

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF PEER INTERACTION AND COMMUNITY IN ACCELERATED
ONLINE LEARNING

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2020

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to provide a phenomenological description of peer interaction and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners in an accelerated online course delivered asynchronously. Though research indicates the importance of peer interaction and community in online learning, and online learners indicate their desire to feel a sense of community in online courses, there is a gap in literature that qualitatively details the essence of peer interaction and online learners' perception of community. To address this gap, I interviewed six post-traditional online learners regarding their experiences interacting with peers and the way those experiences contributed to their sense of community in an accelerated online course.

Five main themes emerged based on participants' experiences and perceptions: (1) Routine, (2) Technology, (3) Course Design, (4) Perceptions of Interaction, (5) Sense of Community. The findings represented throughout this research align with the two research questions that guided this study: (1) How do students describe their experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course? (2) How do students describe their experiences of interacting with peers as contributing to their sense of community in an accelerated online course?

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of factors that shape peer interaction and the sense of community felt in an accelerated online learning context. The findings evidence implications for online pedagogy, learning management systems, and for the implementation of

the Community of Inquiry framework. Future research that focuses on the experiences and perceptions of online learners who share similar or different demographic characteristics through various methods would enhance understanding of peer interaction and community in online learning contexts. The need for such research is evident as diverse student populations' exposure to learning through distance, online, and remote modalities continue to increase.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I will be forever grateful for the love, support, patience, and kindness that has been shown to me throughout my educational journey.

To my advisor, Dr. Ken Borland – Thank you for your unwavering confidence and support. We could have never imagined how important this work would become and I will be forever thankful that you believed in me, my topic, and my work.

To my committee, Drs. Ellen Broido, Jessica Turos, and Marlise Lonn – Thank you for investing your time and effort in this study and in me. Our conversations and the feedback you provided not only shaped this study but also left a lasting impression on me as a lifelong learner and researcher. This study is more meaningful because you are a part of it.

To my BGSU community: The Office of Academic Assessment, The Center for Faculty Excellence, eCampus and The Office of Online and Summer Academic Programs – Thank you for taking a chance on this townie. It has been an honor to come home and to learn from all of you. Sherri – this study would not have been possible without you. Thank you.

To my Cohort – Thank you for doing this big life thing with me. I could not have asked for a better group of women to help me through this time in life. Thank you – for the laughs, for the support, for the celebrating, and for all of the things you taught me. Thank you.

To my family – Thank you. Your love, support, and patience have led to this moment. You have empowered me in life, propelled me towards a life full of learning, and have graciously and patiently allowed me to focus on my education. Because of you, I know how to work hard and achieve great things. And in this moment, it is truly an honor to be able to thank you for making me who I am today and for believing in me every step of the way.

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves as an introduction to this study of peer interaction and my exploration of the sense of community experienced by online learners in an accelerated online course. In this initial chapter, I describe the background of the study and explain the need for such research. I then explain the significance of this study and define key terms used throughout this dissertation. The chapter concludes with a summary and a description of the chapters that follow.

Background of the Problem

Despite reports that overall enrollments in higher education are decreasing, the number of students enrolling in online courses continues to increase. For example, Allen and Seaman (2017) reported that the percentage of all students across different institutional types (public, private, and for-profit) who enrolled in at least one online course increased from 31.1% in 2016 to 33.1% in 2017. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Babson Survey Research Group support such findings as they reported increases in online enrollment for the fourteenth consecutive year (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018).

Furthermore, the increased utilization of learning in an online context encourages researchers to consider the broadening appeal of online learning options (Clinefelter, Aslanian, & Magda, 2019; Grawe, 2018; Magda & Aslanian, 2018; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). For example, there are a number of reports that indicate the continual increase in demand for online learning options among increasingly broader and different than expected student populations (Clinefelter, Aslanian, & Magda, 2019; Grawe, 2018; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). According to Palloff and Pratt (2007), “The original belief that online distance education was

only for nontraditional, adult students has not held up over time” (p. xiv). Continuous increases in the number of students taking courses and the heterogeneous nature of current and future online learners supports their point.

Both the increase in students pursuing online learning options and the diversity among them has led researchers and practitioners (e.g., administrators of online learning, faculty, instructors, instructional designers, etc.) to examine pedagogical strategies that address known issues of online learning (Juwah, 2006). Issues of concern in higher education are retention, student satisfaction, and the perception of an inferior education through online or distance learning (Richardson, Maeda, Lv, & Caskurlu, 2017). Researchers and practitioners of online learning are also concerned with students’ feeling isolated and disconnected from their peers as these feelings can lead to higher dropout rates and overall student dissatisfaction (Richardson et al., 2017). Issues attributed to online learning and underlying causes (e.g., feelings of isolation and disconnection) have led researchers to study the role of *community* in online learning.

According to Lera-Lopez, Faulin, Juan, and Cavaller (2010), the absence of personal connection in a learning environment increases feelings of isolation and disconnection among students. In addition, Rovai (2002) connected issues of student persistence and retention in online learning with the need for students to feel a sense of community. Though Tinto’s (1993) work in retention and persistence did not pertain to online or distance education, he suggested that students who have strong feelings of community are more likely to persist than students who feel alienated and alone. According to Rovai (2002), the encouragement and creation of community in online learning has the potential to reverse feelings of isolation and disconnection and can provide students with a larger base of affective academic support.

However, the accelerated timeframe of online course offerings may hinder students' abilities to form meaningful connections and feel a sense of community.

By encouraging a sense of community among learners in an online course or program, instructors can help mitigate feelings of isolation and disconnection. In addition, in order to create a sense of community within online learning environments, Garrison et al. (2000) suggested that students and instructors convey, or project, *social presence*. Social presence is the projection of individual personalities that enables students to establish inter-personal relationships and plays a vital role in creating a community of learners (Garrison et al., 2000). Students share, or project, their social presence through instances of interaction with their peers or the instructor.

In addition to the pedagogical research around the importance of feeling a sense of community, it is also important to consider students' perspectives and explore their perceptions of feeling a sense of community in online learning. Such consideration is important because online learners have expressed their desire for more interaction with peers and to feel like they are part of a community. For example, research on the demands and preferences of online college students revealed that over 50% of online learners indicated that interaction with their classmates is an important aspect of learning in an online context (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017). In the same study, 25% of online learners indicated that providing more opportunity for contact and engagement with classmates could improve their experiences in online courses (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017). Students' desire to feel a sense of community and for more interaction in their online courses align with Rovai's (2002) assertion that both the amount and quality of interaction in online learning environments directly connect to the sense of community that contributes to student success.

Though findings of research regarding teaching and learning in online contexts continue to reveal the importance of community, it remains an often-unachieved goal of online pedagogy. This can be attributed to the structure of distance education that has become commonplace for online learning (Garrison, 2017). Making the connection between the structure of online learning and the importance of community, Garrison (2017) explained, “The implicit denial of community has been the greatest shortcoming of traditional distance education with its focus on prescriptive course packages to be assimilated by the student in isolation” (p. 35). He further explained that the prescriptive structure of distance education is based on “the misconception that learning is largely an individual cognitive process” (Garrison, 2017, p. 35). As research on cognition and pedagogy progress, there is greater emphasis on education as a collaborative experience and on students’ feeling a sense of belonging or community. The emphasis on collaborative educational experiences also aligns with the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework that guided this study.

Frameworks that promote a sense of belonging and community among diverse learners are becoming more influential in guiding pedagogical practices (Gunawardena, Frechette, & Layne, 2019). For example, scholars of culturally inclusive teaching and instructional design contest that the interactions among peers that contributes to students feeling a sense of community are also essential in the development of socio-cognitive skills (Gay, 2010; Gunawardena et al., 2019). Furthermore, in Chapter 2 I describe literature pertaining to the benefits of peer interaction for students’ self-reported learning and their personal development (Alt, 2016; Hu & Kuh, 2003).

Ursula Franklin, a preeminent scholar on the social impacts of technology, also supports the need for interaction in online learning. In the following quote from a keynote

address, Franklin acknowledged the solitary nature of online learning and the negative impact on social skills:

The greatest cost of using asynchronous technology in teaching and learning is the non- developed people skills...The skill of cooperation, the skill of tolerance, which are essential skills that develop slowly and painfully, are frequently short-circuited when you can just go back to the solitude of a computer screen. (Franklin & Freeman, 2014, p.123)

In addition, Franklin contended that “development of these social skills depends upon an exposure to difference that is unavailable in faceless online environments, which therefore produce an unhealthy monoculture of the mind” (Franklin & Freeman, 2014, p. 166).

Franklin’s insights on the social impact of learning asynchronously in an online context align with prevalent concerns of isolation, lack of social presence in computer-mediated communication (CMC), and the lack of meaningful interaction in an online context. Scholars and practitioners of online teaching and learning (e.g., faculty, instructors, and instructional designers) aim to address such concerns through studying online learning communities and implementing collaborative and community oriented pedagogical frameworks.

As the literature in the following chapter supports, optimal learning is a collaborative experience often reliant on a sense of belonging or community. Consequently, practitioners of online learning and those charged with student success in an online context work to mitigate distance and isolation by encouraging social presence, a key element in creating a community of learners. The literature and practice coincide with trends towards pedagogical frameworks intended to support collaborative and community based learning in online contexts, such as the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Kovanović et al., 2018; Swan,

2003). However, theorists and scholars contend that social presence and aspects of community develop slowly over time and/or through physically shared space and proximity (Franklin & Freeman, 2014; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The disconnect between theory and practice in online pedagogy is a contributing factor for this study.

Statement of the Problem

Though research indicates the importance of peer interaction and community in online learning (Aykol, Vaughan, & Garrison, 2011; Hicks, 2014; Wlodkowski, 2003, etc.), there is a gap in literature that details the essence of peer interaction and online learners' perceptions of community. Research that seeks to describe students' experiences interacting with their peers and their sense of community in an accelerated online course through a qualitative methodology will begin to fill such gap.

Through this study, I address the need for a student-informed description of the peer interaction that contributes to students feeling a sense of community within an accelerated online course delivered asynchronously. While the demand for online learning options increase and evolve, it is important to understand students' experiences and perceptions of interacting with their peers in order to enhance online pedagogy and student success. Insight into this perspective is beneficial for practitioners of online learning as it can help us develop an understanding of the pedagogy needed to create and cultivate community in online learning contexts.

Though peer interaction is an important aspect of learning and overall student success, there is a lack of qualitative research that provides a description of peer interaction in an online learning environment (Liu, 2008; Moore, Warner, & Jones, 2016). Research regarding peer interaction and community is specifically scarce in accelerated courses due

to the abbreviated time frame afforded to students to interact with peers and to develop a sense of community (Rovai, 2002). I address the need for such research throughout this exploration of peer interaction and the sense of community experienced by online learners in an asynchronous accelerated online course.

Purpose of the Study

Given the gap in literature that details the essence of peer interaction and online learner's perceptions of community, the purpose of this study is to provide a phenomenological description of peer interaction and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners in an accelerated online course delivered asynchronously. The insight gained throughout this study contributes to an understanding of the ways online learners experience peer interaction. To implement collaborative and community oriented pedagogy in online learning contexts, practitioners need an understanding of the essence of peer interaction and how it is experienced by students. In addition, the exploration of students' sense of community in an accelerated online course delivered asynchronously can help online practitioners understand and mitigate issues of isolation and disconnection attributed to online learning.

Theoretical Framework

To address concerns of online learning, researchers and practitioners look to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). The CoI framework assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and concludes that deep and meaningful learning occurs through three interdependent elements: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000). The social presence aspect of the CoI framework represents students' ability to project personal characteristics throughout their

interaction that enables them to relate to each other (Aykol et al., 2011). It is important for both researchers and practitioners to understand the projection of social presence through peer interaction and students' perceptions of community so that they may better understand how to facilitate and encourage a community of inquiry in online learning contexts. Furthermore, it is increasingly important to explore the textural and structural aspects of peer interaction and social presence in online learning in order to understand students' perspectives of isolation and disconnection.

Due to Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework's ever-growing prevalence in the design of online learning options, the CoI guides this exploration of students' experiences interacting with their peers and their co-creation of community. The framework is useful in online settings because it was conceptualized using teaching and learning theories that connect to computer-mediated communication (CMC) and collaborative community oriented pedagogy (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). Furthermore, it is reflective of the belief that social activity contributes to knowledge formation and the essence of an educational experience. As such, Garrison et al. (2010) created the framework to "define, describe, and measure the elements of a collaborative and worthwhile educational experience" (p. 6).

The CoI framework is a process model that describes interactive elements (social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence) that collectively create a collaborative online educational experience (Garrison et al., 2010). Throughout this study, I relied on literature regarding social presence and a phenomenological methodology to explore peer interaction as described by students and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners throughout a 7-week course.

Research Questions

Research indicates the importance of peer interaction and community in online learning (Aykol, Vaughan, & Garrison, 2011; Hicks, 2014; Wlodkowski, 2003, etc.) yet the gap in literature detailing the experience and essence of peer interaction and online learners' perception of community necessitates this research. The research questions that guide this study stemmed from the need to understand students' experiences interacting with peers and their sense of community qualitatively in an online learning context. The research questions are: (1) How do students describe their experience interacting with peers in an online course? (2) How do students describe their experiences of interacting with peers as contributing to their sense of community in an accelerated online course? The first research question encompasses the exploration of the phenomenological essence of peer interaction through students' description of their experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course delivered asynchronously. The second research question connects to online learners' perceptions of community as they reflect on the sense of community they may or may not have felt within an accelerated online course.

Significance of the Study

Palloff and Pratt (2007) explained, "The key to successful online learning is the formation of an effective learning community as a vehicle through which learning occurs online" (p. 4). Researchers and practitioners concerned with student success indicate that engaging in meaningful interaction and feeling a sense of community are important factors that contribute to a valuable educational experience and successful online learning (Garrison et al., 2010; Gunawardena, 1997). In addition, students pursuing online learning options have indicated the importance of interaction among classmates and the instructor in online courses

by sharing their desire for more interaction (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017; Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019).

Throughout this study, I conducted phenomenological interviews focusing on the ways students experience and describe peer interaction and their sense of community within one 7- week asynchronous course. I conducted conversational interviews to gain insight into students' lived experiences of interacting in an accelerated online course and to understand their perception of community in online learning. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of factors that shape peer interaction and the sense of community felt in an accelerated online learning context. The findings from this research contribute to filling the gap in literature regarding peer interaction and community as experienced by online learners in an accelerated online course and should be used to enhance the quality of online pedagogy.

This study adds to an understanding of computer-mediated peer interaction that contributes to feeling a sense of community in an online setting and has implications for online pedagogy, instructional design, and learning management systems (LMS). Practitioners will benefit from this study by gaining insight into the experiences of students engaging in online learning. Such insight may enhance the facilitation and encouragement of peer interaction within an accelerated online course.

Definitions of Key Concepts

I use the following terms throughout this study and the definitions provided are reflective of their use in the context of online pedagogy.

Online: Like digital or distance, *online* is a term used to address the mode of content delivery. It refers to courses taken via the Internet, regardless of location. I will primarily

use the term *online* and will use it to refer to courses taught via the Internet that do not have required face-to-face sessions.

Asynchronous: This term describes the nature of interaction or learning that is not limited or bound by place or time. In an asynchronous course, students and the instructors can access materials and engage in the course at different times and in different locations.

Synchronous: This term describes interaction that occurs at the same time though not necessarily the same place. This type of interaction usually occurs via web-conferencing software in online learning.

Accelerated Course: An accelerated course has a duration of between five and eight weeks as opposed to a semester-long course lasting 15 or 16 weeks.

Community: For the purpose of this study, community refers to feeling a sense of belonging, shared purpose, and/or group cohesion that occurs in online learning environments via peer interaction. Throughout this study, I use the terms *community* and *sense of community* synonymously.

