What Are Students' Perceptions of Online Social Work Education,

Specifically Master of Social Work Programs?

A Dissertation

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the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Millersville University of Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Social Work

By Solomon D. Hill

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all who believe that obtaining the highest level of education is impossible.

This work is dedicated to all of the lives that I have impacted and empowered.

This work is dedicated to my family and friends, who have loved, prayed, laughed, and cried with me.

This work is dedicated to all who are my encouragers and cheerleaders.

This work is dedicated to all of the lives that I will impact.

My life is a reflection of all who have poured into me. So, I dedicate this success to all the individuals above.

As I close, I leave my Life Equation:

"Determination + Persistence + God = Success—Solomon D. Hill."

To my loved ones who are with me in spirit: Dallas Jackson Hill (my son), Solomon Denis Guion (father), Granna Beulah Hill, Grandma Louise Gore, Cousin Cora Brooks, Cousin Ebony Love Hill. Their love will continue to live through me.

This Dissertation for the Doctor of Social Work Degree by

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<u>February 2022</u>
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Millersville University, 2022

Millersville, Pennsylvania

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Online learning is a social experience characterized by a sense of belonging and acceptance in a community of people who share common interests. This qualitative and narrative study investigated students' perceptions of sense of belonging in Master of Social Work (MSW) online programs to identify factors that fostered their sense of belonging. Twelve participants currently enrolled in online accredited MSW programs in six educational regions (based on regional accreditors) were interviewed in semi-structured interviews. Results indicated that peer collaboration, group discussion, peer feedback, and social communication were peer factors; breakout group sessions, synchronous activities, and response from discussion posts were course factors; and being available and accessible to students, fostering class discussion, and prompt feedback were instructor factors that fostered students' sense of belonging. These findings can widen and strengthen the understanding of a sense of belonging in online learning programs and inform instructors, program directors, and institutions on how to construct program designs that improve online students' sense of belonging in the programs.

Signature of Investigator _____ Solomon D. Hill_____   Date _February 2022_

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Students' perceptions of online learning and their actual experiences with online courses are linked to students' satisfaction with online learning (Hassan et al., 2021; Landrum, 2020). Learning is, at its core, a social process in which information is generated through interaction (Demmans Epp et al., 2017). When learners negotiate meaning by redefining their concepts while embracing the views of others, fresh perspectives and knowledge arise. Such practices can be facilitated in online courses by establishing a course-wide learning community in which individuals are responsible for sharing knowledge, co-developing ideas, and encouraging one another (Song & McNary, 2011). Adult learning theory, experiential learning theory, and social exchange theory are the theoretical guides for this study because they focus on how adults learn and reflect on their experiences through the exchange of knowledge.

Prior research indicated that students who have a positive sense of belonging in online learning communities have better learning outcomes and a higher degree of satisfaction with their overall educational experience (Law & Law, 2018; Richardson & Swan, 2003). Despite the growing importance of distance education in social work programs, many faculty members remain skeptical of the online environment as a platform for transmitting social work practice knowledge, skills, and values (Bentley et al., 2015). Much of this skepticism stems from faculty members' inability to reconcile how teaching "use of self" and relationship development, widely acknowledged as the core of social work education, can be accomplished when student and instructor are communicating at a distance (Bentley et al., 2015).

For both instructor and students, the online learning environment presents unique problems that must be overcome to create a learning environment where students are actively

engaged (Law & Law, 2018). Students may feel disconnected from the instructor, peers, and course content. Therefore, to develop a feeling of community in the online setting, students must connect with their instructor, other students, and the course material. How to foster students' sense of belonging effectively is a challenge that must be extensively researched. In this study, the author used qualitative methodology to gather relevant, in-depth, and refined information about students' sense of belonging in online Master of Social Work (MSW) programs. The author employed a narrative research approach to measure the impact of three factors in fostering students' sense of belonging: the course, the instructor, and peers.

Students' feeling of isolation and disconnection due to physical separation has been associated with high dropout rates in online courses (Angelino et al., 2007; Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006; Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Rovai, 2002). Hew (2015) highlighted that, to alleviate these feelings, many instructors have chosen to focus on the social nature of learning, such as establishing a sense of belonging and social presence in their courses. However, social presence is significant for social work education, with the exponential and anticipated growth of online learning and teaching in social work, together with emerging proof of distance education's effectiveness (Bentley et al., 2015). Understanding the concept of social presence and learning how to enhance it online may help educators to conclude that there is a way to teach and model the development of collaborative and helping relationships that is essential to social work practice, and to recognize the potential to enhance, reconstruct, and transform social work education and practices (Bentley et al., 2015).

Considering the significance of a sense of belonging in the online learning environment on student outcomes, this study was designed to investigate students' perceptions of a sense of belonging in online MSW programs and to determine the factors that best foster their sense of

belonging, thereby adding to expanding literature regarding sense of belonging in online students.

According to Thomas et al. (2014), some researchers have attempted to identify general recommendations to build a sense of belonging. Introductions, collaborative group projects, adding personal experiences, completing online class discussions, and exchanging resources, for example, were found to influence students' sense of belonging in online learning by Shackelford and Maxwell (2012). Although these broad recommendations are helpful, it was more practical for the author of this study to investigate factors that foster a sense of belonging among social work MSW students who are fully enrolled online. It is hoped that the results of this study will encourage administrators, faculty, and support staff to enhance a learning atmosphere that will create a community within an online course that will lead online learners to feel valued, loved, and accepted. Also, it is hoped that other scholars will reflect on the findings and explore future study possibilities.

Problem Statement

Despite the increased opportunities provided by online course offerings, such as increased student enrollment, student and faculty diversity, a more extensive community outreach, and better access for working adults or those living in remote areas, there are concerns, such as course design, students' responses, and academic output. According to the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2017), social workers should ensure that everyone has fair access to the tools, programs, and opportunities that they need to meet their basic human needs and to grow fully (Reamer, 2013; Zidan, 2015). However, the current structure of many social work distance education programs may make online education difficult by limiting students' access in accord with their learning needs and styles (Reamer, 2013). There

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is a sense that online education can be challenging due to inadequate amounts of time for self-development in learning new skills, combined with a lack of appropriate and adequate training (or of required resources) provided by institutions. Hence, teaching in an online environment is uncomfortable for some educators (Zidan, 2015). Further, common concerns identified by Reamer (2013) include inconsistency in tutor competency and preparation, curriculum content and rigor, use and implementation of online and distance teaching resources, and student tracking and evaluation.

It is crucial in the tertiary education environment for students to feel cared for to ensure that they perform to the best of their abilities and to avoid student attrition (O'Keeffe, 2013). Stachl and Baranger (2020) noted that it is essential to address the sense of belonging at the graduate level, considering the devising approach (strategy) that is useful to foster students' belonging at higher academic levels. Therefore, this study examined students' perceptions of the sense of belonging in online education in MSW programs.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Higher education has a heavy strain of idealism and dedication to public service; higher education's core missions—teaching, science, and service—are focused on the needs of individuals and the wider society (Lingenfelter, 2018). Lingenfelter (2018) stated that the broader purpose of higher education goes beyond meeting just the needs of society; it should also address society's commitment to meeting the needs of its citizens. Higher education adds personal and social value in providing skilled human resources for industries, creating jobs, and generating revenue (Nisar, 2014). The ability of a student to establish a sense of belonging within a higher education institution is widely acknowledged as a critical component in student retention and achievement (O'Keeffe, 2013).

According to Holzman et al. (2019), scholars (citing Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) view students' college enrollment process as having three key phases: predisposition, quest, and preference. How students' progress through these stages is influenced by various social contexts, such as family history, school quality, and state policy. These external factors may either present opportunities (e.g., students from high-income families living in neighborhoods zoned for competitive high schools) or function as obstacles (e.g., Black and Hispanic students being taught by teachers who have low expectations for them).

Between fall 2009 and 2019, overall graduate enrollment grew by 8% (from 2.8 million to 3.1 million students). In fall 2019, there were approximately 3.1 million students enrolled in graduate degree programs in the United States. Master's and doctorate degrees, as well as professional doctoral programs, are included. Female enrollment increased by 11% between 2009 and 2019, accounting for 60% of overall graduate enrollment in fall 2019 (1.9 million students). Between 2009 and 2019, male student enrollment increased by 4% (to just over 1.2 million students) and accounted for 40% of overall graduate enrolment in fall 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021).

While it is a common societal expectation that students begin postsecondary education within a few months of graduating from high school, many students delay enrollment. Financial constraints (inability to pay college fees) and a desire to work are part of the factors that influence delaying enrollment (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Lin & Liu, 2019). Other life events, such as military service, illness, marriage, or pregnancy, can cause students to postpone college enrollment.

Families save money ahead of time, sacrifice current consumption opportunities, and go into debt to support their children's education (Baum & Ma, 2007). Similarly, students devote a

significant amount of time, effort, and money to securing their futures through education. In recent years, the cost of a college education has risen faster than the cost of other products and services. More students and families are faced with serious decisions about the sacrifices that must be made. This has led to concerns about whether the investment is worthwhile.

The average published tuition and fees for graduate students attending public institutions in 2018-2019 was $12,171, compared to $27,776 at private nonprofit institutions and $14,202 at private for-profit institutions (NCES, 2021). The average master's degree holder owes a cumulative student loan debt of more than $70,000. For graduate school alone, the average loan debt owed by master's degree holders is more than $55,000 (Hanson, 2021).

Despite the affordability of higher education in the United States in the early 19th century, the perception of parents and students was that the benefit of higher education was not commensurate with the cost of potential loss in the contribution to family labor (Thelin et al., n.d.). In contrast, today's perception of higher education among parents and students is that higher education gives the assurance of a successful life and a sense of relevance in society (Allen, 2016; Cantwell et al., 2018; Labaree, 1997; Taylor & Cantwell, 2018).

The United States has often been portrayed as a model of success and excellence in higher education. Its dominance in global universities rankings is based on institutional performance in teaching, research, knowledge transfer, and international outlook. For example, according to the Times International rankings of universities, 14 of the top 20 universities in the world in 2020 were in the United States (Times Higher Education, 2021). This number was 15 in Shanghai international rankings (Center for World-Class Universities of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 2021) and 10 in Quacquarelli Symonds rankings (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2021). Despite a survey revealing that the United States was receding in its advantage in the field of

higher education (Nisar, 2014), the nation was ranked 14th in the world in terms of the percentage of people ages 25 to 34 who completed higher education (Nisar, 2014; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012).

In the 20th century, economic and social developments turned higher education into a key path to the middle class, and women and minorities broke through longstanding barriers to participation in mainstream higher education (Eckel & King, 2004) and improved quality of life in various ways (Baum & Ma, 2007). The primary concern for American higher education in the 21st century is expanding the public research university experience in terms of comfort and affordability (Crow & Dabars, 2015; Thelin, 2018). However, to determine whether college activities contribute to an overall sense of belonging or cohesion among diverse students, several measures of student participation in a wide range of activities and memberships in online communities in the college setting are required (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In the same vein, House-Peters et al. (2019) stressed that the rise of online teaching and learning as a means of distance education had sparked a debate about what contemporary, appropriate, and open instruction should be, how it should be provided, and whom it should serve in higher education.

The COVID-19 epidemic has had a significant impact on education. This crisis has brought to light a number of flaws and inequities in our educational institutions, ranging from a lack of access to the bandwidth and computers required for online learning to the lack of supportive surroundings required to focus on learning to a misalignment of resources and needs (Schleicher, 2020). Higher education has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak, with universities closing their doors in reaction to lockdown measures. Although institutions of higher learning were fast to replace face-to-face lectures with online learning, these closures had an impact on learning and examinations, as well as international students' safety and legal

standing in their host country. The challenges, however, do not end with the present crisis. Education expenditure, in particular, may be cut in the coming years. Despite short-term stimulus measures in some states, long-term public investment on education is at risk as public funds are shifted to health and social welfare (Schleicher, 2020).

Higher Education Funding Over Time

Colleges and universities in the United States are funded by various revenue streams that represent the market preferences of students, parents, and other users of the products and services that the institutions offer (Eckel & King, 2004). Tuition and fee contributions from students and families (including government-backed financial assistance that students use to pay tuition); federal, state, and local government appropriations, grants, and contracts; private gifts; endowments and other investment earnings; and revenues from auxiliary businesses and services (Eckel & King, 2004).

Some of these resources are more valuable to some institutions than others. Local governments, for example, account for 18% of revenue at community colleges but only 1% at private not-for-profit institutions. Similarly, private gifts account for 14% of revenue for private not-for-profit institutions but only 1% for community colleges (Eckel & King, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). While American institutions' revenue sources are diverse, two are particularly important to most institutions: state appropriations (particularly for public institutions) and tuition and fees.

Higher education consumes a significant percentage of most state budgets, as the third largest budget item after health care and elementary and secondary education. As health care costs rise and people demand that funding for primary and secondary schools still be covered, lawmakers logically have cut higher education funding budgets because these institutions have a

natural alternative source of revenue: tuition and fees from parents and students (Eckel & King, 2004). State funding support for publicly owned and operated colleges and universities has steadily declined for decades (Sav, 2016). None, however, has seen the accelerated declines in such funding that the financial crisis and great recession have brought about. State funding accounted for 32% of public college and university revenue at the start of the 2004 academic year (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014; Sav, 2016). By 2008, it had decreased slightly to 31% and it gradually declined to 23% by 2013 (Sav, 2016). To compensate for decreases in state funding support, universities have turned increasingly to the private sector. That was a good revenue source until 2008, when, following the financial crisis, private giving decreased and universities saw a more than 12% decline in private gifts as a percentage of revenues from 2008 to 2011 (NCES, 2015; Sav, 2016).

American colleges and universities are making many attempts to diversify and increase their revenue sources, such as creating online education and niche-oriented degree and nondegree academic programs. Student tuition and fees, a primary source of increased revenue, have risen at twice the inflation rate in the past 20 years, outpacing rises in both family income and financial aid resources (Eckel & King, 2004). The type of financial assistance offered to students has changed dramatically, with more aid being provided in the form of loans rather than grants. Furthermore, several grants that were formerly granted based on the financial need of the student and their family are now awarded based on academic merit rather than income or wealth. These reforms have significant consequences for lower-income students and those who are underrepresented in higher education in the United States. The high tuition burden has led to high rates of dropout or stopout (temporary withdrawal from enrollment at a college or university), both of which have resulted in low graduation rates (Zhang, 2009).

Online Education and Increase in Online Learning Programs in General in Higher Education

Academic administrators devised and implemented online education to mitigate the impact of substantial defunding of higher education and the dwindling population of college-age students, as well as to reach more students at a reasonable cost (House-Peters et al., 2019), particularly in public research universities (Ortagus & Tanner, 2018). According to Caudill (2020), the change in demand for professional education learners to online delivery provides institutions more opportunities to increase enrollment through online programs geared toward the adult professional market. Online education is a form of education that allows instructors and students to be physically apart. It delivers timely education to students and allows students to choose a convenient time, place, and pace for their classes. Students may find it easier to gain access to a wide variety of resources in online education that may not be experienced on campus (Moore et al., 2015; Ortagus & Tanner, 2018). Fostering a sense of belonging and a personal connection to learning, especially in the first year, may be a technique to improve these students' learning experience and retention (Thomas et al., 2014). The sense of belonging experienced by graduate students has been shown to influence retention and completion rates and graduate students' desire to pursue a research or professional career in academia (O'Meara et al., 2017; Ostrove et al., 2011).

