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Understanding Disinterest: How Online Undergraduate Students Perceive And Respond To Disengaged Faculty Members

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UNDERSTANDING DISINTEREST: HOW ONLINE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
PERCEIVE AND RESPOND TO DISENGAGED FACULTY MEMBERS

By

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BS (Western Governors University of Indiana) 2013

MS (University of Mary) 2014

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

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Blake Clifford
2018

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this interpretative, qualitative study was to discover reasons students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceive faculty as disinterested, the significance of this perception, and how students respond to disinterested faculty. Online education continues to evolve and change how students learn and how online undergraduate students perceive and respond to faculty members. With these changes, understanding which elements influence and impact the success of online undergraduate students becomes more complex. The distinctive social context of virtual learning environments often contributes to online students characterizing faculty as disengaged. Online students often have limited opportunities to interact directly with faculty, introducing occasion for students to misconstrue faculty intent, which can lead to deteriorated student perception of faculty, institution, online learning, and higher education. Student satisfaction and perceived success is reduced.

This study documented the perceived experiences of eight students 18 years of age or older who attended and completed at least three asynchronous online undergraduate courses at a U.S. higher education institution during the years 2016 or 2017, and who experienced instructor behavior that they characterized as disengaged. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews between the researcher and student participants facilitated data collection for this study. The major themes that emerged during analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes were lack of

faculty concern, diminished or loss of respect for faculty/institution, lack of faculty competence, overburdened faculty, feelings of isolation, and diminished or loss of interest in higher education or online study. The student participants discussed examples of how faculty actions, or inactions, cultivated negative feelings. This study revealed some promising insight to faculty–student interaction from the student perspective. As a result, improved dialogue between instructors and students can establish a basis to motivate students and improve their perceptions of online interaction with instructors. Improvements can arise from scholarly discourse surrounding the exploration of what specific factors induce the subjectivity of undergraduate students’ perceptions of faculty-student interaction. This study’s data and findings can support the efforts of administrators, course developers, and instructors to improve awareness, behavior, and training programs for faculty members who teach in online learning environments.

University of New England

Doctor of Education
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Finally. I am overjoyed this day has arrived. I will now take a nap for the next few weeks.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Online education continues to evolve and change how students learn and how online undergraduate students perceive and respond to faculty members (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006; Papoulias, 2016). With these changes, understanding which elements influence and impact the success of students becomes more complex (Allen & Seaman, 2017). The development of online education introduced a new set of dynamics unique to the environment, all with the potential to affect student satisfaction and success (Eom et al., 2006). Initially, content and delivery systems seemed to have the most significant impact on students' perceptions of learning and content mastery, however, it was learned that faculty played as important a role (McGinley, Osgood, & Kenney, 2012). In fact, students' perceptions of faculty drawn from faculty-student interaction elevated the importance of quality and quantity of interaction in online learning environments (Dziuban, Moskal, Thompson, Decantis, & Hermsdorfer, 2015; Kuo, Walker, Belland & Schroder, 2013).

The distinctive social context of virtual learning environments often contributes to online students characterizing faculty as disengaged (Kearsley, 2000). Markedly, online students often have limited opportunities to interact directly with faculty, opening a cognitive chasm that can cause students to misconstrue faculty intent and impede communication (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009; Swan, 2005). Furthermore, the physical separation coupled with the absence of verbal and nonverbal communication between faculty and students in some online learning environments creates a psychological gap, referred to as *transactional distance* (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). This gap is an inherent part of online learning environments and “pedagogical rather than a geographic phenomenon, with structure, dialogue, and autonomy as the primary dimensions of

distance” (Arbaugh, 2004, p. 170). Therefore, the type of online learning environment can influence the extent of transactional distance students experience. For instance, asynchronous online learning environments typically produce greater levels of transactional distance than synchronous online learning environments because faculty and students do not need to simultaneously access course materials, assignments, or discussions in asynchronous online learning environments (Moore, 1983; Moore & Kearsley, 2004; Rotich, 2013; Skylar, 2009). Conversely, in synchronous online learning environments, faculty and students simultaneously access course materials, assignments, and discussions in real time. Consequently, synchronous online learning environments achieve direct faculty-student interaction, which closely emulate traditional face-to-face learning environments. On the other hand, asynchronous learning environments are less similar to face-to-face learning environments than synchronous learning environments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, asynchronous learning environments produce inherently high levels of transactional distance increasing the likelihood that students will feel disconnected and consider faculty as disengaged (Bower, Dalgarno, Kennedy, Lee, & Kenney, 2015). Notwithstanding the characteristic barriers created by online learning environments, education in the U.S. continues to embrace and expand the use of online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

Although online learning is a relatively new occurrence—beginning in 1960—on the historical timeline of education, it has become a growing part of education and a core component of higher education in the United States. In fact, more than 70% of U.S. higher education institutions incorporate online learning into their long-term strategic plans (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Much of online learning’s appeal is its accessibility because “this delivery medium can be very attractive for older, non-traditional students or for those who are located too far away from a campus to attend traditional physical classes” (Dykman & Davis, 2008, as cited in

Callaway, 2012, p. 1692). However, older students often seek ways to achieve their academic goals while supporting a balanced life. Online learning environments offer students the flexibility they seek to maintain that balance.

Similarly, many faculty members prefer the flexibility that teaching online affords. However, transitioning current faculty from traditional face-to-face environments to online learning environments can be problematic. For instance, some faculty transitioning from traditional face-to-face environments must obtain new competencies in technology and communication, which can be burdensome for those faculty members as well as the institutions where they teach (Kearns, 2016). Recruiting and training new faculty can be equally challenging. Without effective controls and faculty developmental programs, faculty and institutions encounter difficulties that can impact online learning for students. A lack of positive faculty-student interaction impairs the online learning experience, further complicating subsequent faculty-student communications, student learning, and their perception of the institution (Campbell, 2014; Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014; Seok, DaCosta, Kinsell, & Tung, 2010; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). To understand how these and other complications developed, it is necessary to consider the rapid evolution of online learning.

Origins of Online Learning

The public's awareness of online learning originated when corporations began using computer-based programs to train employees in the 1980s (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2010). However, twenty years earlier in 1960 at the University of Illinois, a computer-assisted instruction system referred to as Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations (PLATO) was developed and operated on the university's Illinois Automatic Computer (ILLIAC

I) system and by the late 1970s was linked via network, to other mainframe computers to support several thousand computer terminals located throughout the world (Smith & Sherwood, 1976). Over the next two decades, the capabilities of PLATO continued to advance, which expanded its use into educational settings ranging from elementary to university coursework; however, in 2006, marketing challenges brought PLATO's success to an end (Kats, 2010). The roll out of the World Wide Web in 1991, along with advancements in technology, conventionalized computer-based learning programs, lowered costs and eased entry into the education sector, although on a limited basis and merely as learning tools rather than comprehensive platforms for learning (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Picciano, 2002; Yang, Quadir, Chen, & Miao, 2016). Even so, during the 1990s, use of computer-based learning programs incrementally increased but not across all levels of education. Programs were not readily accepted by faculty in higher education (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012).

From the late 1990s to the early part of the 2000s, online learning gained traction in higher education; however, as with many new technologies, limitations of online learning became apparent (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; Mashaw, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Song et al., 2004; Willging, & Johnson, 2009). Moreover, the prevalence of online learning's limitations increased as enrollment surged during this period. Online learning's major weaknesses were attributed to constrained interaction between faculty and students and the resulting transactional distance (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Aragon, Johnson, & Shaik, 2002; Dixon, 2014; James, Swan, & Daston, 2016; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009; Truong, 2015; Willging, & Johnson, 2009). Nevertheless, chief academic officers were not deterred from continuing to incorporate online learning in the long-term strategies of their institutions and increased efforts to grow enrollment of online students (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Bowen, Guthrie,

& Lack, 2012). Since 2002, computer-based learning programs evolved into comprehensive modes of learning and swiftly matured into a mainstream method used by U.S. higher education institutions to deliver course materials and facilitate student learning (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

From 2002 through 2016, the number of students enrolled in at least three online courses grew 294% from 1.6 million to 6.3 million; extensively higher than the growth of the U.S. population during the same period (Allen & Seaman, 2017; NCES, 2015). By comparison, the U.S. population grew 12.5% from 287 million in July of 2002 to 323 million in July of 2016 (Census, 2017). The convenience of asynchronous online higher education programs appeared to drive the upsurge in enrollment, particularly for adult students with commitments that inhibited them from attending physical campuses (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Callaway, 2012; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). After four years of steady increases in the growth rate of the number of students taking at least three online courses, an incremental decline began in 2010 and dwindled from a growth rate that exceeded 20% in 2009 to 3.9% in 2015, which remains “impressive...at a time of decreasing overall enrollments” (Allen & Seaman, 2017, p. 12). Although the year 2015 yielded a positive growth rate, the year-over-year decline beginning in 2010 provoked concern among higher education administrators with growing numbers of academic leaders believing that:

...additional effort required to deliver an online course represents a barrier for online instruction for 78.0% of academic leaders [and] increasing numbers of academic leaders think that retaining students is a greater problem for online courses than for face-to-face courses. (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 6)

University traditions and culture can be more profoundly experienced by students attending a physical campus than participating in online courses.

Immediacy, interaction, communication, and transactional distance impact student retention rates and the amount of effort needed to deliver online courses (Conaway, Easton, & Schmidt, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Immediacy refers to the psychological closeness between faculty and students. For instance, “if the student manages to feel psychologically close to his or her teacher, this translates into teacher-student immediacy” (Fahara & Castro, 2015, p. 363). Attaining psychological closeness in online learning environments is challenging due to proximity, which limits interaction between faculty and students. Therefore, since immediacy does not occur extemporaneously during online courses, it is essential for the instructional design to purposefully incorporate interactive assignments and exercises that prompt immediacy between faculty and students (Berge, 1999; Merrill, 1994). Similarly, interaction and communication in online learning environments are subject to the effects of transactional distance.

The limited amount of faculty-student interaction in online learning environments increases the significance of each instance of interaction. Online students experience physical disconnection, increasing the likelihood of misinterpreting the intentions of online faculty; in part, due to the higher levels of transactional distance associated with online learning environments (Conaway et al., 2005; Dixon, 2014; Hawkins, Graham, Sudweeks, & Barbour, 2013; Moore, 1983; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009; Truong, 2015; Willging, & Johnson, 2009).

It is important to note that participating in face-to-face learning environments at physical locations does not guarantee that a student will accurately interpret an instructor’s intentions. However, students’ physical proximity to faculty allows students to consider their instructors’ verbal and nonverbal communication. As a result, students participating in face-to-face learning

environments have an easier time deciphering faculty messages. Additionally, face-to-face learners attain a sense of community as well as a sense of immediacy (Dawson, 2006; Moore, 1983; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Therefore, the unique complexities of interacting in online learning environments deepen the need for an advanced set of communication skills for both faculty and students. Therefore, “this kind of environment places a burden on faculty to provide the necessary structure” and “instruction must become more purposeful” (Holzweiss et al., 2014, p. 320). Correspondingly, faculty success depends on developing and using requisite teaching strategies that tackle interaction, communication, and transactional distance.

Positive faculty attitudes and teaching strategies that boost student enthusiasm and participation during faculty-student interaction enhance learning experiences for students (Meyers, 2008). For example, an instructor who lacks passion and/or skill can obliterate exceptional course content, which can cause an immediate decline in student participation whereas an exceptionally passionate and skilled instructor can elevate the blandest course material to a level that energizes students and provokes thought, leading to enhanced levels of participation (Day, 2005). In particular, “motivation is generally accepted as key to creative production, and the most important motivators are intrinsic passion and interest in the work itself” (Adams, 2006, p. 4). Furthermore, the online learning environments instructors form, largely driven by faculty-student interaction, can affect students’ motivation and alter their attitudes toward learning (Painter, 2015). Therefore, an instructor’s mindfulness of a student’s needs coupled with the instructor’s skillfulness in meeting those needs is of vital importance to students’ perceived learning experiences (Day, 2005). However, to accomplish this, “in challenging, affirming, and influencing the students, exemplary educators...create an effective community of inquiry with strong social, cognitive, and teaching presence” (Edwards, Perry, &

Janzen, 2011, p. 107). Therefore, instructor mindfulness is revealed in how they construct and adjust learning environments to accommodate the needs of the students. Ruey (2010) and Yoon (2008) found that instructors who challenge students by applying high expectations inspire students to think both critically and reflectively and create “an environment where possibilities are expanded, and potential is realized” (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 108). Furthermore, Maor (2003) noted:

The role of the teacher in the online environment becomes a significant element in creating quality learning; a task that has required a change in pedagogies for the higher education lecturer. The change in pedagogy also included the need to inspire reflective thinking amongst the learners, while at the same time attempting to be a reflective practitioner. (p. 128)

Beyond challenging students, teachers must recognize the students’ academic aptitude, identify obstacles, and act to assist students with overcoming these factors (Edwards et al., 2011). These teacher actions will affirm the importance of students as individuals and will strengthen the prospect to motivate them.

The ongoing growth of online learning environments continues to change the configuration of higher education. And, with that change comes variations to how student satisfaction and success are approached and perceived; at the core are online faculty and students. Although normative approaches—such as using high expectations to challenge students into successful outcomes—similarly affect most students, employing a social constructivism approach to teaching offers teachers a specific path to awareness, whether face-to-face or online. As a result, increased opportunity for instructors to address learners’ individualities by appropriately adjusting pedagogies occurs. However, the faculty-student

interaction limitations of online learning environments necessitate increased teacher expertise and skill in online interaction. For these reasons, revising outdated hiring models and teaching policies, formerly aimed at traditional on-campus faculty positions, to incorporate applicable professional training and development, will improve the quality standards of online courses and programs at U.S. higher education institutions (Kane, Shaw, Pang, Salley, & Snider, 2015; Magda, Poulin, & Clinefelter, 2015). In doing so, faculty will have a better understanding of how online undergraduate students learn and how they perceive and respond to faculty members, and better prepared to appropriately address online student individualities.

Statement of the Problem

The accessibility of asynchronous online higher education programs prompted a significant rise in online course enrollment over the past 15 years, particularly for adult students with commitments that inhibited them from attending physical campuses (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Revenue grew as the number of students enrolled in online undergraduate courses increased. As with most companies, organizations, or institutions, “above average growth rates are...no guarantor of high profitability” (Roper, 1999, p. 235). In fact, “higher costs for online development and delivery are seen as barriers” (Allen & Seaman, 2007, p. 3) among institutions in the process of forming online programs. Thus, the additional revenue did not always translate into more funds to invest into adjusting, improving, and maintaining the quality of online programs. In fact, the significant rise in online course enrollment deteriorated student satisfaction and seemed to worsen the obstacles online students already faced—the most prominent being the lack of direct interaction with faculty (Callaway, 2012; Campbell, 2014; Holzweiss et al, 2014; Seok et al., 2010; Song et al., 2004). Lower student satisfaction ratings corresponded to undergraduate students’ perceptions of their online instructors’ attitudes and how

students perceived their instructors' levels of interest, which students derived from their faculty-student interactions (Fryer & Bovee, 2016; Ko & Chung, 2014). Therefore, uncovering the reasons undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceive faculty as disengaged provides insight for future study of faculty-student interaction.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this interpretive, qualitative study was to explore reasons undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online college courses perceive faculty as disengaged. The findings from this study can help improve faculty's ability to approach challenges associated with online teaching, particularly the quality of faculty-student interaction. Moore (2014) learned that although no interaction leads to no learning (which mirrored the results of Gunawardena's 1995 study), instructor presence in online higher education courses did not effectively improve student satisfaction and success—the quality of interaction was more important. Furthermore, identifying faculty behaviors that negatively affect student satisfaction and success in online learning environments will help obviate occurrence of those actions during faculty-student interaction.

More than 2,800 colleges and universities responded to Allen and Seaman's (2015) survey used to grasp the character and extent of online education and reported that academic leaders believe that online students require more discipline and self-motivation than face-to-face students to achieve successful outcomes in undergraduate courses. Although this may be true, other motivators affect the academic success of online students. Undoubtedly, recognizing students' perspectives offers substance for introducing transformative actions into the online teaching process. Incidentally, Gaytan's (2015) study compared online faculty and student views and reported that online students regarded the amount of instruction and the quality of interaction

as crucial elements to online student success. With this student perspective in mind, faculty becomes one of the primary variables affecting online student perceived success. Thus, this study will explore reasons undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online college courses perceive faculty as disengaged to improve faculty's ability to engage with the challenges of online teaching.

