on top of things when things are due. It was me kind of guiding how my learning was gonna go instead of like an instructor guiding where our learning was gonna go...it was an experience (lines 54-56)!

Participants K and M gave examples of the two main scenarios when they felt frustrated throughout their courses: 1) when clarification was needed about a project or assignment and they perceived their professor’s presence as low because their response time was greater than 48 hours; and 2) feeling that their hard work was “being picked apart” (line 95; line 113).

Nearly all of the participants briefly discussed that when their professors responded with CMCs including words of encouragement, motivation and positive feedback that it made them feel “very, very good” and like they were “part of a team” (Participant R, lines 55-56; Participant S, line 30).

5.2.4 Connectedness and Cohesiveness

The fourth theme, *connectedness and cohesiveness*, was perhaps the most multifaceted theme considering all of the elements that participants felt were important for professors to employ in order to create a sense of being ‘connected’ with the students and class. One of the characteristics that participants felt their online professors should have is being personable. Being personable and sharing some minor personal things allowed for the participants to gain perspective into their professors’ personalities and point of view. Participants frequently described which types of CMCs were used in their courses which conveyed social presence, these included: using greetings in each interaction; responding to the students by their preferred first name in discussion posts and emails; posting an extended welcome to the course and/or program; sharing information about their background, interests and experiences; and acknowledging individual students’ point of view with respect.

Several participants discussed how important it was for their professors to provide an extended welcome to the course and a bio about their background and lived experiences – “where they’re coming from, what their experience has been” (Participant M, lines 34-35). The opportunity for participants to read their professors’ bios allowed them to better understand their professor’s viewpoints, stances on issues, expertise and

personalities (Participant K, lines 60-61). In addition to extended greetings to the course, participants stated that they felt their professor promoted social presence when responding to students using their preferred first name prefaced by ‘Hello’, ‘Good afternoon’ or ‘Dear’ throughout the various CMCs (Participant J, lines 25-27; Participant K, lines 41-43; & Participant R, line 30). *Participant H* felt that her professor’s communications helped her to feel connected when her professors would address her and her classmates as ‘colleagues’ – she stated that she felt “we were equal...even though we may not have attained our graduate degree...we were skilled nurses and that we were still colleagues” (line 27-31).

Participant K discussed at length how she felt very much like she was “part of a team” in the way her professors used CMCs to share their lived experiences of trying to “balance work, school and life” and promoting a ‘we’re in this together’ attitude (lines 54-56). Several other participants were noted to report similar appreciation for how their professors showed social presence through the way they responded to emails or discussions - often reminding the class that “we’re all going to get through this together” (Participant R, lines 55-56; Participant H, line 53). *Participants C and S* explained that they felt more *connected* to their professors when they were provided with additional means of contact so that the students could reach out to them if there were any questions, concerns or issues.

