CONSTRUCTING INSTRUCTOR SOCIAL PRESENCE IN AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: THE INSTRUCTOR SOCIAL PRESENCE MODEL

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education – Doctor of Philosophy

2021

ABSTRACT

CONSTRUCTING INSTRUCTOR SOCIAL PRESENCE
IN AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:
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Research has shown high levels of instructor social presence createsa social-emotional rich online climate giving students a sense a belonging and their instructor being real and being present. Hence, this study sought to examine how instructors use instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors to establish, introduce and sustain instructor social presence during the design and facilitation of an online learning environment.

Ten online instructors, with an average of 9 years of online teaching experience, were twice interviewed using a semi-structured interview approach. Thematic data analysis was conducted using an *a priori* coding approach derived from existing teaching and social presence indicators and social presence conceptual maps. My data analysis revealed instructor social presence is constructed in a systematic process consisting of three phases: establishing instructor social presence, introducing social presence, and sustaining instructor social presence. Along with these phases, six categories were identified depicting theinstructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors instructors used to construct instructor social presence. These categories include course design and structure, communication and availability, introductions and welcoming activities, affective communication, assignment feedback, and consistent and informal communications.

Lastly, multiple indicators were identified in each of these categories resulting in 17 instructor social presence indicators: online learning frameworks, collaborative spaces and

activities, consistent structure, communication norms, instructor availability, introduction and announcements, welcoming activities, friendly and empathetic tone, real and approachable, acknowledgement and encouragement, one-on-one communication, storytelling and humor, self-disclosure, discussion forums, solicit student feedback, frequent announcements and reminders and conversational style.

Overall, this study builds upon the existing instructor social presence literature and offers new insights including a systematic approach to constructing instructor social presence in an online learning environment. As a result of this research, an Instructors Social Presence (ISP) framework was created. This framework offers individuals a systematic guide to establish, introduce, and sustain instructor social presence resulting in a social-emotional rich online educational experience. Moreover, these results have implications for online institutions' leadership and administration, online instructors, instructional designers or course designers and implications for further research.

To
I dedicated this to Kerry, Noah, Grace – who always believed in me
and to all my loved ones who have taught before.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must acknowledge several people who have inspired and supported me throughout my six years of study and research. First and foremost, I cannot thank enough my husband and children for always believing in me when I did not. To Grace, my cheerleader, who had more belief in me than I did myself and encouraged me more than she could ever know. To Noah, my helper, who was always willing to help me when I needed it most. Lastly, to Kerry, my everything, who took on the responsibilities of mother, chef, chauffeur, investor, sheriff, therapist, and lifelong partner. Without him this wouldhave not even been made possible.

I want to also express my deepest gratitude to my dissertation committee members, Dr. John Dirkx, Dr. Kristen Renn, Dr. Christine Greenhow, and Dr. Steven Weiland for their time and guidance throughout this dissertation project. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Dirkx for his valuable guidance and support, but most of all, for his gentle soul and compassion shown to me throughout the years. I am grateful to Dr. Greenhow for giving me an opportunity to put into practice my knowledge and skills by working with her and other peers. I am thankful for Dr. Weiland for directing me towards my research topic and providing me the opportunities to conduct research outside the classroom norm. Finally, I am very grateful for Dr. Renn's wordsof encouragement during the lowest point of my education experience.

I must also acknowledge all my friends and colleagues who supported me throughout my program. To the Michigan cheer moms who supported me by taking care of my children when I could not. To my new South Carolina friends who faked interest in my research and cheered me on during the final months. Lastly, thanks to several dear friends, who had faith in me that I could even accomplish this dream.

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"When I first started out, I was a young teacher, and I was a new teacher. So, I was certainly more guarded, more reserved about my own personal style. And now that I have been teaching for ten years online and now that I've seen the results in terms of student engagement, that the more you put out there about yourself, the more that you present yourself as a human being with dreams and ambitions and failings; that you do make a strong connection with the students. And then that is reflected in the work that they do. It's reflected in what they ask of themselves because when they know that someone is invested in them. And someone who's invested in their own personal growth; then they really try to rise to that challenge."

- Lily

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, online instruction has steadily become an integral part of contemporary American higher education (Kentor, 2015). Then in March 2020, higher education was drastically disrupted by the COVID 19 pandemic forcing more than 1,300 colleges and universities to cancel in-person classes and shift to online-only instruction (Smalley, 2021). As a result, online delivery became the primary means of continuing educational activities. By the fall of 2020, 44% of U.S. higher education institutions were conducting entirely or primarily online instruction and 21% were using a hybrid model (Smalley, 2021).

The abrupt shift to online instruction created many challenges and barriers for higher education institutions. One consequence was an increase in social isolation among university instructors and students (Filho et al., 2021). Even before the pandemic, higher education leaders and scholars expressed concern with online students' social isolation (Ali & Smith, 2015; Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). To help students overcome the physical distance and isolation associated with online learning, experts have recommended instructors can establish a strong social presence (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010; Picciano, 2002; Richardson, Besser, Koehler, Lim, & Strait, 2016). In fact, some scholars have designated the concept of how an instructor designs a course and uses certain behaviors as instructor social presence (Richardson et al., 2016; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017).

Understanding how to create a social connection in an online environment is critical due to the isolated nature of online learning. Therefore, it is important for instructors to know how to create and maintain a social presence in an online environment. However, instructor social presence research is poorly represented within the literature (Kozan & Caskurlu, 2018; Pollard, Minor, & Swanson et al., 2014; Richardson et al., 2016; Shea et al., 2010) and questions remain

on how it is created and maintained. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how instructors construct instructor social presence in an online learning environment. More specifically, the focus is to examine how instructors use instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors to establish, introduce, and sustain instructor social presence. The remaining chapter presents the background and the purpose of the study, the research questions guiding the study, followed by a description of the study's significance.

Background of the Problem

As online learning has increasingly grown in higher education, so has the concern of attrition rates in online programs compared to F2F programs (Bawa, 2016; Lee & Choi, 2010). Some researchers have found poor online attrition rates are attributed to students' feelings of social isolation and loneliness (Ali & Smith, 2012; Bollinger & Inan, 2012; Lehman & Conceicao, 2014; Lee & Choi, 2011; Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Schaeffer & Konestes, 2010). Studies have found these feelings are caused by online students being physically and geographically isolated from campus, having fewer opportunities to interact and establish working relationships with faculty and their peers, and conducting their learning in an environment where social context cues and behaviors are often absent (Aragon, 2003; Croft et al., 2010; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Stone & Chapman, 2010).

However, multiple studies have indicated a social-emotional rich learning climate can help students overcome the physical distance and social isolation (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Croft et al., 2010; Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Picciano, 2002). In essence, a social-emotional climate creates conditions, so participants feel comfortable to engage in meaningful discourse (Garrison, 2017). Furthermore, this type of climate creates a user-friendly learning environment, builds positive rapport between teachers and students, gives students a sense of belonging, andpromotes

a sense of purpose (Parker & Herrington, 2015).

Research has shown instructors play an integral role in establishing a strong social presence in an online learning environment (Aragon, 2003; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). For many scholars and educators, the COI framework provides a guide for online teaching and building social presence (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Kozan & Cuskurlu, 2018; Swan & Ice, 2010). The COI framework is a process model which outlines the core elements and dynamics of a collaborative online educational experience (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). The CoI framework illustrates the interrelationship of three presences (cognitive, social, teaching), forming areas where the presences overlap and create an educational experience (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

In essence, the CoI framework presumes an online learning environment is most effective when the three presences interconnect, and instructors and students are all present and learn together as a community (D'Alessio et al., 2019, Garrison et al., 2000). Thus, every learning community member (teachers and students) assumes teaching, social, and cognitive roles and responsibilities (Akyol & Garrison, 2011). Akyol and Garrison (2011) suggested that participants in a collaborative learning community can display all presences through co-regulation and shared efficacy. Furthermore, each participant assumes varying degrees of responsibility for each presence depending on the individual task and context (Garrison, 2017).

However, some critics have suggested the roles and responsibilities of an instructor has changed because of the online environment (Conceicao, 2006; Richardson et al., 2016). The role of an online instructor requires them to use affective strategies when interacting with students, be personal online, and be emotionally engaged (Conceicao, 2006). Also, instructors must display social presence behaviors to help students overcome social isolation and create a trusting,

collaborative learning environment (Richardson et al., 2016; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). Thus, critics have claimed the COI framework is inadequate because it overlooks online instructors' social roles and responsibilities (Kozan & Caskurlu, 2018; Pollard et al., 2014; Richardson et al., 2016).

Richardson et al. (2015) recognized this limitation and theorized the intersection of teaching and social presence as instructor social presence (see Figure 2.2). Experts have further defined the instructor social presence concept as how an instructor designs, facilitates and instructs an online course and the specific behaviors and actions used to develop and maintain a social presence (Ladyshewsky, 2013; Richardson et al., 2015; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017).

Over the past two decades, a growing amount of instructor social presence research has been conducted (Conklin & Dikkers, 2021). Previous studies have shown instructor social presence is a significant contributor and strong indicator of building and maintaining a meaningful climate within an online learning environment (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Casey & Droth, 2003; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Pollard et al., 2014; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Swan & Shih, 2005; and Wise et al., 2003). Instructor social presence also helps students project themselves socially and emotionally and creates a climate that cultivates feelings of 'being connected' and 'being real' (Swan & Shih, 2005). Lastly, experts have found online instructors can create and promote instructor social presence through specific instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors during the design and organization and facilitation of a course (Lowenthal, 2016; Richardson et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2016; Stone & Chapman, 2006).

Despite research studies suggesting instructor social presence is a critical element in an online learning environment, existing literature provides little guidance and lacks sufficient

detailon how to design and facilitate the development of instructor social presence. For instance, how should courses be structured to encourage instructor and student interaction? What behaviors should instructors portray to build a welcoming and safe online learning environment? What communication styles should instructors use to be perceived by students as real and approachable?

Moreover, the highly regarded COI framework does not recognize the significant social impact instructors have in an online classroom and does not consider instructor social presenceas part of the framework (Pollard et al., 2014). Thus, instructors and course designers are left without any frameworks, systematic processes, or guidelines focusing on how instructor social presence is developed and maintained. Given this, the purpose of this study is to examine how instructor social presence is constructed in an online learning environment.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research study is to examine how instructors construct instructor social presence in an online learning environment. More specifically, the study seeks to understand how instructors use instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors to establish, introduce, and sustain instructor social presence during the design and facilitation of an online course. Therefore, the following questions guided my research:

1. How do instructors establish, introduce, and sustain instructor social presence in anonline learning environment?
2. How do instructors use their instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors to construct instructor social presence in an online learning environment?

Significance of the Study

Research has found online students are susceptible to feeling socially isolated and disconnected (Ali & Smith, 2012; Bollinger & Inan, 2012; Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Schaeffer & Konestes, 2010). Also, studies have shown instructor social presence can cultivate a sense of belonging and being real among participants (Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Swan & Shih, 2005). Thus, students can feel less isolated and disconnected while participating in an online educational experience where there is a high level of instructor social presence.

However, existing research does not provide sufficient detail or a systematic process of constructing instructor social presence. Thus, this study contributes to a limited yet growing body of instructor social presence research and addresses the gap of understanding how instructors develop and maintain their social presence. By breaking down the constructs of instructor social presence, we can gain a better understanding of the processes, strategies, and practices online instructors use to establish their social presence. By doing so, a conceptual framework can be developed to guide instructors and course designers on the design and facilitation of instructor social presence. Thus, this study contributes to the tradition of developing frameworks to guide online learning experiences such as the COI and TPACK frameworks (Garrison et al., 2000; Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

Furthermore, this study provides online instructors and course designers guidance with using instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors to develop and maintain instructor social presence. By conducting this research, I hope to provide online instructors and course designers with a framework focused on creating a social-emotional supportive online educational experience. This is significant as online instructors' roles and

responsibilities are shifting from instructor to facilitator of a socially supportive online learning climate.

This chapter presented the background of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, and the significance of the study. In the second chapter, a literature review is provided including a description of the COI framework and social presence conceptual maps that guided my study. The third chapter explains the qualitative methodology used including my data collection process and data analysis. This chapter concludes with my positionality statement and description of how I ensured the credibility, reliability, transferability of my study. The fourth chapter details the findings of my qualitative study. The final chapter discusses my study findings and an explanation of the new Instructor Social Presence (ISP) framework. This is followed by the implications for future research and practice.

Definitions of Key Terms

Online learning. A major complaint with online learning research is terms like online, virtual, synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid, e-learning, and distance learning are often used interchangeably, and academics, instructional designers, and education institutions prefer to define their meanings (Bichsel, 2013; Garrison, 2017). For this study, this researcher intends not to define these terms and will use the words online learning, online learning environment, and online climate/setting for simplicity's sake. However, I acknowledge the reviewed literature may encompass different online characteristics and definitions of online learning.

Blended/Hybrid course. A course combines online and face-to-face delivery; a substantial portion of the content is delivered online (30 to 80%), typically using online discussions; reduced number of face-to-face meetings (Pearson Learning Solutions, 2016).

Face-to-Face course or environment (F2F). Course using no online technology with content delivered in writing or orally or a course using web-based technology to facilitate a course using an LMS system or web page(s) to post syllabus and assignments (Pearson Learning Solutions, 2016).

Learning management system (LMS). A software enables educational institutions to create and manage lessons, courses, quizzes, and other training materials (www.cmswire.com).

Online learning or online education. A course where most (80%) or all content is delivered online and typically has no face-to-face meetings (Pearson Learning Solutions, 2016).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter provides a review of the literature which informed this study and consists of three sections. In the first section, I provide an overview of the two theoretical frameworks that guided my study including the COI theoretical framework (Garrison et al., 2000) and social presence conceptual maps (Mykota, 2018). The second section summarizes research focusing on instructor social presence and how instructors perceive it. The third section describes how instructors can use instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors to create instructor social presence.

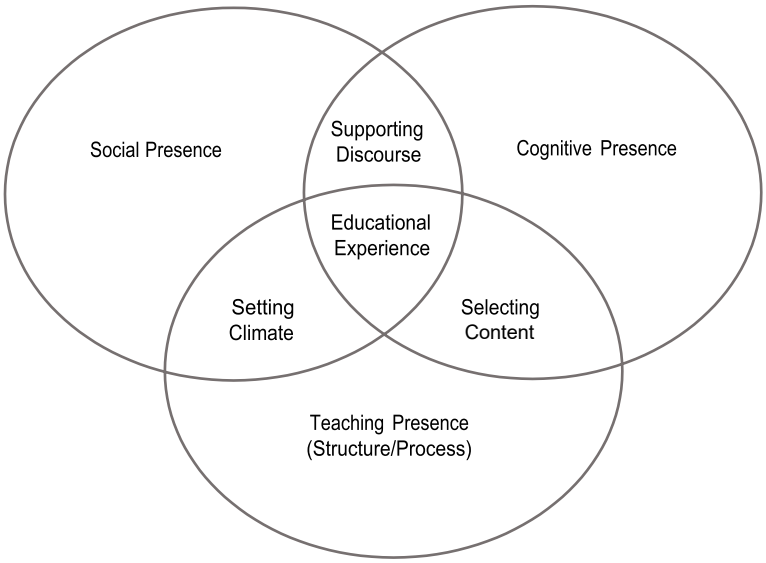
The Community of Inquiry Theoretical Framework

The COI framework was first developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) as a mechanism to outline the core elements and dynamics of a collaborative online educational experience (see Figure 2.1). Today, COI is considered one of the most comprehensive theoretical frameworks providing insights and methodology for online learning (Garrison et al., Kozan & Richardson, 2014). Philosophically, the framework was influenced by John Dewey's beliefs in the social context of scientific inquiry and knowledge construction (Garrison et al., 2010). The CoI framework uses a collaborative constructivist approach to higher education learning and knowledge formation and assumes effective online learning, especially high-order learning, requires the development of a community of inquiry (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009).

At its core, the COI framework depicts the interrelationship of three presences: cognitive, social, and teaching. Cognitive presence is the interaction students have with the content of an online learning experience conducted by cognitive-processing activities and assessments and supported by teaching and social presence (Dunlap, Verma, & Johnson, 2016). Social presence

refers to the degree online participants feel connected to one another (Swan et al., 2009). Teaching presence refers to the decisions made to the design, organization, and facilitation of the communication and interactions between the students, instructor, and course content (Dunlap et al., 2016).

Figure 2.1: The Community Inquiry Framework



Social Presence

Social presence is a central concept of online learning literature and a vital component of the COI framework (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Mykota, 2018). Short, Williams and Christie (1976) are credited to be the first to explore social presence by comparing mediated and non-mediated interactions. They defined social presence as the "degree of salience of the other person in the (mediated) interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (Short et al., 1976, p. 65). Later, Gunawardena (1995) shifted the social presence theory from a technological event perspective to one that determines social presence to be the social and interpersonal interactions with an education context. Eventually, Garrison (2017) advanced the view of social presence to be the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally through the medium of the communication being

used within an educational context.

Social Presence Categories and Indicators

Social presence includes three overlapping categories: interpersonal/affective communication, open communication, and sustained group cohesion (Swan et al., 2009). Together, these components create a social-emotional climate filled with affective, open communication, and group cohesion to sustain collaborative inquiry (Garrison, 2017). Also, within each of the following categories, indicators have been constructed for identification purposes (see Appendix A). The categories are as follows:

Affective communication occurs when learners share personal expressions of emotion, feelings, beliefs, and values. This communication includes theuse of emoticons, capitalization, humor, self-disclosure, and personal references conveying goodwill.

Open communication reflects the purposeful nature of the learning community and happens when learners build and sustain a sense of group commitment.Indicators are greetings and salutations, vocatives, group references, social sharing, and reflection on the course itself.

Group cohesion reflects the collaborative nature of the community andits activities. It occurs when learners interact with common intellectual activities and tasks. Indicators are responses of acknowledgement, agreement and disagreement, approval, invitation,and personal advice (Garrison, 2017; Garrison et al., 2010; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, Archer,1999; Swan et al., 2009).