Flexible and personalized learning became connected with the use of modern information and communications technology (ICT) as distance education penetrated the online space, allowing students greater learning diversity. According to Soffer et al. (2019), online learning environments enable students to experience flexibility by allowing them to choose when, where, and what they will learn. Online learning environments, for example, allow for greater flexibility

in terms of time, place, and access to learning resources (Phirangee, 2017; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Soffer et al., 2019; Vincenzes et al., 2019). The flexibility of time applies to several time-related problems (Soffer et al., 2019), such as (a) when students can begin and end a course, (b) when they can engage within the course, (c) the frequency and speed of learning, (d) the length of learning, and (e) the pacing of evaluation moments (Boer & Collis, 2005; Soffer et al., 2019). The position where learning takes place is referred to as the versatility of place (Collis & Moonen, 2002; Hill, 2006). Flexibility means that learning can take place wherever the learner prefers. Flexible learning environments can reduce distractions and blur unhelpful distinctions between a learner's various activities (for example, at work or home) and learning. Online learning also allows for greater versatility in terms of learning opportunities. This includes (a) the type and origin of research materials, (b) the amount of content, (c) the order in which various sections of a course and study routes are presented, (d) evaluation criteria, and (e) completion requirements (Collis & Moonen, 2002; Cornelius et al., 2011; Hung et al., 2010; Soffer et al., 2019).

According to Xu and Xu (2019), online education includes a wide range of learning environments that are technically not the same as the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom setting, such as telecommunication courses (in which instruction is provided on videotape or via cable delivery to students as they study at home), correspondence study (in which the teacher mails or emails lessons to students who work independently), or online courses (in which course content is delivered via the Internet, sometimes through modules or websites). Learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as assessed by altruism and perceived learning advantages, and social capital, as evaluated by trust, norms of reciprocity, and sense of belonging, will have positive associations with the quality of online engagement as viewed by the learners (Diep et al., 2017).

Pedro and Kumar (2020) gave an account of impressive growth in online education in the past two decades, with at least 31.6% of students taking online courses in the United States in 2016. More than one fifth of U.S. higher education institutions (*N* = 280) surveyed in the Changing Landscape of Online Education (CHLOE) 2019 Report reported that more than 50% of their courses were offered online; from spring 2017 to 2018, the median growth rate of enrolment in fully online courses was 10%. In the same vein, data from the U.S. Department of Education showed that online education had gained much popularity and acceptance, with more than 3.1 million students enrolled in fully online education as of fall 2017, representing 15% of all students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (Gallagher, 2019).

Students who enrolled in 4-year undergraduate programs took the largest portion of online programs (1.46 million), followed by those in 2-year programs (774,000) and those at the graduate level, including doctorate programs (869,000; Gallagher, 2019). These data give an account of the popularity of online bachelor's degrees. According to U.S. Department of Education 2018 data, fully online enrollment in graduate-level programs increased by 6.1% from 2016 to 2017, compared to a 3.7% increase at the undergraduate level (Gallagher, 2019; Ginder et al., 2018).

Campbell and Wescott (2019, as cited in Gallagher, 2019) reported a strong correlation between part-time study and studying online and noted that, at the undergraduate level, women were more likely to pursue fully online programs than men (12% and 9%, respectively). Older students tend to pursue a fully online program more than younger students. For instance, "among all undergraduate students age 30-39 in American higher education, nearly one quarter (23%) are pursuing a fully online program, six times the rate of traditionally-aged undergraduates" (Gallagher, 2019, p. 4). Students who work full time students prefer to enroll in online programs

because of their flexibility. The average age of an online bachelor's degree student was 32, and 84% of online students at the bachelor's level were currently employed. However, according to the NCES, in fall 2019, 1.3 million students were enrolled in at least one online education course, accounting for 42% of all postbaccalaureate students, while online learning courses were taken exclusively by 1.0 million students, or 33% of total postbaccalaureate enrollment (NCES, 2021).

Social Work Online Programs

Social work and other mental health services emerged as online programs as early as 1982, as a form of online self-help support groups (Reamer, 2013). According to Siegel et al. (1998), a survey of graduate, undergraduate, and combined social work programs showed that 27 of 238 (11%) respondents reported offering courses through distance education; 41 of 259 (16%) respondents reported using distance learning when the same study was conducted in 1995-1996. These results showed a 5% increase within 2 years. During the same time, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) administered a similar survey on the use of distance education technology by schools of social work; 22 of 126 (17%) programs reported offering part or all of their courses through distance education (Levin et al., 2018). Vernon et al. (2009) stated that a survey conducted on behalf of CSWE in 2006 reported that 52% of participating MSW programs and 41% of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs reported providing distance education programs. A survey of Deans and Directors of MSW programs indicated that 82 of the 121 (68%) participating programs reported offering distance education programs (East et al., 2014). Previous studies and surveys indicated dramatic growth in social work online programs in the United States. According to CSWE (2015), 76.4% of MSW programs ($N = 178$) and 48.9% of BSW programs ($N = 217$) either offered or planned to offer online courses (Levin et al., 2018).

By 2019, the total enrollment in 450 baccalaureate programs (BSW) had increased by 12.6% in 10 years at institutions reporting data in both 2009 and 2019 (CSWE, 2020). In the past 5 years, enrollment dropped by 5.4%. Over 5 years, the number of students enrolled in part-time courses dropped by 17.7%. The number of approved baccalaureate programs rose by 3.6% in the past 2 years, 8.6% in the past 5 years, and 15.8% in the past 10 years. Almost a third of master's degree students were studying part time; 65.9% of the 68,793 enrolled master's degree students were enrolled full time ($N = 226$; CSWE, 2020). At institutions publishing data in both 2009 and 2019, master's degree enrollment and the number of master's degree (MSW) programs rose annually, with enrollment rising 3.6% in the past year, 15.2% in the past 5 years, and 34.9% in the past 10 years. The number of approved master's degree programs rose more rapidly: 9.2% in the previous year, 27.5% in the previous 5 years, and 50.0% in the previous 10 years. According to *Annual Statistics on Social Work in the United States*, a survey was administered using the Zarca Interactive survey technology in 2016; the results showed that 199 students were enrolled in Doctor of Social Work (DSW) online programs (CSWE, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019).

The expansion of distance education in social work is seen as a constructive and fruitful response to the need for more experienced social workers (Moore et al., 2015). The online curriculum was conceived as a way to meet the growing demand for master's-level social workers in the state and across the nation, encourage fields of emphasis and expertise within the school (e.g., child welfare, oncology social work), and raise revenue in an economic climate where state funding for higher education has been significantly reduced (Moore et al., 2015).

Social work is defined as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (Oliphant et al., 2019). Principles of social justice, human rights, collective

responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by social work theories, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being.

Social work has not been immune to the detrimental effects of the massive defunding of higher education, which decreased the number of enrolled students due to lack of financial resources (both traditional and nontraditional students). As a result, the number of students who chose to study online has risen significantly in recent years from 199 in 2016; The number of DSW students enrolled online was 705 in 2017, 667 in 2018, and 555 in 2019.   (CSWE, 2019). Tuition for traditional face-to-face courses is less than for tuition in online education (Moore et al., 2015; Reamer, 2013). Another factor contributing to the availability of distance education in general, and social work in particular, is that distance education, especially online education, provides educational opportunities for previously underserved populations, such as those living in rural areas or those who are unable or unwilling to relocate for financial, family, or other reasons (Moore et al., 2015). Distance education's expansion in student population is appealing to schools of social work and the larger universities where they are located, as it represents much-needed tuition revenue.

The growth of distance education in social work is seen as a constructive and successful response to the need for more skilled social workers. This need increases more rapidly than the average predicted growth rate for all occupations. The rising demand for social workers results from the expansion of the social services sector nationwide. Professionals in aging, child welfare, mental and behavioral health, military and veteran concerns, health care, education, and corrections are in high demand (Moore et al., 2015). Distance education allows students to personalize their education by selecting programs with their desired specialized curriculum,

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regardless of the program's physical location. It allows students who work full time or have full-time caregiving obligations to build a flexible educational experience.

The digital revolution has changed both social work practice and social work education. Today's social workers can chat with clients on social networking sites, offer online and video therapy services to people whom they have never met in person and who live thousands of miles away, save electronic documents in the virtual "cloud," and share e-mail and text messages with clients via their smartphones. Social work educators can use video conferencing to teach clinical classes online. Social work students can now receive degrees without ever setting foot in a typical classroom or speaking with a professor in person (Reamer, 2013).

Videoconferencing, live online chat, asynchronous podcasts, and webinars are examples of technological advancements that enable social work educators to meet students whose personal circumstances or geographic location would make it difficult to attend class in person (Reamer, 2013). Nonetheless, barriers to further use of technology in social work education exist. There is evidence that some social work educators contend that traditional instruction is superior to web-based instruction, especially regarding micro practice and clinical skills courses (Wretman & Macy, 2016).

According to Moore et al. (2015), challenges in offering an online program in social work include technical technology limitations, regulations that can restrict the geography of a program, faculty growth, time required to identify strategic guidelines on the form of curricula provided, difficulty in finding field placements in other states, and problems with student capacity. Challenges also involve discovering and acquiring appropriate online training sites, training personnel on acquired technology, and restructuring existing courses and modules (Singh et al., 2020). One of the main stumbling blocks for instructors in a virtual environment is modification

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of lessons based on learner demand and tailored to the intended audience. Educators face a significant problem in transitioning to e-learning due to a variety of issues such as insufficient training, lower than required training, a lack of hands-on practice, and so on (Singh et al., 2020).

Aside from the difficulty of participating in an otherwise potentially sterile online environment, also identified are difficulties with the time needed to develop and teach online courses, less pedagogical expertise required to provide students with a well-rounded educational experience effectively, and perceived institutional pressure to increase online educational offerings (Bunk et al., 2015; Racovita-Szilagyi et al., 2018; Seirup et al., 2016; Smidt et al., 2014). According to Singh et al. (2020), traditional learning methods have changed, instructor and student roles remain, and online learning enables a class to run asynchronously 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This development has placed educators and institutions under significant time management pressure.

Due to the challenge of delivering content to students without adequate interaction with a professor, asynchronous online teaching cannot be addressed in the same way as traditional teaching methods. This delivery can be difficult in content areas such as social work, that necessitate critical thinking and practice and clinical learning, all of which can be difficult to demonstrate online, particularly in clinical courses (Zidan, 2015). Aside from technical difficulties, challenges include ensuring that students have sufficient technology and technological knowledge to engage in their coursework fully. Students must have opportunities to build their sense of belonging, professional identities, and practice skills through coursework, contact with professors, practicum opportunities, advisement, conferences, and connections with colleagues (Moore et al., 2015). Another aspect of time use in distance education is that students

and instructors may be in different time zones, making live interaction challenging (Zidan, 2015).

Relevance for Social Work

Social work is an applied profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and growth, social peace, and empowerment and liberation (Oliphant et al., 2019). To achieve and maintain employment as a social worker, most graduates (in some states) must pass licensure examinations and demonstrate proficient practice skills (Moore et al., 2015). Social work education is seen as a platform for educating and developing the next generation of social workers. To do so, educators must possess the expertise, skills, and values necessary to disseminate, teach, and model them to students (Teater & Lopez-Humphreys, 2019) in a structured learning environment that enhances opportunities to practice the skills that are taught.

Online learning requires that students have access to a secure internet connection in a dedicated learning area and develop specific skills, including computer skills, literacy, management of time, interpersonal engagement, cognitive processing, and critical thinking, as well as good lecture and writing skills (Davis et al., 2018).

Online learning should adhere to expectations of excellence and fairness, intellectual honesty and gatekeeping, and privacy and surveillance. The NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) is not prohibitive but somewhat cautionary about continuing education services delivered by technology and notes that social workers must adhere to the NASW Standards for Continuing Professional Education, provide such services in a competent manner (NASW 2017; Phelan, 2015), and meet relevant licensing laws when delivering continuing education by electronic means.

The NASW and Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB; NASW & ASWB, 2005) have joined forces to provide social workers with technology and practice guidance. The consequence of their advice is that continuing education in e-learning venues must adhere to high standards, with users having access to monitoring, "live" help when appropriate, and the opportunity to provide input. If all of these are in place, ethical issues should be reduced (NASW & ASWB, 2005; Phelan, 2015). However, these ethical guidelines and standards were not written or implemented for universities and colleges that offer for-credit courses and/or degree programs.

Uncertain guidelines related to distance and online course workloads, class sizes, adjunct tutor quality, demand on academic staff to teach online courses without proper training, academic staff-student boundaries across the distance and online worlds, and the difficulty of teaching social work practice skills with distance and online worlds are among the challenges faced by social work academics (McAuliffe, 2019). Online learning difficulties can impede student retention, especially for nontraditional students (e.g., first in the family, older, rural/remote).

Theoretical Framework

This research study was theoretically guided by adult learning theory, experiential learning theory, and social exchange theory. Adult learning theory is based on Knowles's (1984) principle of andragogy, which states that adults must participate in the design and evaluation of their education, learning activities are founded on experience (including mistakes), adults are most interested in learning subjects that are directly related to their work or personal lives, and adult education is problem based rather than content based.

Drawing from intellectual work on experiential learning, the experiential paradigm is based on D. A. Kolb's (1984) classic model, which elaborates the idea that learning, improvement, and development occur as learners reflect on their experiences. Experiential learning, according to Kolb, is a process of generating the knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning modes (concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation, and active experimentation) and is responsive to contextual needs. This learning is depicted as an idealized learning cycle or spiral in which the student touches all bases by experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting in a cyclical process that is sensitive to the learning circumstance and what is being learned (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Social exchange theory is drawn from Molm's (1997) assertions that much of what we need and value in life (e.g., resources, skills, friendship, acceptance, status, education) can be obtained only from others. People rely on one another for such valuable resources, which they give to one another through the exchange process (Molm, 1997), which is concerned with the norms, obligations, trust, and commitment established through social exchanges (Dijkstra, 2015; Lawler et al., 2008; Molm et al., 2007). Figure 1 shows how the constructs of adult learning as developed by Knowles (1980), which state that adults are autonomous, self-directed, and goal oriented; are motivated by internal or intrinsic reasons, rather than external or extrinsic forces and enhance reciprocal relations that foster students' sense of belonging within an online learning community.

Figure 1

Construct of Adult Learning Theory.
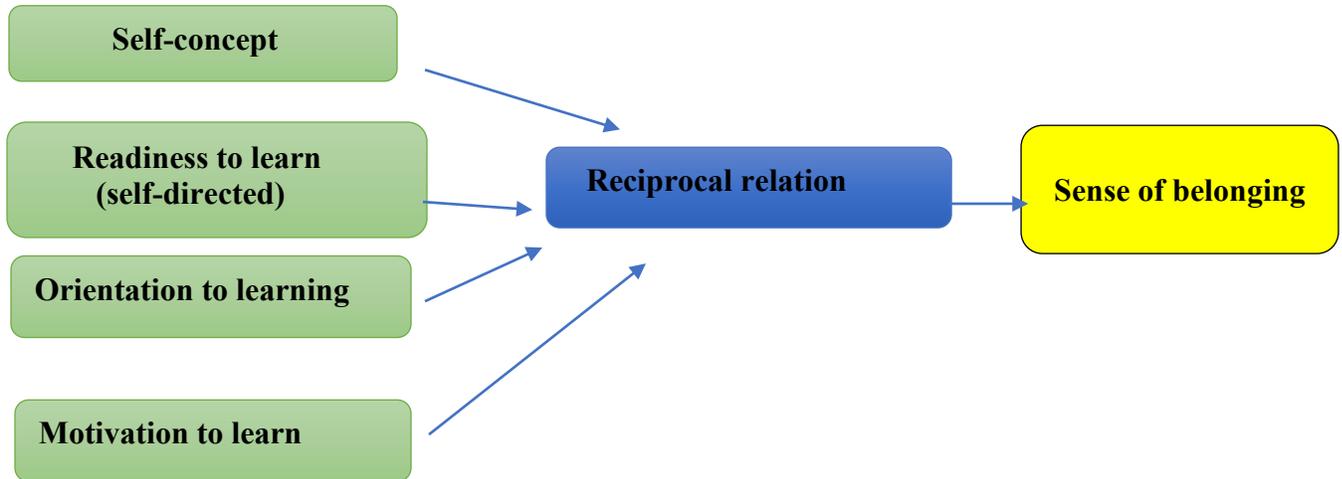
These constructions mirror the types of students who opt to take distance learning courses (Vernon et al., 2009). Individuals act to attain a level of cognitive resonance in which they integrate experiences and beliefs from the outside world into their narratives. This shows that a sense of belonging in online learning communities is an iterative process of dialogue and exchange with other members (Thomas et al., 2014).