Figure 1 – Relationship between the Four Themes

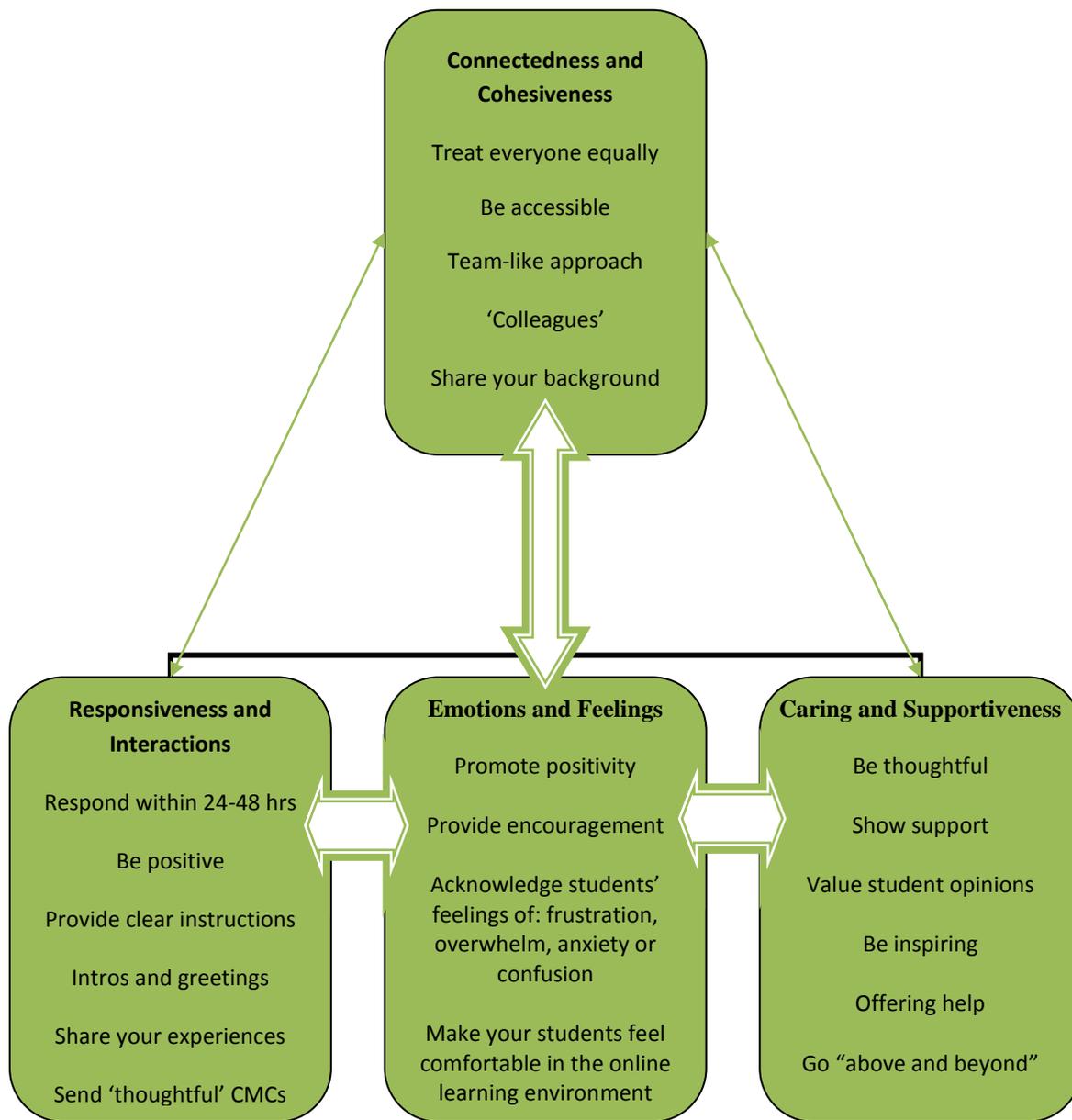


Figure 1 – Figure 1 shows the dynamic relationship between the themes and how they may be interrelated to each other. The researcher recommends utilizing these themes in various combinations to increase their social presence and promote a successful, meaningful student-teacher relationship through the online courses and programs.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

6.1 – Comparing the Results to other Social Presence Studies

Due to soaring rates of enrollment in online courses and programs, professors need to understand how their students perceive their CMCs in the online learning environment. This phenomenological study has found consistencies with other studies conducted on social presence in online learning environments. The importance of professor social presence in the online learning environment should not be undermined, as the results of this study and others report that students perceive their professor's social presence as being very important in making them feel that they are connected in the online community. Within this discussion, the researcher will discuss the key findings of this study as compared to those used in other studies about social presence and CMCs. Table 3 (shown below) shows the researcher's comparison of this current study to the results of previous studies conducted on social presence and online line environments.