Community of Inquiry (CoI): The Community of Inquiry framework is “An educational community of inquiry is a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 94). The framework is a process model that consists of three overlapping elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Akyol, Vaughn, & Garrison, 2011).

Social Presence: The social presence element of the Community of Inquiry framework is defined as “the ability of participants to identify with the community, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships

by way of projecting their individual personalities” (Akyol et al., 2011, p. 232). I will focus specifically on the social presence element of the CoI framework to provide a description of the textural and structural experiences of peer interaction in an accelerated course.

Bracketing: To reflect on experiences with the intent to set aside personal meaning and value in order to take a new, or fresh, approach to phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Textural and Structural Description: The textural description conveys *what* participants experienced and the structural description depicts *how* it was experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These are important descriptive components that contribute to the depth and quality of a comprehensive description of the phenomenon (Bevan, 2014).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this research is to provide a phenomenological description of peer interaction and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners. The findings contribute to filling the gap in knowledge regarding the way online learners experience peer interaction and their perceptions of community in an asynchronous accelerated online course. To provide a background of the problem, I began this chapter by acknowledging both the increase in students seeking online learning options and the significance of community in online learning. I also provided research findings indicating that those pursuing online learning options want meaningful peer interaction and to feel a sense of community in online courses. In addition, I provided a summary of scholarship that indicates the importance of interaction and community in the provision of quality online education. In the following chapter, I will provide a review of literature regarding the socio-

cognitive benefits of community in an asynchronous online learning environment and the projection of social presence through peer interaction in accelerated courses.

Organization of the Dissertation

To address the problem, purpose, and questions associated with the significance of this study, I provide a review of the literature that guided this research in the following chapter. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology and research design I used to conduct this study. In Chapter 4, I detail the findings from the research and present participants' experiences interacting with peers and their perceptions of community. In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings from this study in relation to the previous studies and literature reviewed. I conclude this dissertation by discussing implications and recommendations for theory, pedagogy, and future research.

CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed for this study evidenced the need for peer interaction and community in online learning contexts. Though research indicates the importance of peer interaction and community in online learning, there remains a gap in literature regarding the experience and essence of peer interaction and online learners' perception of community. In the following chapter, I provide a review of literature regarding community, the effect of projecting social presence through peer interaction in computer-mediated communication, and research regarding accelerated course durations in online learning contexts. I relied on such literature to frame this study because the purpose of my research is to provide a phenomenological description of peer interaction and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners in an accelerated asynchronous online course.

Criteria for Selecting the Literature

The literature reviewed for this study comes from a variety of content areas including social sciences, learning and cognition, and online pedagogy in higher education. I limited the scope of literature to those that pertain to peer interaction, online learning communities, and the projection of social presence. I refrained from reviewing studies and literature regarding the teaching presence component of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. Despite the inclusion of teaching presence and cognitive presence in the CoI framework, the social presence element in particular is dependent on peer interaction and is therefore relevant to this study. In addition, I reviewed literature such as peer reviewed journal articles, research based reports and dissertations, and texts that focused on distance and online learning in higher education throughout the past couple of decades. The literature selected and reviewed for this study enabled a broad understanding of the evolution of diverse perceptions of peer interaction and community in online contexts.

Community

An emphasis on learner-centered approaches to online teaching and learning has prompted an increase in research regarding the role of community in online learning environments (Akyol et al., 2009). Such research often details the social and cognitive benefits of students feeling a sense of community in online education. For example, Palloff and Pratt (2007) asserted, “The key to successful online learning is the formation of an effective learning community as a vehicle through which learning occurs online” (p. 4). Researchers of the scholarship described throughout this chapter have found that creating a sense of community in learning environments increases student learning, satisfaction, retention, and persistence (Akyol et al., 2009; Garrison, 2017; Gunawardena et al., 2019; Rovai, 2002). These findings are of particular importance due to the isolation, diminished social presence, and fewer social cues that are commonly associated with asynchronous online learning (Rovai, 2002).

Defining Aspects of an Online Learning Community

Before exploring the findings of research related to community in online learning, it is important to understand the foundational aspects of an online learning community. A commonly cited definition of *community* within the literature reviewed for this dissertation was McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) seminal definition of community. They define community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Though this has been an influential and guiding definition of community, scholars and practitioners of online pedagogy critique definitions of community that imply being geographically or physically located together as essential to feeling a sense of community (Hine, 2002; Rovai, 2002).

Interaction and physical location. To account for the community that occurs in online or virtual environments scholars and practitioners use the concepts of interaction and shared goals to replace the geographically bound implications of community (Hine, 2002; Rovai, 2002). According to Rovai (2002) “When community is viewed as what people do together, rather than where or through what means they do them, community becomes separated from geography, physical neighborhoods, and campuses” (p. 4). Considering shared *interaction* rather than a physically shared *location* is particularly relevant to qualitative research of online or virtual communities. For example, virtual ethnographer Christine Hine (2002) encouraged researchers of virtual environments to concentrate on the flow and connectivity of computer-mediated interactions rather than physical proximity. The flow and connectivity of interaction among peers that enables them to feel a sense of community in an asynchronous course are important aspects that contribute to the textural and structural description of the phenomena of this study.

Feelings of belonging and trust. Rovai (2002) contended that feelings of belonging and trust are key factors in classroom communities. In established online learning communities, members believe that they are important to each other and the group, feel that they have obligations to each other and the school, and work together towards a shared educational goal (Rovai, 2002). By creating inclusive learning environments that enable students to interact and collaborate with each other, instructors can encourage them to establish trust with one another while they contribute to the shared goals of the course. This is an important concept in online learning because a common activity in an online course is to submit an initial post and respond to others’ posts on a discussion board. These are common requirements in online courses that require students to both engage with each other throughout

the course while trusting that their peers will also actively engage and interact. These requirements encourage students to rely on their classmates and trust that all members of the course will contribute by submitting an initial post to which they can respond. When students engage in posting and responding, they are interacting and collaborating in ways that create reliance and dependability towards a shared goal and help establish a sense of belonging. The dependability and sense of belonging that are co- created can help mitigate feelings of isolation and disconnection commonly associated with online learning (Aykol et al., 2011; Garrison et al., 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Commonly experienced feelings of isolation and disconnection in online learning led to a thorough exploration of the importance of community for student learning, persistence and retention, and student satisfaction (Aykol et al., 2011; Garrison et al., 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Though not referring to online learning contexts, Tinto's (1993) work in persistence and retention is often cited in community building research. Tinto connected the importance of feeling a sense of community to overall student success in higher education and theorized that feeling involved and developing relationships, or community, will increase students' satisfaction and their likelihood of persistence in college (Tinto, 1993). Citing Tinto's work and other scholarship regarding students feeling a sense of community, Rovai (2002) reported that a sense of community not only increases persistence but also increases the flow of information among learners, peer support, commitment to group goals, cooperation, and overall satisfaction. This connectivity is important in online learning where feelings of isolation and disconnection contribute to higher stop-out rates in distance and online programs (Aykol et al., 2011; Garrison et al., 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Peer Interaction and Social Presence

Scholars and practitioners stress the importance of social presence in building rapport and establishing a sense of community in online learning contexts (Akyol et al., 2011; Garrison et al., 2000; Gunawardena et al., 2019; Richardson & Swan, 2003, etc.). In an online learning context, students convey social presence through computer-mediated communication. In this section, I provide a review of literature regarding peer interaction and social presence and explain the specific social presence element of the CoI framework within the Community of Inquiry Theoretical Framework section.

Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) introduced the concept of social presence as a sub- area of communication theory and defined it as the “degree of salience of the other person in the (mediated) interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p. 65). Researchers have interpreted this commonly cited definition of social presence as a person’s ability to convey themselves and to be perceived as “real” in computer-mediated communication (Akyol et al., 2011; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Richardson & Swan, 2003). In addition, results from Tu and McIsaac’s (2002) research on the relationship of social presence and interaction in online classes led them to define social presence as “a measure of the feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment” (p. 131). While sharing their social presence through interactions with their classmates, students project their personality and create connections or find commonalities with their peers in their online courses. The projection of personality also contributes to feelings of belonging, trust, and community in online learning environments (Garrison et al., 2000; 2017).

Social presence and peer interaction are important aspects of collaboration and community in online learning spaces that enable various student populations to connect

virtually on a global scale. Through projecting personality and presence in online learning spaces, students with diverse experiences and perspectives can co-create connections to feel a sense of community while collaborating to achieve shared educational goals (Garrison et al., 2000; Gunawardena, 2019). Establishing social presence within computer-mediated interaction and feeling a sense of community can help students develop the social skills that Franklin feared asynchronous technology would diminish - the skills of cooperation and tolerance of diverse perspectives (Franklin & Freeman, 2014). The belief that education is a collaborative experience (Garrison et al., 2000), combined with the increase in demand for meaningful online learning experiences (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016; Grawe, 2018; Palloff & Pratt, 2007) makes the co-creation of an inclusive learning community an important component of online education.

As key components of the Community of Inquiry framework, researchers sought to understand the influence of peer interaction and social presence on cognitive objectives and critical thinking skills (Rourke et al., 1999). For example, in their study to quantify the effects of social and cognitive presence, researchers found that the grades of students with higher social presence averaged 12 points higher (out of 100) than those with lower social presence (d'Alessio et al., 2019). However, the underlying assumption of d'Alessio et al.'s (2019) study is that grades indicate cognition. For this reason, studies regarding students' perception of their learning (i.e., "perceived learning") were included among the literature reviewed for this dissertation.

Researchers of online teaching and learning have conducted a number of studies regarding perceived learning and student satisfaction in online learning. Findings from such studies often reveal a relationship between social presence, perceived learning, and student

satisfaction (Cobb, 2009; Richardson & Swan, 2003; 2005; Swan, & Shih, 2005, etc.). For example, in their study of social presence and its relationship to students' perceived learning and satisfaction in online learning environments, Richardson and Swan (2003) found that social presence related to both perceived learning and satisfaction. Based on their correlational study, they reported that students' perception of social presence in their online courses was predictive of their perceived learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Quantitative results from Swan and Shih's (2005) research regarding online course discussions revealed significant relationships between social presence and student satisfaction. Using the Social Presence Scale developed by Gunawardena and Zittle, Cobb (2009) also found that higher levels of social presence indicated higher levels of student satisfaction in an online course. This aligns with quantitative findings from Richardson and Swan (2001) and Gunawardena (1997) that indicated a high correlation between students' perceived learning, satisfaction, and perception of social presence. A meta-analysis that also showed a positive correlation between social presence and satisfaction, as well as social presence and perceived learning, supports this finding as well (Richardson, Maeda, & Caskurlu, 2017). In addition, when treating peer interaction as a construct distinct from social presence, researchers found that students who reported higher levels of interaction with peers also reported higher levels of perceived learning (Fredericksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, & Swan, 2019). Such findings led Fredericksen et al. (2019) to conclude that peer interaction is a significant contributor to perceived learning in online learning contexts.

Course Duration

Throughout their meta-analysis, Richardson et al. (2017) found positive correlations between social presence and satisfaction, as well as social presence and

perceived learning. They also found that the relationship between social presence, perceived learning, and student satisfaction decreased based on shorter course durations (Richardson et al., 2017). In addition, findings from Kovanović et al. (2018) indicated the importance of course duration on the development of social presence as students reported lower levels of social presence in shorter (6- week) courses. Kovanović et al. (2018) research revealed substantial differences in perceptions of social presence based on varying frequencies of interaction and course duration. This aligns with previous research indicating that course duration is of critical importance to levels of social presence and the development of community in online learning (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Akyol, Vaughan, & Garrison, 2011; Garrison, 2011; Poquet et al., 2016) where time to convey social presence and develop community is limited. However, it is important to note that Akyol et al.'s (2011) research revealed that students in a short-term course perceived themselves more a part of a community than those in a long-term course. Possible contradictions between these studies may be understood via qualitative inquiry such as that pursued in this study.

Students' perception of community, social presence, and their experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course are particularly important to this study. As such, findings that reveal a lack of community are also relevant to this dissertation. For example, Stranach (2017) found that though participants in MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses typically offered in accelerated timeframes) reported feeling comfortable expressing themselves as "real people," the majority of students reported that they did not view themselves as part of a community of learners. This important distinction calls into question

the influence of social presence on feeling a sense of community as well as students' perspective of community.

Literature regarding social and cognitive aspects of teaching and learning in an online context indicate that a sense of community is a key factor in student success, learning and cognition, and helps address feelings of isolation and disconnection in online learning (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison, 2017; Gunawardena, 2019; Rovai, 2002; Swan & Shih, 2005; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). In addition, such scholars contest that the social presence established through peer interaction contributes to collaboration and a sense of community while it also addresses issues of diminished social skills and interpersonal connections for which the prescriptive structure of online education is commonly faulted. Insight from the literature reviewed regarding the importance of peer interaction and how it can help mitigate such issues led me to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework that I describe in the following section.

Community of Inquiry Theoretical Framework

In their seminal research to understand the characteristics and qualities of computer-mediated communication (CMC) for educational purposes, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) sought to “understand the need and nature of learning in a connected world; and to explore the implications of a collaborative and constructive educational experience for a knowledge society” (Garrison, 2017, p. 6). Just as Palloff and Pratt (2007) asserted that the formation of an effective learning community is essential for successful online learning, Garrison et al. (2000) found that a community of learners is an essential element for a deep and meaningful online learning experience. They, along with a number of scholars throughout the past two decades (Anderson, Archer, Cleveland-Innes, Garrison, Rourke, etc.),

have contributed to the theory, methodology, and instrument development of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. Supported by literature and practice, they define a *community of inquiry* as “a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding” (“CoI Framework,” n.d.).

The CoI framework represents the process of creating a community of inquiry through the development of three interdependent presences: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000). A community of inquiry comprised of scholars and practitioners committed to the development of online and blended learning communities co-constructed the definitions of each interdependent element (“CoI Framework,” n.d.). They defined Social Presence as “the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities” (“CoI Framework,” n.d.). The definition of Teaching Presence is “The design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (“CoI Framework,” n.d.). Lastly, the definition of Cognitive Presence is, “the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse” (“CoI Framework,” n.d.).

Within their seminal research, Garrison et al. (2000) asserted that students achieve the sense of belonging and community needed for deep and meaningful learning in online environments through the interactivity of these three elements. This assertion has influenced a number of research studies and scholarship regarding community building and cognition in online learning (“CoI Framework,” n.d.). For the purpose of this study, I explore *social*

presence and discuss it independently from the co-contributing elements of cognitive presence and teaching presence.

Within the CoI framework, each interdependent element is comprised of categories observed in computer-mediated communication (Garrison et al., 2000). The framework, though socially constructed over time, provides indicators for each category that encourage a positivist approach to research. As such, researchers use the framework for quantitative research and look for indicators of each category to analyze deep and meaningful learning in an online context. The indicators they look for are key words or phrases that emerged and reoccurred throughout discourse analysis within online and blended courses (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, Archer, 1999; Garrison et al., 2000). Essential to this study is the element of social presence and the indicators that form its categories of emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion.

Social Presence

Within the CoI framework, the definition of social presence has three components consisting of the student's ability to (1) "identify with the community," (2) "communicate purposefully in a trusting environment," and (3) "develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities" ("CoI Framework," n.d.). Scholars summarize this as a student's ability to portray themselves as a "real" person in an online environment (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999). These facets of social presence are important in this study because researchers have found that they help mitigate feelings of isolation and disconnection in online learning.