Adult Learning Theory

Social work scholars have noted that online learning strategies are facilitated by adult learning theory (Herie, 2005; Vernon et al., 2009). The construct of adult learning theory (Figure 1) states that adults are autonomous, self-directed, self-concept, motivated, and goal-oriented (Vernon et al., 2009). Adults display a high level of commitment when they enroll in a course, and they are motivated to set their priorities and know what goal they want to attain. As one grows older, one builds a pool of knowledge that becomes a more valuable resource for learning (Machynska & Boiko, 2020). However, adults who enrolled in online programs, especially those

who work long hours in paid employment, are less likely to see themselves as students and may have a lower level of sense of belonging to university life and learning (O'Keeffe, 2013). According to research, interactions can help to build a sense of community in an online learning environment. These interactions do not occur on their own, and it is essential that students have a sense of online community (Trespalacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020).

As distance education shifted online, flexible and personalized learning became synonymous with the use of digital Information and Communication Technology (ICT), providing students with more learning opportunities (Soffer et al., 2019). According to research, various factors, such as increasing students' self-belief and improving students' trust, identification, and ownership in the learning process, may exert a positive impact on student interest in learning (Shah & Cheng, 2019). A sense of belonging can emerge if a student builds a relationship with even one crucial individual within the online learning environment. This relationship can significantly influence a student's decision to continue to study (Glennen et al., 1996; Heisserer & Parette, 2002).

Only a few research studies have been conducted on online learning and a sense of belonging. For example, Thomas et al. (2014) provided an insightful summary of tutor and learner perspectives on online learning and sense of belonging. That study emphasized the significance of a sense of belonging for all students, leading to increased learner satisfaction. While the authors stressed the need for peer cooperation and active engagement, they also agreed that a lack of community building may limit a sense of belonging and possibly increase attrition rates.

Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) investigated the types of interactions that were most significant predictors of students' sense of belonging in online graduate courses. Their findings

revealed that introductions, sharing personal experiences, collaborative group projects, class discussions, and resource exchange were the interactions most predictive of a sense of belonging.

Peacock et al. (2020) explored the significance, or lack thereof, of a sense of belonging in postgraduate online education. The researchers investigated the nature and dynamics of students' lived experiences of online learning, as well as their feelings of belonging within it. The preliminary findings underlined the significance of a sense of belonging for them as online learners and identified three major themes: interaction and engagement, learning culture, and support. These preliminary findings emphasized the significance of those three elements in fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring chances for meaningful group and peer relationships.

Self-Directed Learning

In his explanation of self-directed learning (SDL), Knowles (1980) acknowledged the wide-ranging nature of SDL. He defined SDL as a process in which individuals take the lead in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, selecting and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes, with or without the assistance of others (Knowles, 1975). Synchronous and asynchronous interactions are essential activities to generate possibilities for adult students to build knowledge, based on social-constructivist pedagogy of distant learning and the development of bi-way communication technologies. The development of collaborative activities that foster interaction is mentioned in more recent studies (Luo et al., 2017: Oha et al., 2014; Trespalacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020). Students who communicate with their peers and tutors have a much stronger sense of belonging (Dawson, 2006).

According to Carson (2012), the SDL process cycles from the planning phase, in which the student determines a learning path through task analysis and the formation of self-motivational beliefs, to the performance phase, in which the student completes activities to attain the learning goals (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010). Adults devote considerable time and resources to learn new things and acquire skills at their initiatives (Toit-Brits, 2018).

Self-directed learning can be viewed as a dynamic process of meaning making. Meaning making arises from critical reflection on learning standards, which can contribute to open minds that accept change. Making meaning in this setting is a collaborative effort that relies on learners working interdependently (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). To give meaning to teaching and learning (education), adult students must be involved and be self-directed contributors in the learning process, seeking to establish a meaningful interpretation of the learning knowledge found in the learning environment (Toit-Brits, 2018) to enhance their sense of belonging.

Self-Concept

Academic self-concept, self-efficacy, academic performance, and persistence have all been linked to a sense of belonging in higher education (Freeman et al., 2007; O'Meara et al., 2017; Ostrove et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2012). A sense of belonging is more than just a sense of liking or warmth; it also entails encouragement and respect for personal autonomy. Self-concept is an intrinsic motivation that drives individuals to conceptualize and successfully plan for the self-learning models. Adults are motivated to decide how and where they want the learning to occur.

Orientation to Learn

Adults' perception of learning encourages them to handle problems and perform various tasks. Adults seek new knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can enhance their effectiveness (Liu,

2019) and give them a sense of belonging. Adult learners are prepared ahead of time by orienting themselves to the flexibility of learning time and place, the availability of information and communication, and the development of online pedagogy in online education (Liu, 2019).

Motivation to Learn

Self-motivation is vital in adult learning. Social connectedness, cognitive interest, personal achievement, and social welfare are sources of motivation for adult learners. Adult learners cite a variety of reasons for enrolling in school, including extrinsic motivations such as professional, economic, and social advancement, as well as intrinsic motivations such as a desire to understand the subject at hand and social motivations, such as meeting new people.

One mechanism for the link between adult students' sense of belonging and their learning, achievement, and overall academic performance has been proposed as motivational processes (Won et al., 2018). A sense of belonging, in particular, has been proposed to encourage students' internalization of shared values and objectives within a school system and the adoption and pursuit of meaningful goals. According to Berker and Horn (2003), adult education engagement is higher among young, employed, and highly educated people who participate for both intrinsic (interest in the subject, personal enrichment) and extrinsic (job-related) reasons. Self-efficacy beliefs (i.e., the perception of learners and achieving an intended performance level) are significant motivational elements for learning, persistence, and performance (Rothes et al., 2014; Schunk, 1991).

Experiential Learning Theory

The concept of reflection is fundamental to experiential learning theories that are popular in adult education (Kuk & Holst, 2018). Learners should not seek to learn because they have had an experience; according to D. A. Kolb (1984), they must reflect on learning. Kolb suggested an

experiential learning loop or sequence consisting of four components: concrete experience (what happened), reflective observation (how do I feel, think, and want as a result of that experience), abstract conceptualization (how can literature, conceptual tools, or other experiences inform my understanding), and active experimentation (what will I do differently as a result of my experience, reflection, and generalization) (Page & Margolis, 2017). When learners can reflect personally and collectively analyze and align their interpretation of theory with their lived experiences, the capacity for new ideas and behavior increases.

According to Peacock and Cowan (2019), at the graduate level, reflections should go beyond the mere recollection of events and the development of subjective assessments of learning progress, which is sufficient at lower levels. Reflections should include group discussion, with participants feeling a growing sense of belonging as they seek solutions to concerns regarding procedures, supported by relevant data from the shared learning experience wherever feasible.

Kuk and Holst (2018) theorized that not all experiences are synonymous with learning. The relationships among three key components that constitute experiential learning are experience, reflection based on previous knowledge, and learned experience. Reflection is the most important of the three elements in the transition to acquired experience. Present experience may or may not become a part of one's knowledge store as time passes. Only the portion of experience that is the object of reflection gains additional significance and becomes acquired experience, raising the probability of becoming part of one's prior knowledge. Confirming experiences have been related to a higher motivation to continue university education. Reservations and distrust of learning tools can stifle creativity in online reflection, negatively affecting academic and social integration (Masika & Jones, 2016).

According to Masika and Jones (2016), community offers a stabilizing and cohesive force and conditions for discussion, critical debate, negotiation, and agreement. Tutors play an important role in fostering the harvesting of individual and mutual learning. The ability to instill trust, psychological safety, and imagination in a community of learners is critical for inspiring collaborative learning. Therefore, learning must be contextualized in the sense of the lived experience of participation in the social environment.

The difference in pedagogical models that promote and use learning groups is in the idea of learning, which can be thought of as a process of reflection in thinking: Action extends thought; reflection is formed by the implications of action (Masika & Jones, 2016). At their best, online learning community models allow participants to engage actively with one another in educationally worthwhile, entertaining, and provocative ideas and perspectives. These processes can be most efficiently and functionally enabled through the design of the learning environment, with a focus on mutual educational objectives, encouragement, cooperation, and trust (Shea, 2006).

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory offers a theoretical structure with recommendations for increasing active engagement and decreasing lurking (self-concealing). According to Lawler and Thye (1999), social exchange theory assumes transactions between two "self-interested actors" to fulfill the individual purpose that cannot be achieved alone. *Social exchange* is defined as the "exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between two individuals" (Cook et al., 2013, p. 62).

There is a connection between a person's impact (satisfaction with a relationship) and their commitment to that relationship (i.e., their willingness to participate and share knowledge;

Thomas et al., 2014). *Learning* is defined as a community-based social process in which people create and negotiate knowledge. Strategies aimed at fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion in the online environment appear to boost online learning retention.

A sense of belonging to the online educational community is an iterative dialog process and exchange with peers, as people work with others to reach a degree of cognitive resonance, in which experience and beliefs of the outside world are incorporated into their narratives (Thomas et al., 2014). According to social exchange theory, people compare alternate courses of action to get the best benefit at the lowest expense from every transaction performed. When knowledge is viewed as a public good, knowledge exchange is guided by moral responsibility and mutual interest (altruism) rather than by narrow self-interest (personal need, reputation; Koper et al., 2004).

All parties should be committed to creating a trusting atmosphere in the relationship during the process of social exchange. Trust is the product of organizations or individuals accumulating and experiencing trust during the exchange process, leading to the frequency at which knowledge is shared to obtain a certain level of trust and relationship commitment. Relationship commitment refers to the members of a party's conviction that maintaining a relationship with the other party is vital and that they will all do whatever possible to keep that relationship intact (Ho & Lin, 2016).

Aim of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate MSW students' perceptions of online social work education. The study was designed to address three research questions:

1. How do students define a "sense of belonging" in online programs?

2. What course/program factors, instructor factors, and peer factors foster a sense of

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belonging among students in an online environment?

3. What resources foster students' sense of belonging in online MSW programs?

Reflexivity

Studies have been conducted on online students' sense of belonging, but none has been conducted on social work online students' sense of belonging. This study was an attempt to fill gaps in previous studies on online students' sense of belonging. What factors foster students' sense of belonging? The question suggests the approach by which data are gathered, analyzed, and presented. Although it is important to listen to participants' sentiments, I was careful not to dwell on them and make the error of emotionally charged debate that might introduce bias that would jeopardize the objectivity of the study. Qualitative interviews were conducted to collect data and identify emergent themes regarding the participants' sense of belonging in the online MSW program. I reflected on their stories and on my personal experience and background, which influenced how the stories are interpreted.

Positionality

It is conceivable that my background in social work influenced participants to give responses about their online learning community experiences and to use the opportunity to voice their concerns to effect change. However, it is my judgment that my identity and experiences throughout graduate school did not influence how I interpreted the participants' comments. I believe that the conclusions in the study are based on accurate representations of participant responses.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions were utilized in this study.

Asynchronous online learning: Learning in which learners work in their own time, using online curricular materials, while being guided by an instructor (Murphy et al., 2011).

Higher education: In general, study that leads to academic or certification degrees. In this dissertation, higher education institutions include colleges and universities.

Retention: A measure of how long students remain in their educational program at a particular institution.

Sense of belonging: A feeling of being accepted, valued, included, and supported by the instructor and peers in an online learning environment, as well as a sense of being an integral part of the activities (Peacock et al., 2020).

Synchronous online learning: Learning in which instructors and learners are time dependent, planning their schedules to coincide. Learners are at a remote location and are connected by video conferencing, audio conferencing, or both (Murphy et al., 2011).

Chapter Summary

The physical isolation of learners from their teacher is the most important pedagogical challenge in online learning. By definition, an online course offers the majority of its information digitally, removing on-campus attendance requirements. To handle the intangible environment of the online classroom effectively, advanced technologies are necessary. Many complex elements can influence an online learner's performance and academic achievement. A strong sense of belonging can contribute to higher retention and completion rates in online courses and programs. Interaction with peers and support from instructors may play important roles in establishing a sense of belonging among students for any pedagogical activity that occurs in an online setting. This chapter offered a summary of the information needed to continue with the

study, including research questions, context and rationale for study, and theories to understand the phenomenon.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 provides an overview and analysis of the current research on (a) the need for a sense of belonging in online programs, (b) a sense of belonging in online social work programs, and (c) fostering a sense of belonging or community in online learning. Chapter 3 presents the methodology for this study: study design, procedures for data collection, and statistical method of data analysis. Chapter 4 reports the main results of the study, including the patterns that emerged to address the research questions. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the results of the study, its limitations, and implications for researchers and educators who are interested in exploring the connections among the themes and a sense of belonging in MSW students in online learning about social work.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The conceptual model described in Chapter 1 provided the context for the literature

search, focusing on students' sense of belonging. Information for the literature review was

gathered from a variety of sources. Millersville University's Francine G. McNairy Library and

Learning Forum were used to find pertinent research papers, books, and scholarly journals. Other

used databases were EBSCOhost PsycINFO, JSTOR, ProQuest, Educational Resources

Information Centre (ERIC), and Google Scholar. Journals included *Journal of Experimental*

Education, International Journal of Doctoral Studies, Online Learning Journal, and *The*

Electronic Journal of e-Learning. Keywords used in the Boolean search for relevant material

were *belonging*, *community*, *distance learning*, *online learning*, *sense of belonging*, *sense of*

community, and *online social work programs*. Several articles were also discovered using the

reference lists of journal articles. Studies that examined students' sense of belonging and

community in online learning were identified using the following search string *Students'*

perspective AND *belonging* OR *community* OR *sense of belonging* OR *sense of community* AND

online learning OR *distance learning*.

Need for Sense of Belonging in Online Programs

Most of the recent research on the sense of belonging emphasizes the importance of

students having a caring tutor who knows them and is enthusiastic, engaging, supportive, helpful,

and, most importantly, trustworthy. The effect of collegially supportive and facilitative tutor-

learner relationships (Peacock & Cowan, 2019), such as mastery of relevant information,

pleasantness, polite relationships between instructor and students, cooperative interactions

among students, and easy organization (Freeman et al., 2007), play a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging.

Maslow (1954) observed in his psychological hierarchy as early as 1962 that the desire to belong was more critical than the need for information and understanding. Love and belongingness needs are at the center of his motivational hierarchy; Maslow contended that they will not surface until basic needs such as food and protection have been met. Belonging triumphs over self-esteem and self-actualization. Thus, learners may want to feel relaxed and secure in their learning environments and valued by both peers and instructors before they can focus on their studies, whether face to face or online (O'Meara et al., 2017; Peacock & Cowan 2019).

A sense of belonging is not a new or unusual phenomenon in the academic setting (Stachl & Baranger, 2020). According to the need-to-belong idea, humans have an innate desire and incentive to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships, regardless of the circumstances. Within the context of online learning, it has frequently been observed that a sense of belonging to a community was desirable (Thomas et al., 2014). Sense of belonging emerged as a significant aspect of the educational experience after a thorough investigation of the experiences of students from unconventional backgrounds who participated in online learning. In response to Maslow's work (1962), some academics have even claimed that it is vital to perceive belonging to achieve higher-order results, such as understanding and self-actualization (Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012). Therefore, learners' social interactions and involvement in learning communities are some of the values of education, whether it is conducted face to face or online (Thomas et al., 2014).

