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Effect of Instructor Social Presence on Learner Persistence in Online Undergraduate Courses: The Mediating Role of Academic Belonging in South Africa



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Effect of Instructor Social Presence on Learner Persistence in Online Undergraduate Courses: The Mediating Role of Academic Belonging in South Africa



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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article was to analyze the effect of instructor social presence on learner persistence in online undergraduate courses: the mediating role of academic belonging.

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

Findings: Instructor social presence significantly increases learner persistence in online undergraduate courses by improving interaction, motivation, and engagement. The effect occurs primarily through academic belonging, where students who feel connected and valued are more likely to complete and re-enroll in courses. Therefore, strengthening instructor communication and support mechanisms reduces withdrawal and enhances retention in online learning environments.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Community of inquiry (COI) theory, self-determination theory & student integration theory may be used to anchor future studies on the effect of instructor social presence on learner persistence in online undergraduate courses: the mediating role of academic belonging. At the institutional and instructional level, the study emphasizes that improving retention requires deliberate relational teaching rather than only technological investment. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that quality assurance frameworks for online education should include measurable instructor engagement standards rather than focusing solely on infrastructure and content delivery.

Keywords: *Instructor Social Presence, Learner Persistence, Online Undergraduate Courses*

INTRODUCTION

Learner persistence refers to a student's continuation in an online course or program until completion despite academic, technological, or personal challenges. It is commonly measured through retention, course completion, or continued enrolment in subsequent semesters (Rovai, 2003). Research shows persistence depends on academic integration, timely feedback, and institutional support systems (Lee & Choi, 2011). Learners who feel connected to instructors and peers demonstrate higher continuation rates than those experiencing isolation (Rovai, 2003). Consequently, persistence is treated as a key quality indicator in online education (Lee & Choi, 2011).

In the United States, first-year persistence increased from 75.7% (Fall 2021–Fall 2022) to 76.5% (Fall 2022–Fall 2023), indicating gradual recovery in student continuation. Part-time learners recorded 67.4% persistence compared with 92.1% for full-time learners, showing structural differences affecting online education participation. In the United Kingdom, non-continuation declined from 6.7% to 5.4%, while long-term completion remained about 81.7%. These trends demonstrate improving but unequal continuation patterns across learner categories. The evidence aligns with findings that persistence improves when institutional support and interaction structures are strengthened (Lee & Choi, 2011).

In developing economies, learner persistence is influenced by connectivity costs, device access, and digital readiness alongside academic factors. Environmental barriers often interact with motivation and course design to affect continuation (Lee & Choi, 2011). Flexible scheduling and structured feedback improve completion outcomes (Rovai, 2003). Financial interruptions frequently cause temporary withdrawal and later re-entry rather than permanent dropout. Therefore, persistence patterns fluctuate depending on technological and economic stability (Lee & Choi, 2011).

In India's NPTEL platform, registration rose from 9.31% in 2018 to 13.86% in 2019 but dropped to 4.26% in 2020, showing vulnerability to disruptions. Attendance also declined to 35.15% in 2020 after earlier levels above 80%. In Brazil, distance programs report dropout bands ranging from 26%–50% and 51%–75% across institutions. Many institutions also lack complete dropout data, limiting early intervention. These trends support research showing persistence declines when environmental barriers outweigh academic support (Rovai, 2003).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, persistence is shaped strongly by infrastructure reliability, cost of internet access, and competing work demands. Academic support and course clarity still remain critical continuation drivers (Rovai, 2003). Environmental pressures amplify dropout risks more than in many other regions (Lee & Choi, 2011). Flexible learning structures improve completion probability for working learners. As online education expands, persistence becomes an institutional performance indicator (Lee & Choi, 2011).

In South Africa, diploma cohort dropout rose from 32% to 42% between 2018 and 2021, indicating declining continuation across progression years. At UNISA, graduation proxy rates improved from 14.3% in 2019 to 16.4% in 2020 before stabilizing at 15.1% in 2021. The institution's graduate share increased from 22% to 27% between 2019 and 2020. The data indicates growing participation but unstable completion outcomes. These patterns confirm that sustained learner support is necessary to stabilize persistence (Rovai, 2003).

Instructor social presence refers to the extent to which learners perceive the instructor as a real, approachable, and actively engaged person in the online learning environment rather than a distant content provider. It involves visible communication behaviours such as timely feedback, personalized interaction, and supportive facilitation that create psychological closeness between instructor and learner (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). When learners perceive the instructor as socially present, they develop trust, motivation, and a sense of belonging which strengthens engagement and persistence (Richardson, 2017). Four major dimensions commonly associated with instructor social presence include instructional communication clarity, timely and constructive feedback, emotional support and encouragement, and facilitation of interaction among learners (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). These elements collectively reduce transactional distance and improve student commitment to continue learning activities (Garrison, 2000).