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence is considered a critical aspect of online learning and involves the instructional actions and strategies an instructor may use to create a high quality, interactive learning experience (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Garrison, 2017; Kozan &

Richardson, 2014). Teaching presence is first established when the instructor designs and organizes the course. It continues throughout the course when the instructor facilitates learning and directs instruction by using various instructional strategies and methods (Garrison, 2017). Furthermore, teaching presence encourages a cognitive and social presence throughout the learning process by using self-regulated, active learning activities throughout the inquiry process (Oyarzun, Barreto, & Conklin, 2018).

Teaching Presence Categories and Indicators

Similar to social presence, teaching presence is divided into three main categories: design and organization, facilitation, and direct instruction (Anderson et al., 2001). In addition, within each of the following categories, indicators have been formed for identification purposes (see Appendix B). The categories are as follows:

The design and organization category includes planning and designing the course's structure, processes, interactions, and assessments (Anderson et al., 2001).Specifically, the design element focuses on the structural decisions made before the class begins,and the organization element refers to the decisions made during the course (Garrison, 2017).

The second category is facilitating reflection and discourse as students engage and build understanding with the course materials (Garrison, 2017; Swan et al., 2008). Therefore, facilitating discourse requires the instructor to read and encourage appropriateresponses regularly, make linkages between responses, articulate shared understandings, reach out to inactive students, and limit dominant learners' activity when they become detrimental (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison, 2017).

Direct instruction describes how the instructor displays their academic leadership by sharing their subject matter knowledge with students (Swan et al., 2008).Instruction may include

the instructor presenting course content while prompting discussion, reviewing and reinforcing main concepts while redirecting students' misperceptions (Sheridan &Kelly, 2010). Furthermore, online instructors must have the content and pedagogical expertise tolink ideas, diagnose misconceptions and inject knowledge while performing various forms of assessments and feedback (Garrison, 2017).

Social Presence Conceptual Maps

The social presence conceptual maps were developed by David Mykota (2018) to outline the social and technological elements that enhance the development of social presence in a higher education online learning environment. The social presence conceptual maps are a result from a scoping review and content analysis of social presence literature. These maps represent the practices and guidelines for establishing, introducing, and sustaining social presence and are organized into three distinct yet interrelated concepts: establishing social presence, introducing social presence, and sustaining social presence (see Appendix C).

Establishing social presence. The establishing social presence conceptual map is viewed as the foundational practices and guidelines instructors and designers use to form social presence. This map establishes social presence by forming a caring online learning environment built on trust, intimacy, and affective communication. This environment is developed through well-designed and balanced problem-based and collaborative activities and tasks. Additionally, instructors encourage student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction and create low stakes ways for students to engage in course material, establish course expectations, and interaction patterns. Lastly, instructors establish social presence by creating a safe online environment by valuing students' cultures and backgrounds through positive, encouraging, and respectful communication (Mykota, 2018).

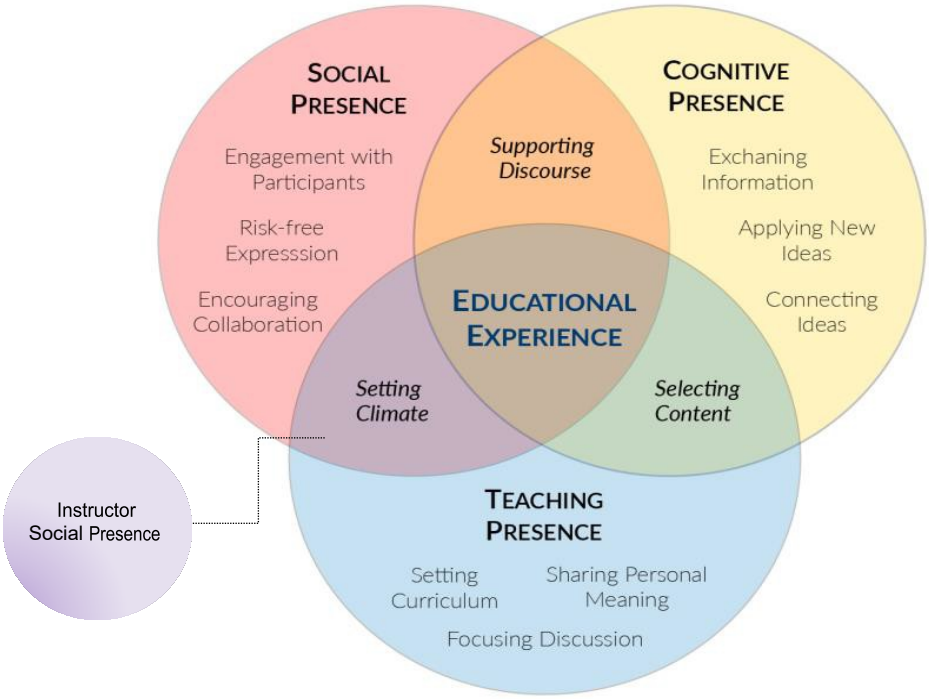
Introducing social presence. The second conceptual map, introducing social presence, describes the introductory activities, behaviors, and communications essential to building trust, rapport, and norms for interaction and participation. Instructors must model and scaffold social presence behaviors and facilitate student engagement to develop group cohesiveness, connectedness, and interaction. Welcoming activities like audio or video messages, orientation activities, biographies, and digital storytelling are unique ways intimacy is built within the course. Instructors may also introduce social presence using immediacy behaviors like prompt responses, discussion responses, social networking sites, and synchronous and asynchronous conversations or meetings (Mykota, 2018).

Sustaining social presence. The sustaining social presence conceptual map refers to the behaviors instructors and students can embody to maintain social presence throughout the course. These behaviors enhance communication and generate intimacy and immediacy to maintain social presence throughout the course. Instructors can use discussion forums to engage in discussion and provide simple, prompt, and positive feedback to enhance social presence. Synchronous meetings, phone calls, and videos can also increase social presence and reduce isolation (Mykota, 2018).

Instructors' Perceptions of Social Presence

As previously described, the CoI framework is composed of three distinct yet interdependent components (Garrison, 2017). Emerging from the intersection of social presence and teaching presence is an area designated by Garrison et al. (2000) as setting the climate. Whereas Richardson and her colleagues described this area as instructor social presence and defined it as "the specific actions and behaviors taken by the instructors that project him/herself as a real person" (2015, p. 259) (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: Instructor Social Presence



Studies have consistently found instructor social presence is a critical aspect of online teaching (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Pollard et al., 2014; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Swan & Shih, 2005). In their study, Stone and Chapman (2006) interviewed three online instructors to understand how instructors perceive the meaning of presence. Their findings suggested instructor social presence is tied to an instructor's view on course content, teaching roles, and student learning needs.

The instructors also believed they developed instructor social presence by the organization and design of their course and display of their immediacy behaviors (Stone & Chapman, 2006). The instructors also explained careful measures were taken to establish a presence throughout the organization of the course content and in the design of the instructional

activities. For instance, they added various multimedia components to the course and created study guides, case studies, and online quizzes. Secondly, the instructors demonstrated high immediacy behaviors by having well-established turn-around response times to student emails (48 hours at most), content updates, informative weekly updates, supportive messages, and assignment reminders. Lastly, the instructors perceived instructor social presence implied meeting the needs of the students including being accessible and providing clear guidelines.

More recently, Richardson et al. (2016) examined twelve online instructors' perceptions of instructor social presence. The examination indicated these instructors believed instructor social presence is essential and a critical aspect of online teaching for various reasons. For instance, the instructors felt their presence was necessary because students wanted to connect with someone and needed to know someone cares and is interested in them. Some instructors deemed their presence carried more weight for students who were at-risk, struggling, or facing an issue. While other instructors felt their presence was significant for students who valued a connection with their instructors.

Additionally, Richardson et al. (2016) found the online instructors believed their presencehelped them connect with students, influenced students' participation and interactions, and established the overall online learning climate. Furthermore, nearly half of the instructors took specific actions to connect with the online students, such as being more encouraging and creatinga positive, harmonious experience. Conversely, several instructors discussed how the lack of an instructor's presence, especially early in a course, can negatively impact students and cause themto become detached.

Instructor Social Presence Constructs

One of the greatest challenges with online teaching is replicating the social aspects and

nuances to create a sense of 'being there' (Oyarzun et al., 2018). For instance, an online learning environment is heavily dependent on text-based communications. Additionally, the social and emotional interactions are mediated through technology, which can cause a change in the interpretation and perception of instructor and students' interactions (Casey & Droth, 2013). However, experts have shown online instructors can construct a sense of social presence through instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors during the design and facilitation of the course (Lowenthal, 2016; Richardson et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2016; Stone & Chapman, 2006)

Instructional Actions

Researchers have documented that instructor social presence is initiated by the course design and the facilitation of an online course (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006: Stone & Chapman, 2006). For instance, Shea et al. (2006) found effective course design and organization improved students' sense of their teacher's presence and connectedness. Other studies have shown instructors displayed their presence by composing very clear and concise instructions, providing clear expectations of students' behaviors, sharing the type and level of feedback students would receive, having online lectures with good audio, setting deadlines and timeframes for activities, and establishing guidelines and boundaries (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Stone & Chapman, 2006).

Researchers also agree course activities and assignments can be designed and organized to support the development of social presence (Stone & Chapman, 2006; Stone & Springer, 2019; Swan & Shih, 2005). Online activities and assessments can be designed to engage students and allow collaboration synchronously and asynchronously (Stone & Springer, 2019). For

instance, collaborative assignments are an excellent way to promote instructor social presence. Collaborative assignments create opportunities for instructors and students to interact with one another and with the content. (Casey & Droth, 2013; Oyarzun et al., 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019). Another learning activity generating instructor social presence is online discussions. Studies have shown online discussions are often the most effective method to increase instructor-student and student-student interaction, communication, and overall community building (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014; Hostetter & Busch, 2013).

Instructor facilitation also has been linked to developing instructor social presence. Hodges and Cowan (2012) found students perceived instructors as being present when instructors responded timely to emails, discussion postings, and feedback. Also, students perceived the availability of the instructor by the instructor's participation in weekly discussions and hosting virtual office hours. Similarly, Hostetter & Busch (2006) found instructor social presence is developed when instructors are actively involved with exchanging ideas withstudents and providing feedback.

Therefore, course design and facilitation has been linked to developing instructor social presence. A well-designed and organized course that includes collaborative and interactive activities and assessments give the perception of an instructor's presence. An instructor who actively participates in online discussions and provides feedback is perceived to be available.

Online Communication Behaviors and Actions

Researchers agree teaching online requires a different approach than F2F since the social and communicative interactions between teachers and students are primarily asynchronous and conducted via technology, the LMS system, or online discussion boards (Picciano, 2002; Stone & Springer, 2019). Hence, an instructor's online communication is essential to establish and

maintain instructor social presence (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). In fact, studies have indicated online instructors use a variety of communication strategies to build and sustain instructor social presence (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Casey & Droth, 2003; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017; Richardson et al., 2016). Several of these communication strategies are as follows:

Instructors strategically use ongoing and consistent communication as one way to establish instructor social presence (Casey & Droth, 2003). For example, instructors explained their commitment to being present was displayed byquickly answering questions at the beginning of the course, monitoring student engagements during the first few weeks, and sending out welcoming messages (Casey & Droth, 2003).

Other researchers have found ongoing communication and perception of the instructor's availability is vital to students (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Swan, 2003). This research indicated the timeliness of an instructor's response and active participation in online discussions emphasized the instructor's availability and overall sense of presence. Conversely, other findings revealed that when instructors failed to communicate, students could not connect with their instructors and believed their instructors did not care. As a result, students felt a lack of instructor social presence (D'Alessio et al., 2019; Richardson et al., 2016).

Furthermore, studies have found instructors need to incorporate consistent patterns of interactions and interventions during their facilitation of discourse (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). For instance, an instructor's ongoing interactions may include encouraging and acknowledging student participation, keeping students on task when they are straying from the discussion, creating effective channels for dialogue, and interacting with students. These interactions show students the instructor is monitoring their actions, and make

students feel they are working under the instructors' guidance (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006). Moreover, Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) found students preferred techniques such as one-on-one emails with their instructors, phone/Skype calls, synchronous sessions, instructor and student bios, and digital stories to sustain a connection with their instructor during the course.

In Richardson's et al., (2016) study of online instructors, most instructors expressed the importance of setting a friendly and approachable tone through course announcements and personal biographies. The researchers also found instructors intentionally tailored their communication style for the online environmentby using students' names, emoticons, and humor. In addition, Tu and McIssac (2002) found communication styles such as being attentive, impression-leaving, relaxed, acquiescent, friendly,open, animated, dramatic, and personnel have a very positive impact on increasing social presence levels.

Another communication strategy online instructors used to display theirsocial presence was self-disclosing personal information (Swan & Shih, 2005; Richardson et al.,2015). Richardson et al. (2015) observed that students are more likely to have a different perspective of an instructor who actively shares personal details than instructors who only disclose a few pieces of information. Moreover, Swan and Shih (2005) found students who perceived high levels of instructor presence recognized the highly personal tone of their instructors' interactions, such as sharing personal experiences and addressing students by name.Similarly, Lowenthal and Dunlap (2010) noticed instructors established their social presence by using self-disclosure, emotional expression, and subtle humor in their digital storytelling.

Lastly, personalized and timely feedback is an essential strategy for establishing instructor social presence (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). In essence, feedback helps establish instructor social presence by having students interact with the

instructors in a two-way, ongoing conversation (D'Alessio et al., 2019). Furthermore, Borup, West, & Graham (2014) found instructors perceived video feedback as an easier way to express their emotions, communicate naturally, and create a sense of closeness with the students. Also, the study found students perceived video feedback as moreconversational and interactive and allowed a stronger connection with the instructor.

Several studies have indicated students view getting feedback promptly as an essential aspect of instructor communication (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). For some students, an instructor's quick response to quizzes and assignments was beneficial since there are no in-class opportunities to ask questions (Bower & Kumar, 2015). At the same time, other findings focused on the importance of giving students personalized feedback (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). For instance, the findings showed personalized feedback (written, audio, and video) is vital to giving students a sense of connection with the instructor and the perception of the instructor being present (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018).

Instructor Immediacy Behaviors and Actions

Achieving a strong instructor social presence requires instructors to exhibit high instructor verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors (Baker, 2010; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009; Stone & Chapman, 2006). High instructor immediacy implies an instructor's behavior enhances the feelings of closeness and minimizes the degree of psychological distance between themselves and their students (Stone & Chapman, 2006).

For example, verbal immediacy behaviors are exhibited when addressing students by name, using humor, sharing personal experiences, providing student feedback, and using inclusion verbiage such as "our" class and "we" are doing (Gorham, 1988). Nonverbal immediacy behaviors include smiling, gesturing, making eye contact, using vocal expressions,

relaxed body posture, and movement around the classroom (Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003). Additionally, Wise's et al. (2004) identified eight ways instructors emphasize their social presence: expressing humor, exhibiting emotions, providing self-disclosure, interjecting allusionsto physical presence, using greetings, addressing people by name, and complimenting others' ideas, and offering support or agreeing with an idea.

Since the online learning environment limits certain visual cues and immediacy behaviors, instructors must compensate by using strategies to portray a sense of being real and present. In Schutt's et al. (2009) case study of how video affects instructor immediacy behaviors, research revealed the students who viewed instructor videos reported higher perceptions of instructor social presence. For instance, the instructor displayed immediacy behaviors such as encouraging students to talk by asking questions, answering questions, allowing students to voice their opinions and questions, and using lots of gestures and calling out individuals by name.

Conversely, Dixson et al. (2017) examined instructors' nonverbal immediacy behaviors for 51 online courses. The results indicated instructors used different levels of nonverbal immediacy behaviors such as using visual, audio, and images related to the content, using various mediums (e.g., embedded URLs, video, discussion forums), and designing a highly organized class. The least used nonverbal behaviors were using personal video and audio, frequently posting to discussion forums, and responding quickly.

Other researchers have concluded instructors demonstrate high immediacy behaviors through their teaching presence (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Ladyshewsky, 2013). For example, Hodges and Cowan's (2012) study of undergraduate preservice teachers' perceptions of instructor presence showed students felt an instructor's availability, timely responses, clear

instructions, feedback, and course design were essential elements for displaying instructor social presence.

In summary, this literature review described the COI framework and social presence conceptual framework, which guided my study. The review also conveyed instructors perceive instructor social presence as a critical aspect of teaching and helps them connect with students, influences student participation and interactions, and establishes an online climate.

The remaining literature review indicated instructor social presence is created by instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors. Specifically, the literature review implied effective course design and facilitation couldproduce a sense of an instructor being real and present. This is accomplished by instructors indicating their presence through well-organized courses, clear instructions, and expectations. Next, the literature suggested online instructors used a variety of communication strategies to establish instructor social presence. These communication strategies include using a friendly andapproachable communication style and tone, sending timely and consistent messages, self- disclosing personal information and providing personalized and timely feedback.

Lastly, the literature indicated instructors portray their social presence through verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors. Immediacy behaviors such as using humor, sharing personal experience, providing student feedback, using visual and audio mediums, and a highly organized course were all identified as contributing to creating instructor social presence.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructors construct instructor social presence in an online environment. Hence, the following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. How do instructors establish, introduce, and sustain instructor social presence in an online learning environment?
2. How do instructors use their instructional actions, communication strategies, and behaviors to construct instructor social presence in an online learning environment?

This chapter presents the philosophical underpinnings that informed this study, an explanation of the qualitative methodological approach, and how a sample population was selected. This section is followed by a description of my data collection methods and data analysis process. The chapter concludes with my researcher role and positionality statement and the trustworthiness and ethical considerations that were used to ensure the quality of research andparticipant well-being.

