Developing Social Presence as an Academic Advisor for Online Graduate Business Students

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Approved February 2020 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2020

ABSTRACT

For more than 30 years, social science researchers have studied how students in online learning environments interact with each other. This has led to the development of a construct called social presence. Studies have shown that high social presence can lead to improved student retention, engagement, and satisfaction. The literature explores how social presence has been measured by faculty or researchers, but lacks insight on how other university staff can affect social presence in online graduate students. This is an action research mixed-methods study conducted by an academic advisor and attempts to measure social presence through a webpage intervention for an online graduate business program. A pre-and-posttest were conducted in a five month span, as well as semi-structured interviews with students of the program. Results suggest that overall, the intervention did not increase social presence in the program. It also suggests that social presence is developed between students in a variety of ways, and can even be developed between their academic advisor and themselves. Overall, this study acknowledges how academic advisors can explore social presence to improve academic advising techniques and interventions for their programs, while also adding to the literature a different perspective through the eyes of a university staff member.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to many people and things. My amazing husband, Michael, for always supporting my endeavors and dreams, but for also being patient while I would yell at my computer screen. My dogs, Tobias and riley, who are slightly upset at the fact that I haven't smothered them with the amount of love I used to while being in school. I promised them more walks, treats, and belly rubs once this is done. My family who always encouraged and believed in me, my grandparents, Esperanza and Jorge Perez. I also dedicate this dissertation to RuPaul, Post Malone, Candy Crush, gemstones and crystals, Scrubs, Parks and Rec, boy bands, and Netflix for keeping me sane while I wrote this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has been forever changed with the emergence of online education. With online education comes new ways of developing relationships between students through electronic means such as email, asynchronous virtual networks (e.g., discussion forums or chat rooms), social media, synchronous technology (e.g. Skype, Facetime, Google Hangouts), texting, and more. All these means of connectivity have online graduate programs around the globe trying to develop the best possible routes to re-create the student engagement, satisfaction, and in the end, student retention seen within in-person graduate programs. Research suggests that keeping students engaged can lead to feelings of perceived learning, satisfaction, achievement, and ultimately a sense of community (Trespalacios & Perkins, 2016). Along with examining the problem of improving communication through technology in an online program, this dissertation explores how social presence is created or enhanced between online students. It also reveals how social presence can be potentially created between an academic advisor and online students. As a very general definition, social presence can be described as, "…the degree to which learners feel socially and emotionally connected with others in an online environment" (Mouzouri, 2016, p. 41). Social presence also has an established history, especially with faculty implementing online strategic tools to establish social presence in a learning context. Studies show that having strong social presence within an online program can have many benefits such as establishing group cohesion, a shared sense of social identity, a trusting environment between students, higher student retention, and the reduction of student feelings of isolation (Jaber & Kennedy, 2017; Kumar & Ritzhaupt,

2014; Waugh & Su, 2016). This study reviews how social presence can be cultivated both between online graduate students and between the academic advisor and themselves. By implementing a small intervention, different avenues of social presence can be developed over time.

Larger Context – The development of online graduate programs

With the arrival of the personal computer back in the 1980's and the development of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990's, online programs have had to use asynchronous tools and other methods to build and deliver education to those in online programs (Garrison, 2017). Before going into detail about the purpose of the dissertation, three levels of contexts must be explored, (1) the current importance and benefits of obtaining higher education, (2) overall general demographics of students returning to school and factors influencing their return, and (3) online program designs and student engagement. The local context will explain the demographics of the graduate students within the context of Thunderbird School of Global Management at Arizona State University, under the Master of Applied Leadership & Management (MALM). Explaining both the larger and local contexts can provide a clearer picture as to the current environment of the dissertation and its purpose.

The importance and benefits of graduate education obtainment. The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) reports that number of master's degrees conferred increased by "56% between [the academic years of] 2001-02 and 2014-2015 and is projected to increase by 22% by 2026" (Hussar & Bailey, NCES, p. 33). Enrollment for students in graduate programs increased by 33% between 2001 and 2015 (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). These upward trends in graduate education obtainment and enrollment

illustrate that graduate education is on the rise. This could be because the demand for graduate education is emphasized through its benefits in society. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the median annual wage for those whose highest level of education obtainment was a master's degree would earn $12,000 more than those with a baccalaureate (Torpey & Terrell, BLS, 2015). To corroborate this even further, Carnevale & Cheah at the Center on Education and the Workforce or CEW (2018) in Georgetown University reports that the median earnings for those with a graduate degree is $80,000 a year, in comparison to $62,000 for those with a bachelors (p. 5). Additional research suggests that obtaining a graduate degree increases earning potential and decreases unemployment rates. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, BLS, (2018), the more educational obtainment an individual completes, the less chance of unemployment. In 2017, those who complete a master's degree have a 2.2% rate of unemployment (BLS, 2018). In general, obtaining a graduate degree has become a corner stone for successful advancement in many different fields. For purposes of this context, a worker who has a bachelor's in business or business-adjacent degree would earn a median earning of around $69,000 (CEW, 2018, p. 7). Those with a master's in business or a business-adjacent degree can earn median earnings of around $86,000 (CEW, 2018, p. 7). Other evidence shows that the number of master's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions in business is rising. The NCES (2018) found that "business (degrees) surpassed education as the field in which the largest number of master's degrees were conferred and has remained the largest field in each subsequent year" (NCES, Graduate Degree Fields, 2018).

Overall online student information. NCES provides a detailed illustration of their most recent reports on populations in graduate education in the United States. Out of almost 2.5 million master's students in a public four-year institution, 42% were male, while 58% were female (NCES, 2016). To break it down even further in 2016 throughout student race and ethnicities: 60.2% were White, 16% were Hispanic, 13.4% were Black, 5.8% were Asian, 3.6% were two races or more, 0.7% were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 0.2% were Pacific Islander (NCES, 2016). According to Gazza & Hunker (2014) the total enrollment of students in online courses grew from 1.6 million in Fall 2002 to over 6.7 million in Fall 2011 (p. 1125). As the numbers show, demand for online programs (also known as distance learning or online education) have increased. Not surprisingly, most of these students are working while going to school.

In a study focusing on an online Master of Science in Technical and Professional Communication (MSTPC), Watts (2017) described that up to 90% of current students of the program worked full-time or part-time (p. 483). According to a 2018 market research report conducted by Learning House Inc., 64% of their graduate level respondents to their survey are employed full-time while enrolled in an online program (Magda & Aslanian, 2018, p. 55). This may be due to the fact "[S]ince 1980, tuition and fees at public four-year colleges and universities have risen 19 times faster than the average family incomes" (CEW, 2018). The increase of tuition has made it virtually impossible for students to go to school full-time without working to support themselves. Surprisingly, the CEW (2018) reports that the majority of Americans who took their survey (51%) experience buyer's remorse and would change their degree if they could go back again (p. 3). As demand has risen, so has the challenge to keep up with competition. Amos Sr. (2012) explains that

colleges and universities are now competing for students "who might not have had the opportunity to attend college because of a variety of reasons, one of these reasons is their geographic location" (pg. 60). Higher education institutions find themselves competing for students who demand the flexibility of an online program while simultaneously transcending the barrier of distance.

Program design and student engagement. Universities have had to pay attention to local, national, and world trends in online learning. Lone et. al (2017) explain that in a university setting, broader environmental influences push higher education institutions into staying relevant (e.g., growing internationally or evolving to online capacities), adopting market-oriented approaches, and emphasizing the professionalization of higher education (p. 6). Not only is it important to be constantly up-to-date with the latest trends in student and societal demands for education, developing curricula that encompasses the interests of students and enhances the engagement of the students is essential for success. Lone et. al (2017) point out that departments who experience high student flow can have better economic conditions and more resources, which can directly affect the quality of the education and support provided to the students from faculty and support staff (p. 14). This can boost overall student satisfaction and retention, while simultaneously solidifying a program's reputation. In the end, this means paying attention to what students want for and out of their online programs.

So what are the trending demands from students? Much of the challenges that come to adapting to online program delivery has to do with the design of the program, as well as the ability to maintain student engagement through online means. Studies have shown that students want technology that bolsters their engagement with the program,

connects students and faculty instantly (which satisfies the need for immediacy), provides the ability to use multiple means of communication and interaction, and contributes to a strong sense of community among fellow students (Amor Sr., 2012; Caplan & Turner, 2007; Crosta, Manokore, & Gary, 2016; Jaber & Kennedy, 2017; King, 2014; Myers, 2015; Rovai, 2003). This has become quite a challenge for universities; back in 2010, research stated that dropout rates for USA higher education institutions "tended to be 15-20% higher than that for conventional undergraduate courses" (Philpott & Pike, 2013). Waugh & Su (2016) mention attrition rates in "online courses are often higher than attrition rates for traditional courses" (p. 1). To help lower attrition rates, the design of the program must be naturally collaborative, create learning communities that present an engaging environment, and a pedagogy that cultivates a sense of community (Lohr & Haley, 2018; Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2017). Although Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett (2010) describe a study on online education students from 2004, the results explained that students "emerged feeling more confident in their use of technology" and more "marketable as future teachers" (p. 317). Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett (2010) suggest that this may have been the result of the collaborative design of the seminar in a "wider online community". Taking this approach, I am creating a different angle to contributing to the sense of community by providing a program forum/medium that the students perceive as a tool to the development of outside communication between each other. I also want to explore if the creation of social presence could be obtained while being an academic advisor, rather than a faculty member within a classroom setting. What would social presence look like when an intervention is designed outside of the classroom setting by an academic advisor?

Local Context – A modern day university, school, and culture

Arizona State University (ASU) is one of the largest public universities in the United States. ASU's charter reads, "ASU is a comprehensive public research university, measured not by whom it excludes, but by whom it includes and how they succeed; advancing research and discovery of public value; and assuming fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities it serves" (Office of the President, ASU, 2017). In 2018, U.S. News & World Report named ASU "the most innovative school" out of 31 schools in the United States. As of January 2018, ASU had a total enrollment of 103,530 students for Fall 2017 (Office of Institutional Analysis [OIA], ASU, 2018). Almost 31% (or 31,702 students) of that population were online (OIA, 2018). To break it down even further, 23% (or 7,356 students) were online graduate status. ASU's online presence in online education is fairly young but has grown exponentially. ASU online launched in Fall 2010, but its first graduate students did not start their online programs until Fall 2011. Since then, online graduate student enrollment has increased by 93% since Fall 2011.

In 2014, Thunderbird School of Global Management (TSGM or Thunderbird) became an independent unit of ASU's Knowledge Enterprise. The school's website explains that this new relationship combined "Thunderbird's multi-decade heritage of developing global business leaders with ASU's expansive resources" (TGSM, para. 4). Thunderbird's history goes back to 1946, where it was chartered on a Glendale, Arizona, World War II airbase (TGSM, para. 1). One of the original faculty members, Dr. William Lytle Schurz, coined the vision for the school, explaining that "borders frequented by trade seldom need soldiers" (TGSM, para. 1). The school has consistently ranked #1 for

international business trade, and has expanded to online programs such as the online Master of Global Management (MGM) and the online Master of Applied Leadership & Management (MALM). This dissertation will be concentrating on the MALM program and its students.

Cycle-zero research

Thunderbird caters to professionals who want to succeed in their careers, most of which are part of the corporate/business world. From programs that provide executive education, to the newest program, the Online Master of Applied Leadership and Management (MALM), Thunderbird's population is very unique because they are experienced professionals who desire not just their degree, but also a way to connect with other students while they are here. By encouraging students to connect with each other, the MALM program can gain the attention and success that some of the other in-person programs have obtained. It is possible to say that students may feel more connected to Thunderbird through the consistency in the quality of academic advising and communication with students. Most of the other programs have been successful through word-of-mouth and marketing strategies. Therefore, there was a great emphasis on behalf of the program Director to create a virtual forum to bolster/support finding ways to engage current students with each other while simultaneously helping student retention, satisfaction, and engagement. My cycle-zero reconnaissance research is based on discovering aspects of the population (MALM students) that I will be interacting with during the intervention. The purpose is to get to know their demographics, backgrounds, previous education, and more. This will help design the intervention with them in mind.

Current profile of the MALM students (pre-MALM Network). The MALM program started in Spring 2018, with a cohort of 10 students. Summer 2018 brought 18 more students, Fall semester 2018 brought 53 more, and Spring 2019 came in with a total of 52 students. The overall total students enrolled in classes as of January 2018 is 133. Collected by the Thunderbird School of Global Management and disbursed to the Director of the MALM program, the demographics of the students and their backgrounds are regularly updated. To summarize, as of January 2018, 50.77% of the program's students are White, 19.23% are Hispanic/Latino, 10.77% are Black or African American, 6.92% are non-resident alien, 4.62% are Asian, 1.54% are two or more races, 0.77% are Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, and 5.38% did not elect to submit their race/ethnicity on their applications.

Another important aspect of the demographics is the students' current career or employment categories. Since they are graduate students, most of them have already established their career or are beginning to do so. Only two out of the 133 enrolled students are not employed and are attending the program full-time (meaning they are taking 9 credits or more towards their program at any given time). One of the program's admission criteria is to have a minimum of two years of full-time experience in an industry. Since the program is a Master of Applied *Leadership & Management,* I reviewed the current titles of the students and discovered that 51% (n=133) of the students had job titles that implied leadership or management positions. By using in vivo coding, I looked for words that implied a leader position, or a position of management such as: *Manager, Director, Chief, Owner, Supervisor,* and *CEO.* Doing this does not imply that students without these words in their titles aren't leaders, if anything, due to

social norms, finding these sorts of patterns can imply that these students have more years of experience. The average amount of full-time work experience in the student population of the MALM program is 10.42 years.

In addition to employment, I also looked at previous academic achievements, which resulted in 12% (n=16) of students having a masters or beyond. The students have an eclectic array of educational backgrounds such as Business, Arts and Sciences, Political Science, Engineering, and Miscellaneous (Fine Arts, Agriculture, and Church Ministry). This information is crucial because it gives us a glimpse into the population, background, and academic interests the students have. The students fall into six job categories and 26 subcategories of employment. Table 1 provides the job categories, the top five subcategories, and the top five educational backgrounds.

Table 1.

Breakdown of general student job titles, categories, subcategories, and education backgrounds.

Leadership/Management Titles	Job Categories	Top five industry subcategories	Top five Educational Backgrounds
Manager	Business Financial Ops	Business Services	Business
Director	Computer/Math	Aerospace/Defense	Arts & Sciences
Chief (CEO, COO, other)	Management	Retail	Political Science
Supervisor	Office/Admin	Education	Engineering
Owner	Production	Healthcare	Miscellaneous (Fine Arts; Agriculture; Church Ministry)
	Sales & Related		

Cycle zero has given me a peek into the world of the population in the MALM program. It will help me orientate myself when it comes to the presentation of the intervention, and how I will approach the students when it comes to encouraging them to participate. Knowing that they are mostly leaders in their field, I want to create an intervention that will motivate them to connect with each other, but also to showcase their accolades and give new students context as to who is taking the program alongside them.

Problem of Practice

The problem of practice revolved around the lack of internal and formal structures necessary to build bridges to connect students with each other. This was supported by anecdotal feedback that was been given by various students, as well as the cycle zero efforts to explore community in two different online programs. Before June 2018, there was no advisor or formal coordinator for the program. Not enough support was available to help students find direction and alert them of policies and procedures. I was hired in June 2018 to help students navigate themselves into their program, as well as provide academic advising.

I had criticism from students from the first two cohorts stating they felt isolated, alone, and disconnected from their peers, the program, and Thunderbird in general. This feedback led me to believe that there may have been an overall feeling of disconnection. With the intention to alleviate this overall sentiment, I designed an internal program webpage that was volunteer based, where students posted profiles of themselves as well as their contact information and resume. This was available to new and current students of the program. I used this to help connect newer students with current students while

simultaneously approaching the construct of "social presence" as a positive reinforcement and catalyst for inter-student connection and networking.

Cycle-one Research

The first step was to establish if social presence exists in other comparable programs outside of the MALM program. In Fall 2018, the coordinator of another online program at Thunderbird provided me the opportunity to send out a pilot survey to their students. This program was the online Masters of Global Management (OMGM). Additionally, I have worked with one other online program in the recent past (before June 2018), so I asked my previous supervisor if I could disseminate the pilot survey to that program as well. This second program was part of a social sciences field, and for brevity will be called the SS (social sciences online graduate program). Both programs had up to 200 students at the time of the pilot survey being disbursed.

Although the SS program is not related to the MALM program (subject-wise), I picked it because it does not have the features that the OMGM has. The OMGM program includes features such as in-person new student orientations, formal/informal in-person events around the country to provide students an opportunity to network, and international trips offered to students to do out-of-country consulting projects. It is fundamentally important to point out that, like the MALM program and the SS program did not have formal program-implemented interventions to help foster social presence with online graduate students. The similarities between the MALM program and the SS program was crucial because both programs are online but did not have any social components like the OMGM program. The null hypothesis and alternative hypothesis of cycle-zero are:

H_0: There are no indicators of social presence within a program that provides formal program-implemented interventions such as international trips, in-person new student orientations, and events.

H_1: There are indicators of social presence within a program that provides formal program-implemented interventions such as international trips, in-person new student orientations, and events.

Although this portion of the dissertation was not approved by IRB, I am able to report overall reliability and general data found from both surveys. The results are essential to shining a light on the importance of having program implemented interventions to help foster social presence among students in online graduate programs.

Pilot Survey instrument implementation

The purpose of the pilot survey was to find out the reliability of the questions posed among the instrument. The pilot survey went over three distinct characteristics of social presence: social context, online communication, and professional connection. Tu & McIssac (2002) define the components of social context as task orientation, privacy, topics, recipients/social relationships, and social process (p. 134). They also describe online communication as "concerned with the attributes of the language used online and the applications of the online language" and explain that this communication is mostly based on text-communication (Tu & McIssac, 2002). Professional connection is the only sub-construct that I chose to make my own. It is based on Tu & McIssac's (2002) sub-component of *interactivity,* which they define as "the potential for feedback [which]

contributes to the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction" (p. 135). They expand this by saying that "immediacy is the component of interactivity", and within my context, making professional connections through an online method seemed fitting (Tu & McIssac, 2002). My goal was to compare and contrast the results of each program, specifically including: the descriptive statistics, the overall reliability score, and to see if there was any significance between the constructs by conducting paired-samples t-tests. Keep in mind, the sample sizes were small and so there may be plenty of variance and error among the statistical tests conducted.

Results of pilot survey instrument implementation

Descriptive statistics. The Likert scale used for each question was consistent over all sub-constructs and through both of the pilot survey instruments. The mean can tell you a central tendency, but the median can give you the skew of the data, to see if the magnitude is to the left or right if the data was visualized in a graph. This scale was between one and five (1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *somewhat agree*, 4 = *somewhat disagree*, 5 = *disagree*, 6 =*Strongly Disagree).* Below, Table 2 gives you the means, medians, and standard deviations of the pilot surveys:

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics for each sub-construct in SS (n=33) and OMGM (n=17)

Subconstruct	Means		Medians		Standard Deviations	
	SS	OMGM	SS	OMGM	SS	OMGM
Social Context	3.63	2.53	3.81	2.45	.982	.749
Online Communication	3.56	2.51	3.66	2.44	.693	.663

Professional Connection	2.85	2.47	3.00	2.42	.946	.831
Overall Social Presence	3.45	2.51	3.49	2.61	.811	.677

Looking closely at Table 2, it is easy to tell that there are substantial differences in agreeance between the two groups. When referencing the Likert scale, one can see that those who were in the SS group stays between *Somewhat agree and agree* with the questions related to the constructs. The least agreed upon construct was social context, indicating that they may not have created strong social contexts amongst themselves. In contrast, the OMGM group had higher agreeance with the items on the survey. Their scores stayed within *agree* with the subconstructs, indicating a higher agreeance with the themes of the survey instrument. The biggest difference is within the subconstruct of social context, which is a difference of 1.10 between the groups. Looking at the overall social presence means, there is a difference of 0.94, where the OMGM program is more agreeable towards the construct of social presence rather than the SS program. Between the two programs, there was less variance in the standard deviations for the OMGM program, suggesting more cohesion in their answers. Although I am not implying that having international trips, in-person new student orientations, and in-person events directly caused the OMGM's score to be higher but having trips/events/orientations is one of the major differences between the programs. Additionally, these descriptive statistics show indicators of social presence already existing within the OMGM program itself.