Though social presence is observable through computer-mediated communication (CMC), it is important to note that not all forms of peer interaction are indicative of social

presence. For example, in their study of social presence and interactivity in an online class, Tu and McIsaac (2002) found that social presence positively contributes to interactivity. However, results indicated that the frequency of interaction was not representative of higher social presence (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). In addition, through data collected from 210 undergraduate students regarding social presence, Kim, Song, and Luo (2016) found that social presence and peer interaction are related yet distinct constructs. This important distinction indicates the projection of social presence does not occur during every instance of peer interaction. The purpose of this study is to provide a phenomenological description of peer interaction and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners in an accelerated online course delivered asynchronously. The projection of social presence, as indicated by the Community of Inquiry framework, bridges the gap between peer interaction and community. Social presence can be found within the instances of peer interaction that are indicative of community and is the degree to which one is perceived as being real, the interpersonal relationships that form as a result, and “a measure of the feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment” (Tu & McIsaac, 2002, p. 131).

To determine indicators of social presence that contribute to deep and meaningful learning in an online context, researchers conducted exploratory analyses of computer conferencing transcripts and theoretical analyses of literature (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison, 2017). Researchers categorized social presence indicators that emerged throughout such research into three types of communication: *affective communication*, *open communication*, and *cohesive responses* (Garrison, 2017). Members in an online learning community use affective communication to “set the academic climate for open and purposeful communication” (Garrison, 2017, p. 45). Examples of *affective communication* are

expression of emotion, use of humor, and self-disclosure. *Open communication* is found within group communication when members feel comfortable asking questions and engaging in CMC that encourages reflection and discourse (Garrison, 2017). This category of social presence is observable in online courses when students recognize, compliment, and respond to others. Lastly, *cohesive responses* are observable in instances of inclusive and plural language such as “we,” “ours,” and “us.” Cohesive responses indicate group cohesion and students’ perception that they are part of a community. Rourke et al. (2007) also found that phatic communication or salutations (greetings that serve a purely social function) are additional indicators of cohesive communication. To summarize, a student’s social presence is observable in interactions where there is a co-construction of meaning and students confirm understanding while completing collaborative activities. These displays of social presence are indicative of a cohesive learning community (Garrison, 2017).

While there are a number of studies regarding the interconnected elements within the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison, 2017; Rourke et al., 2007; Tu & McIsaac, 2002;), there is a lack of qualitative research regarding students’ experiences interacting with peers and their perceptions of community in an accelerated online course. Rourke et al. (2007) encouraged researchers to address this gap by studying students’ perceptions and the value they place in social presence and peer interaction. In this study, I present students’ perceptions qualitatively rather than quantitatively. Through this research, I provide a description of peer interaction and students’ perceptions of community in an accelerated online course. To do so, it is necessary to acknowledge social presence as both the degree to which one is perceived as being real, the interpersonal relationships that form as a result, and “a measure of the

feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment” (Rourke et al., 2007, p. 131).

Evaluation of the Literature

A review of the literature reveals that scholarship regarding online learning communities often includes reference to, or a reliance on, the CoI framework (Richardson et al., 2018). Throughout research thus far, there has also been a reliance on courses designed specifically around the CoI framework. This approach is effective for assessment and evaluation of the framework and its application across various course formats. However, I designed this study to address a gap in the literature that details the essence of peer interaction and online learners’ perceptions of community in an accelerated online course delivered asynchronously. I sought to do so by qualitatively exploring peer interaction and the sense of community that may occur outside of the scope of intentional course design and facilitation. In addition, this study simultaneously addresses the scarcity of research that explores peer interaction and sense of community within an accelerated 7-week course. This is a different approach than that of the literature reviewed as most of the data stemmed from MOOCs and blended learning formats where interaction requirements may differ from those of a 7-week asynchronous online course.

Chapter Summary

This chapter consisted of a review of literature that indicates the importance of peer interaction and community in online learning. Throughout this chapter, I provided a review of literature regarding community, the effect of projecting social presence via peer interaction in computer-mediated communication, and research regarding accelerated course durations in online learning contexts. I also provided a description of the

collaborative and community oriented framework, the Community of Inquiry (CoI), used throughout this study.

The literature reviewed frames the study and its purpose: to provide a phenomenological description of peer interaction and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners in an accelerated online course delivered asynchronously. Literature reviewed for this study called for an understanding of students' experiences and perceptions of social presence, peer interaction, and community (Garrison et al., 2000; Rourke et al., 2007; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). As such, the research questions for this study focus on students' experiences interacting with peers and their sense of community in an accelerated online course. To answer these questions, I relied on students' reflection regarding their sense of community and their description of asynchronous interactions with peers in an accelerated online course. In the following chapter, I describe the research methodology I used to develop a student-informed description of peer interaction and to explore the way peer interaction contributes to feeling a sense of community within an accelerated online course.

CHAPTER III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore online learners' experience interacting with peers and their sense of community in an asynchronous accelerated online course. The research questions that frame this study are: (1) How do students describe their experience interacting with peers in an accelerated online course? (2) How do students describe their experiences of interacting with peers as contributing to their sense of community in an accelerated online course? The findings from this research will contribute to filling the gap in research that qualitatively depicts peer interaction and community as experienced by online learners in an accelerated (7-week) asynchronous online course. Though the Community of Inquiry framework referenced throughout this dissertation has been the subject of a number of quantitative studies (as described in Chapter 2), few researchers have focused on students' descriptions of their lived experiences interacting with peers and their sense of community in an accelerated online course. In this chapter, I describe the methodological process used to address the research questions. First, I provide a description of paradigmatic assumptions and my positionality. Next, I describe the methodology and research setting. The chapter concludes with a description of the trustworthiness, limitations, and delimitations of this study.

Paradigmatic Assumptions

It is important for researchers to consider their paradigmatic assumptions because, "One's worldview of the nature of existence and knowledge has implications for how one will embark upon a study" (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 12). For the purpose of this study, I adopted a social constructionist paradigm and explain the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions within this section. Ontological assumptions relate to the nature or

structure of reality and its characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Epistemological assumptions relate to how knowledge is known and the nature of knowledge acquisition (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Lastly, axiological assumptions are assumptions about the role that values play in research. As the researcher in this constructionist study, I believe my values are inseparable from the research and I acknowledged the ways my values influence this study by engaging in reflexivity and bracketing.

I adopted a social constructionist paradigm for this study because the assumptions of social constructionism align with my worldview. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), the central assumptions of social constructionism are, “that reality is socially constructed, that individuals develop subjective meanings of their own personal experience, and that this gives way to multiple meanings” (p. 45). Therefore, the ontological assumption is that there are multiple “truths” as individuals experience reality differently. Constructivist researchers seek to understand the subjective meaning of experiences and the multiple realities of their participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To do so, researchers interact with participants in meaningful ways to co-construct knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, “Constructivist researchers often address the ‘process’ of interaction among individuals” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 45). I identify with the central assumptions that reality is socially constructed and this study aligns with Bloomberg and Volpe’s observation in that I focused on the interaction, flow, and connectivity among individuals in an online context.

Aligning with the epistemological assumption that reality is co-constructed, I, in conjunction with the participants of this study, co-created the findings as we shared our individual experiences with peer interaction and community in accelerated online courses.

The values that I hold and those of the participants shape the findings of this research. As a researcher, I believe that values influence the way we experience phenomenon and how we communicate our experiences. As such, and in alignment with phenomenology, I reflected on my values and biases that influence my perspectives of online learning, and describe them in the next section.

Researcher Reflexivity and Bracketing

According to Jones et al. (2014), researchers engaged in constructivist designs of qualitative research are the instrument of analysis. This means that biases, values, and experiences that influence my positionality also influence the way I analyze the results (Jones et al., 2014). To address positionality, researchers engage in reflexivity and position themselves in the context of the research. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained reflexivity as having two parts: “The researcher first talks about his or her experiences with the phenomenon being explored” (p. 229). They further explain that the second part of reflexivity is for researchers to discuss how these experiences shape their interpretation of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In addition, to engage in phenomenological research, it is important for phenomenologists to engage in bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Similar to reflexivity, bracketing means that researchers reflect on their previous experiences and attempt to set aside prior knowledge so that they may approach the phenomenon from a fresh, or naïve, perspective (Bevan, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Bracketing encourages researchers to reflect on their experiences with the phenomenon of study and to bracket out, what they may already know about the phenomenon (Bevan, 2014). Though bracketing is often associated with transcendental phenomenology, it is useful in hermeneutic

phenomenology where researchers reflect on their experiences, theoretical knowledge, and personal knowledge to interpret the experiences of participants (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). I employed the hermeneutic school of phenomenological research and engaged in bracketing and reflexivity because my knowledge from both personal experience and extensive study regarding online teaching and learning influenced my interpretation of the experiences shared.

The phenomena explored in this study were peer interaction in an accelerated online course and the ways peer interaction may contribute to students feeling a sense of community. Engaging in both reflexivity and bracketing as the researcher required me to reflect on my experiences with the phenomena as an online learner and practitioner. My experience with peer interaction in an online context is vast and began when I enrolled in online courses to complete my undergraduate degree. I then went on to complete an entirely online master's program. While pursuing my master's degree, I worked remotely as a consultant specializing in student retention for an online division of a large state university. Based on the nature of my remote work and online studies, I felt the sense of isolation that I would often hear about from other online learners. Though I experienced success in online learning and enjoyed engaging in computer-mediated peer interaction for both school and work, I rarely felt a sense of community throughout my online coursework.

I felt a sense of isolation in online learning yet I value feeling like part of a community and believe that social interactions shape *how* we come to know *what* we know. Therefore, I was particularly interested in understanding how online learners experience peer interaction and their perceptions of community in an accelerated online course. To engage in such research, I reflected on my experiences interacting with peers and the sense of community that I sometimes felt but often desired when learning online. I also shared my

experiences and knowledge with participants in order to build trust, establish rapport, and co-construct an understanding of the essence of peer interaction and community in accelerated online learning contexts.

Methodology

Throughout this study, I used a qualitative methodology to explore online learners' experiences with peer interaction and their perceptions of community in an accelerated online course. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a qualitative process of understanding enables researchers to “build a complex, holistic picture; analyze words; report detailed views of participants; and conduct the study in a natural setting” (p. 326). For the purpose of this study, I adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological research design and conducted phenomenological interviews to gain insight into participants' experiences and perceptions and to co-construct a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe the common meaning or universal essence of an experienced phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers use phenomenology because it allows us to focus on lived experiences that enable a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). In particular, I utilized the hermeneutic school of phenomenology because “it involves the hermeneutic circle of grasping the meaning of a phenomenon by understanding the parts and the whole” (Halldorsdottir, 2000, p. 47). In the context of this study, peer interaction is a necessary part of the whole (i.e., community). In addition, hermeneutic phenomenology “focuses on the uniqueness of the lived experience or essence of a particular phenomenon” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 89).

Both the focus on understanding the parts of the whole and on understanding the complexities of a phenomenon align with the research questions that guide this study. With the first research question, I sought a description of students' experiences interacting with their peers. The facets of experiencing peer interaction in an asynchronous online course are complex and together contribute to students' sense of community. With the second research question, I acknowledge that peer interaction is influential in feeling a sense of community and ask how online learners peer interaction contributes to their sense of community. Through the questions, I sought to understand ways online learners experience such phenomena in order to describe the essence of the experience.

Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) explained that, "Phenomenology contributes to a deeper understanding of lived experiences by exposing taken-for-granted assumptions about these ways of knowing" (p. 1373). In addition, Creswell and Poth (2018) also supported the importance of understanding the common and shared experiences of a taken-for-granted phenomenon in qualitative research. In this case, though peer interaction may seem like a well-understood aspect of asynchronous online courses, it is a taken-for-granted component of online teaching and learning. This is evidenced by a dearth of literature that qualitatively depicts peer interaction (and the ways students interact to build community) in an online context.

Research Context and Setting

Due to the research questions that frame this study, the context of the study needed to be one in which online learners interacted with peers in an accelerated format. Factors in choosing the course for this study were enrollment trends and the applicability of the course to a variety of undergraduate programs. I sought a course with high enrollment and that was

applicable to various majors hoping for a population that would be diverse in age, race, ethnicity, academic major, experience with online learning, and life experiences. The institution was a public university with a large undergraduate student population and classified as primarily residential. The topic and structure of the course that served as the site of the study were determining factors because both influence the way peers interact and the sense of community they may feel in an online course.

Description of the Course

The course chosen for this study was a required course for two online undergraduate programs. In addition, the course served as an upper level elective for both online and face-to-face undergraduate students. The topic of the course was computer-mediated communication (CMC), the means through which peer interaction in online learning occurs. The description indicated that the course “introduces students to computer-mediated communications and its applications within training and education today” (Syllabus, 2019). In addition, the course is focused on “the application of networking technologies and resources that support high-quality, interactive instruction in both face-to-face and at-a-distance learning environments” (Syllabus, 2019).

As previously mentioned, the design of the course was a determining factor in its applicability to this study. It was important for me to conduct this study with students from a course in which the instructor did not use the Community of Inquiry framework (which I further describe in the delimitations section). To answer the research questions it was also important that the institution offer the course in an accelerated format. Based on conversations with the instructor and through my observations as a teaching assistant in previous sections of the course, it was clear that the instructor did not use the Community of

Inquiry (CoI) framework to design the chosen 7-week course. This lack of framework was important because it is reflective of current design trends of online courses. Had the course design been based on the CoI framework, the peer interaction may have been more structured and less authentic. In addition, the focus of this study is on peer interaction and community as experienced by students and not on design or pedagogical elements that may or may not align with the Community of Inquiry framework.

Another important factor in site selection was that the instructor encourages types of peer interaction that contribute to community and the projection of social presence. For example, the instructor of the course encouraged peers to interact by assigning points to discussion board requirements and by explicitly encouraging peer interaction within weekly assignments. As stated in the syllabus, students were encouraged to “participate in groups, share their work, and report their learning to other class members.” The instructor also wrote, “Some students will have broad experiences in the topics discussed and others will only be learning about them. Discussion forums provide a venue for students to share together and learn from each other” (Syllabus, 2019). In addition, expectations were for students to “post one new thread per assignment and thoughtful responses (maximum 2 per day) to three posts from other students to receive the total number of points for the discussion” (Syllabus, 2019). As discussed in the literature review, the structure of assignments, the design of the course and the instructor’s presence can encourage the flow of interaction and cooperation among learners (Garrison et al., 2000; Hine, 2002; Rovai, 2002).

Based on the research questions that guide this study, an emphasis on peer interaction in an accelerated course was an important factor in choosing the research setting. Course components such as the topic of the course, the variety of learners within the course (various

degree programs, delivery modes: online or traditionally face-to-face, non/post-traditional student representation, students who identify as veterans, etc.), the emphasis on peer interaction, and the accelerated course duration influenced my decision to use the computer-mediated communications course as the setting of the study. In addition, one of the key characteristics of phenomenological research is that interviews occur with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2014). For this reason, those enrolled in the course served as the population for this study because they are online learners who engaged in peer interaction.

Population in the Course

Due to the variety of majors for which the course was applicable, there was variation among the program of study, level of previous education, and life experiences or backgrounds of the students who enrolled in the course. Enrollment consisted of 72 students within two 7-week sessions throughout one semester of study. The student population in the course consisted of online learners, traditionally face-to-face students, and post-traditional and military learners. Academic programs represented by students enrolled in the course pertained to aviation, management, technology, quality systems, and visual communication. Both the number of students enrolled in the course, their previous experiences and backgrounds, and their contributions to the course discussions inherently influence the dynamics of interaction and the sense of community felt among peers in the course.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

After the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the complete research design (see Appendix A), I asked the instructor of the course to inform students of the study by posting a course announcement in the course shell/LMS. Then, I sent an interview invitation

(see Appendix B) to all actively enrolled students in the course during the last week of two consecutive 7-week sessions. I sent the interview invitation during the last week of the course to ensure the recruitment of students who completed the course and to ensure that their participation in the interviews would not affect their grade in the course. In the email, I invited participants to volunteer for an online, one-hour (or less), conversational interview following the conclusion of the course. I also informed students that if they volunteered and participated in the interview, I would enter their name into a drawing for a chance to win one of four \$25 gift cards.