Constructivist Philosophical Paradigm

A constructivist paradigm informed this study and assumed there are multiple realities (relativist ontology), the knower and respondent co-create understanding (interpretivist epistemology), and methodology is set in the natural world (naturalistic setting) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Specifically, a relativist ontology guided this study and assumed each knower/observer constructs the world according to subjective principles unique to that person (Sipe & Constable, 1996). A relativist ontology aligns well with my research study since the purpose is to understand how each participant constructs instructor social presence.

Next, an interpretivist epistemology also guided this study. Interpretivist researchers

attempt to understand an experience from the point of view of who is experiencing a particular situation (Sipe & Constable, 1998). Additionally, interpretivists argue there are multiple perspectives about the world (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Thus, an interpretivist epistemology guided my qualitative research design of interviewing online instructors and recording their specific experiences with constructing instructor social presence.

Research Methodology and Design

In this section, I describe the qualitative methodological approach I used to design and collect my data. Next, I detail how I selected my sample, determined the sample size and the nature of my sample population. This section is followed by an explanation of how I developed the data collection instruments and collected data using semi-structured interviews. Lastly, I outline my data analysis process.

Qualitative Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology approach to examine how instructors constructinstructor social presence in an online learning environment. Qualitative researchers seek to understand how individuals construct the world around them, including what they are doing, howthey are doing it, and what meaningful things are happening to them (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). In fact, Erickson (1986) stated, qualitative education research is concerned with issues of human choice and is essential when considering the "distinctive local meanings that actors have for actors in the scene at the moment" (p. 122). Since I am interested in examining how instructor social presence is constructed from theinstructor's point of view, a qualitative research design is an appropriate approach. Qualitative research allowed me to interpret the lived experiences of a small group of online instructors through their own words and meanings.

Moreover, I selected a semi-structured interview approach to collect how instructors

intimately describe the behaviors, communications, and instructional actions they use during the design and facilitation of a course to form instructor social presence. Interviews are commonly used in qualitative research to record how individualsconstruct the world around them and their meaning behind those experiences in long narratives (Flick, 2018; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Thus, the semi-structured interview approach allowed me to focus on specific themes and obtain descriptions concerning the construction of instructorsocial presence from the study participants' perspectives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Participant Sampling

This study used Robinson's (2014) four-point theoretical approach to sampling to define the sample population, sample size, strategy, and recruitment of sample. The following section details how I selected and recruited a sample population for my research study.

Purposeful sampling. A purposeful sample strategy was used to select participants who were in the best position to answer my research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Specifically, this study utilized a life history homogeneity sampling approach and defined inclusion criteria as shown in Table 3.1. Life history homogeneity selects participants who share common experiences (Robinson, 2014).

Inclusion criteria for sample population. The following inclusion criteria was used to select the sample population for this study:

- Participant has over five years of experience in online teaching at a higher education institution.
- Participant has designed and organized an online course within the past year. Participant has taught a fully online (asynchronous or synchronous) course within thepast year.
- Participant has demonstrated expertise in online teaching with a higher educationcontext.

- Participant holds beliefs and utilize strategies reflecting a student-centered approach to teaching.
- Participant is willing to participate in two interviews during the Spring 2021 semester.
- Participant is willing to give researcher permission to record the interview and publish findings in my dissertation and other publications.

Therefore, study participants were selected who shared a common experience of teaching online (asynchronously or synchronously) at higher education institutions. Other criteria included participants who had taught or designed an online class within the last year and preferred a student-centered approach to teaching. These criteria factors were selected to include only those online instructors who would likely demonstrate instructor social presence.

Sample recruitment. My study participant recruitment process began by contacting a colleague who worked at a large Midwestern University's Teaching and Learning Center. My colleague referred five faculty members who had demonstrated excellence in online teaching andlearning. I contacted each faculty referral via email and invited them to voluntarily participate inthe study (see Appendix D). Out of the five faculty who were contacted, three met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate. I then recruited other participants by using a snowball samplingreferral process. Snowball sampling involves asking participants for recommendations who might qualify to participate in a study. (Robinson, 2014). After interviewing each study participant, I asked them to recommend other experienced online instructors. Using these recommendations, I emailed 12 instructors requests to participate in my study. Seven out of the 12 instructors met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in my study. Therefore, a total of 10 instructors were interviewed.

Sample size. The sample size of 10 study participants was influenced by practical

considerations and at the point of data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Robinson, 2014). Practical considerations included the amount of data collection and analysis required for two in-depth interviews per participant, limited transcribing and data analysis resources, and constrained funding. Another practical consideration was the unpredictable responsiveness of study participants due to the current online teaching demands caused by the COVID 19 pandemic. The interviews also were conducted until the point of data saturation and no new themes or data was begin collected.

Overall, this sample size resulted in a total of 19 interviews and a total of 15 hours of interviews. A total of 10 online faculty members participated in the first interview. Nine out of the original 10 faculty members participated in the second interview. Multiple interview requests were sent to the remaining faculty member, but they did not respond to any requests. Idecided to keep the data collected from the first interview because of its rich descriptive responses.

Table 3.2: Online Faculty Participants
This table lists the study participants pseudonyms, college department, years of online teaching experience and if they teach synchronous or asynchronous courses.

Pseudonym	College	Years of Experience	Synchronous/Asynchronous Courses
Beth	College of Arts and Letters	13 years	Asynchronous
Charlotte	College of Natural Science	7 years	Synchronous/Asynchronous
Elizabeth	College of Natural Science	10 years	Asynchronous
Emma	College of Education	7 years	Asynchronous
Grace	College of Education	7 years	Asynchronous
John	College of Natural Science	14 years	Synchronous/Asynchronous
Julie	College of Education	9 years	Asynchronous
Lily	College of Education	13 years	Synchronous/Asynchronous
Michael	College of Arts and Letters	10 years	Synchronous/Asynchronous
Samuel	College of Natural Science	7 years	Synchronous/Asynchronous

Study Participants

Ten online instructors at a large research university were interviewed. The university has approximately 49,000 students and 2,800 full-time and part-time faculty. The instructors' online teaching experiences ranged from seven years to 14 years of experience. Many of the instructors had received special awards, grants, and recognition for their excellent online teaching practices. Although all the instructors taught online courses for the same university, they taught for various colleges including the College of Education, College of Natural Science, and College of Arts and Letters as shown in Table 3.2. All the participants had taught asynchronously, and six participants had taught synchronously and asynchronously.

Institutional Context

This study's data collection occurred from December 2020 to May 2021. This timeframe is noteworthy because the study was conducted during an unprecedented event in online higher education. In March 2020, the university suspended all in-class instruction and moved all classes to a virtual learning environment in response to the COVID 19 pandemic. According to the university's president letter, dated October 2020, only 40 in-person classes were offered in Fall 2020, and 400 in-person classes were scheduled for Spring 2021. The immediate transition to online instruction had affected several participants' teaching experiences and these are noted in the remaining chapters.

Semi-Structured Interviews

For this study, two semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. An interview protocol was developed for each interview detailing a list of open-ended questions (see Appendix E). Both set of interview questions were guided using existing literature to identify broad categories. This approach is typically used in qualitative studies to focus the data

collection process and guide interview questions (Rossman & Rallis, 2018).

The first interview questions focused on four broad topics: (a) prior experience with online teaching, (b) instructor behaviors, (c) communication strategies, (d) and the design and organization of online courses (see Appendix F). These broad categories correspond to Richardson's et al. (2015) definition of instructor social presence, which is "how an instructor positions him/herself social and pedagogically in an online community and would fall at the intersection of teaching and social presence with the COI framework" (Richardson et al., 2015,p. 259).

The second interview questions focused on four broad topics (a) how instructor social presence has changed over their teaching career, (b) establishing social presence, (c) introducing social presence, and (d) sustaining social presence (see Appendix G). These broad categories correspond to the social presence conceptual maps (Mykota, 2018). Similar to Richardson et al. (2015), Mykota (2018) drew upon the COI framework and existing social presence literature to develop these maps.

Before the first interview, each participant was emailed an informed consent form and asked to sign and email it back (see Appendix H). Then at the start of the interview, I asked each participant if they objected to being recorded and reminded them their identity and all answers would remain confidential. Each interview was conducted synchronously using the Zoom interface. Zoom was chosen because of its ability to conduct and record a synchronous meeting, and the researchers and participants experience with the tool. The first interviews were scheduled for 60-minutes and held in December 2020 and January 2021. The second interviews were scheduled for 30-minutes and held in April and May 2021.

Initially, the purpose of the first interview was to collect how the instructors planned to

incorporate instructor social presence in their Spring 2021 semester courses. Then, the purpose of the second interview was to record the instructors' reflections og their social presence at the end of the Spring 2021 semester. However, after conducting three interviews, it became apparent the participants did not describe their instructor social presence in such finite terms as a specific semester or course. Instead, the study participants described their experiences across their entire online teaching career. Therefore, I slightly altered the interviews to focus on how instructors construct instructor social presence throughout their careers. This adjustment resulted in a better representation of the instructors' experiences.

After reviewing the results from the first round of interviews, I developed some overarching categories and potential codes and identified some potential gaps in my research. This prompted the development of clarifying questions that were asked during the second interview. For instance, the second interview asked instructors to describe how they designed and structured their courses, their use of informal communications, how they used feedback, and how their online teaching has evolved over time.

After each round of interviews, I used the professional online transcription service Temi to transcribe each interview verbatim. After every transcription, I substituted each participant's name with alternative pseudonyms and altered the transcripts to eliminate any institutional or personal descriptors to ensure anonymity. Then I listened to the recording of each interview while reviewing the transcript to check for accuracy and edited the text as necessary to reflect an accurate representation of the interviews. Each electronic transcript was stored on a password-protected drive located on the iCloud.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of consolidating and interpreting what participants have said

and what the researcher interprets and understand (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For my data analysis, I utilized a thematic analysis method to examine how instructor social presence is constructed. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative data analysis method and offers researchers a way to make sense of shared meanings and experiences (Braun & Clark, 2012).

Throughout my data collection and data analysis, I followed an ongoing analysis approach using analytic memos. An analytic memo is a short narrative detailing a researcher's insights, potential themes, and methodological questions (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Writing analytic memos throughout the data collection and analysis process is an invaluable tool for researchers to encourage analytic thinking and materialize ongoing reflections (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Memos were written after each interview transcription and after the first and second rounds of interviews to record my initial thoughts and identify potential themes or codes. Analytic memos were also written throughout my data analysis to help organize my thoughts and data and generate potential categories and themes. After reviewing my interview transcripts, I began to code my data using *a priori* or deductive codes derived from Richardson's et al. (2015) coding schema and indicators for instructor social presence. *A priori* codes were assigned to interviewee statements that indicatedinstructor social presence indicators. For example, if an instructor discussed sharing personal information with students, I coded their statement as self-disclosure (SD).

An *a priori* coding method develops a provisional list of codes based on theoretical frameworks or drawn from themes from existing literature (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2020). As a novice qualitative researcher, this approach allowed me to use pre-existing schema codes and indicators noted in the conceptual frameworks guiding my study. Some methodologists have suggested novice qualitative researchers should use an *a priori* coding approach to focus their

data analysis on issues important in the literature (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019; Saldana, 2013).

During the coding process, I also created inductive codes based on the study participant's significant statements. Significant statements are phrases that are repeated and emphasized in interviews, mentioned in the literature, and ones the interviewer has heard before (Costa, 2019). These codes include informal communication style (INF), reminders (REM), one-on-one meetings (ONE), communication strategies (COMM), trust (TRT), and structure (STR).

Next, I reviewed my coded data and organized and grouped my data according to the social presence conceptual framework. I categorized my data into three phases: establishing social presence, introducing social presence, and sustaining social presence. During this step, I consulted with two colleagues to determine if they agreed with the extent of my coding decisions.

After grouping the data into the three phases, I grouped similar codes together and began searching for themes. While reviewing the coded data, I continued to reflect on my second research question and grouped codes focused on instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors. While examining each of these groups, I identified patterns within theparticipants' statements and constructed themes and subthemes. As I identified potential themes,I continued to review the themes in relation to my data as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013).In addition, I would ask questions such as (a) Does this theme answer my research questions? (b)Is there enough meaningful data to support this theme? (c) Does this theme fit in the designated phase?

Once the themes and subthemes were selected, I consulted with two colleagues to review my themes and subthemes. My coding and themes were also reviewed and confirmed by my

dissertation chair. As a result, my themes and sub-themes are referred to as phases, categories, and indicators in the remaining chapters. These terms align with the terms often used in the COI framework and instructor social presence literature.

Researcher Role and Positionality Statement

Since this research study was structured using a constructivist paradigm, I must recognize my role and positionality and reflect on my potential interests and biases this may bring. Therefore, this role and positionality statement allows me to critically reflect on how I designed and analyzed this study. In general, I must recognize my positionality as an individual and educator with many years of experience and expertise in online teaching while also playing the roles of an online teacher, an online student, an online administrator, and a novice researcher. Each of these roles has given me specific perspectives regarding online education and instructor social presence.

First, my role as an online teacher has given insight into my study participants' experiences of teaching online. I have over a decade of experience teaching online and have spent many of those years studying current research and best practices for this delivery method. I must also acknowledge how my own beliefs and online teaching practices have evolved over time. In fact, my own experience is similar to some of my study participants. I began online teaching being very guarded and teacher centered. Over time, I moved to a more student-centered approach and became more open and empathetic towards my students. This evolution was highly influenced by my courses and readings throughout my PhD program. Also, I have spent the past few years creating social presence within my online classrooms and have experienced first-hand how this improves students' motivations and interactions. Thus, I am aware of my bias towards instructor social presence and sought to remain critical throughout my

data analysis and writing of my findings.

My role as an online student has significantly been influenced by beliefs pertaining to the importance of instructor and student social presence. Over the past five years, I have taken F2F and online classes as part of my doctoral program. During this experience, I have grown to understand the importance of an online instructor being present and available. For example, over the past two years, I have completed my doctoral program in a totally online format. I have grown to appreciate online instructors who are very active in their online classes and create ways for students to collaborate and interact. Once again, I strived to remain critical during my data analysis to ensure my participant's perspectives were detected and clearly noted.

My current professional role as Head of Curriculum Development and Design for an online global business school has also impacted my perception of instructor social presence. I began this role during the past year, and it has given me additional insight into the design and organization of online courses. As Head of Curriculum Development and Design, I oversee the learning management system and the curriculum and instructional design for every online course. So, I found myself particularly interested in how my study participants designed and organized their own courses and learning activities. During my study participant's interviews, I tried to remain neutral and focus only on their stories. However, at the end of some interviews, I did ask some participants follow up questions concerning any engaging activities or resources I found professionally beneficial. Additionally, I did not interview any faculty members from my institution to eliminate any bias this may have brought to my study,

My last role is a novice researcher focusing on online learning. Over the past five years, I have conducted a significant amount of research on topics such as online student retention and satisfaction, online students' sense of belonging, social presence, and online curriculum and

instructional design. The knowledge gained from this research has impacted my own understanding and beliefs of online teaching and best practices. For example, I have concluded that online students are retained by an instructor's online presence. This presence is often felt by students through their instructors' frequent communications, feedback, and use of interactive activities. Thus, I am aware of my bias towards instructor social presence and my strong belief of its importance within an online learning environment.

While each of these roles will help inform my understanding of my participants' experiences, they should not overshadow my data analysis and findings. Therefore, during my participant interviews and data analysis, I tried to keep my own thoughts and opinions in check. For example, I was conscious of how my words may influence participants' answers and was respectful of my participants' answers. I drew upon my undergraduate journalism education and training to remain neutral during interviews and allow the interviewee to voice their thoughts and opinions.

I also acknowledge my perspectives regarding online instruction and recognize they may influence the interpretation of my participants' experiences. Thus, throughout the data analysis and writing of my findings, I sought to remain neutral and represent each of my study participants' perspectives and experiences.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness tactics are used in qualitative research to ensure the data is ethically and appropriate collected, analyzed, and reported (Carlson, 2010). The following section describes the strategies used to enhance the study's credibility, reliability, and transferability.

Credibility

Credibility or internal validity refers to the trustworthiness and plausibility of the

researchfindings (Carlson, 2010). For my study, I used triangulation, member checking, and peer review to establish credibility. Triangulation is a powerful strategy to increase the credibility of research by collecting and analyzing data from multiple and different sources of information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I used triangulation by using multiple sources of data collection including interviewing ten different people and interviewing each person twice. I also compared and cross-checked my participants' responses with each other and existing literature toensure their credibility.

Member checking was also conducted to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data collection (Carlson, 2010). Member checking involves soliciting feedback on preliminary findings from some of the study participants to confirm the credibility of the researcher's interpretation. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After the second round of interviews was transcribed, I emailed both sets of interview transcripts to each participant to check for accuracy. The participants were given two weeks to review the transcripts and provide me with any corrections, feedback, or concerns. Lastly, I asked two peer reviewers, who are highly knowledgeable in online learning and teaching, to review my overall findings.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings are consistent and dependable. During my study, I created an audit trail and expressed a researcher's reflexivity by including mypositionality statement in this chapter. An audit trail was created to document my data collection process and acted as evidence for my research. A Microsoft Excel file was used to record the date, names, times, and data collection activity. Audit trails assist qualitative researchers in carefully documenting all components of a study (Carlson, 2010). I also used analytic memos to record my thoughts during the data collection and analysis process. Memos

were completed after each interview transcript and cycle of data analysis. Lastly, I will maintain all video and audio for three years in a password protected drive.

Transferability

Lastly, transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of one study applies to other contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transferability was achieved by using thick and rich descriptions and maximum variation in sample strategies. I have provided rich, detailed descriptions of the study participants' experiences through direct quotes. Maximum variation was also used to enhance the study's transferability. The study's sample consisted of a range of online instructors who teach in different subject areas, have different years of online teaching experience, and have an array of demographics.

Ethical Considerations

Qualitative studies are dependent on the integrity and ethics of the researcher to support the research study's credibility and reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this section, Patton's (2015) ethical issue checklist was used to guide my ethical considerations and described below.

Each study participant was asked to sign a consent form informingthem of my study's aims, what their participation entailed, the voluntary nature of the study, andhow their anonymity was protected.