Table 3 – Comparison of Prior Study and Current Study Findings

Prior Study for Comparison	Prior Study Findings	Current Study Findings
Cobb (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students wanted instructors who could “facilitate course discussions” Establish a comfortable online environment which promoted a sense of community Acknowledge students’ POV (p.118-119) 	More interactive – felt like my professor was “here, there and everywhere”
Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> social presence is a direct contributor to the success of the educational experience” “find the interaction... enjoyable and personally fulfilling” (p. 89) 	Positive feedback, words of encouragement from my professor
Ke (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “adult students have identified instructors who demonstrated high presence online as a key to learning satisfaction” (p. 818) 	Greater satisfaction with professors showing empathy , sending emails with words of encouragement and being ‘available’ “like a 24/7 job”
Mayne & Wu (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> social presence used in a purposeful manner during CMCs promotes student success and satisfaction; and desire to continue with online learning format (p. 113) when students perceive the experience as “enjoyable, satisfying, and personally and professionally fulfilling...tend to interact more”...”contributes to overall success of the educational experience” (p. 112) 	Participants stated having a positive experience in their online courses; one stated she had considered leaving the program due to scrutiny of her papers but due to being able to ‘connect’ with her professors, she decided to continue
Richardson & Swan (2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students perceived high social presence from their instructors as an integral aspect of their educational experiences (p. 76) 	Participants provided feedback that their experiences were positive when the professor was more interactive and communicated in an empathetic manner
Sitzman (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students preferred instructors who were clear in their expectations for the course and the assignments timeliness/responsiveness highly important to students empathetic communications – offering support, insight and compassion accessibility and engagement – preferred instructors who were more easily accessible as well as those who were more interactive (p. 173) 	Clarity and responsiveness were noted to be important, as well as providing words of encouragement and expressing empathy ; participants stated they liked how their professors would state “we’re here for you” and would provide various ways to get in touch with them (cell phone, personal email, etc.)

Table 3 – Details the comparisons made between prior studies and the current study as interpreted by the researcher.

6.1.1 – Results compared to Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000)

This study found many consistencies when compared with the literature that is available about social presence and CMCs. One of the primary references and theoretical

framework for this study was Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) *Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education*, where their observations throughout their years of studying social presence in text-based environments determined the following:

Social presence is a direct contributor to the success of the educational experience and needs to be meaningful so that the participants find the interaction...enjoyable and personally fulfilling and continue their educational journey to complete their program of study (p. 89).

This current study revealed that participants were most satisfied with their learning experience(s) when their professor showed social presence by responding in a timely manner, providing encouragement and sharing insight from their previous experiences. Participants within this study also made frequent statements about the importance of professors showing social presence in a positive manner to promote a positive learning environment and by encouraging them to continue to work hard to finish the course and ultimately the program.

6.1.2 – Results compared to Mayne & Wu (2011), Ke (2010) and Richardson & Swan (2003)

Within this study, participants frequently reported as having a positive perception of their professor's social presence when their professors were more interactive and provided positive, encouraging feedback in a timely manner. These findings are consistent with Mayne and Wu's (2011) study which determined that social presence used in a purposeful manner during CMCs increases student success and satisfaction, as

well as developing a greater sense of community and connectedness. This study's findings are also consistent with Ke's (2010) study which found that "adult students have identified instructors who demonstrated high presence online as a key to learning satisfaction" (p. 818). Richardson and Swan's (2003) study also had similar findings and reported that students perceived high social presence from their instructors as "an integral aspect of their educational experiences" (p. 76). The current study supports these presuppositions because of how strongly the participants felt that they could connect with their professors by the way their professors interacted with them in the online learning environment and worded their CMCs in a positive manner.

6.1.3 – Results compared to Sitzman (2010)

This study also contained results stressing the importance of providing students with clear instructions for assignments and their respective due dates. Participants in this study frequently discussed how stressful, overwhelming and frustrating it was to "have to do a hunt and find" when there were inconsistencies between the syllabus, assignment instructions, due dates and other information posted in their online forums (Participant K, lines 78-80). Similarly, Sitzman's (2010) study found that one of the top four characteristics that students preferred in their online professors was their ability to clearly describe their expectations for the course, clarify all due dates and provide clear instructions for the assignments in the course. Sitzman (2010) also discovered three other characteristics which were rated as highly important by her participants: 1) timeliness of response; 2) use of empathy in communications; and 3) the ability of the professor to engage the class (p. 173). Just as Sitzman found in her study, this study also found

consistencies with participants feeling that their professors were more socially present when they: were clear on their expectations, responded to inquiries in a timely manner, used empathy in CMCs and were able to remain interactive with the entire class throughout the course.