Reliability analysis. Table 3 below the gives you a comparison between the programs and their Cronbach alpha (or reliability) scores. Field (2013) describes (α) as "the most common measure of scale reliability" (p. 708) and reliability is defined as "whether an instrument can be interpreted consistently across different situations" (p. 13). Cronbach's Alpha (α) coefficient of reliability ranges from 0 to 1. Golforth (2015) mentions that if:

> …the scale items are entirely independent from one another (i.e. are not correlated or share no covariance), then $\alpha = 0$; and, if all the items have high covariances, then (α) will approach 1 ("Using and Intepreting Cronbach's Alpha", 2015).

Basically, if (α) is closer to 1 then "the items share covariance and probable measure the same underlying concept" (Golforth, 2015). The subconstruct, professional connection, had the highest reliability among the SS group's responses, followed by social context and online communication. Since online communication has the lowest score, this indicates that this item was not as reliable as the other two constructs for this group of students. On the other side, the OMGM group consistently scored above a .800, indicating a high reliability of the survey instrument. The highest was, again, professional connection. This is reassuring because one of the main goals for this dissertation is to gauge the importance of professional connections within an online graduate program. A high reliability indicates that the items were consistently interpreted correctly by the students who took the survey.

Table 3.

Cronbach's alpha scores for social presence pilot questionnaire

Construct	Items within construct	Coefficient alpha of SS (N=33)	Coefficient alpha of OMGM (N=17)
Social Context	Q1 through Q11	.889	.869
Online Communication	Q12 through Q20	.684	.803
Professional Connection	Q21 through Q31	.910	.895
Overall alpha	All items above	.944	.941

Paired Samples T-test. The last statistical test applied to the two surveys was a paired samples *t*-test. Defined by Allua & Thompson (2009) a paired samples *t*-test "can be used to determine whether there is a significant difference in means" between the subconstructs, social context (SC), online communication (OC), and professional connection (PC). This was to establish if the students felt the constructs to be different from each other. Table 4 below gives you the *t*-test ran for the subconstructs within the SS results:

Table 4.

T-test statistics and effect size for SS group (n=33)

Sub-constructs	AD	SD	P-value	DF	Cohen's D (effect size)
SC – OC	.077	.621	.479	32	0.01
SC –PC	.782	.611	.000*	32	1.30
OC – PC	.705	.578	.000*	32	1.23

AD = absolute difference between the factors, SD = standard deviations, p = significance levels, and df = degrees of freedom. *Difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) ($p < .05$)

The first item observed is that social context and online communications have a *p* value of .479 (with the confidence interval set a 95%) and effect size of 0.01. Unfortunately, this *p* value means that social context and online communications for the SS group was not significantly different nor did it have a big effect on the study. Both social context/professional connection and online communication/professional connection both scored a significance level of .000 with an effect size of 1.3 and 1.23. An overall scale that provides researchers an idea of how big the effect size can be in a specific study, where a Cohen's *d* of 0.2 is small, 0.5 is medium, and 0.8 is a large effect size (McGough & Faraone, 2009). What this may mean is that the students may perceive their social context to be synonymous with online communications. On the other hand, they seem to perceive social context and professional connection, as well as online communication and professional connection as separate constructs.

The second paired samples t-test was ran for the OMGM group, and Table 5 below gives you the data for interpretation:

Table 5.

T-test statistics and effect size for OMGM group (n=17)

Sub-constructs	AD	SD	P-value	DF	Cohen's D (effect size)
SC – OC	.025	.390	.795	16	0.06
SC – PC	.060	.652	.710	16	0.09
OC – PC	.035	.603	.814	16	0.06

AD = absolute difference between the factors, SD = standard deviations, p = significance levels, and df = degrees of freedom. *Difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) ($p < .05$)

Unfortunately, there were no significant p-values and effect sizes. One probable observation that is that the sample size was only 17. Additionally, there may be variables that may have contributed to the *p* value of this test. I do not know much about the context of this program, so there are probably nuances that the students perceive that I did not think about while conducting the survey. In comparison to the SS program, it seems that the OMGM program does not perceive differences between the subconstructs.

Research Questions

Cycle zero gave me insight as to the validity and the reliability of the survey instrumented created. Additionally, it gave me more information and a better understanding of my research questions for the actual intervention in this dissertation. My research questions are:

> *RQ1: How and to what extent can social presence between students be affected by a student profile-based webpage intervention within the program?*
>
> *RQ2: How can an academic advisor create social presence among online graduate students?*
>
> *a) Can they create social presence between themselves and the student?*
>
> *b) What are some emerging characteristics of social presence in this instance?*

The purpose of the pilot surveys was to prove a difference between two online graduate program populations. The SS population just happened to have no program initiated activities or mechanisms (such as international trips) to help students get to know each other better, while the OMGM population did. Next, we will explore the literature of

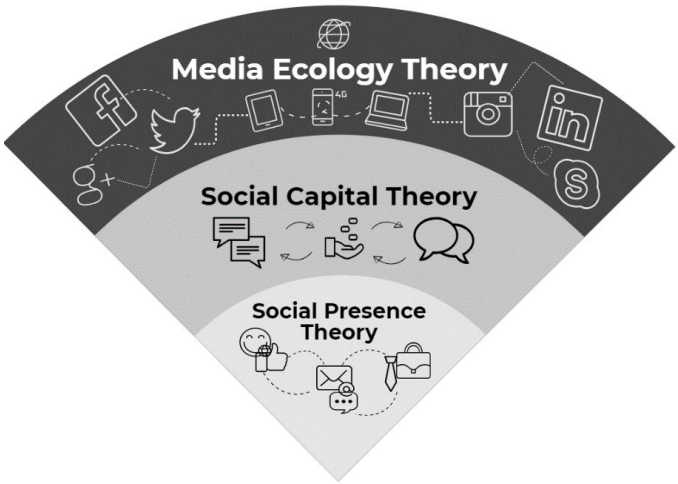
which will further give a foundational aspect to these online programs and the extent of social presence within them.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online learning and education has evolved immensely over the last 30 years. Along with this evolution, the development of various schools of thought have been created, all trying to deliver the best online education. This review will go through five layers of literature: (1) media ecology theory (MET) and its omniscient presence over online education and general life, (2) social capital and its relevance to the landscape of this dissertation, (3) a thorough look into social presence and the three constructs that are integral to it: social context, online communication, and professional connection, (4) a look at the literature on how academic advisors can contribute to student success, specifically over creating social presence, and (5) student engagement, retention, and satisfaction within online programs. Before going into the literature, I would like to illustrate how the theories in this dissertation have been organized through a visual. Figure 1 gives an idea of how the theories fit together:

Figure 1.
Media Ecology Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Social Presence illustration.



Media ecology theory sets the stage for an overall theory which explains that humans and technology are intertwined and it is inescapable (Bozkurt & Tu, 2016). Social capital theory is the next level down which explains that people gain social capital (or a sense of status) by interacting with each other (Cheung & Chan, 2010). Lastly, social presence is the last and third level of this illustration. Social presence theory takes into account that the amount of "socialness" in a situation, which can still happen even if those interchanges are between electronic means (Tu & McIsaac, 2002).

Media Ecology Theory

The broadest theory which sets the stage for the problem of practice is Media Ecology Theory (MET). MET is a complicated notion that the influence of technology and media is inescapable from our daily lives (Bozkurt & Tu, 2016). To unravel this theory, the ecology of education must be mentioned. Ellis & Goodyear (2009) have defined ecology as the study of "interactions between individual organisms and their environments" which includes "living and non-living things" (p. 18). With this comes interdependence and an emphasis on the relationships that occur within that interdependence (Ellis & Goodyear, 2009). Back in 1964, McLuhan proposed MET to have three assumptions:

- Media infuses every act and action in society
- Media fixes our perception and organizes our experiences
- Media ties the world together (Bozkurt & Tu, 2016)

With these three assumptions comes the idea that technology and media are indefinitely intertwined within our daily lives. MET assembles what we can see by providing a media environment that specifies what we can and cannot do; in a sense, it compels us to form

online identities that cater to the limitations of technology, while simultaneously creating network structures where unique social identities can be constructed (Bozkurt & Tu, 2016; Ellis & Goodyear, 2009; Ellison et al., 2010; Scolari, 2012; Yu et al., 2016). This consistent push and pull within the limitations of technology (e.g., lack of physical presence) and limitless social identity construction (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat) along with the increasing amount of accessible technology makes media ecology theory the foundation of the ideas in this dissertation.

Within an online graduate program, technology by default is mandated to be woven into the way students absorb their knowledge. MET acknowledges that technology is something that cannot be escaped in real life, and even less so in an online education realm. Not only must students interact with another person or group virtually through different computer-mediated communications (CMC), students should also need to communicate their own personalities through the media being used. Following that train of thought, Hogan (2010) explains Goffman's emphasis on people always trying to present a piece of their "idealized self" rather than a whole version of themselves to others (p. 378). Hogan (2010) expands by explaining the creation of self is always bounded by space and time, especially in an online setting (p. 379). Adding to this, Bozkurt & Tu (2016) explain:

> Individuals are able to create multiple identities. They can further edit, delete, and then re-create these identities. Because these environments can function as ecologies, they allow social interaction and let these identities influence and be influenced by others (p. 156).

How does this tie back to online education and social presence? The explanation lies on the actions of the students. Online students generate online identities when they interact with each other virtually through group work, discussion board posts, emails, texting, real-time chat software (e.g. Skype, Google hangouts, Zoom), etc. They also present a certain identity when they have exchanges with their professor, or engagements with support staff, such as academic advisors. Online students use this as an "addition to their real identities and environments" outside of the electronic world (Bozkurt & Tu, 2016). This also matters because students rely on "mutual interaction and identification" mainly because "we judge our own conduct by viewing it as through the eyes of other people" (Burkitt, 2009, p. 9). Through an online education program, interaction with others must be established through electronic means, and as a substitute for in-person interaction, the student tries to create themselves electronically to be able to relate back to the eco-system of the program. This identity plays out with other students and is an integral part of navigating the online environment in the program, and in the long-run, how they socialize with others. The intervention keeps these ideas in mind, especially because identity is a big part of communication through an online graduate program.

Social capital in an online graduate program

Before explaining social presence, an overall understanding of social capital must be established. Although both concepts draw from similar ideas, social capital is supported by social presence, mainly with the idea that if one were to increase social presence, social capital would increase within the core population being studied (Leafman, Mathieson, & Ewing, 2003). With this said, not all online graduate programs

are created in a vacuum, and the correlation between social presence and social capital is not clear. However, the literature suggests that there is a connection between the two.

Beyond that, social capital and its definition have not been properly defined, and yet, each definition throughout the literature quote the following characteristics: trust, creating shared norms, obligations, solidarity with community, social cohesion, inclusion, reciprocity, cooperation, shared identity, sense of collegiality, motivation, goodwill, support, and mutual understanding (Appel & Dadlani, 2014; Daniel, Schiver, & McCalla, 2003; Diep et al, 2016; Diep et al., 2017; Grooteart et al., 2004; Leafman, Mathieson, & Ewing, 2013; Pescosolido, 2007; Schneider, 2006) All of these traits share a common thread: collective interactions. For example, *trust* cannot be formed unless *trust* is established between two people. *Shared norms* within a community cannot be created with just one person, or else *shared norms* could not be shared and it would not be a norm. Mutual understanding, sense of collegiality, shared identity, reciprocity and cooperation all require interacting with others in order to form these characteristics. All of these characteristics require an exchange of information, whether formal or informal, to exist, and according to Witte (2014), "belonging to a group confers on individuals as well as groups for a number of benefits exchanged for commitment and solidarity" (p. 361). Each person comes with "social capital", which Cheung and Chan (2010) explain that,

> Just as financial capital can afford the use of technology and labor in production and capital accumulation, social capital hinges on helpful social relations to enable the acquisition of information, resources, and other forms of capital in productive work and regeneration of capital (p. 206).

The exchange of resources, information, and trust is essentially a transactional relationship. When more resources, information, and trust are exchanged among a network or organization, one's own social capital begins to rise, since the access to those resources and information becomes easier to obtain. Social capital itself can be viewed as a means to an end, in this case, the enhancement of social presence.

Social Presence

In the first chapter, I give a very broad definition by Mouzouri (2016) of social presence to help orientate the dissertation. As a reminder, this definition states "…the degree to which learners feel socially and emotionally connected with others in an online environment" (Mouzouri, 2016, p. 41). This section will delve deeper into the complexity of social presence, and why it is so imperative to use as a goal for an online graduate program. Enhancing social presence is the goal of the intervention and the main focus of the dissertation. I will explain where social presence originated and how it has been defined for higher education. I will also explain how it is used outside of the classroom and how it can be a benefit to online students and online programs. Lastly, examples exploring social components and studies on social presence in online graduate programs help give guidance as to how the intervention can be approached later on in chapter 3.

History of Social Presence. Back in the 1970's, the concern for the loss of intimacy because of "the absence of visual channels" was thought to be a threat to social presence (Short, Williams, and Christie, 1976). Several authors cite Short, Williams, and Christie as one of the earliest academic teams to mention the concept of social presence (Garrison, 2017; Kim, 2009; Mayne & Wu, 2011; Strong, 2012; Tu, 2002; Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Whiteside, 2005; Yen & Tu, 2008). The specific definition mentioned

was, "... degree of salience of the other person in a mediated communication and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interactions" (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p. 65). Another author, Gunawardena (1995), clarified the previous definition by saying social presence is "the degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication" (p. 151). This definition introduced the concept of how "real" a person could portray themselves to others over CMCs. Lastly, Garrison (2017) is also a heavily cited author that specifically defines social presence within their framework of the "Community of Inquiry" (COI). The COI framework has three components: teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence. Garrison (2017) argues that these three items are necessary to create an environment "where students can take responsibility and control of their learning by negotiating meaning, diagnosing misconceptions, and challenging accepted beliefs" (p. 24). Although Garrison (2017) says that in an academic venue, social presence "does not mean supporting engagement purely for social purposes", this dissertation explores social presence in that particular context. Recent research points that social presence in an academic setting doesn't just revolve around the classroom, but that it presents itself as beneficial in different ways outside of the classroom. Having a social component in an online program can decrease feelings of isolation, increase student satisfaction/retention, support the construction of knowledge, create a shared sense of social identity/organization, increase trust, influence learning outcomes, and create group cohesion (Crosta, Manokore, Gray, 2016; Glassmeyer, Dibbs, & Jensen, 2011; Jaber & Kennedy, 2017; Kumar & Ritzhaupt, 2017; Waugh & Su, 2016).

Social presence as a tool. Social aspects of programs (both in-person and online) have been explored in multiple contexts, and have suggested its importance as a tool. Beck & Milligan (2014) explored the factors that influenced online students' commitment to their institutions, one of which was social integration. There were 839 respondents to their study, which was a College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ) instrument that had been tested on more than 8000 students prior to that study (Beck & Milligan, 2014). Another study which used components of the CPQ mentioned that it had a component dedicated to social integration, which had an internal reliability score of 0.77 for their study (Beck & Davidson, 2016). Although not directly related, a study on non-academic factors contributing to the success of undergraduate engineering students used the CPQ and found that most of the constructs of the instrument averaged a Cronbach alpha score of $\alpha = 0.70$ for all factors (including Social Integration) (Bernadin & McKendrick, 2015). The reason I focus on social integration is that Beck & Milligan (2014) define social integration as "sense of belonging, shared values, and similarity to others" (p. 52), and their study suggests a statistically significant relationship between institutional commitment and social integration (p. 55). Students may interpret the degree of institutional commitment to student support through their interactions with their academic advisors and other support staff.

To circle back to the problem of practice, Gazza & Hunker (2014) help reiterate the importance of social presence in helping combat student isolation by calling for student support in "both academic and social support [that] need to be readily available and accessible in order for students to succeed" (p. 1127). Their study included a meta-analysis of literature based on student retention for online graduate nursing education

programs. This study highlights plenty of the ideas this literature review has already discussed. Within it, they address concepts directly linked to student retention such as interpersonal relationships, multi-media orientation, access to academic advisors; and concepts associated with retention and supported by research including the enhancement of social presence, class size and social interaction (Gazza & Hunker, 2014). Their recommendations suggested that the program create "virtual student-only lounge for social interaction among students" and "include online students in student affairs via remote participation in meetings" (Gazza & Hunker, 2014).

Social presence outside of the classroom. Throughout the literature, much of the research has focused on the development of social presence within virtual classrooms implemented by the professors of the course. There is a gap in the literature that fails to acknowledge the role of academic advisors and their influence on students and social presence. Academic advisors interact with students constantly, but as a practitioner, I feel that with the proper implementation, academic advisors and professional staff can leverage their positions to improve the social experience of students in their online programs. Kumar & Ritzhaupt (2014) explain that:

> Social presence in online *programs* is also formed in spaces where students socialize outside of online courses, for instance, in small groups with similar interests, in social networking sites (e.g. Facebook or LinkedIn), during professional activities (e.g. conferences, webinars) or in professional organizations in the field (p. 60).

One study conducted by Leafman, Matthieson, and Ewing (2013) centered around the ideas that the learning management systems (LMS) do not encompass the complexities of

social presence, and are not as dynamic as they are needed to be for such a task (p. 67). This study aligns with my dissertation due to its focus on "assessing perceived levels of social presence in an LMS and willingness to use social media tools outside an LMS among online doctoral students" (Leafman, Matthieson, & Ewing, 2013). Although the program being studied was a blended (95% online and 5% in person), 70-credit, post-professional degree for healthcare professionals in the field, I selected to mention this study because of the parallels it shares with the population and intention of my study. Even though it was specifically a quantitative cross-sectional survey design study, the population were full-time professionals (ages from 31-50 years old), median 50 hours worked per week, a wide variety of professional backgrounds; the program was at a graduate and online level, and it measured social presence within the LMS and social presence outside of the LMS. With a 52% response rate (138/263), the survey showed a Cronbach alpha of .84, demonstrating internal consistency (Leafman, Matthieson, & Ewing, 2013). The results presented that there was a high perceived level of social presence within the LMS (±.48), but that 65% of the students "felt that discussions using Blackboard tended to be more impersonal than face-to-face discussions" (Leafman, Matthieson, & Ewing, 2013). The discussion of the study reminds the reader that "social presence is integral in developing social capital, which is the mechanism that sustains physical or virtual communities" (Leafman, Matthieson, & Ewing, 2013). With that said, they suggest that:

> …the ability of the internet to seamlessly offer social or participatory media through digital social media tools coupled with online programs commitment to

> student centered learning – which clearly indicates a desire for social presence – should not be ignored (Leafman, Matthieson, & Ewing, p. 73, 2013).

The pinnacle of their discussion mentions that if there were a social media-based tool in their program, specifically for social communications with peers (and instructors), this would be welcomed by most of their student population (p. 74). My dissertation intends to pick up on this suggestion and create a social component for a program that currently only uses an LMS (Canvas) as a source of social presence.

Student engagement, attrition, and student satisfaction

Student engagement, student attrition, and student satisfaction are all related to the bigger picture of the dissertation. All three of these items are intertwined with online higher education programs and give more breadth to the context and issues discussed in this dissertation. Although higher education departments strive to enhance student engagement and satisfaction, they also try to keep student attrition at a minimum. As common as these goals are within departments, literature has not properly defined these terms and still has room to grow in the academic realm.

Student Engagement. Since the dissertation is focused on an online graduate level program, student engagement will be focused on graduate students. Student engagement is an elusive term that even researchers have trouble defining. Many definitions are based on student engagement and learning *within* courses (Dixson, 2015; King, 2014; Liu, Liu, & Liu, 2018; Redmond et al., 2017). But student engagement can also apply to activities *outside* of the classroom by looking at:

> [H]ow the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in

> activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning and graduation (Kuh et al., 2007).

As the academic advisor and program manager of the MALM program, this definition resonates with the intervention and dissertation because of my position and interactions with students *outside* of the classroom.