In the interview invitation email, I also informed students that I would select the first 10 volunteers who responded to the interview invitation and scheduled an interview. I decided to set the maximum number of participants to 10 because it aligns with phenomenological methodology. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the number of participants within phenomenological studies can range between of a heterogeneous group of three to 10 individuals. In addition, “The concept or the experience under study is the unit of analysis; given that an individual person can generate hundreds or thousands of concepts, large samples are not necessarily needed to generate rich data sets” (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374). From the population of 72 students throughout two sessions of the course, seven students responded to the interview invitation. One of the volunteers did not respond to either of my two follow up emails asking to schedule an interview time. After students responded to my interview invitation, I emailed each of them an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C) and asked to have a conversational interview with them at their convenience. I also asked each participant to review the form prior to our scheduled interview. In the interviews, before asking any predetermined interview questions, I asked

participants if they had questions about the study and answered them to their satisfaction. I then asked them for their verbal consent to proceed with the interview as detailed on the Informed Consent Form. Due to the online nature of the interviews, the IRB approved the option for participants to provide their verbal consent.

Participants in the Study

Six online learners participated in this study. The age range among participants was 26 to 51 years of age or older. One participant did not share their age. Their previous experiences in online learning varied as one participant had been in only one online course prior to this study whereas others had participated in many online courses and training programs with various durations. I listed additional demographic data that participants shared in Table 1 and further describe characteristics in Chapter 4.

Table 1

Demographic Information and Previous Learning Experiences of Participants in the Study

Participants	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity (as stated by participants)	Military Affiliation	Previous Online Learning Experiences
Brian	Man	38	Caucasian	Active Duty	Completed accelerated online courses through two different universities
Jay	Man	26	White	N/A	Completed online courses with various durations at different universities
Pete	Man	Did not disclose	White	Veteran	Completed courses and online training through the military
Renee	Woman	43	White	N/A	Completed both synchronous and asynchronous online courses
Robert	Man	46	White	N/A	Completed online courses as an adult learner through certification programs
Tonya	Woman	51	Moldovan	N/A	Completed one online course

The academic majors of participants pertained to management and technology or quality systems – both entirely online degree completion programs. In addition, five of the six participants mentioned that they were married and/or had children and discussed ways their family's schedule influenced their interaction in the course. I provide additional details about these characteristics and their influence on participants' experiences interacting with peers in online course throughout Chapter 4.

Data Collection

Six students participated in an individual semi-structured virtual interview that lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. After scheduling individual interviews, I emailed the interview protocol (see Appendix D) to each participant for their review prior to the interview. Each interview took place in WebEx the week immediately following the end of the course. The timing of the interviews was pertinent because it gave students time to reflect on their experience interacting with peers in the course, to review the interview protocol, and further conveyed that their participation would not affect their grade in the course. Waiting longer to conduct interviews may have affected participants' ability to recall and convey detailed descriptions of their experience. In addition, due to the 7-week course duration throughout a 15-week semester, conducting interviews after the deadline for professors to submit grades would have required an eight-week lapse between the date the course ended and the date the grades were due.

In addition to a phenomenological research design, I also conducted phenomenological interviews focusing on peer interaction, social presence, and students' perception of community within one 7-week asynchronous course. This approach to interviewing enabled me to gain insight into participants' lived experiences of interacting

with peers in an accelerated online course and to understand their perception of community in online learning.

According to Belk (2006), “The phenomenological interview is largely unstructured, and develops through the active participation of both parties in what has the feel of a conversation” (Belk, 2006, p.160). In addition, Moustakas (1994) explained that the aim of phenomenological interviewing is to explore “what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). He went on to explain that it is from these descriptions that general meanings, or the essence of the phenomenon, are derived (Moustakas, 1994). Throughout the interviews for this study, I asked open-ended questions to elicit a clear description of online learners’ experiences interacting with peers and the sense of community they experienced.

To determine the interview questions, I relied on three guiding questions: (1) How do students describe their experience interacting with peers in an accelerated online course? (2) How do students describe their social presence in an accelerated online course? (3) How do students describe their sense of community in an accelerated online course? Though they are similar to the research questions that frame this study, I used these three questions as stems to create phenomenological interview questions that would help me gain an understanding of the “parts that make up the whole,” as described by Halldorsdottir (2000). In the context of this study, the “parts of the whole” are peer interaction and social presence (as they contribute to a sense of community). Thus, the “whole” is *community* in online learning.

I referenced the guiding questions and previous literature to create interview questions that aligned with the open-ended and conversational components of phenomenological interviewing. I also asked open-ended questions to encourage interviewees to reflect on their experiences and to share their perceptions. Two dissertation committee members familiar with qualitative research reviewed the questions and provided feedback. I also piloted the interview questions with two undergraduate students to ensure that the verbiage was appropriate.

Gathering feedback from my dissertation committee and undergraduate students helped ensure that the questions I asked would elicit detailed descriptions from the participants. This is important in phenomenological research because participants' reflection and interpretation of their experiences serve as the primary source of data (Bevan, 2014). In addition, it was important to gather detailed descriptions of the phenomenon because, "The utterances of participants might be preserved, but the experience of participating is not" (Hine, 2000, p. 23). Therefore, it is important for phenomenologists to gather detailed descriptions of the phenomenon so that they may provide a rich, or thick, description that allows readers to imagine themselves engaged in the experience (Hine, 2000). Table 2 shows the alignment between the interview questions I asked and questions that guided this study.

Table 2

Alignment Between Interview Questions and Guiding Questions

Interview Questions	Guiding Questions
1. How would you describe the way you interacted with your peers throughout this course?	Q1: How do students describe their experience interacting with peers in an accelerated online course?
2. What were some of the ways that you interacted with peers in this course that helped you connect with them?	Q1: How do students describe their experience interacting with peers in an accelerated online course? Q2: How do students describe their social presence in an accelerated online course? Q3: How do students describe their sense of community in an accelerated online course?
3. Please tell me about a time when you felt that you could be <i>real</i> in your interactions with peers.	Q2: How do students describe their social presence in an accelerated online course?
4. Please tell me about a time when you felt a sense of community in any of your online courses.	Q3: How do students describe their sense of community in an accelerated online course?
5. What were some factors that made you feel like a part of the class even though you were physically separated from your peers and instructor?	Q2: How do students describe their social presence in an accelerated online course? Q3: How do students describe their sense of community in an accelerated online course?
6. Please show me an example of an interaction/post that you specifically remember or that you found most meaningful.	Q1: How do students describe their experience interacting with peers in an accelerated online course? Q2: How do students describe their social presence in an accelerated online course?
7. How have different course durations affected your sense of community in online classes?	Q3: How do students describe their sense of community in an accelerated online course?
8. Please describe your ideal interaction with peers in an online course.	Q1: How do students describe their experience interacting with peers in an accelerated online course? Q3: How do students describe their sense of community in an accelerated online course?
9. In your opinion, how important is it to feel a sense of community in an online course?	Q3: How do students describe their sense of community in an accelerated online course?

The conversational and in-depth interviews also align with the social constructionist paradigm adopted for this study. For example, within the interview I asked each participant to show me an example of an interaction they specifically remembered or that they found most meaningful throughout the course. Based on the details they shared, I asked follow-up questions that allowed us to co-construct the meaning of that reflection and what it revealed about their experiences with peer interaction in the course. This is an example of co-constructing meaning between the researcher and participants and aligns with constructivist designs in which the researcher is an instrument of analysis and a co-creator of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2014).

I audio recorded the interviews and took notes on a printed version of the interview protocol. I then transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. To store the data, I uploaded the audio recordings of the interviews to a password protected file and saved all information using the participants' pseudonym.

Data Analysis

The goal of the data analysis process of phenomenology is to provide a description of the phenomenon of study (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). To provide a description, phenomenologists cluster data into categories or meaning units that together represent the essence of the experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). To analyze the interview data, I engaged in a coding and thematic analysis process.

My initial steps of analysis began when I started to transcribe the interviews. Throughout the process of transcribing each interview, patterns began to emerge and I started to recognize similarities and differences in experiences. After I transcribed each interview, I

printed the transcripts and conducted an initial reading of each. Through this initial reading, I was able to get a sense of the data from a broad perspective.

During the second reading of each transcript, I began to code the data by writing my initial thoughts in single words or short phrases in the margins. I also used *in vivo* coding during the second reading, meaning that the direct language of the participants served as codes. For example, when participants described peer interaction by saying that it was like texting or like social media I wrote “like texting,” or “like social media,” in the margins. I read these printed transcripts, along with my hand-written interview notes, many times after this step to review the *in vivo* codes, my initial codes, and my reactions to the interviews.

After these initial steps of coding, I began to cluster these codes into categories that represented the essence of the experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). To do so, and to visualize the data, I read each document (transcripts and protocols) and wrote the notes from each on large sheets of post-it flip chart paper. I color coded the notes and codes per participant and wrote recurring codes and concepts near each other, thereby clustering the data. Themes began to emerge based on the clustered data. Thematizing the data as described allows the researcher to describe the topic under investigation by weaving various themes together for a comprehensive representation of the phenomenon (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Saldaña, 2013).

After each step of the coding and themeing process, I revisited the research questions and purpose of the study to ensure that the experiences shared throughout this study are represented in a way that meets the goals of this research. After many iterations of reading codes, clustering data, and condensing clusters, themes began to emerge. Through the thematic analysis, five themes emerged. The five themes together represent the essence of

students' experiences and informed the textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon. To provide the textural and structural descriptions, I compiled and analyzed participants' descriptions of *what* they experienced while interacting with peers and *how* it was experienced. In alignment with phenomenology, and to convey experiences accurately, I shared direct quotes of the participants of this study throughout the results section.

Trustworthiness

In order to instill confidence in qualitative research findings and to assure that a study is of high quality, researchers are encouraged to demonstrate trustworthiness. Criteria for trustworthiness include credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Jones et al., 2014). These criteria for evaluating qualitative research focus on how well the researcher provided evidence that their description and analysis represent the experience of study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In this section, I provide definitions of these criteria and describe ways I addressed them throughout my research.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the researcher's accurate representation and portrayal of participants' perceptions, and what they think, feel, or do (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I engaged in the following research activities to support the credibility of my research: engagement in reflexivity, engagement in member checking, and the use of peer debriefing. Through self-reflection and bracketing, I was able to explore and clarify the ways my positionality and prior experiences with the phenomena influenced the study. To support credibility, I also provided details of each step of the research process.

In addition, I engaged in member checking by emailing each participant a summary of the themes and quotes from the interviews that represented the themes. I did this to ensure

that I was accurately portraying participants' perspectives and to ensure the accuracy of my findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). One participant responded to the member checking email and stated, "I believe everything you have summarized accurately describes the general vibe with the 7-week online course. I would say this all coincides with what I have felt throughout [other 7- week] courses and I would imagine how others have felt as well." Though I did not receive a response from five of the six participants, the response I received supports the accuracy of my findings.

I also engaged in peer debriefing to support the credibility of my research. Peer debriefing consists of asking a colleague to examine transcripts of the data and to engage in discussion regarding assumptions or alternative perspectives of the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The colleague who helped debrief my notes and data for this study is an instructor familiar with inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy in online and face-to-face environments. She was also familiar with learning online having completed her doctoral program in an entirely online program. Together we reviewed interview transcripts and emergent codes and discussed our initial thoughts of the data. We also met to discuss the themes and quotes to include per theme as I began to outline the results chapter.

In addition to reviewing the data with a colleague, I asked a committee member familiar with qualitative data analysis for feedback regarding my analysis and representation of the results. We met through WebEx and discussed my coding process, the themes that emerged throughout, and the alignment of the themes with the research questions of this study. I was able to refine and clarify my reporting of the results based on her insight, feedback, and guidance.

Dependability

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), “Dependability refers to whether one can adequately track all the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data” (p. 204). For guidance regarding dependability, I sought feedback regarding the research process and methodology from a professor of qualitative methodology who also served on my dissertation committee. In addition, I maintained clear records of my interactions with participants and my progress throughout different phases of the research process. I also met with the chair of my dissertation committee multiple times throughout each semester to review steps of my research process and proper documentation throughout. The guidance I received from my dissertation committee members helped ensure that the research process I implemented aligned with phenomenological research philosophies and was clearly documented, logical, and traceable.

Transferability

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), the goal of qualitative research is to “develop descriptive context-relevant findings that can be applicable to broader contexts while still maintaining their content-specific richness” (p. 205). Transferability refers to “how well the study has made it possible for readers to decide whether similar processes will be at work in their own settings and communities by understanding in depth how they occur at the research site” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 205). Therefore, it is incumbent upon the researcher to provide detailed descriptions of the phenomenon, or topic of study, the context of the study, as well as detailed descriptions of their research process. The depth and richness of these descriptions contribute to the transferability of research. To contribute to the

transferability of this study, I provided detailed descriptions of purposeful sampling and the participants, their experiences, and the research setting.

Confirmability

To demonstrate confirmability, researchers should establish that their findings and interpretations derive from the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This requires the researcher to explain how they have reached conclusions and show that their findings are a result of the research rather than their biases. Throughout this study, I engaged in reflexivity, member checking, and peer debriefing to support the confirmability of my research. Engaging in reflexivity helped illuminate my biases while member checking and peer debriefing helped ensure that I represented the participants and their ideas accurately, appropriately, and in alignment with phenomenology. Explaining my use of these reflexive and collaborative steps throughout the research process helps readers understand how and why I made decisions throughout the process.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations of the study are constraints that influence transferability or application of findings to practice (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). One limitation of this study was the lack of racial diversity among participants with five of the six identifying as White. Another limitation regarding participants was a lack of diversity in degree program with only two different undergraduate programs represented among the six participants. In addition, each participant was an active student in an entirely online program despite the availability of the course to students in face-to-face programs. Though the ages of participants varied, they are non- or post- traditional students in that they are older than the traditional 18-24 year old undergraduate. In addition, the resources I used and the data I collected pre-date the sudden

and mass transition to remote teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Though *remote* teaching and learning directives differ from *online learning* in that remote delivery focuses on synchronous sessions that mirror face-to-face courses, it can be argued that the transition influenced perspectives of online learning where the focus is on asynchronous teaching and learning. These limitations influence the transferability of this study and the applications of findings.

Whereas limitations are often discovered after research has been completed, delimitations of the study are “characteristics that define and clarify the conceptual boundaries of research” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 207). I set boundaries for this study in both timeframe and data collected. For example, whereas the accelerated course duration may have limited the amount and quality of peer-to-peer interactions and experiences, the time-bound structure was a key factor in the study. In addition, the instructor did not design the course based on the Community of Inquiry framework. This was important for the study because it allowed me to focus on student experiences with peer interaction and their perceptions of community rather than their evaluation of teaching or course design. By not focusing on students’ evaluation or level of satisfaction with the instructor, I was able to refine the focus of my research to the peer interaction that contributes to the social presence component of the Community of Inquiry framework.

Chapter Summary

This phenomenological study is a representation of students’ experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course. In this chapter, I described my positionality and paradigmatic assumptions of social constructionism, and the ways they both influenced this study. I also explained the steps I took throughout the data collection and analysis process. In

addition, I provided a summary of the steps I took to instill confidence and trustworthiness in this research and the findings. Through phenomenological interviews, I explored students' experiences interacting with peers and their perceptions of community within an accelerated asynchronous online course. In the chapter that follows, I share the results of the interviews by providing direct quotes from my conversations with participants.

CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

In this chapter, I describe the findings from this phenomenological study regarding students' experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course and their perceptions of community. The findings from this research will contribute to filling the gap in literature regarding peer interaction and community as experienced by online learners. To address the need for such research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six students who had taken the same accelerated online course to answer the following research questions: (1) How do students describe their experience interacting with peers in an online course? (2) How do students describe their experiences of interacting with peers as contributing to their sense of community in an accelerated online course?