6.2 Limitations

Within this study there were a few limitations. Within the first few weeks of beginning this study, the researcher realized that one of the limitations was having too specific of a population. The original inclusion criteria only included students enrolled in online MSN courses at CSU. This led to a lack of participants and the researcher had to submit revisions to the IRB after receiving authorization from the primary investigator. The revisions included broadening the inclusion criteria to include a larger group of students, which included students who were enrolled in: RN-to-BSN, MSN, Health Sciences, Public Health, Masters of Science in Health Sciences (MSHS), Masters of Public Health (MPH), Masters of Occupational Therapy (MOT), Doctorates of Physical Therapy (DPT), Physician Assistant (PA), Speech Pathology and Audiology, and Gerontological Studies courses.

Within a few weeks, approval was received from the IRB to proceed with the study by implementing the revisions. The researcher proceeded to email the professors of those various health science courses (as per the CSU directory) with the request to post the recruitment email to their BlackBoard™ course sites to assist in the recruitment of participants (Appendix D). The professors within the CSU School of Nursing were also requested to post the same revised recruitment email. The recruitment of participants

outside of the School of Nursing did not respond to the recruitment email; however, six additional participants from the School of Nursing contacted the researcher about participating. Majority of the participants preferred to have phone interviews conducted and therefore the researcher was not able to include non-verbal cues in the field notes; only one participant met with the researcher at a place of their choosing.

6.3 Recommendations for future studies

The researcher recommends the following as potential future studies regarding professor social presence through the use of computer mediated communications:

- 1) Conduct quantitative studies to generate statistical data to determine which characteristics are most sought after by students;
- 2) Develop a quality improvement initiative by incorporating some of the recommended student-preferred characteristics to see if the implementation of these in fact leads to an increase in student and professor satisfaction and communication;
- 3) Conduct the same study at a local hospital where RNs might be taking online courses at various schools of nursing to see if similar findings occur; and/or
- 4) Continue to explore the phenomenon of student perception in online learning environments at other schools of nursing to see if the results may be generalized to online nursing programs across the state and/or country.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study was to describe how students perceive their professors' social presence used within their Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs). This study met its intended objectives, which included: illustrating how students perceive their professors' social presence as used within CMCs; describe the emotions evoked by the CMCs; unveil common themes of student perception; and to find themes in relation to student preferences for how nursing professors could increase social presence in their online courses. This study revealed four main themes, which include: *responsiveness and interactions*; *caring and supportiveness*; *emotions and feelings*; and *connectedness and cohesiveness* related to professor social presence in CMCs. These four themes are interrelated and would allow for professors to provide a positive learning environment when using a combination of those themes in their CMCs.

The general consensus of the participants in this study was that professors need to remain cognizant that each interaction or exchange used in their CMCs can have a

profound impact on their students in a negative or positive way. The participants in the study perceived the majority of their interactions via CMCs with their professors to be positive, but clearly stated how devastating it can be to receive feedback that is written in a very critical manner. Overall the participants mentioned that they felt that their professor(s) were more socially present when they: responded quickly to emails and discussion posts; wrote CMCs using kind, caring words which made the students feel like their professors cared about them, supported them and were providing encouragement; posed thought-provoking questions in discussion posts; discussed some of their previous experiences, background and/or viewpoints; and came across in their CMCs as showing qualities such as caring, understanding and empathy.

As enrollment in online health science and nursing courses and programs continue to sky-rocket, educators need to remember the power of their presence in the virtual classroom as this is how they can successfully promote connectedness with their students. The researcher recommends implementing purposeful techniques for social presence from this study (see Figure 2) and those from previous studies in a variety of online course settings to further determine which characteristics are most meaningful for both students and the professors to further build connectedness and satisfaction with their learning experiences.

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Appendix A

Original Recruitment Email



Cleveland State University

School of Nursing

Dear Colleague,

My name is Samantha Mencini and I am a graduate student who is completing her Master's Thesis for Cleveland State University's Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) – Nursing Education program. As a future educator, I am interested in hearing about your experiences in your online courses. In accordance with the Thesis requirements for an MSN, I have developed a qualitative study which will serve as my Thesis research project. It is my hope that the information you provide will assist me in identifying common themes which would improve upon online educators' current teaching practices. As an additional requirement for this Thesis project, the study will be overseen by my Thesis advisor, Dr. Maureen Mitchell.