Literature on *graduate* student engagement is relatively sparse when compared to undergraduate student engagement (Gardner & Barker, 2014, p. 340). Gardner & Barker (2014) explore this by clarifying just how different graduate students are: a) the average age of the graduate student is typically older, usually 25 years of age or older, b) graduate students tend to enroll part-time in their programs due to other life responsibilities (e.g. family, health issues, careers, etc.), and c) some students will delay getting their master's or professional degrees (such as business students) to obtain work experience to gain acceptance to their programs (p. 340-341). The biggest concern when it comes to graduate student engagement relates directly to student retention. Since graduate students are more apt to be enrolled part-time, balance family and professional obligations, they may face more stressors balancing all of these items (Gardner & Barker, 2014). The ways to engage graduate students by support staff and faculty must be strategic. Online graduate student engagement has even less literature to cite. Even when exploring student engagement in technology-mediated learning, Henrie, Halverson, & Graham (2015) call for a general consensus that is needed to define and operationalize "student engagement" in the online-realm (p. 49). Although student engagement is nebulously defined within the literature, it is an issue that online and in-person programs try to conquer to keep students retained.

Student Attrition and Retention. Even online student attrition has its gaps in literature. Cross (2013) explains that the operationalized definition of attrition has been murky at best, and that "by some measures, attrition is measured by whether or not a student completes his or her courses of study at a specific institution" (p. 38). Although some of these factors have already been mentioned above, Lee & Choi (2011) identified "69 factors that influence students' decisions to drop out" in online courses and categorized them into "three categories: (a) *Student* factors, (b) *Course/Program* factors, (c) *Environmental* factors" (p. 593). To expand on their study, they found that *course/program* factors composed 20% of the factors (14 out of 69) and had sub-categories of "course design (6%, 4 factors), institutional supports (6%, 4 factors), and interactions (9%, 6 factors)" (Lee & Choi, 2011, p. 608). The most interesting sub-category that applies to this study is institutional supports. The study broke this down even further to explain that institutional supports are composed of five components, one of which is student-support services. Lee and Choi (2011) underscored that "when [any of] these factors were insufficient or unsatisfactory, they became barriers for students" (p. 609). Some of the strategies they recommend for institutions to implement involve providing student orientation programs, utilizing advisors to support students, and staff trainings to help support online courses (Lee & Choi, 2011). This study gives credibility to the fact that even factors outside of the virtual classroom, can affect students' decisions to stay in or leave a program.

Student Satisfaction. Student satisfaction is one of the goals that higher education institutions hope to increase, especially when it comes to a customer service standpoint. The general notion of satisfaction means that there needs to be a degree of "congruence"

or positive/pleasurable emotional states that can come from evaluating a product or experience (Bright & Graham, 2016). Bright & Graham (2016) make the valuable claim that "from this perspective, effective organizations are those that are able to learn and adapt to the desires of customers by offering products that are congruent with customer preferences" (p. 18). Although this train-of-thought is leaning towards a consumerist lens, academia must acknowledge that higher education is a product, and student satisfaction is an important variable to monitor. These ideas have been met with resistance by higher education institutions with the thought that "a customer focus is potentially damaging to the learning process" (Mark, 2013). Higher education institutions must start utilizing customer satisfaction strategies to help support student satisfaction. Mark (2013) continues to explain, "in business, customers bring a considerable amount of useful knowledge and information, and when they are not fully engaged, the firm forfeits a valuable resource and makes itself less competitive" (p. 4).

Although there are not many studies explaining what contributes directly to student satisfaction in graduate programs (both online and in-person), Bright & Graham (2016) point out possible factors that may contribute to student satisfaction, such as demographics within the program, curriculum and program characteristics, professional and alumni interactions, public/private sector experiences, program climate, and level of interaction between students and professors (p. 20-22). Carter & Yeo (2016) speak to non-teaching support structures like welfare support and course communication structures are identified as being "significant determinants of student satisfaction" (p. 638). In fact, Carter and Yeo's (2016) study specifically asks about student support mechanisms and how it relates back to student retention and satisfaction (p. 639), and

also points out that "a growing body of research suggests that the social adjustment of students might be an important factor in predicting persistence" within a higher education program (p. 638).

The importance of academic advising

Lack of literature on non-faculty academic advisors. The literature lacks a robust look into how academic advisors can contribute to the success of students, specifically in how they help enhance social presence. Academic advising in a higher education is a staple of student success:

> Advising ensures that students are enrolled in courses they need to graduate; that students are enrolled in courses they want to take for personal interest, professional interest, or enrichment… quality advising increases student retention rates; an occurrence that is beneficial for the department and university as a whole (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013).

Much of the academic literature on academic advisors and their role in student lives is overlooked by the prevailing role academic *faculty* advisors. The majority of literature found examines how faculty influence the students, who encourage student engagement, underscore the salience of faculty-student mentoring, and boost student self-efficacy (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013; Darling, 2015; Harrison, 2009; Young-Jones et al., 2013). The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) purposefully emphasizes and researches the importance of *professional* academic advising. NACADA (2017) specified that from 2015 to 2017, academic advising from a university staff member perspective grew from 37% to 42% in the United States (p. 13). Within this report, they touched on different organizational models of advising: self-contained,

faculty only, supplementary, and split (p. 35). Self-contained applies to this dissertation because it is defined as "all advising occurs in a center that is staffed primarily by primary-role advisors" (p. 35). However, searching through the general literature, it seems that it concentrates on "faculty only", where NACADA defines it as "all students are assigned to a department advisor, usually a professor from the student's academic discipline" (NACADA, 2017). A specific example of academic advising success involves the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), a non-profit organization concentrating on the success of students from preschool to doctoral education. In a 2010 report, they surveyed 30 universities and colleges to investigate academic advising as a tool to help student success and retention. Among the examples, they found that the Academic Advising Center of Queens College (2010) in New York has leadership that recognizes the value of academic advising:

> …the Academic Advising Center documented 16,399 student interactions and is widely viewed by students and staff members as a major reason for the college's relatively high completion rates, with well over 90 percent of users calling it "effective" on surveys (p. 37).

Departments investing into advising through professional staff is valuable not only to the student but also to the university's goals.

An example of social presence and academic advising. In a very recent study, Stermer (2018) focused on the problem that the impact of academic advising on teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence is unknown (p. 5). Stermer (2018) explored through the literature that "online student support strategies encourage expanding beyond the short-term classroom to a long term student life-cycle approach"

and that it requires a "holistic and networked approach to leverage existing technologies" (p. 23). Stermer's (2018) study on online undergraduate students' perceptions of teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence on academic advising found that social presence was the highest ranked perception, with findings suggesting that "as time with advisor increased, social presence means increased" (p. 178). The role of the academic advisor is not only crucial to helping social presence develop, but it is part of the student retention and engagement process. Their responsibilities, by default, are to maintain student retention by advising students on policy, course scheduling, and resources. Additionally, this study gives an incentive to see if it can be applicable to graduate students. The academic advisor can provide more than just student retention strategies. Earlier, I had mentioned the idea of *prescriptive* advising. Prescriptive advising is usually one-way, with advisors sharing relevant information to the student about their program, and the student passively receiving the information. This dissertation brings in *intervention*-based advising. He & Huston (2016) describe intervention-based advising as an "approach that allows advisors to intervene and prevent academic challenges by offering support to targeted student groups" (p. 215). Two of the critical points of the article mentions that this type of advising includes the advisor developing relationships with students and being the students' connection to the institution, both of which are major key roles of the study (He & Huston, 2016).

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This chapter describes the research design, methodology, and methods that will help the implementation of the intervention. The problem of practice is that there are no formal social structures in place to enhance the currently level of social presence (defined below) within the Master of Applied Leadership and Management program (MALM) at Thunderbird School of Global Management (used as "Thunderbird") at Arizona State University. In this study, I focus on developing an online talent community, named the "MALM Network". In addition, I explore how an academic advisor may or may not influence social presence in the program. Through the literature review, social presence has been proven to be an essential part of online higher education programs because it creates a sense of community and connection from the students to the university. Part of this process is to form relationships with students that can cultivate trust and fluid communication between students *outside* of their virtual classroom and provide a space to review who else is within their program. A possible by-product of the study is that the students develop a stronger bond with each other, and by proxy, their program, Thunderbird, and ASU.

Review of Problem of Practice

The sister program to the MALM program is the Online Master of Global Management (OMGM). This program was launched in Fall 2016, with a bigger budget that allows for an in-person orientation, international trips, and access to career service management for students. Based on these three formal student support interventions built into the flow of the program, advisors and coordinators report a high level of inter-

student connectivity and social presence. In contrast, the MALM program is very similar (because it is online like the OMGM) but it has no funding for in-person student connectivity and bonding experiences, leaving students to connect only through course work and assignments. This is a problem because students have explained they feel isolated, lonely, and disconnected from their peers, the program, Thunderbird, and ASU in general.

Even though creating more opportunities for social presence to develop among students does not imply that the perceptions of the students on the program will improve, the point of the intervention is to begin to implement formal social structures and in the end measure what impact (if any) it has on social presence within the program. While the other programs within the department already have social support interventions, the MALM program is new and does not have the funding to put together elaborate in-person orientations, international trips, or events for current students. Based on the success of other programs (e.g. students forming tight communities with each other) and their incorporated interventions to connect students, I feel that the MALM program should at least try to implement a cost-effective intervention to help students connect with each other.

Research Questions

Based on the literature and pilot survey, it seems that indicators of social presence are present within the other two programs that I surveyed. Thus, the research questions for this dissertation are:

RQ1: How and to what extent can social presence between students be affected by a student profile-based webpage intervention within the program?

RQ2: How can an academic advisor create social presence among online graduate students?

a. *Can the academic advisor develop social presence with the students?*
b. *What are some emerging characteristics of social presence in this instance?*

The first question was evaluated through a pre-and-posttest survey instrument with open-ended survey questions, while the second question and sub-points were explored through qualitative means such as semi-structured individual interviews, situational mapping, and open-ended questions through the survey instrument.

Below I explain the hypotheses of the study, the participants that will be involved, data collection methods, data collection instruments, the procedure to implement the intervention, data analysis, researcher positionality, validity/trustworthiness, and any limitations that may occur or exist. The two hypotheses of this study are:

H_0: MALM students will not experience an increase in social presence through the MALM Network.

H_1: MALM students will experience an increase in social presence through the MALM Network.

Intervention

The intervention was a webpage called "MALM Network" where students volunteered to put up a picture, small auto-biography, and their resume for other MALM students to view. The difference between social media and this webpage is that it is a static page to showcase the students in the program, rather than create a forum where students can interact. Although this sounds very similar to a LinkedIn profile, the utility

of it has different purposes. Whereas students may rely on group work assignments to get to know each other, the intervention served as an embedded social structure to help students connect with each other outside of the classroom. The main idea of the intervention is to provide an outlet to students to communicate with each other, *not* to provide a social media page. This page gives them the *option* to contact each other directly without having to create a log in page, or upkeep their profiles. This is crucial to the study because it provides a highly controlled environment where the communication is not the center of the study, but rather the utility of the webpage between students.

The website contained a simple homepage with two options: (1) a link to the MALM Network profiles, and (2) a link to submit a profile. The main homepage links you to a page where visitors can peruse those who volunteered to be part of the webpage. From there, students can browse each student's profile, review a small biography, and resumes of the students currently within the program. All of these profiles were voluntary. Students can request to change their bios or pictures by emailing me, but initial profile requests need to be submitted in the homepage link. For students to access the webpage they must be signed in with their university username and password. This is an extra precaution to guard against any FERPA violations, but also to maintain trust with students that their information will not be used in any other manner other than to help students network amongst each other.

Research Design

The research design for this study is an action research design. Action research is a systematic approach to practical solutions that combines theory, practice, action, and practitioner/researcher knowledge in order to solve a problem within the sphere of

practice at hand (Mertler 2012; Ivankova, 2015). Action research was proper for this dissertation because it allows for the monitoring of changes throughout the MALM program before and after the intervention has been implemented. It involves action to be taken on behalf of the researcher, and then the measurement of the results of the action. The intervention and study is built on a foundation of evidence and theoretical literature. This provides a lens to analyze the study throughout the course of the intervention and provides grounded reasoning for the purpose of the intervention. The problem of practice can be approached through action research because it provides a cyclical research design foundation to measure a possible change with an intervention, and make appropriate adjustments until the desired result is achieved.

Participants

Survey sampling. I chose non-probability sampling as my strategy. Daniel (2012) defines nonprobability sampling as "a procedure that does not give some elements in the population a chance to be in that sample" (p. 66). Those who graduate in Spring 2019 and Summer 2019 will not be surveyed. The reason for this is that the post-test will be sent in Fall 2019 and by then, they will have already graduated. The total amount of students projected to graduate by Spring and Summer 2019 is around 15 students. This leaves 118 students still in the program. In addition, those admitted in Summer 2019 or Fall 2019 will not be included in the study. This is because they would not have had a chance to take the pre-test survey back in Spring 2019.

Interview sampling. Towards the end of the intervention, students who had taken the pre-test were given post-test survey and an opportunity to participate in a semi-structured interview. Interviews were also opened to the general MALM population to

get a broader sense of their views on the MALM Network. In total, nine students participated in the interviews. Table 6 below gives you a breakdown of the interviewed students' backgrounds:

Table 6.

General profiles of MALM Students who participated in semi-structured interviews.

Pseudonym	Term admitted	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Gender	Work
Olivia	Spring 2018	Black	42	F	Education
Anna	Fall 2018	White	34	F	Management
Robert	Fall 2018	White	29	M	Aerospace
Gordon	Fall 2018	White	30	M	Retail
Christopher	Summer 2018	White	35	M	Education
Liam	Fall 2018	White	52	M	Consulting
Anthony	Fall 2018	Black	58	M	Finance
Paul	Fall 2018	Black	55	M	Engineering
Stephanie	Fall 2018	Hispanic (International)	42	F	Entrepreneur

All students who were interviewed had still been in the program at the time of the interviews.

Data Collection

Data collection was implemented and completed between March 2019 and October 2019 with the primary sample of students for the pre-and-post test. There are six

different types of data collection methods that I utilized. Table 7 below gives a data type, source, and purpose for each method used in the data collection process.

Table 7.

Data collection types, sources, and purposes.

Data type	Data source	Purpose
Semi-structured interviews	Individual semi-structured interviews	To understand student perspectives on Social Presence (Social Context, Online Communication, Professional connection).
Field notes	Google analytics of MALM Network webpage + spotlight emails	To monitor and observe student visits to the page, any patterns after showcasing emails are sent out each month
Student online profile	Students	To find commonalities of students within their profiles – what is detailed, what is important to them.
Survey	Pre-and-post test	Observe any changes between pre-and-post test on Social presence indicators (social context, online communication, professional connection).
Analytical memos	Author (myself)	Record any thoughts of the development of the study, impressions of the qualitative data and overall coding process,

		but also review any indicators of social presence manifesting among the study between students and academic advisor
Situational Mapping	Author (myself)	Using the codes provided by open-ended survey questions, semi-structured interviews, and analytical memos, situational maps are created to organize and evaluate relationships between codes and themes.

Virtual semi-structured interviews. Data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews with MALM students. I specifically chose the semi-structured interview because it comes "close to an everyday conversation, but… it has a purpose and involves a specific approach and technique" and is "neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). I did not want to stray from my usual self when interacting with the students, so this approach seemed the best fit for data collection because it avoids the pressure of having "the correct" answer from the student.

All interviews were conducted virtually through an online conferencing application called Zoom. Zoom is licensed through ASU to be used by students, staff, and faculty and has the capabilities of recording the interview sessions. All interviews were first transcribed by hand and then reviewed multiple times for consistency and precision.

Field Notes. Since the site was created on a google webpage through university resources, Google provides a way to collect data on the webpage. This data includes how many visits the website collected over a certain amount of time, how it was accesses (computers, tablets, phones, etc.), demographics of those who visited the page (location), and possible other markers. These data were used as field notes to capture the interest garnered by the MALM Network page, and if there are any trends to the number of visitors to the site. In order to encourage people to visit the site, a total of six "spotlights" were sent out to all MALM students and the leadership team of Thunderbird. With the permission of the student, spotlight emails highlighted two students in the program and encouraged people to visit MALM network overall. These emails were sent to all MALM students, faculty, staff, and the leadership team. Special attention was paid to the google analytics when these spotlight emails were sent to see any patterns or increase of webpage visitors was recorded. Chapter four figure 4 illustrates the spikes each time an email was sent out.

Online Talent Profiles. Students were given the option to create an online talent profile on the MALM network which included the following questions:

- Career Category (student would choose)
- A little bit about yourself
- Start of program
- What is your leadership/management style?
- What do you think you need to improve on?
- Aspirations and goals
- Contact info

Students who created a profile had the option to answer all, some, or none of the questions. They also had the option to post their resume, post a photo, or both.

Survey Instrument. Qualtrics is an online-based software that distributes custom surveys and collects information from the study based on the responses. This system is licensed by ASU for students, staff, and faculty use. Qualtrics was used to disseminate the survey. The same survey instrument that was used in cycle one was used for this cycle. Students received a special link unique to them that indicated who answered the survey and allowed me to keep track of pre-and-post-test answers to measure any changes. Any and all identifying information in the outcomes were redacted and anonymized for extra confidentiality.

Analytical Memos. During the study, detailed notes, thoughts, and observations of both the quantitative and qualitative data will be recorded. Phillips & Carr (2007) explain that analytical memos "embraces unpredictability and the emergent and bifurcation processes inherent in action research" (p. 562). This includes thoughts, references, reviews of comments in interviews, possible trends, etc., and will be recorded in a handwritten journal. This helped keep track of my biases and provided me with the but also help tease out the more important themes and patterns of the study.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis. All quantitative analysis was conducted through IBM's SPSS Statistics software. The pre-and-posttest were analyzed to see if there were any changes in social presence after the application of the MALM Network. Descriptive statistics were used to measure the mean, median, and standard deviation of the tests

independently. According to Field (2013) the following definitions for these descriptive statistics are:

> *Mean:* measure of central tendency, or the average of scores (p. 23)
>
> *Median:* the center of distribution where one looks for the middle score when scores are "ranked in order of magnitude" (p. 22)
>
> *Standard deviation:* estimate of the average variability (spread) of a set of data measured in the same units of measurement as the original data (p. 884).

Paired samples t-tests were conducted to find statistically significant differences among the results for both social presence and the corresponding subconstructs. This is demonstrated through a "p-value", which is "the smaller the p-value, the greater the statistical incompatibility of the data with the null hypothesis" (Wasserstein & Lazar, 2016). A t-test can be defined as a "technique for comparing mean values of two sets of numbers" while a paired samples t-test is "to compare observations from two measurement occasions for the same group" (SPSS, 2012). Looking towards the p-value that the t-test provides, it can shine a light on if there is a statistically significant difference. Over-reliance on using the p-value can also be detrimental, so Cohen's d (or effect size) was also calculated to further explore the data's p-value and its significance. McGough and Faraone (2009) explain "while a significant p-value suggests that something nonrandom has occurred, it does not inform us about the significance of the nonrandom effect" (p. 2) Effect size is defined as "a quantitative reflection of the magnitude of some phenomenon that is used for the purpose of addressing a question of interest" (Kelley & Preacher, 2012). An overall scale that provides researchers an idea of

how big the effect size can be in a specific study, where a Cohen's *d* of 0.2 is small, 0.5 is medium, and 0.8 is a large effect size (McGough & Faraone, 2009).

To check for reliability, I conducted a Cronbach's alpha (α) analysis. Field (2013) describes (α) as "the most common measure of scale reliability" (p. 708) and reliability is defined as "whether an instrument can be interpreted consistently across different situations" (p. 13). Cronbach's Alpha (α) coefficient of reliability ranges from 0 to 1. Golforth (2015) mentions that if:

> …the scale items are entirely independent from one another (i.e. are not correlated or share no covariance), then $\alpha = 0$; and, if all the items have high covariances, then (α) will approach 1 (p. __).

If (α) is closer to 1 then "the items share covariance and probably measure the same underlying concept" (Golforth, 2015). Being that I already tested the pilot survey instrument in two different scenarios, I anticipated the (α) to be high and build momentum towards becoming a more reliable instrument for future research in this topic.