Due to the sensitive nature of in-depth interviewing, several confidentiality actions were taken to ensure the participant's confidentiality. First, pseudonymswere assigned to each participant and used throughout the data collection and analysis process. Secondly, participant names and affiliations and any indicators were not included in transcriptsor the final written report.

This study utilized several methods to ensure the informed consentof all study participants. First, each participant was asked to sign a consent form outlining the voluntary nature of the study and confidentiality. Secondly, student participants were asked to review their interview transcripts and provide any corrections or feedback.

All collected data was saved via iCloud drive and was password protected. Also, any participants' requests to review their transcripts, my findings, andmy final research paper will be honored.

Limitations of Study

There are several limitations that may affect the generalizability of this study's findings. All study participants were situated in the same large Midwestern university, which limits the findings to only one higher education context and region. Future considerations may include interviewing online instructors at other higher education institution types and regions. The second limitation is restricting my research to only online instructors and not including students' perceptions of instructor social presence. In future studies, student perceptions may becollected to gain a better understanding of how instructor social presence is constructed and perceived by all members of the learning community.

Thirdly, the study only interviewed instructors who had seven years or more experience teaching online. Therefore, these findings may not apply to all online instructors. There may be additional value in understanding how instructors with limited online teaching experience construct instructor social presence. Lastly, this study was conducted during the height of the COVID pandemic. This experience may have impacted how participants construct instructor social presence due to additional demands. A follow-up study may bring additional insights on how the transitions to online learning have changed how instructors construct instructor social

presence.

In conclusion, this chapter presented an overview of my constructivist philosophical approach to this qualitative study. This approach guided my research design to include a purposeful sampling process to select my study participants and the use of semi-structured interviews for data collection. As a result, ten online instructors were interviewed twice for a total of nineteen interviews. The chapter also presented my data analysis process of using an *a priori* coding approach derived from existing teaching and social presence indicators and social presence conceptual maps. Finally, the chapter ended detailing how I ensure my study's credibility, reliability, reflexibility, and transferability.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructors construct instructor social presence within an online learning environment. The first research question was aimed to explore the processes and practices instructors used to establish, introduce, and sustain instructor social presence. The second research question examined how instructors construct instructor social presence using instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors. In the following chapter, I present the findings from my data analysis.

Overall, my data analysis revealed instructors construct instructor social presence by navigating through three phases: establishing instructor social presence, introducing social presence, and sustaining social presence. Within each of these phases, several sub-themes were identified and organized into categories and indicators as shown in Table 4.1. The terms categories and indicators are frequently used in the COI framework literature, and therefore, the same terminology is used in my findings for clarity and consistency.

In the Establishing Instructor Social Presence phase, two categories were identified (course design and structure and communication and availability) along with five indicators (online learning frameworks, collaborative spaces and activities, consistent structure, communication norms, and instructor availability). The Introducing Instructor Social Presence phase included two categories (introductions and welcoming activities and affective communication) and eight indicators (introduction and announcements, welcoming activities, a friendly and empathetic tone, real and approachable, acknowledgement and encouragement, one-on-one communication, self-disclosure, and storytelling and humor). The final phase is Sustaining Instructor Social Presence phase and includes two categories (discussion and feedback and frequent and informal communications) and four categories (discussion forums,

feedback, frequent announcements and reminders and conversational style). In the following sections, I present each phase and its associated categories and indicators.

Table 4.1: Summary of Data Analysis Findings
The following table lists the phases, categories, and indicators identified in the data analysis.

Phases	Categories	Indicators
Establishing Instructor Social Presence	Course Design and Structure	Online learning frameworks Collaborative spaces and activities Consistent structure
	Communication & Availability	Communication norms Instructor availability
Introducing Instructor Social Presence	Introductions and Welcoming Activities	Introductions and announcements Welcoming activities
	Affective Communication	Friendly and empathetic tone Real and approachable Acknowledgement & encouragement One-on-one communications Storytelling and humor Self-disclosure
Sustaining Instructor Social Presence	Assignment Feedback	Solicit student feedback
	Consistent and Informal Communications	Frequent announcements and reminders Conversational style

Establishing Instructor Social Presence Phase

My data analysis suggested the first phase associated with constructing instructor social presence is the Establishing Instructor Social Presence phase. In this phase, two categories and five indicators were identified. The first category is Design and Organization, and its indicators are online learning frameworks, collaborative spaces and activities, and consistent structure. The second category is Communication and Availability and its indicators communication norms and instructor availability. The following sections further explain my findings.

Design and Organization Category

The Design and Organization category refers to how instructors design and organize the structure of the online environment, collaborative spaces, and instructional activities and assists in laying a foundation to construct instructor social presence. This was completed using the three indicators: online design frameworks, creating collaborative spaces and activities, and building a consistent structure.

Online learning frameworks. My data analysis found instructors use online learning frameworks to guide the structure of their courses. Three instructors described using specific learning frameworks to help ensure instructors and students interact, build connections with students, and provide a curriculum road map. For example, Charlotte described using the COI framework to ensure her students would interact with the instructor (teaching presence), interact with each other (social presence), and interact with the course content (cognitive presence).

Another instructor, John, articulated how he designs his online courses using Moore's (1997) Theory of Transactional Distance. This theory postulates that the transaction between teachers and students requires three factors: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. He explained how Moore's theory helps him build connections between students, the content, and himself:

> I actually use that (Moore's Theory) to frame my course. Like when I'm looking at the environment, do I have all three represented? And then, how am I actually using that interaction to facilitate student engagement? So, with regards to content, am I actually making it so that students feel that they can master the material? That they are capable of being successful in the classroom. Are they engaged with the material?

Lastly, Emma shared how she uses the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge

(TPACK) framework to design her courses. The TPACK framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) considers three knowledge areas when designing lessons: technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge. Emma further explained how all her online courses are designed using a roadmapshe calls explore, create, and share:

> Everything falls into either an explore, create or share. And so, in explorations, people are reading and watching videos. And in creating, they're working on something, and in sharing, they're somehow sharing with colleagues. And then, at the end of each unit, we have a checklist to help make sure that they are clear on that.

Collaborative spaces and activities. Several of the study participants discussed creating intentional spaces and learning activities to create a learning community. Online communities were formed using instructional activities requiring students to collaborate or interact with one another. The dedicated spaces and activities were built using tools like the university's LMS, Google classrooms, and Flipgrid. Flipgrid is a video-based discussion tool used by many of the instructors to increase the quality of interactions.

Online discussion forums were often used by the instructors to promote collaboration and interactions between instructors and other students. John described his evolution of designing discussion forums and why he uses Flipgrid, a video-based discussion tool:

> What I have learned over the years is to move away from very cognitive-oriented questions in the discussion forums to more affective questions. So, looking at things like motivation or values that students can share who they are. And then, I think that also helps to form that relationship with other students when you're not just talking about theories, but you're also talking about how those things impact your life….The idea is that instead of having a text piece, you might have students being more spontaneous and

> connecting to other signals besides the narrative they're talking about in a post. So, I think there's a lot of cues that can go into that, and you know, maybe potentially a better understanding of who the person is.

Michael also noted the importance of a well-written discussion question stating, "There should be some good prompts and guided questions, to help, so that the instructor can respond with follow up questions to students."

Consistent course structure. Many instructors spoke about implementing a clear and consistent structure or navigation to their course. They believed a clear and consistent structure promotes a stable and trusting presence and lowers student anxiety. For instance, Lily explained what she considered when designing an online course:

> Consistency is the most important for me. If students know what to expect from unit to unit, if you're using consistent structuring, then that communicates a stable, consistent instructor presence. Which again, is very important if you're hoping to establish trust because you have to; build a certain level of familiarity and consistency so that you can encourage risk-taking in other areas.

Lily continued and shared examples of how she ensures consistency resides in her courses:

> The course I teach has four sections: every single chapter is learn, play, create, engage. So, you always know there's going to be a section where you're going to take in some new stuff, you're going to play around with something, and then you're going to somehow work on your own on work based on what we've introduced…So, I think that clear and consistent structuring throughout the course is really important for presence because it provides a feeling of security that you're not lost.

Furthermore, Emma explained how a consistent course structure helps lower student anxiety:

> For all of our courses, we always start with a roadmap…So, I think that consistent structure helps students know what to expect and decrease their anxiety, where they knowlike 'Oh, this is this, and this is this'. Then they don't have to worry about how am I navigating this course? And they can focus on the content. So, in my mind, that is actually kind of freeing.

Communication and Availability Category

The second Establishing Instructor Social Presence category identified in my data analysis is communication and availability. This category describes the types of guidelines and norms instructors establish prior to courses beginning and consists of two indicators: communications norms and instructor availability.

Communication norms. Some of the instructors said they often determined guidelines on how and when they will communicate with students. These communication norms were decided upon and added to either the course syllabi or LMS prior to the course beginning. Grace determined communication norms to clarify her expectations and create a safe learning environment. She explained:

> For example, I've got an infographic that is communication norms. This is how I'm going to communicate. This is when I'm going to communicate. This is how you can reach me. This is what you can expect from me. Same thing with the organization by having a structure in place; it tells them, again, this is, in my opinion, this is a safe place.I want you to go in knowing exactly where to find things, when I'm going to communicate, and how I'm going to communicate and go from there.

Lily also includes clear communication expectations in her syllabus so students know when they can expect a response or feedback:

> We're always really clear about when we're going to get back to them. So, if you send me an email, I will respond to you within 48 hours. If I don't, please follow up with me because that is what I try to do. We're really clear in the syllabus about when you're going to expect feedback. If you turn something in to me, I'll have feedback to you in seven days. If I don't, please follow up with me.

Instructor availability. Besides setting communication norms, the instructors also reflected on how and when they would be available. Many of the instructors felt it was essential to offer students multiple ways to connect with them. In particular, the instructors used email, texts, phone, discussion forums, virtual office hours, private chats, and time during synchronous classes. These communication methods were clearly listed in their syllabi and added in multiple places in the LMS.

Some of the instructors also shared they often face the challenge of always being available to students because of emerging technologies. Charlotte stated:

> The one challenge I mentioned earlier is making sure you're not available 24/7. And setting that expectation. But also, it's hard for me to set that expectation when students text me or message me, and I respond within five minutes because I can. Right? But then, it's later on when they message me again, and I am unable to respond in five minutes. They're like, what is going on? Right? So, I'm still finding that challenge with using (Microsoft) teams that sometimes it's so easy…Once they've seen me respond quickly, then there tends to be an expectation on their part that I can respond quickly.

Michael shared similar feelings about the expectation of responding very quickly to

students' emails:

> I think 24 hours these days is almost too long. You know. But I still say 24 hoursand probably much earlier because we don't want to say I'm going to respond to you in 20 minutes, and sometimes I'm really not going to do 20 minutes. Yeah, expectations nowadays, I think, is really to respond as quickly as you can.

Introducing Social Presence Phase

Introducing Instructor Social Presence is the second phase identified during my data analysis. This phase encompasses the initial instructional activities, and behaviors instructors used to build a community of learners and relationships with students. For purposes of this study, this phase was confined to the first four weeks of a course. During this phase, two categories and eight indicators were found. The following sections further detail these findings.

Introductions and Welcoming Activities Category

The Introductions and Welcoming category explains how instructors introduce their presence by sending introductions and announcements to students. This category consists of two indicators including the first indicator introductions and announcements and the second indicator welcoming activities.

Introductions and announcements. Every instructor discussed sending out an introduction or announcement via video or email at the beginning of the course. Although all the instructors sent out messages, the purpose and timing of the messages slightly differed among instructors. For example, Elizabeth, Emma, and Grace sent out emails even before a course began to give students reassurance and structure. Elizabeth explained her process as:

> Usually, a week or two before courses start, students tend to get a little extra itchy and uncertain. And they'll often reach out to me. So, when I'm teaching, I always send a

message a couple of weeks ahead saying, 'Here's where the course is. It's not open yet. There's nothing you need to do'. It's sort of reassuring them but also letting them know there is a human who's going to be helping them.

During the first few weeks of class, all the instructors sent messages to provide instructions, clarify expectations, connect with students, and lessen student anxiety. For example, Emma shared the purpose of her first announcements:

> I do think helping students not feel anxious and nervous is such a goal in those first couple of weeks. So, I think, maybe that's part of it for me; it's more making sure that my students feel okay versus that they know that I'm here.

In Beth's introduction emails, she tries to infuse herself into her explanations about herself, what she is interested in, and why she is excited to teach the class. Likewise, Lily's introduction video includes personal storytelling and humor to help make connections with students. Other instructors send out announcements to introduce themselves, their teaching assistants, the structure and major components of the course, and their expectations.

Welcoming activities. Many instructors also described facilitating welcoming activities to encourage interactions, gather feedback, and lessen student anxieties. In one of her classes, Charlotte includes a welcome unit that contains no academic content. Instead, the unit is designed so students can practice using technology and allow them to get to know her and other students. Charlotte explained:

> The different pieces of the welcome unit have them practicing each piece of technology that they're going to use. So, they might use Flipgrid to introduce themselves. And then they have to reply to someone in Flipgrid. So, they practice that. But the questions they'reanswering in Flipgrid are all just personal questions about themselves, what their

career goals are, what their major is, you know, whatever. So, that involves them getting to know each other.

Several of the instructors also used surveys or asked questions to get to know students better. For instance, Lily stated:

> I always administer a survey to the students. And I know that it doesn't seem like it relates to instructor presence, but that communicates to them that I'm interested in who they are, which is a big part of who I am as an instructor is someone who knows that I'm going to be able to teach them better the more I know about them. So, I think that survey administration in the first five weeks is really crucial.

John and Charlotte spoke about how their welcoming activities allowed them to help many students who have anxiety about taking online classes. For instance, Charlotte described her interactions with students:

> They give me some personal information what they've liked about online classes.If they've had online classes before and what kind of experience they've had withonline classes. And then, that's nice because it gives me something to respond tobecause most people have concerns about online classes. Most of them haven't done them before. And so, I'm able then to respond and talk through their worriesa little bit and say, 'I've done this a lot. Like this is what we're going to do to solve that'.

Affective Communication Category

Another prominent category identified from my data analysis is the affective communication category. Affective communication is described as personal expressions of emotions, feelings, beliefs, and values and is considered a social presence indicator (Rourke et al., 2001). Within this category, six indicators were discovered including friendly and

empathetic tone, real and approachable, one-on-one communications, self-disclosure, acknowledgement and encouragement, storytelling and humor. The following sections further explain each of these indicators.

Friendly and empathetic. During the first few weeks of class, the instructors wanted to set a friendly and empathetic tone with students. In fact, several instructors mentioned this was especially important during COVID. For Charlotte, she tries to be friendly, welcoming, and supportive early in the semester. She described trying "so hard, in the beginning, to come across as I'm willing to listen. I'm willing to help you." In addition, she described how she wants her students to perceive her:

> I try to come across as friendly and welcoming… I'm trying to be me to my students. And I would like to think that comes across… I've seen students fear professors before, and I don't think my students fear me. So, I feel like I'm succeeding in that, at least, in some way.

Julie and Lily also mentioned examples of the supportive and empathetic comments they shared with students during COVID. For instance, Julie displayed empathy by telling her students:

> The whole goal is that you're better in eight weeks than you are from today. And I don't want you staying up until two in the morning, stressing over the work because you most likely have a job to go to the next day. So, don't stress about the late points. Don't stress about that. Have a conversation with me. And we'll move from there.

Likewise, Lily shared how COVID influenced her use of words like empathy and grace, especially in her welcome video:

> I said to the students this semester we're going to have, you know, kind of our ruling

word be grace. I'm going to give you a lot of grace, and I hope you give each other a lot of grace, and we understand that we're all in a very unique situation.

Real and approachable. Another tactic used by instructors to introduce their presence is demonstrating they are a real persona and approachable. For Samuel, his objective is to show students that he is a real person. He explains:

> The first couple of weeks is when I try to be the most relatable. I am a real person. So, I share the things that are happening in my research around that time. I share the things that are happening in my life at that time…So, I introduce myself as a person, as an approachable person.

Samuel also mentioned he tells students early on, "Sometimes it's not so comfortable for you to stop a professor. Please do so at any time because I'm never going to get mad. I'll be very happy to answer any questions or whatever".

Elizabeth also shared an example of how she has evolved in showing students thatshe is a real person:

> I'm always trying to figure out ways to make them (students) very aware I am a real person. And so, part of that is over time my intro videos have changed. Like I mentioned, they were much more formal. I would have just a solid like curtain background, and if I made any mistakes while talking, I'd redo the video. That was a couple of years ago. And since then, if I make a mistake while I'm talking, I keep thatvideo. If my dog barks once or twice, I'll still keep the video.

One-on-one conversations. Another way instructors introduced their presence had one-on-one communications with students. Many instructors indicated establishing office hours to meet with students directly or have one-on-one videos with students. Other instructors described

using the private chat feature in their LMS or Microsoft Teams' chat feature to communicate one-on-one with students. For instance, Charlotte posts questions students must answer privately during the first few days of class. She explained:

> That's so they know where the private chat is, but it's also, I make sure to reply to every single student, regardless of how many I have to private chat and say like 'Thanks for this info.

Charlotte also uses the one-on-one conversation to ask students if they have any concerns and address them early. Another example given by Lily was having required one-on-one meetings with students early in the class. She explained these meetings seemed especially important during COVID since many students felt very isolated. Furthermore, Michael shared his thoughts on establishing communication early on:

> I think communicating transparently and openly with them from as soon as they enroll, if that's possible, or at least a couple of weeks before the class is scheduled to start. I think that's very important. So, we cannot wait until we walk into the classroom on the first day like many people maybe do in F2F teaching.

Acknowledgement and encouragement indicator. Besides being friendly and empathetic, instructors also talked about acknowledging and encouraging students early in the semester. For instance, instructors created online discussion forums or questionnaires to gather information about students and turn around and acknowledge the information the students shared. For example, Lily described how she creates podcasts after gathering the students' introductions and making sure to say every student's name somehow.