This chapter begins with a description of each participant including demographic information they shared. Aligning with phenomenology, I incorporated verbiage the participants used throughout the interviews into the participant profiles and within the description of the themes that follow. I edited quotes by removing various vocal fillers for clarity and to improve readability while still conveying the essence of the experience as described by each participant. Within this chapter, I also describe the alignment between the themes and the research questions. I conclude this chapter with a summary of the findings and a description of Chapter 5.

Participant Profiles

At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to provide a pseudonym and to tell me about themselves and why they chose to enroll in the course. To compose brief profiles for each participant, I relied on participants' answers to this initial interview question, and the last question of the interview regarding demographic information. Guided

by the literature reviewed for this study and the context of the university, I was specifically interested in learning participants' age, race and/or ethnicity, gender, military affiliation, their reason for enrolling in the course (required in their curriculum or chosen as an elective), and their familiarity with learning online. Though these factors contribute to their experiences interacting with peers and their sense of community, I did not ask participants to share this information prior to the interviews because it was not pertinent to the participant recruitment and selection process.

Brian

Brian identified as a 38-year-old Caucasian man and enrolled in the accelerated course because it was a required course for his degree program. Throughout the interview, he shared that he was in his sixteenth year of serving in the United States Air Force. Brian was familiar with learning online and had taken online classes through two different universities prior to enrolling in an online bachelor's program. Throughout the interview, Brian shared that he is an instructor of aircraft maintenance and teaches in a face-to-face setting.

Jay

Jay identified as a 26-year-old White man and enrolled in the accelerated course because it was a required course for his degree program. Throughout the interview, Jay shared that he completed his associate degree while enrolled in an apprenticeship program and that he and his wife were married shortly after he completed his degree. Jay also mentioned that his wife earned a bachelor's degree and that she inspired and supported his efforts to achieve the same. As a machinist, Jay often worked 60 hours a week, including evenings and weekends, and felt that enrolling in an online program was his only option to

complete a bachelor's degree. Jay had taken online courses before and was familiar with the format of both 15-week and 7-week courses.

Pete

Pete identified as a White man and enrolled in the accelerated course because it was a requirement for his degree program. Though he did not share his age, Pete disclosed that he retired from the United States Air Force in 2012, is married, and has a son who recently graduated from college. Pete's familiarity with learning online developed through online courses and training while in the military. Throughout the interview, Pete shared that he often sought advice from his wife regarding discussion board posts and responses. He also shared that he tried to convey his sense of humor through his writing.

Renee

Renee identified as a 43-year-old White woman and enrolled in the course because it was required for her degree program. Renee felt that she was held back at work because she did not have a bachelor's degree. She also shared that she is married and has three children. Renee's familiarity with learning online, her busy schedule, and her desire to finish a bachelor's degree influenced her decision to enroll in an online program. Throughout the interview, Renee shared that her age and busy schedule made her feel "a little awkward" as a student stating, "...sometimes it feels like I'm a student with an asterisk."

Robert

Robert identified as a 46-year-old White man and enrolled in the accelerated online course due to it being listed as a required course for his degree program. Robert was familiar with learning online prior to enrolling in an online bachelors' program and referred to himself

as an adult learner. As a Quality Manager, Robert had engaged in online training through his place of employment and completed professional certifications online.

Tonya

Tonya identified as a 51-year-old woman from Moldova and enrolled in the course because it was required for her degree program. Throughout the interview, Tonya shared that her husband had a surgery that left him unable to work. To “make ends meet,” Tonya worked two jobs and that made it difficult for her to find the time to dedicate to the online course. In addition, Tonya shared that she struggled with the English language and was unsure of communication customs while interacting with peers in the online course. She described herself as being “very new” to learning online and completed one online course in the semester before this study.

Findings from Data Analysis

The research questions that guided this study are: (1) How do students describe their experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course? (2) How do students describe their experiences of interacting with peers as contributing to their sense of community in an accelerated online course? Five themes emerged throughout data analysis: Routine, Technology, Course Design, Perceptions of Interaction, and Sense of Community. I organized the data by research question and explained the connection between the emergent themes and research questions in the sections that follow.

Research Question 1

The first research question for this study was, (1) How do students describe their experience interacting with peers in an accelerated online course? Throughout the interviews, I asked participants to describe their experience interacting with peers in an accelerated online

course. Asking participants to describe their experiences aligned with my efforts to address the lack of qualitative data from students regarding their experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course. Aligning with the purpose of phenomenology, I asked participants to describe the way they interacted with peers and to describe it as if they were talking to someone who had never taken an online class before. Responses to these questions and information gleaned throughout the interviews led to the *textural* and *structural* description of the phenomenon or, what each participant experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). The essence of participants' experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course involved descriptions of posting routines (their posting habits and that of their peers), the influence of technology on their online communication, and insight into the ways the design of the course guided their peer interaction.

Routine. Throughout the interviews, I asked participants to describe various aspects of their interaction with peers (e.g., how they felt about peer interaction, their approach to interacting with peers, and to describe tools or strategies they used to engage with peers). They spoke about ways their work and life schedule influence their posting habits and acknowledged the influence of their peers posting habits on their communication efforts. Two subthemes emerged regarding their posting routine, Schedule and Early or Late Poster.

Schedule. Participants provided insight into their schedules and discussed their efforts to establish a routine to incorporate peer interaction and online coursework into their daily lives. For example, Jay spoke positively about the way online courses fit into his schedule and the steps he takes to prepare for course interactions.

It was great because I can do things, you know? I come home from work, fix supper, get cleaned up and all that. It's like, "Okay, I need an hour to sit down, log in, do this

or that, check some emails” ... And then it's like, “Okay, back to me time and time with my wife.” And just [taking the course] online, it just made it so convenient.

Jay also spoke about getting back into the “groove,” or routine, of being in an online class and strategies he used to remind himself of coursework that required peer interaction.

Now, there was a little bit of a challenge, you know? It's been since 2016 that I was in school. So, getting back into the groove was a little tricky. At first, I was like, “Okay, you really gotta be mature and responsible enough to remember: Hey, sign in, check it out so you know what's going on. Make sure you remember the due dates.” So, I've set a lot of alarms in my phone like, “Hey, remember - you got something going on this day. Don't make any plans.”

Similarly, Pete talked about struggling to develop a routine that would allow him to read peers' posts and create responses in a timely manner.

Towards the end, I figured it out. I had a game plan and I would start when I got home from work and read through the posts and decide who I wanted to post off of. At first, I waited to the end to read off of everybody's and then answer. Then I realized that that's not a good thing to do. You should jump on it right away and get moving. I think if you stay on top of it, you don't get behind.

Renee explained that online classes fit into her work and family schedule and appreciated the convenience of learning online. She also acknowledged the importance of establishing a routine and making time for online coursework stating, “First session - I was great about checking every day, getting on every day, you know? That was my routine. Every night, get on my laptop. Second session - I kind of slacked a little bit.” She further explained that an increase in her workload at her job during the second session negatively affected her

schedule and routine. Tonya also spoke about the impact of her work schedule on her performance in the course and empathized with peers who struggled to stay current with their coursework and discussion board posts.

[Another student] was saying that it takes her more time because her workload [at her job] is so much. And then she was like, losing her track on the classwork. I know that feeling and it's hard! You have to balance both of them, you know? Sometimes your boss is requiring you to [stay at work] and you stay more hours. And then your work...your classwork is behind.

She further described the time-consuming nature of preparing posts for the online course and the additional editing steps she has added to her routine because English is her second language.

Most of the time, I work so hard [at my job] and I didn't have time. I always come home late, like, I just got home at 7:30 [p.m.] and usually I'm between jobs, you know? [When] I come home, sometimes I'm tired. But when I'm reading my work, it takes a long time. Maybe [it takes] normal students maybe two hours a day. For me, it's maybe double. Four hours sometimes. Sometimes I get tired. And then whatever I write, I have to go fix it and I have to do Grammarly to make sure my grammar is right. So, it takes a lot of work.

Making time for coursework and developing a routine for reading, posting, and responding to peers were factors discussed throughout participants' descriptions of their experience interacting with peers in the accelerated course.

Early or late poster. In addition to their schedule and posting routine, participants referred to their personal posting and responding habits, and that of their peers, in terms of

being an “early-” or “late-poster.” Online learners use early or later poster as common parlance to describe different approaches and timeframes for submitting posts. As an online learner and practitioner, I am familiar with this concept and did not need the participants to clarify. However, for those who are unfamiliar with learning online, online learners use the descriptors to refer to posts and responses submitted during the day (early) or in the evening (late), or during the beginning (early) or end of the week (late). For example, Renee and Tonya referred to themselves as late posters because they would submit posts and respond to peers during evening (and early morning) hours.

Throughout the interviews, participants described their personal approach to peer interaction and described the ways that being an early or late poster affected their experiences interacting with peers in the course. As Pete described:

Getting your timing for discussion posting and doing your homework, and then submitting your assignment was a little strategic. And that took me a little while to figure that out...like about maybe, I don't know, six weeks! So, I learned - I don't know half or quarter of the way through maybe - that you gotta post early, and then there's times you just couldn't post early. But moral of the story is: When you post early, you gotta wait for the responders to come in.

Robert shared his proclivity to interact with people who posted early stating, “People who posted at the last minute all the time...those people, you know? I didn't interact with them as much.” He went on to explain, “You start out and you try and read as many as you can. However, you know, people post late. I think I interacted more with the early posters because I'm an early poster, than I did the later posters.” Throughout the interviews, participants

revealed their inclination to interact with students who posted during timeframes similar to their own.

In addition, Pete described the way display settings in the learning management system (LMS) influenced his peer interaction in a way that may illuminate Robert's proclivity to interact with early posters:

There's a lot of posts, you know? Like, the first five, or first two, or three posts are like everybody's replying to those. And the ones at the bottom - they kind of get overlooked.

Everybody's like, "Well, I already did my two posts here."

Discussion board posts and responses in LMS' are typically displayed as a thread in chronological order. The earliest posts are listed at the top of the screen, or thread, while later submissions are displayed at the end of the thread. This means that posts submitted earlier in the week appear at the top of the screen, are seen first, and also remain visible each time a student opens specific discussion board threads. As Pete described, students can often overlook posts at the bottom, or posts submitted towards the end of the week as they continue to make progress on their assignments throughout the week. Pete specifically acknowledged the impact this realization had on his peer interaction: "I would go through and look for like, the 'no post' or the 'no reply to a post' and read that one carefully and answer it so that I didn't leave somebody out." Pete's perception of being an early or late poster and the default display setting in the LMS connect to the next theme of technology and the description of technological aspects that influence peer interaction.

Technology. While sharing their experiences and describing peer interaction throughout the accelerated course, participants spoke about the way different features and notifications within the learning management system can influence interaction decisions, like

when and with whom to interact. Participants also discussed limitations in communicating asynchronously via a discussion board, like the lack of non-verbal or visual cues.

Learning management system (LMS). Both Pete and Brian discussed aspects of the LMS that influence the way they experience peer interaction in an accelerated online course. For example, Pete described looking for discussion board posts that did not have a response and described his use of indicators within the LMS to determine which posts he had not read:

Well, I discovered that not only are there so many posts, but there's so many that "you haven't read" posts. And when I realized that, I realized that once I read them, I need to refresh so that the "you haven't read" posts is zero. And so, then I realized that if it's orange, then there's some stuff I haven't read and I probably ought to pay attention to those.

In the description Pete provided of how discussion board posts made later in the week can be overlooked, he stated, "Everybody's like, well, I already did my two posts here." To further explain; participation or discussion requirements in this course, like other online courses, revolve around one initial post and multiple responses to classmates. Once a student has met the requirements for that module or discussion-based assignment, it may be unlikely that they will return to that particular discussion board to interact with peers. Being aware of this, and after our discussion about fostering dialogue between students, Brian described his desire for a personal notification when a peer responds to his posts.

That's something that I would love to see technologically added to the [LMS] abilities: "Hey, somebody responded directly and specifically to your post. Even though you have met your quota and met your requirement, why not go back and take a look and see what it is that person said specifically to you?" We have a tendency as people to

want to respond to information or whatever directed at us rather than just in general to the class.

Though the LMS was not explicitly discussed by each participant, both Pete and Brian discussed salient aspects of an LMS that influence the way online learners experience peer interaction in an accelerated course.

Limitations in online communication. Throughout the interviews, participants explained the ways their peer interaction would be different in a face-to-face environment with synchronous communication. For example, Robert described how a common face-to-face teaching strategy of calling on a student in the classroom is often missing in an online course:

When you're in a live classroom and there's a conversation going on you get to hear everything. You get to participate when you think it's appropriate. Sometimes the professor will point [at you] and go, "Well, what do you think?" But when it's online, you got to take your own initiative.

Pete talked about the lack of non-verbal or visual cues when interacting in an online course:

The interaction would have been different face-to-face because you have verbal cues and things like that - visual - that you can't get in an email, let alone a forum like [the discussion board] But, I mean, you can still have your humor and... and you can be real - to a point. There is a line you can't cross.

Tonya also referenced the lack of non-verbal cues in an online environment and explained how it influenced her interaction as someone who learned English as a second language.

I could have, you know, interacted more openly. But sometimes I just [think], "Okay, I don't know... is it the right word or...?" I don't want to offend somebody, so I just hold

back. But if I went to face-to-face, I can ask, “Is it okay?” Or, if I say it, I can at least...I can see the face, you know? And I know, “Okay, it's all right. I'm not offending somebody I know,” you know...through body language or something. But in this case, I don't know so that was kind of a little difficult.

Renee also expressed a preference towards synchronous face-to-face communication and explained how a conversation can evolve throughout synchronous communication.

Personally, I am very good when I'm talking things out and bouncing ideas off of other people. I think you can always learn something from someone else. So, I think if you're just sitting around talking about things then someone else says something about it and it's like, “I never thought about that.” And you know, maybe they bring another perspective.

When describing their experiences interacting with peers in an online course, participants acknowledged limitations in online communication and the influence of the learning management system on their peer interaction.

Course design. Participants shared that aspects of the course and the course design influenced their experience interacting with peers throughout the course. Elements of course design, like the first assignment of the course, the overall structure and flow of assignments, and collaborative group projects influenced participants’ peer interaction and sense of community in the accelerated online course.

First assignment. The initial assignment of the course entailed students submitting a discussion board post and responding to at least three posts from other students. The discussion board was titled “Let’s Get to Know Each Other.” Within the assignment, students were encouraged to change their profile picture in the LMS and to share a short

autobiography (including their occupation, major and class status, interest, hobbies, etc.). Jay and Robert spoke about their approach and perceptions of the first assignment. Jay described the first assignment stating:

So, when we first started the course, it was like the whole, like, “get to know me” type thing and all. And so, within that the, you know, [the professor] was like, “Hey, tell me a little about yourself,” and...I'm guilty of being kind of long winded sometimes. But like, you know, just like a little blurb like, “Hey, this is what I'm into,” you know? “I like doing these different things and like this is my day to day [life].”

Jay went on to explain one of the reasons he enjoyed the initial assignment.

[I enjoyed] just getting to know each other, especially with the first assignment. Just seeing what people are into and it was, you know, a nice thing...especially the very first assignment being back in school and all. So, that was a big deal. It's like, get back and get the wheels turning and all, and it's like, “Okay, the first thing you're going to do is get to know some people.” And it was definitely nice to meet some people that kind of think the way I do as well.

The first assignment in this course is reflective of a common initial assignment used in online courses. Robert shared his experience with similar assignments and his perception of the interaction.

You know, every course that I've taken so far has that "get to know you" post and to me it kind of reads like an online personal [ad]. You know, "I'm this old, I do this, my family does that, this is my major." So there's that block of information that's always like filling in a template, but some people actually go the extra distance and put something in there that's a little more meaningful, and that's hard to do about yourself

or anybody, but those people are...those people are easier to interact with.