Qualitative analysis. There are three major sources of data (that does not come from the academic advisor) in this dissertation: (1) open-ended questions from the pre-and-post tests, (2) online student profiles, and (3) semi-structured interviews. Multiple cycles of data analysis happened for each area. All of the methods used descriptive coding, which "summarizes the primary topic" of the data (Saldaña, 2016). Table 8 below gives each area's approach for analysis:

Table 8.

Sources of data, their purpose, research question it answers, and data phases of qualitative coding.

Data type	Purpose	Research Question it applies to:	Data analysis approach
Open-ended survey questions	To understand the impact of the MALM network on social presence; explore what social presence looks like outside of the virtual classroom	Research Question #1 (RQ1) and Research Question #2 (RQ2) + RQ2(a), RQ2(b)	Phase one: In-vivo coding Phase two: Descriptive coding Phase three: touch coding Phase four: comparing answers pre and post.
Online MALM Student Profiles	To understand what is important to the overall MALM Student when it comes to their profiles; commonalities, differences; better understanding of their context within the program.	RQ2 (a) & (b)	Phase one: descriptive coding Phase two: in-vivo coding Phase three – Situational Mapping
Semi-structured interviews	To find ultimate themes and categories that lead to saturation of data and corroborates the other sources of data above. This helped the formation of negative and positive social presence aspects.	RQ1 and RQ2 plus (a) & (b)	Phase one: analytic memos and descriptive coding (simultaneous) Phase two: in-vivo coding Cycle three: hypothesis coding

As an example of how the coding process worked, below is a table that explains how themes were reached through the different processes depending on the source of the data. These themes are not all of the themes deciphered in the study. Instead, this set reflects particular data that supports the quantitative results.

Table 9.

Survey Data supporting quantitative results on minimal impact of MALM Network on social presence and students

Subconstruct	Theme	Descriptive Code	Example from In-vivo code	Source
Social context	Uncertainty	Undecided about MALM Network	"I thought it didn't go deep enough to be beneficial. It didn't strike me one way or another – somewhat ambivalent"	Semi-structured interview
Online Communication	Apathy	Social media not important	"Online social interaction is not important to me"	Open-ended survey questions
Social Context	Forgettable	MALM Network not enough to keep attention	"I looked at the website when it first came up, and I haven't really looked at it since."	Semi-structured interview

Online Communication	Oversaturation of social media	Too many social media outlets	"It's hard to check everything"	Open-ended survey questions
Professional Connection + Social Context	Apathy	Apathetic attitudes	These are people you are unlikely to ever meet, so why try?	Open-ended survey questions

The table above gives you some examples of the process I used to create themes. The first in-vivo code for the theme "forgettable" used the word "ambivalent", which is used as a descriptive code as well. The quote gave the word "ambivalence" which gave a sense of an uncertain opinion towards the MALM network. This uncertainty lead to the ultimate theme of ambivalence because it resonated with the social context subconstruct. The MALM network was supposed to enhance the social context of the student, yet, in this case, it ended up giving more of an uncertain vibe than an enhancing one.

In addition to the three major sources of data, two extra sources of data came from analytical memos and situational mapping.

Table 10.

Sources of data created by the academic advisor

Data type	Purpose	Research Question it applies to:	Data analysis approach
Analytical memos	To make sense of what social presence is to the general MALM population, but also to be aware of personal biases or lenses that I may	RQ1 and RQ2 plus (a) & (b)	Critical analysis of the different variables that can affect the students and/or the study. Created *during* the coding cycles

	apply towards the overall intervention and students themselves.		of each data source in Table 7.
Situational mapping	To understand the influence that an academic advisor may have on the study, but also to critically analyze one's ability to perceive social presence as (1) a participant, (2) as an advisor, and (3) as a higher education practitioner	RQ1 and RQ2 (a) & (b)	Created lists and taxonomies that applied to the situation based on my closeness to the study; helped orientate academic advisor role among the data. Created *between* coding of each data source in Table 7.

Using analytical memos and situational mapping provided an in-depth look at how an academic advisor can affect social presence. This can be through the MALM network (the intervention) but can also detail other methods whether knowing or unknowing to the advisor. This contributes important information for the overall study.

Open-ended survey questions. The first cycle of coding for semi-structured interviews involved using in-vivo coding. In vivo coding is taking direct quotes from the participant and using it as data for the study (Saldaña, 2016). I wrote down important quotes within the survey questions on note cards. From there, I laid out the notecards on a large table, and used codeweaving to start creating categories. Codeweaving is the "integration of key code words and phrases into narrative form to see how the puzzle pieces fit together" (Saldaña, 2016). To do so, I needed to use the "touch test", which

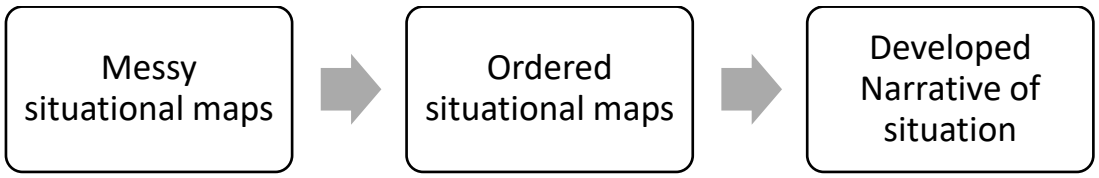
Saldaña (2016) explains as “a strategy for progressing from topic to concept, from the real to the abstract, and from the particular to the general” (p. 276). About a day later, I used descriptive coding to analyze each answer as the second cycle in Microsoft excel. This was separate from the in-vivo note cards. The codes produced overall categories and major themes about the importance of social activity and the MALM network.

Semi-structured interviews. In total, there were nine interviews for the study. Interviews were transcribed by hand and printed out on paper. Each interview was printed twice. Each interview was coded two times with two different techniques, and I made sure to leave at least one to two days between coding the same interview. For the first cycle, descriptive coding was used in tandem with analytical memos. The analytical memos helped make sense of the coding, and reveal themes as I examined the interviews. The second cycle of coding was in-vivo coding with note cards. Just like the open-ended survey questions, I laid them out on the table and used the “touch test” to start forming major categories and themes.

Situational mapping. The importance of acknowledging the role of the researcher is fundamental to this study. Not only does the study explore how an intervention was implemented to affect social presence, the intervention itself led to the exploration of how an academic advisor directly and indirectly affects social presence. To help make sense of this, I followed the processes outlined for narrative discourse situational mapping in the 2005 book *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn* by Adele E. Clarke. Figure 2 illustrates the methods used to analyze the data to come to these results.

Figure 2.

Order of operations for situational mapping.

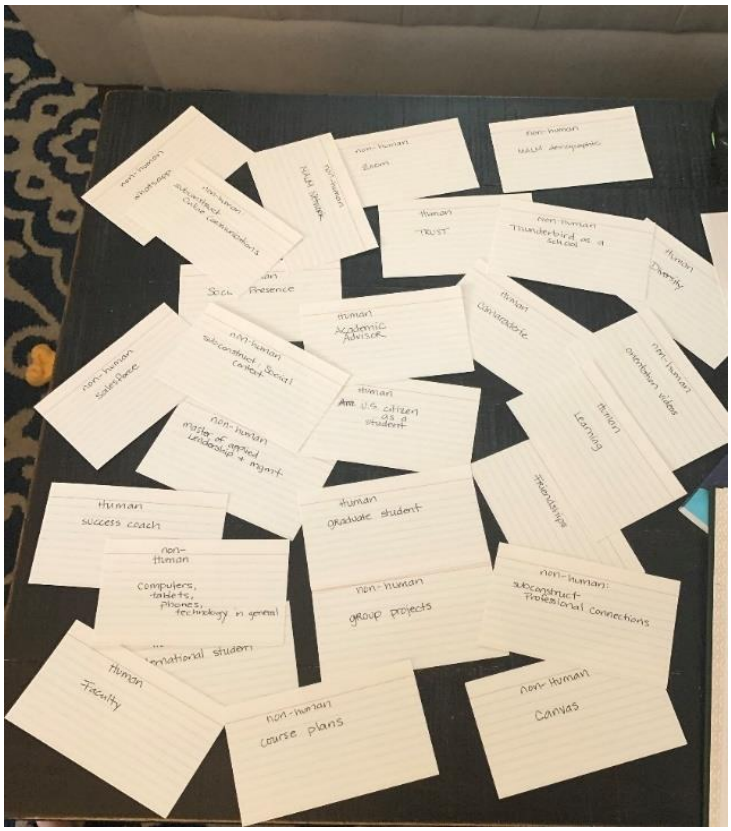


Situational mapping requires the researcher to ask questions such as "what are the discourses in the broader situation? Who (individually and collectively) is involved (supportive, opposed, providing knowledge, materials, money, what else?) in producing these discourses? What and who do these discourses construct? What material things – nonhuman elements – are involved in the discourse?" (Clarke, 2005). In answering these questions, I used index cards to help organize the data further. The themes used on the index cards were themes and codes that were originally used for descriptive coding purposes; thus I already had a supply of codes and themes that I could use for situational mapping.

Below is a photo of the "messy" situational map used as a steppingstone to construct the "ordered" situational map. After the "ordered" map was created, I was able to create narratives that shed light on how the academic advisor affects social presence in the program.

Figure 3.

"Messy" situational map.



The messy situational map allowed me to create an organic space to visualize all human and non-human elements when it comes to academic advising. Through this method, I shifted words to be closer or further away to each other and analyzed their relevance in relation to one another. Some words would float off the table because their relevance to how it affected social presence would be minimal. This left a main group of words. Other words started to connect and float closer towards the center. Doing this process allows for an "ordered" situational map to emerge from the "messy" one. Table 11 is the "ordered" result of the "messy" situational map above.

Table 11.

Ordered situational map in relation to how academic advising affects social presence in an online graduate program.

Collective Human Values	**Status of Actor**
Trust	International
Camaraderie	MALM student
Diversity	Academic advisor as a graduate student
Friendships	Academic Advisor
Social Presence	Faculty
Success	MALM Demographic
	Full-time professionals
Non-Human Elements	**Spatial Elements**
Zoom	Time-zones
Whatsapp	Canvas shells
Canvas	Social context
Orientation Videos	
Course plans	
Online Communication	
Email	
MALM Network	
Social media	
MALM Program	
Graduate Student Policies & Procedures	
Sociocultural/symbolic elements	
Professional connections	
Course plan symbol for success	
Obtaining MALM equals success	

After completing the "ordered" situational map, I put together narratives explaining the situation, which are outlined in chapter 4. As a general rule, the narratives I created did not use all the words to fit into one situation and they can be used for multiple situational narratives.

Researcher Positionality

Just as important as it is to detail the methods involved in creating and implementing the study, my positionality needs to be clarified and stated as well. Bourke (2014) says that

> "the concept of self as research instrument reflects the likelihood that the researcher's own subjectivity will come to bear on the research project and any subsequent reporting of findings…. Related to subjectivity is the expression of voice that results in the reporting of research findings. Through this voice, the researcher leaves her or his own signature on the project, resulting from the using of self as the research instrument and her or his subjectivity" (p. 2).

There are three dimensions that I need to address: 1) my demographic background, 2) my role as a graduate student, and 3) my role as an academic advisor.

First, I am a heterosexual, cis-female, Latina and I have grown up in Arizona for the majority of my life. I am part of the millennial generation and grew up in the age of online communication developments. MySpace, Livejournal, and Facebook have contributed to my social identity, but also has opened doors for me to flourish professionally. Sites like LinkedIn provide an outlet to showcase my talents to others. All of these social media outlets helped me establish friendships and professional relationships in other states and other parts of the world. It is extremely easy for me to show my authentic self in a virtual sense. I have navigated my online identity since I was 11 years old, and with that, comes the fluidity of knowing how to express myself while getting to know others in an online environment. It comes easily to me because it is embedded within my own personal social tapestry.

I am a person of color, who was born in a different country, whose first language is Spanish, and whose family did not come a wealthy background. I am the first generation of my family to obtain higher education. These are elements of my experience that I take into consideration when relating to others. As a result, growing up I practiced English so much as a child and forced my accent to disappear to be able to relate to others; I have worked hard to gain financial stability and professional credentials, and I take this into account when interacting with other professionals, especially in a program such as the MALM program. I do not use this as a way to ostracize myself, but I use this as a way to create empathy. I personally pick up on the ideas of privilege, or the "unawareness" of privilege when it comes to those I interact with. I also am genuinely interested in the experiences of others. Whether they come from a "privileged" background or not, I create empathy to be able to create authentic responses. I am hyper-aware of power differentiations between myself and the student within the interview, but I am also aware of the power differentiations outside of the interview in the professional realm. I take into consideration their own approaches, their own hardships, but I try to extract the most authentic reaction without being too personal.

As a graduate student, I identify with the various struggles and roadblocks the students experience throughout their program. My natural tendency, as a human, and as a student, is to identify with other graduate students and connect my student-status to the overall experience of graduate education. Being a graduate student has helped me develop a sense of trust with the students. This may seem like a major bias, but it is part of the definition of social presence, "…the degree to which learners feel socially and emotionally connected with others in an online environment" (Mouzouri, 2016, p. 41).

Instead of being seen as a bias, it can be seen as a strength, whereas much of the data collected on social presence has been through the lens of a faculty member conducting studies within their virtual classrooms, I am conducting this *outside* of the virtual classroom without any authority over the students. In a sense, I am a peer of the MALM students *because* I am going through some of the same experiences they are (full-time professional, full-time graduate student, bills, rent, etc.)

As an academic advisor, my goals are to create the best experiences for students who are participating in online graduate degrees. I believe in creating spaces of empathy, and my goal is to make sure these students are confident in my abilities to support them. Academic advisors have to take on many different roles in one: gatekeepers of policies/procedures/university resources, emotionally supportive counselors, student retention strategists, etc. My relationship to the MALM students is just as authentic as it is when I am helping a regular in-person student. Possibly even more so, because I help guide these students over a span of one to three years, giving me plenty of opportunity to get to know them, their personalities, and their personal experiences in the program. Having a master's Higher Education, as well as seven years of academic advising experience, I am aware of how privilege and diversity can come into play in an online graduate program. Through my personal past and my academic advisor role, I am highly mindful to the experiences of students of color, students with poor backgrounds, and students from different countries. I take into account their context and their possible past experiences which form their current views. I treat each student as if they will eventually be a potential friend, and I also make sure they feel comfortable being transparent with me about their needs. I know when to stop conversations, apply professional and social

boundaries, and continue the conversation with the students. My approach to advising and to developing trust between myself and the student was not tailored for the purpose of the project. In fact, I made it a point to be the same in semi-structured interviews as I am in regular advising appointments over the phone or zoom, to keep the student in a consistent experience overall.

Trustworthiness

Threats to validity. Smith & Glass (1987) establish that there are multiple threats to validity within and outside of a research study. Some of the internal threats to validity can manifest in different ways. When it comes to this study, three of the biggest threats to internal validity are maturation, mortality, and a threat to external validity is the Hawthorne effect. Smith & Glass (1987) describe maturation as "certain events internal to the research subjects… consist[ing] of physiological or psychological development that occurs naturally through the course of time, or as the subject grows older, more coordinated, fatigued, bored, and the like" (p. 128). Smith & Glass (1987) also acknowledge mortality by saying "even well-designed and carefully conducted studies usually have dropouts" (p. 131). A big external validity threat is the Hawthore effect, where "people in experiments alter their behavior to conform to perceived expectations about what is proper and appropriate behavior for subjects of scientific research studies" (Smith & Glass, 1987).

Maturation was a threat because if the MALM Network is not perceived as an important or vital factor of student connection and social presence among the students, then over time, the intervention can fade into the background. Students may get bored with it, or it may be too much to keep up with. A way that I helped stem this is to keep

profile customization as low as possible. This way, students were not pressured into thinking they have to take time out of their day format their own profiles. I also controlled the profiles' contents. Edits to profiles were requested by the student; this kept the profiles consistent across the board. To stem boredom, students received the "spotlight" emails to highlight other students and remind them that new profiles were added regularly.

Mortality (which I am labeling attrition) is a bigger problem than maturation, mainly because dropouts from the study are always inevitable. Being an academic advisor, dropouts from a program is inevitable as well. My current responsibilities in my job is to minimize attrition within the MALM program. I will be using some of the techniques I have established over the years to help minimize attrition in the study. The first technique is establishing a simple yet deep rapport with the students. Checking up on them occasionally, asking them about their lives and their goals really helps establish a connection between student and academic advisor. If I see they have dropped from a course, or the program as a whole, I give them a call and email them to ask how I can support the continuation of the program for them. Doing has helped keep the attrition rate low. Mortality isn't something that I can mitigate 100%, but it may be minimized by being proactive and prosocial with students.

The Hawthorne effect is when study participants alter their behavior to fit the perceived norms of the study in order to "please" or behave as "good subjects" and help the researcher. Although this may something that can be unavoidable, one thing to keep in mind is that I am not an authority figure to these students. I do not control their grades, nor do I have any academic influence on them, so if they do "aim to please" it is of their

own volition and cooperation, since I am not in any position to influence them with power.

Reliability. To maintain the trustworthiness and reliability of the study, I will use multiple strategies. The first step taken was to review the survey instrument in detail to find any unreliable items within the constructs prior to disseminating it in cycle zero. Inter-construct reliability tests were ran in SPSS to identify these items. This technique helped establish the internal reliability of the instrument. The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was already high with the two pilot surveys that were sent out to two other programs, so using the survey instrument for this population only helped establish its reliability even further. Below are the reliability results of cycle one.

To increase the reliability in qualitative methods, I had my dissertation chair review qualitative data and codes. I also had another third-party friend who matched the demographics of the program. This friend was between 30-40 years old, male, works in a full-time finance position, with a bachelor's in communications. I taught him how to code the qualitative data for the open-ended survey questions through in-vivo and descriptive coding. Without showing him my codes, he followed the same review process and came up with very similar codes and themes as I did.

Table 12.

Cronbach's alpha scores pre-test (n=31) and post-test (n=26)

Construct	Items within construct	Pre-test estimate of reliability	Post-test estimate of reliability
Social Context	Q1 through Q11	.900	.876

Online Communication	Q12 through Q21	.862	.747
Professional Connection	Q22 through Q36	.934	.864
Overall Alpha	All items above	.961	.931

Although the reliability decreased from .961 to .931, the reliability is still very high for the instrument. The reason that it may have gone down was that the sample size was smaller in the posttest.

Since there were only 13 participants who took both the pretest and the posttest, I also checked the reliability of the instrument with those participants.

Table 13.

Cronbach's alpha scores for comparison group (n=13)

Construct	Items within construct	Pre-test estimate of reliability	Post-test estimate of reliability
Social context	Q1 through Q11	.777	.570
Online communication	Q12 through Q21	.828	.654
Professional connection	Q22 through Q36	.938	.860
Overall Alpha	All items above	.950	.884

The table indicates that even with a sample size of 13, the instrument is still highly reliable. That does not mean there is no error in the calculations. There was a significant decrease in the reliability for the posttest, but this probably was due to the overall non-effect that the MALM network had on the participants.

The first graduate program was a business-related program with 200 students, and the second was a social sciences related program, also with about 200 students. The business-related program had pre-established interactive mechanisms established to help

students interact with each other and collaborate outside of the classroom. It also offered in-person opportunities. The social sciences online graduate program did not have these interactive mechanisms, and very similar to the MALM program, did not provide other ways for students to interact between each other outside of the program. The results suggested that those in the business program were more connected and familiar with each other, using more than 5 different electronic ways of connecting with each other outside of their courses, while the social sciences program results did not suggest a cohesive feeling of communication between the online students.

For the official pre-and-posttest on the MALM population, used triangulation of the data as way to compare and contrast the results. Triangulation is defined as the use of multiple data sources to enhance the credibility of the research project and findings, and the data can be qualitative, quantitative, or both (Ivankova, 2015). Using the survey (quantitative), open-ended survey questions (qualitative), semi-structured interviews (qualitative), analytic memos (qualitative), and google analytics (quantitative), helped compose a snapshot landscape of social presence in this program for this study. This can also remove any potential biases or inferences I may have made about the student. Being as transparent as possible with the participants will help me lessen the amount of bias I have when interpreting the data.

