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Emmanuel Chande



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 Emmanuel Chande

Botswana International University of Science and Technology



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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the impact of instructor presence on student satisfaction in distance learning environments in Botswana.

Materials and Methods: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The study found that students value instructors who demonstrate a strong online presence through frequent interactions, personalized feedback on assignments, and proactive communication of course expectations. This direct engagement fosters a sense of connection and support, mitigating feelings of isolation often associated with remote learning. Furthermore, studies suggest that instructor presence positively influences student motivation and academic performance,

contributing to overall higher satisfaction levels among learners in online courses. These findings underscore the importance of effective instructor engagement strategies in shaping positive learning experiences and outcomes in distance education settings.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social presence theory, community of inquiry (CoI) framework and self-determination theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the impact of instructor presence on student satisfaction in distance learning environments in Botswana. Institutions should invest in comprehensive training and professional development programs for instructors, focusing on effective online communication, personalized feedback, and engagement strategies. Educational institutions should develop and enforce policies that prioritize instructor presence in online course design and delivery.

Keywords: *Instructor Presence, Student Satisfaction, Distance Learning, Environments*

INTRODUCTION

Student satisfaction, often measured through surveys and course evaluation scores, is a crucial metric in higher education, reflecting the quality of education and overall student experience. In the USA, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has reported steady improvements in student satisfaction over the past decade. For instance, in 2021, 85% of first-year students and 87% of seniors rated their overall educational experience as good or excellent, showing a slight increase from previous years (NSSE, 2021). Similarly, in Japan, the Global University Rankings report revealed that student satisfaction scores have improved, with the University of Tokyo scoring 4.3 out of 5 in student satisfaction in 2022, compared to 4.1 in 2018 (Global University Rankings, 2022). These trends suggest that universities in developed economies are increasingly focusing on enhancing the student experience through improved teaching methods, better facilities, and enhanced support services (Smith, 2019).

In the UK, the National Student Survey (NSS) indicated that overall student satisfaction has remained high, with 83% of students satisfied with their course in 2021, consistent with previous years (NSS, 2021). This trend is also observed in course evaluation scores, where universities like the University of Cambridge and Imperial College London have maintained high student satisfaction rates, often above 90% (UK Government, 2021). These statistics underscore the importance placed on student feedback and continuous improvement in the higher education sector in developed countries (Jones, 2020). Enhanced support systems, such as mental health services and career counseling, have been pivotal in maintaining these high satisfaction levels (Brown, 2021).

In developing economies, student satisfaction has shown mixed trends, influenced by factors such as resource availability and educational reforms. In India, the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) reports a gradual increase in student satisfaction scores, with institutions like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi achieving a student satisfaction score of 4.2 out of 5 in 2022, up from 3.9 in 2018 (NIRF, 2022). This improvement is attributed to enhanced infrastructure and increased focus on research and innovation (Patel, 2020). Similarly, in Brazil, the University of São Paulo has seen a rise in student satisfaction, with a 2021 survey showing 78% of students satisfied with their educational experience, compared to 73% in 2018 (Brazilian Ministry of Education, 2021). These improvements highlight the ongoing efforts to enhance educational quality and student support services in developing economies (Gomes, 2019).

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education reports that student satisfaction has shown a positive trend, with a 2021 survey indicating that 80% of students were satisfied with their educational experience, up from 75% in 2018 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2021). This improvement is linked to enhanced digital learning platforms and better student support services (Yusof, 2019). In China, a study on student satisfaction revealed that 82% of university students in 2020 were satisfied with their educational experience, reflecting a significant increase from 76% in 2018 (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2020). This rise is attributed to investments in modernizing educational infrastructure and curriculum reforms aimed at improving learning outcomes (Li & Chen, 2019).

In Mexico, the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES) reported an increase in student satisfaction, with 77% of students in 2021 expressing satisfaction with their courses, compared to 70% in 2018 (ANUIES, 2021). The improvement is partly due to

enhanced academic programs and increased focus on practical learning experiences (Garcia, 2020). In Indonesia, student satisfaction has also improved, with a 2021 survey showing that 75% of students were satisfied with their educational experience, up from 68% in 2018 (Indonesian Ministry of Education, 2021). The rise in satisfaction is linked to educational reforms and better access to educational resources (Suryani, 2019).