Research Questions

Grounded in the specified research problem, the overarching question of this study is

- How do online undergraduate students perceive and respond to disengaged faculty members?

Supplemental research questions included:

- How do online undergraduate students describe and understand their expectations of faculty interaction in online learning environments?
- How do online undergraduate students describe the influence faculty immediacy has on their attitudes toward learning?

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework discovers and investigates the links existing between constructs and notions derived from individual experience, observations, recognized theories, and prior research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Ravitch and Riggan (2012) suggest that “conceptual frameworks are comprised of three primary elements: personal interests, topical research, and theoretical frameworks” (p. 10). These three primary elements assure that a conceptual framework includes subjectivity, regardless of the researcher's efforts to circumvent personal bias from entering into the study. A conceptual framework is subject to “curiosities, biases, and ideological commitments (what you think is interesting or important), theories of action (why

you think things happen), and epistemological assumptions (what constitutes useful or valuable knowledge), all of which are” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p. 10) affected by the researcher’s experiences acquired through living in addition to his or her social position.

Personal Interest

Having attended multiple online universities on part-time and full-time bases before finally settling at WGU Indiana to complete and receive a Bachelor of Science in Business Management and then a Master of Science in Strategic Leadership from the University of Mary, the researcher amassed significant direct experience participating in asynchronous and synchronous online courses. Similar to the undergraduate, online students who participated in this study, the researcher was influenced by the subjectivity of his interpretations derived from specific assumptions about knowledge, learning, and reality—emphasized in the theory of social constructivism (Creswell, 2013; Gergen, 1999; Merriam, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978), which affected how he perceived online learning experiences, interaction (Lai, 2015; Liu, 2016; Moore, 2014), faculty feedback (Hung & Chou, 2015; Roby, Ashe, Singh, & Clark, 2013), and faculty immediacy (Dziuban et al., 2015).

Topical Research

Coinciding with the topic of this study, research that centers on the perspectives online students have toward faculty is becoming more prevalent. However, a limited amount of research is specific to student perspectives resulting from their interaction with faculty in online learning environments. Doctoral students’ dissertations represent an expanding segment of scholarly research aimed at discovering student perspectives of online faculty-student interaction (Moser, 2015; Painter, 2015; Papoulias, 2016; Rotich, 2013). However, much of the available literature of online student perspectives was investigated using quantitative research methods

(An, Shin, & Lim, 2009; Brooks & Young, 2015; Dawson, 2006; Ho & Swan, 2007; Painter, 2015; Papoulias, 2016). As a result, perspectives of online students' interactions with faculty assumed fixed and measurable realities and did not seek to understand the behaviors that instigate student perspectives. Furthermore, the quantitative approach fails to identify how culture and society impact online students' perceptions of their communication with faculty. Therefore, the absence of the impact of culture and society coupled with the limited amount of research specific to online student perspectives of faculty-student interaction exposes a gap in the available scholarly research.

Conceptual Framework

Developing from personal interest, topical research, and the theoretical framework, a conceptual model will form the structure that guided this research of faculty's effect on student perceived success in online learning environments. The theoretical framework for this study presents social constructivism and transactional distance theories to clarify and rationalize the problem of faculty disengagement from interaction with students in online learning environments. These online learning environments exclusively comprised undergraduate courses that incorporated structured settings with explicit schedules for assignments as well as start and end dates for the course.

Differing from face-to-face learning environments, online learning possesses intrinsic features that enkindle sensitivities not typically experienced, or experienced to a significantly lesser degree, by students who participate in face-to-face learning environments (Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, & Thompson, 2012; Jaggars, 2014; Sun & Rosa, 2015). An obvious characteristic intrinsically associated with asynchronous online learning environments is transactional distance, which causes many students to experience isolation more intensely than

those participating in face-to-face learning environments (Conaway et al., 2005; Dixon, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2013; Moore, 1983; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009; Truong, 2015; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Like transactional distance, social constructivism appears in many learning environments. Vygotsky (1962, 1978; Wenger & Traynor-Wenger, 2015) asserted that learning occurs through social interaction, albeit an individual cognitive experience. Furthermore, activity, communication, and interactions with others cultivates an individual's understanding, which develops into meaning (Hutchison & Mitchell, 2010; Swan, 2005). However, feelings of isolation emerging from the increased transactional distance endured by many online students increase susceptibility to personal bias infiltrating learning (Shearer et al., 2015). Online faculty's inability to identify and/or directly and immediately address students' personal biases slows students' ability to accurately understand concepts and material. For these reasons, the theories of transactional distance and social constructivism frame this study of how online undergraduate students describe and understand their expectations of faculty interaction in online learning environments.

Assumptions and Limitations

This interpretive, qualitative study assumed that individual experiences create biased perspectives, indicative of social constructivism (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Merriam, 2009). It was assumed that students' perspectives and learning objectives were affected by the culture of learning at institutions and the outward characteristics of the instructors' communication during faculty-student interaction (Chang & Chen, 2014; Ko & Chung, 2014). Additionally, the structure of the study's asynchronous online learning environment introduced the assumption that some transactional distance exists. Finally,

it was assumed that the students interviewed for this qualitative study would be cooperative and provide truthful statements.

The limitation of this study was its sample size of eight student participants. The relatively small sample size facilitated enriched descriptions of students' experiences. The sample selection was limited to undergraduate students who participated in undergraduate courses that incorporated structured asynchronous online learning environments consisting of explicit schedules for assignments as well as start and end dates for the courses. Participants were enrolled in undergraduate courses in either Associate or Bachelor programs at both for-profit and not-for-profit 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities. All schools were either accredited by regional accreditation agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and/or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Consequently, the small sample size curtailed generalizing the findings to a wide-ranging span of undergraduate students across the United States.

Significance

This study will contribute to the scholarly dialogue on faculty-student interaction in asynchronous online undergraduate courses; in particular, instructors' behaviors that undergraduate students perceive negatively. A vast array of research has addressed online instructor best practices (Ferdig, Kennedy, & Al, 2014; Finch & Jacobs, 2012; Fish & Wickersham, 2009; Githens, Sauer, Crawford, Cumberland, & Wilson, 2014; Rovai, 2007). However, a limited amount of information centered on how undergraduate students perceive the behaviors of their instructors in asynchronous online learning environments exists. Therefore, the information from this study can assist the efforts of administrators, course developers, and instructors with creating or improving current online courses.

Definitions of Key Terms

Asynchronous. Not occurring at the same time. Online education environments not occurring in real-time where students reflect and complete assignments and/or interact (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Baby Boomers. The Strauss–Howe generational theory states that Baby Boomers are individuals born between 1943 and 1960 (Straus & Howe, 1997).

Face-to-face learning. The interaction between individuals occurring in the same physical location for the purpose of learning (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

iGenerers. Refers to the iGeneration: individuals born in the 1990s into the new millennium who are “even more enmeshed with technology than their older siblings” (Rosen, 2010, p. 13). The *iGenerers* older siblings are referred to as the Net Generation—individuals born in the 1980s and 1990s.

Online learning environment. A learning environment where content is dispersed, and interaction occurs via the internet using computers, tablets, smartphones, and/or other electronic devices.

Social constructivism. Learning derived from interaction with other individuals and life experiences (Woo & Reeves, 2007).

Transactional distance. The gap in communication caused by physical distance and behaviorally-based misunderstanding (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Conclusion

This first chapter introduced the interpretive, qualitative study addressing the reasons undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceive faculty as disengaged. As the use of online learning environments continues to develop and enrollment continues to rise, particular attention to the quality of faculty-student interaction is likely to progress. As a result, improved dialogue between instructors and students will establish a basis to motivate students and improve their perceptions of online interaction with instructors. Additional improvements can arise from scholarly discourse surrounding the exploration of what specific factors induce the subjectivity of undergraduate students' perceptions of faculty-student interaction. The theories of social constructivism and transactional distance will frame the examination of particular effects on students that result from faculty-student interaction in online learning environments. The following chapter presents a review of the literature relevant to faculty and student behaviors, encounters, and perceptions associated with their participation in asynchronous online learning environments, after which the third chapter will describe the methodology used for this study. Next, the fourth chapter will provide the examination and analysis of the findings from this study, which will lead to the fifth chapter's presentation of the interpretation of the findings, implications derived from those findings, recommendations for further research, limitations, and the conclusion for the chapter and study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will support the qualitative study of how online undergraduate students perceive and respond to disengaged faculty members. Students 18 years of age and older participating in higher education coursework comprise the group referred to as “undergraduate students” in this study. The wide range of individuals that make up the undergraduate student group have an equally wide range of family and job commitments inhibiting them from attending physical campuses. Online learning environments afford undergraduate students accessibility to higher education courses (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Therefore, higher education enrollments drastically increased because individuals were no longer required to physically attend campus locations.

The massive upsurge in undergraduate courses offered in the online environment exploded over the past decade to support a 294% growth in overall enrollments: from 1.6 million in 2002 to 6.3 million in 2016 (Allen & Seaman, 2017; NCES, 2015, 2017). Although accessibility is a significant benefit of online learning environments, drawbacks exist that lead some undergraduate students to select face-to-face over online courses. One such drawback is students’ limited interaction with faculty in online learning environments, which can lead to feelings of isolation. Therefore, literature that explored faculty-student interaction and faculty actions that affect student learning as well as the online course atmosphere and identified influences faculty had on students participating in online undergraduate courses as one of the core determinants of students’ perceived learning experiences were examined (An et al., 2009; Baker, 2010; Fryer & Bovee, 2016; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006).

This study focused on identifying faculty behaviors that occurred during interactions with students during online undergraduate courses to answer the question: What causes undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses to view faculty as disengaged? With that in mind, this literature review examines the use of technology to deliver courses throughout higher education, faculty-student interaction obstacles encountered during the introduction of new technologies to the higher education system, student perception of interaction with online faculty, student objectives and inhibitors, faculty behaviors and how the behaviors affect faculty-student interaction, and student perception of faculty behaviors.

Technology Influenced Higher Education

The impact of technology on society has permanently altered the landscape of higher education. The level of advancements in computer and data communication technology provoked innovation that cascaded into all aspects of society, including learning environments—academic and workplace. Initially, computers were supplemental educational tools used for processing complex calculations in math and science settings (Gupta & Gupta, 2016; Kentor, 2015; Roll, Baker, Alevan, McLaren, & Koedinger, 2005; Rotich, 2013). Successively, the enormous explosion of technological capability thrust computers to the center of many learning environments and as tools to administer comprehensive stand-alone platforms used for virtual learning environments.

Online education utilizes mobile devices such as smartphones, notebook computers, and tablets to increase the opportunity for individuals to access content and interact with instructors and other students. In addition to providing access to content and other individuals, online higher education institutions obtain evidence supporting training results and demonstrating the value of learning (ASA GAISE, 2016). Furthermore, numerous tools are used to distribute

content, enable interaction, and evaluate learning in online learning environments. Online learning environments have progressed from the direct back-and-forth verbal and physical communication associated with traditional face-to-face learning environments to multiple asynchronous and synchronous methods including virtual classrooms, chat, conference calls, discussion posts/threads, email, interactive documents, live and recorded video lectures, video chat, and webinars (Arbaugh, 2014). In addition, evaluation instruments such as feedback forms, questionnaires, quizzes, and tests are constructed, distributed, and maintained using technology. The objective is to enhance virtual learning by emulating portions of traditional ground campus characteristics in a virtual environment by employing software platforms designed to support asynchronous and synchronous online classrooms (Bowen et al., 2012).

Learning Management Systems

Asynchronous and synchronous online classrooms are rapidly emerging communication technology tools used to increase interaction within online education environments (Comer & Lenaghan, 2012). Students making use of asynchronous and synchronous online classrooms utilize software applications referred to as learning management systems (LMS). These LMS bring about virtual environments that provide students with portals to access assignments, view video files, access e-books, listen to audio files, upload completed work, interact with classmates in discussion posts, and connect with the course instructors or facilitators. Many of the current and most widely used LMS offer internal video conferencing or link other video conferencing software within the LMS. Video conferencing is the foundation for synchronous online classrooms.

Synchronous online education environments produce occasion for real-time faculty-student and student-student interaction (McGinley et al., 2012). When an individual hears or

reads the words *synchronous virtual classroom*, a mental image of video conferencing typically arises. However, online learning environments using asynchronous technology are currently most common, and generally include discussion boards, messaging, recorded material—audio and video, and wikis (Abraham, 2014). Despite this, rapid technological advancements continue to expand virtual learning environments to new areas, such as game-based learning, live chat, and social websites (Robledo, 2012). Nonetheless, asynchronous and synchronous online learning environments provide new obstacles to learning as well as some longstanding difficulties associated with traditional learning environments. Although difficulties may delay progress, technological expansion continues. Incidentally, society seems to have abandoned passivity and adopted an attitude that expects rapid technological advancements. The infiltration of technology and social media into all aspects of personal and professional life has forever altered society's appetite for advancements along with new and expanded uses for current technology.

Technology and Growth Mask Vulnerabilities

Technological advancements in computer science and the rapid rise of internet usage were the conduit for the massive growth of online education. At the same time, the enormous growth exposed glitches ranging from software development to connectivity problems. However, less detectable vulnerabilities went unnoticed. In some instances, the less obvious vulnerabilities eventually ascended to the forefront, changing online learning far more significantly than the initial obstacles. One example is the rising amount of transactional distance occurring in asynchronous online learning environments caused by a lack and/or poor quality of faculty-student interaction, which often involves a “disproportionate focus and responsibility on the teacher” (Rudestam & Schoenholts-Read, 2010, p. 4). Consequently, a

disconnect formed among online faculty and students increasing the occurrence of students' experiencing feelings of isolation (Hawkins et al., 2013; Kim, Park, Yoon, & Jo, 2016; Pigliapoco & Bogliolo, 2008; Tello, 2007; Williams, Duray, & Reddy, 2006; Willging & Johnson, 2009; Woods, 2002). It is important to note that the primary concentration during development and implementation of new technology is on the technology's intended use, overlooking other potential uses and/or misuses. Furthermore, the accelerating pace of technological advancement can cloak weaknesses. To illustrate, identifying and planning for would-be impediments when technology is changing at an increasing rate is similar to shooting at a moving target. Therefore, to anticipate all potential problems is not feasible. In fact, even predicting the varying levels of transactional distance and the potential effects on students learning in online environments is problematic.

The quality of interaction among individuals communicating through the internet is subjective. The generational differences in learning preferences as well as the modes used to communicate affect the method and effectiveness of communication for each generation. For example, a Baby Boomer may prefer face-to-face or telephone communication while an individual from the iGeneration favors text messages or online chatting (Rosen, 2010). Without suggesting one communication mode is superior to another, it is important to realize each mode includes differences that impact communication's decoding process. One difference is the informality of text messages, which may increase the fluidity of communication among the iGeneration. However, the informality of text messages may impair communication between an individual from the iGeneration and a Baby Boomer. For instance, a Baby Boomer's incorrect decoding of an acronym-laden text message received from an iGeneration individual could cause a communication breakdown. Although text messaging lacks clarity and thoroughness, causing

misinterpretation and hindering interaction between the sender and receiver, it satisfies society's desire for immediacy, which plays a significant role in the popularity of text messaging. As technology becomes more intertwined with people's lives, the influence—whether good or bad—will continue to increase (Surry & Baker, 2016).

Online Education's Growing Pains

The growth experienced by the online segment of the U.S. higher education system sustained during the past 15 years moved far more rapidly than society could ever have imagined (Arbaugh, 2014). To illustrate, the number of students enrolled in at least three online courses during any given semester grew 294% from 1.6 million in 2002 to 6.3 million in 2016 (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Census, 2017)—a substantially higher growth rate than the U.S. population. By comparison, the U.S. population grew 12.5% from 287 million in July of 2002 to 323 million in July of 2016 (Census, 2017). As a result of the extraordinary growth in the number of students participating in online courses, a myriad of issues emerged (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Arbaugh, 2014; Bowen et al., 2012; Callaway, 2012; Dixon, 2014). For the sake of the convenience of online programs, some higher education institutions failed to realize the complexities and importance of positive faculty-student interaction in online learning environments (Callaway, 2012). As a result, substandard faculty-student interaction instigated a decrease in satisfaction levels for a portion of students participating in online learning environments (Park & Choi, 2009). However, other students willingly overlooked deficiencies in the quality of education for the convenience of completing undergraduate coursework via the internet. In a study of the implications of online learning, Callaway (2012) hypothesized that students enrolled in entirely online education programs were motivated by accessibility over quality and students enrolled in traditional education programs were driven by quality over accessibility. Conversely, Horspool

and Lange (2012) found that students perceived the quality of face-to-face and online courses equally effective.