Sense of Belonging in Online Social Work Programs

Belonging, in education, has been described as students' feelings of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by teachers and peers and their sense of being an essential part of the classroom operation (Masika & Jones, 2016; Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Feeling a sense of belonging within one's field of study is a factor that is usually emphasized as an essential predictor of success and retention in academia. A *sense of belonging* is defined as the extent to which the person is convinced that they are accepted and regarded as a legitimate part of an academic community and that their presence and contributions to that community are cherished (Stachl & Baranger, 2020). Online learners may improve their experience and performance and reduce attrition rates by fostering a sense of belonging (Peacock et al., 2020). The absence of a sense of belonging may trigger anxiety, dissatisfaction, and forbearance, with an adverse effect on academic life and performance.

According to educational researchers, one of the most critical needs for all students to perform well in any learning environment is a sense of belonging (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Fostering a sense of belonging and a personal connection to learning could help students to enhance their learning experience and retention (Thomas et al., 2014). High dropout rates have been recorded in online classes, often attributed to students' feelings of alienation and disconnection due to physical separation. Therefore, many tutors have chosen to concentrate on the social nature of learning, such as establishing a sense of community and social presence in their classes to alleviate these feelings (Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

Technology has enabled social work faculty to choose from a broad range of approaches to training the social work practitioners of tomorrow (Washburn & Zhou, 2018). Because human behavior and applied activities and skills are the subject of social work in particular, some

responses to technological education in social work pedagogy have been unfavorable. However, since technology is increasingly used in social work programs, many schools and colleges have implemented distance learning and Internet-mediated lessons, while others offer their entire social work programs online (Zidan, 2015).

Although students' participation is a multilevel phenomenon with multiple mechanisms, advocates and funders in the education sector have attempted to grapple with the dynamic relationships among these processes and implement programs to improve the student experience and educational outcomes (Masika & Jones, 2016). The character and longevity of learning are determined by how the learner mobilizes mental energy for learning through motivation, emotion, and volition. A lack of belonging may lead to feelings of anxiety, dissatisfaction, and boredom, negatively affecting academic life and results (Peacock et al., 2020).

The integration of graduate students into critical networks in their graduate departments, the help that graduate students receive from advisors, and a sense of belonging have all been linked in studies on graduate student sense of belonging (O'Meara et al., 2017). According to research, graduate students who have access to support in mentoring relationships are more satisfied with their education and have higher academic success, critical thinking capacity, and academic skill growth (Curtin et al., 2013; Lovitts, 2001; O'Meara et al., 2017). The facilitative tutor's role in cultivating trusting, open, and meaningful interactions, and an increasing sense of belonging to a community of inquiry make significant contributions to the emerging learning experience (Peacock & Cowan, 2019).

Fostering Sense of Belonging and Community in Online Learning

Online learning is a social experience characterized by a sense of belonging and acceptance within a community of people who share common interests (Garrison, 2017; Peacock

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& Cowan, 2019). Particular attention should be paid to how structured learning is facilitated and how students are motivated, especially the tutor-learner relationship, and promoting online learners' sense of belonging. Online communication creates unique opportunities that should be taken advantage of to promote a sense of community among online learners. Learners build on their ability to work together, pool resources, and accelerate learning by using the online option for program delivery (Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017).

Students who take online classes are mostly older and more experienced (with computers and previous online courses) and are therefore more likely to be intrinsically motivated (motivated by personal interests or satisfaction rather than external consequences) and prefer a less controlled, more autonomous class structure in which they can function independently (Drouin & Vartanian, 2010). These students in online learning communities will actively engage in ideas and viewpoints that they believe are educationally worthwhile, entertaining, and provocative. These processes can be most efficiently and functionally enabled by designing the learning environment, focusing on mutual educational goals, support, collaboration, and trust (Shea, 2006). The value of a clear sense of belonging to one's course/program, instructors, and peer groups has been ranked as a key to academic performance and persistence for tertiary students.

Program/Course Factors That Foster Sense of Belonging

In online learning environments, accessible and effective communication, which are identified as crucial aspects of social presence, are needed to create a sense of community (Berry, 2017; Rovai, 2001; Trespalacios & Uribe-Florez, 2019; Yuan & Kim, 2014). Discussion activities in online learning environments encourage students' learning through collaboration while facilitating social interaction among students by allowing them to exchange task-related

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messages and personal thoughts. For example, shared goals, working as a team, support and contributing to each other, mutual respect between peers, idea sharing, discussion, and debate (Daniel et al., 2003; Masika & Jones, 2015). In discussing the benefit of participating in the class group discussion, a student stated that: "So, if you don't understand something and you ask a question, they don't make you look like you're stupid or make you feel like you're stupid. Everyone kind of just help each other out. So, that's quite nice." (Masika, & Jones, 2016, p. 143)

Participants in a research study by Masika and Jones (2016) reported that spending time working together increased the quality of their learning and experiences of having a voice in the construction of knowledge and changes in knowledge interpretations and behavior elicited through group work. Their sense making of their learning and the meanings that they assigned to it indicated that they had a reflective understanding, with one student remarking about the intervention, "It makes you think" (p. 145). Another participant said,

> As I get to know more of the people that's on the course, I think I appreciate more and more working as a team and getting involved with the team members, especially when you're in a group task. It's not just about what it is that I can get from them. But I'm contributing to the team. And everyone's really benefiting from it…it sounds cheesy, but when you do get other people's opinions and perspectives, it does help you to branch out in your level of thinking. And it allows you to get a perspective that you wouldn't have had by yourself, or it takes you a shorter time to get there if other people help. (Masika & Jones, 2016, p. 146)

According to Pascale (2018), graduate-level classes provide more opportunities for seminar-style discussion and debate, and students frequently used discussions to identify persons in their program with whom they thought they could connect socially. This information is

corroborated by a shared experience of one of the students: "I enjoy the relationships I've got

from being in the classroom. I feel like the conversations in the classroom help me identify

individuals that I may have interest outside of the classroom in terms of friendship or hanging

out" (Pascale, 2018, p. 8).

According to Phirangee and Malec (2017), for all identities, experiences, values, and

knowledge sets to be embraced rather than marginalized in an online course, it is essential to

create a social presence. For instance, according to Trespalacios and Uribe-Florez (2020), peer

review was adopted in a research proposal that students developed in a particular course. This

allowed participants to respond to questions and feedback from the instructor and classmates.

Students had time to reflect on and integrate their comments throughout the talks. About this

activity, a student stated,

> I already learned more from the reading of someone else's and critiquing someone else's
>
> almost than just my own. It provided the ability to support each other, those activities,
>
> and I liked that part. I think that did build community, that you're trying to help
>
> somebody else do a better job on their paper and identify things that you have questions
>
> about. (Trespalacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020, p. 64)

Learners in a study by Peacock and Cowan (2019) engaged in partnerships for 10 weeks,

with specific instructions, such as the maximum duration of the artifact and the deadline for

submission. The activity was designed to promote and enhance a sense of belonging in their

social presence. Leaners reported that they gained higher-level cognitive understanding,

interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and self-worth. Online learners in the course were asked to

reflect on their learning, using Cowan's reflective model (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). The learners

structured the submission by expanding on their initial posts, presenting their personal module

goals, which they shared with the group for collegial feedback. They addressed not just their

desire for greater understanding in this initial "reflection-for-action" posting. For example, they

discussed how to encourage social presence in online environments and considered capability

growth, such as enhanced interpersonal skills in online communities and skills, that they would

need for success.

Learners can also capture reflections during the course (reflection-in-action) and use

them as evidence to support their learning analysis (reflection-on-action). According to Garrison

(2007), the hallmarks of social presence are open communication and group cohesion formed

through collaboration.

Instructor Factors That Foster Sense of Belonging

Students can develop a sense of belonging in online classrooms when instructors help

them to feel comfortable and express themselves openly and encourage them to support their

peers' academic and social development through feedback, constructive criticism, and reflective

dialogue (Berry, 2017; Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Gray, 2004). Relationships with

instructors influence strongly how students feel about school and how well they do in college

(Curtin et al., 2013; L. S. Johnson, 2009). According to Wentzel (1999), students must first

develop an attachment with instructors before feeling a sense of belonging in a learning

community. The consistent facilitative role of a loving, trusting, and committed instructor is

referred to as a teaching (instructor) *presence* (Peacock & Cowan, 2019).

Instructors may be active in designing and preparing curriculum events to assist students

in meeting their learning goals. They assist learning throughout the course by promoting

individual and community meaning making and deepening of understanding. Through the design

and facilitation of both social and cognitive presences, an instructor can create interpersonal

relationships and a sense of belonging, which are important to an academic endeavor (Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; Trespalacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020).

Pascale (2018) compared graduate students' sense of belonging to undergraduate students' sense of belonging. The results indicated that graduate students felt more connected to their professors than did undergraduate students. Even for students who had established relationships with instructors during their undergraduate years, the relationship had transformed from "teacher-child" to "mentor-mentee" during graduate school. Also, the feeling that instructors were approachable and compassionate to life circumstances may have contributed to the closeness with faculty. One student described how her advisor had helped her through her divorce.

> I consider him a good friend . . . he's been divorced so luckily when I was going through mine . . . he was totally understanding, and even in my research there was a point where I just stopped doing it, but he had to be a supervisor and was like look I understand but you gotta do it. (Pascale, 2018, p. 9)

Glass et al. (2015) examined the motivating dynamics of professor-foreign student relationships that foster international students' sense of belonging and help them to achieve their academic goals. Participation and inclusion, personal ways of knowing, and possible selves were identified as dynamics that international students perceived as having an educational and developmental impact on their sense of belonging. Professors discovered culturally sensitive strategies to enhance inclusion through expressing gratitude, emphasizing the importance of a student's contributions throughout the course, and giving one-on-one attention before and after class. Several students reported experiences that brought them into deeper activism and engagement in class debate with their personal, one-on-one expressions of emotive interest

(Exter et al., 2009; Glass et al., 2015). For instance, a female Nepalese student described a professor's cultural sensitivity in fostering an inclusive classroom environment:

> I had one professor, he was American, but I just loved his class because he knew that I was afraid to talk, and he said, "If you have something and you are not able to say in class, come and talk to me, and maybe we can raise that in the next class, so that if I start the topic, then you might be able to contribute a lot." That kind of stayed in my mind. In his class, I can speak. I can say what I see because he is okay with it. Little things like that even just giving a little bit of care. (Glass et al., 2015, p. 358)

Instructors can also improve the sense of belonging of students by providing various communication methods, encouraging and promoting comments, and defining expectations for the course (Bolliger & Martin, 2018).

Morina (2019) focused on how students with disabilities can develop a sense of belonging through student-instructor relationships. The study emphasized that emotions play an important role in learning and are an integral part of relationships, claiming that how one feels about others and with others is crucial to the quality of the relationships that are formed. The instructor who teaches with excitement and passion and who encourages students to participate in class will help students to establish a sense of belonging. According to research, instructors who had a positive attitude toward impairment were more adaptable, personable, understanding, and willing to help (Morina, 2019; Riley, 2019). Students with disabilities value faculty members who are not overly theoretical and instead use examples and incorporate new ideas into their classes.

In both physical and virtual environments, trust has been thoroughly studied. It has been identified as a key component in outcome variables, such as technology adoption or acceptance

and system use or success (Zhao et al., 2012). Thriving online learning communities are built

based on trust among peers and instructors (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Garrison (2017) stated,

"The more we know about other members of the community, the more trustful and responsive

we become in terms of academic discourse" (p. 45). One who trusts a virtual community and its

members is more likely to become involved in the virtual community and engage with other

participants (Zhao et al., 2012). Furthermore, that person is more likely to believe that

information offered by other virtual community members is relevant and credible.

In an illustrative example reported by Peacock and Cowan (2019), a Chinese student

newly studying in an online environment noted the influence of his instructor: "I was scared

about how the course expected me to plan my skills development. Your very first e-mail

convinced me I could trust you to help, if I confessed my very basic needs" (p. 72). Also, in

appreciating a small but significant effort of his instructor, during a program review a learner

said, "You cared enough to come to meet us [online] before we arrived. That set the tone for my

course experience" (p. 72).

Zhao et al. (2012) conducted a research study on factors that influence a virtual

community member's sense of belonging to the community and the consequences on

engagement in the virtual community in terms of intent to gain and give experience/knowledge

using a social capital viewpoint. Three factors were related to three dimensions of social capital

in a virtual community: structural familiarity with members of the virtual community, cognitive

perceived similarity with other members of the community, and relational trust in other

members. These factors were tested for possible effects on the sense of belonging and the two

types of intention. The findings indicated that all three social capital characteristics were

positively associated with a sense of belonging, which had a considerable impact on both types of intention (to get and to share knowledge).

By setting a warm and inviting tone in the classroom and using technology in many ways to involve all students and build a customized learning environment, instructors help students to develop a sense of community (Berry, 2019; Trespalacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020). The essence, form, and tone of instructor-community communications can go a long way toward fostering a trusting, caring, and encouraging atmosphere. By safeguarding the way learners behave through their friendliness, helpfulness, and excitement, and by maintaining communication through discussions, announcements, and posts, the instructor's attitude and approach set the tone of the learning and the development of a sense of belonging. All this assist in reinforcing a sense of belonging.

Online instructors can regularly check in with online realms, even if only for a few minutes, influencing a sense of belonging through their transparency and authenticity and having a consistent presence during online conversations and short videos. It is suggested to create a welcoming tone from the beginning and launching an online icebreaker activity where students honestly share their recent learning experiences and apprehensions regarding upcoming tasks. Learners soon build trust in online discussions, connect with peers, and build personal relationships. Ultimately, learners grow and feel a sense that they belong to a collaborative, respectful educational community in which debates that do not include any discourse can occur without intimidation (Masika & Jones, 2016; Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Peacock et al., 2020; Won et al., 2018).

Shepherd and Bolliger (2019) reported that learners feel connected, boost their performance and comprehension by receiving a simple, meaningful, routine, and timely tutor-

generated feedforward, and acquire a sense of community when instructors actively engage in course events, promote and facilitate communication, help students to understand that they have common interests, and foster an environment of trust. According to O'Meara et al. (2017), learners who have good mentoring relationships show higher satisfaction levels and improved academic performance, critical thinking abilities, and academic skill growth.

Peer Factors That Foster Sense of Belonging

Sharing cognitive responsibility for creating new information is valuable to the community and advancing knowledge (Cacciamani et al., 2019; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2010). Including collaboration in evaluation is necessary and beneficial for encouraging social relationships and a sense of belonging (Masika & Jones, 2016; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; Thomas et al., 2014). In a research study conducted by Masika and Jones (2016) that focused on higher education students' experiences of participating and learning together, the participants in a focus group discussed examples of transformative learning in which they helped with the production, exchange, distribution, and consumption of knowledge, establishing the dialectical relationship between individual and collective learning. A student remarked on the importance of working together as a group:

> I think like in group work, you're only as strong as your weakest member. So, you really have to like rely on other people. Like to get everything done, you can't just do it yourself. Like, we've just done like a business project like as a group. And we were like, oh, you do this task. You do this task. And everyone's done their tasks, and everyone got it in in time. And we all kind of worked together to make it as strong as possible. So, it's like five minds are better than one. (Masika & Jones, 2016, p. 145)

Peacock et al. (2020) sought to determine the origins, nature, and importance (or lack thereof) of a sense of belonging in the lived experience of online learning for a group of postgraduate students. They investigated what a sense of belonging meant to them, and which aspects of the online learning experience were essential to them in terms of sense of belonging. They argued that learners could expand and enhance the skills and abilities needed in their chosen career paths by learning in a collaborative atmosphere with like-minded peers. Learners were actively encouraged to collaborate with their co-learners to reach end goals by a particular given period, which was considered a significant technique of establishing a sense of belonging through group work and other partnered activities. One of the study's interviewees noted,

> In group tasks we have been able to help each other out by taking on a bit extra here and there at various times; it's good to have someone to help and make you feel like you are together in a class. (p. 25)

To build feelings of confidence, worth, and significance, interactive online learners must feel that they relate to those with whom they connect online as real people (Garrison, 2017; Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Social presence in an online course aids in developing social connections between online instructors and students, reduces dropout rates, and enhances student satisfaction and motivation. Social presence aims for learners and tutors to establish accessible, meaningful communication to feel connected to and engaged with other sentient beings who have a background and sincere concern for the community. To express themselves socially and emotionally online, students in online courses must feel that their identity is acknowledged, respected, and appreciated by their peers (Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Trespalacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020).