"I think it's very important for motivation very early on to make sure that you acknowledge in a public forum peoples' name to say you have done work, I have seen it,and I

appreciate it," said Lily.

Similarly, Emma sends a welcome message to students and identify different students and what strengths they bring to the course and acknowledge that "we all have a voice and value". Beth and Emma described how they acknowledge students' hard work. Specifically, Emma tries to highlight the positives of her students' hard work and acknowledge when students share personal information because "for students that was potentially a moment of vulnerability for them and I'm a safe person to share that type of thing with."

Encouragement was also used to create a positive learning climate. Lily described her recent experience co-teaching with an instructor at a different institution. This instructor "brought a lot of overtly positive energy to the course" and used very overt expressions of support like "I appreciate the time that you are dedicating to your own progress."

Lily confessed, at first, she thought it was very patronizing to speak to graduate students as if they were children. However, she was surprised to find the exact opposite happened. The students really appreciated the positive expressions and performed very well. "I will definitely continue those – what seemed to me, you know, to be quite heavy-handed but really seeing the students really appreciate those expressions of support," admitted Lily.

Storytelling and humor. Several instructors also noted using storytelling and humor. For instance, Julie used stories to connect with students:

> If they're sharing a story, I'm trying to share back and make connections right away. I'm okay with taking class time to do that because I've been in the education field for over two decades. I know a lot of schools and school districts, so I normally find connections with them. So, sharing those stories, pulling in the connections, remembering the stories they tell and asking them about it throughout the way.

Lily also shared stories from her past professional experiences:

> It comes naturally for me that I share stores a lot, a lot, a lot. I also try because I am a teacher and I'm teaching teachers. It's easy to empathize with them and what they're going through. So, I share my struggles with them.

Both Lily and Michael described using humor when interacting with students. Lily shared, "I definitely use humor when I can. And sometimes, I'll just put on weird glasses and a big nose and a mustache and just visual things that are also kind of easy to get".

Self-disclosure. Another prevalent indicator found in my data analysis is self-disclosure behaviors. Self-disclosure is when an instructor discloses information about their lives, educational background, family background, hobbies, etc. and is known as a strong indicator of social presence (Richardson et al. 2015; Swan, 2002). For Elizabeth, she felt very comfortable sharing personal details with students like her own struggles with depression:

> I will relay to them if they are coming to me (to discuss their depression) and letting them know like it's okay. I'm not one of those people that think, 'Oh, it's all in your head'. And you can just see the relief on their face as soon as you say it. And there's been a lot of students that I've been able to really connect with because we have that commonality.

On the other hand, some instructors had reservations about sharing personal information in an academic setting. For instance, Michael shared these thoughts:

> I feel like with online teaching, you kind of end up revealing more about your personal personality and personal circumstances, maybe than you do in F2F teaching…I don't go out of my way to artificially share too much either because I want to find that balance of what is appropriate and what is necessary to function because we are still a learning teaching community.

By and large, most instructors indicated they were comfortable sharing their educational background, professional experiences, and what is happening in their research. For Grace, sharing this type of information helped her develop relevancy and credibility to students:

> I want them to understand that I have relevancy and that I've been where they've been, you know, I want them to basically know that I have credibility, that I'm not somebody that I never taught in a class and I'm going to come in and teach you how to do this in a classroom.

Moreover, several instructors spoke about using social media like Twitter and personal websites to share information about themselves. For instance, Julie explained how Twitter plays a large part in her classes. She often shares information regarding her conference presentations and tries to connect students with professionals in the field.

Instructors also felt comfortable sharing their past difficulties or personal mistakes and failures when they were a student. Samuel shared this example:

> I try to be relatable before exams to prep them and to talk about how I started when I was a student. I talk to them and tell them how I failed one class when I was a student myself.I was an A student, and I still failed this optics class. And it was a hard shock for me, andit was hard to not be angry. But it was not the end of the world. And here I am. I'm a professor now. So, I told them everyone fails at times in their life, and it is okay.

Another example, shared by John, involved sharing his own mistakes and how this has helped him learn and grow as a person:

> I tell stories about things like mistakes I've made as a developing person myself of when I've made errors in judgement based on valuing things other than science. So, talking about personal examples of helping family members with health crises and how do you

evaluate that information. Or how do you put that into a context of understanding unintended consequences? All of those things are basically trying to show that we are all on this kind of path of how do we improve our thinking? And that is partly telling stories and letting them know that even though I have things that can help them, I'm also learning as well.

Lastly, a few instructors talked about how being on camera during COVID changed how they felt about disclosing personal information. "I think, especially this year, my mind has changed a bit. I think since everybody is sort of sharing a lot more and it's just part of it because we need to talk about things. I think it has maybe become more accepted to share more," said Michael.

Likewise, Lily discussed how teaching at home during COVID caused her to share more about her personal life than she previously would. For instance, she told the story of how her young children kept interrupting her while she was recording a video and "it's now part of the introduction video." While Elizabeth expressed how her puppy would make an appearance during her synchronous classes or video recordings and the students loved it.

Sustaining Instructor Social Presence

Sustaining Instructor Social Presence phase is the third phase instructors navigate to construct social presence. Two categories were identifiedincluding the first category discussion and feedback and the second category frequent and informal communications. Along with the categories, four indicators were discovered: discussion forum, feedback, frequent announcements and reminders and conversational style.

Discussion and Feedback Category

The first category identified in this phase is the discussion and feedback category. In this

category, instructors sustained or maintained their instructor social presence by interacting with students in online discussion boards and providing student feedback. Two identifiers are included: discussion forums and feedback.

Discussion forums. Many of the instructors spoke about using online discussion forums in their online classes. The participants' responses were mixed when asked to explain their online discussion board participation. Elizabeth spoke about participating in online discussion boards more in the first half of the semester because students are getting used to responding to questions. She also tries to participate more in the first half of the week than the second of the week to try and catch issues or mistakes early on. Whereas Charlotte selected not to participate in the online discussion boards because:

> I kind of want them (discussion boards) to be the students' space where they can work through the thought process, work through questions, and see what they come up with. Now, if I see something that's like completely wrong, that's when I can pop in.

John and Emma have tried multiple approaches, from participating in online discussions at the beginning of the course and fading out to not participating at all. They both considered discussion boards as a way to engage with students and create a learning community rather than using them as an assessment method. Therefore, they are very intentional when and how they give students feedback.

Feedback. Feedback was another popular way for instructors to interact with students and show their presence. "For me, that's the most critical and the most important part of the teaching process," claimed Samuel. Similarly, Emma clarified her thoughts on feedback as:

> I think for me, especially with teaching online, because you don't have those face-to-face interactions, all of it needs to come down on the feedback. Like you are paying

> thousands of dollars for this experience. And even if you were paying hundreds of dollars, I want it to be worthwhile. That's where I can help.

The instructors also spoke about giving feedback in multiple forms and ways. For example, Michael uses both written and verbal feedback, emojis, and reaction buttons during his synchronous classes. Charlotte uses a very structured approach to providing feedback using videos. She lets students know which day she posts feedback on and tries to post feedback on the same day throughout the class. She believes this provides a structure for the students and gives them a sense of her presence.

However, several instructors voiced concerns about providing personalized feedback due to their large class sizes. For instance, Samuel shared how he provides feedback to very large classes:

> Now, in all honesty, last semester, I had 2,000 students. So, the chances of me giving any meaningful one-on-one formative assessment to 2,000 students is close to zero. So, then I have to build activities that are kind of like self-assessing. Right? You get the activity from the activity. So, I build a lot of practical homework, multiple-choice questions, and short essay questions.

Elizabeth also commented on the difficulty of large classes, "when you have 600 students, and I'm sure you've heard this before, there gets to be a point where it's hard to give individualized feedback." Thus, she tries to use students' names in any correspondence to try and provide some personalization.

On the contrary, Grace and Lily discussed gathering feedback from students. Grace sends students a very detailed survey at the end of the course to help her connect with students and improve her courses. Whereas Lily administers a mid-semester survey to check in with students

and responds accordingly:

> I always respond collectively to those surveys. So, I say, this is what I heard from you is going on. Here's how I appreciate what you've told me. And here's how I'm going to try to address what you have said needs addressing. So, in that way, just again, it's always useful for me because I find out how the course can be improved before it's too late.

Consistent and Informal Communications Category

The second and final category identified in the Sustaining Social Presence phase is the Consistent and Informal Communication category. This category refers to how instructors frequently send communications to students and use an informal communication style. Two indicators are noted in this category: frequent announcements and reminders and conversational style. The following sections provide additional information.

Frequent announcements and reminders. Almost every instructor talked about sending frequent announcements and reminders to interact and support students. Elizabeth's explanation was a very typical response:

> One way that I communicate with them is through these weekly intro videos. I also postit as a podcast in case they don't; if they're using data and they don't have enough or whatever, they can do that instead. And so that's kind of my first 'here's what we're doing'. It's something that's like four minutes long video to see what's going on, how it relates to last week, and what does the agenda look like for this week.

While some instructors send announcements at the beginning of the week, others send recaps at the end of the week, like Grace, who said:

> I always send a recap from the previous week on a Monday. So, they know when it's coming. And in that, I will recap and then give additional links, or if I have personal

> examples as an educator in the field to share with them, you know, to learn more, I add those in. And I've found that in evaluations, students have said that I'm very approachable. So, I think that kind of helps begins to build community.

Besides weekly announcements and recaps, most instructors discussed frequently sending reminders to students. The instructors felt it was essential to send students these reminders for important assignment due dates or exam dates. Interestingly, several instructors seem to defend sending these reminders. For example, Samuel described his response to those who think he is treating his students like they are in high school:

> I'm treating them as people. People. People that have a lot to do. And I appreciate it when people remind me of important things. Right? And give me important points along the way. Right? Don't forget that…And if there is special homework this week, I'm going to let you know. Now, don't forget this special homework has an extra way to do this or that.

Conversational style. My study findings also showed most instructors used an informal communication style. For many of the instructors, an informal conversational style gave students a sense of being real, friendly, and approachable. Charlotte described her communication tone or style in this way:

> I'm kind of an informal person. So, the tone at which I have been speaking to you is the tone I usually use with my students. I make jokes a lot of times. I try to put emojis and things because that's who I am. I try to be me essentially. I don't try to be some stuffy person because that would make me uncomfortable.

The instructors also modeled informal communication styles to students. For instance, Grace always tells her students, "I'm just Grace. I'm not a professor" to put them on a level

playing field with me." And Charlotte tells her students they can use an informal tone when communicating with her in private chats because "If they use emojis or if they use you are instead of, you're, that's fine with me because it's all about just getting the message to them quickly."

Several instructors described instances when they used an informal tone. For instance, Samuel uses a very informal speech tone during lectures and interacting with students during online course breakouts. Lily described using a more informal tone when making videos for students and a more academic tone when giving feedback.

While John expressed the importance of balancing informal communications to make students feel safe but still establishing boundaries. He stated:

> I want to create a system that they can feel safe and engaging with me. And I think it's again another balancing act between trying to be very informal with regards to if you need help, you should totally come to me, and I'm here, and I can help. But also, being very much like these are the things that are appropriate for me to help you with. I try to be very clear about boundaries, but at the same time, be informal.

Emma also described using her informal communication style to make students feel sheis real and reflect her personality style:

> I always read through things multiple times to just make sure – like I'm generally a pretty friendly person – but my email tone sometimes can become 'hard'. So, sometimes I just go back and say, 'Okay, do I need to soften that a little bit?' And then I just, by habit, tend to use smiley faces and exclamation points, which is a whole gender issue. But like that is part of my style in email form of communication. I would say…I think at the bottom line, I try to make sure it's an email that, if I were a student, I would want to

receive.

In conclusion, my data analysis found instructors constructed instructor social presence in an online environment by navigating through three phases: establishing instructor social presence, introducing social presence, and sustaining social presence. Then within each of these phases, the instructors deliberately used specific instructional activities, immediacy behaviors and communication strategies to build, introduce, and maintain their presence with students.

For example, instructors established instructor social presence using three categories to establish their presence. First, instructors noted using online frameworks to ensure interaction between faculty, students, and content. Secondly, instructors shared the importance of adding intentional spaces and activities such as online discussion forums to promote interaction and relationship building. Thirdly, instructors voiced the importance of having a clear and structured course of building trust and lessening student anxiety. Next, instructors made conscious decisions regarding their communication norms and availability before courses beginning. Finally, instructors design a safe and inclusive climate by extending parts of their human self-honoring student identities and backgrounds and including student resources and climate statements in their courses.

Next, the instructors introduced the instructor social presence by using two methods to portray being real, friendly, empathetic, and approachable and to begin creating a social, emotional climate. The first method instructors used was sending introductions and announcements and facilitating welcoming activities. The purpose of these messages and activities were to connect with students and lessen their anxieties. The second method focused oncreating an emotional, social climate by being friendly and empathetic, acknowledging and encouraging students, and having one-on-one interactions and communications with students.

The final phase consisted of the instructors sustaining instructor social presence to maintain a presence within the online learning communication and strengthen their students' sense of intimacy and connection. In this phase, instructors exhibited immediacy behaviors, actively interacting with students, sending frequent communications, and using an informal communication style. The first method consisted of the instructors displaying immediacy behavior using self-disclosure, storytelling and humor, and acknowledging and encouraging students. The instructors' next method was actively participating in online discussion boards and interacting with students by providing and requesting feedback. The third method had instructors deliver frequent announcements and reminders and use and promote an information communication style.

Overall, the instructors constructed instructor social presence by designing and building a social-emotional online learning climate where students feel welcome and safe. This climate was designed and organized to encourage instructor and student engagement and interaction. Then the climate was supported through the instructor's immediacy behaviors and communication styles that portrayed the instructors as being real, empathetic, approachable, and available or present. In the next section, I will use these findings to answer my research questions and provide implications and recommendations for future research and practice.

INTERLUDE

The purpose of this interlude is to allow the reader to pause and gain a better understanding of the context of the following discussion of findings and implications for practice and research. As previously mentioned, this study was conducted during the Spring of 2020. This timeframe was during the COVID-19 global pandemic, which forced most higher education institutions to transition to what Hodges et al. (2020) described as emergency remote teaching (ERT). Emergency remote teaching is the "temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternative delivery model due to crisis circumstances" (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 13). During this time, instructors were forced to quickly shift from face-to-face to a fully virtual instructional delivery approach. In stark contrast, this research study looks beyond this "moment of time" and offers insights into a potential paradigm shift for online teaching and learning – instructor social presence.

An examination of the teaching and learning literature offers a vast amount of "advice," based on research, concerning the effectiveness and practices of teaching and learning (Banner & Cannon, 1997; Hativa, 2012). The current study adds to this "advice" literature and focuses on providing online instructors with a conceptual framework and process to establish a learning environment that is socially and emotionally supportive. However, I acknowledge other works such as Banner and Cannon's (1997) "*The Elements of Teaching*," and their view that we should consider not only the process of teaching but also the people who are responsible for it. For instance, Banner and Cannon (1997) denote successful teachers have specific qualities such as learning, authority, ethics, order, imagination, tenacity, compassion, patience, character, and pleasure. Therefore, I recognize the significance of the human factor variables of teaching and learning.

The study of teaching and learning is also undergoing a significant transition as online education and new technologies have quickly expanded into higher education. Online teaching and learning have caused traditional paradigms to shift towards new pedagogical approaches and innovative ways learning environments are designed, built, and facilitated (Carnegie Mellon University, 2020). For instance, the traditional approach to teaching is evolving to one focused on increasing collaboration, communication, and connecting learning through enhanced teaching practices (Kastner, 2020). As a result, the role of the instructor must evolve and they must become responsible for the design and facilitation of a learning experience that encourages interactions, socialization, collaboration and generates an online presence.

Readers may sense my strong viewpoint towards the role and responsibilities of the instructor to create and manage an online learning experience. I acknowledge this perspective and recognize it may be problematic for those who consider online teaching as a collaborative process as suggested by the COI framework. However, my study reflects the perspectives of other online education researchers such as Kozan and Caskurlu (2018), Pollard et al. (2014), and Richardson et al. (2016), who believe instructors have a unique social role in online teaching environments.

Besides online pedagogies, I also recognize other pedagogies may impact how online instructors establish and facilitate instructor social presence. For example, a culturally responsive pedagogy honors students' cultural strengths and backgrounds and requires instructors to be culturally responsive (Lynch, 2018). I am fully aware of the significance of online instructors valuing the cultural and heritage backgrounds of students and ensuring the instructional practices and behaviors are culturally responsive. However, this consideration is outside the scope of this research study.

My research findings also highlight the significance of utilizing technology, media, and learning management systems to establish instructor social presence. For instance, my findings indicated instructor and student social interactions were facilitated using a variety of technologies and media such as Zoom and Microsoft teams video conferencing tools, prerecorded videos, instant text messaging, and online discussions. Thus, different forms of media, video conferencing programs, and educational technology may also impact how instructor social presence is constructed.

Next, pedagogical shifts require online instructors to adopt new instructional practices and technologies and change existing characteristics, qualities and underlying beliefs. I realize the recommendations presented in the next chapter are based on the notion that instructors will receive adequate education and professional development and institutional support. However, I am aware of studies that have explored the complex institutional and cultural factors that inhibit faculty from adopting new pedagogies and instructional practices. For instance, Smith and Herckis' (2018) study of Carnegie Mellon's adoption of technology-enhanced learning found faculty are committed to the practice of teaching. However, they also found there is an institutional disconnect between the roles faculty envision and their personal satisfaction roles required by their institution. For instance, when it comes to the consideration of hire, tenure, and promotion, new disciplinary knowledge is more valued by the institution than the scholarship of teaching.

Lastly, I recognize the existence of the philosophical differences and underlying tensions between a teacher-centered approach and the student-centered approach presented in this study. The purpose of this study is not to disregard other philosophical beliefs of online instruction and teaching. Instead, the purpose is to examine the concept of instructor social presence leading to

further discourse and understanding of creating a quality online educational experience.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of my research study was to examine how instructors construct instructor social presence within an online learning environment. This study was guided by two research questions:

1. How do instructors establish, introduce, and sustain instructor social presence?
2. How do instructors construct social presence using instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors?