Understanding the motivation of students enrolled in online undergraduate coursework can help education institutions adapt online course design to the needs and wants of students seeking accessible undergraduate education. The subject matter, presentation, and in some cases, the technology, can be modified to accommodate students seeking convenience. Nevertheless, the students' perceived quality is vitally important to the long-term success of higher education institutions—traditional and online.

Student Perception of Interaction. Quite often, a student's impression of an institution and/or a course begins with faculty. Indeed, student views develop as interaction with course content, the learning management system, other students, and the instructor increases (Ko & Chung, 2014; Lowenthal, Bauer, & Chen, 2015). No matter the setting, a first impression remains significant and difficult to shed when the mental image a student developed was negative, especially when interaction is limited as is the case with online learning environments. Limited interaction is intrinsic to asynchronous online learning environments. Worse yet, a negative perception that developed over the duration of a course is even more challenging to escape and can interfere with how a student perceives the quality of her or his learning (Ko & Chung, 2014). Essentially, a student's perceived learning and satisfaction correlate with the student's impression of an instructor, which is derived, in large part, from the instructor's behavior and the tone of interaction between faculty and student (Fryer & Bovee, 2016). Recently, attention has shifted to student learning and teaching methods aimed at increasing faculty awareness of their role in self-directed learning environments (Ko & Chung, 2014; Lai, 2015).

Faculty-student interaction affects students' learning objectives—including student performance in online coursework (Borup, Graham, & Drysdale, 2014; Fish & Wickerman, 2009; Ko & Chung, 2014). This is not to suggest that a student's active participation in learning is unimportant (Watts & Lawson, 2009). Isolating the emphasis of higher education's instructional efforts on the instructor overlooks the most important component of learning—the student. In online learning environments, students can have an even greater effect on learning than in traditional face-to-face settings. Without the face-to-face interaction between faculty and student and other students, online students are frequently left to their own devices—online students are expected to work more independently than traditional students (Conaway et al., 2005). Consequently, working independently requires online students to have more discipline than traditional students (Allen & Seaman, 2015). A lack of discipline alone can negatively impact an online student's success. In fact, it is not uncommon for online students to feel isolated due to the structure of online learning, which offers little or no face-to-face interaction with the instructor or other students (Gallagher & McCormick 1999; McIsaac, Blocher, Mahes, & Vrasidas, 1999). Conversely, education institutions offering online courses exercise a balance between multiple forms of student interaction to avert feelings of isolation. Although three of these forms of student interaction—student-content, student-facilitator, and student-student—were acknowledged as significant by Moore (1972), and again by Moore and Kearsley (2012), the emphasis for this review is on student-facilitator interaction. Absence of in person student-facilitator interaction can negatively influence the student's mindset, which can induce feelings of isolation. Then again, feelings of isolation are not limited to those three forms of communication/interaction. For instance, when a student perceives her or his instructor as

disinterested based on an element of or reaction to faculty-student interaction, feelings of isolation frequently emerge (Driscoll et al., 2012).

Student Learning Objectives and Inhibitors. Students' learning objectives and subsequent successes are affected by course design, the culture of learning at the institution, faculty, and teaching methods (Chang & Chen, 2014; Ko & Chung, 2014). For example, a student that considers an online course too difficult or overly remedial due to course design or student placement may experience a lack of desire to actively engage in coursework or interact with the instructor or other students, which may lead the student to drop the course (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Artino, 2008). In the example provided, the course design or student placement negatively impacted the student and the institution's learning objectives. As a result, the student's perception interfered with her or his level of satisfaction, subsequently inhibiting accomplishment. This type of situation is not uncommon. In general, unanticipated elements and poorly executed processes alter outcomes in normal daily interaction with people, places, and things. The online education environment is no different for the reason that it involves people, places, and things.

A student's academic success is closely tied to a student's study methods and attitude toward study (Ko & Chung, 2014). Shea and Bidjerano (2010) noted that ordered and well-planned research methods combined with an optimistic view of study reportedly links to high levels of learning. In addition, coalescing a student's positive attitude with transformative learning experiences constructed by an emboldened instructor creates an encouraging environment capable of bolstering student achievement (Baran & Correia, 2014). Some individuals are adept at learning in online environments, such as independent learners capable of successfully absorbing material with less pre-configuration or aid of an instructor or facilitator.

However, other individuals work better in traditional face-to-face environments with the guidance and structure provided by a classroom setting and an instructor. With this in mind, discovering the multidimensional concepts that integrate intellectual, human action, motivational, and developmental aspects of how students control their learning processes prepare students and instructors for successful learning (Artino, 2008). In other words, students and instructors become better suited to engage in learning experiences as they increase their self-awareness.

Content, students, and faculty are fundamental to learning in higher education environments. However, technology is increasingly becoming commonplace in all learning environments—traditional ground campus to online virtual learning environments. As much as a room to hold a class of students is to traditional ground campus institutions, technology is the conduit used to facilitate online learning. Technological advancements continue to transpire and are designed specifically for educational purposes or adapted for use with existing learning tools. Nevertheless, new technology designed as a tool to enhance learning can inhibit learning, which can inhibit students' learning objectives and successes.

The Importance of Instructor Behavior

The character of an online learning environment established by an instructor can abruptly alter a student's attitude toward learning. Therefore, an instructor's mindfulness of a student's conceivable needs coupled with the instructor's skillfulness in meeting those needs is crucial to a student's perceived learning. The interaction between faculty and students in online learning environments can reveal how faculty actions impact student perception of faculty, which aligns with the social constructivist premise that interaction is necessary to any learning process (Woo & Reeves, 2007). More specifically, social constructivists believe that understanding is

accomplished through reflective thinking transpiring from communicative interaction occurring with other people (Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz, & Yang, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Outside of the social constructivists' basis for learning, the disposition of the interaction between faculty and students shapes students' mindset toward faculty, the course, the institution, and learning—both positive and negative interaction affect learning. However, positive interaction leads to intellectual progress, which has an important constructive effect on the learner while negative interaction can impede intellectual progress and can deteriorate the learner's attitude toward learning. Therefore, positive interaction among faculty and students is paramount and requires appropriate faculty behavior and presence to support positive interaction.

Immediacy Behaviors

Arbaugh (2001) explained that instructors demonstrate immediacy behaviors to exhibit closeness to students. Students sustained a sense of belonging through cultivating interpersonal relationships and a sense of community, which developed from teacher presence and immediacy behaviors (Hung & Chou, 2015). Arbaugh (2001) indicated that instructors who ask students questions rather than provide personal examples related to the course material receive lower quality responses; and, instructors who provide students with personal examples offer students more intense interaction and demonstrate a level of ease, or directness, communicating about topics in relative terms. It is also important to note that instructors who struggle deconstructing concepts to make those concepts more recognizable to students encounter inferior faculty-student interaction, which increases transactional distance (Shearer, 2010).

In face-to-face and online learning environments, to decrease students' apprehension and increase faculty-student interaction as well as students' ability to learn, faculty must reduce "the psychological distance between themselves and their students" (Swan, 2001, p. 309). Relaxing

the message style and feedback given to students can lessen student apprehension and may provide an opportunity for faculty to improve their immediacy behavior (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Furthermore, verbal and nonverbal interaction employed by faculty, such as asking for student viewpoints, inserting humor, making eye contact in face-to-face or video settings, sending assignment instructions in audio files, employing text chatting, and LMS direct messaging in online learning environments can help reduce the psychological distance between faculty and students (Swan, 2001). These types of exchanges encourage collaborative faculty-student relationships, which promotes student learning.

Micari and Pazos (2012) found three instructor behaviors that promote valuable interpersonal faculty-student connection in face-to-face courses: instructor approachability, respect for students, and the instructor's ability to act as a role model to students. Online faculty can exercise these same face-to-face faculty behaviors, although different communication vehicles—such as computers, learning management systems, telephones, smartphones, and/or digital tablets—are employed to achieve positive faculty-student connections in online learning environments, which can complicate transmitting faculty's intended expressions. Compared to the consistent and direct verbal and nonverbal face-to-face communication that takes place in physical classrooms, online modes of faculty-student correspondence inherently include higher levels of transactional distance and are incessantly evolving as technology advances. The most common forms of online faculty-student correspondence are blog-style posts, online chat, text messages, video chats, and webinars. Achieving approachability, displaying respect and acting as a role model to students using these online modes of communication can be enigmatic. Nevertheless, faculty behaviors and their interplay with students remain significant factors in how students perceive online classrooms and regard faculty. As Arbaugh (2001) stated,

immediacy behaviors by faculty lead to closeness to students or at least students' perceived closeness. For this reason, faculty's ability to effectively employ immediacy behaviors—verbal and nonverbal communication—can reduce the psychological distance a student undergoes in a virtual environment, which enhances a student's sense of being together with faculty.

Theoretical Framework

Grant and Osanloo (2014) stated that “without a theoretical framework, the structure and vision for a study is unclear, much like a house that cannot be constructed without a blueprint” (p. 13). A theoretical framework is the elemental structure of a study, which includes the viewpoint brought to the study by the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Somewhat like a schematic of the components of a study, theoretical frameworks illustrate the correlation among suppositions, generalizations, and perceptions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Therefore, a theoretical framework consists of carefully chosen theories that bolster the researcher's rationale of how the topic will be researched (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The theoretical framework for this study derives from two theories: social constructivism and transactional distance. Social constructivism along with Moore's (1983) theory of transactional distance furnished the theoretical basis for this study of undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online courses.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism descended from Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) assertions that learning is a consequence of social interaction. In fact, social constructivism “is perhaps the most common version currently in favor and...normally evoked by the term ‘constructivism’” (Swan, 2005, p. 4). Social constructivism is an effort to comprehend “social phenomena from a context-specific perspective....as value-bound rather than value-free, meaning the process of inquiry is

influenced by the researcher” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 28). The topic of this study included the researcher’s assumption that at least some undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceived faculty as disengaged and that transactional distance between instructors and learners was inherent to asynchronous online undergraduate coursework. Overcoming the intrinsic transactional distance of asynchronous online undergraduate coursework requires instructors to establish a student-centered approach. Incidentally, a student-centered approach is characteristic of the collaborative and interactive qualities of social constructivism.

The sociological theory of social constructivism asserts that interpretations affect an individual’s perspective, which develops from individual experiences (Woo & Reeves, 2007). In fact, social constructivists are most concerned with “knowledge construction through social interactions” (Swan, 2005, p. 4). Therefore, the theory of social constructivism supports the notions that the beliefs and expectations of undergraduate students developed from context and culture influence how they receive communication from faculty in online learning environments and how they learn.

The specific assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning that make-up social constructivism will be used to relate the sample data obtained during interviews to the social interaction between faculty and students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses. The study embodies a student-centered attitude toward collaborative and interactive qualities, which is characteristic of social constructivism. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of this study follows social constructivists’ belief that reality is constructed through human activity; knowledge is constructed culturally and socially by human interaction; and learning transpires through human engagement in social activities (Taylor & Maor, 2000).

Social constructivists contend that interaction is necessary to any learning process (Woo & Reeves, 2007). Considering this contention, both positive and negative faculty-student interactions impact the learning process. Positive interaction has an important constructive effect on the learner, hopefully leading to intellectual progress. Conversely, negative interaction can produce an equally important deconstructive effect on learners, quite often hindering intellectual progress. Understanding that interactions between faculty and students in online learning environments can uncover which faculty actions impact students' perceived progress as well as the students' perceptions of faculty. In addition to social constructivism, the study's structure will include the transactional distance theory.

Transactional Distance

The Theory of Transactional Distance (Moore, 1972) elucidates the conceivable feelings of isolation experienced by students participating in online learning environments. Expanding on Moore's (1972) transactional distance theory, Moore and Kearsley (1996) discovered that the frequency and type of interaction influenced the level of transactional distance and ensuing feelings of isolation experienced by online students. Separately, Vygotsky (1978) concluded that "the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development...occurs when speech and practical activity" (p. 24) meet rather than independently develop. Therefore, direct communication between faculty and students not only diminishes feelings of isolation but also enhances intellectual development.

The transactional distance between student and instructor emerges from two variables: dialogue and structure (Keegan, 1993). The first variable, dialogue, portrays the level of interaction between a student, teacher, and the program (Moore, 1983). In particular, the physical distance coupled with a lack of continuity in communication produced from

misinterpreted behaviors of instructors and learners is transactional distance (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). The study considered all forms of dialogue available within the online course's learning management system (LMS), which encompassed interactions between faculty and students. These interactions are speculated as means of shaping students' perceptions of instructors; in particular, students' perceptions of instructors' disinterest.

The second variable of Moore's (1983) transactional distance theory is structure, which gauges the awareness, receptiveness, and reactivity of the course faculty and support team members to the individual needs of students. Transactional distance appears in all instances of education that involve an instructor and a learner, even face-to-face learning environments (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). In essence, structured online learning environments should provide instructors and learners with more regular intervals of interaction, diminishing the likelihood of students suffering from feelings of isolation. In short, the variables of the study centered on the faculty-student interactions and connections that form reasons undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceive faculty as disengaged. Substantiated by the findings of Moore, Kearsley, and Vygotsky, increasing the amount of faculty-student interaction in asynchronous learning environments can improve student learning and student satisfaction (Kuo et al., 2014).

Students expect quality interactions with faculty. In structured online learning environments, students undergo more exposure to faculty behaviors—positive and negative. As a result, students develop perceptions of faculty that typically parallel faculty behaviors. The perceptions drawn from faculty-student interaction can affect how students construct ideas—the way they learn. According to the social constructivism learning theory, knowledge construction is derived from social interventions (Swan, 2005). The variables of this study center on faculty-

student interactions and connections that form the reasons undergraduate students, participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses, perceive faculty as disengaged and the relationship between faculty-student interaction and the student's perceived learning. In qualitative research, multiple experiences, viewpoints, and realities—regarded as variables—of individuals are frequently considered within an individual study. Interaction amidst variables is central to forming the conclusion of a study by answering research questions. The aim of this study is to enhance the understanding of human experience that occurs as a result of faculty's effect on students' perceived success in online learning environments. In like manner, the theoretical framework for the study presents the social constructivism and transactional distance theories to clarify and rationalize the problem of faculty not engaged in interaction with students in online learning environments, extending beyond initial suspicions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this interpretive, qualitative study is to explore the reasons undergraduate students taking part in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceive faculty as disengaged. This chapter reviewed literature which examined impactful elements of online learning and faculty-student interaction. The focus was applied to three main areas: technology's influence on higher education, the effects rapid growth had on higher education and student perception of faculty-student interaction. Multiple researchers, including Allen and Seaman (2014), Arbaugh (2014), Surry & Baker (2016), and Turkle (2011), provided the foundation for technology's influence on higher education, which included a review of the ways higher education harnessed technological advancements in its development of online learning environments to deliver undergraduate courses along with some of the detrimental effects that higher education encountered because of its precipitous employment of new technologies.

The second area of focus in this chapter—the effects rapid growth had on higher education—emanated from Allen and Seaman’s (2015) research of online higher education, which extended more than a decade and is the sole national publication reviewing online higher education. Student perception of faculty-student interaction was the third major area discussed in this chapter. The research efforts of Fryer and Bovee (2016), Ko and Chung (2014), and most prominently by Moore and Kearsley (2012) offered evidence beyond simple foundational data of student perception and faculty-student interaction. The next chapter describes the methodology and procedures applied to the study of undergraduate students taking part in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceive faculty as disengaged.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This third chapter presents the methodology, the research questions, the setting, student participants, data, analysis of the data, and participant rights used to conduct the research for the study along with the potential limitations associated with the study. The purpose of this study was to discover reasons undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceived faculty as disinterested, how students responded, and the significance of the students' perceptions. The experiences encountered by undergraduate students during their participation in online undergraduate courses were explored using an interpretive, qualitative approach that employed semi-structured interviews to identify the lived experiences among the student participants in this study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The data obtained was used to answer the following research questions:

1. How do online undergraduate students perceive and respond to disengaged faculty members?
2. How do online undergraduate students describe and understand their expectations of faculty interaction in an online learning environment?
3. How do online undergraduate students describe the influence faculty immediacy has on their attitudes toward learning?