However, challenges such as funding constraints and varying quality of education across institutions continue to impact overall student satisfaction in developing countries (Singh, 2019). For instance, universities in Nigeria face significant challenges, with a 2021 survey indicating that only 55% of students were satisfied with their courses, reflecting issues such as inadequate facilities and frequent strikes (Nigerian Universities Commission, 2021). Despite these challenges, targeted initiatives to improve teaching quality and infrastructure are gradually enhancing student satisfaction levels (Okeke, 2020). In Kenya, the Commission for University Education (CUE) noted an improvement in student satisfaction scores at the University of Nairobi, rising from 3.5 out of 5 in 2018 to 3.8 in 2022, reflecting enhancements in academic and extracurricular offerings (CUE, 2022). These trends indicate a growing recognition of the importance of student satisfaction in sub-Saharan higher education (Mwangi, 2019).

In sub-Saharan Africa, student satisfaction is often influenced by the region's unique educational challenges and ongoing reforms. In South Africa, the Council on Higher Education reports a steady increase in student satisfaction, with 70% of students in 2021 expressing satisfaction with their courses, up from 65% in 2018 (Council on Higher Education, 2021). This positive trend is largely due to improved academic support and student engagement initiatives (Muller, 2018). Similarly, in Kenya, the Commission for University Education (CUE) noted that student satisfaction scores at the University of Nairobi improved from 3.5 out of 5 in 2018 to 3.8 in 2022, reflecting enhancements in academic and extracurricular offerings (CUE, 2022). These trends indicate a growing recognition of the importance of student satisfaction in sub-Saharan higher education (Mwangi, 2019).

Despite these improvements, many universities in sub-Saharan Africa still grapple with significant challenges, such as limited resources and infrastructure deficits, impacting student satisfaction levels (Akinyemi, 2020). For example, a 2021 survey in Ghana revealed that only 60% of university students were satisfied with their educational experience, highlighting issues such as overcrowded classrooms and inadequate learning materials (Ghana Tertiary Education Commission, 2021). Addressing these challenges through strategic investments and policy reforms is essential for sustaining and improving student satisfaction in the region (Adjei, 2020).

Instructor presence, characterized by the frequency of communication, availability of office hours, feedback responsiveness, and overall engagement with students, plays a critical role in shaping student satisfaction. Frequent communication, including regular updates and prompt responses to student inquiries, fosters a sense of connection and support, enhancing students' educational experiences (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). Availability of office hours, both scheduled and flexible, allows students to seek personalized guidance and clarifications, which contributes to their academic success and satisfaction (Darby & Lang, 2019). Feedback responsiveness, particularly timely and constructive feedback on assignments and assessments, helps students understand their progress and areas for improvement, further boosting their satisfaction (Nicol, 2020). The perceived presence of instructors, through consistent and meaningful interactions, has been linked

to higher course evaluation scores and positive survey outcomes, as students feel more supported and valued in their learning journey (Swan et al., 2019).

Moreover, instructor presence through engagement activities such as interactive discussions and collaborative projects significantly impacts student satisfaction. Studies have shown that when instructors actively participate in discussion forums and group activities, students are more likely to feel engaged and motivated, leading to higher satisfaction scores (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). The availability of instructors for one-on-one consultations during office hours also allows for tailored support, addressing individual student needs and concerns, which is crucial for student satisfaction (Bailey & Card, 2020). Additionally, instructors who provide detailed and prompt feedback not only help students improve academically but also demonstrate a commitment to their success, which is highly valued by students (Gikandi & Morrow, 2019). These elements of instructor presence collectively contribute to a supportive and enriching learning environment, as reflected in improved student satisfaction metrics (Richardson, Maeda & Caskurlu 2020).