Whereas Jay and Robert shared their perception of the first, “Let’s Get to Know Each Other” discussion-based assignment, Pete spoke specifically about the flow and structure of the course.

Structure. Participants felt that the design of a course, specifically the structure and flow of assignments and interactions, influenced their communication with peers and the development of their sense of community. This theme represents participants’ discussion regarding both the amount of reading required in online courses and the inclusion of collaborative, group based assignments. For example, throughout the interview with Pete, he described how the amount of assigned reading and the timing of assignments impact peer interaction and the sense of community in accelerated courses. He compared his experiences in two accelerated online courses stating:

This class was set up with the right amount of material for the right amount of time.

The other class was set up with a crap load of material so,...it lent itself to more frustration and more work - at which point you never had a chance to discuss anything with your peers because all you had time to do was [submit your post] for the day and get into the material.

Most participants mentioned the amount of reading required in online courses. Jay shared, “Sometimes I have to like read [posts] like two or three times, and it’s like, ‘Okay, now it’s clicking.’ But um, you know...I had to reread, reread, reread multiple times.” As previously shared, Tonya referenced the amount of reading (and rereading) required to submit an initial post and to respond to peers. In addition, Pete shared that the amount of coursework can negatively affect a sense of community: “If you pack too much material into the lesson, then

that community is hampered because everybody's busy trying to read a bunch of... a myriad of things.” He also noted the instructor’s role in structuring or scheduling assignments and shared that having access to both the discussion board and assignments concurrently influenced his peer interaction stating, “The way the instructor set it up you had...well, you had the discussion and then you had the assignment. But during that assignment period you could go back and still do more discussion with your classmates. That was cool.”

Pete also explained how the structure and combination of assignments and discussion board prompts contributed to his connection and engagement with the course material.

I think this [course] was more fluid and the assignments matched the discussion. I think that was really good. And [discussion board prompts] weren't completely off or totally different from what the assignment was. So, you could focus and blend the two together if you paid attention to what you were doing.

Relating to the structure of the course, Brian, Renee, and Robert discussed the individual nature of assignments within the course and shared their desire for group-based collaborative assignments. They also acknowledged the way collaborating in a group could contribute to feeling a sense of community. For example, Renee explained, “I think if maybe we, if maybe some of the assignments were broken down into groups, it would have... it would have encouraged more [community], or at least getting to know more people better.” Brian felt that the opportunity to work in groups would have benefitted his experience interacting with peers in the course and shared:

There just wasn't that you know, storming, norming type ability with this class.

There wasn't a lot of project type stuff where you had to interact with another

student, which meant that you never had to get past the very superficial, "Yeah. Hi, I'm [Brian] and from I'm doing this as part of a class," and that's about it.

He also described his proclivity to get to know peers when working on a group project compared to other assignments stating, "If there was a project requirement where I have to interact with people to be able to get all the pieces together and to get this project done. Now I'm invested in that - that 'getting to know people' piece." Acknowledging time-conflicts often associated with group projects, Robert shared:

I think one of the things that would have made a difference is a group project. And even if it's something simple and short because, you know, if you make it too complicated then you start getting into time conflicts. But this could be something simple and quick. That's a good way to at least get you to connect with a smaller group of people.

The theme of Course Design emerged throughout data analysis and represents participants' description of ways the design of the course influenced their sense of community. They spoke of design aspects including the initial assignment, the overall flow of assignments and discussions, and their desire for group-based collaborative projects.

Perceptions of interaction. Throughout the interviews, participants described what it was like for them to interact with their peers. Within their descriptions, they spoke about ways they project their personality and how peers may perceive them. They also compared peer interaction in an online course to other forms of computer-mediated communication (i.e., texting and social media) and described how age and maturity can affect communication. Based on their experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course, three subthemes emerged. Participants' process of Conveying Social Presence (and that of their

peers), the nature of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC), and their Age and Maturity level along with those of their peers influenced their experiences and overall perception of peer interaction and community in an accelerated online course.

Conveying social presence. Social presence, as defined by Akyol et al. (2011), is “the ability of participants to identify with the community, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities” (p. 232). Social presence is one of the three elements in the Community of Inquiry framework used for this study. Within the interviews, participants talked about their social presence by discussing how they felt when engaging in peer interaction throughout the course. Participants described a sense of ownership regarding their engagement in the course and the information they shared throughout the course. They also discussed factors that contributed to their decision to interact with peers.

For example, throughout the interview with Pete he discussed one way he tries to project his personality and show his sense of humor throughout his interaction with peers in the course – an indicator of his social presence; “I’m a clown so I have a good raw sense of humor. So, I would use humor in my writing sometimes. I think that’s really helpful. And actually, it’s been commented on that it was enjoyable to read!” In addition, Robert shared that the way he communicates via CMC may influence the way peers perceive him stating, “Sometimes when I write emails they might come off as a little bit terse. But they’re not meant to be very mean but to be concise. But when people don’t know you, that can be a problem.”

While Pete incorporated his sense of humor throughout CMC to project his personality, both Renee and Tonya described ways they limited their social presence.

For example, Tonya explained:

Well, it depends on...I mean, it was great, I can see... especially this class. It was very friendly online, you know? A positive group. So, it was easy to interact. But for my case, I interacted with them less - which I'm supposed to be interacting with them more. But [it is because of] a lack of language and also, um, it was kind of...well, it was out of my comfort zone, you know? So, it needs...it takes time to [be able to] interact more comfortably. For me, I was kind of holding back while interacting. It's kind of different. [English is my] second language and the custom is different. So, I wasn't sure what my boundaries are, you know?

Renee shared that she felt the need to be guarded in her interaction with peers.

I know for me; I am always a little bit... maybe guarded because - or maybe a little intentional is a better way to put it - because I don't want to say something that's going to be misinterpreted. And it's hard. I mean, just like through text – it's difficult to convey your tone and emotion. And so, it's ...I know I find myself...I try not to ramble. I try to make my point concise and direct and that's about it. I try not to embellish too much because I don't want somebody to take something the wrong way and be offended or...be hurt.

Regarding her feelings about limiting or protecting the information she shared with peers, Renee explained, “My husband works in law enforcement, so I am not completely comfortable with opening myself up to a bunch of strangers. And especially online where there is a record.” Renee’s experiences are also reflective of the sense of trust needed among peers in order to interact authentically and develop inter-personal relationships.

Communicating purposefully in a trusting environment is one aspect of social presence that Tonya and Jay discussed in terms of agreeing and disagreeing with peers. Tonya shared:

There were some things that I disagreed with the students. But, I...I wasn't sure, "Should I just be straightforward [and tell them]?" I said, "Well, maybe I'll just save this." Or, "Maybe I respond to somebody similar or somebody agreeable," you know, like that kind of people. I choose – or how do you say...I pick my posts: "I can answer this one" or, "No, I can't answer this one," you know? Even though I read through them...I guess I was choosing similar experience or similar situations that people were going through. That was easier for me to answer.

Though Jay talked about the possibility of disagreeing with peers in an online class, he shared that he was not concerned about disagreements throughout the course.

There were never issues to where I ever had to be concerned of like, "Well, how far can I actually say this?" Nobody wants to offend anybody [but] it's inevitably going to happen when somebody disagrees. Somebody is going to be like, "Well, I don't like the way you think." Basically, everything was kind of vanilla [in this course]. It was just like, "Hey, what are your hobbies?"

Tonya also shared that she was motivated to continue in the course by receiving positive feedback from her peers as she developed her social presence in the course.

I felt kind of afraid, or nervous kind of. But they eventually, you know [as the course progressed], I feel more comfortable because people gave feedback. The feedback was very important for me so I can see what I'm doing wrong or what I'm learning [compared] to other people.

She further explained:

I guess I'm like half-full glass kind of person and try to say things like, politely. So, when somebody writes or posts to my... how do you say... replies to my post saying, "Oh, yeah Tonya, that's good!" then it gives me more confidence and then I'm thinking, "Okay, right!" So, it gives me more confidence so I would like to continue: "Okay, I'm going in the right direction so let's [continue to go] that way!"

Receiving positive feedback and feeling a sense of encouragement from peers was important to Tonya and positively influenced her social presence and overall perception of the course.

I guess at the end of the day, you know, I learned a lot. It was a great group of people. It was very positive. That's the main thing for me, you know? That we're encouraging each other and getting feedback...positive feedback. If somebody is so negative then the environment is negative and I don't think everybody wants that much, you know? That would have been a different story.

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed a sense of reflection and intentionality regarding both the way they projected their personalities and the extent of information they shared throughout their interaction with peers in the accelerated online course. The next subtheme of computer-mediated communication (CMC) represents the way participants related peer interaction in an online course to other forms of CMC, like texting, and social media.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC). Participants described what it was like to interact with peers and connected peer interaction in an online course to the way it feels to text a friend or to interact on social media platforms. For example, Jay explained that peers

who submitted meaningful posts made him feel like he was texting with friends.

People were putting meaningful thought into things and people did seem like they took the time to write out something [and] actually put forth effort. So, you do feel like, “Hey, seems like I'm just talking to my friend David, or Joe, or Zach” or whoever, you know? Just like a text message. Like a long-winded text message. You know, you do feel that human interaction that some people would be concerned [about] with taking an online course.

Pete also described peer interaction by relating it to text messages stating, “I mean, it's just like what they do day-to-day most kids. Like, texting back and forth. I mean, it's just like that except with the discussion it's more um, what do you call it? ‘Topic centric’.”

Relating peer interaction in an accelerated online course to Facebook, Robert explained: I would equate it to Facebook; kind of like interacting with the people in high school you didn't really interact with then. It's kind of a social experiment from afar. So, you kind of... you kind of converse - but it's not the same as, you know, a lot of classrooms. It works, but it's different.

When asked to elaborate, Robert further explained, “What makes it a strange conversation, kind of like Facebook, is there's all this stuff posted at different times. And, you know, it's really, I don't think possible to take-in the entire message board.” Tonya also referenced social media when referring to the pace and technical skills needed for CMC and peer interaction in an online course.

It was so fast paced, you know? You're trying to figure out how to write and what to put on it. And then also you need your technical skills and techniques, you know? And again, I use a computer a lot at work, but we use certain software or certain

programs. It's not like everything, you know? So, I'm not like a social media person so it was challenging. That's the thing. But actually, I enjoyed it a lot.

In addition to relating their experience interacting in an online course to other forms of CMC like texting and social media, participants described the way their age and maturity influenced their peer interaction.

Age and maturity. Participants spoke of age and maturity, both their own and that of their peers,' as factors that influenced their peer interaction in the accelerated online course. It is important to note that participants referenced "age" and "maturity" but did not talk about prior learning experiences. For this reason, the Age and Maturity became the subtheme rather than using the terms "traditional" or "non/post traditional."

In relating her age to her comfort interacting with peers online, Renee stated, "I hate to sound like I'm using it as a crutch but, I'm a little bit older. So, you know, my whole life hasn't been online." She also described an instance of feeling out of touch because of her age and explained how that influenced her interaction.

There were some assignments, where, as I was doing them, I'm thinking, "I am so out of touch. I cannot even believe this." Like, we had an assignment with search engines, and it sounds so stupid but I did not realize that there were so many different types of search engines! So, there were some assignments where I'm thinking, "I am so old, and I'm out of touch, and I don't get this at all!" But I tried not to convey that because I don't... I don't want that kind of attention.

Whereas Renee anticipated receiving unwanted attention regarding her age, Robert shared that being in a class with other adult learners made him feel a sense of belonging: "You know, there's a lot of adult learners and you feel a part of that - part of the people who are

working and going to school. And I have worked and gone to school before too.” In connecting age and maturity, Pete explained, “Half the class is older, and the other half of class is younger so, there...there's some growing up to be done in places, if you will. So, one can't just blast them for being young and vice versa.”

The level of maturity displayed by his peers influenced Jay's experiences learning online and engaging in peer interaction. While reflecting on peer interaction throughout the course, Jay explained:

I felt like everyone was going to put forth their best effort. People were really going to, you know, try to shine a little bit. And it was nice to feel that the maturity was there - which I wasn't used to because I took a couple of online courses while finishing out my associate degree and some of those people - they were really just going through the motions. But I didn't notice that with this course. And with the previous school I was at - when people are just going through the motions - you just want to get through it as fast as possible. You just don't care what type of people you're encountering and interacting with because, you know, on the other end, they're just typing whatever and it doesn't matter to them as long as they get a C and just pass the class.

Jay also explained that the level of maturity among peers in online courses may differ based on the level of the degree program. He felt that it was “disheartening” to be in online courses with peers who put forth minimal effort.

I feel like the higher you climb, you're going to encounter more, you know, professionalism. You're going to encounter more maturity. You're going to come across people that are like, "Hey, I'm here to get work done and let's enjoy this as

much as possible.” But the other courses, you had a lot of immaturity. You had people that you know...say if there were three talking points on a discussion, they would just basically answer those three talking points, insert no effort, and there was no opinion. There was no belief. There was nothing. It was a, "I answered your three questions and give me my minimal points so I can get out of your class."

Participants' experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course led to four themes that together represent the textural and structural description, or the essence, of peer interaction. The essence of peer interaction is computer-mediated interaction within a learning management system that is influenced by time and schedules, contextualized by forming connections and establishing familiarity among peers, and is made meaningful through self- disclosure and the sharing of experiences. The essence is represented throughout the themes of Routine, Technology, Course Design, and Perceptions of Interaction. In the following section, I describe the remaining theme, Sense of Community, and its alignment with the second research question.

Research Question 2

The second research question for this study was: How do students describe their experiences of interacting with peers as contributing to their sense of community in an accelerated online course? Throughout the interviews, I asked participants to describe ways they engaged in peer interaction that helped them connect with peers and feel a sense of community. I also asked them to describe the importance they place in feeling a sense of community in an online course and how different course durations have affected their sense of community.

Sense of community. Responses from these questions and others asked throughout the interviews, led to the overarching theme, Sense of Community, and three subthemes: Shared Experiences, Familiarity, and Course Duration. In the following sections, I describe the subthemes and provide the corresponding descriptions as shared by the participants.

Connecting over shared experiences. This subtheme emerged from participants' description of instances of connecting over commonalities, relating to each other, and sympathizing over shared difficulties or struggles. For example, Robert described an instance of peer interaction that helped him establish an ongoing connection throughout the course.

There was somebody who had posted about how he almost deleted his post because it was so close to mine, and I posted mine first, you know? Like, that happened to me last semester. I spent hours writing something and then I go to post it and then I scroll up, I'm like, "That's about the same as what I just wrote." But you know, it's a small world and we're all writing about the same stuff. And I think that person and I really connected and kind of conversed and commented on each other's posts the rest of the class, you know?

Tonya shared her perspective of observing other students connect and build a relationship in the course.

I've seen in this class for example, if the peers have more common experiences, they get more, you know, connected easily. I [saw] a couple of the guys [who became] so close, you know? Um who was it? It was [David] and [Rick], and they were getting more connected because of their common interests - it was the same, you know? So, it makes them more connected and closer.

Relating her need to feel a sense of community in online learning to her age and ability to connect with peers, Renee shared:

I know for me personally, it's not that important to feel a sense of community. I know there are certain things where - Yes, I'm a student - but sometimes it feels like I'm a student with an asterisk. So, you know, I got the email about volunteering for the Special Olympics and I'm thinking, "I can't be with a bunch of 19-year-old kids." So, I'm not going to rush out and get a [university] t-shirt, you know, "I'm a [university] student!" that kind of thing. Just I think because of my age it kind of makes me feel a little awkward.

Renee also shared her proclivity to interact with peers with similar life experiences.

If I noticed that somebody was in the same boat as me, maybe I gravitated more towards, posting on their things, or it seemed like I gravitated more towards them - people who were married and had families versus people who were still living with their parents and right out of high school.