The framework for this study developed from two theories: social constructivism and transactional distance. Social constructivism clarified and rationalized the problem of faculty perceived as not interactively engaged with students in online learning environments (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Swan, 2005). The theory of transactional distance was used to understand how transactional distance derived from the metaphorical and physical distance between students and

their instructors instigated negative perceptions of instructors' behaviors (Hawkins et al., 2013; Moore, 1983; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Both social constructivism and transactional distance supported the interpretive character of this qualitative research.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methodologies are descriptive and offer opportunities to uncover original viewpoints on topics, which aligned with this study's topic (Roberts, 2010). More precisely, unraveling the experiences of how individuals discern their life experiences favors an interpretive, qualitative research strategy to a quantitative study. Interpretation—both, researcher and student—was necessary to understand the reasons online undergraduate students deemed faculty as disengaged and to identify how students responded to faculty's disengaged behavior. Although growing, there is limited scholarship on student perception of faculty behaviors as it relates to asynchronous online courses for undergraduate students. Therefore, this study aimed to increase the awareness of common faculty behaviors that students regarded as off-putting. The findings of this study can aid coaching, development, and recruiting administrators/managers develop and implement strategies to enhance training opportunities and professional development for faculty. The interpretive disposition of qualitative research provides administrators, managers, and researchers with rich expression of online undergraduate student experiences.

The interpretive type of qualitative research utilized for this study aimed to discover “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). These three aims of interpretive, qualitative research help researchers decipher how an individual interacts socially, whether personal, professional or academic. Highlighting the academic aspect, students' perspectives on their interaction with faculty in online courses represents the subjectivity of

learning through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Creswell (2013), subjectivity does not materialize, it develops during interaction with individuals, “hence social construction” (p. 25), and is influenced by individual interpretations resulting from specific assumptions about knowledge, learning, and reality (Gergen, 1999; Merriam, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Although erroneous, people commonly believe that an objective approach to research is vital to achieving valid results. Objectivity is difficult, if not impossible. More important, it is not relevant to the validity of particular research. Conversely, social constructivists admit subjectivity and “view inquiry as value-bound rather than value-free” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 28). Furthermore, objectivity and subjectivity are correlated. Ratner (2002) found that:

Objectivism integrates subjectivity and objectivity because it argues that objective knowledge requires active, sophisticated subjective processes—such as perception, analytical reasoning, synthetic reasoning, logical deduction, and the distinction of essences from appearances. Conversely, subjective processes can enhance objective comprehension of the world. (p. 2)

The varied interpretations uncovered during qualitative research validate the usefulness of subjectivity within research (Jootun, McGhee, Marland, 2009). The subjectivity of understanding how students interpret their interaction with faculty is the nucleus of this interpretive, qualitative study’s objective.

This study was framed by applying the transactional distance theory “that has both a psychological dimension of distance, in terms of connectedness, and one that describes the efficiency of the interactions in reducing miscommunications around the dialogue and the learning experience” (Shearer, 2010, p. 1) along with the social constructivism assumption that reality and knowledge are constructed through human interaction and social activities that lead to

meaningful learning (Jackson, Karp, Patrick, & Thrower, 2006; Kim, 2006; Merriam, 2009). Given these points, this study aimed to use the methods of an interpretive, qualitative inquiry to discover how the online undergraduate student participants perceived and responded to faculty during the context of their online courses. Question-and-answer exchanges coupled with participant narratives that described encounters with disengaged faculty members as a basis for postulating what influenced their feelings and/or stances in relation to faculty-student interaction faced during the online undergraduate courses the student participants completed (Huberman & Miles, 2002). This chapter examines the designated research methodologies, setting, student participants, data collection and analysis procedures, participant rights, and limitations of the study.

Setting

This study only considered undergraduate students who participated in and successfully passed undergraduate courses that incorporated structured online learning environments consisting of explicit schedules for assignments as well as start and end dates for the courses during the 2016 or 2017 calendar year. For-profit and not-for-profit institutions were both considered viable settings for this study. Regardless of the institutions' profit structure, the other facets of this study exclusively encompassed data from higher education institutions within the United States. Therefore, only institutions based and operated in the United States were included. Since the focus of this study was on the perspectives of undergraduate students who participated in asynchronous online undergraduate courses, the setting was not limited to one institution. Instead, the higher education institutions where student participants of this study attended were included and made up of multiple colleges and universities—purely based on the

institutions attended by the student participants. Nevertheless, specific criteria were required for the inclusion of student participants in this study, which formed a setting, albeit ethereal.

Participants

The nonprobability sampling method employed to identify student participants for this interpretive, qualitative study was in the form of purposeful sampling; also referred to as criterion-based selection (Merriam, 2009). The selection criteria for choosing the student participants were comprised of elements that are fundamental to this study. The delineation between various types of purposeful sampling commonly includes one variation labeled as unique sampling because its attributes are atypical (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). This study employed the unique sampling type to select student participants because of the specific features enmeshed in identifying the reasons undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceived faculty as disengaged.

As Creswell (2013) and Robinson (2014) suggested, a small sample size allows for collecting extensively detailed data from the participants. Therefore, the sample size for this study was eight student participants who were interviewed to obtain their perceptions and expectations of instructors they encountered while participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses. Prior to interviewing the study's student participants, a pilot interview took place to validate and address the interview questions and adjust the sequence of the questions to improve the interview flow. All student participants were at least 18 years of age, participated in and completed at least three asynchronous online undergraduate courses at a U.S. higher education institution during the years 2016 or 2017, experienced instructor behavior they characterized as disengaged, lived in the U.S. at the time of the interviews, had access to a computer that could run GoToMeeting, Skype, or Zoom using a high-speed internet connection

or lived in Northwest Indiana and were willing to meet at a mutually agreed upon location for the interview. The duration for the interviews was approximately one hour. The ability to host interviews in-person or online eliminated the obstacle of proximity to the student participants.

Social media postings on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, were used to acquire individuals who met the criteria and voluntarily participated in the study. Response rates for social media advertisements significantly varied by industry and diversity of the websites where the advertisements were posted. In addition, the varying methods of measuring response rates can complicate interpreting the performance figures. Click-through rate (CTR) is one of the most common methods of measuring online advertisements. To determine the CTR, the number of clicks is divided by the number of times the advertisement was seen—referred to as digital impressions (Google Adwords, 2017). The CTR percentages are significantly lower than the 7-10% CTR experienced by email campaigns such as Constant Contact (2017). However, the 0.5% to 1.6% CTRs for popular social media websites such as Facebook are deceptive (Smart Insights, 2017). The considerable number of digital impressions made of advertisements posted on popular social media websites offset the low CTR percentage. The online postings for the invitation to participate in this research study netted 8 student participants. The 0.02% social media posting CTR was greater than the projected 0.005%. Respondents to the social media invitation to participate in this research study who met the requirements were considered. There were no direct benefits to student participants of this study. Consent materials were completed by the student participants before the interview process began.

Data

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews between the researcher and student participants facilitated data collection for this study. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) assert that the primary

emphasis of qualitative research is an exploration to uncover findings and “is suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspectives of the research participants” (p. 27). The study utilized a semi-structured interview format, which allowed the opportunity to explore other ideas not included in the scripted portion of the semi-structured interview process. Merriam (2009) explained that the semi-structured format of interviewing averts the potential for the typical rigidity of structured interviews to stifle potential outgrowth of information from interviewees. In addition, the flexibility of the semi-structured format affords the interviewer to ask responsorial questions that may arise from the interview conversation as well as allow latitude to cultivate a connection with the interviewees, which prompts openness and honesty from the interviewees. In addition, interviewees’ responses were restated in summary by the interviewer to verify accuracy during the interviews.

Interviews began mid-September 2017 and continued through November 2017. When data saturation was achieved in late November of 2017, the interviews concluded. To accurately capture data, a pilot interview and official interviews were recorded. Online interviews were recorded using web conferencing software, and had in-person interviews taken place, they would have been recorded using a ZOOM H1 stereo digital recorder. The audio files were saved in an MP3 format and then uploaded to *Trint.com* for transcription.

Upon the completion and receipt of the transcriptions, the researcher reviewed the transcribed interviews for transcription errors and made necessary corrections. Next, the transcribed interviews were provided to the interviewees for their review; in particular, to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions by notating errors and/or exceptions, a process known as member checking (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 2009). With attention to participant rights, this additional step provided interviewees the opportunity to consider their statements. If

the interviewees were uncomfortable with any of their statements, adjustments were made, and/or follow-up interviews were scheduled.

Analysis

The analysis of data acquired during the interviews of student participants followed the interpretive, qualitative analysis method of Creswell (2013) to identify and clarify the meaning of the data (Merriam, 2009). Drawn from the subjective experiences of student participants, a considerable amount of interview data require reduction to simplify the process of identifying likenesses among the participant narratives. Therefore, the interview data were condensed during analysis by using codes—a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based...data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). The coding process occurred in cycles. In the first cycle of coding, descriptive words or short phrases were assigned to sizeable sections of the interview data to give a straightforward summative topic of those sections. The second cycle of coding was used to “work with the resulting First Cycle codes themselves” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 72) to create an inventory of interview data for indexing and categorizing into larger groups based on commonalities among ideas, referred to by Creswell (2013) as themes. The next step in the coding process for this study involved emotion coding in conjunction with in vivo coding. By utilizing emotion coding, interview participant perspectives were simplified or drawn from the participant’s words and used to identify patterns and their recurrence. When the participant’s words are used in emotion coding, they must be in vivo coded in quotation marks (Miles et al., 2014). Upon forming five themes and one subtheme, a review of each interview transcript occurred and guided the researcher’s summarization of each transcript, which was considered by the student participants who were interviewed. Once reviewed, the data was interpreted with the

intent to identify a “larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 187). Finally, an amalgamated portrayal of what and how the student participants experienced was written.

The semi-structured one-on-one interviews facilitated asking all interviewees the same questions while allowing enough latitude to encourage rich quality data. Presenting the same questions during all interviews helped achieve data saturation. Nevertheless, asking the same questions did not prevent the researcher from interpreting the responses to the questions through his lens, which is an obstacle that interferes with achieving data saturation. The difficulty of separating personal perspective from the research is most difficult for novice researchers such as students. Therefore, to achieve data saturation, it was essential for the researcher to identify his viewpoint to mitigate its interference during data collection and analysis.

Participant Rights

The first layer of protection stemmed from voluntary participation. In addition to the voluntary involvement, student participants were able to opt out of the study at any time. Prior to consenting to participate, student participants received information that outlined the nature of the study, the varieties of data that were collected, the format and process of the study, as well as specific details about how the interviews were conducted to include the opportunity they had to review the transcripts from their interview. A consent form addressed confidentiality, and the last layer of protection was in the form of pseudonyms—each participant was only referred to by his or her pseudonym in all documents created and/or used in connection with the study. The researcher was the only one to know participant identities or access participant information (including email addresses). All consent forms were kept in a password protected directory on DropBox, and any paper forms were kept in a locked cabinet.

Limitations

Limitations of this study relate to its scope and concerns common to qualitative research. Researcher bias is intrinsic to academic research and can potentially endanger the legitimacy and impartiality of the research results (Creswell, 2013). In addition to cultural and other common biases connected to a person's perspective, the researcher's personal experience as an undergraduate student who participated in asynchronous online undergraduate courses generated the potential for bias. Thus, during the interview process, the researcher refrained from leading the interviewees by limiting inquiry to open-ended questions. The final limitation identified was the sample size of student participants. Eight student participants made up the sample used in this study inhibiting the opportunity to provide generalization on a larger scale.

Conclusion

Methodology, research questions, setting, student participants, data, analysis of the data, participant rights, and potential limitations of this study were discussed in this third chapter. The purpose of this study was to uncover reasons why online undergraduate students perceive faculty as disinterested by using an interpretive, qualitative approach to research. This study documented the perceived experiences of undergraduate students who participated in online courses at U.S. institutions of higher education. The findings of this study can be used to assist administrators to enrich training opportunities and professional development for faculty. The results of this research study are specified and examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this interpretative, qualitative study was to discover reasons students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceive faculty as disinterested, the significance of this perception, and how students respond to disinterested faculty. This study documented the perceived experiences of undergraduate students who took part in online courses at U.S. institutions of higher education. The experiences students encountered while participating in online undergraduate courses were explored using an interpretive, qualitative approach that employed semi-structured interviews to identify the lived experiences of the student participants in this study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The findings can help improve: faculty's ability to approach challenges associated with online teaching, the quality of faculty-student interaction, and training opportunities and professional development for faculty. The data obtained during this study will be used to answer the following research questions:

1. How do online undergraduate students perceive and respond to disengaged faculty members?
2. How do online undergraduate students describe and understand their expectations of faculty interaction in an online learning environment?
3. How do online undergraduate students describe the influence faculty immediacy has on their attitudes toward learning?

Participants

Eight students 18 years of age or older who attended and completed at least three asynchronous online undergraduate courses at a U.S. higher education institution during the years 2016 or 2017, and who experienced instructor behavior that they characterized as

disengaged, participated in this study. Each of the semi-structured interviews of the eight student participants lasted between 60 and 100 minutes. To sufficiently anonymize the individuals who participated in this study, they will be referred to as the pseudonyms Undergraduate Student 1 (US1), Undergraduate Student 2 (US2), Undergraduate Student 3 (US3), Undergraduate Student 4 (US4), Undergraduate Student 5 (US5), Undergraduate Student 6 (US6), Undergraduate Student 7 (US7), and Undergraduate Student 8 (US8). Table 4.1 includes key demographic information relative to this study.

Table 4.1
Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Location	Institution	Organization
US1	Female	18-24	Pennsylvania	Public University	Not-for-profit
US2	Female	25-34	Indiana	Public University	Not-for-profit
US3	Male	35-44	Ohio	Private University	Not-for-profit
US4	Female	18-24	Indiana	Public University	Not-for-profit
US5	Female	25-34	Texas	Private University	For-profit
US6	Male	25-34	Washington	Private University	Not-for-profit
US7	Female	25-34	Michigan	Private University	Not-for-profit
US8	Female	35-44	Texas	Private University	For-profit

Note . Information obtained during the eight interviews included in this study.

Method of Analysis

The eight interviews were semi-structured in nature to avoid the rigidity commonly associated with structured interviews, which can stifle developing the data articulated by interviewees (Merriam, 2009). Sample size and/or tallying views were not the aim of data collection. According to Sutter (2011), qualitative research “often studies single cases or small

groups that build arguments for the study's confirmability" (p. 347). Therefore, the data collection concentrated on sample sufficiency and the extent to which the conclusions were corroborated by student participants of this study. Merriam (2009) states that "qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 14), which suggests the richness of the collected data is more important than the quantity of data collected. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview format afforded the interviewer flexibility to ask responsorial questions that surfaced during the interview conversations—increasing the richness of data by cultivating a connection between the interviewees and interviewer while encouraging forthrightness from the interviewees. The interviews produced an abundant amount of heterogeneous data to support the qualitative research for this study.

The subjective experiences of student participants furnished considerable interview data that required reduction to simplify the process of identifying likenesses among the participant narratives. To assure transcription accuracy as well as capturing the interviewees' intent, the interview transcripts were member-checked. Afterwards, the interview transcripts' data were condensed during analysis using the Dedoose software program to compile and apply codes—a "word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based...data" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). A substantial amount of data was drawn from the participant interviews. The interviews were transcribed, member-checked for accuracy, and the data were condensed during analysis using the Dedoose software program.

The coding process occurred in cycles. To give a straightforward summative topic to large sections of the interview data, during the first cycle of coding, descriptive words and short

phrases, referred to as descriptive codes, were assigned. The second cycle of coding comprised “work with the resulting first cycle codes themselves” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 72) to create an inventory of interview data for indexing and categorizing into larger groups based on commonalities among ideas, referred to by Creswell (2013) as themes, which is appropriately titled, Topic/Thematic Coding. The next step in the coding process for this study involved emotion coding in conjunction with in vivo coding. By utilizing emotion coding, interview participant perspectives were simplified by drawing from each participant’s words, which were used to identify patterns and their recurrence. Using student participants’ words in emotion coding necessitates using in vivo coding in quotation marks (Miles et al., 2014). Once reviewed, the data was interpreted to identify a “larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 187). Finally, an amalgamated portrayal of what and how the student participants experienced was written.