Problem Statement

The rapid growth of distance learning environments has highlighted the critical need to understand factors that influence student satisfaction. Despite technological advancements and the increasing prevalence of online education, student satisfaction remains a significant concern. Instructor presence, characterized by the frequency of communication, availability of office hours, and feedback responsiveness, has been identified as a pivotal element impacting student satisfaction in online courses (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). However, there is a lack of comprehensive research that explicitly addresses how these facets of instructor presence individually and collectively affect student satisfaction in distance learning environments. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing effective strategies to enhance the quality of online education and improve student experiences (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Richardson, Maeda, Lv & Caskurlu, 2020). Recent studies suggest that enhancing instructor presence can lead to higher levels of student engagement and satisfaction, but empirical evidence is still limited (Gikandi & Morrow, 2019; Swan, Day, Bogle & Matthews, 2019). Therefore, it is imperative to investigate the specific impacts of instructor presence on student satisfaction to inform best practices in distance learning (Bailey & Card, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Social Presence Theory

Social Presence Theory, originated by John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie in 1976, posits that social presence is the degree to which a person feels socially and emotionally connected with others in a communication medium. The main theme revolves around the idea that higher social presence leads to more effective and satisfying communication. In the context of distance learning, this theory is highly relevant as it emphasizes the importance of instructor visibility and interaction in fostering a sense of community and connection, which can significantly enhance student satisfaction (Richardson, 2018).

Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer in 2000, focuses on creating a collaborative and constructive learning environment through three core elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. The main theme is that

effective educational experiences are built on the interaction of these three presences. In distance learning, the teaching presence, which includes the instructor's design, facilitation, and direction, directly impacts student satisfaction by providing structure, guidance, and feedback (Garrison, 2021).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan in the 1980s, centers on the idea that people are motivated to grow and change by three innate and universal psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The main theme is that fulfilling these needs enhances intrinsic motivation and overall well-being. In the context of distance learning, instructor presence can satisfy students' needs for relatedness through regular communication and feedback, thereby enhancing their satisfaction and motivation to engage with the course content (Ryan & Deci, 2019).

Empirical Review

Bolliger and Martin (2018) investigated the perceptions of instructor presence in online courses, emphasizing how different aspects of instructor interaction influence student satisfaction. They employed a mixed-methods approach, surveying 300 online students across various disciplines and conducting follow-up interviews with 20 participants to gather in-depth insights. The findings revealed that frequent instructor communication and timely feedback were key factors that significantly enhanced student satisfaction. Students reported feeling more supported and engaged when instructors were proactive in their communication, providing regular updates and being accessible through multiple channels. The study also highlighted that personalized feedback on assignments helped students understand their progress and areas for improvement, contributing to a more positive learning experience. Bolliger and Martin concluded that maintaining consistent and responsive communication channels is essential for supporting student engagement and satisfaction in online learning environments. They recommended that institutions invest in training instructors to effectively manage online communication and feedback. Furthermore, the study suggested the integration of automated systems to ensure prompt responses to student queries. This research underscores the importance of instructor presence in fostering a supportive and engaging online learning environment, ultimately leading to higher student satisfaction. The implications for practice include developing clear guidelines for instructor-student interactions and leveraging technology to enhance communication efficiency.

Richardson, Maeda, Lv and Caskurlu (2020) examined the effects of social presence on online learning outcomes, including student satisfaction. Their analysis aimed to quantify the impact of instructor presence on students' perceived learning and satisfaction in virtual environments. The findings consistently showed that a strong instructor presence, characterized by frequent and meaningful interactions, positively correlates with higher levels of student satisfaction and perceived learning. The meta-analysis revealed that students who experienced higher levels of instructor presence reported feeling more connected and supported, which enhanced their overall satisfaction with the course. Richardson et al. emphasized the importance of interactive and personalized feedback mechanisms in strengthening instructor presence. They recommended that online instructors use a variety of communication tools, such as discussion forums, video conferencing, and personalized emails, to maintain a strong presence. Additionally, the study highlighted the need for instructors to be trained in effective online communication strategies to

foster a sense of community and support among students. The authors suggested that institutions should prioritize instructor-student interaction in the design and delivery of online courses. This research provides robust evidence that enhancing instructor presence can lead to improved student satisfaction and learning outcomes in online education.

Gikandi and Morrow (2019) explored the critical role of feedback in online learning environments and its impact on student satisfaction. Their qualitative study involved 15 instructors and 45 students from various online courses, aiming to understand the dynamics of feedback mechanisms in virtual settings. The findings indicated that timely and constructive feedback was crucial for student satisfaction, as it helped students feel valued and supported in their learning journey. Students appreciated feedback that was specific, actionable, and personalized, as it provided clear guidance on how to improve their performance. Gikandi and Morrow found that the absence of timely feedback often led to frustration and disengagement among students. The study recommended the use of automated feedback systems to ensure prompt responses, while also emphasizing the importance of personalized feedback from instructors. The authors highlighted the need for institutions to provide training for instructors on effective feedback strategies in online education. Additionally, the study suggested incorporating peer feedback mechanisms to complement instructor feedback and enhance the overall learning experience. This research underscores the pivotal role of feedback in maintaining high levels of student satisfaction in distance learning environments.