Peer and tutor feedback, individual and group reflections, and resource use enable participants in communities of inquiry to make sense and deepen their understanding through meaningful individual and group dialogues (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). The concept of cognitive presence is how students can build and validate meaning through continuous reflection and discourse. The four phases of cognitive presence are triggering (conceptualizing a problem), exploration (finding relevant information), integration (building concrete solutions), and resolution (assessing the proposed solution).

According to Masika and Jones (2016), the intersection of social and cognitive presence is primarily concerned with meaning making. Learning as social participation involves active participation in activities involving people and social practices, identity building, and the meaning making or interpretation of what has been done within these communities. In this context, it is a responsibility to make meanings that depend on the interdependence of learners. Learning will be stimulated by relevant and collaborative interactions and effective loops that allow constructive peer feedback. The tutor's presence is not directly concerned with this influence, except to advise, suggest, and facilitate appropriate skills (Nicholson, 2005; Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012).

Collaboration and engagement with peers fosters a sense of camaraderie that reduces some of the isolation linked to online learning. Such interactions reduce anxiety and assist students in developing ideas and building connections. One respondent offered a complementary perspective, saying that avoiding online discussion made him feel isolated: "If I feel disconnected, it is invariably because my own work obligations have taken over and I have missed out on online discussion or distanced myself from the learning materials" (Peacock et al., 2020, p. 26).

Participation creates a social learning history and a competence system, including understanding of the issues involved and the community business, the ability to engage productively with others in the community, and appropriate use of the community's resources. Learners build on their social presence through icebreaker events and participate in joint, open, and meaningful conversations. Their sense of belonging grows as they work together to choose and use various technologies. They give truthful and positive feedback to each other, and the result of the collaborative endeavor is mutual meaning making, leading to a sense of worth and mattering. Pascale (2018) suggested that, in his study, friendships began with a shared interest in the academic subject and a sense of belonging due to sharing the graduate school experience. Connecting with people and constructively engaging is at the heart of experiencing positive life satisfaction, school happiness, and belonging during this highly social phase in life (Jordan et al., 2018).

Chapter Summary

This chapter was a review of a sense of belonging as one of the most critical needs for all students to function well in all types of learning environments. The review supports the creation of a sense of belonging in online learning as a critical aspect in maximizing student satisfaction with the live experience. The review indicates that a sense of belonging can best be fostered in environments with effective education, emphasizing mastery of meaningful content, warm and respectful interactions between instructors and students, collaboration among students, and smooth organization. In the higher education setting, a sense of being cared for by tutors and peers is crucial, both in ensuring that students perform to their full potential and in reducing student attrition.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study contributes to understanding of the best practices for fostering a sense of belonging among students in online MSW programs. The study was designed to address three research questions.

1. How do students define a "sense of belonging" in online programs?

2. What course/program factors, instructor factors, and peer factors best foster a sense of belonging among students in an online environment?

3. What resources foster students' sense of belonging in online MSW programs?

This study utilized a qualitative method (narrative approach) to generate appropriate, in-depth, and refined information about students' perceptions of belonging in online MSW programs. The narrative approach allows participants to share their experiences freely, without constraints (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study design addressed the open-ended questions about the experiences of MSW students in online programs. According to Maxwell (2013), the primary purpose of qualitative research is to learn about the significance of a participant's life experience.

The research study received approval from the Millersville University Institutional Review Board (IRB: 75348662) to ensure that the survey questions and their administration were consistent with the ethical principles of conducting research with human subjects.

Study Design

A qualitative narrative study design was adopted in this research work. Qualitative design is a method of exploring and comprehending the meaning that individuals or groups assign to a social or human issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the qualitative approach

entailed using a narrative design in gathering data, data analysis, and interpretation to address the research questions.

The narrative design was appropriate for this study because people typically encode their experiences in narrative form, and they use stories to explain and justify their thoughts and actions (Shkedi, 2014). According to Padgett (2016), the goal of the narrative approach is not just to idealize people's experiences but also to explore the sociological, historical, familial, and institutional narratives within which those experiences were created, shaped, articulated, and enacted. The narrative approach in this study led to understanding of each participant's perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) of online MSW programs. The researcher collected data from 12 MSW students currently enrolled in fully MSW online programs across the six educational regions in the United States to examine their perceptions of belonging and to identify particular factors that fostered their sense of belonging in online social work MSW programs. Conventional qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

Participants

A cluster sampling technique was used to recruit participants because qualitative researchers use it to find people who can offer in-depth and thorough information on the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This does not necessarily imply a high number of participants, as is common in quantitative research. The study's target group was MSW students, at least 18 years old, currently enrolled (part time or full time) in a fully online program. Participants were sought by sending recruitment emails to the directors of online MSW accredited programs across these six regions to inform their potentially eligible students to participate in the research study.

An online survey was published on Qualtrics™ (2021). The link to access Qualtrics was included in the emails that the directors sent to their students to invite them to participate in the study. Participants completed a brief online survey that captured informed consent, demographics, and the region of the United States in which they were enrolled in the MSW program. All consented to a follow-up interview.

The recruitment process took 6 weeks to complete. Two participants were randomly chosen from each of the six educational regions (based on regional accreditors): Middle State Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), Higher Learning Commission (HLC), Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), and Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Although 119 participants accessed the online survey, only 103 participants completed the survey and agreed to a follow-up interview. For this study, it was intentional to have representation from 12 universities and from the six accreditor regions. More participants would have been recruited from each region, but getting two from each region to make the twelve selected participants was a challenge due to the size of the region and the willingness of the universities in the region to participate in the study. As a result, the recruitment process was prolonged by six weeks. Appendix A contains a copy of the recruitment email and Appendix B contains a copy of the informed consent.

Data Collection

Upon agreement to participate voluntarily in the study, based on their understanding of the informed consent that was attached to the email, a one-time 45- to 60-minute semi-structured interview was conducted via Zoom (https://zoom.us/) on a mutually acceptable day and time. The interview was utilized to examine participants' experiences in online MSW programs and

the factors that contribute to their sense of belonging in those programs. The interviews were video and audio recorded via Zoom, then automatically transcribed to guarantee that the transcription and analysis were as accurate as possible. The recordings were saved in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer. After transcription, the video and audio recordings were erased. All computer data will be kept for 3 years to comply with federal regulations (Office for Human Research Protections, 45 CFR 46).

In addition to demographic questions (age, race, gender, region), participants answered six open-ended questions (e.g., "Describe how course strategies promoted your sense of belonging within your MSW online program"; Appendix C), which allowed a natural dialogue to emerge between the participants and the researcher. This study addressed the research questions with data from students' perspectives. A core strength of this design was the concept of asking which of the course/program, instructor, and peer factors best contributed to students' sense of belonging.

Data Analysis

Transcription

Automatic transcription of the interviews was done via Zoom to save time and resources and to increase accuracy. Transcription also helped to formulate appropriate findings that might otherwise have been overlooked if the researcher had listened to the audio recording and missed the important context. The audio transcript option in the settings of the personal Zoom account was enabled, and a transcript was automatically generated after each interview. Transcripts were read line by line while listening to the audio recording to check for accuracy and to make necessary changes. The researcher carefully listened to the pronunciation of several words that were not properly transcribed, and the misspelled words were fixed. Transcripts were then read

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through for overall understanding to give a general idea of the information and to allow the researcher to reflect on the meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Coding

A priori coding was done in the qualitative analysis process. Coding entailed categorizing the collected data and labeling categories with a keyword in computer files (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher employed categorical coding to find text segments that corresponded to each of the studied factors. Text segments in which students mentioned any significant experience in an online learning environment for MSW programs were coded. Each factor that fostered students' sense of belonging was identified through a line-by-line analysis of the transcriptions. The data were organized and coded under categories that fostered a sense of belonging in students: course factor, instructor factor, and peer factor. Because the research was data driven, an inductive analytic technique was used to find themes. The data were coded without being forced to suit the researchers' prejudices of previous study knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

Qualitative Data Analysis Process

The transcribed interviews were uploaded into NVivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 12, 2018) to analyze the qualitative data. A direct content analysis was performed to extend the data analysis by counting the codes and generating qualitative data on factors that foster students' sense of belonging. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), content analysis is based on the development of labels (codes) that may be applied to data to transform them into meaningful categories that can be analyzed and interpreted. A six-step inductive category development technique, as described by Creswell (2014), was adopted to analyze the qualitative data generated from the interviews: (a) Data were sorted, arranged, and prepared for analysis; (b)

data were read through in order to give a general sense of information and an opportunity to reflect on the overall meaning; (c) data were coded; (d) the coding process was used to generate a description of participants, as well as categories for analysis; (e) it was determined in advance how the findings of the analysis would be expressed in the qualitative narrative; (f) validity and reliability were checked; and (g) results of analysis and interpretation of findings were presented (Creswell, 2014).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

It takes a keen eye to discover the specific stories that encapsulate the individual's experiences in source material (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher actively collaborated with the participants to collect extensive information on them and to understand the background of their stories. Codes were determined based entirely on the recordings, reflecting only the surface meanings of what the participant stated, with no other information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is important because predetermined codes might enhance researchers' sensitivity to bias by forcing data to conform to predetermined categories and restricting the possibility of unexpected discoveries (Saldaña, 2009). According to Padgett (2016), peer reviews are often impartial to the work's authorship and are strictly adhered to existing quality standards, thereby reining in arbitrariness and biases.

Chapter Summary

This chapter describes the qualitative method employed and specifies the study design, participant selection process, data collection procedure, and data analysis approach. Within online MSW programs, data were collected to investigate students' views of a sense of belonging. To collect data and address each research question, a qualitative study approach (narrative research) was used to understand the perceptions of MSW students who are fully

enrolled online on their sense of belonging in their program. The section on qualitative data

analysis explained how the conventional qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the

qualitative data.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with participants who were currently enrolled in accredited online MSW programs across six regions of the United States. The findings are validated and direct quotes from the participants support the emergent themes found in this research study. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to preserve their anonymity. This study was an investigation of students' perceptions of a sense of belonging in online MSW programs. The researcher employed categorical coding to find text segments that correspond to each of the factors being studied. Each theme aligned with the factors that foster students' sense of belonging was identified through a line-by-line analysis of transcriptions of the interviews.

Analysis of Research Findings

Following publication of the demographic survey on Qualtrics and distribution of recruiting emails to the directors of accredited online MSW programs, 119 participants from six educational regions (based on regional accreditation) across the United States agreed to participate in the project and 103 (94.5%) agreed to a follow-up interview. Of the 103 interviewees, 17.47% ($n = 18$) were from MSCHE, 17.47% ($n = 18$) were from the NEASC, 31.19% ($n = 30$) were from the HLC, 8.74% ($n = 9$) were from the NWCCU, 12.62% ($n = 13$) were from the SACS, and 14.56% ($n = 15$) were from the WASC (Table 1, and Figure 1).

Table 1

Number of Participants that consented to follow-up interview.

Regional Accreditors	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Middle State Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)	18	17.47
New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)	18	17.47
Higher Learning Commission (HLC)	30	31.19
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)	9	8.74
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS),	13	12.62
Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)	15	14.56
Total	103	100%

Figure 2

Number of Participants that consented to the interview from each region.
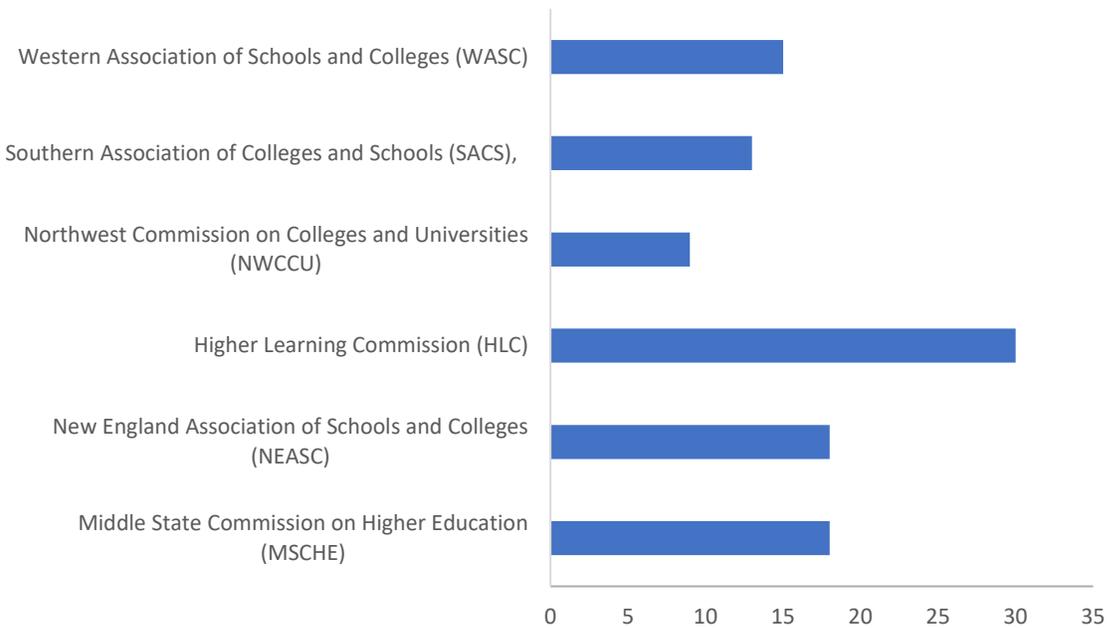
Twelve participants (two from each region) were selected at random for a follow-up interview. All 12 interviews were conducted via Zoom, where transcription of the interviews was automatically done. Ten participants were women and 2 were men. All 12 participants were working (either from home or in person). Ages ranged from 24 to 43 years. Six participants were White, 3 were African American, 2 were Hispanic or Latino, and 1 was Native American (Table 2)

Table 2

Characteristics of the Participants

Partici-pant	Name	Gender	Age	Race	Regional Accreditor
1	Jefferica H.	Woman	28	African American	SACS
2	Ossen D.	Man	32	White	NEACS
3	Sheryl G.	Woman	25	Native American	NWCCU
4	Pamela W.	Woman	29	White	NWCCU
5	Angela Y.	Woman	34	White	NEACS
6	Ashlee S.	Woman	26	White	HLC
7	Precious S.	Woman	28	Hispanic or Latino	WASC
8	Alexandra K.	Woman	43	White	MSCHE
9	Veronne C.	Woman	24	African American	MSCHE
10	Jessica B.	Woman	27	White	HLC
11	Polite K.	Woman	42	African American	SACS
12	ViDual F.	Man	39	Hispanic or Latino	WASC

Research findings are broadened to focus on the critical areas related to the research questions: (a) students' understanding of a sense of belonging, (b) course/program factors, (c) instructor factors, (d) peer factors that best foster a sense of belonging, and (e) resources provided by their program that made the students feel connected. Research findings focused on the themes that were identified by 50% of the participants and above.

Understanding Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is a desirable aspect of an online learning context (Thomas et al. 2014). Participants in this study were asked to describe what a sense of belonging meant to them. All 12 participants spoke of what they understood by a "sense of belonging." They conveyed a range of beliefs that a sense of belonging was a "feeling" of being a member of a community, belonging to a group of learners with a shared objective, and connecting with peers, instructors, and learning resources.