Analysis Results

How online undergraduate students perceived and responded to disengaged faculty members was the overarching question guiding this research study. The student participants’ primary reactions of how they perceived and responded to disengaged faculty members were unfavorable. The aforementioned themes and subtheme listed in Table 4.2—lack of faculty concern, diminished or loss of respect for faculty/institution, lack of faculty competence, overburdened faculty, feelings of isolation, and diminished or loss of interest in higher education or online study—emerged during analysis of the transcripts and field notes.

Table 4.2
Theme and Sub-Theme Associations

Number	Theme	Subtheme
1	Lack of Faculty Concern	
1a		Diminished or Loss of Respect for Faculty/Institution
2	Lack of Faculty Competence	
3	Overburdened Faculty	
4	Feelings of Isolation	
5	Diminished or Loss of Interest in Higher Ed or Online Study	

Note. Themes emerged from the eight interviews included in this study.

Prior research has found that one of the common reasons undergraduate students select the online format of study was accessibility (Bower et al., 2015; Bowers & Kumar, 2017; Callaway, 2012; Jaggars, 2014; McGinley et al., 2012; Painter, 2015; Papoulias, 2016). The findings from this study reinforced previous findings. The online undergraduate students who participated in this study most commonly stated that they chose the online format for accessibility. Only one participant began online undergraduate study because she thought it would be enjoyable based on her prior experience taking online courses while she attended high school. However, at the beginning of the second semester of her undergraduate study, she was working a full-time job. For that reason, online undergraduate courses became an accessible format as well as an enjoyable one. The other seven student participants in this study cited accessibility as the reason for embarking on undergraduate course work in an online environment.

Theme 1: Lack of Faculty Concern

The first two themes to materialize as recurring patterns in the data were the theme, *Lack of Faculty Concern* and sub-theme, *Diminished or Loss of Respect for Faculty/Institution*.

During the interviews, student participants communicated that they perceived a lack of faculty concern for a myriad of reasons, although a few occurred more frequently than others. The eight student participants indicated three missteps of faculty that led the student participants to perceive a lack of faculty concern. The three missteps were: (a) lack of faculty immediacy and/or absence of responses, (b) ambiguous instructions and/or feedback, and (c) lack of respect for students. Painter's (2015) study of "the relationship between face-to-face orientations, instructor verbal immediacy behaviors, and persistence in online courses" (p. 1) found that the "perceived instructor verbal immediacy" (p. 116) influenced student satisfaction, which embodies the sentiment of the student participant statements given during the interviews for this study.

Discussion with the students about the first online course of their undergraduate careers uncovered the fact that each participant entered those online courses with some level of apprehension because it was their first online undergraduate experience. In spite of this, each participant was very excited and had high expectations for the course. Much of their excitement and expectations were intensified by their admissions representatives' boastful descriptions of the institutions' and faculty's elevated level of commitment to student success and the cutting-edge technology of the LMS utilized at the institutions they represented.

Although the focus of this study was on understanding disinterest drawn from students' perceptions of disengaged faculty members, it was important to include the interview findings that seven out of the eight student participants of this study did not experience disengaged or

disinterested faculty during their first online undergraduate course. In fact, each of the seven student participants who were not confronted by disengaged faculty during their first online undergraduate course conveyed that they were energized by the frequency and quality of communication with the faculty members who led those courses. Furthermore, the accessibility and demeanor of the faculty who led the first online undergraduate course for each of those seven student participants were described as outstanding by the student participants. The single exception appeared during the interview of US8, who explained that the faculty member who led the course demonstrated a lack of concern.

Subtheme 1a: Diminished or Loss of Respect for Faculty/Institution. The synergetic relationship between the themes, *Lack of Faculty Concern* and *Diminished or Loss of Respect for Faculty/Institution* was the impetus for including both themes in this section's discussion of the themes that emerged during the analysis of participant interview data. The subtheme *Diminished or Loss of Respect for Faculty/Institution* appeared as a result of the primary theme, *Lack of Faculty Concern*. It was aforementioned that during the student participants' first online undergraduate course, only one student out of eight experienced what that student perceived as a lack of faculty concern. That student described how respect for faculty and the institution diminished as she experienced faculty behaviors that conveyed a lack of concern. Consequently, the student's perception of faculty and the institution moved away from the admissions representative's glowing review expressed throughout the admissions process.

The student, Undergraduate Student 8 (US8), who had the unpleasant experience during her first online undergraduate course said that "it was a huge disappointment." US8 explained, the reason I say that is [because] college in general was huge disappointment to me and I had a baseline in that my father was also [a] non-traditional student who went back to

school after years of being at a job. So, I watched him go to school and he made friends and they had these wonderful deep philosophical conversations and I kind of got this idea that that's what college was like. And my experience was radically different...I didn't have a peer group to begin with and in the online space, it just felt magnified. So, the instructor had us, I guess to simulate interaction, do bulletin board conversations that we had to post a question and then respond to two of your classmates' questions with at least five sentences or something and they were completely lame and there was no substance, and nobody was digging their teeth into the subject matter.

Based on US8's description, the type of interaction with the faculty member who led her first online undergraduate course was not what she had hoped for, which increased her frustration level. Since the faculty member did not respond to US8's requests to connect and was not available at other times, the faculty member was not aware of US8's dissatisfaction, according to US8. Describing one such instance when US8 attempted to reach the faculty member for that first online course, US8 said, "when I would contact the instructor with a request for clarity, or in one case, a family emergency, I felt like the system was automated—press three for family emergencies." US8 explained that her frustration level increased from occurrences like the unsuccessful attempt to contact faculty about her family emergency. She further elaborated that during her attempts to connect with faculty, she felt as though she was pushed from one department to another. As a result, US8 stated that faculty lacked concern for her academic success. Furthermore, faculty's unavailability gave her the impression that the school might not have had a human faculty member assigned to her course or, even worse, as she stated, "working anywhere in the online program." Drawn from US8's statements, she clearly had a diminished level of confidence in that particular faculty member and began to question the quality of the

institution, which is the first sub-theme—diminished or loss of respect for faculty/institution—to the theme: lack of faculty concern.

During subsequent online undergraduate courses, all eight student participants experienced instances when they perceived a lack of concern by faculty. Although the occurrences differed, the overarching theme—lack of faculty concern—developed from similarities. The student participants provided examples of how faculty actions, or inactions, cultivated negative feelings experienced by each participant of this study. Instead of beginning with the first participant of the study, the initial example was provided by the eighth participant because it explicitly illustrated the acute reasons that led one student to perceive a lack of faculty concern, which ultimately led to an Assistant Dean taking over teaching the course to the class of students. The student, US8, explained:

So it didn't become a he-said, she-said thing, I emailed my accounting instructor and asked, because I was a little confused as to how I should present the answer....[and] I gave him my rationale and my reasoning for each answer and I said, which one am I? I asked, am I on the right track with this...the response I got was, yes. But I had like three or four questions. And, the only response I got...took three days...and then the response...was, yes.

In addition to US8's perceived lack of faculty concern, her account possessed a level of distrust revealed when she said, "So it didn't become a he-said, she-said thing, I emailed my accounting instructor." This comment bared a potential bias previously developed socially through interaction with others. Nevertheless, the faculty member's terse responses produced disappointment for US8. US8 continued with another example from another undergraduate course:

Both...classes were writing intensive courses. And it would be you know sometimes you have to turn in your project summary. You know to let them know what your project is going to be about and make sure that you're on the right track and that you would have a due date. And then, you would almost have to beg to get the feedback back so that you could start your project with this one particular instructor...it was just like pulling teeth to get the feedback that we needed to actually progress in the class. And then she sent out an open e-mail to her entire class letting us know that we chose to be online students. So, we had to understand that...she could not give us the same amount of attention that she gave her in-class students and basically saying you know you're not getting the attention that you need or the instruction that you need that's your fault because you chose to be an online student.

And then the response was almost like, why are you bothering me. You should already know this stuff. You're a senior you're about to graduate you know and if you don't know it by now that's kind of your problem. That was the attitude that...I got with that particular instructor and another instructor that comes to mind...it got so bad with her not responding at all that a group of us actually had to send an open letter to the Dean saying you know we're trying to get help and we're just not getting responses from her so it wasn't just one person it was pretty much an entire class and it got to the point where the Assistant Dean took over the class halfway through the class.

The difficulties US8 contended with were far more extreme than those of the other seven student participants whose experiences had significantly lower intensity levels. In fact, four of the seven remaining student participants explained that their experiences encompassed both positive and negative aspects. All eight student participants recognized that keeping a positive attitude helped

each of them maintain an open-mind to circumstances and dynamics that potentially affected faculty's ability to communicate or suitably interact with students. Rather than defer to a negative outlook, US4 said,

I try to stay positive and consider that I don't know what's going on in their lives before letting my attitude switch to aggravation because the instructor didn't email me back in 30 seconds or respond the way I thought they'd respond.

According to US6, keeping a positive outlook was indispensable. He explained that allowing negativity to overcome his frame of mind, even for a single day, increased his uncertainty. He said, "being negative could affect my mood or my state of mind for that day and maybe how much I accomplished that particular day." Moreover, the student participants suggested that a negative attitude was more likely to cause inaccurate interpretations of their interactions with faculty. This study's student participants most frequently cited eight faculty behaviors that caused them to feel as though faculty lacked concern, which were: 1) not promptly responding, 2) not responding, 3) lack of faculty-initiated interaction, 4) faculty not offering an introductory message, 5) not providing a course syllabus, 6) neglecting to list assignments, 7) a lack of comprehensive feedback on assignments, and 8) self-important language used by some faculty when responding to students.

The student participants in this study interpreted faculty's slow response times and neglect to respond as instances when faculty demonstrated lack of concern. When lack of faculty concern cropped up, whether real or perceived, frustration followed, as said by US1, US5, US6, and US7. For instance, the first seven weeks of one online class US1 attended, brought about weariness because the course instructor repeatedly responded slow. Nevertheless, US1 strove to remain positive. She explained that the instructor for that online course charged students with

initiating correspondence via email, which was the only form of communication the instructor accepted during the initial seven weeks of the course. Email as the only form of communication for such a lengthy period frustrated US1 mostly because quick responses seemed unattainable. US1 said, if she was “already working online” she could “pop over [to] email and shoot the professor a quick” message. However, there were times when US1 sent emails to the instructor during regular office hours and did not receive responses for up to 10 hours. She said that it “was frustrating because I couldn't get the response fast enough...meaning the assignment that was due might have already passed.” Although a 10-hour response time would thrill most online students, US1 resided on campus, which acclimatized her to receiving rapid responses from instructors who taught the face-to-face classes she attended. Eventually, the slow-responding instructor teaching the one online course adjusted the communication process to include Blackboard messaging. US1 stated that although Blackboard messaging “was a little faster,” when the instructor responded slowly, “another student would at least respond [and] give you a little feedback and insight.” As a result, the instructor’s adjustment to communication improved her response times during the remaining weeks of the course.

Typically, higher education institutions expect faculty response times to be between 24 to 48 hours; of course, responding in less than 24 hours is exceptional. Although US6, US7, and US8 experienced slow response times by faculty, US7 explained that not responding in a timely manner aggravated her and displayed a lack of faculty concern, there were more significant issues causing her to feel that faculty did not care about her. US6 described most of his instructors as “pretty quick in responding.” However, he did experience response times that lasted longer than some of the other student participants. For instance, US1’s 10-hour wait for her instructor to respond was far quicker than the instance US6 recalled when it “took a couple

of days” for the course instructor to respond to one of his questions. He went on to say, “that class was supposed to be over and I was supposed to be turning in the last couple of assignments” but was not in a position to do so because he “felt like [he] was in the dark and there was no way” to finish. US8 said, “instructors won't give me feedback and it's kinda frustrating.” The instructors lack of response to student posts seemed conspicuously like a lack of faculty competence, according to US8.

Differing from slow or no response, lack of interaction was described by the student participants of this study as limited faculty-planned or faculty-initiated interaction with students. The conversations with the student participants revealed that lack of interaction with faculty affected how they viewed the institutions more so than faculty’s slow or no responses, which clearly illustrated diminished or loss of respect for faculty/institution. US2 explained that her dissatisfaction was predominantly compelled by a lack of direct interaction between her, her classmates, and faculty. The lack of interaction she experienced, triggered thoughts such as, “you're not actually part of the” college. While discussing faculty-initiated interaction, US3 stated, “it's what I would call...an attention to detail that makes the student feel more engaged and I guess more relevant.” Feeling of consequence was important to the student participants, as indicated in US4’s comments about an online course where the instructor was missing for the first two weeks. US4 said,

the teacher...didn't send out any...introductory message, you know like, hey class...we're going to start on this day. And then she didn't have our modules open until...week two. So, we were all kind of freaking out. We didn't...have a syllabus, we didn't have any other way of contacting her except through Canvas. She didn't respond to anything and then all of a sudden, like middle of week two...[Canvas] pops up with the modules

and...everyone has zeros for the first two weeks for us not getting work. So, actually that freaked everyone out and she just was horrible...we didn't have...actual grades until week eight. I want to say, this semester...turned into a whole big ordeal...everyone meeting with the dean about the teacher.

US4 conveyed that her experience in the class with the missing instructor left her with a negative impression of the institution. As time went on, her impression persisted, comparable to US2's feeling that the lack of interaction she experienced caused her to feel she was not part of the college she attended. US2 revealed that she felt as though her "mind-space...magnified." As time went on, the feelings she experienced intensified and led her to feel increasingly isolated.

The student participants of this study regarded self-important language used by some faculty as condescending. Rather than improving online learning environments for students, self-important language used by faculty left student participants with the sense that their instructors were unapproachable and lacked concern for them and the other students. While describing episodes that occurred in several online undergraduate courses, including a vexing experience that occurred in an online undergraduate course attended by US7, she said some instructors seemed to lack concern for students because of the lofty statements made to the students. US7 stated that,

I think one of the biggest things is how some of them...talked to me. They don't talk to me like we're both just respectable adults that have real lives and are real people. A lot of them...talk down [to us] and act like they're just better, and...better than you in every way possible. And, I really have a tough time tolerating that. I think one of the last instructors I talked about, that I don't even know her name...had a few times that she did...talk with us. It wasn't pleasant. It was very rude and down putting. And, basically

she would state that our own opinions and thoughts don't matter because we're not a scholarly source. And I understand...college sources, I get that and you know using references and citing and doing this and doing that was what we [would] do. But our own opinions should be part of the topic as well...to prove that your understanding or even before all the learning...you know classes and information that we're taking and we're basing all this stuff on our own experiences. So, the majority of teachers ask you to explain...things based on your own experience. Well this one particular teacher basically said flat out, your experiences, your opinions, none of that matters because you are a nobody and literally...because you're a nobody and...not a scholar....so, I guess the biggest frustration is...them not contacting you in a timely manner about something important or just the way that they talk.

Not all these firsthand accounts of students' experiences depict an absolute absence of concern by faculty. However, in some instances faculty's alarming behavior conveyed an immoderate lack of concern for students, among other things. Conversely, most student participants experienced a limited number of occasions when faculty displayed a nominal lack of concern for their students. In either case, students' perspectives of faculty and/or the institution changed. Therefore, faculty's apparent lack of concern brought about, even if momentarily, a frame of mind for students that included diminished or loss of respect for faculty and/or the institution.

Hung and Chou (2015) suggested, "creating a learning community characterized by an atmosphere of trust and reciprocal concern" (p. 2) can promote effective learning. In addition, boosting the quality and quantity of faculty-student interaction in asynchronous learning environments can improve student learning and satisfaction (Kuo et al., 2014). By and large,

faculty's authentic and outward concern, or lack of concern, for students influenced how students felt about faculty, institutions, online learning, and perceived satisfaction.

Theme 2: Lack of Faculty Competence

The next theme to appear while reviewing the data was faculty competence; in particular, instances of perceived lack of faculty competence. Participant narratives included positive and negative examples, and were not as disproportionate as the encounters experienced during the student participants' first online courses. The theme surfaced during the interviews as the student participants discussed their feelings about faculty competency and its effect on the level of confidence they redirected back at faculty and/or the institution.