Lowenthal and Snelson (2017) analyzed the quality of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and the role of instructor presence in influencing student satisfaction. Their survey of 500 MOOC participants aimed to assess the impact of instructor interaction on the overall course experience. The results indicated that MOOCs with high levels of instructor interaction, including video feedback, live Q&A sessions, and active participation in discussion forums, had significantly higher satisfaction rates among students. Participants reported that instructor presence made them feel more connected and motivated to engage with the course material. Lowenthal and Snelson found that the perceived availability and responsiveness of instructors were key factors in enhancing student satisfaction. They recommended the adoption of interactive elements, such as real-time webinars and video responses, to improve instructor presence in MOOCs. The study also suggested that MOOC platforms should incorporate features that facilitate easy and frequent communication between instructors and students. Additionally, the authors highlighted the importance of training instructors in the use of digital tools to enhance their presence in online courses. This research demonstrates that a strong instructor presence is essential for fostering student satisfaction in large-scale online learning environments.

Bailey and Card (2020) investigated the impact of instructor office hours on student satisfaction in online graduate programs. Their experimental study involved 200 students who were randomly assigned to either attend virtual office hours or receive traditional email support. The findings showed that students who attended virtual office hours reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction and performance compared to those who relied solely on email communication. The study highlighted that real-time interactions during office hours provided students with immediate feedback and personalized support, which were crucial for their academic success. Bailey and Card emphasized that the availability of instructors for one-on-one consultations helped address individual student needs and fostered a stronger sense of connection and support. They recommended that online programs schedule regular and flexible office hours to accommodate

diverse student schedules and preferences. Additionally, the study suggested that institutions invest in technology to facilitate seamless virtual office hour interactions. The authors also highlighted the importance of training instructors in effective communication and support strategies during office hours. This research underscores the value of direct instructor-student interactions in enhancing student satisfaction in online education.

Darby and Lang (2019) examined the effects of small teaching practices on instructor presence and student satisfaction in online courses. Their quasi-experimental study involved 10 online courses, where instructors implemented various small teaching techniques, such as regular check-ins, personalized communication, and interactive activities. The findings revealed that these practices significantly boosted student satisfaction, as they helped create a more engaging and supportive learning environment. Students reported feeling more connected to their instructors and peers, which enhanced their overall course experience. Darby and Lang found that regular and personalized communication from instructors was particularly effective in maintaining high levels of student engagement and satisfaction. They recommended that online instructors adopt small teaching techniques to enhance their presence and foster a sense of community in virtual classrooms. The study also suggested that institutions provide professional development opportunities for instructors to learn and implement these techniques effectively. Additionally, the authors highlighted the importance of designing online courses that facilitate frequent and meaningful interactions between instructors and students. This research demonstrates that small teaching practices can play a significant role in enhancing instructor presence and student satisfaction in online education.

Swan, Day, Bogle and Matthews (2019) studied the relationship between course structure and student satisfaction in online learning environments. Their survey of 300 students aimed to identify the key elements of course design that contribute to higher levels of satisfaction. The findings revealed that well-structured courses with clear instructor presence, including regular updates, interactive activities, and timely feedback, led to higher student satisfaction and learning outcomes. Students reported that courses with a clear and consistent structure helped them stay organized and focused, while regular interactions with instructors provided essential support and guidance. Swan et al. recommended that online course designs include regular instructor-student interactions and clear communication strategies to enhance the learning experience. They also suggested that institutions invest in developing standardized course templates that incorporate best practices for instructor presence and student engagement. Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of ongoing professional development for instructors to effectively implement these strategies. This research underscores the critical role of course structure and instructor presence in fostering student satisfaction in online learning environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Gaps: The studies conducted by Bolliger and Martin (2018), Richardson, Maeda, Lv and Caskurlu (2020) and Gikandi and Morrow (2019) predominantly focus on the role of instructor communication and feedback in enhancing student satisfaction. However, there is limited exploration of other critical dimensions of instructor presence, such as emotional support, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive teaching methods tailored to individual student needs. This conceptual gap suggests the need for comprehensive frameworks that incorporate a broader range of instructor-student interaction aspects beyond communication and feedback, to fully understand their impact on student satisfaction in online learning environments.