Describing her understanding of a sense of belonging, Angela Y. stated,

Sense of belonging to me, is a feeling of connection to the people in my program and being able to develop a relationship with the people in my program getting to know them better. You know, sharing parts of my life and getting parts of their life and feeling like we can support each other, kind of give and take, support.

Sheryl G. alluded to the notion that a sense of belonging is a feeling of being an essential part of the other's life, where one is valued and motivated:

Feeling connected in the community or within society or a cultural group or your family. Like feeling like there's a reason why you're there, a purpose, I guess being useful to the group in some way, you're feeling valued and yeah, contributing to their group in some way.

Ossen D. described a sense of belonging as meeting the expectations of both the university and the online student.

> I think that means shared expectation between the provider, between the educational service provider and the person who's being provided for, and I think some of those expectations are around the way that you conduct yourself. The way they communicate communication, The consistent communication. And that the services you're receiving are relevant. So, it's, I think it's just meeting the expectations between the provider and the providee.

According to Angela Y., a sense of belonging is felt when people gain support from others and can render support, as well.

> Oh! sense of belonging, I guess, it would be a community where you feel that you can reach out to others and others reach out to you, not just about the work at hand but also even about personal issues and things that might be going on. A place where you can laugh, as well as learn.

Jessica B., Precious S., and Veronne C. also expressed their understanding of a sense of belonging. Jessica B. said, "Just a feeling of kind of being included in the program being connected with other students and with the institution and feeling like kind of a part of the whole thing." Precious S. said, "A sense of belonging means acceptance and being included in any particular group, it could be based off of, I guess our education connections interests." Veronne C. said,

> It means not feeling awkward for situations or just feel like you can easily have conversations with other people and not feel out of place. Feeling like you belong, it's like feeling like you're in within a community and you guys can all accomplish the same

goals together, like the social work like we all belong together because we're all part of it.

Table 3 shows extracts of the participants' understanding of a sense of belonging, with the emphasized adjectives in italics.

Table 3

Understanding of a Sense of Belonging

Participant	Understanding of a "sense of belonging"
Jefferica H.	Just anywhere that you as a person feel the most ***comfortable*** feel the most ***authentic***.
Ossen D.	I think that means ***shared expectation*** between the educational service provider and the person who's being provided for.
Sheryl G.	***feeling connected*** in the Community or within society or a cultural group or your family
Pamela W.	So, sense of belonging to me, is a ***feeling of connection*** to the people in my program.
Angela Y.	Being a ***part of*** the team, being someone who feels like they are needed
Ashlee S.	***feeling included***, like supported. Like if you need to ask for help it's available and that
Precious S.	A sense of belonging means ***acceptance*** and ***being included*** in any particular group.
Alexandra K.	it would be a community where You feel That you can reach out to others and others reach out to you
Veronne C.	you guys can all accomplish the same goals together, like the social work like we all ***belong together*** because we're all part of it.
Jessica B.	just a feeling of kind of ***being included*** in the program
Polite K.	the belief or the feeling that one is a ***part of*** an organization, family or a group.
ViDual F.	A sense of belonging, it means to me that you ***belong to*** something other than yourself.

Peer Factors that Foster Sense of Belonging in Online MSW Programs

Participants were asked to describe how peers foster their sense of belonging in online MSW programs. Through analysis of the interviews, the themes of "group discussion," and "social communication" emerged. The findings indicated that participants ranked social communication, and group discussion as the top two peer factors that fostered their sense of belonging. Social communication was ranked first (8 of the 12 participants). Group discussion was ranked second (6 participants). The frequency with which participants identified these factors is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 3

Peer Factors That Foster Students' Sense of Belonging in Online MSW Programs
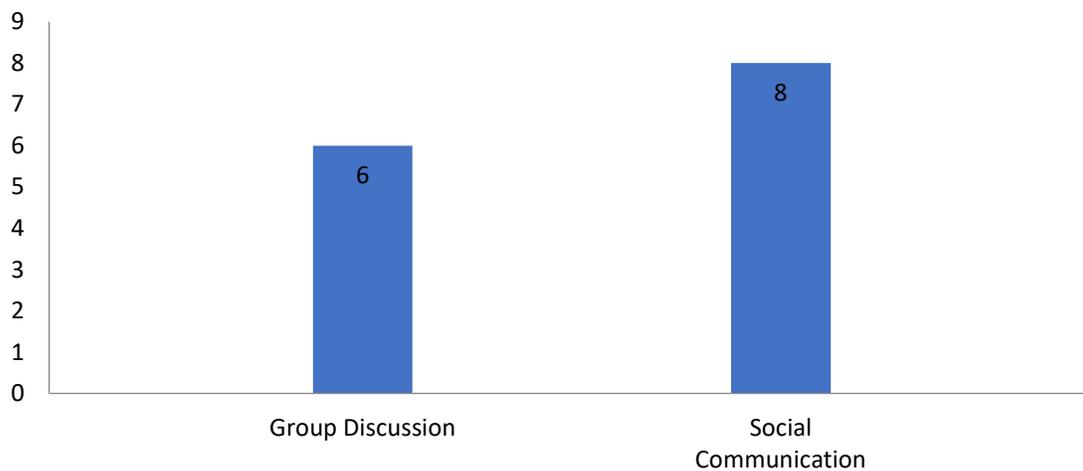
Group Discussion

Online group discussions promote social interaction among students by allowing them to communicate task-related messages and personal challenges and sharing of experiences. In online environments, the notion of interaction is engrained in the discussion process. According

to 6 of the 12 participants, discussion activities in the online learning environment increased their learning and fostered their sense of belonging. Participants discussed how breakout group activities, including discussions and study group communication, had helped them to feel less alone and to communicate more effectively. Students who have a discussion with peers are reported to collaborate on academic goals and encourage one another as they grow as active learners.

Ashlee S. stated,

In our classes, we go into breakout groups a lot and we just talk to each other and practice, like the skills, and being able to have these opportunities to talk to a couple of people at a time and, like get to know them a little bit has been nice, instead of just all being in the classroom and just listening to the teacher talk.

Polite K. remarked,

One that I have met through the online program, and I believe she fosters that sense of belonging, by maintaining communication, discussing assignments. Discussing career goals, discussing other students, peers, colleagues. Just our overall communication about the program be academic or social, emotional or professional and so it makes us feel a sense of belonging, or more part of a program having someone with whom we connect with issues surrounding the program.

According to Precious S., peer discussions assisted in identifying peers who shared one's ideology or who were pleasant to be with as friends.

We talk about privilege and class, so of course there's going to be those people who don't believe in privilege, and they'll speak on that. Well, I do believe that there is privilege and so you do see the different points of views, but then you can relate to others, and I

think that's where that sense of belonging came in and like, oh well, maybe I want to be

more than just a colleague to this person, maybe we should be friends, because we come

from the same upbringing, or we have the same background.

Social Communication

Informal interactions with learners appeared to be consistently positive, providing

learners the sense that they were not facing challenges alone. The majority of those who were

interviewed expressed a need to provide a social space outside of established academic forums to

engage in unmonitored discussions. GroupMe (https://groupme.com/en-US/), iMessage (Apple

Inc. (2011). *iMessage*), Facebook (https://web.facebook.com), and WhatsApp

(https://web.whatsapp.com) are a few examples. This strategy was apparently well liked by the

participants. This was said to have fostered their sense of belonging in various ways.

Jefferica H. stated,

I would say we foster it by creating a GroupMe, we use GroupMe for a majority of my

classes, and you have those people in your cohort that you know that you can go to at

different times of the day. You know, those who are going to give you a little more help

or be a little more helpful than others, and then you have those who I would say, its

surface level, and then you have those that you have their personal numbers.

Veronne C. shared that she encouraged her peers to create a social media platform to

eradicate the feeling of disconnection.

So, in the first few weeks of the semester, I reached out to some of the students and threw

out the idea of starting a group chat just because I have never done school using an online

profile or platform before and I was feeling a real like lack of connection, and so I

reached out and started a group chat. But I don't necessarily know if anyone that would

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have done that, had I not initiated it so it's kind of one of those things where it's like I feel like I've got a good group of people that I've been chatting with in connecting with now, but had I not made the effort to initiate that I'm not sure if anyone would have reached out.

Apart from connecting with peers for a discussion on social media, the platforms provide an opportunity to get help and information to help with academic pursuits. Jessica B. commented that social media chat had fostered a sense of belonging.

And I'd say the biggest thing is that there is like an online MSW Facebook group. That is kind of the primary way that I'm connected with other people in the program, where people can ask questions or get recommendations for professors or people sign up to participate in things like this, like just kind of a place that people can connect to discuss the program and what's going on with them.

Course Factors That Foster Sense of Belonging in Online MSW Programs

When asked to describe course factors that fostered their sense of belonging, participants responded with theme "breakout group sessions." Eight of the 12 participants mentioned that breakout groups were created in the majority of their classes to foster group discussion. The findings showed that more than 50% of the participants mentioned breakout group sessions, and this theme was ranked first. Figure 3 shows the frequency of this identified factors.

Figure 4

Course Factors That Foster Students' Sense of Belonging in Online MSW Programs
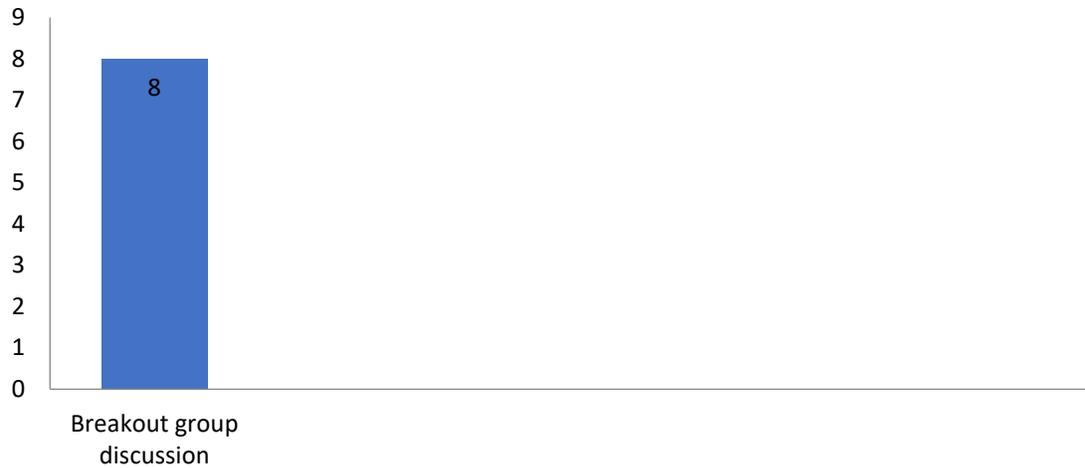
Breakout Group Session

Participants reported that instructors design breakout rooms to allow students to engage in private discussions. These discussions are heard by a limited number of learners in the same room, and the conversations are not recorded. In breakout rooms, learners tend to be comfortable and willing to interact with peers. Some participants explained that some courses allowed them to form breakout rooms to debate the subject matter and express their perspectives. According to Ossen D.,

> I think there's only one class that promoted sense of belonging and that was the group
> therapy course, and I think I've done so many assignments, but I think the assignment
> was like a peer group, so we're literally in this group, we were assigned with creating a

peer group and I think what happened was that every week we had to lead a group, and it was a peer support group.

Jefferica H. said that the breakout group is usually small but fosters peer group discussion:

Smaller, and you can kind of get that one-on-one teaching from your classmates, if you have any questions, maybe you didn't understand, you cannot only just get your professors opinion or input, you can also get the input of your classmates because let's be honest all your classmates have different experiences with social work, say maybe working with CBS or maybe working in mental health and maybe working with children, so you get to see out of the aspects of social work at work and get different people's experience in it and their opinions.

Pamela W. shared that the breakout group had enhanced her commitment and participation in class activities.

You know, you can sit there with your camera off and on mute and you don't really have to participate, but when they put you in those smaller groups. Then suddenly you're looking straight at one other person's face and you're having a genuine discussion with them and typically, you know we'll do the class assignment that we're supposed to be doing in the small group, but it'll also be a time that, most of the time with any of my classmates were checking in with each other how we're doing personally in our lives, you know, like hey how are your other classes going how's your family doing, like what have you been doing to stay busy, how are you feeling, are you experiencing burnout like I am right so. Those breakout sessions in our classes have been really, really important in

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being able to develop that more friendship relationship with my classmates as opposed to just them being one of the other 16 faces in the class.

Talking about group cohesion, Alexandra K. commented that an individual could not work alone in a breakout group; it is collective participation that makes group members feel a sense of belonging.

Well, like right now, in my policy class, we have a group assignment, our professor gave us a chance to pick our own group and we, each have a piece, but we also are doing a presentation with it, so we can't like each do our own piece, and just plug it in and forget it, we have to work together to make it cohesive so that's been a challenge. But it's a good challenge because I'm probably going to be, with at least a couple of the people in my group for the next, you know, three semesters so that's helpful as far as feeling like you belong, and we want to be around.

Instructor Factors that Foster Sense of Belonging in MSW Programs

All participants discussed the importance of their instructors in helping them to feel that they belonged. The theme of "available and accessible to students" emerged from analysis of the interview data. Eight participants identified the availability of instructors and their being accessible as a major factor that fostered their sense of belonging. The frequency with which participants identified this factor is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 5

Instructor Factors That Foster Students' Sense of Belonging in Online MSW Programs
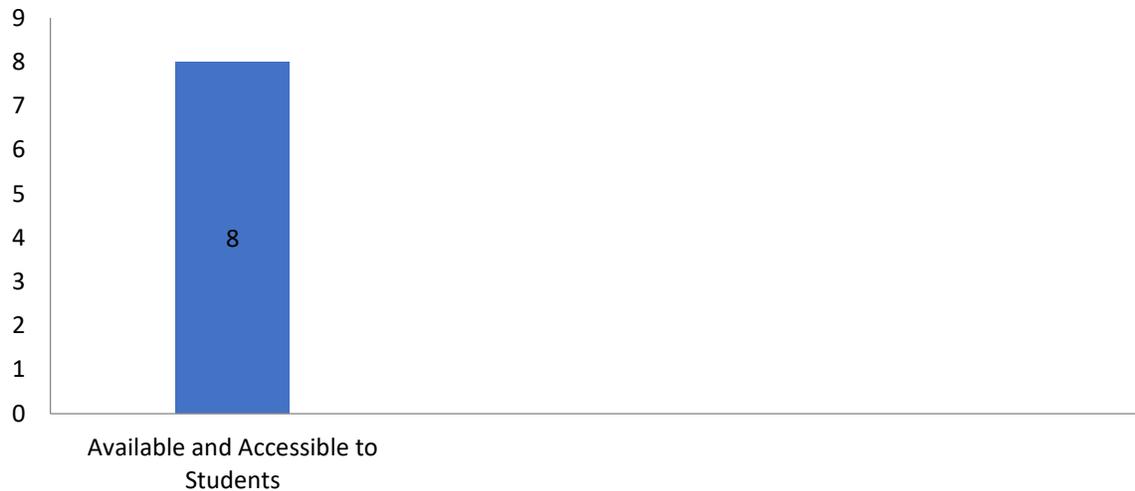
Available and Accessible to Students

Participants indicated that having a solid relationship with instructors who were accessible and willing to address their concerns fostered their sense of belonging in online learning and pushed them to follow their aspirations. Pamela W. noted that she valued one-on-one meetings with her professor during office hours, which made her feel a strong sense of belonging.