Instructional communication clarity helps learners understand expectations and assessment criteria, increasing course completion because students are less likely to disengage due to confusion (Richardson, 2017). Timely and constructive feedback encourages re-enrolment since students perceive progress and academic support throughout the course (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). Emotional support and encouragement improve retention by strengthening academic confidence and reducing dropout anxiety (Garrison, 2000). Facilitation of peer interaction builds a learning community that motivates learners to persist until the end of the program (Richardson, 2017). Overall, instructor social presence functions as a persistence mechanism by promoting satisfaction, engagement, and long-term participation in online courses (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017).

Problem Statement

Online undergraduate education has expanded rapidly worldwide due to advances in digital learning technologies and flexible study arrangements. Universities increasingly rely on online delivery to widen access, support working students, and reduce infrastructure costs. However, online courses continue to experience significantly lower persistence rates than face-to-face courses, often reflected through withdrawal, non-completion, or failure to re-enrol (Lee & Choi, 2011; Richardson, 2017). Studies show that lack of meaningful interaction and psychological connection with instructors contributes to disengagement and dropout in virtual learning environments (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Although institutions invest heavily in learning management systems and content design, persistence remains a major challenge in online undergraduate programs.

Research suggests that instructor social presence learners' perception that the instructor is real, responsive, and supportive plays a critical role in sustaining participation and motivation (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Richardson, 2017). When students feel socially connected to instructors, they develop stronger academic belonging, which increases commitment to continue the course (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Conversely, online learners who experience isolation are more likely to withdraw despite having adequate academic ability (Lee & Choi, 2011). While prior studies have examined social presence and retention separately, limited empirical work has explored academic belonging as a mediating mechanism explaining how instructor behaviour influences persistence in undergraduate online learning. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the effect of instructor social presence on learner persistence in online undergraduate courses and determine whether academic belonging explains this relationship.

Theoretical Review

Community of Inquiry (CoI) Theory

Originated by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, the Community of Inquiry theory explains online learning as a process created through the interaction of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. The theory emphasizes that students learn effectively when instructors are perceived as real, visible, and actively guiding learning activities. Recent literature indicates that strengthening teaching and social presence improves participation and persistence in virtual courses (Flock, 2020). In relation to the study, instructor social presence represents the instructor's visibility and engagement in the course, while academic belonging develops when students feel part of the learning community. This sense of community ultimately supports learner persistence in online undergraduate programs.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Developed by Deci and Ryan, Self-Determination Theory explains that student motivation and continuation depend on satisfaction of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Relatedness refers to feeling socially connected and valued by others, which is especially important in online environments where students may feel isolated. Contemporary research shows that when instructors create supportive interactions, intrinsic motivation and persistence increase (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In this study, instructor social presence fulfills the need for relatedness, while academic belonging reflects the learner's internalized feeling of connection. The satisfaction of this need motivates students to continue and complete online courses.

Student Integration Theory

Proposed by Vincent Tinto, Student Integration Theory states that persistence in education occurs when learners become academically and socially integrated into the institution. Students who feel they belong to the academic environment are more likely to remain enrolled and succeed (Tinto, 2022). In online learning, integration occurs through meaningful interaction rather than physical campus experience. Instructor social presence facilitates communication, participation, and trust, thereby promoting academic belonging. Academic belonging then mediates persistence because students who feel part of the learning community are less likely to withdraw from online undergraduate courses.

Empirical Review

Glazier and Harris (2021) investigated whether instructor presence influences student satisfaction and continuation across learning modalities. The purpose was to understand how instructor behaviour affects persistence in online and face-to-face learning. The researchers used a large-scale quantitative survey involving 2,007 university students. Students evaluated both their best and worst learning experiences. The study measured communication quality, responsiveness, and engagement. Findings showed that instructor visibility significantly improved learner motivation. Students reported higher willingness to continue courses when instructors were active in discussions. The presence of clear communication reduced frustration and confusion. Timely feedback encouraged students to remain enrolled. The study also found that students associated instructor care with academic belonging. This belonging predicted persistence and course completion intentions. Weak interaction was linked to disengagement and dropout intentions. The authors concluded that instructor presence is a central retention factor. They recommended faculty

development programs focused on communication and engagement practices. Institutions were also advised to monitor instructor interaction levels to improve persistence.