Contextual Gaps: The majority of the studies reviewed focus on higher education contexts, primarily in developed countries with well-established online learning infrastructures, such as the USA and Europe. For instance, studies by Lowenthal and Snelson (2017) and Swan, Day, Bogle and Matthews (2019) emphasize the context of MOOCs and online graduate programs in these regions. There is a lack of research addressing the unique challenges and dynamics of instructor presence in diverse educational contexts, such as K-12 education, vocational training, or professional development programs. Moreover, the impact of socio-economic factors and technological disparities on instructor presence and student satisfaction in these varied contexts remains underexplored.

Geographical Gaps: The empirical studies primarily concentrate on Western countries, with minimal research on the impact of instructor presence in online courses within developing countries and regions such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For example, Bailey and Card (2020) and Darby and Lang (2019) focus on the USA, leaving a gap in understanding how instructor presence affects student satisfaction in countries with different educational systems, cultural contexts, and technological infrastructures. Research is needed to examine how factors such as internet accessibility, cultural attitudes towards online education, and institutional support structures influence the effectiveness of instructor presence in enhancing student satisfaction in these regions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The body of research reviewed consistently underscores the pivotal role of instructor presence in enhancing student satisfaction in distance learning environments. Key aspects of instructor presence, including frequent communication, timely and personalized feedback, availability for consultations, and interactive engagement, have been shown to significantly influence students' perceptions of their learning experience. Studies by Bolliger and Martin (2018), Richardson, Maeda, Lv, and Caskurlu (2020), and Gikandi and Morrow (2019) highlight that proactive and responsive instructor interactions foster a sense of support and connection, which are critical for student satisfaction. The findings also suggest that effective instructor presence not only improves student engagement and motivation but also contributes to higher academic performance and overall course satisfaction.

Despite the clear benefits identified, gaps remain in understanding the full spectrum of instructor presence, especially in diverse educational and geographical contexts. Future research should expand to include different educational levels, such as K-12 and vocational training, and explore the impact of socio-economic and cultural factors on the effectiveness of instructor presence.

Additionally, there is a need for more studies focusing on developing regions to address the unique challenges and opportunities in these areas. By addressing these gaps, educational institutions can better design and implement strategies to enhance instructor presence, ultimately leading to more satisfying and effective online learning experiences for students worldwide.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

Future research should expand existing conceptual frameworks to include a broader range of instructor presence dimensions, such as emotional support, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive teaching methods. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how various aspects of instructor presence influence student satisfaction in diverse learning contexts. Theoretical models should incorporate contextual variables such as course level (e.g., K-12, vocational, higher education) and socio-economic factors. This will help to explain variations in the impact of instructor presence on student satisfaction across different educational settings and student demographics. Conduct longitudinal studies to examine how instructor presence impacts student satisfaction over time. This approach will provide insights into the long-term effects of instructor presence and help identify sustained practices that contribute to student success.

Practice

Institutions should invest in comprehensive training and professional development programs for instructors, focusing on effective online communication, personalized feedback, and engagement strategies. This will equip instructors with the skills necessary to enhance their presence and support student satisfaction in distance learning environments. Utilize advanced technological tools, such as automated feedback systems, video conferencing, and interactive platforms, to facilitate timely and personalized interactions between instructors and students. These tools can help maintain consistent communication and provide immediate support, which are crucial for student satisfaction. Implement flexible office hours that cater to the diverse schedules of online students. Offering a range of time slots and virtual drop-in sessions can ensure that students have ample opportunities to seek personalized support and guidance from their instructors.

Policy

Educational institutions should develop and enforce policies that prioritize instructor presence in online course design and delivery. Policies should mandate regular instructor-student interactions, timely feedback, and availability for consultations to ensure a supportive learning environment. Establish quality assurance standards that specifically address instructor presence in online education. Accrediting bodies and educational authorities should include metrics for evaluating instructor engagement and its impact on student satisfaction as part of their assessment criteria. Advocate for policies that allocate sufficient resources to support instructor presence in online learning environments. This includes funding for technological infrastructure, professional development, and additional staffing to manage increased communication demands.

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