In addition to connecting over life experiences, participants discussed their propensity to interact with people who faced similar struggles or hardship. As Robert explained, "Just reading that some of the struggles and confusions that other people had were the same as me. Those were the people who I connected with on the message board as well." Renee explained that discussing similar hardships with peers helped her feel a sense of camaraderie, "...essentially the shared hardship between everybody. When everybody was going through the same anxieties for a project or an assignment. Then, when we did comment, and have similar opinions to people, that stuff definitely felt...you feel the camaraderie."

Jay discussed his ability to connect with peers and get to know them via discussion board posts.

I can just connect to these people, you know? Even if it's only a day a few times a week - just like writing back and forth, you know? Like, just kind of reading what they have to say and just kind of sending a little comment...you still feel like - even though I may never meet any of these people - you still feel like you get to know them just from little bits here and there.

Jay, Tonya, and Brian discussed their ability to connect with peers over common goals and similar reasons for enrolling in the course. Jay shared,

When I started talking about why I was taking this course, other people were like, “Oh my gosh, yes!” [and shared similar goals]. Like, there's a light at the end of the tunnel for all of us so, I felt like “Hey, we're all here for the right reasons. We're all here for honestly similar reasons.”

Tonya explained, “We are all trying to learn one thing, you know? Everybody is trying to explain it based on their own experience. So that's, I feel like we have common goals. So, we are a community all together.” Referencing his perspective on connecting with students and feeling a sense of community, Brian shared, “Together you can be a better class than individually you can be a student.”

In addition to feeling a sense of community from connecting and relating to peers throughout the course, participants described how being familiar with classmates contributes to their sense of community.

Establishing familiarity. Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned that they recognized the names of their peers from previous courses. Their familiarity with peers came

from being in the same degree program or having similar course schedules. Participants also acknowledged a progression towards feeling a sense of community in the course as they became more familiar with their peers. When asked about feeling a sense of community in the course, Renee explained:

I think that we're getting there because so many people are in the same program and you're in the same classes with a lot of the same people. I know that there is a gentleman who I believe he's been in all three of my classes here. He's also going back to school after 10 years. He's a little bit older like I am. So, we had an interaction and I can't even remember what we actually said but...you know, there was more joking around between the two of us because after seeing his posts and things like that, you know, you're getting to know people a little bit.

Also acknowledging his familiarity with peers from previous courses, Robert stated, “There were some other relationships carried in from previous classes – names that I recognized.” When asked to elaborate, Robert explained, “There are people in [my degree] program that I've taken other classes with and I kind of tend to gravitate towards them.” During the interview with Pete, he discussed the influence of being familiar or connecting with peers outside of the course and the progression towards establishing familiarity among other classmates.

At first, there was a huge presence of Air Force personnel in this specific class. And so, at the beginning, yeah, I felt like that was a commonality that would lend itself to more discussion through the course. However, halfway through, maybe just a little before that, it... that part disappeared because you got more familiar with the rest of the students. That commonality with the Air Force lent itself to communication but,

the rest of the communication that would happen in response to our conversations, you know, warmed up for the rest of the class.

Jay shared that the familiarity he established with peers in the course used for this study continued in other courses.

One of the guys that I said I pay attention to a lot - he's in this new [course] with me. And there's also [Jeanne]. She's in this one as well and she made the comment on one of my new courses that she's in the same program. She's doing pretty much the same thing as I am so, I will probably be seeing her name in quite a few things from here on out.

The interactions that participants associated with feeling a sense of community and found the most meaningful were those in which peers shared personal information through affective communication. Relating to the connections they were able to establish in the course and the familiarity felt among peers, participants discussed the influence of course duration (7-, 15- weeks) on establishing a sense of community.

Course duration. Participants discussed the impact of the amount of time they had to establish connections, build relationships, and feel a sense of community within an accelerated online course. The accelerated duration of the course hindered students' ability to connect with their peers. As Brian stated, "When classes are fairly short in duration, there's not a lot of free type interaction - which kind of [prevents] that ability to make a personal connection with anybody else." Brian also shared that peer interaction and feeling a sense of community are challenging in a 7-week course.

So, within the 7-week course, it makes it a little bit more of a challenge to interact with peers. In that there's, there's a very short introductory phase to the class. In other

classes that I've taken that weren't quite as short, there was a longer introductory period

When asked to elaborate, he explained:

So, the shorter the course the less time that the class has to go through the stages of becoming more of a team. And the other piece of that puzzle is having that shared goal. Everybody wants to pass, but setting up that shared [goal of], "Hey, all of us are going to be working toward this together," requires some time. Finding out those folks that have strengths in certain areas or weaknesses in others takes a little bit of time.

So, I think yes, that the duration does have an impact on [one's sense of community].

Renee shared another perspective of how having more time for peer interaction and to learn about each other could influence the sense of community felt by the class.

I think that you would have time to go through more milestones. So, if you're in a class with someone over holidays, you're going to have that that interaction maybe about the holidays, maybe learning about how other people celebrate holidays, or other religions or cultures. I think for a longer duration, you may have someone who's leaving for a deployment or coming home from a deployment or just... just more time with things going on in someone else's life to learn about.

Jay's experiences with a shorter course duration and its influence on his peer interaction and sense of community differed from Brian and Renee.

I actually prefer [7-week courses]. Like, I want to get my work done and I want to get it done in a timely manner. I feel like when you stretch things out to the 15-week courses, people at some point, you know, they lose interest [with their peers] and you lose their attention. As far as you know, the interactions I feel like people are...they're definitely

putting more effort forth in the shorter courses because you're keeping their attention.

You're keeping their interest as much as possible.

Participants shared their opinions of shorter course durations and discussed their experiences establishing connections, building relationships, and feeling a sense of community in accelerated courses. While online learners may prefer accelerated courses, the shorter course durations may negatively influence their ability to establish connections and feel a sense of community. The theme, Sense of Community, reflects participants' description of the way the duration of the course, familiarity among students in the course, and connections made throughout discussion board posts influence their sense of community in an accelerated online course.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described the results from this phenomenological study regarding students' experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course and the ways those experiences contribute to their sense of community. The findings from this research contribute to filling the gap in literature regarding peer interaction and community as online learners in an accelerated online course experience them. In addition, pedagogical practices in online learning contexts can improve based on the insight gained throughout the interviews.

The quotes shared and the themes described throughout this chapter represent the essence of peer interaction and participants' perception of their sense of community in an accelerated online course. The essence of peer interaction is computer-mediated interaction within a learning management system that is influenced by time and schedules, contextualized by forming connections and establishing familiarity among peers, and is made meaningful

through self- disclosure and the sharing of experiences. The interactions that students associated with feeling a sense of community and found the most meaningful were those in which peers shared personal information through affective communication. To understand these experiences and perceptions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants who had taken the same accelerated online course. I began the chapter with a description of each participant followed by a thematic summary of the findings aligning with each research question.

The results of this study indicate that participants' personal schedule and routine, including factors like their work and family schedule, affected their ability to engage in the course and interact with peers. In addition, peers' posting schedule and routine, specifically being an early or late poster, influenced their peer interaction. Participants also described technological aspects like the LMS and elements of course design that influenced their experience interacting with peers in the accelerated online course.

Students' experiences interacting with peers provided meaningful opportunities for them to learn personal information about each other. Sharing personal information and self-disclosure via peer interaction contributed to students' sense of community in their accelerated online course. The results also indicate that connections created with peers through shared experiences and connections they may have previously established with peers affect participants' sense of community. In Chapter 5, I focus on the findings of this qualitative study and how they contradict, support, or align with previous studies quantitative studies referenced throughout the literature review. In addition, Chapter 5 includes discussion regarding the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework in relation to the findings of this study.

CHAPTER V. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand students' experiences in order to provide a phenomenological description of peer interaction and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners in an accelerated online course. The findings from this research contribute to knowledge regarding peer interaction and community as experienced by online learners and is needed to improve pedagogical practices for the increasing number of students pursuing accelerated online learning options. In this chapter, I provide a discussion of findings organized by each research question, the implications of the findings, and recommendations for online pedagogy and future research.

Discussion of Findings

After thematizing participants' descriptions of their experiences and perceptions, I reviewed the literature that framed this study and considered similarities and differences between this study and previous literature. In this section, I describe the major findings that emerged from such analysis. To begin, Table 3 includes a summary of participants' experiences represented by themes and subthemes relevant to each research question. I discuss findings per research question and the ways participants' experiences connect to the literature or provide new insights thereafter.

Table 3

Research Questions, Themes, and Experiences Portrayed by Participants

Research Questions	Themes and Subthemes	Experiences
1) How do students describe their experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course?	Routine	Participants described ways their work and life schedule influenced their posting habits and acknowledged the influence of their peers' posting habits on their communication efforts.
	Schedule	
	Early or Late Poster	
	Technology	Participants described their use of interaction indicators within the LMS and discussed limitations they felt when communicating in an online course.
	Learning Management System (LMS)	
	Limitations in Online Communication	
	Course Design	Participants described ways the first assignment encouraged peer interaction and described how the flow or sequencing of assignments and discussions guided their interaction and sense of community
	First Assignment	
	Structure	
	Perception of Interactions	Participants shared ways they conveyed their personality throughout the course, compared peer interaction to other forms of computer-mediated communication like texting and social media, and described how they considered age and maturity throughout their interactions.
	Conveying Social Presence	
	Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)	
	Age and Maturity	
2) How do students describe their experiences of interacting with peers as contributing to their sense of community in an accelerated online course?	Sense of Community	Participants reported that they developed a sense of community when they connected over shared experiences with classmates, engaged with classmates with whom they had taken other courses, and struggled to develop community in accelerated classes due to the limited time frame to connect and collaborate with their peers.
	Connecting over Shared Experiences	
	Establishing Familiarity	
	Course Duration	

Findings from Research Question 1

With the first research question, (1) How do students describe their experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course, I sought to develop an understanding of online learners' experiences interacting with peers in an accelerated online course. As detailed in the first chapter, there is a gap in literature regarding the essence of peer interaction and what it is like to interact with peers in an accelerated online course. The findings of this study represent online learners' experiences interacting with peers and the way their routines, their perceptions of online interaction, the technology used for online course delivery, and aspects of course design influenced their experiences. Based on descriptions provided by the participants and my understanding developed through analysis, two findings emerged while answering the first question.

Regarding the first finding, online learners' schedules and routines not only affect *when* they interact with peers, but also *with whom* they interact. Much of the appeal of online learning is the asynchronous nature that affords students the flexibility to complete coursework at their convenience. That was also the case within this study as each participant acknowledged the flexibility and convenience of asynchronous online learning. However, the significant finding was participants' inclination to interact with students who posted during timeframes similar to their own. Participants throughout this study not only referred to themselves as "early-" or "late posters" but also described the influence of other's posting schedule on their proclivity to interact with peers. For example, participants who posted early in the day or the week described their inclination to respond to peers who posted around the same times. In addition, participants admittedly chose not to respond to or interact with peers who posted later in the day or week, or during different timeframes than themselves.

Participants' proclivity to interact with those who post at similar times indicates that, though asynchronous learning options appeal to post-traditional students, online learners are inclined to interact with those who may be actively engaged in coursework at the same or similar times as them. This finding relates to literature regarding ways students establish connections because the participants in this study revealed that they connected with peers based on the timing of their interactions. The connection over similar posting times encouraged participants to interact and connect with select peers in ways that may have combated feelings of isolation and disconnection – feelings associated with key concerns in online education.

The second finding regarding online learners' description of peer interaction is the insight gained regarding students' use of the learning management system (LMS) and its influence on their interaction. Whereas most participants described the ways their schedule and posting timeframes of others influenced their peer interaction, two participants described the influence of the LMS – both in how they use different features and features they would like to utilize. Pete described his use of a filtering tool to indicate which posts he had not read and to find posts to which no one responded. In addition, Brian described his desire for personal notifications when a peer responds to a post he submitted. He explained that the notifications would encourage more of a “back and forth” conversation. Based on their descriptions, engaging in peer interaction in an accelerated online course includes the use of LMS indicators to prioritize which posts to respond to and with whom to interact. Participants in this study also described peer interaction by associating it with other forms of computer or technology mediated communication outlets, like texting and social media that provide immediate notifications and encourage real-time interaction. Online learners' use of

and desire for communication filtering tools within the LMS can influence both when they interact with peers and with whom they interact.

The findings from the first research question indicate that online learners choose to interact with those who post during similar times and would like to receive real-time notifications when a peer responds to their posts. These findings suggest that the online learners from this study were more inclined to communicate with peers who were likely to be working on coursework during the same time as them. In addition, these online learners use communication tools available to them that often encourage real-time, synchronous interaction while also indicating that they would use additional communication tools if available.

Both significant findings support and expand upon existing literature regarding feelings of isolation and disconnection. For example, Lera-Lopez et al. (2010) explained that the absence of personal connection in a learning environment increases feelings of isolation and disconnection among students. Also within the literature reviewed for this study, researchers connected students' feelings of isolation and disconnection with prevalent issues regarding persistence and retention in online learning. In addition, Richardson et al. (2017) expressed concerns regarding such feelings and explained that they contribute to higher dropout rates and dissatisfaction among online learners. These connections led researchers to explore community in online learning as a way to combat feelings of isolation and to support students' sense of community in online and distance education (Aykol et al., 2011; Garrison et al., 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Rovai, 2002). This research expands upon existing literature because the significant findings that arose from this research question are not referenced within existing literature: Online learners connect to peers who post at similar

times, are inclined to communicate with peers who were likely working on coursework during the same time as them, and would use additional LMS communication tools that encourage real-time interaction despite preferring asynchronous delivery.

Textural and structural description. As discussed in the first chapter, there is a need for qualitative descriptions of students' experiences interacting with peers and online learners' perception of community in an asynchronous accelerated online course. Predicated upon the need for such description, I sought to explore and understand the experiences of online learners and to provide a description of the essence of peer interaction. As such, and in alignment with phenomenology, it was important to describe the textural and structural experiences of peer interaction in an accelerated online course.

The textural description reflects what happened and the structural description reflects how the phenomenon was experienced (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). What the students described as happening were instances of computer-mediated communication that felt like interaction via texting or on social media platforms. The communication was asynchronous and described as being disjointed, focused on course content, prioritized using the learning management system, and superficial at times. The participants described their interaction as "warming up" over time, dependent on their schedules, and influenced by the posting habits of their peers. When they interacted with peers, they felt a sense of comradery and support yet were mindful and intentional regarding the personal information they shared with peers in online learning contexts. A description of peer interaction from the student perspective can be useful when designing interactive assignments and assessing student engagement.

The essence of peer interaction. The results of this study indicate that the essence of peer interaction in an accelerated online course is computer-mediated interaction within a learning management system that is influenced by time and schedules, contextualized by forming connections and establishing familiarity among peers, and is made meaningful through self- disclosure and the sharing of experiences. Online learners are inclined to communicate with peers who are likely working on coursework during the same or similar timeframes as themselves. In addition, online learners use filtering tools within the learning management system that encourage real-time synchronous interaction and have indicated their desire for additional communication tools. Lastly, results indicate that the interactions online learners found to be the most meaningful were those in which peers shared personal information or provided insight into their personality. These interactions encouraged them to make connections throughout the course that evolved into feelings of familiarity among peers.

Findings from Research Question 2

The second research questions for this study was (2) How do students describe their experiences of interacting with peers as contributing to their sense of community in an accelerated online course? Research regarding cognition and effective pedagogy for online learning has trended towards social constructionist learning theories and revealed the importance for students to feel a sense of community in online courses. As stated by Palloff and Pratt (2007), “The key to successful online learning is the formation of an effective learning community as a vehicle through which learning occurs online” (p. 4). In addition, the literature reviewed for this study indicates online learners’ desire to feel like part of a community and for more meaningful interactions within their online courses (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017). However, the current structure of online course delivery - asynchronous

content delivered through homogenized course templates within learning management systems – frames online learning as an individual cognitive process: “The implicit denial of community has been the greatest shortcoming of traditional distance education with its focus on prescriptive course packages to be assimilated by the student in isolation” (Garrison, 2017, p. 35).