> Being really accessible during their office hours and encouraging attending office hours, which is just another zoom meeting with them right, but when you're one-on-one with the professor, I think that has been a huge help in feeling a sense of connection with them and feeling like I belong in the classes when they are able to spend time with me one on one. . . . Before, I was afraid that I wasn't going to be able to like interact with my

professors ever, but that's not really true, they're very accessible, they're very, all of them are you know, like willing to share what their own experiences have looked like as social workers are while they were students. Often there, most of them are like really, really very kind and have a whole lot of empathy for what it's like to be a student online in the time of COVID like the level of stress, so you know they're really willing to work with you and be flexible and have a discussion with you.

Angela Y. shared that her professor was available when she had a challenge in her field hours. She noted that it was difficult to relate with her field instructor, but her professor was there to guide her through and resolve the issues.

I've also spoken with my professor and now she saw that I was having issues with my female instructor and we actually talked on the phone, so the fact that she took time out of her day to call me, that made me feel like oh you know it's really cool that she was able to talk to me and help me figure out how to get my hours in and to work with the fields instructor on how to get those hours and what I need to tell her, you know, it's my internship, I'm not an employee.

Precious S. said that her professor encouraged them to reach out to her (professor) when additional help was needed.

I just had one professor like she constantly reminded us that it was a safe space, and, I thought that was nice in the beginning of the session, you know and to contact her if you needed additional assistance right because there were some heavy topics that we're going to talk about like sexual assault, substance use, helplessness, so if those triggered anything you know, in a student that they could contact her and then also each one of her

emails included like mental health crisis like numbers and resources, so I thought that was good.

It was reported that not all professors were accessible to students; some were not always available to attend to students' questions or concerns. According to Veronica C., "Some of them have been pretty responsive, at least, I mean when I reached out so in terms of them being available to answer questions and go over things some more responsive than others."

How Social Work Programs Have Made Participants Feel Connected

Participants were asked to describe how their social work program had made them feel connected. Eleven of the 12 participants shared how the program made them feel connected, while the other one said that the program had not made him feel connected in any way. Figure 5 shows how social work program made participants feel connected. The most frequently reported ways of connecting students to social work (4 participants each) were getting support from peers and having compassionate instructors. Compassionate instructors provided an environment that was conducive to effective communication by inviting students to ask questions. They also indicated a personality type through which learners were advised, assisting them in integrating their social, intellectual, and cognitive abilities. Compassionate instructors demonstrated good manners as role models in a positive way, which aided students' social development as people in an online learning environment.

Figure 6

How Social Work Program Made Participants Feel Connected
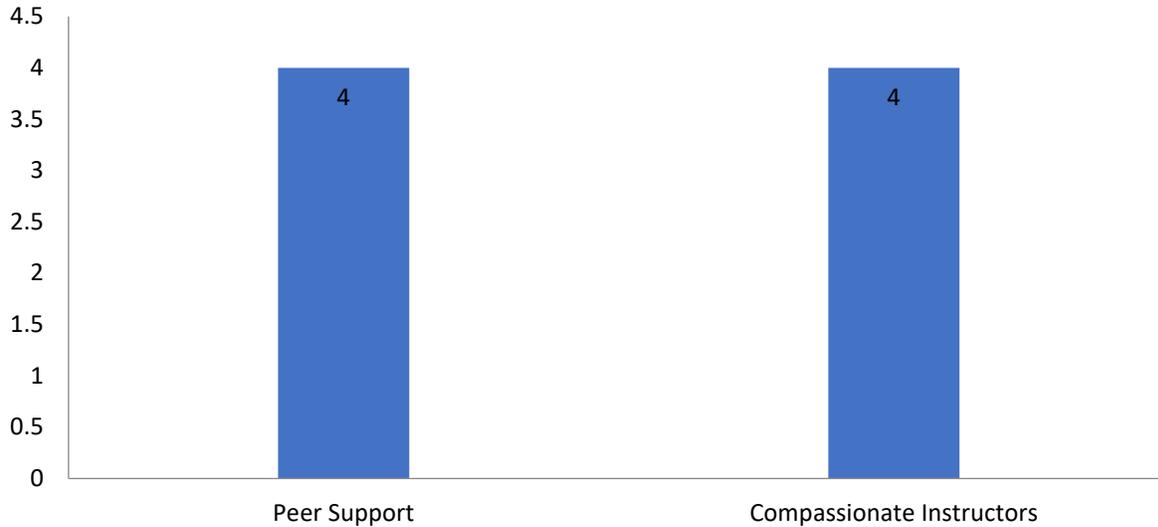
Being passionate and checking in on students was reported by Pamela W. to have fostered a connection with the social work program,

> Fostering that relationship and being connected with their students and being passionate
> about the program and being excited to see us in continued classes right, like if you
> haven't seen class with Professor two semesters in a row, they're like hey, I'm so happy
> to see you in the class and you're like wow, thank you for saying that.

Peer support is an important part of the online learning experience. Students may get help from their peers in a variety of ways, such as sharing of materials, getting encouragement to keep going, clarifying tasks, clearing up misconceptions about assignments, and delivering advice on any issue. Jefferica H. shared that she was connected to social work by support from peers.

> Being able to be supported by my peers and like I say it's taken from their experience,
> because some of them have way more experience than me. My experience and their

experience are totally different, so I feel like learning from the film and being able to role play like in real life. But still being able to be supported by my peers and being able to be being able to hear from them hey you know, next time, maybe look at it this way, or maybe next time do it this way.

The findings showed a reciprocal relationship between students and instructors. Everyone recognized their own needs and expectations and was able to communicate them, thereby being capable and willing to satisfy their partner's needs. This relationship fosters students' sense of belonging, as shown in Figure 7. Contributing jointly to the meaning-making process in online learning environment increases learners' sense of self-worth, fosters a sense of belonging and connection to the community, and fosters feelings of mattering. In this sense, meaning creation is a collaborative effort that relies on learners' collaboration. Opportunities for meaningful and collaborative contacts and utilization of effective channels that enable constructive peer feedback encourage a sense of belonging. According to Peacock and Cowan (2019), the role of instructors in the meaning-making process is to advise, suggest, and facilitate relevant skills, as well as to aid interaction by enabling the growth and exercise of higher-level functionality involved in having to engage with demand for meaning making, as well as the formation of breakout groups to foster interactions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the research findings. From the analysis of research findings, factors that foster a sense of belonging in MSW online programs emerged. The results indicated that peer collaboration, group discussion, peer feedback, and social communication were peer factors; breakout group sessions, synchronous activities, and response from discussion posts

were course factors; and being available and accessible to students, fostering class discussion, and prompt feedback were instructor factors that foster students' sense of belonging.

Figure 7

Model for the Factors That Foster a Sense of Belonging Among Online MSW Students
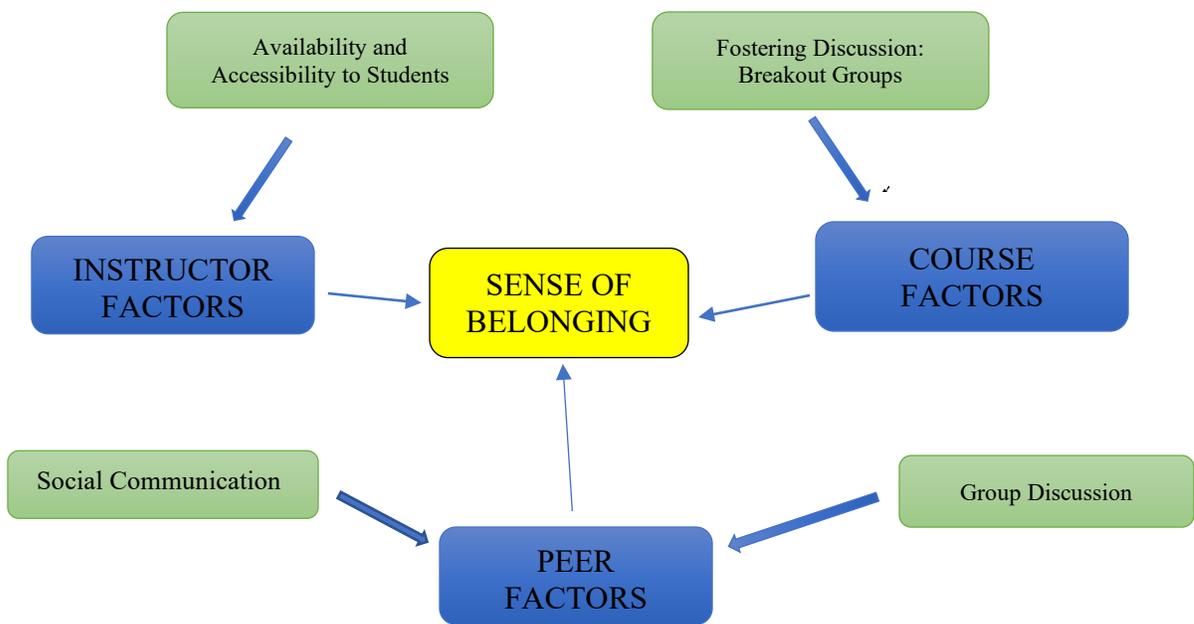
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, RESEARCH LIMITATIONS,

IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated and discussed factors that foster a sense of belonging in students enrolled in MSW online programs. The findings strongly aligned with the theoretical framework that guided this study and the literature review. In MSW online programs, peer factors, course factors, and instructor factors were discovered to have significant impact on a sense of belonging. More than fifty percent of participants identified peer discussion, and social communication as major peer factors that fostered their sense of belonging. Breakout group sessions was identified as main course factor that fostered a sense of belonging. Participants also mentioned accessibility and availability of professors as main instructor factor. Most participants who discussed these factors in their interviews said that discussion and connection with peers, participation in course strategies, and relationships with instructors helped them to feel that they belonged.

Summary of Findings

Peer Factors

Some of the participants stated that they had enrolled in graduate school with a priority of academic accomplishment and the goal of advancing their careers, which is consistent with Pascale's (2018) study. These participants did not anticipate building social connections as important in the graduate phase because they already had formed lifestyles outside the graduate program. However, as they reflected on their social connections in graduate school, participants reported that they formed meaningful relationships in their program of study. The friendships

began with shared academic interest and fostered a sense of belonging due to sharing the graduate school experience.

There is evidence that discussions with peers in and out of class foster students' sense of belonging, improve their understanding of the program, and provide a valid learning experience. This discovery is aligned with Shackelford and Maxwell's (2012) relevance of online student discussion as a means of fostering a sense of belonging, constructing understanding, and questioning and clarifying information through discussion with peers. Social communication improved accessibility and helped participants to engage with one another in an online environment efficiently. It aided in reducing the impact of physical obstacles imposed by the online education system. It employed various technology to enhance the active peer-peer experience and significantly boost student connections. By instilling a deeper sense of belonging in students, social communication innovation continues to grow rapidly, delivering positive results and boosting effective academic achievement.

Course Factors

The availability of activities that foster dialogue from the beginning of course work appears to be critical in building a relationship between instructor and students and among peers. The use of multiple-media features rather than a full-text foundation contributed favorably to maintaining a sense of belonging (Peacock et al., 2020). Another activity that fostered students' sense of belonging was peer collaboration, which was enhanced through breakout groups and it allowed participants to work together to solve problems. Participants made time to meet and collaborated with peers despite the demands of families and full-time jobs. The significance of collaborative group work in fostering an online sense of belonging is extensively reported in the literature (Rovai, 2002). In this study, participant students stated that breakout groups enhanced

collaborative work in their online courses, and these sessions were essential in fostering their sense of belonging. Peacock and Cowan (2019) noted that learners' participation in group activities encourages progress and creation of meaning for both the individual and the group, resulting in a feeling of value and significance and fostering the sense of belonging.

Instructor Factors

The benefits of a positive relationship between instructors and students cannot be underestimated. A student's relationship with an instructor can help to ensure that the student does not drop out of the course. Student satisfaction with the online learning environment is predicted by the instructor's empathy for the student's circumstances (Morina, 2019; O'Keeffe, 2013). Participants reported a higher chance of communicating with compassionate, empathetic, sympathetic, and attentive instructors. This leads to the formation of a safe and healthy learning environment. Thus, the perceived lack of a sense of belonging for these students might result in emotions of anxiety, anger, and boredom, which can have a severe influence on their academic life and performance. This might be the case in situations when their values and aspirations appear to be neglected (Peacock et al., 2020).

Limitations of the Study

The sample size ($N = 12$) was limited, with two students from each of the six educational areas of the United States. The sample consisted of 10 females and 2 males. These factors may have contributed to sample bias and limit the generalizability of this study. Padgett (2016) said that, in qualitative research, transferability of qualitative research findings is stressed over generalizability. Very few research studies (Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Masika & Jones, 2016; Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Peacock et al., 2020; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; Thomas et al., 2014) have focused directly on the factors under consideration in the research questions

posed in this study; peer, course, and instructor factors were rarely examined together as the major topic of study. There might have been deeper studies, but they were not available online, so they could not be included in the literature review. Because a sense of belonging is highly subjective and more likely to have various functional definitions, it is difficult to keep it consistent in an assessment. The definition and the criteria used by academics to measure sense of belonging vary so much that it is impossible to establish a single definition that is totally consistent with the research objectives posed for this study.

The strength of this study is having representation from all the six regions within the United State of America. The data collection tools of a one-time semi-structured interviews to generate appropriate, in-depth, and refined information about students' perceptions of belonging in online MSW programs have worked well in generating rich data, leading to the emergence of the themes.

Implications for Social Work Education

The findings offer insight for faculty in social work online programs regarding how to address program structures in a way that fosters a sense of belonging among students in an online learning environment. The findings contribute to understanding of the factors that foster a sense of belonging in students. The following discussion focuses on putting the research findings into practice and offers suggestions for future research on fostering a sense of belonging in online MSW students.

Peer Factors

Fostering a sense of belonging, whether in open or distance learning, has significant implications for the education sector. Finding effective ways to foster and sustain a sense of belonging in students can assist students in enhancing their academic performance and retention,

accomplishment, and general happiness and motivation. Although factors that foster a sense of belonging differ, as reported by the participants in this study, the research findings show that most students agreed that peer discussion and social communication foster a sense of belonging.

Group Discussion

The live connection and the speed with which conversations and feedback can be exchanged were highly valued in online collaborative discussions. The importance of social communication in fostering collaboration cannot be overemphasized. There can be no true collaboration if there is a lack of peer discussion (Trespalacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020). Participant learners were actively expected to interact with their peers to reach end goals by a given time. Sharing knowledge and experience and other paired activities were considered an effective strategy for fostering a sense of belonging. For example, Peacock et al., (2020) explained that early opportunities for learners to introduce themselves and share their experiences, motivations for studying, and long-term objectives in online discussions can facilitate group connection and establishment of peer support networks.

Students participate in a social and interactive learning process and establish a questioning community through online group discussions. Individuals who take part in these group discussions acquire higher-order critical thinking abilities, which improve their ability to apply knowledge. By engaging in many discussions, learners may exchange resources and engage in dialogue without needing to take turns, have better access to others' views, and have the chance to reflect on their thoughts before expressing them openly.

Instructors and online program directors could urge students to participate in live web-based discussions and could provide collaborative group projects to encourage them to work together. Instructors could give enough guidance and assistance to increase the likelihood that

this collaboration will contribute to a sense of belonging. Icebreakers were described as a tactic for encouraging student participation as a prerequisite to developing a sense of belonging to a learning community (Thomas et al., 2014). At the beginning of the program, the instructor could communicate with students about the benefits of exchanging learning resources. Students with experience or skills in a particular professional field might contribute to the achievement of classmates by offering resources such as documents, research articles, stylistic hints, or links to intellectually essential articles.