Limitations

As with everything, there are limitations. The first limitation was time. Most of the students that are accepted into the MALM program are mid-to-upper level employees of big companies. They thrive on efficiency and quickness. Designing the survey instrument to be as quick but thorough as possible was a big challenge, especially

because these are students who have full-time jobs, families, work 40+ hours a week, and have 15-20 hours of homework a week. Simply having them complete the survey was hard because of their lack of time and full schedules. To encourage the completion of the survey, four $50 Amazon gift cards were offered in a raffle. Students would be submitted once into the raffle if they completed the pre-test, and a second time if they completed the post-test.

Another limitation was that this was the first time the intervention was actually implemented. I designed the MALM network based on the students' backgrounds in the program and increasing anecdotal evidence that students needed a conduit for connecting with each other. I also used the evidence that came from comparing the pilot survey programs, to which one program had pre-established mechanisms for social presence, while the other one did not. I essentially created the MALM Network based on this evidence, but now I have the data to review changes and make it even more effective.

One last limitation was creating interest in submitting profiles. I am not a professor of the program, nor am I a Director of the program, but I can have an influential role on the students since I have already established relationships with them prior to the intervention. On the opposite end of the spectrum, I do not have any authority or influence over them and their grades. I noticed that interest waned after the MALM Network was launched, so I recruited a professor to offer extra credit to those who would voluntarily submit a profile. 64 students submitted requests for a profile to be created for them as a result.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter presents the qualitative and quantitative results of the study. The first part will explore the quantitative and qualitative results for the first research question, while the second part will review the qualitative findings for the second research question and the two sub-questions. The table below gives an overall map to how this chapter is laid out.

Table 14.

Outline of chapter 4 results by research question.

4.1 Research Question One	**4.2 Research Question Two**
How and to what extent can social presence between students be affected by a student profile-based webpage intervention within the program?	*How can an academic advisor create social presence among online graduate students?*
4.1.1. Quantitative Results 4.1.1.1. Survey 4.1.1.2. Pre-and-posttest 4.1.1.3. Engagement trends 4.1.2. Qualitative Findings of open-ended survey questions	4.2.1. Social presence was increased by academic advisor through MALM Network 4.2.2. Social presence was developed *between* the academic advisor and graduate students. 4.2.3. Social presence provided insight into development of grounded theory

4.1 Research Question One

The first research question is: *How and to what extent can social presence between students be affected by a student profile-based webpage intervention within the program?* As a reminder, the definition of social presence in this study is "the degree to which learners feel socially and emotionally connected with others in an online environment" (Mouzouri, 2016). Keeping the definition in mind as an overall lens is imperative to interpreting results.

4.1.1 Quantitative results

Quantitative results are composed of pre-and-posttest survey results and webpage engagement trends captured by google analytics. The pre-and-posttest survey results are split into two groupings to analyze. The first group is the results and analysis for the pre-test versus the post-test (includes people who did not take both tests), and the second is the comparison results between the pre-and-posttest participants (includes only people who took both tests).

4.1.1.1 Overall Survey Results

Descriptive statistics. The pre-test was sent out March 2019 to a total of 112 students in the MALM program. 45 surveys were started, and only 31 surveys were fully completed. This gives a response rate of 41% and a completion rate of 28%. Since the students only had two weeks to complete the survey, two reminders were sent to those who had not finished. As a reminder, the hypotheses for the quantitative portion of the study are:

H_0: MALM students will not experience an increase in social presence through the MALM Network.

H_1: MALM students will experience an increase in social presence through the MALM Network.

The survey instrument used a six-point likert scale where (1) is *Strongly Disagree,* (2) *Disagree,* (3) *Somewhat Disagree,* (4) *Somewhat Agree,* (5) *Agree,* (6) *Strongly Agree.* Below are the descriptive statistics for the first group (pretest and posttest group).

Table 15.

Mean, Median, and Standard Deviation for pre-test (n=31) and post-test (n=26)

Subconstruct	Mean (pre)	Mean (post)	Median (pre)	Median (post)	SD (pre)	SD (post)
Social Context (SC)	4.28	4.17	4.36	4.22	.885	.781
Online communication (OC)	4.54	4.62	4.50	4.70	.814	.586
Professional Connection (PC)	4.22	4.13	4.33	4.26	.910	.697
Overall Social Presence (SP)	4.35	4.31	4.41	4.47	.801	.620

The descriptive statistics imply that there was a slight increase in disagreement between the pre-test to the post-test. For example, the mean of the subconstruct of social context decreased by 0.11 from 4.28 to 4.17, and the median changed by 0.14 from 4.36 to 4.22. This median means that the central tendency of the subconstruct tends to skew towards *Somewhat Agree* rather than *Agree.* The time between when the pre-test was

implemented to the time the post-test data was collected, there was a decrease in agreeance among those participating when it came to social context. We can see the same happening with the professional connection subconstruct, where the mean decreases by 0.09 and the median changes slightly by 0.07. What is interesting is that the online communication subconstruct increased in both mean and median, indicating more agreeance on this topic than the others on behalf of the participants. This may be due to the fact that the students had five months to navigate their online communications between each other, making them more proficient with the technology and increasing their agreeableness to the subconstruct of online communication. The standard deviations for all subcontracts decreased, which suggests less variability in answers the second time the survey was taken. This may be because the students had already anticipated the questions to be the same the second time around. The mean of the overall construct of social presence had a difference of 0.04, and the median had a slight increase of 0.06, indicating that the whole change in attitudes towards the intervention was minimal. These means and medians could have been affected by the fact that the online communication subconstruct increased the most impacting these measures. Overall, the small sample size in both tests contributes to more error in the results.

Paired samples t-tests. One question comes to mind: is there a significant difference between the means of the subconstructs and overall construct? This is where two paired samples t-test was conducted. The first one was a t-test for the same construct to construct for pre-and-posttests for all participants and the second one was a t-test between those who took both pre-and-posttets. A paired samples t-test also can test whether the null hypothesis can be rejected. In addition, Cohen's D (or effect size) was

calculated to see if the difference between the pre-and-posttests had any impact or magnitude within the study. As a reminder, effect size can be measured by the following conventional rule where a "Cohen's D of 0.2 as small, 0.5 as medium, and 0.8 as large" (McGough & Faraone, 2009). Below is a table that illustrates the paired samples t-tests for pre-test and post-test.

Table 16.

Paired samples t-tests for pre-test (n=31) and post-test (n=26)

Sub-constructs	AD	SD	P-value	DF	Effect size
SCPre – SCPost	.23776	1.16	.320	25	0.20
OCPre – OCPost	.00000	1.06	1.00	25	0.00
PCpre – PCPost	.14872	1.11	.499	25	0.13
SPPre – SPPost	.12883	1.03	.633	25	0.12

AD = absolute difference between the factors, SD = standard deviations, p = significance levels, and df = degrees of freedom.

In this case, all p values are above 0.05, which indicates that there were no statistically significant differences between the pre-and-posttest means. In addition, the effect size was very minimal, in which the only subconstruct suggesting a minimal impact was Social Context at 0.2, suggesting a low impact on the statistics conducted.

For the second t-test, the subconstructs were pitted against each other to see if there were any statistically significant differences between them. The point was to

determine if the respondents felt (or reported feeling) significantly different about the subconstructs. Table 17 below gives a breakdown of the subconstructs against each other.

Table 17.

Paired samples t-test among subconstructs of pretest (n=31) and posttest (n=26)

Sub-constructs	AD (pre)	AD (post)	SD (pre)	SD (post)	P value (pre)	P value (post)	DF (pre)	DF (post)	Effect Size (pre)	Cohen 's D (post)
SC – OC	-.26	-.45	.613	.453	.025*	.000*	30	25	-0.42	-0.99
SC – PC	.054	.048	.609	.589	.628	.684	30	25	0.09	0.08
OC – PC	.314	.500	.550	.552	.003*	.000*	30	25	0.57	0.90

AD = absolute difference between the factors, SD = standard deviations, p = significance levels, and df = degrees of freedom.

The subsequent t-test shows a different story than the first t-test. While the first t-test implies that there was no statistically significant difference between the pre-and-post tests, the second t-test measures inter-subconstruct differences. Again, this was to determine if the respondents felt (or reported feeling) significantly different about each subconstruct during the pre-and-posttest. When the pre-test social context (SC) and pre-test online communication (OC) were tested, there was a statistically significant difference as shown by the p-value of .025, which is lower than the set confidence interval of 0.05. However, the effect size (Cohen's *d*) measured at -0.42, meaning the p-value may be interpreted as significant, but the effect size indicates that it is not significant to the study. The same constructs ended up reporting at .000 in the posttest, which is lower than the original .019 p-value. At the same time, the effect size was still under 0.2 at -0.99, suggesting the two constructs weren't impactful to the subconstructs. We can see the same change in p-values when comparing online communication (OC) to

professional connection (PC), as the p-value changes from .003 in the pretest to .000 in the posttest. The difference here is that the effect size ends up being 0.57 suggesting there is a statistically significant difference between the subconstructs and this difference's effect is significant to the study. In the post test, this effect size jumps to 0.9, implying there is a large effect size on the study. The results among SC and PC were minimal, suggesting no statistically significant difference between the two when students were taking the survey. The effect sizes are also below 0.2, suggesting little to no impact on the data.

4.1.1.2 Direct comparison of pre-test and post-test participants

There were only thirteen participants who completed both the pretest and posttest in its entirety. This group will be labeled the "comparison group". The same hypotheses used above will be applied to this population as well:

H_0: MALM students will not experience an increase in social presence through the MALM Network.

H_1: MALM students will experience an increase in social presence through the MALM Network.

The following results will give information on whether the null hypothesis can be rejected. Keep in mind, since this population was small, the data can have a good amount of error and variance within the results.

Descriptive statistics. The table below illustrates the descriptive statistics of the pre-test and post-test for all thirteen participants.

Table 18.

Descriptive statistics for pretest (n=13) and posttest (n=13) comparison group.

Subconstruct	Mean (pre)	Mean (post)	Median (pre)	Median (post)	SD (pre)	SD (post)
Social Context (SC)	4.11	4.15	4.27	4.10	.577	.441
Online communication (OC)	4.53	4.57	4.60	4.58	.727	.510
Professional Connection (PC)	4.14	4.27	4.46	4.47	.940	.664
Overall Social Presence (SP)	4.26	4.33	4.41	4.47	.688	.467

Looking at the results of the descriptive statistics, all means landed between (2) *Agree* and *(3) Somewhat Agree* suggesting that the comparison group is agreeable towards the subconstructs and overall construct of social presence. What was surprising was that the comparison group increased their social presence, while the rest of the population decreased. Social context increased by 0.03, online communication increased by 0.04, professional connection had the highest jump by 0.13, and the overall social presence increased by 0.06. Although small, all means and medians landed between *Agree* and *(3) Somewhat Agree*. The medians tell us where the skew is, and even though social context

improved by 0.03, the post median suggests that the central tendency of the answers skewed towards the right towards *(3) Somewhat Agree.* All standard deviations went down, suggesting a lower amount of variance or error in the answers the participants gave. The overall conclusion of the descriptive statistics is that a very small increase in social presence was captured in the comparison group, but it was not enough to impact the population, which shows an overall decrease in social presence.

Paired samples t-tests. Two paired samples t-tests were conducted to see if there were any statistically significant differences among the subconstructs and construct as a whole within the comparison group. This data may contain a high amount of error because of the small number of participants who completed both the pretest *and* the posttest, but some insight was gathered from the data nonetheless. The table below breaks down the first paired samples t-test for the pretest and posttest for the comparison group.

Table 19.

Paired samples t-tests for comparison group pretest (n=13) and posttest (n-13)

Sub-constructs	AD	SD	P-value	DF	Cohen's D (effect size)
SCPre – SCPost	.02797	.56819	.862	12	0.04
OCPre – OCPost	.04615	.65271	.803	12	0.07
PCpre – PCPost	.12308	.38379	.270	12	0.32
SPPre – SPPost	.06573	.42780	.590	12	0.15

AD = absolute difference between the factors, SD = standard deviations, p = significance levels, and df = degrees of freedom.

No statistically significant differences were found when using a paired samples t-test

between the pre-and-posttest. None of the p-values were below 0.05, and their effect sizes were minimal at best. For example, the lowest p-value was for the professional connection subconstruct at .270 with an effect size of 0.32. Referencing back to the scale, 0.2 is a small effect size, and 0.5 is a medium one. The effect size of 0.32 registers at a small effect, but the p-value does not illustrate a statistically significance. Additionally, the sample size ultimately affects the amount of error in the calculations.

The second paired samples t-test was conducted between the subconstructs to see if any statistically significant differences could be found within the comparison group. Again, the point was to determine if the respondents felt (or reported feeling) significantly different about the subconstructs in the instrument. Table 20 explains the breakdown for this paired samples t-test.

Table 20.

Paired samples t-test for comparison group pretest (n=13) and posttest (n=13)

Sub-constructs	AD (pre)	AD (post)	SD (pre)	SD (post)	P value (pre)	P value (post)	DF (pre)	DF (post)	Effect Size (pre)	Effect Size (post)
SC – OC	.3958	.4139	.378	.3676	.003*	.002*	12	12	1.044	1.126
SC – PC	.0522	.1473	.652	.5457	.778	.350	12	12	0.079	0.269
OC – PC	-.343	-.267	.616	.5392	.067	.100	12	12	-0.557	-0.50

AD = absolute difference between the factors, SD = standard deviation, *p = significance levels ($p < 0.05$), and df = degrees of freedom.

The paired samples t-test between SC and OC for both pre-and-posttests have a p-value of .003 (pre) and .002 (post). The p-values indicate that there was a statistically significant difference between these two constructs. Moreover, the effect size started at 1.044 and in the posttest increased to 1.1260, indicating these two subconstructs have a

higher magnitude over the other subconstructs, making them very different from each other, and hold higher power than the other subconstruct combinations. This may be laced with error, mainly because the sample size was so small. Social Context and Online Communication are dissimilar to begin with. The questions about social context talk about forming friendships and trust, while the questions for online communication only asks questions about what technology they use and their frequency/preference of use. Professional Connection (PC) and Social Context (SC) however, are very similar, which is supported by the insignificant p-value and low effect size.

Overall the survey suggests that there was a small decrease in social presence through the MALM network but was negligible. The t-tests also showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the pre-and-posttests. One factor that may have led to small interest in the MALM network is that the survey was implemented towards the end of the spring, and continued into the Summer semester before Fall, which probably lead to less interaction with the page. Historically, students usually take summer off, or have vacations during this time, thus could have led to less interaction with the page. Secondly, the page itself was not coded to be dynamic, but more of a reference page where students could learn about each other. No comments, likes, or "share" button were created for students to interact with the profiles. This may have been limiting and students lost interest when interaction with the page was low. With these statistics, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

4.1.1.3 Engagement trends

The statistical results show that the students did not experience a significant shift in social presence and the engagement trends may provide alternative evidence to support

these findings. Throughout March 2019 to August 2019, I connected google analytics to the MALM Network page to capture engagement data with the webpage. A full report on the analytics of the MALM Network was collected on October 2019. Capturing the engagement trends helps answer research question one because it supports the overall survey data that social presence was not affected through the intervention.

Google analytics recorded that there were 2,931 unique visits to the page. This equates to roughly 486 visits per month from March to August 2019. The most interaction with the page was between April and May 2019 when the launch of the MALM network was catching momentum. Figure 4 below shows the spikes in overall interaction within that time frame.

Figure 4.

Spikes of page visitors as spotlight emails were sent out.

These spikes also correspond with the spotlight emails I sent out to maintain interest in the page. As time went on, the efforts with the spotlight emails did not retain the same amount of interest that was initially caught in the beginning of the study. Google analytics reported 296 new visitors total to the page from March to August. Over the time of six months, there were a total of 296 users, and over those who visited, 106 (36%) of them returned at one time or another to browse profiles. The top ten countries to visit

were, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Argentina, Kazakhstan, Rwanda, Canada, Germany, and Nicaragua. This corresponds directly with the student population (both domestically and internationally) that the MALM program had at the time. Table 21 gives a breakdown of the number of visitors per country for the top ten countries between March 2019 and August 2019.

Table 21.

Top ten countries to visit MALM Network from March 2019 to August 2019 (n=292)

Country	Number of New Users	Percentage
United States	255	87.33%
Indonesia	11	3.77%
Nigeria	5	1.03%
Afghanistan	3	1.03%
Argentina	3	1.03%
Rwanda	3	1.03%
Canada	2	0.68%
Germany	2	0.68%
Nicaragua	2	0.68%

The system was also able to capture what sort of technology students used to access the MALM Network. Out of the 296 total users, 143 users (48.31%) used Google Chrome as their browser to access the page, while 106 (35.81%) used Safari. Internet explorer (6.08%), Firefox (4.05%), and Edge (3.04%) came in third through fifth. The top five operating systems were Windows at 126 (42.547%) of users, followed by 92 (31.08%) iOS users, Macintosh at 56 (18.92%) users, Android at 19 (6.42%) users, and Chrome OS at 3 (1.01%) users. Finally, out of all 296 users, 113 users (38.17%) accessed

the MALM Network through a mobile device, with iOS having 92 (81.42%) users, Android having 19 (16.81%) users, and Windows with 2 users (1.77%). In this case, if someone was using a mobile device to access the MALM Network, then they would most likely use an iPhone, but if they were using a computer, they were more likely to use a Windows based device.

Although both the engagement trends and the statistical analyses point to a low impact and change in social presence, the engagement trends give a view into how an intervention can gather high interest. The challenge is to keep the interest peaked, which the spotlights were supposed to do, but failed to do so, with the declining interest and returning visitors to the site between March to August. This information can be useful towards tailoring and creating different ways of keeping engagement high while continuing to encourage new students to put up their own profile and contribute to the community.

4.1.2 Qualitative results of open-ended survey questions

To capture deeper information from the students, open ended survey questions were embedded within the instrument. For example, if a student answered a specific question with “strongly disagree, disagree, or somewhat disagree” an extra question would pop up to give them a chance to explain why they chose their answer. If the quantitative data is showing that students did not experience a major increase in social presence, can the qualitative data give information on how the intervention may have been more effective? Although open-ended questions are informative and give a deeper look into the data, it may not be representative of the whole view of the student body or

why they did not increase in social presence. Below is a table that summarizes the major themes found within the open-ended survey questions.

Table 22.

Themes found in open-ended survey questions under the corresponding subconstruct acknowledging social presence.

Subconstruct	Theme	Codes
Social Context	Trust is important for the creation of social presence.	Camaraderie Rapport Relationships Relating to each other Supporting each other Friendship Feeling Comfort Trust
Online Communication	Online communication through asynchronous and synchronous methods must be repetitive in order to communicate authentic self.	Social media can be fake Texting and phone can establish authenticity better than social media Live sessions Being nice and sincere

		Being responsive to others
Professional Connection	Learning professional skills is essential to creating social presence	Accountability Productivity Networking Teamwork Exchanging knowledge

The themes in table 23 give dimensionality to the social presence definition. The open-ended survey questions pointed to trust, authenticity, and learning professional skills as three major factors in building social presence. Students build trust through rapport, relating to each other, supporting each other, friendship, having a sense of camaraderie, and overall engagement with each other. The more times they do so, the more trust can be built. The MALM Network did not provide dynamic opportunities or multiple opportunities for students to interact in real time, or even asynchronously. Additionally, comments about social media being a way for "inauthenticity" were prevalent. Some students felt that social media and online interaction can pave the way for inauthentic identities, and that live sessions, texting, phone calls, and being responsive to others in their teams, is a better way of communicating their identity and authenticity. The MALM network was made to be an outlet where students can present themselves to others. Whether or not they presented their authentic selves cannot be measured, but the overarching theme was that online communication needed to be consistent and constant in order for a student to communicate their authentic self. Lastly, the program is for

business and management students, so naturally, the students focused on using social presence as a way to sharpen their professional skills such as productivity, networking, teamwork, exchanging and communicating knowledge, and accountability. These elements tied back to the subconstruct of professional connection because they are exercising these skills in every class. The MALM Network does not have the capability to do so.

There is also more evidence to support that the MALM network did not affect social presence in the program in a major way. Students mentioned their group work and interactions outside of classrooms more than they did the MALM Network. They also mentioned that the MALM Network was one-dimensional and forgettable. One student completed the survey with:

> "After the initial stage when I entered my profile and browsed other students' profile, I have somewhat forgotten about it. I often forget about my LinkedIn or my Instagram accounts, but there are reminders/events that being emailed to me that keep reminding me of such existence of profiles. MALM Network sends emails from time to time about the same people, I rarely go and browse since I have read the profiles before"

This student explained that the initial novelty wore off fairly quickly, and this supports the waning in interaction and interest with the webpage.