Of course, faculty who instruct online undergraduate courses should possess a broad understanding of the subject matter being presented. However, student participants in this study described occasions when faculty demonstrated a lack of subject matter expertise. In one such instance, US2 explained her experience in an online undergraduate accounting class where a faculty member struggled when he presented and explained the material. US2 pointed out that although the instructor was a business college faculty member, he had not taught accounting. US2's frustration resurfaced as she declared, "I don't think he was qualified to teach that class....clearly there was a disconnect there and...[it] certainly colored my view of him as an instructor and, to some extent, as a human being," which seemed harsh. Part of US2's harshness emerged from her belief that the instructor's motives were misguided; she wondered why the instructor did not refuse to teach a course if he lacked competence. During her participation in the accounting course, her thoughts frequently drifted away from the course material and moved toward her cognitive comparisons of the accounting course instructor to teachers she knew who

“like...learning and sharing...knowledge with people.” US2’s experience in the accounting class tainted her perception of the instructor, the accounting department, and the institution.

An introductory message from the instructor that addressed his background and the circumstances that brought him to the online undergraduate accounting course might have shifted the students’ perspectives to include more compassion from the students. Furthermore, communicating more specific details to the students might have improved faculty-student interaction and student perception of the instructor and the institution. Naturally, faculty may have the background—academic and/or professional—in a subject area, yet not teach in that subject area. However, if students are unaware of the circumstances, their perspectives will not have the benefit of a thorough understanding of the situation.

Subject matter expertise was not the only area wherein student participants believed faculty lacked competence. Faculty’s ability to lead an online class compassionately and passionately was just as important as subject matter knowledge, US4 cautioned. A faculty member who taught an online course US4 attended retaliated against her and other classmates for speaking with the dean of the department about the faculty member’s rigidity, lack of compassion for students, lack of outward passion for the subject matter, and an apparent lack of desire to teach. US4 emphasized the mundane and incredibly simple composition of the assignments presented by the faculty member who taught the class. The assignments entailed looking up definitions in the textbook only to transfer them to digital documents and/or online posts in the course’s LMS discussion board. US4’s frustration conspicuously stood out when she said, “I was just not feeling like I was learning.” Desiring to get as much out of the class as she could, US4 was particularly interested in learning from instructor feedback on graded assignments, which could have offered her improvement suggestions, however, instructor

feedback was omitted on many assignments. Additionally, the absence of feedback relegated the importance of providing rationale to support grades given by the instructor; and, left students to determine how to improve (Gredler, 2017). Although the instructor seemed to not notice the students' efforts and avoided providing constructive feedback on graded assignments, he was quick to notice the students who spoke with the dean about his performance. For the two weeks following their meeting with the dean, the students received zeros on all their assignments with no explanation. The instructor's retaliation stunned US4 who then teetered between rage to self-blame. As a result, US4 began to feel socially disconnected from the instructor and the institution. This study's other student participants struggled with feeling isolated from time to time. However, unlike US4, most of the other student participants indicated transactional distance associated with the online learning format caused their isolated feelings.

Although not unsettled about a particular faculty member, US5 felt isolated attending online classes and jokingly declared that one of her prior online courses had no instructor. US5 explained her "no instructor" statement by citing a past experience from an online literature course where the instructor posted nothing and responded to nothing. As US5 progressed through the literature course she recurrently expected the instructor to begin communicating. However, faculty-student interaction remained nonexistent, which troubled the recent high school graduate who was accustomed to a steady flow of interaction with teachers. Disappointed, at the end of the course, US5 composed what she called, "the angriest course feedback" she had ever written. By itself, her review of the instructor might have been considered unwarranted criticism from a difficult, discontented student. However, US5 included an embarrassing detail concerning her final paper. She wrote, "I put a sentence in the middle of my [final] paper that said, 'I'm just putting this here to make sure that you're reading it.'" US5

continued her feedback and shared that the course instructor did not notice the comment she included in her final paper, yet, she received an A-plus on that final paper. She went on to say, “clearly, he's not reading it.” Like US5’s nonexistent faculty-student interaction in the literature course she attended online, student perceptions of faculty competency were affected by the amount of faculty-student interaction they encountered. US6 and US8 echoed the mindsets of the other student participants when they specified that perceived faculty competency was linked to student perception of faculty communication and faculty-student interaction, which indicated the magnitude of importance faculty-student interaction has on student perception. US8 disapproved of the lack of faculty-student interaction she met. She said faculty members should take the attitude “I’m going to engage...these teams [and] keep them engaged, keep them active, [and] keep [up]...communication.” US8 went on to say engaging the teams is a way to work toward effective faculty-student interaction.

Compassion, or lack of, can affect a student’s perception of faculty competence, as conveyed by US7. She proceeded to say that faculty’s lack of compassion induced anxiousness. US7’s anxiety was amplified in a human sexuality course she attended due to the subject matter and the instructor’s lack of compassion. US7 then gave an account of some factors to illustrate the importance of compassion.

The class itself was a human sexuality class. People are going to talk about their opinions and their experiences based on each of the topics we have to go through with...the most amount of decency and respect for people's private lives. It was a mess because half the time [the instructor] either wasn't active, didn't exist, nobody even knew where she was or what she did. She had some pretty negative things to say. And it was usually either one of the times specifically they were talking about the different stages of

sex and partners and what's considered abuse and what's not. And I had, I don't remember the exact phrase, but my topic was oral sex. And [when] I said, oral sex....she told me to elaborate. [I asked] how am I supposed to appropriately elaborate that? So, I just took an F and got a zero grade because I didn't finish it. I did not feel comfortable that way. It happened in a public discussion post in front of my entire class with 30 other students. You know, other people will be like, "we get the idea, she does not need to elaborate." I almost dropped the class because of it. [However], it was past the point of no return as far as getting reimbursed for it.

After the instructor refused to allow an alternative way to complete the assignment, US7 made it clear that she was more comfortable accepting a zero grade for the assignment than posting pertinent details about oral sex in a semi-public forum. The instructor's inflexibility and unwillingness to help US7 demonstrated a lack of compassion. As a result, US7's opinion of the instructor's attitude as well as ability to teach faded severely.

Overall, the student participants asserted that faculty lacked some level of competence, which was supported by participant's described examples from online undergraduate courses they attended where faculty competency and incompetency were illuminated. Furthermore, the student participants' descriptions illustrated that faculty competency was an important factor to student satisfaction. Hamilton (2016) stated, "faculty may not possess the skills to develop and teach high-quality online courses. While there is a requirement for all online faculty to attend a mandatory distance learning training session, the training is primarily on the use of the LMS" (p. 20). Hence, faculty competency, on multiple levels, affects students' confidence in faculty and institutions, learning satisfaction, and persistence.

Theme 3: Overburdened Faculty

Student participants of this study identified faculty workload as a potential factor that negatively impacted the student participants' perceptions of instructor teaching ability and faculty's concern for students. All student participants made mention that many of their instructors—no matter how the participants perceived the instructors—had full course loads, families with children, aging parents or other loved ones, and other personal commitments, yet, the instructors made themselves available via text message, email, and the institutions' LMS. As previously discussed, some faculty were not available, and struggled with follow-up and interaction. However, those faculty members might have been tremendously burdened, which negatively impacted their ability to effectively interact. The student participants shared that it was difficult to know if a faculty member was overburdened; particularly online instructors who did not interact with students. Unless the instructors communicated their course schedules and/or explained their personal commitments, student participants were unable to appreciate the constraints on the instructors' time and/or develop a rapport with them. Lack of rapport with instructors discouraged student participants and significantly influenced their perceptions of instructors, courses, and institutions. The student participants articulated that their perceptions frequently lessened their confidence in faculty and the institution. Bowen et al. (2012) wrote:

Faculty time is the scarcest resource on any college or university campus. For already overburdened faculty, a salary supplement may be far less attractive than released time to develop a new online course. Thus, it may be worth considering reducing the faculty member's competing responsibilities in other areas to make sure he or she has sufficient time to develop or learn to use the resources available to teach online. (p. 24)

This assertion by Bowen et al. (2012) supports the student participants' impressions that faculty's workloads impacted their performance. Further supporting the significance of the effects burdensome workloads have on instructor competence and performance, Abraham (2014) stated, "Along with the challenges of establishing online course materials and online instruction, the increased workloads and the demand to work longer hours makes faculty members prone to burnout" (p. 16). The student participants of this study agreed that many of their professors had online and in-person course or institution responsibilities, which, at times, overburdened faculty and diminished faculty's timeliness as well as their ability to provide comprehensive support to students.

Theme 4: Feelings of Isolation

Accessibility to online learning environments afforded students flexibility not available to students who learned in face-to-face environments. However, drawbacks existed that led some undergraduate students to select face-to-face over online courses. One such drawback was feeling isolated, which was a key factor that distinguished online from face-to-face learning environments (Driscoll et al., 2012; Jaggars, 2014; Sun & Rosa, 2015). In fact, feelings of isolation were often far more intense in online learning environments than in face-to-face learning environments (Conaway et al., 2005; Dixon, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2013; Moore, 1983; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009; Truong, 2015; Willging, & Johnson, 2009). This study's student participants agreed that feelings of isolation in online environments seemed more intense than face-to-face learning environments.

Although student participants experienced feelings of isolation from time to time, residing on-campus provided opportunities to connect with other students in the online courses US1 attended. Whereas, the off-campus student participants did not have that line of recourse to

combat feelings of isolation. The student participants expressed that interacting with online classmates took place in some of their classes. Still, unless the instructor initiated and facilitated an online meeting of some sort, reaching out to classmates was somewhat awkward; especially during the initial weeks of the course. When instructors did not initiate contact with US4, she did not “want to keep reaching out and cause problems or go to the dean or go to the advisor because [she didn’t] want to be that person who’s not fast enough.” Similarly, US6 stated “I very much felt like I was alone trying to figure out what I was supposed to be doing.” US7 did not feel that instructors understood the importance of responding or that not responding could lead to students feeling isolated with nowhere to turn for assistance. She said, “if I email you it’s because I genuinely have tried all of my options on figuring out on my own and I need help.” US7 was discouraged by no reply or a reply from her instructor that included the statement, “look at the syllabus,” which US7 revealed she received 90% of the time. She went on to say, “When you get treated like that or not treated like anything at all—completely ignored. It’s really demotivational and it makes you...[develop] this impression of that person.” Feeling isolated and left to figure out instructor expectations and/or the course material, US4, US6, and US7 felt uncomfortable contacting their instructors due to limited or no initial interaction between faculty and students. US8 explained, “I feel that faculty should have been more engaged, kinda like a cheerleader.” For those reasons, family members became their main sounding boards.

Family support was vital to the emotional state of student participants and used to surmount obstacles to persistence, which led to success in the online courses the student participants attended (Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Kruger-Ross & Waters, 2013; Moser, 2016). While they attended online undergraduate courses, it was the families’ support for the

student participants that eased the mounting tension. US2 searched for student clubs as other means of support. However, she could not find a club or group relevant to adult online students. After she had no luck finding a relevant club or group, US2 spoke with her children who were traditional college students at the time and learned that they had a plethora of opportunities to enrich their college experiences not available to adult online students. US2 believed feeling disengaged contributed to her feeling isolated and wished the institution she attended were more effective engaging adult online students by facilitating groups, clubs, and other activities. Based on US2's candid comment, "I was an army of one getting this thing done, thank God it's over," she experienced frustration. Moreover, her frustration led to feeling isolated while participating in online courses at the university she attended.

Not all the children of student participants were college age or old enough to act as sounding boards for their parents. Rather, children were the reason many student participants chose online undergraduate courses. The flexibility of online study allowed the student participants to manage commitments—fulltime jobs, children, weekly shopping for food and household items, as well as other responsibilities. Moreover, online undergraduate courses were the best choice for all student participants when they attended the courses, whether full- or part-time.

This fourth theme considered the perspectives of undergraduate, online students related to experiencing feelings of isolation while participating in higher education online learning environments. The candid commentary by the student participants of this study incorporated accounts of their frustrations, which, for some, deteriorated interest in higher education and/or online study. Although all participants continued to attend online undergraduate courses, diminished interest negatively affected some student participants' perspectives.

Theme 5: Diminished or Loss of Interest in Higher Education or Online Study

Overwhelmingly, the student participants of this study regarded embarking on post-secondary education as a transformative, life-altering undertaking. Students must commit a great deal of effort, expense, and time into post-secondary education. Therefore, as the participants of this study were confronted with what they perceived as lack of faculty concern, lack of faculty competence and/or overburdened faculty, as well as accompanying feelings of isolation, their interest in online study and, in some cases, higher education, deteriorated.

The beginning of a downward slide in attitude, in part due to procedural requirements of an online course and those of a particular instructor, was illustrated by US2's use of the past tense in her statement, "I was super gung-ho, and I was here to learn [and]...have great experiences." As US2 bore more feelings of frustration and isolation prompted by negative faculty-student interaction and procedural rigidity, she began to believe that she was subjugated by the online learning process. Her attitude shifted from "gung-ho" to just wanting to finish the course with an acceptable grade. US2 said, "I wasn't looking for extra opportunities to dig deeper. I knew, from the syllabus, that I had to provide five points on this topic and so that was good enough." It was easy to realize US2's initial "gung-ho" frame of mind was replaced by a "just get it done" attitude. In addition, US2 abandoned seeking support seeing she had no "sense of peer community" because the class encompassed completing assignments in an online workbook. It seemed to US2 that the institution relinquished control of the course to an online workbook, saying, "work your way through it and good luck at the end of the semester." Once again, US2 questioned her ability to continue online learning and complete the remaining course requirements.

In addition to negatively impacting students' ability to learn, negative opinions of instructors or online undergraduate courses may cause students to avoid a particular course or instructor. However, immoderate instances may yield more severe outcomes. An instructor of an online undergraduate course US7 attended brought about feelings so significant that US7 nearly dropped out of the course and the school. US7 recounted the effect an instructor's behavior had on her cognitive and perceptual point of view:

To an extent you get so far with [someone] that it makes me question everything. It makes me question if it is the teacher, if it's you, if it's the class, if it's your knowledge, and can you really do this at a really good college. It can go really, really far but she went to a really dark place. You can't succeed in this class based on the instructor and how they treat you. And they knock you down like that or isolate you and just make you feel like you're not good enough to be there. You believe that at least I personally at many times have believed that and almost where I've been very close to cutting college all together a few times. Based on how they treated me and maybe that will really make you feel like you don't belong there.

US7 persisted in the course and school even though her frustration nearly led to leaving the school.

US8 also considered leaving the university she attended because of an instructor's rigidness and lack of concern. US8 shared, "I was so frustrated at that point...in my undergraduate program that I basically told my academic advisor if it isn't straightened out, I'm going to withdraw from the school and I will find another school." Even still, US8 did not lose interest in higher education and enjoyed the format and accessibility of online study.

Other student participants occasionally questioned their aspirations to study online, however, to a lesser degree than US2, US7, and US8. For instance, US1 underwent very minor and short-lived feelings that lowered her interest in higher education and online study. US4 had a somewhat different experience when she participated in an online course with an instructor who posted assignments several days after the start of each week, did not post grades until after the class had moved on to the next section, and provided little or no feedback. The instructor's behavior frustrated US4, yet, she tried to remain positive. She candidly said that it was a bad experience, but she didn't allow it to bother her too terribly much. Instead, US4 commented that "maybe had I met her in person I would have a different opinion of her." Three student participants—US3, US5, US6—did not lose interest for higher education studies or online learning environments.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to discover reasons undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceive faculty as disinterested, the significance of this perception, and how students respond. This fourth chapter included findings based on eight semi-structured interviews examined through multiple coding techniques to provide a broad analysis of the data. Five themes and one subtheme emerged from the data and reasons undergraduate students who participated in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceived faculty as disinterested were uncovered. Chapter 5 will include discussion of the findings, and their correlation to the research questions.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Understanding which elements influence and impact the success of students is multifaceted in online learning environments. Online learning environments' unique dynamics can affect student satisfaction and success (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Eom et al., 2006). Two essential components that influence student success in online learning environments are content and delivery systems (Arbaugh, 2014; Helms, 2014; Kim et al., 2016; Kuo et al., 2014). Although both content and delivery systems are foundational, faculty behavior and faculty-student interaction play as vital a role in online learning environments and have considerable bearing on students' perceptions of learning and content mastery, as well as their perceived success in online learning environments (McGinley et al., 2012). The significance of faculty behavior and faculty-student interaction were at the center of this study's enquiry of undergraduate students who participated in asynchronous online courses. A limited number of earlier studies focused on the perspectives of undergraduate students in online learning environments (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012; Hung & Chou, 2015). Even more scarce were preceding studies that included online undergraduate student perspectives focused on reasons undergraduate students who participated in asynchronous online undergraduate courses and perceived faculty as disengaged.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to uncover reasons undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceived faculty as disinterested, how students responded, and the significance of this perception. The experiences encountered by undergraduate students during their participation in online undergraduate courses were explored

using an interpretive, qualitative approach that employed semi-structured interviews to identify the lived experiences among the student participants in this study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The data obtained was used to answer the following research questions:

1. How do online undergraduate students perceive and respond to disengaged faculty members?
2. How do online undergraduate students describe and understand their expectations of faculty interaction in an online learning environment?
3. How do online undergraduate students describe the influence faculty immediacy has on their attitudes toward learning?