Peacock and Cowan (2019) examined the role of belonging in online learning communities within the Community of Inquiry framework. The study aimed to determine how instructor support affects student persistence. The researchers adopted a mixed-methods design combining surveys and reflective responses. Participants were students enrolled in accredited online courses. The study measured perceived belonging and course continuation intention. Results showed that strong instructor guidance increased students' sense of community. Students who felt connected were less likely to withdraw. Clear instructor facilitation improved engagement. Emotional encouragement enhanced confidence in learning tasks. Belonging strongly predicted course completion expectations. Students described instructors as anchors of participation. Lack of instructor interaction increased isolation feelings. Isolation reduced motivation to continue studying. The authors concluded belonging mediates persistence in online learning. They recommended structured discussion facilitation and supportive communication. Institutions should encourage instructors to actively maintain student connection.

Peacock (2020) explored how belonging affects online learner engagement and continuation. The purpose was to understand why students remain in or withdraw from online courses. The researchers conducted qualitative interviews with distance learners. Participants described their interaction experiences with instructors. Students emphasized the importance of personalized communication. Instructor encouragement increased participation willingness. Learners stayed enrolled when instructors acknowledged them by name. Prompt responses strengthened trust. Humanized communication reduced feelings of isolation. Students linked belonging to persistence decisions. Lack of instructor presence reduced commitment. Participants described emotional support as motivational. Belonging improved learning confidence. The authors concluded instructor interaction drives persistence through belonging. They recommended proactive instructor communication strategies. Online programs should design courses that promote relational teaching approaches.

Al-dheleai (2019) examined social presence in online interaction environments. The study aimed to determine how interaction affects learner continuation. Researchers used a quantitative survey among postgraduate students. The instrument measured perceived social presence and engagement. Instructor participation significantly predicted connection levels. Students felt motivated when instructors shared experiences. Social interaction improved commitment to course activities. Students reported greater willingness to complete tasks. The study linked presence with persistence intention. Reduced presence correlated with withdrawal tendencies. Peer discussion increased belonging but required instructor facilitation. Interaction frequency influenced satisfaction. Higher satisfaction improved retention expectations. The authors concluded presence improves persistence indirectly. They recommended collaborative activities supported by instructors. Institutions should design platforms encouraging visible instructor engagement.

Richardson (2015) investigated instructor presence behaviours in online learning environments. The purpose was to identify behaviours affecting student continuation. The researchers used case study methodology across several courses. They analyzed instructor feedback and communication tone. High-quality feedback increased engagement. Students remained active when instructors participated frequently. Positive tone improved comfort in discussion forums. Comfort

strengthened academic belonging. Belonging predicted completion intentions. Weak feedback reduced participation levels. Students disengaged when instructors were passive. The study found presence promotes motivation. Engagement acted as pathway to persistence. The authors recommended structured instructor participation guidelines. Course design should embed interaction checkpoints. Training instructors in feedback delivery was also advised.

Paquette (2016) evaluated the impact of training instructors to use social presence cues. The study aimed to test whether communication style affects persistence intention. An experimental instructional intervention was conducted. Instructors were trained to personalize messages. Students received acknowledgment and supportive comments. Engagement increased in experimental classes. Learners expressed higher motivation. Students were more willing to continue the course. Personalization improved satisfaction levels. Satisfaction strengthened persistence decisions. The control group showed lower engagement. Students described trained instructors as approachable. Approachability improved belonging perception. The author concluded instructor training enhances persistence. Institutions should implement professional development in online facilitation. Continuous communication monitoring was recommended.

Lammers and Gillaspy (2013) examined the relationship between student–instructor rapport and student success. The purpose was to measure whether rapport predicts academic outcomes. The researchers used survey methodology in online courses. Rapport was measured through communication warmth and availability. Strong rapport predicted higher academic performance. Performance is a precursor to persistence. Students felt comfortable asking questions. Comfort improved course participation. Participation reduced dropout likelihood. Lack of rapport increased disengagement. Students valued approachable instructors. Approachability strengthened belonging feelings. Belonging influenced retention intention. The authors concluded rapport supports persistence indirectly. They recommended relational teaching strategies. Institutions should encourage approachable communication styles in online teaching.

METHODOLOGY

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

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gap

Existing studies consistently confirm that instructor social presence improves motivation, engagement, belonging, and continuation intentions (Glazier & Harris, 2021; Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Al-dheleai, 2019). However, most of the studies examine direct relationships between instructor presence and learner outcomes such as satisfaction, engagement, performance, or persistence (Paquette, 2016; Lammers & Gillaspy, 2013). Only a few acknowledge belonging as important, but they do not formally test it as a mediating psychological mechanism explaining how

instructor presence translates into persistence (Peacock, 2020). Consequently, the causal pathway linking instructor social presence academic belonging learner persistence remains insufficiently modeled empirically. This creates a conceptual gap because the psychological process underlying retention is still unclear despite strong correlational evidence. The proposed study therefore addresses the missing mediation framework by empirically testing academic belonging as the explanatory mechanism connecting instructor social presence and learner persistence.

