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Anonymity and Engagement in Online Learning: An Asian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The rapid shift to online learning, catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic, has brought opportunities and challenges to the forefront of education, particularly in the Asian context. Although online education offers flexibility and global access, it can increase transactional distance and hinder interpersonal interactions. However, online anonymity may help alleviate anxiety and promote participation among students who feel inhibited in traditional settings. To address this duality, a hybrid learning model is proposed, combining face-to-face learning with a small amount of online learning for early education to develop essential skills with a gradual transition to more online learning in later stages. This approach can help Asian educational systems balance cultural and social dynamics and ensure a holistic and effective learning experience.

Keywords: *Online learning, Transactional distance, Anonymity, Deindividuation, Asian cultural context*

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INTRODUCTION

Often seen as a panacea during a pandemic crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (1), online learning can occur in asynchronous or synchronous formats (2). Asynchronous learning allows students to engage with materials such as prerecorded audio or video presentations, discussion forums, and online quizzes at their own pace and on their own time, without the need to be in the same place or at the same time as their instructors. In contrast, synchronous learning takes place in real time, similar to conventional in-person classes; however, it is conducted through online platforms such as video conferencing applications. Although online learning offers several benefits, such as flexibility, access to a diverse range of resources, and opportunities for global participation (3), it also presents positive and negative implications.

In any learning environment, three fundamental types of interactions take place, i.e., student–content interaction, student–instructor interaction, and student–student interaction (4). In online learning, transactional distance is widened owing to the diminution in two of these interactions, i.e., the student–instructor and student–student interactions (4).

Transactional distance is defined as the psychological and communication gaps that occur between lecturers and their students in online learning, primarily because of the time and space separation (5).

The widening of transactional distance is particularly evident in synchronous online learning settings, where students may exhibit passive or "lurking" behaviour (6). "Lurking" refers to a form of passive participation in which students engage by merely reading without actively contributing to discussions or sharing their thoughts on online platforms (6). Various reasons have been proposed for why students might "lurk." For instance, Beaudoin (7) identifies three key reasons for this: (a) the belief that their ideas have already been expressed by others; (b) uncertainty about how to best articulate their thoughts, even if they have ideas; and (c) preference to carefully consider the information shared by their peers before contributing their own.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF VIDEO CONFERENCING

Specifically, in the context of synchronous online learning, frequent use of video conferencing tools such as Zoom, Webex, and Google Meet can result in "zoom fatigue" (8). This may be because of excessive eye contact during these interactions, which can result in significant anxiety (8, 9).

The cognitive load in such synchronous online learning may often be higher than that in face-to-face learning. Cognitive load consists of three types: (a) intrinsic (related to subject complexity); (b) extraneous (stemming from how information is presented); and (c) germane (necessary for learning) (10). Online learning often increases the extraneous cognitive load owing to unfamiliar digital tools and platforms. For instance, technical glitches in video conferencing, such as broken or muffled audio, can add to this load as well as to the increased voice volume by up to 15% during video communications compared with in-person interactions (11). The need to overemphasise nonverbal cues, such as exaggerated nods or gestures, to compensate for the lack of immediate feedback in online environments also contributes to this load (8). Even minimal delays in communication, such as of 1.2 seconds, can negatively affect perceptions of the other party's friendliness (12).

ANONYMITY AND DEINDIVIDUATION

Consequently, because of the phenomenon of "zoom fatigue," several students opt to switch off their web cameras, resulting in a form of anonymity. Keipi et al. (13) described three levels of online anonymity. The first level, visual anonymity, is the most common, where a student's physical appearance is concealed while their name remains visible. The second level, pseudonymity, involves using pseudonyms or avatars rather than real names. The third level, full anonymity, occurs when students remain unidentifiable even after the session ends, such as by sharing a screen with peers rather than logging in individually.

Anonymity often results in deindividuation, a concept in which individuals in a group lose their distinct identities and merge into a collective entity, as first theorised by Le Bon in 1896 (14). This effect, now encapsulated in a model called the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation, suggests that a dominant group personality can emerge as individual identities fade (15).

In the Asian context, the impact of anonymity and deindividuation in online learning may be more pronounced because of cultural tendencies towards collectivism and high-power distance (16). A strong sense of collectivism denotes a strong cohesive focus towards societal, familial, or group interests rather than individual interests (17). In Chinese culture, for example, this inclination towards collectivism aligns with Confucian principles, which stress the importance of fostering and maintaining harmonious and positive interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*).