These questions were addressed using a qualitative research design. Ten online instructors, with an average of nine years of online teaching experience, were interviewed twice using semi-structured interviews. A thematic data analysis was conducted using an *a priori* coding approach derived from existing teaching and social presence indicators and social presence conceptual maps.

My data analysis revealed instructor social presence is constructed in a systematic process consisting of three phases: establishing instructor social presence, introducing social presence, and sustaining instructor social presence. Along with these phases, six categories depicted the instructors' instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors to construct instructor social presence. These categories include course design and structure, communication and availability, introductions and welcoming activities, affective communication, assignment feedback, and consistent and informal communications.

Lastly, multiple indicators were identified in each of these categories resulting in 17 instructor social presence indicators: online learning frameworks, collaborative spaces and activities, consistentstructure, communication norms, instructor availability, introduction and announcements, welcoming activities, friendly and empathetic tone, real and approachable,

acknowledgement and encouragement, one-on-one communication, storytelling and humor, self-disclosure,discussion forums, solicit student feedback, frequent announcements and reminders and conversational style (see Figure 4.1).

The following chapter answers my research questions, discusses my research findings, and outlines the phases, categories, and indicators used to develop the ISP framework. The first research question is answered by explaining the three phases: establishing instructor social presence, introducing instructor social presence, and sustaining instructor social presence. The second research question is answered by the discussion of individual categories and indicators for each phase. The remainder of this chapter explains the implications for future research and implications of practice for online instructors, course designers, and institutions and research.

Introducing an Instructor Social Presence Model

Overall, my data analysis revealed a systematic approach to constructing instructor social presence in an online learning environment. In addition, my data analysis indicated the social presence conceptual maps developed by Mykota (2018) had significant gaps in depicting the social presence of instructors. Therefore, categories and indicators are either renamed are added to the conceptual maps based on the instructor social presence categories and indicators revealed in this study. All in all, these findings were used to develop the proposed ISP framework (see Table 5.1). The following sections detail each phase and explain the categories and indicators discovered in my data analysis.

Establishing Instructor Social Presence Phase

My research findings confirmed Establishing Instructor Social Presence is the first phase associated with constructing instructor social presence. This phase refers to how instructors select, design, and organize an online environment's structure, collaborative spaces, and

instructional activities. In this phase, two categories were revealed during my analysis: course design and structure and communication and availability. In these categories, a total of five indicators were identified including online learning frameworks, collaborative spaces and activities, consistent structure, communication and availability.

During this phase, the instructors' instructional design and organization actions found in my study also appears in the COI framework's teaching presence components. For example, teaching presence emphasizes how an instructor communicates goals, provides clear instructions for expected behaviors, sets deadlines and times frames for activities, and determines guidelines in an online learning environment (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006). All of these teaching presence actions were performed by my study participants while they designed and organized their online courses. Furthermore, other research has claimed instructors who teach in a virtual setting must take on the critical role of setting clear and consistent course structures, interactive processes, and boundaries (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Swan, 2003). This role is also exhibited by the instructors in my study with the categories and indicators revealed during my data analysis.

Based on my research results, the Establishing Social Presence phase requires two of the original social presence maps' categories to be renamed to reflect several critical instructor social presence elements identified in this study. Five new indicators are also suggested based on my analysis. The renamed categories and new indicators are explained in the following section.

Design and Organize Course Structure and Activities Category

The Design and Organize Course Structure and Activities Category represents how instructors design and organize an online environment conducive for instructor social presence. In essence, this phase lays the foundation for instructor social presence to be introduced and sustained in an online classroom. This category has been renamed from the original social

presence category (Design a Balance of Course Activities) to Design and Organize Course Structure and Activities category. The terms ‘design’, ‘organize’, and ‘structure’ are added to the category to the importance of a course’s organization and structure. My data analysis also identified three indicators in this category: online learning frameworks, collaborative spaces and activities, and consistent structure.

Indicators for Design and Organize Course Structure and Activities

Online learning frameworks indicator. Several instructors described using existing online theoretical frameworks to design effective and interactive online learning experiences. Each of these instructors used different frameworks depending on their overall goals. For example, John used Moore’s Theory of Transactional Distance to ensure students interact with students, content, and the instructors. Regardless of what framework was used, the frameworks involved the participants interacting with either instructors, peers, content, or technology.

Thus, this finding implies instructors use online frameworks to design an interactive course. In fact, this finding emphasized the need for robust theoretical frameworks for online teaching and learning and prompted the development of the ISP framework. Online frameworks, especially the COI framework, are often used as guides for online teaching and learning (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Shea et al., 2010). However, online frameworks have never been recognized as an indicator in the literature. Therefore, this indicator is added to the ISP framework.

Collaborative spaces and activities indicator. Several of the instructors described designing collaborative spaces and activities to create a learning community among participants. Online discussion forums were frequently used to encourage instructor and student interactions and student collaboration. This finding is consistent with other studies that have noted

collaborative activities help establish and sustain instructor social presence (Paquette, 2016; Pollard et al., 2014; Richardson & Swan, 2003). Likewise, online discussion forums are frequently used to build instructor social presence (Lowenthal, 2016).

Interestingly, two instructors spoke about the importance of writing effective discussion prompts to encourage student interaction. Online discussion literature does suggest discussion questions should be designed to promote higher-level thinking and critical discussion (Foo & Quek, 2019). However, there may be value in further research in how discussion prompts can be used to construct instructor social presence.

Consistent structure indicator. The consistent structure indicator refers to a learning environment that is highly consistent and structured. As past research suggests and my results found, a highly structured and consistent course plays a vital role in establishing instructor social presence (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Stone & Chapman, 2006). For instance, several instructors believed a consistent structure established a stable presence, built trust, and lowered student anxiety. Lucy explained that a well-organized class offered her students some familiarity and consistency. Therefore, the students were able to take risks in other areas.

These results suggest a highly structured course is crucial in giving students a sense of consistency, familiarity, and trust. Thus, consistent structure is added to the ISP framework as an indicator. Additionally, the terms ‘organize’ and ‘structure’ are included in the original social presence maps category and renamed as Design and Organize Course Structure and Activities. Hence, the category now stresses the important of ensuring a consistent structure is used when establishing instructor social presence.

Communication and Availability Category

The Communications and Availability category emphasizes how instructors must

determine a variety of factors before starting a course. My data analysis discovered instructors considered how students would communicate with them, determine timelines for student responses and feedback, and set boundaries around their availability and responses to students.In total, two indicators were revealed and added to the Instructor Social Presence framework: communication norms and instructor availability.

Indicators for Communication Norms and Availability

Communication norms indicator. The instructors considered multiple factors when planning their communication strategies. First, they decided on the communication norms for the class and ensured these norms were clearly indicated in the syllabus or LMS. Setting communication norms allowed them to set clear expectations on when and how they would communicate with students. Research also suggests norms and timeframes are vital to establishing instructor social presence (Picciano, 2002; Shea et al., 2006). Shea et al. (2006) found time parameters and group norms are vital in forming a productive presence and supporting a sense of connectedness and active learning. Establishing communication norms is also considered a high immediacy behavior since it makes instructors seem accessible to students. Past studies have also attributed high immediacy behaviors with creating higher instructor social presence levels (Picciano, 2002).

Instructor availability indicator. During the interviews, the instructors also discussed making decisions regarding their availability prior to courses beginning. In this context, an instructor's availability refers to their office hours, policies on returning emails, or timeframes for providing feedback. Instructor availability is often mentioned within the teaching and social presence literature as an important element to students (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). For example, Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) noted

students believed an instructor's accessibility is critical to make them feel connected with their instructors.

Sheridan and Kelly (2010) also found that students reported instructors being available and responding to students in 24 hours was essential. In a similar study, students felt an instructor's timely responses and availability are essential factors when exhibiting instructor social presence (Hodges & Cowan, 2012). Thus, the instructor availability indicator is added to the framework to denote the importance of instructors communicating their availability and displaying immediacy behaviors such as being available.

Based on previous social presence studies, instructor availability was likely to be mentioned by the instructors. However, the instructors' conflicting feelings regarding their availability was unexpected. Two of the instructors shared their conflicting feelings with students' expecting instructors to be available twenty-four hours a day and immediately responding to questions and emails. For example, Charlotte described how text messaging and private chats have transformed the expectation of providing immediate responses.

To summarize, the Establishing Instructor Social Presence phase includes instructors selecting, designing, and organizing the structure and components of online classes and determining the communication strategies and behaviors they will use. During this phase, the instructors established their instructor social presence by incorporating a consistent course structure within their classes, developing collaborative learning activities, and deciding specific communication and behavior guidelines and timeframes. Based on these findings, two categories were renamed and five new indicators were added to the ISP framework.

Introducing Instructor Social Presence Phase

Introducing Instructor Social Presence is the second phase instructors navigate to

construct instructor social presence. This phase refers to the introductory and welcoming activities instructors facilitate, and the affective communication components instructors use to introduce instructor social presence. During my data analysis, two categories were identified including Introductions and Welcoming Activities and Affective Communication. The Introductions and Welcoming Activities category is comprised of two indicators: introductions and announcements and welcoming activities. The Affective Communication category comprises six indicators: friendly and empathetic tone, real and approachable, acknowledgement and encouragement, one-on-one communications, self-disclosure, and storytelling and humor (see Table 5.1).

My data analysis suggests that in the Introducing to Instructor Social Presence phase, instructors facilitate welcoming activities, demonstrate immediacy behaviors, and use affective communication strategies and behaviors. These research findings are consistent with existing research (Conklin & Dikkers, 2021; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2010; Parker & Herrington, 2015). For instance, my data analysis discovered all the instructors sent out introduction messages and announcements and facilitated online discussion forums at the beginning of their online classes. Researchers have found that introductory activities like announcements and activities develop trust and connections among participants and prepare the online climate for instructor social presence (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2010).

Many of the study's instructors conveyed behaviors associated with affective communication. For instance, the instructors used communication strategies and immediacy behaviors such as self-disclosure, one-on-one communications, using a friendly tone, digital storytelling, and humor. These findings are in keeping with components identified with the COI framework's social presence. According to Garrison (2017), there are three major indicators of

affective communication. The first indicator is expressions of respect and welcoming intonations. The second indicator is humor and personal references that convey goodwill. The third indicator is establishing a personal connection through self-disclosure. Other studies have found open, friendly communications, being approachable, recognizing and praising students, and empathetic facilitation creates a highly effective instructor social presence (Conklin & Dikkers, 2021; Parker & Herrington, 2015). Hence, my research results suggest instructors intentionally introduce social presence at the beginning of an online course.

Based on my research findings, one of the social presence conceptual maps' categories will be broadened and renamed the Introductions and Welcoming Activities category. A new category, Affective Communication, is added along with its six indicators to the ISP framework (see Figure 5.2). The following sections describe these new categories and indicators in greater detail.

Introductions and Welcoming Activities Category

The Introductions and Welcoming Activities Category refers to the introductory announcements sent by the instructors and the welcoming activities facilitated by the instructors to initiate instructor social presence. My data analysis identified the following indicators and added them to the Instructor Social Presence Framework: introductions and announcements and welcoming activities.

Indicators for Introductions and Welcoming Activities

Introductions and announcements indicator. During the first few weeks of class, all the instructors sent out introduction announcements to build student connections, provide instructions, clarify expectations, and lessen student anxiety. For instance, all the instructors sent out announcements to introduce themselves and their teaching assistants, explained the course's

major components, and clarified student expectations. These introductory announcements are consistent with other online teaching books and articles, which suggests sending introductory videos or messages to students (Aragon, 2003; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014; Major, 2015). This finding also demonstrates the evolution of online instructional practices with online instructors assuming introduction announcements are a requirement rather than a suggestion.

Welcoming activities indicator. Many of the instructors facilitated welcoming activities to help students become familiar with technology and gather student information. For instance, instructors asked students to use Flipgrid to create introductions or send messages using the Microsoft Teams' chat feature. These findings are consistent with other studies which suggest instructors should conduct introduction or ice breaker activities (Aragon, 2003; Croft et al., 2010;Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2009; St. Clair, 2015).

An interesting finding derived from John and Charlotte's comments surrounding student anxiety. They stated they were somewhat surprised by how their welcoming activities helped identify students who were anxious about taking online classes. Proactively addressing student anxieties often helps students with subsequential problems (St. Clair, 2015). This finding demonstrates a wide range of instructor social presence indicators. For instance, designing a dedicated space and activity to prompt students in sharing their worries proves the importance of establishing a dedicated collaborative space and planned activities. Next, how instructors communicatw one-on-one with students to calm their fears displays a variety of affective communication style indicators including being empathetic and approachable, having one-on-onecommunication, and providing encouragement. These indicators will be explained in the next section.

Based on the research findings, the word "Introductions" is added to the social presence

maps' Welcoming Activities category to emphasize the importance of introductions. Also, introductions and announcements and welcoming activities replace the original welcome messages indicator to depict the need for introductions and activities accurately.

Affective Communication Style Category

The Affective Communication category addresses the immediacy behaviors and communication strategies instructors use to introduce instructor social presence. My data analysis revealed six indicators: friendly and empathetic tone, real and approachable, one-on-one communication, self-disclosure, acknowledgement and encouragement, and storytelling and humor. Each indicator is detailed below.

Indicators of Affective Communication

Friendly and empathetic tone indicator. During the first few weeks of class, the instructors focused on communicating a friendly, welcoming, and supportive tone. These instructors wanted their students to perceive them as being friendly, supportive and not to fear them. The instructors were very deliberate in using language like "I'm willing to listen. I'm willing to help you" and "Contact me if you're having problems." Research also has shown instructors try to set a friendly tone and build a positive rapport to promote their social presence (Parker & Herrington, 2015; Richardson et al., 2016).

Furthermore, several instructors discussed displaying more empathy, understanding, and support for students, especially during the COVID pandemic. In another study about instructor social presence during the COVID pandemic, Conklin and Dikkers (2021) found instructors seemed to display empathy and understanding. In this particular study, students described how their instructors used empathetic facilitation, or in other words, being extremely understanding, very accommodating, sympathetic, and caring during the difficult time.

Real and approachable indicator. Some instructors focused on showing they are real and approachable to their students, especially during the first few weeks of class. In general, the instructors' objectives were to create a safe environment where students felt welcomed and safe. For instance, Samuel seemed to share personal details about his research and his life and explicitly told students to reach out for help. This practice is also noted in other research, which found instructors can communicate being real and approachable by sending out announcements, articulating their availability, responding promptly to students, and sharing personal information (Parker & Herrington, 2015; Richardson et al., 2016).

One-on-one conversations indicator. Another communication strategy used by the instructors was having one-on-one conversations with students. Several instructors described scheduling one-on-one meetings or having private chats with students during the first few days of class. Charlotte explained how she requires students to answer questions using a private chat. She feels this activity helps students practice using the private chat feature and offers the opportunity to address any students' questions or concerns early on.

Other researchers have discovered similar findings (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Swan & Shih, 2019). For example, Swan and Shih (2019) found students who have private talks or meetings with their instructors feel a certain level of intimacy and connection with the instructor. Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) also found students felt having synchronous sessions or phone/Skype calls helped them feel connected to their instructors. Furthermore, these types of activities helped improve the sense of others being real and being there.

Another noteworthy finding is Lily's comment about scheduling one-on-one student meetings during COVID. She felt it was extremely important to schedule one-on-one meetings with students to lessen their isolation caused by the COVID pandemic. This sparks the need for

additional research on the impact COVID had on online teaching practices. This recommendation will be further explored in the implications for research section of this study.

Acknowledgement and encouragement indicator. Another indicator used by instructors was acknowledging and encouraging students. The instructors explained using multiple strategies to acknowledge students. One popular strategy used by instructors was gathering student information and incorporating the information in course announcements, videos, or even podcasts. Specifically, the instructors described intentionally using students' names and acknowledging if they shared something personal or did good work. Lily also described how using overly expressions of student support and displaying positive energy greatlyimpacted a recent online course she co-taught. These results are consistent with other studies which find acknowledging students and their work helps grow instructor social presence (Ladyshewsky, 2013; Whiteside, 2015). In these studies, the instructors often acknowledged students by name and acknowledged students' work through assignment feedback.

Storytelling and humor indicator. Instructors spoke about sharing stories with students regarding past professional experiences or past struggles or mistakes they made as students. Furthermore, several instructors spoke about incorporating humor during synchronous sessions to become more real or approachable. Storytelling and humor are considered indicators of social presence and are commonly used by instructors to convey goodwill and establish personal connections (Garrison, 2017; Swan, 2002).

Research has indicated that digital stories and storytelling are powerful teaching strategies and can be used by instructors to present themselves as real people (Lowenthal and Dunlap, 2010). Digital storytelling is a story being told using digital images, audio, and video. Lowenthal and Dunlap (2010) have found digital storytelling builds social presence by helping

people connect with others, disclosing personal information, and relating to each other's common experiences. Humor has also been found to reduce social distance and convey goodwill within an online environment (Aragon, 2003).

Self-disclosure indicator. Self-disclosure is considered a high immediacy behavior and an indicator of social presence (Swan, 2002). Throughout the interviews, every study participant used self-disclosure behaviors to develop relevancy and credibility, be relatable with students, or connect with students. However, each instructor expressed different comfort levels with sharing personal information. For some instructors, they only felt comfortable with sharing professional information like their educational background, professional experiences, and current research. Other instructors were more comfortable sharing personal struggles or mistakes they made as a student. These personal stories were often shared to connect and support students and let students know they are not alone.

Similar results have been found in other studies. Richardson et al. (2015) found instructors used self-disclosure as a way for students to see them as real people. In their study, the instructors also had divided feelings regarding sharing personal information. Richardson and her colleagues categorized instructor self-disclosure in two levels – those who were willing to share comfortably and those who were hesitant. My study findings confirm these two levels of self-disclosure among online instructors.