Social Communication

Social communication is often described as a process of giving and receiving information within a socio-cultural framework that, in combination with the personalities involved, determines how communications are interpreted. When students use synchronous chat rooms, they create a sense of social presence Rovai (2001), which typically leads to a stronger sense of belonging. A strong sense of belonging is fostered through social communication, which creates a strong, personalized, and dynamic learning environment. Students' participation in social communication reflects their physical and mental involvement, as well as time spent on enhancing educational excellence, such as time spent interacting with peers for collaborative learning. Participants were seen to be active on social media after class to communicate with their peers, and with the growth of information technology, the digital world has become a repository of knowledge. Online learning has evolved into a powerful tool in the field of information technology that has a significant influence on a student's academic achievement.

More online learning opportunities are enabled by social media. As online classes become more popular, teaching students to collaborate from a distance is a vital lesson, and social media may assist (West, 2021). Instructors may create a social media group for each of

their classes and use it to broadcast live lectures, post discussion topics, assign assignments, and give information. Post reminders and assignments to keep students engaged during school holidays. When utilizing social media for education, however, it is crucial to maintain a professional boundary, so instructors do not have to send friend requests to each student. Instead, students are given a direct link to the group for membership. Creating these groups is a great way to engage with students, especially in online learning environment. Because certain social media sites have character limits, students are encouraged to think critically about how to communicate clearly and efficiently, which is a valuable skill to learn. Students can utilize these platforms to display a sequence of photographs or graphics in a visually attractive manner in a visually intensive lecture. Students will be able to practice digital storytelling in ways that discussion boards may not allow (West, 2021).

Course Factors

The course factor that fostered a sense of belonging in the course design, as described by the participants, was fostering discussion via breakout groups sessions. Participants emphasized that the course strategies employed in teaching them contributed to their engagement and ease in the classroom.

Breakout Group Session

In general, students who participated in this study described themselves as active participants who shared and tested ideas with one another and engaged in intellectual debate. The practice of classroom interaction was viewed as one of the best methods to foster a sense of belonging (Peacock et al., 2020). A significant part of this finding is that when instructors are designing course strategies, they could beforehand plan collaborative course activities that will foster dialogue and help foster a sense of belonging in such a course. In this approach, instructors

seek to have students collaborate with their peers to evoke individual learning and collective understanding by fostering environments that encourage active engagement, learner-centered discoveries, and creative dialogues. Collaboration is required to construct effective learning environments. The core subject of any collaborative partnership is to examine and reflect on current frameworks that support values and beliefs, as these are the foundations of most of our everyday interactions.

Instructors could make discussion boards user friendly. Although participants acknowledged the effectiveness of discussion boards in online learning environments, few shared displeasures about the difficulty of navigating on discussion boards and receiving expected feedback. In addition, it is essential to provide students with the privilege of briefly sharing their personal experiences (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012), either during the asynchronous threaded conversations or synchronous discussions. Although not all students will want or need to contribute, those who do will benefit from the opportunity to engage personally with learning resources. This learning opportunity is enhanced by extending beyond the curriculum to incorporate reflection on the privilege of working together in order to promote learners' involvement in subsequent group projects, organizational teamwork, and personal growth. Learners should be given opportunities to present, facilitate, and share their knowledge with their cohort members throughout their learning experience.

Instructor Factors

Online instructors that understand that creating a secure, and caring atmosphere is critical to students' satisfaction, comfort, and, ultimately, completion rates put community building at the top of their priority list. The most prevalent supportive instructional factor identified by most is accessibility and availability of the instructor.

Available and Accessible to Students

Participants talked about the roles the instructors played in fostering their sense of belonging in MSW online programs. They enjoyed the teaching strategy of their professors as they created breakout groups, which enhanced discussions among peers and enabled group collaboration on assignments and other program-related tasks. Students felt valued and perceived empathy because of the instructor's availability and accessibility and prompt email response (Peacock et al., 2020). Instructors in this study aided in the achievement of learning objectives and explored the best technology-based tactics for fostering peer rapport and community. This strategy prevented students from feeling disconnected from their instructors, which is a major drawback of online learning. Instructors demonstrated a basic knowledge of a student's situation based on their own experiences and expressed that understanding to support the student.

In the same vein, it is crucial that instructors follow up with students on field placements. Few participants reported conflict between what they were taught in class and what the field instructor said. Online learners are usually adults who are juggling family demands and occupations that need additional hours and shifts to deal with the situation. The tone of an online class can be read by instructors, and it is difficult to dismiss the students' overwhelming sense of exhaustion and burnout. Even in the best conditions, it is difficult for students to maintain their excitement and desire for their studies. A caring and supportive instructor would create an informal sharing space where students could relieve tension and be rejuvenated after a hectic day at work. This reiterates Peacock et al.'s (2020) findings in investigating the importance, or not, of a sense of belonging for postgraduates' online education, that "a supportive, facilitative tutor can effectively help online learners to develop and maintain a sense of belonging throughout their studies" (p. 20). In their experience with online learning, Peacock and Cowan (2019) found

that "to promote learners' sense of belonging, it is essential to enthuse and, consequently, to infect learners with enthusiasm to learn" (p. 78). Therefore, instructors could create an informal sharing space in an online course to motivate the students by doing something as basic as starting a Zoom session 15 minutes ahead of time or establishing a continuous course chat to impact the learning process. This will provide an unstructured time and space for students to express their daily difficulties and achievements with instructors who can connect and respond.

Findings in this study showed that supportive, consultative instructors supported online students in fostering and maintaining a sense of belonging through their education. McAuliffe (2019) asserted that "Online social work educators have to learn a completely new and different set of skills" (p. 111). Thus, instructors should receive special training on how to teach in an online setting, with a focus on strategies to promote student connections and a sense of belonging. In order to promote a sense of belonging, the extent, timeliness, and quality of assistance were all regarded as significant by the participants. Learners felt more comfortable in the online environment and more confident in their skills after brief exchanges and support from instructors and peers. Tutors were a constant presence throughout online discussions and through motion pictures, according to learners, making the online environment less alien and much more of a place to go for assistance and support.

When an instructor writes a personalized answer to a student's discussion board post, or addresses a student by name in an email particularly addressed to them, or even just checking in to see how things are doing, an online presence of compassion emerges. Instructors need information beyond professional judgment to guide them as they explore the various course design alternatives to foster students' sense of belonging in online learning programs. They need practical information to guide their design decisions as they incorporate interactive activities that

might help students to form collaborative learning in their courses. Therefore, social work educators could develop engaging and innovative discussion forums that promote student participation and collaboration by introducing an online discussion component into their courses. Students contribute insights based on their knowledge of the course content and share knowledge with peers as active participants in the discussions, while instructors set the criteria for discussions.

The instructor's presence online should not dominate the discussion; rather, it should stimulate discussion among students, provide clear instructions to students, when necessary, provide technical assistance, and keep students focused on the subject at hand. This will foster a sense of belonging and encourage students to reflect on their diverse backgrounds and to embrace numerous points of view, while exploring other points of view encourages criticism, insight, and understanding. This is aligned with Peacock and Cowan's (2019) assertion that "the tutor's facilitative role is crucial in helping learners deepen their understanding significantly and in increasing sense of belonging in supporting learner development" (p. 76).

One of the most important tools online educators use to improve small group discussions is the breakout group. To engage students in critical thinking and reflection in breakout groups, educators should use creative, open-ended questions. Students in breakout groups, on the other hand, should be familiar with the learning objectives and their relevance to the course. Instructors should provide students with timely feedback on how well they are doing, to make it clear if their contributions are fulfilling the objectives and to maintain a high level of participation, as supported by Peacock and Cowan (2019), "regular tutor-generated feedforward that helps learners improve their performance and understandings should be clear, meaningful, and timely" (p. 75). When designing online courses, program directors should ensure that course

content allows for breakout group discussions, which will allow online students to explore and understand course content more easily and engage in collaborative activities. At random, instructors may assign certain roles or allow students to choose one at the beginning of the breakout session. This will go a long way toward encouraging participation. Group members with clearly defined responsibilities may communicate more effectively, support balanced workloads, and allocate duties for the activity's success in a way that fosters their sense of belonging.

Implications for Social Work Leadership

The findings of this research study indicate a number of implications for the leadership of online MSW programs. The level of competency of instructors with technology and approaches used to enhance distant communication is crucial to students' capacity to communicate effectively with their peers as well as the instructors. (Exter et al., 2009). However, professional development is deemed necessary for social work online program instructors to learn how to design and integrate technological tools that will enhance students' interaction and promote a sense of belonging. In an online environment, it is imperative to design course content that is accessible, participatory, and promotes a sense of belonging (Moore et al., 2015). A well-equipped online instructor would provide resources to assist students in navigating through the technology, provide quick responses, offer regular feedback, give clear objectives, and also provide online leadership in a way that fosters a sense of belonging. Instructors will also benefit from personal and professional growth as they develop new skills while learning to use instructional technology during the planning of online courses. McAuliffe (2019) noted that this is possible if an educator is dedicated, enthusiastic, and willing to put in the effort and experiment with the numerous digital tools available.

By understanding the factors that foster online MSW sense of belonging, program directors and administrators may identify critical areas in the program to improve and develop opportunity for all faculty to have more direct online teaching exposure. According to Bolliger et al. (2018), experienced faculty members may get comfortable with instructional practices, opting for learning experience to foster program community rather than promoting program-wide activities This may be accomplished by MSW program directors and instructors attending professional development workshops, receiving guidance on fostering belonging and establishing safe classroom settings, and planning all group activities so that students have a sense of belonging to others such as those mentioned above. Instructors may get a better grasp of the tools and factors that build a sense of belonging (Bolliger et al., 2018), including peer, course, and instructor factors, as they gain experience with online learning.

Further Study

Other themes that emerged in the study analysis but were reported by less than 50% of the participants include peer collaboration, peer feedback, and sharing of experience (peer factors); synchronous activities, and peer feedback on discussion posts (course factors); fostering class discussion, and prompt instructors' feedback (instructor factor). These themes were minor in comparison to the goal of this research study. This underlines the need for further research, which should include these themes. Future researchers will benefit from investigating these themes in fostering students' sense of belonging in online MSW programs. Also, it has often been reported that graduate students frequently juggle opposing demands of life commitments and education. It would benefit future researchers to investigate what leads students to select and enroll in an online program delivery model and how students reconcile the flexibility of online learning with their daily lives.

Conclusion

Factors that foster a sense of belonging in MSW online programs were investigated in this study. Three factors were examined: the peer factor, the course factor, and the instructor factor. Few articles have stressed the significance of a sense of belonging for online learners, particularly those thought to be at risk of course noncompletion (O'Keeffe, 2013; O'Meara et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2014). There has been very limited study of MSW online learners' sense of belonging. Online students in a new and perhaps alienating setting and physically apart from their colleagues appear mainly to desire a sense of belonging. Participants in this study stated in relating their experiences that peers, course design, and instructors built a sense of belonging in their study experience. The findings of this study address some of the gaps in current knowledge about online learners' sense of belonging. The findings are expected to widen and strengthen understanding of sense of belonging in online learning programs while offering suggestions for instructors, professional staff, program directors, and institutions regarding how to construct program designs that will improve online students' sense of belonging in the programs to encourage more students, especially working adults or those living in remote areas, to have access to graduate education.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

Solomon D. Hill
Millersville University, Pennsylvania
571-330-3674.
sdhill@millersville.edu

28th October, 2021

Dear [department]:

My name is Solomon D. Hill, and I am a DSW candidate at Millersville University of
Pennsylvania School of Social Work in Lancaster, PA. The focus of my dissertation study is to
explore the students' perceptions of sense of belonging in online Master of Social Work
programs, and to determine the factors that best foster their sense of belonging.
The study cannot be completed without the input of your students, specifically MSW
students. This survey is anonymous and will be used only for the purpose of gathering data for
my dissertation. I would like you to help inform your graduate students who are currently
enrolled in online Master of Social Work programs and are 18 years old and above about this
research project, in case they would like to participate.

The study has been approved by the IRB at Millersville University.
IRB number: 75348662
IRB contact information: 5713303674
Sdhill@millersville.edu

I will be collecting demographic data from the potential participants, and also conduct semi-structured
interviews via Zoom on a mutually acceptable day and time. The interview will take approximately 60
minutes, and participants will be allowed to freely share their experiences without any constraints. Taking
part in this study is completely voluntary and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any
time. Additionally, participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating
in the online survey.
Below is the link to the Qualtrics survey to send to your students and inviting them to participate
in this study.
https://millersville.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_enSXuJEUFEPIBqC

Thank you for your anticipated cooperation.
Sincerely,
Solomon D. Hill. BSW, MSW, DSW Candidate
School of Social Work
Millersville University,
Millersville, PA 17551-0302
sdhill@millersville.edu

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a study conducted by student researcher Solomon D. Hill under the supervision of his faculty dissertation chair, Dr. Karen Rice. This study is part of Solomon D. Hill's dissertation at Millersville University. Please read the following information carefully and ask any questions you may have before consenting and proceeding with this survey. By clicking "OK" indicates that you understand the information provided below and agree to participate.

Title of the study:

What are students' perceptions of online social work education, specifically Master of Social Work (MSW) programs?

Purpose:

Considering the significance of a sense of belonging in the online learning environment on student outcomes, this study aims at investigating students' perceptions of sense of belonging in social work online MSW programs and to determine the factors that best foster their sense of belonging, thereby add to expanding literature regarding sense of belonging of online students.

Procedure:

If you consent to participate in this study, you will be participating in a survey to collect demographic data about you. Interview will be conducted with semi-structured open-ended questions about your experience as a student in a Social Work online program. Two participants from each region will be interviewed and will be selected based on the order in which surveys are received. The interviews will occur via Zoom and last approximately 60 minutes. The interviews will be recorded for accuracy and later transcription.

Risk and Discomfort:

There are no known risks in taking part in this study. Identifiable information will not be included in any publications or presentations resulting from this study. To preserve anonymity, participants will be given pseudonyms.

Compensation, Refusal, and Withdrawal: There is no compensation for your participation, and your participation is voluntary. You may terminate your participation at any time during this study by contacting Solomon D. Hill at sdhill@millerville.edu

Age: All participates must be 18 years old and above.

Statement of Confidentiality: Data collected will be analyzed in aggregate form to protect individual confidentiality. While your comments may be included in reports or statements produced by this research study, any identifying information will be kept in strict confidence. Names and other identifying information will not be included in final transcripts or research notes. All data will be stored on password protected computer and only the research and dissertation committee would have access to the data. All data will be maintained for three years in compliance with federal law.

Contact: If you have any questions, comments, or concerns before, during, or after the study, please contact Solomon D. Hill at sdhill@millerville.edu or Dr. Karen Rice at karen.rice@millerville.edu.

Responsible Parties: This study has been approved by the Millersville University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board. Dr. Rene Munoz, Director of Sponsored Projects and Research Administration at 717-871-4457 or mu-irb@millersville.edu.

Institution Approval:

This study has been approved by the Millersville University Institution Review Board (IRB).

Appendix C

Demographic and Interview Questions

Q. **Age:** What is your age?

Q. **Race/Ethnic origin:** Please specify your ethnicity.

- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native American or American Indian
- White or Caucasian
- Multiracial or Biracial
- A race/ethnicity not listed here

Q. What is your gender?

- Man

- Woman

- Transgender

- Please specify

- Rather not say

Q. Which region are you from?

- Middle State Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE); (Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, District of Columbia)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC); (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire)
- Higher Learning Commission (HLC); (Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia)
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU); (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS); (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia)

- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS); (California, Hawaii)

Q. Would you agree to follow up interview to explore your sense of belonging within online MSW program?

- YES
- NO

If YES, kindly provide your email address for follow up.

Interview: Open-Ended Questions

1. What does sense of belonging mean to you?

2. Describe the how your peers fostered a sense of belonging within your MSW online program.

3. Describe how course strategies promoted your sense of belonging within your MSW online program.

4. Describe how your instructors promoted a sense of belonging within your online MSW program.

5. What led to your selecting to enroll in an online program delivery model?

6. Identify specific ways your social work program made you feel connected