In addition, the data can be used to understand and improve dialogue between instructors and students. Furthermore, additional benefits arise from scholarly discourse surrounding the exploration of what specific factors induce the subjectivity of undergraduate students' perceptions of faculty-student interaction.

Review of Methodology

The framework for this study developed from two theories: social constructivism and transactional distance. Social constructivism clarified and rationalized the problem of faculty perceived as not interactively engaged with students in online learning environments (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Swan, 2005). The theory of transactional distance was used to understand how transactional distance, derived from the metaphorical and physical distance between students and their instructors, instigated negative perceptions of instructors' behaviors (Hawkins et al., 2013; Moore, 1983; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Both, social constructivism and transactional distance supported the interpretive character of qualitative research.

The nonprobability sampling method employed to identify student participants for this interpretive, qualitative study was in the form of purposeful sampling; also referred to as criterion-based selection (Merriam, 2009). The differentiation between different types of purposeful sampling commonly includes one variation labeled as unique sampling because its characteristics are atypical (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). This study employed the unique sampling type to select student participants on account of the specific features involved in identifying the reasons undergraduate students participating in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceived faculty as disengaged. Eight students 18 years of age or older who attended and completed at least three asynchronous online undergraduate courses at a U.S. higher education institution during the years 2016 or 2017, and who experienced instructor behavior that they characterized as disengaged, participated in this study. Each of the semi-structured interviews of the eight student participants lasted between 60 and 100 minutes. The interviews produced a plentiful amount of diverse data that supported the qualitative research for this study. Consequently, the participants' perceived experiences related to this study were revealed and subsequently documented.

Major Findings

The overarching question, "What are the reasons undergraduate students who participated in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceived faculty as disengaged?" guided the research. The major themes that emerged during analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes were lack of faculty concern, diminished or loss of respect for faculty/institution, lack of faculty competence, overburdened faculty, feelings of isolation, and diminished or loss of interest in higher education or online study, which are also listed in Table 4.2. To grasp the significance of student participants' perceptions, which formed the major themes, the

interpretive, qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews ameliorated identifying the lived experiences of the student participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

Table 4.2
Theme and Sub-Theme Associations

Number	Theme	Subtheme
1	Lack of Faculty Concern	
1a		Diminished or Loss of Respect for Faculty/Institution
2	Lack of Faculty Competence	
3	Overburdened Faculty	
4	Feelings of Isolation	
5	Diminished or Loss of Interest in Higher Ed or Online Study	

Note . Themes emerged from the eight interviews included in this study.

Looking back at the conversations, the student participants' desired faculty characteristics were straightforward. Even still, the characteristics were transformative and "constructed on the basis of instructor characteristics that students perceive to be important" (Sarapin & Morris, 2015, p. 21). The wish-list of faculty characteristics developed during the participant interviews included:

- Adaptability / Flexibility
- Authenticity
- Awareness
- Communicative
- Compassion / Care
- Conscientiousness
- Enthusiasm

- Honesty / Integrity
- Listening
- Passionate
- Promptness
- Substantive

Each of the characteristics directly linked to the first theme, lack of faculty concern, and indirectly linked to all other themes. The major themes identified in this study together with the faculty characteristics announced by the student participants illustrate the value student participants placed on the quality of active teaching presence, which positively influenced student participants' sense of community in online learning environments (Ma, Han, Yang, & Cheng, 2015).

According to the student participants, sense of community in online learning environments evolved during the courses. Although the wish-list of faculty characteristics could not be validated at the onset of online courses, the student participants pointed out that faculty's demeanor, genuine or fake, set the tone for the initial atmosphere of asynchronous online learning environments. The student participants went on to say classmates and the LMS appended characteristics to the culture of online learning environments, which evolved as the courses continued. Similarly, faculty's effect on the online learning environment's culture evolved throughout the course. Faculty-student interaction that took place during online courses exhibited the ways faculty's actions shaped student participants' perceptions of faculty, the course, the institution, and online education, which lines up with the social constructivist notion that interaction is needed for the process of learning (Woo & Reeves, 2007). Thus, positive faculty-student interaction demands well-adapted, relevant faculty behavior and positive teaching

presence to support constructive interaction. Constructive faculty-student interaction reduces feelings of isolation, which preempts proliferating the inherently high levels of transactional distance present in asynchronous learning environments (Bower et al., 2015).

Interpretation of Findings

This interpretive, qualitative study explored reasons undergraduate students who attended asynchronous online college courses perceived faculty as disengaged and how the students responded to faculty behavior. The student participants discussed examples of how faculty actions, or inactions, cultivated negative feelings experienced by each participant of this study. The data collected from the student participant interviews were used to answer the research questions for this study. The questions articulated what the researcher aimed to identify—student and faculty intentions and perspectives before, during, and after faculty-student interactions. The interpretations uncovered during this study substantiated the value of subjectivity within research, which rests in understanding how students interpret their interaction with faculty (Jootun et al., 2009).

The research questions guided the interpretation of this study's themes. Rather than seeking hidden meaning—referred to as “suspicious” interpretation—each major theme was interpreted empathetically—referred to as “empathetic” interpretation—to understand the student participants' responses that occurred during the interviews and the patterns that led to recognizing each theme (Willig, 2011). The student participant responses unveiled patterns equivalent to logical groupings of the data. Furthermore, from the responses and resulting patterns, this study sought “to elucidate meaning that is implicit in the data” (Willig, 2011, p. 278). Admittedly, the intent of this study was to identify *how* online undergraduate students perceived and responded, rather than attempting to discover the reasons *why* students did either.

Each theme was explored intellectually with subjectivity attributable to applying the research questions to the process of cogitating the themes. Beginning with the first overarching question, “How do online undergraduate students perceive and respond to disengaged faculty members?” student participant interview comments were compiled into lists and applied to the themes. For instance, during the examination of the theme, Lack of Faculty Concern the researcher produced lists from the interview data answering the first research question, “How do online undergraduate students perceive and respond to disengaged faculty members?” The first list considered the student participants’ perception, “How do online undergraduate students perceive disengaged faculty?” and comprised student comments such as the statement made by US2, “the professor didn’t reply to my post, so it seemed as though he didn’t care” and an account of a disengaged online faculty member who US7 declared, “He spoke down to us, which made me feel bad, like he was more worried about himself than his students.” Next, the manner in which student participants responded to the disengaged faculty was examined. During the development and examination of the list of student participants’ interview comments, some comments were removed from the list and/or relocated to a more relevant list.

The next research question, “How do online undergraduate students describe and understand their expectations of faculty interaction in an online learning environment?” represents anticipated faculty-student interaction. The same process as the initial assessment of the first research question and the same interrelated theme, Lack of Faculty Concern, was utilized for the second and third research questions. The third and last research question, “How do online undergraduate students describe the influence faculty immediacy has on their attitudes toward learning?” denotes perspectives formed during or after faculty-student interaction occurred. The process was repeated for each of the major themes that surfaced during the

analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes, which were lack of faculty concern, diminished or loss of respect for faculty/institution, lack of faculty competence, overburdened faculty, feelings of isolation, and diminished or loss of interest in higher education or online study.

The framework stemmed from two theories: social constructivism and transactional distance. Social constructivism explained and simplified the problem of students' perceptions of faculty as not interactively involved with students in online learning environments (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Swan, 2005). Transactional distance is a characteristic inherently connected to asynchronous online learning environments in which students undergo weightier feelings of isolation than students participating in face-to-face learning environments (Conaway et al., 2005; Dixon, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2013; Moore, 1983; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009; Truong, 2015; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Vygotsky (1962, 1978) maintained that the process of understanding stemmed from social interaction, even though learning is an individual cognitive occurrence.

Finding #1: Faculty's Impact on Students Intensified Online

How did online undergraduate students perceive and respond to disengaged faculty members? For the student participants' first online undergraduate course, seven out of the eight of them did not experience disengaged faculty. In fact, those seven student participants were encouraged by the positive experiences of their first online undergraduate courses. According to the student participants, faculty's efforts, which included accessibility and positive demeanor, coupled with outstanding communication and follow-up led to student participant excitement about the institution and upcoming online undergraduate courses. For example, US7 said, "I loved it, I absolutely loved it because...it was really exciting to be in college and I was able to

understand the information in the class.” Optimism was high as the student participants entered their next online undergraduate courses. Though, their optimism dissipated while they attended their next online undergraduate courses. Eight out of the eight student participants expressed that faculty instructing their second online courses were not as helpful as the faculty members who taught their first course. The student participants also stated that the faculty instructing the second courses lacked concern.

All eight of the student participants experienced disappointment while attending their second online undergraduate courses, some more than others. For example, US4, US5, and US7 were stunned by unfavorable faculty encounters in their second online undergraduate courses. According to the student participants, the widest disparity existed in the faculty members’ enthusiasm and helpfulness, particularly in the way those two attributes related to faculty’s accessibility, level of communication, and demeanor. US4, frustrated by a faculty member’s apparent lack of concern, stated “the teacher didn’t send out or post an introductory message and didn’t have the modules open until week two and we were freaking out.” The drastic swing from exceedingly positive experiences to disturbingly negative ones prompted the student participants to question the institutions’ integrity. Although faculty initiated the student participants’ frustration, the student participants looked upon them as employees of the institutions. The student participants wondered if the institutions’ first online courses were staffed differently than other courses. Did the institutions’ staff online entry courses with the best instructors and/or did the entry course instructors receive specialized training on effective methods to support students who took part in online undergraduate entry courses? Or, were instructors incentivized for positive persistence rates of students who attended online undergraduate entry courses. These

questions compel further research into institution practices in consideration of student experiences.

For the online undergraduate courses that followed the entry courses, how did online undergraduate students perceive and respond to disengaged faculty members? The student participants pointed to three missteps—lack of faculty immediacy and/or absence of responses, ambiguous instructions and/or feedback, and lack of respect for students—most responsible for the perceptions that led to their belief that faculty lacked concern for the students or teaching, which influenced students' opinions of faculty, institutions, online learning, and the students' perceived satisfaction. The student participants stated that the faculty's impact on the student participants seemed greater in online than face-to-face courses primarily because they felt isolated. The student participants' feelings of isolation emanated from a lack of psychological closeness, referred to as immediacy.

Immediacy refers to the psychological closeness between faculty and students. It is more difficult for faculty to effectively facilitate online courses because of the aspects inherent to online learning environments, which elicit faculty's increased level of focus on immediacy, interaction, communication, and transactional distance (Conaway et al., 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Correspondingly, reaching psychological closeness in online learning environments is challenging due to proximity. Since impromptu psychological closeness typically does not occur in online learning environments, instructional design should incorporate interactive assignments and exercises that exhort immediacy between faculty and students (Berge, 1999; Merrill, 1994). Similarly, interaction and communication in online learning environments are subject to the effects of transactional distance extending the potential for diminished immediacy.

The online undergraduate student participants considered faculty members' more impactful in online learning environments than in face-to-face classroom settings. US7 stated, "in an online class you can't just walk to the dean's office to talk about what is going on, you have to place a call or send an email and then wait for a response, which can take longer than you'd like and while you wait you are at the mercy of the instructor." The idiosyncratic social and virtual framework of online learning environments limited students' opportunities to engage in faculty-student interaction, which increased the significance of the interaction that occurred and consequently contributed to the student participants characterizing faculty as disengaged (Kearsley, 2000). Higher education institutions should provide faculty members who instruct in online learning environments ongoing specialized training iterating the importance of interaction and communication (Conaway et al., 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Painter, 2015). Additionally, the specialized training should include actions to avoid the three missteps the student participants identified: lack of faculty immediacy and/or absence of responses, ambiguous instructions and/or feedback, and lack of respect for students.

Finding #2: Faculty Competence is more than Subject Matter Expertise

Faculty competence first surfaced during the student participant interviews and then again while reviewing the data. It became clear that student participants' dissatisfaction with online undergraduate courses was linked to faculty competence. US2 stated, "the instructor was from the business college, but I don't think he was qualified to teach accounting. The only help I could get was from Kahn Academy, which I found by Googling. It was so insanely frustrating." Accurately, the student participants believed that subject matter expertise was only one component of faculty competence (Abraham, 2014; Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011; Kearns, 2016). The student participants deemed faculty's ability to manage online learning environments

of equal importance as subject matter expertise. The student participants indicated that faculty competence was most affected by faculty's compassion for students and passion for the subject. US1 stated, "the professors at my college have been teaching in higher education for years and at least 10 years at my college. They had the experience and knowledge the students expected from them and they were all capable communicators who seemed to care about the students." Furthermore, competence did not rest in faculty's ability to answer all content-related questions instantaneously, according to the student participants. Faculty's passion for the subject matter was a larger part of faculty competence than rapidly answering subject matter questions. Instructors who displayed passion for the subject energized the student participants to dig deeper into the subject matter.

The student participants acknowledged that an instructor's ability to lead an online class with compassion was of greater importance than subject matter expertise. Compassion should include willingness to set aside rigidity on occasion, which parallels society outside academia. US1 shared an instance when a faculty member set aside rigidity, which can occur in academia. She stated, "the professor specifically mentioned if you prefer text messaging to email, he would text us." It was evident that the student participants struggled to learn from uncompassionate instructors who were inflexible—putting process above people. Rigidity was interpreted as apathetic behavior that led the student participants to a cognitive shut down, in some instances. Worsening students' views of uncompassionate instructors, lack of rapport between faculty and students negatively influenced students' perceptions of instructors, courses, and institutions. Abraham (2014) suggests that increased workloads associated with online instruction augment the need for faculty to work extended hours, which increases the likelihood of burnout. Consequently, faculty's teaching ability and concern for students can deteriorate. All student

participants stated that many of their instructors seemed overloaded with full course loads, families with children, aging parents or other loved ones to care for, and personal commitments. US1 knew of one professor's heavy workload, however, US1's experience with the instructor was positive. US1 stated, "she has a full course load plus children and a family at home. She might not be able to respond for hours. It gave me a more personal aspect of her." Nonetheless, most instructors made themselves available via text message, email, and the institutions' LMS. When responses were not timely or did not occur at all, student participants considered workload as a potential factor.

Finding #3: Feeling Isolated in Online Learning Environments

Accessibility to online learning environments was a benefit enjoyed by the student participants. However, disadvantages existed including considerable self-directed study, which amounted to more alone time. This characteristic led some student participants to feel isolated more so than face-to-face learning environments. US6 pointed out an occurrence when one of his online instructors seemed overloaded. US6 stated, "I felt like I was a burden and felt like I was bothering the instructor, which made me feel pretty isolated." Intrinsically, interaction and communication in online learning environments are subject to the effects of transactional distance. Online students experience physical disconnection, which increased misconstruing online faculty's intent (Conaway et al., 2005; Dixon, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2013; Moore, 1983; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009; Truong, 2015; Willging, & Johnson, 2009). Effective faculty-student interaction was a means to combat misinterpreting faculty's intent. Moreover, battling isolation was "important in online distance study as a means to overcome the influence of isolation while encouraging productive, self-directed learning" (Prior, Mazanov, Meacheam, Heaslip, & Hanson, 2016, p. 91). Although the

student participants persisted, some said feeling isolated negatively affected their views of online learning. If accessibility was not essential, the student participants would consider face-to-face, hybrid, or synchronous learning environments for selected courses.