Although self-disclosure was included in the Instructor Social Presence phase, the instructors exhibited self-disclosure throughout all phases. However, discussing this finding with colleagues during my data analysis, it was decided to add self-disclosure to the affective communication category for several reasons. First, self-disclosure has been identified as an indicator of affective communication throughout the COI literature (Garrison et al., 2010;

Garrison, 2017; Rourke et al., 1999). Secondly, the Introducing Social Presence Phase focuses on introducing instructor social presence. My results found instructors prefer to set a real and approachable tone by disclosing personal information in the first few weeks of class. Therefore, self-disclosure was added to this phase to guide instructors to share some personal information early on.

All the affective indicators revealed in my study are also mentioned in the existing literature to introduce instructor social presence. However, the difference between this study and other research is grouping the indicators and identifying them as instructor social presence indicators. Therefore, the six affective communication indicators are added to the ISP framework.

To summarize, the Introducing Instructor Social Presence phase refers to the introductory and welcoming activities instructors facilitate, and the affective communication instructors exhibit to introduce instructor social presence. During this phase, the instructors sent introductionmessages and announcements to let students know them and vice versa. The instructors also facilitated multiple welcoming activities like online discussions and student questionnaires to begin connecting with students. The instructors also displayed a variety of immediacy behaviorsto help students perceive them as being friendly, approachable, and real people. Moreover, affective communication indicators such as self-disclosure, acknowledging and encouragingstudents, sharing stories and using humor were used to show students empathy and support.

Sustaining Instructor Social Presence Phase

Sustaining Instructor Social Presence is the third phase identified in my data analysis. This phase refers to the instructional actions and communication strategies instructors exhibit to

sustain instructor social presence. In this phase, the Frequent and Informal Communication category was identified. In this category, the following two indicators were found including frequent announcements and reminders and conversational style. The solicit student feedback indicator was also identified and added to an existing social presence map category.

During the Sustaining Instructor Social Presence phase, the instructors focused on the facilitation and instructional responsibilities of teaching an online class. Facilitation and direct instruction are also identified as two components of the COI framework's teaching presence (Anderson et al., 2001). Furthermore, my results indicated instructors sustained instructor social presence by taking on a facilitator role. The facilitator role is consistent with other researchers who have suggested the role of online instructors has shifted from one that provides direct instruction to one that facilitates the interactive learning process. (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Richardson et al., 2015; Stone & Chapman, 2006; Swan, 2003).

Furthermore, my data analysis revealed the instructors used specific communication strategies to sustain instructor social presence. My findings are in keeping with Richardson et al. (2016) study, which found instructors used a variety of communication strategies to establish their social presence such as setting a modeling expected behaviors in discussion and providing student feedback.

Based on my research findings, the Sustaining Instructor Social Presence phase requires one category to be added. Three indicators are also added to reflect how instructor social presence is sustained. The following sections describe these categories and indicators in greater detail.

Consistent and Informal Communications Category

This category highlights the consistent and informal communication style instructors

exhibit to interact with and support students throughout the course. Two indicators were identified in my data analysis including: frequent announcements and reminders and conversational style. Therefore, this category and the following indicators are added to the ISP framework.

Indicators of Frequent and Informal Communications

Frequent announcements and reminders indicator. This study found each instructor sent students some type of weekly 'touch base' announcements. The purpose of these announcements varied among the instructors including providing weekly introductions or weekly recaps, explaining upcoming assignments or expectations, or sharing additional resources.This finding is particularly interesting since other studies have found students value instructors who send regular reminders for assignments or exams (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Conklin & Dikkers, 2021; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). Another curious finding was several of the instructorsseemed defensive with sending out these types of reminders. For instance, Samuel commentedhow some individuals had accused him of treating college students like high school students.Therefore, these results demonstrate how online instruction is evolving to become more of asupportive role and instructor communication strategies align with student preferences.

Conversational style. Another communication strategy used by many of the instructors was to use an informal or conversational style. Many of the instructors reported changing their communication style to adjust to the online format. They felt an informal or conversational tone helped students perceive them as being real, friendly, or approachable. Other instructors used an informal style to display their personality, add humor, or make students feel less fearful.

Tu and McIssaac (2002) suggested when students communicate with other students, they use a casual or informal style because they feel they are at the same level. However, students

perceive the relationship between the teacher and themselves to be more formal. So, an instructor may want to use a more casual communication style to encourage reluctant students. In another study, students indicated they appreciated instructors who used a conversational tone. They felt a less formal tone helped them feel connected to their instructor and made them perceive them as human beings (Conklin & Dikkers, 2021). As a result, the new category Consistent and Informal Communications will be added, and the frequent announcements and reminders and conversational style will be added to the ISP model.

The instructors also described how their self-disclosure and informal conversational style were the two elements that changed most for them over time. For instance, some instructors discussed using a more formal style when they began teaching online. However, after years of experience, they evolved to using a more informal style for a more personable approach. They also spoke about how the COVID pandemic had caused them to become more open in sharing personal details like children, pets, and personal struggles.

Assignment Feedback Category

The Assignment Feedback category describes how instructors sustain instructor social presence by providing student feedback. The solicit student feedback indicator was identified in my data analysis and added to the ISP framework.

Indicators of Solicit Student Feedback

Solicit student feedback indicator. Providing student feedback is one way the instructors communicate with students. For several of the instructors, feedback was the "most critical and most important part of the teaching process." These findings are almost identical with existing research that has identified feedback as an important component for constructing instructor social presence (Richardson et al., 2016; Stone & Chapman, 2006). Studies have

found instructors maintain their presence by providing individualized feedback such as informing students on their progress or providing comments on their assignments (Lowenthal & Dunlap; Parker & Herrington, 2015; Stone & Chapman, 2006). However, several instructors in my study voiced the difficulty of providing instructor social presence due to very large class sizes. These concerns have been recognized in the past. For instance, scholars have suggested limiting course enrollment to a 30:1 ratio (Mykota, 2018; Rovai, 2001).

The data analysis did highlight one aspect of feedback not indicated in the social presencemaps. Multiple instructors described soliciting feedback from students. For instance, Lily wouldcollect student feedback mid-way in a course and directly respond to students addressing any mentioned issues. She felt this approach let students know they were being heard. In fact, soliciting formative and summative assessment feedback has been recommended as a fourth component of teaching presence (Shea et al., 2010). As a result, Solicit Student Feedback has been added to the ISP framework to reflect this finding.

In summary, the Sustaining Social Presence phase refers to the instructional actions and communication strategies instructors use during the facilitation and direct instruction aspects of sustaining instructor social presence. During this phase, the instructors often displayed their presence by providing student feedback and soliciting feedback from students. Also, the instructors sent announcements to introduce next week lessons and reminders for upcoming assignments or exams. Lastly, the instructors practiced an informal conversational style to communicate a friendly and approachable tone to students.

Overall, my study confirms online instructors use teaching and social presences throughout the development and facilitation of an online course. For example, as instructors first design and organize an online course, they use teaching presence indicators like setting

curriculum and establishing time parameters. Likewise, the instructors also use social presence indicators such as determining communication norms and availability. Therefore, the first phase of instructor social presence demonstrates that instructors use teaching and social presence components to design and create an effective online educational experience.

The Introducing Instructor Social Presence phase focuses on the instructor's role and responsibilities of introducing and modeling social presence. My study found instructors intentionally lead and participate in online communications and interactions to build a safe online climate making students feel the instructor is real. The instructors also exhibited immediacy behaviors and affective communication at the beginning of a class to help students feel they are friendly, approachable, empathetic, supportive, and a real person. Hence, my student's instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors are highly representative of social and teaching presences.

Lastly, in the Sustaining Instructor Social Presence phase, instructors use teaching and social presence to facilitate their online courses. During this phase, the instructors focused on being present and interacting with students through discussion forums and feedback, which are teaching presence indicators. Similarly, the instructors spent time using social presence indicators such as affective and informal communication practices.

The Instructor Social Presence Framework

The ISP framework depicts a systematic process of establishing, introducing, and maintaining instructor social presence in three phases: establishing instructor social presence, introducing instructor social presence, and sustaining social presence. It also categorizes instructors' instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors to cultivatereal and present feelings. Lastly, the framework depicts a variety of indicators for each

category.The indicators are keywords or phrases commonly used in literature to identify presences (see Table 5.1)

Table 5.1: Instructors Social Presence Framework
This table depicts the proposed Instructor Social Presence framework including the phases, categories, and indicators.

Phases	Categories (Methods)	Indicators
Establishing Instructor Social Presence	Design and Organize Course Structure and Activities*	- Online learning frameworks* - Collaborative spaces and activities* - Consistent structure* - Problem-based and collaborative tasks - Discussion forums - Front end analysis by instructional designers
	Provide Course Information/Expectations	- Communication norms* - Instructor availability* - Detail communication approaches - Provide course previews - Ungraded pre-lesson and feedback
	Creating a Safe Online Environment	- Use positive relational responses - Ensure privacy, trust, and respect to create intimacy and interactivity
Introducing Instructor Social Presence	Introductions and Welcoming Activities*	-Introductions and announcements* - Welcoming messages & activities* - Course orientation - Biographies - Syllabus scavenger hunt
	Affective Communication*	- Friendly and empathetic tone* - Real and approachable* - Acknowledgement & encouragement* - One-on-one communications* - Self-disclosure* - Digital storytelling and humor*
	Initiating Instructor Communication Patterns	- Model and scaffold social presence behaviors - Prompt responses - Analyze students posts through a social presence coding template
	Student Engagement in Content	- Limit course enrollment - Form groups based on interests - Integrate social networking sites
Sustaining Instructor Social Presence	Discussion Forums	- Structured forums - Assign roles - Model moderation - Synchronous/Asynchronous video communication
	Assignment Feedback	- Keep feedback simple, prompt, positive & related to coursework - Solicit student feedback*
	Frequent and Informal Communications*	- Frequent announcements and reminders* - Conversational style*
	Synchronous Meeting	- Phone calls, small group chat/video, or coffee shop style conversations

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Overall, my research findings suggest a systematic approach in the form of three phases: establishing instructor social presence, introducing instructor social presence, and sustaining social presence. Within each phase, categories were identified as particular methods used by experienced instructors to construct instructor social presence. Furthermore, instructor social presence indicators were also identified and used to denote instructor social presence indicators. Based on these research findings, there are several implications for practice and future research. The following section provides several implications for higher education institutions, online course designers, and online instructors. Implications for future research follow this section.

Implications for Practice

Higher education institutions that offer online programs face the ongoing challenge of providing online educational experiences that are socially and emotionally fulfilling to improve students' feelings of social isolation and loneliness. The following implications for practice offera variety of suggestions for online institutions, instructors, and course designers to construct instructor social presence minimizing or overcoming this challenge.

Implications for Online Institutions

This study's overall findings highlighted individuals who design and facilitate online courses need a certain level of expertise and dedicated time to adequately plan and implementthe suggested practices noted in the following sections. Therefore, these study results have implications for institutional leadership and administration.

The first implication for institutional leadership andadministration is providing appropriate training and professional development to faculty. Incorporating instructor social presence in an online educational setting requires an institutional or departmental commitment to

this pedagogical approach and the use of appropriate frameworks. Online frameworks, such as the ISP framework, are incredibly helpful to help faculty and instructional designers with the complexities of creating and maintaining instructorsocial presence. However, faculty and staff must receive adequate training to enhance their understanding and adoption of the instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors required for instructor social presence.

Instructors and course designers also need a strong understanding of the LMS system and emerging technologies to design and support a collaborative and interactive environment. Many of the interviewed instructors had expertise in using different technology tools and programs like Microsoft teams, Flipgrid, and Twitter. Therefore, faculty training should also focus on introducing and training faculty on new educational technologies.

The second implication for online institutions is creating programs andinvesting in resources providing support throughout the process of designing, introducing, and sustaining instructor social presence. Although training and professional development are critical for faculty and instructional designers, these individuals also need continuous support. This is especially important for instructors who are new to online teaching and learning. Institutions may want to create an online community where individuals are supported to design and facilitate their classes. Additional faculty members or administrative staff should be selectedto become mentors or provide faculty direction and support.

The third implication for institutional leadership and administration is establishing incentive programs and recognition. The study found this pedological way of teaching is extremely time-consuming in terms of design and facilitation. Thus, faculty must be given incentives and scholarly recognition for those who risk and innovate online courses focused on

instructor social presence. Online class sizes should also be monitoredand capped to avoid large class sizes. This would allow instructors to dedicate the appropriate amount of time and energy necessary to provide high levels of instructor social presence.

In summary, the following suggested practices should be considered by university leadershipand administration to ensure online environments are filled with high levels of instructor social presence.

- Institutional or departmental commitment to instructor social presence pedagogy
- Strong understanding of LMS and educational technology
- Online faculty communities to provide faculty support
- Establish incentive programs and scholarly recognition
- Monitor and limit online class sizes

Implications for Online Course Designers

Studies have shown the design and structure of an online course can influence how faculty and students construct their social presence (Lowenthal, 2016; Swan & Shih, 2019). Therefore, this study has implications for anyone who designs and builds online environments including instructors and instructional designers. Based on the presented findings, there are threepractices course designers should consider when planning the design and structure of an online course. First, collaborative spaces should be included in online courses. Secondly, course designers should design engaging discussion forums. Thirdly, courses need to have a clearly defined and consistent structure.

The first practice for course designers is to incorporate collaborative spaces, so instructors and students have a place to interact or have one-on-one conversations. These spaces can be online discussion forums, virtual meetings, instant

chat rooms, or social network sites. This study proved instructor social presence is constructed when instructors and students interact and communicate with one another, especially on a personal level. Therefore, course designers should include discussion forums or set up Microsoft Teams with the sole purpose of instructors and students interacting and communicating with one another.

The second practice for course designers is designing discussion forums to encourage instructor and student engagement. Online discussion forums were a common method used by the study participants to engage with students. Yet, my findings have implications for those who use discussion forums. First, course designers should write discussion prompts that encourage instructor and student interactions. John described writing affective-oriented questions aimed to have students share their motivations and values. Next, course designers should incorporate technology or tools to enhance student interaction. For example, many of the instructors interviewed in this study used Flipgrid and Microsoft Teams.

The third practice for course designers is to plan and design a structured course. Instructors should use the ISP framework as a guide to design and structure an online course specifically focused on instructor social presence. By using online frameworks such as the ISP frameworks, instructors can incorporate the necessary components in their online classes. In addition, Lily shared how her classes were structured using the elements learn, play, create, and engage. Similar course maps can be crafted to outline course elements logically and consistently. Also, courses should be consistent in displaying due dates, expectations, assignments, and learning experiences.

Therefore, the following suggested practices should be considered by instructors and instructional designers when developing and maintaining instructor social presence:

- Add intentional spaces for instructor and student interactions and communications
- Design discussion forums to encourage instructor and student engagement
- Use Instructor Social Presence framework to guide course design and structure
- Structure of a course should be clear, logical, and consistent

Implications for Online Instructors

Besides online course designers, this study has significant implications for online instructors and the communication strategies and behaviors they use to build and maintain instructor social presence. Overall, online instructors should aim their student communications to be informal, welcoming, positive, encouraging, and supportive. In other words, online instructors should exhibit social presence behaviors to create a supportive and safe online learning environment. Additionally, online instructors should offer students multiple methods to communicate with them and provide norms and expectations. Lastly, online instructors should be consistent in the messages and reminders they send students.

A communication practice online instructors should consider is using an informal or conversational style with students. Studies have found that an informal communication style helps students perceive their instructors as real people and preferfriendly, empathetic, approachable, and positive (Parker & Herrington, 2015; Sheridan & Kelly,2010).

Therefore, instructors should aim to use a welcoming, friendly, and approachable tone when communicating with students. A simple practice used by the study participants was telling students they were willing to help and come to them with any issues. The participants also met one-on-one with students to calm students' anxieties early on in a course. Student communications should also be positive, encouraging, supportive, and empathetic. This is accomplished by using students' names, acknowledging students' hard work, and using positive

and encouraging messages. Emma seemed to sum it up best when she said, “I think at the bottom line, I try to make sure it’s an email that if I were a student, I would want to receive.”

Another communication practice is establishing and sharing communication norms or guidelines to be used during a course. For example, instructors shouldinclude a statement in the syllabus or the LMS outlining the email response times students can expect. Moreover, instructors should provide students with clear explanations of how and whenthey will receive feedback on their work.

Ultimately, instructors should be easily accessible to students. However, accessibility does not mean instructors should always be available. Instead, instructorsshould set clear boundaries regarding expectations and communicate those to students. In addition, instructors need to arrange multiple ways for students to contact and meet with them. Results have shown instructors often use email, phone, synchronous videos, instant chat, andonline forums to communicate with students.

The final communication practice instructors should use issending consistent communications to students. For instance, weekly announcements or task checklists can be sent to students to introduce new content, provide necessary instructions or guidance, and offer feedback. Ideally, instructors should send messages regularly and in a manner that becomes familiar to students. For instance, instructors in the study described alwayssending weekly announcements on a particular day of the week. The study results also showed instructors often sent reminders for upcoming assignments and exams. Therefore, instructors should use various functions of the LMS or other technologies to set up consistent reminders.

Therefore, the following suggested practices should be considered by online instructors to establish and maintain instructor social presence

- Use an informal or conversational tone when communicating with students
- Student communications should be welcoming, friendly, approachable, positive, encouraging, supportive, and empathetic.
- Establish communication norms or guidelines
- Offer students multiple ways to communicate
- Set clear boundaries and communicate expectations to students
- Send consistent communications and reminders to students

Implications for Introduction Activities

Scholars believe there is a connection between students' feelings of trust and belonging and their willingness to share and build a personal connection or a learning community (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2014). Therefore, this study has specific implications for online instructors who wish to introduce instructor social presence, develop trust, and give students a sense of belonging. The following practices are recommended to make students feel welcome and develop instructor social presence based on study results.