The study will consist of one-on-one interviews which will be audio recorded. These individual interviews would take place either in-person at a quiet location of your choice or over the phone. Upon your completion of an Informed Consent and demographics form, I will provide you with a few definitions related to the study and then ask you a series of 4-5 questions about your online learning experiences. The interview process should take no longer than 15-30 minutes.

Your confidentiality and safety within this study is a number one priority. There is no greater risk for participating within this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. However, please be aware that if the interview takes place in a public site that there is the potential risk of a Breach of Confidentiality – your responses to the questions could be overheard by others. I will make every effort to ensure that your confidentiality is maintained – *no personal identifiers will be used throughout the audio recording and transcription processes or in publication.*

I respectfully ask for your participation in this study. *Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and will have no effect on your course grade whether or not you*

participate. Please contact me for more information about participating in this study. I can be reached by phone at **(440) 864-2268** or via email (preferred) at **SJMenciniRNBSN@gmail.com**.

The favor of your reply is appreciated by **September 29th, 2015**. I look forward to hearing from you!

Very sincerely yours,

Samantha Mencini, BSN, RN, CMSRN

Revised Recruitment Email



Cleveland State University

School of Nursing

Dear Colleague,

My name is Samantha Mencini and I am a graduate student who is completing her Master's Thesis for Cleveland State University's Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) – Nursing Education program. In accordance with the Thesis requirements for an MSN, I have developed a qualitative study which will serve as my Thesis research project. The study will be overseen by my Thesis advisor, Dr. Maureen Mitchell from the School of Nursing.

Eligible student participants must be enrolled in at least one online course for one of the following undergraduate or graduate programs at Cleveland State University: *RN-to-BSN, Masters of Science in Nursing (MSN), Masters of Science in Health Sciences (MSHS), Masters of Public Health (MPH), Masters of Occupational Therapy (MOT), Doctorates of Physical Therapy (DPT), Physician Assistant (PA), Speech Pathology and Audiology or Gerontology Studies*. In conducting this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study, I have the following objectives: illustrating or identifying how students perceive their educator's social presence in Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs); the emotions evoked by those CMCs; unveil common themes of student perception; and find commonalities in student recommendations for how educators can increase social presence in their online courses. The intended goal of this study is that its findings will contribute additional knowledge regarding social presence of educators within their online courses.

I respectfully ask that you post or paste the attached recruitment email to your Blackboard™ Learn announcement page in an attempt to recruit participants for my study.

Please contact me for more information if you have any questions. I can be reached by phone at **(440) 864-2268** or via email (preferred) at SJMenciniRNBSN@gmail.com. It would be appreciated if you could let me know that the announcement has been posted. The favor of your reply is appreciated by **October 31st, 2015**. I look forward to hearing from you!

Very sincerely yours,

Samantha Mencini, BSN, RN, CMSRN

Appendix B

Informed Consent



Cleveland State University

School of Nursing

Informed Consent

My name is Samantha Mencini, BSN, RN, CMSRN and I am a graduate student in the Cleveland State University's Master of Science in Nursing in the Nursing Education track program. In accordance with the Thesis requirements for my MSN, I have developed a qualitative study which will serve as my Thesis research project. As an additional requirement for this Thesis project, the study will be overseen by my Thesis advisor, Dr. Maureen Mitchell.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into your thoughts, feelings and experiences with communicating with your professor(s) in your online course(s). It is my hope that the findings of this study will provide educators information about how their communications come across from a student's perspective; and to assist in transforming how educators conduct their online courses and communications.

After signing this consent form, you will be asked to complete a demographics form. *This information, along with any data collected during the study, will remain confidential – no personal identifiers will be used.* All paper data and electronic-based data, which will be stored on a password protected USB flash drive, will be stored in a secure, locked filing cabinet in the locked office of Dr. Maureen Mitchell at 2121 Euclid Ave, Cleveland, (JH 231) for a minimum of three years.