4.2. Research question two

The second research question (RQ2) is: *How can an academic advisor create social presence among online graduate students?* The second research question is strictly qualitative and digs deeper into how social presence is created, but also considers who

and how social presence is cultivated in this study. The question comes with two sub-questions: (RQA) *how can an academic advisor create social presence between themselves and their students*, and (RQB) *what are some of the emerging characteristics of social presence in this instance?* As an introduction to the major findings, table 23 gives the big-picture findings of the qualitative data.

Table 23.

Major findings and sources for data triangulation.

Major findings and the research question they answer	Source of data			
	I	**OE**	**SM**	**AM**
Social presence was perceived to be increased by the academic advisor through the MALM Network. (RQ2)				
1. The MALM Network provides unity for students.	X	X		X
2. The MALM Network provides utility for students.	X	X		
3. The MALM Network provides professional reflection for students.	X	X	X	X
Social presence was developed between the students and also between the advisor and students. (RQ2A)				
1. Social presence can be developed between the students and the academic advisor	X		X	X
2. Academic advisor contributes indirectly to overall social presence in the program.	X		X	X
Social presence provided insight into emerging characteristics special to this study to produce grounded theory. (RQ2B)				
1. Students can have active, passive, positive, and negative presence, or a combination of these in different situations.	X	X	X	X

Note: I = Interview, OE = open-ended survey questions, SM = situational maps, M = analytical memos

The following qualitative data will tell the story of how an academic advisor affected and increased social presence, how it developed between academic advisor and graduate students, and how emerging characteristics provided data for a grounded theory about the nature of social presence in an online setting through the lens of an academic advisor.

4.2.1. Social presence was perceived to be increased by academic advisor through MALM Network

MALM Network and Unity. Within the interviews, there was a reoccurring theme of "togetherness". Gordon stated that the MALM Network helped them realize:

> "we all have not only school work, we have families, you have your personal life, you have school – and at least for me, the fact that we are all going through this together, I do feel a connections with individuals in the program".

Additionally, Anna pointed out that the MALM Network "helps unify – so it's diversifying and unifying everyone on one page". The idea of being "together" and "unified" was pervasive in the interviews. The participants explained that the MALM Network helped the participants realize the diversity of age, gender, professional backgrounds, location, and ages of and in the program. Robert commented on this by saying, "Visually, you can see everybody, and it brings more of an intimate relationship, versus just a person you know by a name on a screen". Social presence tries to measure the social and emotional connections students develop in an online learning environment, and although the statistical analyses point to a decrease in social presence overall, the qualitative data indicates that social presence was strengthened in other, more passive ways, such as creating a sense of "unity" and "togetherness".

MALM Network and Utility. In addition to unity, the interviewees expressed that the MALM Network had utility. The most important way the MALM network was used was to learn about others in the program. Anna explained that she "used it where I want to know a little more about a person before picking who you want to be in a group with". In Anna's example, she used the information from the profiles to make decisions on who she would like in her group or which group she would join in her class. Three other interviewees mentioned that the MALM network helped them familiarize themselves with their classmates, and that it helped "put a face to an electronic signature". Anthony specifically stated that "I like this stuff [MALM Network] because I'm a context person that likes to understand a lot of the 'behind-the-scenes' of people". The MALM Network provided students the ability to learn about each other and become comfortable with those in the program. In relation to social presence, the MALM Network was used by students to make decisions about their online social interactions, which directly affects their social presence overall.

MALM Network and professional reflection. The last theme that the students mentioned in reference to the MALM Network is that it helped them reflect professionally. Olivia pointed out that looking through the MALM Network helps "you see there are plenty of working professionals out there, even outside the US. And they have excellent experience, and as a result, our professional growth is really impacted by that". This brought pride to the students; Gordon mentioned that,

> "You have people from all over the world; you have people in leadership, education, military, etc. I think it broadens the horizons, personally and professionally, to be able to connect with these people".

These sentiments were echoed in the open-ended survey questions, where students referenced the diversity of the program as a strength of the MALM Network.

4.2.2. Academic advisor developed social presence

During the entire process of the study, I realized that I had mimicked the same steps students would have taken when using the MALM Network. I used the profiles to create the interview protocols, and during the development of those questions, I started to get to know the students. Reviewing and coding all profiles not only helped me design the interview protocol, but I also realized that I started to become "socially and emotionally" connected to the students. By default, I learned more about them, which helped me connect their names to an identity. The same process was experienced by the students. Although the students did not review the profiles in as much detail as I did, the interviews provided evidence that the MALM Network provided unity, utility, and professional reflection. I felt like I was a part of the students because I identify with their backgrounds: full-time professionals looking to get a degree in leadership while maintaining family and social lives outside of school.

4.2.2.1. Social presence can be developed between the students and the academic advisor

After thoroughly reviewing MALM profiles to develop interview protocols, speaking with nine MALM students, and reviewing data from the survey, I realized I "caught" the social presence bug. Much like the flu, social presence is contagious. I fervently refer to the definition of social presence, acknowledging that the development of social presence requires "social and emotional connections in an online learning

environment". In hindsight, I developed social presence *with* the students themselves, and evidence suggests the feeling was mutual.

The semi-structured interviews solidified this hunch. Semi-structured interviews provided an in-depth look as to how relationships can develop in an online learning environment, but it also provided clues as to how social presence can be developed among actors inside *and* outside of the program. MALM students would be an actors *inside* the program and the academic advisor would be an actor *outside* of the program, residing on the fringes of the virtual classroom and being there for support of those *inside* the program.

Some of the most powerful and insightful information on how I developed social presence with the online graduate students was from the semi-structured interviews. I started to notice a trend when interviewing students: they would approach the interview with genuine positivity and unintentionally give me clues as to the status of their connection to me. For example, within my interview with Anthony, he asked me about how my sister was doing after her graduation. I was slightly confused as to why he would have brought that up, but looking at the context, it dawned on me that I share much more information with the students, as if they are friends of mine. In this case, I had previously sent out a mass email letting students know I would be out of the office because my sister was graduating with her bachelor's. Apparently, students pay attention to these things.

I specifically chose to have semi-structured interviews, because I wanted to have the flexibility of conducting interviews that were robust not just for collecting formal data but also unplanned informal data. Some of that information is in an excerpt of one of the interviews:

Gina: Do you travel a lot?

Anthony: I used to, now for this program, I've stopped!

Gina: I haven't been able to hang out with any friends and family because, well… I'm doing this (my dissertation). I know how you feel.

Anthony: Except for your sister's graduation! I hope she is doing well!

Gina: You remembered!

It was at this point in the interview that the mood shifted towards a more casual tone. We started talking about his first impressions of the MALM Program, and as a side-lib he mentioned, "After seeing the diversity in the program, I got this feeling that you communicate with all these students, and I thought, gosh, how does she do that?" In that moment, I responded with a laugh, adding that I don't know how I do it, I just do. This strengthened my "social presence" towards Anthony. My "social and emotional" connection was strengthened because he noticed the amount of work I had put into my academic advising and also remembered that my family was a part of my personal fabric outside of the program.

In reflection to what Anthony said, I reviewed the other interviews once more and found many more examples of appreciative comments from students towards me. Olivia, who was admitted in Spring 2018, mentioned that we were "friends":

Gina: Do you think the online aspect of the program is a barrier? Are there's social cues that might get missed or a bit harder to pin down?

Olivia: I think the disadvantage would reside in communication. To be fair, you and I have developed a friendship right? Because you are my advisor, and we've bounced back a few times for the last year if not longer…

In that moment, and in review of the interview, my instant reaction was "she said it, not me! We are friends!" Another example is when Anna mentioned that I never updated her on my dissertation:

> Gina: So that's pretty much everything I have to cover for this interview! I've gotten a lot of insight from you, I appreciate that you did this –
>
> Anna: Is this your dissertation thing before you graduate?
>
> Gina: Yes, I was collecting quantitative data, and now I'm doing interviews.
>
> Anna: It's funny – I thought it was kind of weird, but I wanted to reach out to you because you had said "I've got to go in front of the board and present it!" but you didn't sent out an update. And not that you had to, but some people (like myself) were like "how did it go?!" They were rooting for you as well!

As she said that, I started to become happy to think that people I do not know (in-person) were rooting for me to successfully complete my dissertation, even though I am not a MALM student. MALM students had even started adding me on LinkedIn. To this date, 33 students have connected with me on LinkedIn. I purposefully do not add them on social media unless they add me. This is because I want the student to bridge that gap on their own.

As an academic advisor, I make it a point to connect with students as *humans.* Generally, I approach everyone as genuinely as possible. Academic advisors must hear a lot of personal information from students, and sometimes, that connection is needed to make sure we serve our students correctly. If a student does not feel comfortable sharing difficult information, we may not be able to provide information on how to request a refund, submit for medical/compassionate withdrawal and much more. As part of my

personal being and professional approach, I share information that I feel helps me connect with my students as a possible friend and mentor. In this example, Anna was referencing the time I had taken some days off to study for my comprehensive examinations and proposal defense. I sent out a mass email to all students letting them know that I was going to be out because of this. I did not think to update them after the proposal defense, and so Anna mentioning this solidified the argument that some of the students had become "socially and emotionally" connected to me (and vice-versa) through online means.

A situation map I created helps evaluate how my status as a graduate student and my role as an academic advisor is important to the study. The narrative also lines up with my experiences and the information coming from the semi-structured interviews and advisor evaluation:

> SOCIAL PRESENCE characteristics can be "caught" (like the flu) by the researcher. The ACADEMIC ADVISOR AS A GRADUATE STUDENT does not have the same authority as a FACULTY member would have. Students also know that the ACADEMIC ADVISOR is a graduate student. Pro-social behaviors were experienced to enhance the feelings of social presence on behalf of the academic advisor. The SOCIAL CONTEXT of the academic advisor was enhanced by reviewing the MALM NETWORK profiles, conducting semi-structured interviews, and constant communication through EMAIL with students. Students also used SOCIAL MEDIA: they added the academic advisor out of their own free-will on LinkedIn, and this can be interpreted as a PROFESSIONAL CONNECTION effort. This points that students want to

maintain a connection with the academic advisor. ONLINE COMMUNICATION tools such as WHATSAPP, ZOOM, and CANVAS were used as well. All elements of SOCIAL PRESENCE manifested between the academic advisor and the MALM STUDENTS as an indirect result of the creation of the MALM NETWORK.

In conclusion, it is possible for an academic advisor to develop social presence between themselves and their program's online students.

4.2.2.2. Academic advisors contributes indirectly to overall social presence in the program.

Throughout the data, evidence was found that the academic advisor (the researcher) had indirectly affected the development of social presence between students. For example, in one of the interviews, it was mentioned that "as you go through the course program that's laid out for you, you end up seeing people who you're familiar with". Looking to situational mapping, I realized that one the practices I use for students to stay on track affected the development of their social presence directly. When students first started the MALM program, two course plans are given to them and they are encouraged to choose and follow *one* of those plans for the duration of their program. Most students do stick with the plans, very rarely do students deviate from their course plans to begin with. And if they do, they end up on track once again when I work with them on realigning the courses they need to complete to graduate on time. This would be an example of how an academic advisor indirectly affects social presence among students in the program. After making the ordered situational map, I created the following narrative to explain this finding:

An ACADEMIC ADVISOR (the researcher) directly affects SOCIAL PRESENCE through COURSE PLANS. They encourage students to pick a plan and follow it through for the duration of the MALM PROGRAM. This is reinforced through systematic reference to SUCCESS in the program (e.g., GRADUATE STUDENT POLICIES AND PROCEDURES), but also made clear in the mandatory ORIENTATION VIDEOS all students complete before the start of the program. Most students continue their plans without changing it, which leads to more chances to develop TRUST, CAMARADERIE, FRIENDSHIPS, and PROFESSIONAL CONNECTIONS between each other. Most of the program's courses require GROUP PROJECTS, and if students are following a prescribed plan, then most of them will end up interacting with each other multiple times, reinforcing their overall SOCIAL CONTEXT. All these situations add up to a strengthened SOCIAL PRESENCE between the MALM STUDENTS.

Not only do the course plans provide what courses to enroll in for each semester, the course maps also incidentally keep students in the same courses with each other. This creates more opportunities for students to connect "socially and emotionally in an online learning environment", thus increasing the chances of social presence being developed. This was not my intention, but for retention purposes, keeping students on their chosen plan keeps them on track for graduation. A side-benefit is that social presence is strengthened in this manner. A couple of strong examples came from the semi-structured interviews.

Two interviewees, Liam and Anthony, both joined the program in Fall 2018, and referred to the course plans in their interviews. They suggested that the course plans

directly affected who they got to know in the program because each student was following a similar plan. Anthony is an older gentleman, in his late fifties, with a robust career in finance. He had mentioned that a group of individuals had continued to speak with each other between courses, outside of group work. He indicated that he had become part of a group of five gentleman and that "it looks like this group wants to stick together. We just finished out a project for this class, and we are still getting together on WhatsApp to chat". As I asked about the group, he elaborated that "I think they probably are doing the three classes for one semester; they probably took the regular two-year program. I did the extended plan. But they will be taking a class that I am doing next semester". This is a great example of how students talk about their progress in the program with each other while creating groups and bonds– eventually they end up knowing each other's schedules enough to know which courses they will take together.

Liam, a consulting expert in his early fifties, also expressed that there is a group of individuals that he looks out for to collaborate in group projects,

> "There is a group of people that I've done multiple things with that we communicate fairly well; you don't always get to pick the people in your project in each class. When you do, we tend to end up together. How can I say this… they aren't as old as me, but they are more experienced? So, we've worked well together. I've had about three or four projects with this same group"

Not enough information was given to indicate that both Liam and Anthony were talking about the same group of individuals who focus on working together through the program, but I found it curious that both of them were hyper-aware of what courses their classmates were taking in the next semester. The main takeaway is that these two

individuals stayed on track with their course plans and took advantage of creating social and emotional connections with others while continuing their social connections outside of the virtual classroom.

4.2.3. Social presence provided insight into development of grounded theory.

Patterns started to emerge after multiple phases of coding and re-coding. I started noticing the way students experienced social presence had two major dimensions that had not been fully mentioned in previously established literature. First, social presence in this study and in relation to the MALM Network seems to be passive rather than active. Secondly, the development of social presence among students could be either positive or negative, very rarely did it emerge as neutral.

Social presence as a passive and active construct. The original approach to social presence involved trying to record the ways in which students actively engaged with each other in an online setting with relation to their professional connections and social contexts. As the study progressed, I found that social presence started to take a passive role in relation to the MALM Network. Students used the MALM Network to absorb information about others and it affected how they interacted with others in their group projects. However, there were exceptions to the rules. Those who had entered the program before the implementation of the MALM Network had to embrace a more "active" version of social presence.

One interviewee, Robert, did not have the MALM Network when he joined the program. His approach to social presence was more active, mainly because the network was not available to him when he started. One important detail is that he had already received his bachelor's from an online institution, and thus, being an online student came

naturally to him. Using different tools such as google hangouts, zoom, whatsapp, email, and texting, Robert was used to being active with his classmates to forge social and emotional connections. He explained that as he started the program, he would have to "feel out for the kind of people who are involved in the program". His reference to having to "feel people out" meant that he had to find out about people manually, without having a place to reference who was in the program. He would ask questions in the discussion boards and continue to monitor and take note of who was in the program. In the interview he referenced the course plans by saying "you go through the course program that's laid out by the school of global management, and you end up seeing people you're familiar with". His multiple experiences with the same students gave him opportunity to get to know or to "feel out" those students in the courses. He eventually came up with the overall conclusion that the typical MALM student is a person who is "serious about their career, and serious about moving forward with their education and being successful". At the time of the interview, Robert was in the last semester of the program, and mentioned that "having everything in one place (the MALM Network) gives you an outline of steps you can take to get you oriented with who is in the program. For new students, it is really good to have structure".

Another student, Gordon, had similar feelings. He had also started the program in Fall 2018, before the MALM Network was implemented. He also had to get to know others without having the knowledge of who else was in the program as he progressed. He echoed the same sentiments that the MALM Network was great for students just starting out,

> "Ask more questions, have way more in-depth questions, surveys, anything like that so you can learn about individuals. Especially if it's somebody that maybe just started the program six months ahead of me. Given them a chance. We might not be in the same classes, but we might have this or that in common. I think that would be super beneficial from where I stand"

His suggestions imply that the benefit of having the MALM Network is to be able to learn about others in a more passive manner. Gordon outlined that "I would love to be able to spend, even if it is just like 15 minutes to meet with someone who is just starting the program, because I was a little overwhelmed when I started". He also stated that the MALM Network could contribute to student connections, "What a lot of comes down to is that the more you (students) are able to give into the profiles, the more that we can put out there of our experiences. That's what's going to be more useful to increase those connections with students".

Anthony, a student who joined in Fall 2018 before the MALM Network was implemented, had plenty to say about the usefulness of the MALM Network and its effects on him. Anthony was very reflective and introspective about his profile:

> "Actually, (the MALM Network) exceeded my expectations, because as much as some other people did, I thought my contribution was 'so-so'; it wasn't all that impressive. The picture that I chose was not that good and then you allowed me to change the picture; and people explained their type of leadership and who they are. I just said "authentic", but a lot of people described their leadership style in-depth. I thought that was great. I like seeing that. I need to spend some time on developing mine! The person I had in my first group – I think you featured her in

> one of the emails; she was on whatsapp. I liked the way she described her background, and what she likes and so forth. But that was impressive."

This quote made me realize that the MALM Network could have made other students aware of how they present themselves to each other. It also gives evidence that social presence can be passive. Anthony's experience indicated he had started to form "social and emotional" connections to his fellow classmates without having to interact with them directly. His reference to a specific person's profile, and how she presented herself, gave him a template on how to mirror his profile on the site. This also gave him a positive opinion on his peers, connecting him to his classmates in a passive manner, without having to actually get to know them in real-time.

Anna, who was in her mid-thirties, used the MALM Network to strategize about how she would interact with others. Anna pointed out to me that she is not social media savvy, saying "I don't have a Facebook, I don't have any of those things. And I am completely content with that". Taking this into account, I was surprised to learn about how she utilized the MALM Network to her benefit without having to interact directly with others. She went into detail about how she used the MALM Network to verify trustworthiness of those she interacted with in her group work:

> It actually helps to familiarize yourself with other classmates, that is actually super cool when you can use it as both – for example, the teacher has an open forum in their class where you can decide who you want to be in a group with. I've used that (MALM Network) where I might want to know a little more about a person. And/or if you are already assigned in your group, again, you can still utilize that to find out more about them. Not being creepy, there's been times that

I investigate to see what people say about themselves. You know, to compare how they do introductions in the class and then you can see if it's consistent or true.

Anna's comments connect back to the ideas of building trust in an online graduate program. To the credit of descriptive coding and how the themes of "camaraderie" and "friendship" emerged, Anna's approach to building passive social presence comes from the intention of building trust in order to create friendships. Her development of trust started to depend on how others represented themselves in the MALM Network.

Social Presence is an intricate construct that can be approached from many different ways. As a way to start to building the characteristics of passive and active presence, I took the codes that I found and started categorizing them according to being passive or active. Table 24 below lists those basic examples.

Table 24.

Examples of passive and active presence

Passive	Active
Learning about others in the program (for example, MALM Network, social media)	Interacting through discussion boards
Turning in homework/assignments	Communicating through email, text, phone, chat with other students and professor
Browsing course materials	
Downloading course materials	Working on group projects
	Reaching out to others for help

Overall, conversations with students indicated that those who had started the program before the implementation of the MALM Network had to use active techniques

to create social presence within their program. The interviews also suggest that there were benefits of having the MALM Network for passive social presence purposes. The MALM Network contributed to their social presence by passively constructing their social contexts, giving new students a chance to refine their social image while absorbing others' images.