Contextual Research Gap

Most prior studies focus broadly on online learning environments without isolating undergraduate academic programs as a distinct learning context (Richardson et al., 2015; Al-dheleai, 2019). Some involve postgraduate students, mixed cohorts, or general institutional samples, which differ significantly in motivation, maturity, and self-regulation ability compared to undergraduate learners. Undergraduate online learners often face higher dropout risk due to weaker academic autonomy and transitional learning skills, yet limited research specifically examines persistence mechanisms in this population. Additionally, earlier research emphasizes satisfaction, engagement, or performance rather than long-term indicators such as re-enrolment and retention (Glazier & Harris, 2021). As a result, persistence in structured undergraduate online courses remains underexplored as a specific educational outcome. The current study therefore fills a contextual gap by focusing exclusively on undergraduate online programs and measuring persistence outcomes rather than general engagement outcomes.

Geographical Research Gap

The reviewed empirical studies are largely conducted in Western and developed higher-education systems or unspecified global online institutions (Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Glazier & Harris, 2021). These environments differ significantly from developing and Sub-Saharan contexts in terms of infrastructure reliability, digital readiness, learning culture, and student support systems. Cultural expectations about instructor authority, communication style, and learner independence can also alter how social presence influences belonging and persistence. Consequently, findings from these settings may not generalize to institutions in developing regions where online learning adoption is still evolving. There is limited empirical evidence testing the instructor presence–belonging–persistence relationship within resource-constrained educational systems. This creates a geographical gap that justifies conducting the study in a different regional context to validate the theoretical relationships.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The review indicates that instructor social presence is a critical determinant of learner persistence in online undergraduate courses. When instructors communicate clearly, respond promptly, show empathy, and actively participate in learning activities, students perceive the learning environment as supportive and engaging. This interaction reduces psychological distance and increases motivation to continue participating in coursework. However, the influence of instructor behaviour does not operate only directly on persistence outcomes such as course completion or re-enrolment. Instead, its strongest impact occurs through the development of academic belonging, where learners feel accepted, valued, and connected to the learning community.

Academic belonging therefore functions as the psychological bridge linking instructor social presence to persistence. Students who feel they belong to the course community demonstrate greater confidence, engagement, and commitment to learning goals, making them less likely to withdraw. Conversely, low instructor visibility leads to isolation and weak attachment to the course, which increases dropout risk. The study therefore concludes that improving persistence in online undergraduate education requires institutions to move beyond technological investment and focus on relational teaching practices. Training instructors to intentionally cultivate social presence is essential for strengthening belonging and sustaining learner continuation in online programs.

Recommendations

Theory

The study contributes to theory by demonstrating that academic belonging acts as a psychological mechanism linking instructor social presence to learner persistence in online undergraduate learning. Rather than explaining retention through direct instructional influence alone, the findings support a mediation framework where instructor behaviours first create a sense of connection and acceptance, which then motivates continuation. This refines existing online learning theories by integrating psychological engagement into retention explanations. It also helps bridge established perspectives such as Community of Inquiry, Self-Determination, and Student Integration by showing how instructional interaction leads to persistence through belonging. Future theoretical models should therefore incorporate belonging as a core explanatory construct and develop standardized measurement scales specifically designed for virtual undergraduate environments.

Practice

At the institutional and instructional level, the study emphasizes that improving retention requires deliberate relational teaching rather than only technological investment. Universities should train instructors in communication clarity, timely feedback, empathetic responses, and active discussion facilitation to build student connection. Course structures should embed weekly instructor interaction, personalized announcements, and feedback checkpoints to sustain engagement. Learning management systems should also support early-warning analytics so instructors can contact disengaging learners before withdrawal occurs. Additionally, student orientation programs should clarify expectations about communication and participation so belonging develops early in the learning experience.

Policy

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that quality assurance frameworks for online education should include measurable instructor engagement standards rather than focusing solely on infrastructure and content delivery. Institutions and regulators should define minimum response times, participation frequency, and facilitation requirements for online instructors. Professional certification in online facilitation pedagogy should be required before teaching virtual courses to ensure consistent learner support. Retention-focused funding policies should prioritize instructor development and student support services alongside technology investment. At the national level, e-learning policies should incorporate psychological engagement indicators such as belonging and persistence rates as core measures of educational effectiveness.

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