When teaching online, instructors should immediately introduce themselves to their students and have students introduce themselves aswell. Therefore, the first practice for instructors is creating a welcome video or message. Welcome videos are often mentioned as an online teaching best practice (Aragon, 2003; Parker& Herrington, 2015). Yet, my findings also suggest messages should be sent to students even before the course starts to lessen students' anxieties and communicate instructions and expectations. Secondly, instructors should use a friendly and conversational style in theirwelcome message and offer positive and encouraging words.

Thirdly, instructors should share some personal information in their messages. My

findings confirm instructors have two levels of self-disclosure. However, the study suggests instructors should find a balance in sharing personal information. For example, instructors may consider sharing information regarding their educational background and past and current research interests to present their expertise and credibility. Instructors could share past student or professional experiences that align with course content or discussions. Other instructors mayfeel comfortable with sharing personal hobbies, families and pets, or personal struggles to connect with students on a personal level.

Another practice implication for instructors is designing and facilitating welcoming activities to build an online community and connections with students. For example, online discussion forums are a popular learning activity that encourages student interaction. Instructors should participate in these initial discussions as members of the online community rather than as a facilitator. This participation also offers instructors an opportunity toself-disclose information and begin building personal connections with students.

Another suggestion is creating activities requiring students to practice any technology that will be used in class. For example, Charlotte required students to use Flipgrid to introduce themselves and answer questions using Microsoft Teams private chat feature. Another tactic many instructors used was sending students a questionnaire to gather information and acknowledge it in future communications. Therefore, instructors should be strategic in the learning activities they design. Potential ideas may include recording introduction videos using Flipgrid or creating ice breakers requiring sharing limited personal information. Another idea used by the instructors in my study was asking students a non-threatening question and then creating an infographic or video sharing the results.

Online interaction is critical to introducing instructor social presence. Therefore,

instructors should create spaces and opportunities to interact with studentsimmediately and, better yet, one-on-one interactions. For instance, online instructors should offer synchronous opportunities such as virtual office hours or virtual study sessions. In addition, instructors should send individual emails or texts to students offering feedback or words of encouragement or support.

Therefore, the following suggested practices should be considered by online instructors tointroduce instructor social presence:

- Create a welcome video or message
- Balance sharing professional and personal information
- Assign welcoming activities to build community and connections
- Participate in initial online discussions and ice breakers
- Gather student information for future engagement
- Create opportunities and ways to interact with students immediately

Implications for Future Research

In addition to the implications for practice, there are several implications for future research. A major contribution of this study was the development of the ISP framework. This framework illustrates the three phases instructors navigate to construct instructor social presence. The framework also denotes multiple instructor social presence categories and indicators. Therefore, the first implication for future research is validating and conducting a more rigorous study of the ISP framework. In turn, additional research may result in various survey instruments to identify and measure instructor social presence levels. Furthermore, this study was conducted using a qualitative methodology approach in the form of semi-structured interviews. Other qualitative and quantitative studies should be conducted to provide a greater depth of

understanding of the ISP framework and its indicators. For instance, other institutional contexts and study participants may provide further insights worthy of consideration.

As noted in the first chapter, online students often struggle with the physical distance and social isolation associated with an online environment. Research has also shown a strong instructor social presence can lessen these feelings of isolation. While this study examined how instructor social presence is constructed, more research is needed to understand how instructor social presence affects online student social isolation. Specifically, additional research would provide further understanding of how course design impacts students' feelings of isolation. Otherstudies could investigate how an instructor's use of social presence communication strategies andbehaviors affects students' sense of belonging and connection with the instructor.

Another implication for research is examining the concept of instructor availability. Several of the study participants shared their concerns of unrealistic students' expectations of instructors always being available. There is a need to understand how advances in technology have changed instructor interactions with students and student expectations. Conversely, research is needed to explore how online faculty balance being accessible yet maintaining a personal life, especially in the age of instant messaging and social networks.

Finally, future research should be conducted to understand how the COVID pandemichas affected online instructional practices and instructor behaviors. For instance, Michael believed COVID has caused people to be more comfortable with sharing more. Likewise, Elizabeth shared how her young children and puppy would make regular appearances during synchronous classes. Thus, these comments suggest the need for research on how COVID hasimpacted instructor social presence. Some questions may be: How has COVID changed how instructors exhibit their presence? Has COVID changed how instructor's feel about sharing personal

information? Therefore, understanding how COVID affected instructor beliefs and practices may significantly affect future online teaching practices.

In summary, this chapter detailed the phases, categories, and indicators identified in my data analysis. My research findings revealed instructor social presence could be constructed using a systematic process consisting of three phases: establishing instructor social presence, introducing social presence, and sustaining instructor social presence. Along with these phases, six categories depicted the instructional actions, communication strategies, and instructional methods used to construct instructor social presence. These findings were then developed into the Instructor Social Presence framework. The chapter concluded with the implications for future practice for online institutions, instructors, and course designers and future implications for research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to examine how instructors use instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors to establish, introduce, and sustain instructor social presence during the design and facilitation of an online course. In the first chapter, I reviewed the background of the problem with online students struggling with the physical distance and social isolation of online learning. However, research has shown high levels of instructor social presence creates a social-emotional rich online climategiving students a sense a belonging and their instructor being real and being present. Unfortunately, existing research does not provide sufficient details or a systematic process of constructing instructor social presence. Thus, this study contributes to the overall literature and address this gap by understanding how instructors develop and maintain their social presence. Bydoing, so, a conceptual framework was developed to guide instructors and course designers on how to design

and facilitate instructor social presence.

In the second chapter, I provided a review of literature including an overview of the COI framework and social presence conceptual maps which guided my research. A review of instructor social presence literature was also presented including how instructors perceived instructor social presence and three key constructs on instructor social presence including instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors. The third chapter presented an overview of my qualitative research design including my population sampling, semi-structured interview approach, and thematic data analysis. In total, ten online instructors were interviewed two times resulting in a total of 19 interviews and a total of 15 hours of interviews.

The fourth chapter presented my data analysis findings. Overall, the data analysis revealed instructor social presence is constructed in a systematic process consisting of three phases: establishing instructor social presence, introducing social presence, and sustaining instructor social presence. Along with these phases, six categories were identified depicting the instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors instructors used to construct instructor social presence. These categories include course design and structure, communication and availability, introductions and welcoming activities, affective communication, assignment feedback, and consistent and informal communications. Multiple indicators were also identified in each of these categories resulting in 17 instructor social presence indicators: online learning frameworks, collaborative spaces and activities, consistent structure, communication norms, instructor availability, introduction and announcements, welcoming activities, friendly and empathetic tone, real and approachable, acknowledgement and encouragement, one-on-one communication, storytelling and humor, self-disclosure,

discussion forums, solicit student feedback, frequent announcements and reminders and conversational style.

The final chapter discussed the answers to my research questions and detailed the ISP framework. The ISP framework depicts a systematic process of establishing, introducing, and maintaining instructor social presence in three phases: establishing instructor social presence, introducing instructor social presence, and sustaining social presence. It also categorizes the instructional actions, communication strategies, and immediacy behaviors instructors use to develop and facilitate instructor social presence. Lastly, the framework depicts a variety of indicators for each category. The remainder of the chapter explained the implications for future research and implications of practice for online instructors, course designers, and institutions and research.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Social Presence Categories & Indicators

Table 5.2: Social Presence Categories & Indicators

Categories	Indicators of Social Presence	Definition
Affective Communication	Expressions of emotions	Conventional expressions of emotion or repetitious punctuations, conspicuous capitalization, emoticons
	Use of humor	Teasing, cajoling, irony, understatements, sarcasm
	Self-disclosure	Presents details of life outside of class or express vulnerability
Open Communication	Continuing a thread	Using a reply feature of software rather than starting a new thread
	Quoting from other messages	Using software features to quote others' entire messages or cutting and pasting selections of others' messages
	Referring explicitly to other messages	Direct references to the contents of others' posts
	Asking questions	Students ask questions of other students or moderator.
	Complimenting, expressing appreciation	Complimenting others or contents of others' messages
	Expressing agreement	Expressing agreement with others or content of others' messages
Cohesive Responses	Vocatives	Addressing or referring to participants by name
	Addresses or refers to the group using pronouns	Addresses the group as we, us, our, group
	Phatic/Salutations	Communication serves a purely social function; greetings or closures.

Appendix A. Social Presence Categories and Indicators. Adapted from "E-Learning in the 21st Century," by D.R. Garrison (2017), New York, NY: Routledge.

APPENDIX B: Teaching Presence Categories & Indicators

Table 5.3: Teaching Presence Categories & Indicators

Categories	Indicators	Examples
Instructional Design and Organizational Indicators	Setting curriculum	"This week we will be discussing…"
	Designing methods	"I am going to divide you into groups, and you will debate…"
	Establishing time parameters	"Please post a message by Friday…"
	Utilizing medium effectively	"Try to address issues others have raised when you post."
	Establishing netiquette	"Keep your messages short."
	Making macro-level comments about course content	"This discussion is intended to give you a broad set of tools/skills which you will be able to use in deciding when and how to use different research techniques."
Facilitating Discourse	Identifying areas of agreement/disagreement	"Joe, May has provided a compelling counter-example to your hypothesis. Would you care to respond?"
	Seeking to reach consensus/understanding.	"I think Joe and May are saying essentially the same thing."
	Encouraging, acknowledging or reinforcing student contributions	"Thank you for your insightful comments."
	Setting the climate for learning	"Don't feel self-conscious about 'thinking out loud' on the forum. This is a place to try out ideas after all."
	Drawing in participants, prompting discussion	"Any thoughts on this issue?" "Anyone care to comment?"
	Assess the efficacy of the process	"I think we're getting a little off track here."
	Present the discussion on specific issues	"Bates says…" "What do you think?"
Direct Instruction	Focus the discussion on specific issues	"I think that's a dead end. I would ask you to consider…."
	Summarize the discussion	"The original question was… Joe said…Mary said … We still haven't addressed….
	Confirm understanding through assessment and explanatory feedback	"You're close, but you didn't account for…" "…this is important because…"
	Diagnose misconceptions	"Remember, Bates is speaking from an administrative perspective, so be careful when you say…."
	Inject knowledge from diverse sources, e.g., textbook, articles, internet, personal experiences (includes pointers to resources)	"I was at a conference with Bates once, and he said…" "You can find the proceedings from the conferencing at http://www..."
	Responding to technical concerns	"If you want to include a hyperlink in your message, you have to…"

Appendix B. Social Presence Categories and Indicators. Adapted from "E-Learning in the 21st Century," by D.R. Garrison (2017), New York, NY: Routledge

APPENDIX C: Social Presence Conceptual Maps

Table 5.4: Social Presence Conceptual Maps

Maps	Social Presence Categories	Social Presence Indicators
Establishing Instructor Social Presence	Design a Balance of Course Activities	- Problem based and collaborative tasks - Discussion forums - Front end analysis by instructional designers
	Provide Course Information/Expectations	- Detail communication approaches - Provide course preview - Ungraded pre-lesson and feedback
	Creating a Safe Online Environment	Use positive relational responses; ensure privacy, trust, and respect to create intimacy and interactivity
Introducing Instructor Social Presence	Welcoming Activities	- Welcome messages - Course Orientation - Biographies - Syllabus scavenger hunt - Digital storytelling
	Initiating Instructor Communication Patterns	- Model and scaffold social presence behaviors - Prompt responses - Analyze students posts through a social presence coding template
	Student Engagement in Content	- Limit course enrollment - Form groups based on interests, integrate social networking sites
Sustaining Instructor Social Presence	Discussion Forums	- Structured forums - Assign roles - Model moderation - Synchronous/Asynchronous video communication
	Assignment Feedback	- Keep feedback, simple, prompt, positive & related to course work
	Synchronous Meeting	- Phone calls, small group chat/video, or coffee shop style conversations

Appendix C. Social Presence Conceptual Maps. Adapted from "The Effective Affect: A Scoping Review of Social Presence" by D. Mykota (2018), International Journal of E-Learning & Distance Education, 22(2), 13-17.

APPENDIX D: Interview Requests

First Interview Email Request

Dear ---- ,

I was given your name by ----- as an excellent online instructor. My name is Anna Ankenbrand and I am a student in MSU's HALE PHD program. I am working on my dissertation 'Navigating Instructor Social Presence in an Online Learning Environment'. I am search for faculty who are scheduled to teach online this upcoming Spring. I was wondering if you would be open to me interviewing you?

The purpose of this study is to examine how you socially and pedagogically develop and sustain your presence in an online environment. I am interested in understanding how you use your behaviors, communication strategies, and interactions with students during the development, organization, and facilitation of an online course.

You will be asked to participate in two interviews, each lasting 60 minutes in length. The first interview will be in the next two to three months and the second interview would be after the semester is over. Your interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and they will be sent to you for feedback. The final data analysis will be included in the researcher's dissertation and other potential journal articles.

Thank you for your consideration,
Anna Ankenbrand

Second Interview Email Request

Dear ---- ,

Thank you so much for participating in the first interview for my dissertation study. I would like to try and schedule the second interview sometime over the next six weeks. I realize this time of year can become very busy and want to be respectful of your time.

The second interview should last about 30 minutes and will consist of several follow up questions based on my initial analysis. Could you provide me with several days and times you are available and I will schedule a Zoom meeting?

Anna Ankenbrand

APPENDIX E: Interview Protocol

Introduction

The researcher will begin the Zoom conference by greeting the participant. The researcher will welcome the participant and ask permission to record the call.

Purpose

The researcher will explain the purpose of the study is to examine how instructors develop and maintain their presence in an online course. The researcher will remind the participant the interview process will include two separate interviews. The first interview will focus on the instructor's experience with online teaching and how they have developed a presence in the past or how they plan to develop a presence in their current online class. The second interview will focus on them reflecting on their experiences. The researcher will remind the participant at any time they may share any documents or examples to help aid in their explanation.

Procedures

The researcher will explain open-ended questions will be asked to the interviewee and they may choose to answer or not to answer any questions. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes and will be recorded and transcribed. After data is collected, the interviewee's identity will remain confidential and will be replaced with pseudonyms. The interview transcription will be shared with the participant for feedback. The final data analysis will be included in the researcher's dissertation and other potential journal articles.

Consent

The researcher will explain to the interviewee their participation is voluntary and ask them to sign a consent form and verbally consent their participation. The researcher will encourage interviewees to share only the information they are comfortable sharing and remind them their privacy will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. The interviewees will be asked to choose their pseudonyms, and if not, the research will choose a pseudonym for them.

APPENDIX F: First Interview Questions

1. Explain how many years have you taught online? How many classes would you estimate you teach online per year and/or per semester?

2. How did you first get involved with teaching online?

3. If I made the statement "My instructor has presence in the online classroom" how would you define the term presence?

4. What behaviors might you use to help students feel welcome or safe in an online class?

5. What behaviors might you use to make students feel you are present or an actual real person?

6. How have you expressed your emotions, feelings, beliefs, or values in an online class?

7. Describe the kind of communication strategies you have used to show students you are present.

8. Describe the tone or style you use for an online class.

9. What are your thoughts on sharing personal information? Do you have any examples?

10. Describe how you participate in course discussions.

11. Explain how you interact with students.

12. What type of decisions do you make before the course begins regarding making yourself seem available and you care about the student?

13. Describe how you design the course to encourage communication and interaction with students.

14. Describe how you organize a course to encourage your presence.

15. What type of activities do you use to allow students to interact with course content?

16. What activities are planned to enable students to interact with you?

17. Describe how you display your subject matter knowledge or expertise to students.

18. What kind of decisions do you making during the course to show your availability?

APPENDIX G: Second Interview Questions

1. Before our interview were you aware of the concept Instructor Social Presence?

2. How did our interview impact your thoughts or actions regarding instructor social presence?

3. Describe how your opinion or actions of building a personal connection or projecting yourself as real have changed over the course of teaching online?

4. What considerations, if any, do you make when organizing the structure of your online course to establish your instructor social presence?

5. What considerations, if any, do you make when designing your online courses to establish your instructor social presence? (This might include the syllabus, learning activities, assignments, or assessments.)

6. What intentional strategies do you use at the introduction of your online course to build a level of personal connection, comfort, and trust with the students?

7. When you interact or communication with students during the first few weeks of the course, explain how you take into account the online environment?

8. What specific communication strategies do you use during the first few weeks of class to establish a friendly and approachable tone and explain why you use them? (Focus on tone, style, frequency)

9. What verbal or nonverbal behaviors do you use to enhance feelings of caring, intimacy, interactivity, or immediacy or otherwise your social presence?

10. Do you believe giving personalized feedback to students as a viable way to build instructor social presence? If so, describe how you use personalized feedback to build your instructor social presence?

APPENDIX H: Participant Consent Form

Study Title: Navigating Instructor Social Presence in an Online Learning Environment

Researcher: Anna Ankenbrand, Doctoral Candidate in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education

Department and Institution: Educational Administration, Michigan State University

Purpose of Study
The purpose of this study is to examine how you socially and pedagogically develop and sustain your presence in an online environment. I am interested in understanding how you use your behaviors, communication strategies, and interactions with students during the development, organization, and facilitation of an online course.

You will be asked to participate in two interviews, each lasting 60 minutes in length. Your interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and they will be sent to you for feedback. The final data analysis will be included in the researcher's dissertation and other potential journal articles.

Potential Risks: There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study. However, if you wish, you may at any time, select not to answer a question or discontinue from participating.

Confidentiality and Privacy: Your identity will remain confidential and will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the interviews is voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdraw your consent or discontinued participation in the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits.

Requestion for Additional Information: If you have any questions about this study, please contact Anna Ankenbrand at 810.623.1174 or aankenbrand@gmail.com. If you have concerns regarding your rights as a study participant or dissatisfied at any time with this study, you may contact anonymously to Dr. John Dirkx, Michigan State University, 620 Farm Lane, East Lansing, MI 48824. Email dirkx@msu.edu Phone 517-353-8927

I hereby agree to these terms and give my consent.

_____ _____
Participant Name Date

_____
Participant Signature

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REFERENCES

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