Social presence as a positive or negative construct. Emerging characteristics of social presence point out that a student could have positive or negative social presence with other online students. Again, referring to the definition of social presence being "socially and emotionally connected to others in an online learning environment", this presents a myriad of ways students can internalize social presence as positive or negative. The degree to which someone has positive or negative social presence depends on many different variables and individual traits (Oh, Bailenson, & Welch, 2018). This can be variables such as the student's own personalities, time dedicated to socializing with other students, personal lives, outside influences, and more. Some students provided more evidence towards having positive or negative social presence based on their individual experiences. The richest data to support this argument was found mostly in the semi-structured interviews, but also a bit in the open-ended survey questions. Although there is no set definition of what positive and negative social presence is, the following evidence provides insight on what might be a start to defining the terms.

Aspects of positive social presence emerged when interviewees explained certain interactions with others in the program. For example, Anna pointed out that students connect (after classes have ended) and "still serve as cheerleaders for each other" saying things to others like "it's hard but you'll get through it!" when they start their next

semester. This example and others include prosocial behaviors, consistency in positive behaviors among peers, compliments, and expressing positive emotion. A couple of the interviews stand out to me when it comes to the development of positive social presence.

Paul, who is an African American male in his fifties, gave a robust outlook on the positive experiences that he has had in the program. He was also a special case for the interviews. Due to unfortunate personal matters, he had taken a leave of absence for the exact amount of time that I had implemented the MALM Network. I wanted to include him in the interviews because I wanted to get a real-time reaction to the MALM Network from someone who had not known about the intervention.

Storytelling is Paul's strength, and he opened-up about *many* things related to his experience in the program. During the interview, Paul realized the MALM Network clued him in on how close he was to another student that he had never met in person. He pointed out that Anthony's profile mentioned where he works, and where Anthony is from. Paul was astounded to find that Anthony "is vice president of that company, and my mother retired from that same company". At first glance, it doesn't seem too important, but what was astonishing was that Paul's mother had retired from the same company back in 2002, while Anthony started working for that company in 1987. To make things even more serendipitous, they worked in the same city, and both Anthony and Paul grew up in the same neighborhood. Both individuals have never met. Until their involvement in the program, Anthony and Paul had not crossed paths. Paul had initially noticed Anthony's location when he added him on LinkedIn, and the MALM Network solidified his suspicions. In addition to his unexpected connection with another MALM

Student, Paul also expressed being part of a tight-knit online group of individuals who continue to chat outside of the virtual classroom. Anthony is also part of that same group.

As stated before, the degree to which positive social presence is developed depends on a multitude of variables. In Paul's case, he is very outgoing and sociable. Paul referred to many people in the program by first name, which implies that he is very social with others in the program,

> "Our group is staying together through our whatsapp group. We kept it open and we still talk to each other, even since the class has ended. Some of them are in the class, like Anthony, and [redacted name]. Another student, [redacted name], is in one of my other classes. As a matter of fact, we are on the same team – you get to pick what team you're on, and so I picked to be on a team I already knew"

Paul even clued me in on how students sometimes use applications such as WhatsApp in unconventional manners:

> "I always forget his name, but it's funny because I was confused for a long time. He never created a WhatsApp account, he uses his wife's account. I think his name is [redacted]. He uses his wife's app. So I kept wondering 'how come I never see her in the program?' and I realized 'she's in our group, and we have two people named [redacted] in this group, and only see one listed in the class, so what happened to [redacted]? So I asked, and [redacted] said "whenever you see the name [redacted], that's me! I don't use WhatsApp for nothing else. It's never my wife, I just grab her phone."

Paul jovially explained how this student did not want to use WhatsApp or download it on their device, so they used their wife's app on their phone to keep updated with the group.

Paul always seemed to be okay with reaching out to others through social media and online communications, “I’m intrigued by the fact that [redacted name] is a broadcaster and my daughter is doing conversions media. I reached out to him to talk about my daughter and we connected on LinkedIn.” At that point, he had also mentioned that he was comfortable reaching out to others, especially if the invitation was there to do so,

> “As a matter of fact, he put the invitation to connect through LinkedIn at the end of his posts in discussion boards. When he did is introduction in the class, he explained that he is on LinkedIn and to ‘feel free to reach out and connect’. So, I sent him a connection invitation within an hour or so”

Paul’s proactive mindset on connecting with others contributes to an overall positive social presence. Since the interviews were conducted over Zoom, I was able to share my screen and present to him the MALM Network. I was also able to capture his initial reactions to the webpage. As I scrolled through the MALM network profile page, he immediately started naming students’ that he knew by heart,

“[Redacted name], she’s been in a lot of classes with me, and we’ve commented on a lot of each other’s discussion boards. I’ve connected with [redacted name] on Linkedin. I also know [redacted name] and [redacted name] from some classes. Yep! I know these people!”

But one moment in the interview captured my attention fully. When I had asked about whether he would like the MALM network to be more personal or professional, Paul answered with, “I want to *know* the person. I would rather have a personal side in these profiles. Honestly, personally, *who you are says a lot when it comes to business*”. I

meditated a lot on this comment. These students are business students, and yet, these profiles serve as a gateway to who they are as *people* rather than just professionals.

Olivia, an African American woman in her early forties, was admitted to the program in Spring 2018, has been in the program the longest. Instead of sticking with a specific course plan, she extended her time in the program to also receive a certificate from another department. She has gone through the evolution of the program since its launch and has experienced many iterations of course plans that have changed due to higher administrative decisions. Yet, she still stuck around to complete the program. Her interview exemplified positive social presence because she stressed the importance of community and belonging.

> Gina: What is being socially connected through an online environment mean to you in this program?
>
> Olivia: For me it's made it real. I have learned from my classmates. And I have felt a kinship, even though we don't really talk outside of class. I genuinely care about my students. That really has given me community. In addition to the caliber of our professors, I feel we got pretty great students. I have learned from them, and I have felt validated from them. They encourage me, I feel like we are in this together. It has felt like college for me

What stands out most about what she has mentioned is that she maintains a positive social presence among her peers even though she does not actively talk to them outside of the virtual classroom. This implies that a positive social presence can be maintained without having to continuously be active in communications with others in an online environment.

Throughout the interviews, there was also a shadow to social presence. Sifting through the data, I realized that students could also develop negative "social and emotional" connections towards one another within the online environment. Negative social presence can be attributed a variety of items: a group project gone wrong, a lack of communication from another classmate, a misunderstanding, or maybe even social norms intruding on group dynamics. Either way, negative social presence indicators started to bubble up in the data.

Christopher, Liam, and Paul explained that there were occasions where students did not "show up" to participate, and the group had to carry their weight through to the end. Their experiences were separate, but very similar. This created tension, and as they recollected their memories on the events, I could sense that they were slightly perturbed at the fact that the student did not make efforts to communicate or explain their lack of participation. Christopher explained his frustration,

> "When it comes down to the social aspect, I think it really comes down to getting buy in from some of the students who aren't participating to the level that they should. Because there is *literally nothing you can do about it.* It's not like you see them in class, and you're like 'Gina, what the hell!?', or 'Where's your part of the project?' – you don't have the opportunity. So when they fail to uphold their end, then that falls on those who do.

Liam's case was a bit more detailed:

> "I'll start with the worst failure I had, in the accounting class. Fortunately, I am fairly adept at accounting, so the class wasn't a tremendous struggle for me. The class had a group project that was a 30-page written assignment with a whole

bunch of tables that needed to be added to it. I ended up single-handedly writing the thirty pages as well as doing the tables for *all five people.* Everyone else participating kept saying 'I don't understand it, so I don't know how to contribute'. That was a bit challenging, and I know that class, from what I had seen, a lot of people had difficulty. That was probably the worst failure I had."

Liam went on to explain that he had experienced multiple times like this, but not to that extent. That particular example made him irritated, mainly because he felt helpless to motivate others. This was something he pointed out later on in the interview, stating:

> "One or two people will say okay to meeting over a phone call, but then nothing else happens. And one or two people won't respond at all, so generally what happens from there, I'll give it that day, and then I'll start giving assignments. It ends up with me assigning things to turn in, and at this point, I just fill in the gaps. It gets annoying! I'm certainly as busy, if not busier, than the next person, so it gets annoying".

Paul explained his situation when other students would not show up to task:

> Gina: have you had any roadbumps? Any experiences with other students that have been difficult?
>
> Paul: In one of my classes, there was a guy who just disappeared. He was on our project team, and after the first week, he disappeared. And he showed back up when we were getting ready to submit the project, and he said 'the project looks great!', and I'm thinking 'NO… we haven't seen you since the first of the first week of class of prep week!" I noted that on my evaluations. He wrote no part of that paper. NONE!

Gina: and he got credit for it?

Paul: no, I think people called him on task, I know I did! And normally I'm not like that. Normally, if you're not causing any problems, I would be fine with it. But it's like *come on.*

Although students "ghosting" other students seemed to be the theme and root of the development of negative social presence, one example really blew the lid on why negative social presence can be a real experience. Stephanie, an international student, explained that she was the receiver of many microaggressions in a group project:

Stephanie: For example, we were investigating about India. They wanted to go and do their own thing rather than stick to the assignment. I asked them why they do that, and to stick to the real research. And they said that the professor is never going to know and ignored me. That group made me feel very attacked. For example, we were talking about analyzing a specific bank from a different country. I knew how some of those things worked. I happen to have a bank account with that bank. But they say, before I could let them know, "no but you don't know because you don't have an account in that bank, it doesn't work that way'. In fact, I do, but I never said anything because they didn't need to know. I wanted to cool down the waters. I felt attacked.

Gina: So you felt attacked?

Stephanie: Yes. Another example, is that my home country is a good market, we needed to pick a country outside of the United States. It's a good country, so I say let's pick it. And they say, 'no, we need to do India because your market (my

home country) is not worth it.' Okay fine. It's like they know everything, they don't want to hear what you have to say anyway.

As I was hearing her voice, I could tell that this struck a very deep chord. Even though this experience was from one of her first classes, some of it still seemed raw. At the time of the interview, she was preparing to enter her last semester of the program. In this situation, not only was her own expertise being discredited, but she felt that her own country was being slighted as well. These are definite grounds for the development of negative social presence.

Gina: Was the group mostly men or women?

Stephanie: All women and a man. They were more complicated. In fact, two or three attacked me, and then wrote me "I'm sorry, I'm not like that". I never answered them, I don't like confrontation.

Gina: Did it make you feel better?

Stephanie: no, it didn't. I felt like "whatever, let's finish this class"

Stephanie's experience did not stop there. She also explained that she had to maneuver the microaggressions *and* communicate with another international student in the group who did not have an iPhone:

Stephanie: This group, [name redacted], from [redacted] was in it. I have a US number. And the group added me on instant messaging. Because here in the states, they don't really use WhatsApp. [name redacted] wasn't added because he doesn't have a US number. So I have to take all the group talk, copy all the messages to WhatsApp to him or email him because they excluded him.

Gina: But I have family in Panama, and I just put their numbers into my phone without hesitation. It's pretty easy!

Stephanie: I tell you, people in the USA…

Gina: I wish they would have contacted me, and I would have given them instructions on how to use WhatsApp.

Stephanie: He wrote me; I added him to LinkedIn, and said "Hi [name redacted], this is what we have to do." This was my *first* course and I was like "I can't believe it! This is happening to me, but why?!" They wanted to exclude me too, but because I had a US number, I could participate.

I found this instance to be an example of a situation where negative social presence could be developed. Stephanie experienced being judged, slighted, and misunderstood. On top of that, she had to help another international student who was being outright ignored. These sorts of social dynamics in an online environment can prime someone for negative "social and emotional" connections towards others. She continued to interact with her group, but even after some of them apologized, she did not feel as if she needed to mend the connection with them.

Taking into account these experiences in the interviews, I started to categorize what it meant to have a positive or negative presence in this specific study. I did not start with a priori codes. Table 25 below gives you examples of what emerged.

Table 25.

Examples of positive and negative presence

Positive	Negative

Good feelings about the program	No interaction with others (discussion boards, group projects)
High grades/good grades	Apathy towards program
Proficient use of technological applications	Low grades
Proactive use of resources (example: tutoring, office hours)	Late assignments
Assignments on time	Refusal to use technological applications
Learning new content and skills	

Combining active, passive, negative, and positive. As I continued to re-code and review the interviews multiple times, I noticed that passive, active, negative, and positive could be combined. For example, someone can be positive and active by encouraging others to succeed. Another student could be negative and passive if they have developed a lack of trust or lack participation within their online courses. This was the last dimension to add to the grounded theory. Table 26 explains the positive passive, positive active, negative passive, and negative active emerging examples of social presence.

Table 26.

Characteristics of positive passive, positive active, negative passive, and negative active emerging characteristics of social presence.

Positive Passive	Positive Active	Negative Passive	Negative Active
Being inspired by others	Starting and maintaining friendships	Lack of participation	Microagressions

Feelings of kinship	Cheerleading/Encouragement towards others	No response to communications from others	Intentional exclusion of others
Feelings of community	Asking others about their well-being, families, or general life	Lack of trust	Conflict with others
Empathy towards others	Building trust	Apathy	
Having good feelings towards others	Asking others to study together		
Having good opinions of others			

Below are the definitions for the different dimensions:

Active presence can be any sort of interaction in the online environment, whether positive or negative. For example, contributing to discussions and participating in group work can be considered active presence.

Passive presence may be instances where the individual absorbs or observes information about their learning environment. For example, Anna used the MALM network to absorb information about her classmates, which led to social decisions later on.

Positive presence can be anything related to the student individually without concerning anyone else. An example of positive presence can be high grades in classes.

Negative presence is anything related to the student individually without concerning any other person that negatively affects the student's progress or

ability to maintain presence online. An example would be someone who joins a class but does not participate in discussion or submits their homework.

In addition to the four main dimensions, four sub-dimensions were found to intersect with the main dimensions. Below are the definitions for each sub-dimension:

Positive active presence: positively interacting with others in the online program. Examples are creating friendships, cheerleading, and encouragement towards other students.

Negative Active presence: using anti-social behaviors (ignoring, slights, negative comments) when interacting with others in the online program. Examples are microaggressions towards others and/or the active exclusion of others in group work or socialization.

Positive Passive presence: experiencing positive feelings through interaction with others in the online program. Examples can be feelings of kinship, empathy, and feeling inspired by those around them.

Negative passive presence: experiencing negative feelings through the interaction (or lack thereof) with others in the online program. Examples: no interest in interaction with others, apathetic towards group work or program participation, and lack of trust towards others in an online environment.

Throughout the study there were examples that popped up through the results. Stephanie's experience applies to the negative aspects of the theory. She experienced both a negative passive and negative active sense of presence. Her wish for no confrontation or continuation of conflict applies to a negative passive presence towards her group members at the time. The students who purposefully tried to exclude her and

actively used microaggressions towards her and the other international student is an example of students embodying negative active presence. On the other hand, Olivia experienced a sense of kinship with others through her interactions in the virtual classroom, which can be categorized as positive passive presence. Anna used the MALM Network to learn about others and make social decisions later, which is not a negative or a positive action, and lands it under “passive presence”.

The overall sense is that social presence is an intricate web of social interactions that is hard to measure through just one simple intervention. The MALM network provided an opportunity to learn about how students create social and emotional connections in an online program, but it also allowed to explore the role of the academic advisor with online graduate students. Out of the quantitative and qualitative data, I concluded that social presence is something that can be elusive, while one tool measured a decrease in social presence, the interviews suggested a development of social presence. I think where the biggest blind spot about the study was the inability to predict *how* students would use the MALM network. While I assumed they would use it to connect with each other actively, they ended up using it passively each in their own manner

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The construct of social presence is hard to pin down. After more than 30 years of published literature, social presence still does not have an official definition. Even so, strides have been made to understand how social relationships are formed and experience through online technologies. This study reviewed the overall impact on students of a simple webpage intervention in an online graduate program. This webpage provided a location for student profiles, which were 100% volunteered, and students posted information about themselves. Some students spent time developing their profiles by providing a photo of themselves, contact information, resumes, and thoughtful answers to questions about themselves. Others did not upload information or pictures, and only provided one-worded answers. A pre-and-posttest was conducted with students who had been in the program, excluding those who entered the program when the webpage was already inaction. Semi-structuired interviews, analytical memos, and situational mapping were used to obtain and triangulate quantitative and qualitative data. Although the quantitative data did not show a desirable impact on the students overall, the qualitiative data implied otherwise.

Although this study does not provide *statistical* significance, it has *substantive* significance. Kelley & Preacher (2012) define substantive significance to be more subjective while statistical significance is more objective (p. 139). From a substantive lens, the data shows that the intervention had minimal to no effect. Upon triangulation of data, it became clear that the study is useful to opening up new ways of designing interventions. It has provided not only information as to how students create social

presence within an online learning environment, but it also has given some clues into how students might shift their "presence" in a combination of passive, active, positive, and negative states while in the program. It has also provided feedback from students on creating other interventions that are more interactive and collective. Its substantive significance to my context is essential to the development of grounded theory and practice.

Overall, I learned how the implementation of such interventions on behalf of an academic staff *outside* of the virtual classroom is different than social presence studies *within* virtual classrooms. Results show that academic advisors can indirectly influence the social presence between students through course plans. They also show that academic advisor can develop (or "catch") social presence and form bonds between themselves and the students. Social presence was found to have emerging characteristics such as: active presence, passive presence, positive presence, and negative presence. This last chapter is a discussion on 1) using the proposed grounded theory to inform practice, 2) the future role of academic advising, 3) future directions with this study, and 4) implications for higher education at large.

Using information for practice. If the MALM network would not have been implemented, the dimensions of social presence in this instance would not have been discovered. This study helps inform practice for university staff and faculty members because it shines a light on the complex nature of social relationships in an online environment. Student retention, engagement, and satisfaction are not simple goals to accomplish, and social presence exposes just how intricate they are.

The study shows that the difference between social presence and social context is a very thin line, but there is a difference. Although the definition of social presence is related to making social and emotional connections, social context runs along the same lines. The difference that I saw was that a social context can be built through the lens of the student depending on what technology they use, while social presence is an emerging, more inherent, part of being in an online learning environment. Students create their social context depending on the technology they use, one student can use WhatsApp and another uses iChat. Each experience is different, and thus the way they interpret their social context can be different. Social presence is the result of the context being built. Some students find it easier to develop relationships in online learning environments due to the technology they use to build their social contexts, while others might find it harder. This information can be used to zero in on what technologies work the best, which then can be used across the board in all courses to unite students in a cohesive manner.

Another use for this information is the how the students started to create or mention a "shared sense of identity". The words "we are all in this together" starts to touch on how students were starting to think in terms of "we". Since there are indicators that academic advisors affect social presence indirectly, their feedback helps me create ideas for new interventions that are collective rather than individually based. For example, professional development webinars, where MALM students can present their expertise in their field while also including skills they are learning from the program. Monthly "virtual" sessions where students can log on and I can mediate conversation in a casual way. Not only does the literature state that a shared sense of identity can boost morale, but it can start to connect students in terms of a group dynamic rather than having

them individually reach out to each other. This is reflected in the components of the social theory of learning. The social theory of learning provides four dimensions: community, identity, practice, and meaning (Wenger, 1998). Using this as a foundation, it is possible that the new interventions can support the development community, shared identity, practice (of using technology), and create meaning for the students while in the program.

I feel that once that common ground is established it would be easier for them to approach each other after the webinars or virtual sessions. These sorts of activities would have the students benefit from "non-formal" or "informal" learning. These experiences provide opportunities for students to learn from each other and their social situations, which can be just as important and valuable than formal learning in classrooms. Tang et al. (2017) compare non-formal and formal learning, saying, "whereas formal learning is organized, intentional and has learning objectives, informal learning is not intentionally arranged and has no set objective" (p. 553). They also state that "non-formal learning may be provided in the workplace and through the activities of civil society organizations and groups" (Tang et al., 2017). Using this concept, these future interventions are great to start measuring exactly what non-formal learning is and how it emerges or contributes to the richness of an online learning program.

Student retention efforts usually end at enrolling the student in their classes for the next semester, which officially counts them as "retained". This study not only gives higher education practitioners a glimpse into how social relationships develop among online graduate students, it provides more information into the context as to why students may or may not continue in the program. Students who experience negative passive or

negative active presence can be at risk of leaving the program. One positive experience may turn that around for them. As academic advisors, there is no way of knowing if any negative experiences are taking place, unless trust is developed with students. Which even then is not guaranteed they will communicate, but using empathetic advising techniques while keeping in mind the different emerging characteristics from the grounded theory can help design different approaches to those emerging characteristics.