As the student participants were confronted with a notable lack of faculty concern and/or faculty competence, the students' feelings of isolation increased, which deteriorated the appeal of online study and higher education. For some student participants, the effect was more significant. The student participants' attitudes moved back and forth between a desire to achieve a high-ranking in the class and just wanting to finish with an acceptable grade. Furthermore, the negative impact produced by the aforesaid issues students faced, deflated their views of instructors, and in some cases, online undergraduate courses. That said, each student participant's perseverance saw them through previous courses or continues to maintain their dedication to undergraduate study.

Ancillary Finding: Positive Behaviors of Online Faculty Members

The focus of this study is understanding disinterest derived from students' perceptions of disengaged faculty members. However, each student participant encountered faculty members who demonstrated positive behaviors and characteristics that embodied the qualities of excellent instructors. The positive actions represented the absence of the undesirable behaviors and characteristics exhibited by some faculty members who were discussed in this study; behaviors that frustrated the student participants. For example, the student participants described their positive faculty experiences with encouraging examples such as, "I feel like I got lucky...my teachers are really great about helping if I need help" (US4). US4 went on to say,

I definitely felt how invested the instructor was in the class and the time and...resources that he made available and the willingness to meet on my schedule as well as the willingness to meet off campus if I needed extra help with my paper.

In a separate instance, US4 revealed that she struggled with computer programming for one of her online undergraduate courses. Although she grappled with the course, US4 was impressed by the instructor's effort and his willingness to take the time to help her. US4 said, "I even had a teacher [who] called me a couple of times just because I was having issues. He walked me through how to set up some programming on my computer." US4's instructor displayed and encouraged the type of care, humility, willingness to assist, and desire to promote learning that Mayeroff (1971) put forward when he wrote, "The man who cares is genuinely humble in being ready to and willing to learn more about the other and...I am not humiliated to learn from any source, including my own mistakes" (p. 30). Although Mayeroff's statement was not explicitly directed at online instructors, the essence of the statement is just as applicable to the online faculty member and student who interacted as it is within the context of Mayeroff's book. Mayeroff's statement encircles the idea "caring as helping the other grow" (p. 7), which is the title of the first chapter in his book, *On Caring*. The actions of US4's instructor were easily recalled during the interview for this study. The instructor inspired future study and positive memories US4 will likely carry with her throughout life.

US5 communicated details of actions some instructors employed that provided positive experiences for students. The instructors, according to US5, "gave out [their] e-mail addresses, they gave out their [contact] information so that we could contact them if we had any questions; and anytime we did have questions they were extremely quick to reply." The act of providing an email address and/or other contact information is insignificant. However, gladly allowing

students to contact them together with a willingness to assist students during personal time is tremendous. Similarly, US6 encountered a methodical faculty member who helped him remain current with assignments for an online undergraduate course he attended. The methodical faculty member's direct and simple actions that US6 appreciated could have been misconstrued by other students as negative faculty behavior. US6 said, "interaction seems to help me....there [are] times when I'll get emails from instructors [reminding me] to turn the assignment in on time, and that's a great reminder." Unlike US6, some students might have perceived the instructors' emails as annoyances—similar to being browbeaten by an elementary school teacher to get assignments completed on time. From timely reminders to departing asynchronous online environments to connect directly with a student in person or via telephone, compassionately and effectively communicating during interaction with students seemed to be at the root of many success stories.

Another success story involved a faculty member, who taught an online undergraduate course US1 attended. The faculty member eagerly accommodated his students' learning needs, even when multiple instances of faculty-student interaction were needed during his personal time. US1 recalled the positive approach of the faculty member who repeatedly exceeded US1's expectations with the faculty member's willingness to compassionately assist students. US1 provided a brief example:

If you e-mailed him a question—even about the syllabus, which had explanation after explanation of the course, he would reply promptly. And, even after his initial reply you still found yourself confused, you could email him [again] and almost instantly he would reply.

As disturbing as the negative behaviors and characteristics reviewed in this study were, the positive accounts of faculty behavior by student participants are uplifting and provide examples that can be used to develop best practices and as a component of the specialized training for faculty members who instruct in online learning environments. Based on a study by Williamson (2014), adjunct faculty's perception of motivation was impacted by the impression they were not valued by the institutions and was due to a lack of substantive communication from colleagues and the leaders of the institutions. Both value and communication parallel the student participants' feelings toward disengaged faculty, which clash with the positive behaviors reviewed in this section.

Implications

The findings from this study stemmed from faculty-student interaction. Limited opportunities to interact directly with faculty along with the idiosyncratic social context of virtual learning environments contributed to the student participants' who described faculty as disengaged (Kearsley, 2000; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009; Swan, 2005). Asynchronous online learning environments' inherent physical gap along with the absence of verbal and nonverbal communication between faculty and students produced psychological separation labeled transactional distance (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Asynchronous learning environments have intrinsically higher levels of transactional distance, which raises the probability of students feeling disconnected from both, classmates and faculty (Bower et al., 2015). To reduce student participants' feelings of disconnection, the independent structure of online learning environments supports constructivism teaching methods such as Guided Instruction (GI), which consists of a course instructor who "guides the class to a destination but encourages students to find solutions...and answer each other's questions" (Moore-Russo & Wilsey, 2014, p. 81). Faculty-

student and classmate interaction affords students the opportunity to reduce transactional distance while engaging in learning-by-doing and interacting with peers—social constructivism. Utilizing a social constructivism method to teaching puts forward an explicit channel to awareness, whether face-to-face or online. Consequently, instructors are better able to address the uniqueness of learners by applicably adapting pedagogies. Nevertheless, the limitations of faculty-student interaction in online learning environments obliges enhanced teacher expertise and skill in online interaction.

Identifying faculty behaviors that negatively affect student satisfaction and success in online learning environments will help prevent those actions from reoccurring during faculty-student interaction. In effect, a student's perceived learning and satisfaction relate to a student's impression of an instructor, as a result of the student's interpretation of the instructor's behavior and the tone of interaction between faculty and student (Fryer & Bovee, 2016).

Recommendations for Action

Hamilton (2016) noted four key ideas and actions: “preparing faculty to teach online, engaging students in the online classroom, course design and delivery, and supporting distance learning students” (p. 66). Incorporating Hamilton's four key themes along with faculty behaviors similar to the eight cited in this study, and the twelve wish-list faculty characteristics—listed in Table 5.1 alongside the eight negative faculty behaviors that surfaced during this study—into a specialized training program for online faculty can present added perspective for faculty to use when striving to modify their behaviors. The eight faculty behaviors listed in this study and in Table 5.1 gave students the impression faculty lacked concern. Integrating social constructivism and transactional distance, the two theories used to develop this study's framework, into the specialized training can deepen faculty's understanding of the barriers online

students contend with and how those challenges can impact their perspectives. It is important for the specialized training to highlight the notion that learning occurs from social interaction, more specifically, knowledge is constructed through interaction with humans and not merely course material (Vygotsky 1962, 1978; Wenger & Traynor-Wenger, 2015).

Table 5.1

Negative Faculty Behaviors & Positive Faculty Characteristics

Negative Faculty Behaviors	Positive Wish-List Characteristics
Not Promptly Responding	Adaptability / Flexibility
Not Responding	Authenticity
Lack of Faculty-Initiated Interaction	Awareness
Faculty Not Offering an Introductory Message	Communicative
Not Providing a Course Syllabus	Compassion / Care
Neglecting to List Assignments	Conscientiousness
Lack of Comprehensive Feedback on Assignments	Enthusiasm
Self-Important Language When Responding	Honesty / Integrity
	Listening
	Passionate
	Promptness
	Substantive

Note . Behaviors and characteristics emerged from the eight interviews included in this study.

Social interaction is a valuable conduit for learning comprising elements likely to fluctuate, such as an individual's proclivity to change their behavior when their environments and/or situations shift. The faculty member's negative behaviors that occurred during faculty-student interaction as described by the student participants in this study led to the students'

diametric choices of desirable characteristics faculty should exhibit, which made up the student participants' wish-list of positive faculty characteristics listed in Table 5.1. Finding opportunities to improve faculty awareness and effectiveness can begin with the wish-list of positive faculty characteristics, which provide a foundation to expand upon. Furthermore, the deficiencies revealed during the student participant interviews and in this study's findings can be used to acclimate the specialized training for faculty members who instruct in online learning environments. The specialized training should spotlight social interaction skills with an emphasis on specific behavioral deficiencies, which were cited by the student participants. In addition to specialized training, efficient and thorough faculty recruitment and orientation programs are essential.

Higher education institutions' staff recruitment and orientation processes can take place in online learning environments. Utilizing a digital format helps ensure newly hired faculty are familiarized efficiently, which elicits improved employee retention (Nieten, 2018). Programs designed to assist faculty with transitioning from traditional face-to-face learning environments to online learning environments are practical ways to reduce faculty turnover. These programs can be tailored to address countless situations and can be contained in virtual learning environments where faculty can access course content and tools. Correspondingly, the findings from this study presented the student experiences and descriptions of online faculty behaviors that can aid administrators and developers. It is important to note, without proper support from administration, faculty can feel unappreciated, which can lead to turnover (Mech, 2017). Differentiating the many possible factors of transitioning from traditional face-to-face environments to online learning environments can begin with this study's findings. For instance, new competencies in technology and communication can be burdensome for the transitioning

faculty members and the institutions where they teach (Kearns, 2016). It can be equally challenging for institutions to recruit and train new faculty. Without adequate controls and faculty developmental programs, faculty and institutions contend with difficulties that can impact online learning for students. Without actively and effectively recruiting faculty members, the monetary and non-monetary costs—such as, low student persistence rates and deteriorated morale of faculty and students—of onboarding and training will increase. Moreover, the popularity of high school dual-enrollment courses coupled with the Higher Learning Commission’s recent explanation of the necessary instructor credentials increases the need for qualified instructors at high schools, which may decrease the pool of prospective faculty members for higher education (Smith, 2018). This potential dilemma necessitates increased human resource efforts that may entail hiring incentives.

In 2015, the country’s largest regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission, issued a policy clarification stating that high school teachers of dual-credit courses, along with instructional college faculty members, are required to have a master’s degree in the specialty they’re teaching, or at least 18 graduate-level credit hours within that specialty.

Some states and institutions, particularly those with significant numbers of dual-credit students, like Indiana and Minnesota, pushed HLC for an extension so they could meet the requirements. The accreditor then pushed the deadline to September 2022 for any institution or state that applied for one. For those that didn’t apply, the clarification went into effect this past fall. (Smith, 2018, para. 4-5)

Developing consistent and uniform hiring and training procedures improve an institution’s ability to maintain a normalized cost per hire (Understanding Cost Per Hire, n.d.).

Based on the findings of this study and available literature, increased faculty-student, classmate-student, and third-party interaction can all be channels for student learning (Arbaugh, 2014; Holzweiss et al., 2014; Horzum, 2015; Hung & Chou, 2015; Ke & Kwak, 2013; Paechter, Maier, & Macher, 2010). Student's active discourses with faculty and/or peers are indispensable aspects of producing vivid impressions essential to learning (Kim, Kim, & Karimi, 2012). Exploring current discourses between faculty and students participating in online learning environments may clarify the importance active discourses have on averting or combating the physical separation between faculty and students. Additionally, understanding how active discourses between faculty and students participating in online learning environments impact learning can guide institutions and faculty to improve course design and delivery, and cultivate useful student engagement and support.

Improving faculty's awareness and understanding of what online students shoulder can contribute to faculty's ability to ease the magnitude of transactional distance online students undergo; particularly in asynchronous online learning environments where feelings of isolation can rapidly intensify (Conaway et al., 2005; Dixon, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2013; Moore, 1983; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009; Truong, 2015; Willing & Johnson, 2009). This recommended action of developing and implementing specialized training for the faculty members who teach in online learning environments is intended to assist those faculty members with developing behaviors and skills to address the challenges in adapting their teaching skills across multiple teaching environments—in particular, online learning environments.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research of student perspectives may reveal additional findings that can be used to inform decisions and practices of students, faculty, administration, support departments, and stakeholder groups within higher education. The first recommendation for further study is to replicate this study using a larger sample size. A larger sample size can furnish opportunity to generalize the results from this study to a wider depiction of students, which will increase the level of confidence in the findings as uncertainty decreases (Hamid et al., 2015). Furthermore, widening the scope of the study to include social and instructional roles in blended learning environments as a comparison to this study's exclusive focus on online learning environments can augment the insight into student perspectives, which encourage researching "the types of tactics instructors might use to create social presence to determine which are most effective and the contexts in which they are most appropriate" (Arbaugh, 2014, p. 358). By and large, increasing the sample size may raise the point at which saturation is attained expanding the amount of perceptions, perspectives, and/or information considered.

The second recommendation is to expand on this study's second tier of frequently cited faculty behaviors that caused the students to feel as though faculty lacked concern. The eight faculty behaviors cited in this study were: 1) not promptly responding, 2) not responding, 3) lack of faculty-initiated interaction, 4) faculty not offering an introductory message, 5) not providing a course syllabus, 6) neglecting to list assignments, 7) a lack of comprehensive feedback on assignments, and 8) self-important language used by some faculty when responding to students. Conversely, student participants suggested that recurring components positively affected academic success and cognitive growth. The most significant recurring factors were faculty

behaviors that led faculty to remain well-prepared for class and design assignments that present meaningful content in an interesting way.

Gaytan (2015) identified two critical findings: “online students would like to receive more instruction from their professors and more comprehensive feedback that would allow them to engage in corrective behaviors to improve performance” (p. 56). The appeal to receive comprehensive feedback was the seventh out of eight behaviors listed in this study’s most frequently cited faculty behaviors that caused student participants to deem faculty as lacking concern. Faculty may acquire a lack of concern or students may incorrectly perceive faculty’s lack of concern. Nonetheless, understanding which faculty behaviors lead students to perceive faculty as lacking concern can provide administration, faculty, and students with sounder awareness to recognize and more appropriately address the behaviors.

The third recommendation is to study staffing and training practices and the impact both have on student learning and satisfaction in online learning environments of higher education. The findings can supply faculty and administration with information to develop and refine best practices for those areas. Approaching staffing and training practices for faculty who teach or will teach in online learning environments necessitates distinctive methods. When developing or refining best practices, it is important to remain aware of historical inconsistencies between face-to-face and online learning environments that developed when “hiring practices, academic qualifications, research opportunities, and criteria for evaluation” differ (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). In addition, gathering data about expectations, hiring, and institution policies intended for faculty who teach or will teach in online learning environments can enrich correlations between the data acquired from examining staffing and training practices.

Conclusion

Few studies concerning student perspectives of faculty behaviors have been published. This study revealed some promising insight to faculty–student interaction from the student perspective. As a result, improved dialogue between instructors and students can establish a basis to motivate students and improve their perceptions of online interaction with instructors. Improvements can arise from scholarly discourse surrounding the exploration of what specific factors induce the subjectivity of undergraduate students’ perceptions of faculty-student interaction. Institutions have collected course evaluations of teaching for decades, and although student evaluations of teaching are possibly the most researched topic in education, the results of this line of research are inconclusive—in part because of the narrow focus of much of this research. Rather than focus solely on the validity of student evaluations to document teaching effectiveness, more researchers should investigate these evaluations simply as indicators of student satisfaction with their learning experience. (Lowenthal et al., 2015, p. 95)

The findings from this study are conceivably a preliminary locus for larger scale research on understanding online undergraduate student participation, expectation, perceived success, and the effects of faculty interaction with students and presence in online learning environments.

Contributing to the scholarly dialogue on faculty-student interaction in asynchronous online undergraduate courses, this study presents online undergraduate students’ viewpoints of faculty behaviors the student participants perceived negatively. The amount of research dedicated to the study of online undergraduate students’ insights into faculty behaviors that took place in asynchronous online learning environments is limited. Conversely, ample research of online instructor best practices is available (Ferdig et al., 2014; Finch & Jacobs, 2012; Fish &

Wickersham, 2009; Githens et al., 2014; Rovai, 2007). Therefore, this study's data and findings can support the efforts of administrators, course developers, and instructors to improve awareness, behavior, and training programs for faculty members who teach in online learning environments.

This study provided examples of faculty behaviors from the students' perspectives to ascertain reasons undergraduate students who participated in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceived faculty as disinterested, how the students responded to faculty behavior, and the significance of the students' perceptions. The findings were based on eight semi-structured interviews examined through multiple coding techniques to deliver a wide-ranging analysis of the data. Five themes and one subtheme emerged and uncovered reasons undergraduate students who participated in asynchronous online undergraduate courses perceived faculty as disinterested.

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