I will interview you one-on-one either in person at a quiet site of your choice or via a private telephone call. Your interview will consist of 4-5 questions about your thoughts, feeling and experiences in your online courses. The interview should take no longer than 45-60 minutes. Your responses will be audio-recorded and later transcribed by me for analysis. *All data will be assigned an alphabetical and numerical code which will only have meaning to me as the researcher – no personal identifiers will be used to ensure your confidentiality.* An analysis of your transcript will be completed to identify important statements. These statements will then be compared to other transcripts to identify common themes. Those themes are what will be used to show educators how their communications come across from your perspective.

Your confidentiality and safety within this study is a number one priority. There is no greater risk for participating within this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. However, please be aware that if the interview takes place at a public site that there is the potential risk of a Breach of Confidentiality – your responses to the questions could be overheard by others. I will make every effort to ensure that your confidentiality is maintained – *no personal identifiers will be used throughout the audio recording and transcription processes or in publication.*

Your participation in this study is **strictly voluntary** and **will have no effect on your course grade** whether or not you participate. You may withdraw from this study at any time. There are no direct benefits to you as a participant of this study. However, your participation may contribute to transforming knowledge and teaching practices which would be helpful to future students and educators participating in online courses.

By reading the following statements and signing this form, it is assumed that you are consenting to participate in my research study.

There are two copies of this consent form which also includes the consent to audio record your interview. After signing both copies, keep one copy for your personal records and return the other one to me. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and participation.

I, _____, agree to be audio recorded at _____ on _____, 2015.

I have been informed that I have the right to listen to the audio recordings before they are used. I have decided that I (check one):

_____ want to hear the audio recording

_____ do not want to hear the audio recording

S. Mencini and other researchers approved at Cleveland State University **may / may not** (circle one) use the audio recordings made of me. The original audio recordings or copies may be used for (check those you agree to):

____ this research project ____ teacher education ____ presentation at a professional meeting

1. Quotes from my audio recorded interview may be used to assist the researcher in illustrating important data found in the study (circle one).

YES NO

2. Quotes from my audio recorded interview may be used in publication (circle one).

YES NO

“I have read and understand the information above regarding this research study. I have read and understand the procedure, tasks and risks which may be involved with this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I understand that if I have any questions or concerns, I may contact Mrs. Samantha Mencini at (440) 864-2268 or via email: SJMenciniRNBSN@gmail.com.”

“I understand that if I have questions or concerns about my rights as a research participant I can contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.”

Print name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

Code _____

Age (in years): _____

Gender (circle one):

1. Female
2. Male

Ethnicity/race (circle one):

1. African American
2. American Indian
3. Asian American
4. Caucasian
5. Hispanic
6. Multi-racial
7. Pacific Islander
8. Other: _____

Years of college experience (in years): _____

Highest level of education (circle one):

1. Associates
2. Bachelors
3. Masters
4. Doctorate
5. Other: _____

Which program are you enrolled in (circle one)?

1. RN-to-BSN
2. MSN
3. Health Sciences
4. Public Health
5. Masters of Science in Health Sciences (MSHS)

6. Masters of Public Health (MPH)
7. Masters of Occupational Therapy (MOT)
8. Doctorates of Physical Therapy (DPT)
9. Physician Assistant (PA)
10. Speech Pathology and Audiology
11. Gerontology Studies

How many online courses have you taken (number)? _____

Interview Script and Question Guide

- Confidentiality and safety is a top priority in this study – therefore I will not be asking you to state your name within this interview. I will ensure that any personal identifiers have been removed throughout the transcription process and in publication.
- I would like to request that in response to the questions regarding your experiences in your online classes that you do not use the name of your professor(s).
- Before I ask you some questions, I would like to provide you with definitions of two terms I will frequently refer to. The first is *social presence*. Social presence in this study will refer to your professor’s ability to project him or herself as a “real” person by showing their full personality through their communications on the computer. The second is *Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs)*. Computer-mediated communications are what are used to respond or ask questions in your online classes, such as email, discussion posts and responses, videos and learning modules.
- Do you understand what social presence and computer-mediated communications are by the definitions I have provided?
 - If yes – continue with questions. If no, review the definitions with the participant.
- Now that you have an understanding of those definitions, I would like to start asking you some of the interview questions:

- 1) Thinking back on your online courses: what words, phrases, sentences or greetings did your professor(s) use that made you feel that they were socially present in the course?
 - 2) Are there others way that your professors showed social presence through their computer-mediated communications?
 - 3) When your professor used those types of communications, how did they make you feel?
 - 4) Is there something you wish that all professors would do in order to increase their social presence in the online learning environment? Why?
 - 5) Is there anything else you would like to add about professor social presence and their computer-mediated communications?
- Before we end this interview, I want to make sure that I have captured the essence of your thoughts and feelings. (Review field notes of phrases/words jotted down during interview.)
 - I would like to thank you for participating in my study. The information you have provided me with will hopefully help educators to learn more about the student perspective of how their communications come across in the online courses and what students wish professors would do to increase social presence.

Appendix D

Samples of Researcher's Bracketing Entries

10/28/2015 – Reflection (Bracketing)

Within this study, there have been quite a few things that I had found to be important when I had conducted the different interviews and throughout the analysis process:

- Some of the students' perception is in feeling that they are supported and valued throughout the course and program. Many students mentioned characteristics that they felt really helped with intermingling and become more connected with that professor: terms of endearment or greetings (such as: hello, dear, good afternoon, good morning) prior to using the student's name and then continuing with acknowledging what was within that specific post or email. *This happens to be somewhat of a following of 'netiquette'.
- The next thing that they often talked about were some of the frustrations which come with the online courses, such as: timeliness of responses ("responsiveness was not what they initially thought it would be").
- General understanding that the online courses are meant to be flexible for the student, so they can come and go as they please. The general perception was that the professors should be available "24/7", which is not possible. They also frequently mentioned that not having the "responsiveness of life" made it difficult in trying to connect with their professors.
- Introductions are one of the biggest things the students look for in starting the course and program; and if there is minimal information – students didn't feel as connected or didn't feel that their professor was as "socially present". A couple of participants stated that they felt that when professors would reach out via email and more personable, that it allowed the students to feel that their professor was more socially present. "I felt that my professor was here there and everywhere – it was kind of like she was everywhere and getting into everything."
- Use student names so that we would know who the response was directed to, but then also pose questions to the rest of the class to open up and allow for a more broad discussion.
- What they wanted professors to do across the board: reaching out to students, initial orientation to put a name to a face, ability to have in class sessions or a

synchronous class to assist in developing rapport. Also discussed social media or video conferencing – some of them would almost like a synchronous online environment. A few participants actually stated that they would really prefer to have somewhat of a synchronous portion of the course and that was based upon previous online course experiences, or in discussing online courses with friends and family who had been in synchronous online learning environments.

- Less approachable – they are able to get some of the personality of the professor just by the tone the professor has written in. They may sense some increase in criticism in the tone and this could be a big “turn off”; one participant felt that her work was being “criticized so badly, I really wanted to leave the program and go elsewhere.”
- Get into the mindset of being independent, meet deadlines and working around home and work life around it – very strenuous when working on career too.

12/18/2015 – Bracketing Entry

Reflection – According to the analysis in this study, one of the most commonly mentioned themes was regarding feedback. Participants stated that receiving feedback was necessary to assist in their success. However, along with this theme of feedback there was also the concern as to how professors word their feedback and responses. Most participants in the study stated that much of the feedback from their online professors was helpful; however, that some of the feedback regarding assignments left them feeling as if their work was being scrutinized and “torn apart”. One participant stated that she felt that professors should “really consider how their responses will affect the students.”

Another theme which was common was ‘mindfulness’. Participants in the study stated feeling “like part of a team” and “valued as a person” when their professors addressed them by either their first name and/or “colleague”. Other phrases that the participants stated were meaningful to them and made them feel “good” was when professors would state “I hope this message finds you well”, “I hope you’re keeping warm” and “Make sure you take time to take care of yourself throughout the program”. Within these mindful phrases, the researcher has found that these phrases tend to have great appeal to the individual students’ emotions and how they felt about their course(s).