Student engagement is hard to gauge, especially because academic advisors and coordinators are not in the thick of social development in the classrooms. There are typical indicators of engagement, such as high grades, participation in discussion, and completing group work. There are no definitive steadfast ways of measuring student engagement outside of these examples for academic advisors. This study provides insight into how students engage with each other and their courses. Some students prefer to have low engagement, and through the survey, made it very clear that social outlets are not necessary (in their eyes) for success. Other students are highly engaged, such as Paul and Anna, and take advantage of opportunities to learn about others (whether through the MALM network or through other means).

High student satisfaction is something that colleges strive to achieve. High satisfaction can boost morale in the program. Olivia explained that she felt a sense of kinship, and that Thunderbird has a high caliber of professors and courses. This indicates a high sense of satisfaction. High satisfaction can also lead to students referring others to apply to the program due to their positive experiences. The study provides data into students' satisfaction on opportunities to connect with each other. Some felt that the MALM network was a great addition to the program, others were ambivalent to it.

The role of academic advising. Academic advising is usually seen as prescriptive practice, where an assigned individual informs new and current students of policies and procedures of their program. They also guide students to enroll into their next courses. In general, that is usually the case, but academic advising can be very dynamic and affect students in a major way. From personal experience, in this instance, students connect back with the department and university through their connection with me. I am the first person they talk to after they have been admitted, and the last person to help through through their graduation ceremony. Students open up to me about their personal lives, professional lives, hopes, fears, and much more. This intimate connection cannot be copied – it organically evolves as the student continues to progress through the program.

The study has made me hyper-aware of my own academic advising style. Not all academic advisors are as personal and comfortable sharing information about themselves. I am not opposed to talking about my family, friends, educational, or professional experiences. My personal approach to student advising is to be as authentic as possible. Creating and maintaining trust with students is a huge part of my strategy for student retention, but it is also a way of keeping true to my own self.

After multiple phases of coding and analysis, I started to create a visual to help understand and articulate the experiences of the students in relation to social presence in this particular study. Figure 5 below is the visual created to explain how social presence manifested in this study. It is important to note that this visual was created through the lens of the researcher, who is the academic advisor of the students, and it is *not* a steadfast interpretation of social presence as a whole.

Figure 5. *Grounded theory on active, passive, negative, and positive presence.*

The visual created is the beginnings of a grounded theory on the state of social presence a student may be in while in an online education program. Future development of this theory would require on-going data collection about how academic advisors interact with their students, and if they can intuitively place their students in a category when they are advising them. In my own experience, when speaking with a student on the phone or through zoom, I try to gauge where they are at in terms of social presence and ask myself questions like “Are they experiencing positive interactions with others?” and “are they participating and receiving high grades”? All of these questions are important to an academic advisor, and the visual can help orient the advisor as they speak with the student to further provide the support they need. For example, if a student is complaining about other students being hostile towards them, we can say that they can land in a “negative passive” role. This is an over-simplified example, but once an academic advisor can gauge where the student is, pre-determined strategies can be taken to move

the student from one side of the visual to the more positive side. These strategies can be anything from withdrawing the student from the course and suggesting they go to another course (if possible), suggesting that they talk to the professor, or maybe just giving them the time of day to vent can improve their chances of switching to a more positive state. Additional research is needed, but using this information can be important to creating a possible community of practice for academic advisors university-wide. It would be interesting to see how this can enhance the roles of academic advisors but also provide more insight into how students develop social presence in their programs.

During the interviews, students brought up previous moments of when I had shared pieces of my life. Anthony had mentioned my sister and her graduation, Anna had asked about the results of my dissertation proposal, and Olivia had hinted that we had developed a friendship. These instances are not isolated, it is very common for students to ask me questions about my life. All of these examples fall under "positive active social presence" for me. The students mentioned my personal details without my solicitation. This indicated to me that they had started forming "social and emotional connections" towards me through the online mediums. Overall, this study solidified and underscored the importance of an academic advisor and how they approach connecting with students. My own style and approach is rooted in treating everyone with respect, but also genuinely getting to know them.

Inversely speaking, I started to form social presence indicators towards the students. During the development of the interview protocol, I used the MALM network to create questions that we sensitive to the students and their backgrounds. While meticulously reading and "absorbing" their profiles, I realized I started to get to know the

students passively, and felt closer to them as a community. Most of the profiles were of individuals who are in similar situations as I am: working 40+ hours a week, striving for a better professional career, and pursuing academic goals to better ourselves. Suddenly, I felt that I was part of a community even though I did not communicate or engage with them as much as they do in their classrooms. I felt that sense of kinship, and as Gordon said in the interview "we are all in this together". I feel I was able to connect, empathize, and identify with all students whether younger, older, international, or domestic *because* I am a graduate student and professional at the same time. It will be interesting to see if this changes once I graduate.

Future directions with this study. There are three future directions that this study may take: 1) the re-implementation of the MALM network with thoughtful improvements that take into consideration the feedback collected by this study, 2) deeper exploration of how the MALM network could help international students assimilate into the program, and 3) possible investigation into how power and privilege play out in social circles between students through online education.

The re-implementation of the MALM network will include volunteer students to help me design how the network will re-launch and how it could keep interest with new and current students. The spotlight emails will continue, but instead of highlighting just two students in the program, the email will highlight the various careers and backgrounds by adding data and information about the group as a whole. The MALM Network will also most likely be launched in a different web platform, with elevated visualizations and designs to make it more user-friendly and not as "flat".

Another direction to pursue is investigating how internationals students use the MALM network and what capacities it has helped them with. It can also shine a light on how international students create social connections with others in their program, and help higher education practitioners understand their international populations' roadblocks to succeed in the program. As online education continues to become a powerful medium for professionals all over the world, it is crucial to capture their voices and learn from their experiences in these platforms.

Lastly, the student captured a negative experience, where we learned about how microaggressions and exclusion in an online environment can be a reality even in a virtual world. This may or may not have been an isolated incident. Continuing to collect information as the academic advisor can start to help form a map of how power and privilege play out in an online environment. In that situation, not only were three domestic students potentially trying to exclude two international students from communication in group work, they were exercising their power and privilege by maintaining their stance on keeping communication within iChat rather than Whatsapp. The student who did not have access to Apple products, living in an emerging market, and spotty connection to internet had to receive communication through another international student who would manually copy and paste group decisions from iChat rather than Whatsapp. These are stories that I wish I could have known as they were happening. Although I may not have been able to intercept directly, I would have been able to give information to the students about how WhatsApp could work for them. Or possibly give them more resources for ways to communicate, such as using Slack, which is a messaging system approved by Arizona State University. I do not expect students to

tell me about these instances, but it is something that is now on my radar, and when I talk to students throughout the year, I can ask them if they have had good or bad experiences within their groups.

Implications for higher education research at large. As stated before, social presence has been a construct that has been explored for more than three decades. The majority of research concentrates on how social presence develops within an online learning environment, but there lacks literature recoding how social presence can be developed between students outside of the classroom, and even with their academic advisors. I believe that higher education practitioners can be important sources of information to start to compile how social presence can be developed outside of the virtual classroom in an online program.

The most important part of this research is how empowering this could be for all higher education practitioners. My biggest recommendation is that higher education practitioners learn basic qualitative skills to collect information on how they connect with their students. Researchers can focus on how academic advisors are influencing social presence and participating in the cultivation of social presence overall. Researchers can also conduct studies with academic advisors, teaching them how to interview students and keep journals and memos of their experiences with students. Capturing this data can lead to new ways of approaching students and the development of their social connections within the program. In my case, I used my ability of connecting with students to create the MALM network. What results was a wealth of knowledge of how students navigate their social terrains, and a deeper connection to those who I had never met through online means.

Online education is still growing and with it, the ability to understand social connections and relationships will be a necessity to inform practices for student retention, engagement, and satisfaction. Using simple interventions, like the MALM network, lead to rich insight of how students connect with each other. It also led to discovering how academic advisors can influence social presence indirectly without being in the midst of the social action. The impact of having academic advisors creation interventions and using action research as a method of bringing fresh eyes onto the construct of social presence is important. Having university staff (like academic advisors) contribute to academic research can close the gap in the literature, but also empowers them to be part of the community they are serving. It integrates practice and research, combines theory and application, and encourages exploration and evolution for higher education practitioners everywhere.

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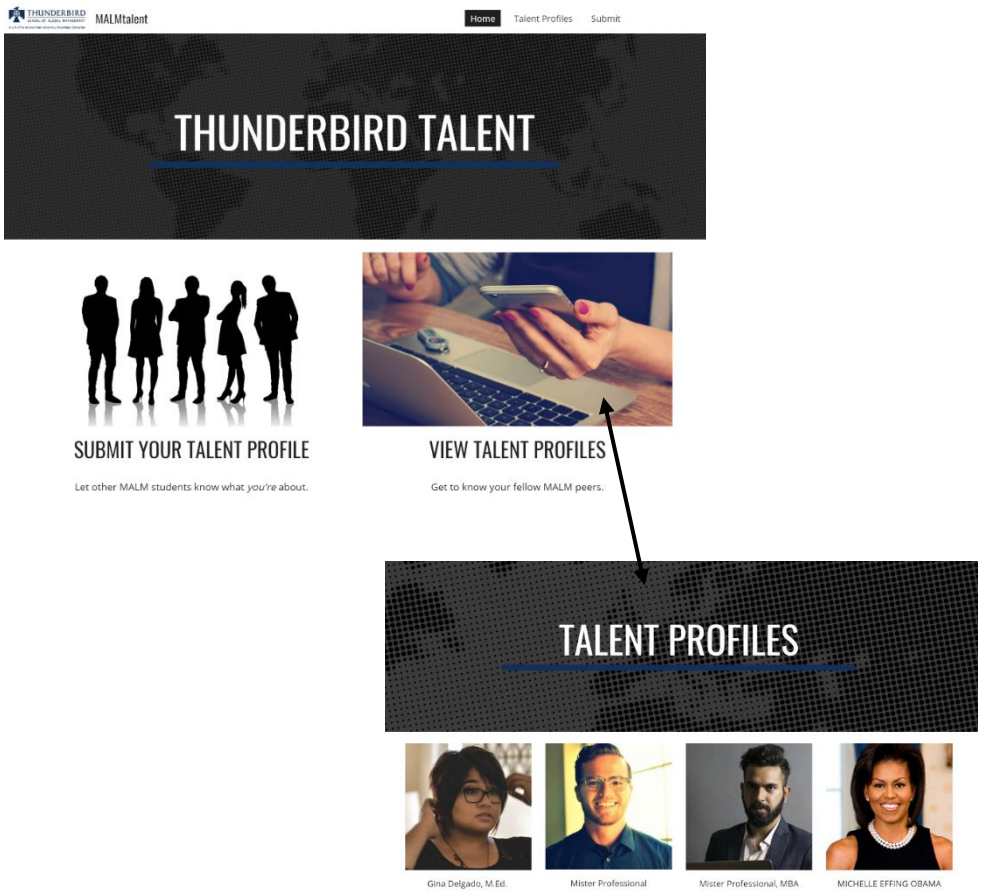
APPENDIX A

SCREENSHOTS OF WEBSITE PROTOTYPE

Welcome page – Welcome page for MALM Talent website. Students can submit a talent profile or view other talent profiles submitted by students.



Talent profiles page - Page when clicking “view talent profiles” from welcome page. Shows the photos of different students who submitted their profiles. Each picture is a linked to the actual profile.

Student profile example – All components are optional. Includes a small bio, the student's preferred leadership style and why, what they need to work on, and aspirations and goals. Below is their resume (which is also optional) which indicates to students their talents, achievements, and details on how to communicate with them (email, phone number, social media).

GINA DELGADO, M.ED.

Artist, Academic Advisor, Higher Education Nerd

A little about Gina: Born in Panama, raised in the United States; first generation graduate; passion for art, research, higher education, and dogs.

Leadership Style: Empathetic leadership; Transformational Leadership

Why did you pick that leadership style? Leaders should not only think about stakeholders from the outside, but also from within. Transforming the workplace includes investing in your employees. Encouragement and empowerment should come from all levels: from those who work directly with customers, to those up top maintaining the vision and integrity of the company. Leaders who make data driven decisions can also utilize those who work within the practice to obtain real-time data on customer satisfaction, desires, and needs. Not only does this empower those who maintain the community of practice, but also keeps the leaders informed about current processes to improve their business overall.

What I need to work on: Imposter syndrome; constant self-reflection to check my biases; become less resistant to change, more fluid with changing dynamics of the work setting.

Aspirations and goals: To become a Director of a Graduate Program in a higher education setting; but CEO of a dog portrait business is fine too.

Gina Delgado

Aspiring basketweaver

123 Your Street
Your City, ST 12345
(123) 456-7890
no_reply@example.com

EXPERIENCE

Company, Location — *Job Title*
MONTH 20XX - PRESENT
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit, sed diam nonummy nibh.

SKILLS

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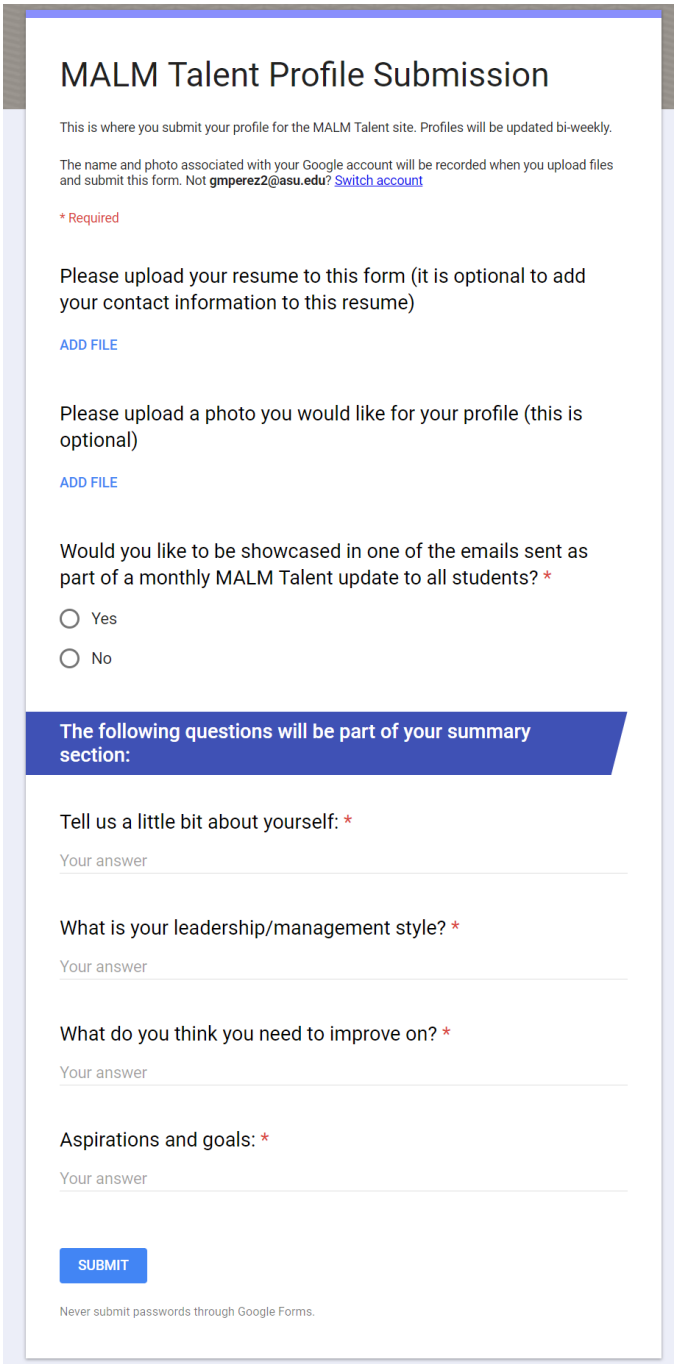

MALM Talent Profile Submission

This is where you submit your profile for the MALM Talent site. Profiles will be updated bi-weekly.

The name and photo associated with your Google account will be recorded when you upload files and submit this form. Not **gmperez2@asu.edu**? Switch account

* Required

Please upload your resume to this form (it is optional to add your contact information to this resume)

ADD FILE

Please upload a photo you would like for your profile (this is optional)

ADD FILE

Would you like to be showcased in one of the emails sent as part of a monthly MALM Talent update to all students? *

- Yes
- No

The following questions will be part of your summary section:

Tell us a little bit about yourself: *

Your answer

What is your leadership/management style? *

Your answer

What do you think you need to improve on? *

Your answer

Aspirations and goals: *

Your answer

SUBMIT

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

Submitting a profile (continued) – This is a screenshot of the official form that students will use to submit their profile information. From there, I will put the information up to the website for them.

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Introduction to Participant (will be read to them before the interview starts):
Thank you for taking the time to volunteer and be part of these interviews. This interview will be semi-structured, which means that I might ask you to clarify certain questions, or ask you other questions that might not be listed below, but specifically related to the topics covered. Additionally, this interview should last anywhere from 30 minutes to 45 minutes depending on the answers and information reviewed.
Since you are a volunteer, you do not have the obligation to answer a question or complete all the questions. If at any time you feel that you would like to skip a question, please let me know. Additionally, you can stop the interview whenever you would like.
We will be covering some of the questions that you answered in your survey, just to clarify why you chose the answers you did. The main conversation will focus around how you perceive your social context through the Master of Applied Leadership and Management, as well as how you use online communication and professional connections to help you through the program.
With this said, your consent will be recorded verbally through Zoom. Do you consent to this interview?

Semi-Structured Interview questions

General Demographics

1. Where are you from?
2. Where do you currently work?
3. Why did you choose an online program rather than an in-person program?
4. Why did you choose the Master's of Applied Leadership and Management (MALM) program as your master's degree?

Social Context

1. How do you currently meet other students in the program?
2. Outside of the classroom, how do you interact with other students?
3. Can you describe your experience with group work in classes?
4. What role has meeting the other students played within your program experience?
5. Tell me about some of the other students you have met virtually.
    a. Have you met anyone in-person or plan to?
6. How is connecting with other students in the MALM program different than in-person?
    a. What are some of the obstacles you have experienced?
7. What do you think the MALM program staff and administration can do to strengthen or improve student connectivity between each other?
8. On question ___, you answered _____, can you elaborate on why you chose the answer you did? (there might be multiple questions like this)

Online communication

1. How has online technology in general helped or hindered your access to fellow classmates?
    a. How has synchronous technology (Google hangouts, Skype, Zoom, Facetime, phone calls) helped/hindered with accessing fellow classmates?
    b. How has asynchronous technology (discussion boards, texting, social media, emails) helped/hindered with accessing fellow classmates?
2. What is your technological preference when communicating with other students? Why?
3. What role(s) have these technologies played within the program for you?
4. Can you describe
    a. the hardest parts of using technology as a method to connect with other students?
    b. The beneficial parts of using technology as a method to connect with other students?
5. On question ___, you answered _____, can you elaborate on why you chose the answer you did? (there might be multiple questions like this)

Professional Connections

1. How important is professional networking to you within this program?
2. What would be the ideal way of professional networking with other students?
3. What sorts of professional connections have you made, if any?
    a. (if they have not made professional connections) Why?
4. How could you utilize these (professional connections) outside of the program?
5. On question ___, you answered _____, can you elaborate on why you chose the answer you did? (there might be multiple questions like this)

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL

Screenshot of IRB Approval for study.

ASU Knowledge Enterprise Development

Ying-Chih Chen
Division of Teacher Preparation - Tempe
-
Ying-Chih.Chen@asu.edu

Dear Ying-Chih Chen:

On 4/8/2019 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Using social presence to create student connections in an online graduate program.
Investigator:	Ying-Chih Chen
IRB ID:	STUDY00009720
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Semi-structured interview consent form, Category: Consent Form; • Social Presence IRB Info updated date, Category: Consent Form; • Focus group questions, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Semi-structured Interview questions, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Social Presence Recruitment Email , Category: Recruitment Materials; • IRB Survey Instrument , Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Focus Group Consent form, Category: Consent Form; • IRB Social Presence Protocol , Category: IRB Protocol;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 4/8/2019.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Gina Delgado
Gina Delgado