The Korean concept of *nunchi* (also spelled *noonchi,* literally meaning "eye measure") involves the subtle skill of listening and assessing the moods of others in a group setting without speaking, thereby emphasising the importance of silence and attentive listening rather than talking (18). In the educational context, unlike in Western settings where active student engagement often involves students interrupting lecturers to ask questions during the lecture, the practice of *nunchi* in Korean education usually discourages students from raising their hands during class. Such interruptions could be seen as rude, selfish, and disrespectful to the lecturer. Korean students are instead encouraged to ask questions privately after the class ends. This approach is based on the belief that interrupting a lecture disrupts the flow of teaching and may prevent other students from fully benefiting from the lecturer's presentation (18). Furthermore, the high degree of power distance also means that there is a general acceptance of unequal power distribution and a demonstration of respect towards authority figures instead of challenging or debating with instructors (17).

Similarly, in Malaysia, the cultural concept of *budi* among the Malay community emphasises collective well-being over individual interests, reinforcing the commitment to maintaining peace and harmony (19). The Malay community also shows deep respect for people in positions of higher authority (19). While these collectivistic cultural values are inherently positive, they may result in further widening of the transactional distance and render it difficult for lecturers to evaluate the competencies of each student individually from online engagement. In virtual environments, students may often be "reduced" to numbers or avatars, further contributing to deindividuation and potentially hindering their personal development and acquisition of essential skills, such as the "4 Cs" of 21st-century skills, i.e., critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.

However, the effects of anonymity and deindividuation in online learning can also be viewed from a different perspective. Although these phenomena may reduce opportunities for interaction with lecturers and peers, they also offer specific benefits. When students are anonymised and deindividuated, they may experience a sense of security from scrutiny (20), which can relieve the pressure of being judged by lecturers and peers (21, 22).

Melchor-Couto (22) suggested that this can be particularly beneficial for international students, as anonymity in the virtual world can enhance their learning experience and performance and increase their contributions to learning activities (23). Anonymity serves as a "shield" from being in the spotlight (24), reduces anxiety (25), promotes relaxation, and eases self-criticism when mistakes occur during learning (26). Some argue that anonymity makes it easier for Asian students to provide direct feedback and engage in interactions without being confrontational or risking social harmony (26). Conversely, when identities are visible, students may hesitate to give critical feedback on their peers' work, fearing that such honesty could cause their peers to "lose face" (27). In this regard, Chen (26) found that anonymity is not only preferred by some students but also essential for encouraging more confident participation.

MOVING FORWARD: HYBRID LEARNING APPROACH

Given the complexities involved, what should the future of Asian education look like? Considering the positive and negative aspects of online learning, a hybrid approach that combines traditional face-to-face education with online learning is crucial. The proposed method prioritises face-to-face learning with a small amount of online learning in the early years of a study programme. During these foundational years, in-person learning provides crucial scaffolding and allows lecturers to offer structured guidance and develop important virtues such as self-discipline, respect for others, leadership skills, and the 4 Cs. Specifically, face-to-face learning is particularly suitable for activities that require teamwork and collaboration, such as problem-based learning and team-based learning, where such direct interaction fosters communication and cooperative skills. At the same time, beneficial features in online learning such as anonymity can be leveraged to enable students to express themselves without fear of judgement, especially for activities such as debates on controversial topics, where critical thinking is required.

However, as students progress to their senior years, their focus gradually shifts to a predominantly online learning model. This shift affords students the flexibility to manage their academic responsibilities alongside other commitments, such as internships and research projects. It also encourages students to take greater ownership of their learning journey while cultivating essential skills such as self-motivation and independent learning. In the Asian context, students can benefit from the anonymity and less confrontational nature of online platforms, allowing for more open and honest participation. Furthermore, exposure to various digital tools through online learning can help students adapt to the increasingly digital nature of modern workplaces.

CONCLUSION

The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed benefits and challenges, particularly in the Asian educational context. Online learning offers flexibility and global access; it also increases transactional distance and fosters anonymity, which can hinder interpersonal interactions and the transmission of key life skills. However, anonymity can also reduce social pressure and encourage participation. A hybrid learning approach, combining face-to-face instruction in the early years with more online learning in later stages, offers a balanced solution by integrating the strengths of both methods to enhance the educational experience.

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