This implicit denial of community or the failure to prioritize students’ sense of community and belonging in online learning led to the second research question for this study. I sought to understand online learners’ perceptions of community and to understand how online learners’ experiences interacting with peers contributed to their sense of community in an accelerated online course. The significant finding that emerged while answering this research question is that the most meaningful peer interactions, and the interactions that students associated with feeling a sense of community, were those in which peers shared personal information through affective communication. This finding aligns with the Community of Inquiry framework in that self-disclosure is a key component in the affective interaction that contributes to social presence.

As previously cited, McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) definition of community is commonly referenced in literature pertaining to online learning communities and details aspects of community, like the need for members to feel a sense of belonging, to trust one another, and for members to feel that they matter to each other. Through the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, Rourke et al. (2001) linked self-disclosure to social bonding and forming connections with peers. As rationale, they cited Cutler’s (1995) explanation, “The more one discloses personal information, the more others will reciprocate, and the more individuals know about each other the more likely they are to establish trust, seek support,

and thus find satisfaction” (p. 17). In this study, students provided examples of ways they felt supported by their peers and ways they connected with their peers as they worked towards the shared goal of successfully completing the course. However, participants described different instances of peer interaction when asked to talk about meaningful interactions.

When asked to provide examples of their most meaningful peer interactions and the interactions that they associated with feeling a sense of community, participants described those in which peers disclosed personal information, provided insight into their personality, or interactions when they connected with peers over similar experiences. As an answer to the second research question, students' experiences interacting with peers provided meaningful opportunities for them to learn personal information about each other. Sharing personal information and self-disclosure via peer interaction contributed to students' sense of community in their accelerated online course.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings from this research provide insight into online learners' experiences interacting with peers and their sense of community in an accelerated course. In this section, I discuss the implications these findings have on theory, in practice, and for future research.

Theory

The theoretical framework referenced throughout this study was the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. According to Garrison and Archer (2000), “The Community of Inquiry theoretical framework represents a process of creating a deep and meaningful (collaborative-constructivist) learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements – social, cognitive and teaching presence” (p. 2). The definition of social presence is “the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of

study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities” (Akyol et al., 2011, p. 232). I focused on the social presence component of the Community of Inquiry framework for this study because it is projected through peer interaction and is a vital component of creating community via computer-mediated communication (CMC).

Students express their social presence through three types of communication: affective, open, and cohesive responses (Garrison et al., 2000). While students project their personality and build community through these three types of communication, the findings from this study imply that affective communication (specifically self-disclosure and the sharing of personal information) is vital to students’ feeling a sense of community. This finding was evidenced within the results of this study whereby the most meaningful peer interactions, and the interactions that students associated with feeling a sense of community, were those in which peers self-disclosed personal information, provided insight into their personality, and interactions when they connected with peers through similar experiences. This implies that greater attention should be given to the role of affective communication in forming a community of inquiry.

Pedagogy

The significance of affective communication in projecting social presence and in feeling a sense of community has implications for online pedagogy. Within this study, online learners spoke of instances of peer interaction within their online course that they found most meaningful. The meaningful interactions of which they spoke consisted of affective communication and occurred throughout different assignments. The assignments that elicited meaningful interactions were those in which the instructor prompted students to share

information about themselves as part of the assignment. The theme that represents this finding is Course Design and is comprised of subthemes regarding the First Assignment and the Course Structure. The key finding is that online learners value affective communication and the sharing of personal information in the first or initial assignments of the course. In addition, the participants in this study spoke of their desire for group-based collaborative assignments and discussion prompts that could encourage them to connect to their peers in meaningful ways. The findings imply that instructional strategies and LMS tools that encourage affective communication and collaboration among peers contribute to online learners' sense of community in an accelerated online course.

Based on these implications, I recommend that online instructors design assignments that encourage students to discuss their personal connection to course content via affective communication. Assignments that encourage students to reflect on their experiences, then share their connection to the course content with their peers through open and honest discussion should occur early within an online course and often throughout. By sharing personal insight gained from previous experiences or pieces of personal information throughout discussions, students can contribute to each other's meaning making and understanding of a topic while creating opportunities to connect with each other in ways they may find meaningful.

In an accelerated online course. Participants in this study spoke of their desire for group-based collaborative assignments and prompts that encourage deep and meaningful interaction within their accelerated course. Group-based or collaborative projects are not often incorporated into accelerated online courses – perhaps due to their seemingly time consuming nature or the lack of appropriate technology to facilitate such interactions.

However, as represented in the Structure subtheme, online learners in this study acknowledged such limitations yet saw group projects as opportunities to invest in getting to know each other. As Robert stated, "...even if it's something simple and short because...if you make it too complicated then you start getting into time conflicts. But this could be something simple and quick. That's a good way to at least get you to connect with a smaller group of people." In addition, Brian stated, "If there was a project requirement where I have to interact with people to be able to get all the pieces together and to get this project done - now I'm invested in that - that 'getting to know people' piece."

I recommend the inclusion of small-scale assignments that encourage collaboration among peers while creating opportunities for meaningful learning experiences in accelerated online courses. These experiences can be meaningful in both creating a sense of community and meeting course objectives when designed in ways that connect to course objectives and student learning outcomes. The short, small-scale collaborative experiences can also encourage students to participate in smaller groups while creating more opportunities for them to engage in affective communication early and often throughout an accelerated online course.

Facilitating communication and connections. In addition to course design and structure of assignments being important components of online learning, the role of the instructor in facilitating communication and connections among learners is a vital aspect of online pedagogy. For example, the finding of online learners' schedules and routines influencing when and with whom they interacted evidences the need for instructor facilitation. In addition, the finding of online learners' use of and desire for communication tools that encourage real-time interaction indicates the need for learning management systems to

incorporate tools and notifications that help facilitate communication and connection among peers. This aligns with existing literature that indicates the importance of facilitating meaningful interactions in an online course. According to Protopsaltis and Baum (2019), “Researchers, as well as both proponents and skeptics of online education, emphasize the need to design online courses that facilitate robust interactions as an essential component for improving the quality of learning and student outcomes” (p. 5).

Online learners’ schedules and routines influence both when and with whom they interact. In addition, participants in this study were inclined to interact with peers who may have been actively engaged in coursework at the same or similar times as them. Represented within the Early and Late Posters subtheme, students also indicated that they did not often respond to or interact with those who posted during different timeframes than themselves. The proclivity to interact with select students has implications for the different perspectives gained, opinions considered, and peer connections online learners expose themselves to in accelerated online courses. By encouraging affective communication and creating opportunities for students to share and collaborate in meaningful ways, instructors can help students create connections among various peers.

The results that led to the theme of Perceptions of Interaction and the subtheme of Age and Maturity also indicate the need for online instructors to help establish connections among diverse peers as students may not interact with various peers otherwise. This approach to online facilitation also connects to literature regarding the need for the development of social skills in online environments that are reliant upon exposure to difference (Franklin & Freeman, 2014). Instances of students choosing to interact only with those who have similar posting habits, or with whom they have felt a connection or shared a

commonality (see Shared Experiences and Familiarity subthemes), indicate the need for instructors to facilitate peer interaction. They can do so by conveying their presence throughout discussion based assignments and facilitating conversations among peers that may help broaden their connections to various peers throughout the course.

The results that led to the Shared Experiences and Familiarity subthemes evidence the importance of online learners establishing connections with their peers. By incorporating strategies, activities, and collaborative assignments that help students get to know each other and work together, online instructors can encourage interaction among diverse peers and can contribute to the sense of community felt in an accelerated online course. This recommendation also connects to the theme Course Design and subtheme of Structure as short, small-scale group projects can also serve as “spaces” where students may feel more comfortable engaging in affective communication (such as self-disclosure and open and honest discussion) with peers whom they may not have chosen to interact with otherwise. Evidenced by the First Assignment subtheme, the assignments that encourage online learners to share personal information and establish connections are often the initial assignments for the course. Based on the results of this study, instructors should incorporate teaching strategies and design assignments in ways that not only encourage online learners to create connections with their peers but also to cultivate those connections throughout the duration of the course.

Learning Management Systems

As previously mentioned, the finding of online learners’ use of and desire for communication tools that encourage real-time interaction indicates the need for learning management systems (LMS) to incorporate tools and notifications that help facilitate

communication and connection among peers. As indicated within this study (and as I have experienced throughout my time as an online learner, instructor, and practitioner), real-time indicators, notification tools, and technology that offer synchronous communication capabilities are highly desired among users of learning management systems. Providing online learners the option to choose to receive real-time notifications for various communications in an online course can help facilitate student engagement and communication among peers – and those with whom that may have not interacted otherwise. Communication tools like real-time notifications and interactive LMS interfaces are vital as online learners and practitioners continuously seek ways to connect and engage online. The need for such tools may only increase as those who have been raised and educated in an era of remote or online education seek avenues for higher education.

Future Research

Based on the findings from this research and their implications on online course design, pedagogy, and learning management systems, I offer recommendations for future research regarding peer interaction and community in online learning among various student populations and through different qualitative approaches.

Various student populations. Future research should aim to explore the sense of community experienced by students from various student populations (18-24 year olds, various racial and ethnic groups, minoritized students, etc.). For example, participants in this study indicated age and maturity as influential to their peer interaction. However, the participants in this study were 26 years of age or older and considered post-traditional. There is a need for research regarding students' perceptions of community in virtual

contexts as younger generations' exposure to learning through distance, online, and remote modalities continues to increase.

In addition, future research should focus on the sense of community felt by students from various cultures and who identify with various racial and ethnic groups as definitions and feelings of community may differ. One limitation of this study is the lack of demographic diversity among participants within the context of a predominately White university. However, participants of this study acknowledged the influence of their upbringing (how and when they were raised) on their experiences interacting with peers. Tonya, for example, explained how her experiences interacting with peers in the online course illuminated communication customs that she was unfamiliar with being from Moldova. She described feeling unsure of how to respond to peers at times due to different styles and approaches to online communication. As online and remote learning options continue to increase, we will see greater diversity in age, race, ethnicity, and different levels of exposure to various cultural customs and backgrounds. Therefore, research that focuses on the experiences and perceptions of students who share similar or different demographic characteristics would enhance understanding of peer interaction and community and what they mean to various student populations in online learning contexts.

Grounded theory. Future research regarding peer interaction and perceptions of community in online learning contexts using a grounded theory approach would be beneficial to our understanding of student experiences in online education. Whereas a phenomenology focuses on the essence of lived experiences in order to provide a description of the phenomenon, grounded theory research moves beyond the description to generate a theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, "Grounded theory research focuses on a process or an

action that has distinct steps or phases that occur over time” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 83).

For example, there are commonalities among the steps students take to interact with peers in an online course. The instances of peer interaction that contribute to the overall process of building community are also contributing factors in students feeling an individual sense of community. Therefore, peer interaction, building community, and feeling a sense of community are processes and actions that occur over time. Throughout this study, participants described both their processes and the actions they took to interact with peers and to project their social presence. For example, one participant described their sense of community within the course as something that warmed up over time. While this study consists of descriptions of the phenomenon, a grounded theory approach to generate theory would enhance understanding of peer interaction, community building, and the progression towards feeling a sense of community among various student populations learning in an online context.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to provide a phenomenological description of peer interaction and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners in an accelerated online course. Though research indicates the importance of peer interaction and community in online learning, and online learners indicate their desire to feel a sense of community in online courses (Aykol et al, 2011; Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017, Hicks, 2014; Wlodkowski, 2003, etc.) there is a gap in literature that qualitatively details the essence of peer interaction and online learners’ perception of community. To address this gap, I interviewed six post-traditional online learners regarding their experiences interacting with

peers and the way those experiences contributed to their sense of community in an accelerated online course.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of factors that shape peer interaction and the sense of community felt in an accelerated online learning context. The findings evidence implications for online pedagogy, learning management systems, and for the implementation of the Community of Inquiry framework. Research that focuses on the experiences and perceptions of online learners who share similar or different demographic characteristics through various methods would enhance understanding of peer interaction and community in online learning contexts. The need for such research is evident as diverse student populations' exposure to learning through distance, online, and remote modalities continue to increase.

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APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

DATE: September 30, 2019

TO: Kristen Hiding

FROM: Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [1426994-2] Study of Peer Interaction, Social Presence, and Community in an Accelerated Online Course

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: September 29, 2019

EXPIRATION DATE: September 17, 2020

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the IRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on September 17, 2020. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or orc@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board's records.

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW INVITATION

Hello!

My name is Kristen Hiding and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education Administration Program at Bowling Green State University. **I am emailing you to invite you to participate in a study about your experiences interacting with peers and your perception of community in an online course!** As a former teaching assistant for TECH 3000, I have seen some of the great connections and conversations that students get to be involved in throughout the course. Those experiences led me to choose this course, specifically your class, as the source of my study. The overall purpose of my study is to provide a student-informed description of the peer interaction that contributes to social presence and community within an accelerated (7-week) online course and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners. Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated! In addition, **if you decide to volunteer and participate in this study, your experiences, opinions, and perceptions will help contribute to the enhancement of online teaching and learning at BGSU and beyond!**

Details:

- In the interview, I will ask you to share your experiences of interacting with peers and your perceptions of community throughout a *conversational* 60-minute (or less) interview. I will also ask you to show me an example of a meaningful/memorable interaction you had with a peer in this course.
- I hope to conduct individual interviews during the fall semester.
- Those who volunteer will also be asked to create a pseudonym to help ensure the confidentiality of responses. Additional measures taken to protect confidentiality are detailed in the Informed Consent Form that volunteers will receive prior to participating in the interview.
- The interviews will be conducted individually and will take place via the course WebEx tool in Canvas. Audio from each interview will be recorded and transcribed to ensure that your experiences are accurately documented. Recordings and transcripts will be saved under the pseudonym of your choice in a password protected file and will not be shared with the instructor.

Please email me back if you are interested in participating in the interview. I am also happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Kenneth Borland (kborlan@bgsu.edu), or the Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board at 419-372-7716 (orc@bgsu.edu) if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your consideration and I hope to hear from you soon!

-Kristen

Disclosures: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without explanation or penalty. Your decision to participate will NOT affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University. **Your participation will not affect your grade or class standing.** You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study. HSRB Approved Study: Project ID # 1426994

APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT FORM



BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent for the Study of Peer Interaction, Social Presence, and Community in an Accelerated Online Course

Key Information: The purpose of this study is to provide a description of the peer interaction that contributes to social presence and community within an accelerated online course and to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners. Participating in this study is voluntary and involves your participation in one interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. To help ensure the confidentiality of participants, all volunteers will create or be given a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study.

Introduction of the Researcher and Purpose: My name is Kristen Hiding and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at Bowling Green State University. My advisor is Dr. Kenneth Borland, a professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University. The purpose of this study is to explore and develop a student-informed description of the peer interaction that contributes to social presence and community within an accelerated online course. Furthermore, the purpose is to explore the sense of community experienced by online learners. I am asking you to participate in this study based on your enrollment and completion of TECH 3000: Computer-mediated Communication in Training and Education.

Those who volunteer for the interview will be given the opportunity to share and discuss their experiences and perceptions of peer interaction and community that occurred within the online course. Though there is no direct benefit to the individual participants, your experiences and perceptions will contribute to the enhancement of online teaching and learning in areas specifically related to peer interaction and community-building in accelerated online courses.

Procedure: If you choose to volunteer to participate in the 60-minute (or less) interview, I will ask you to share your experiences of interacting with peers and your perceptions of community within an accelerated (7-week) online course. Within the interview, I will also ask you to show me an example of peer-interaction (i.e., a discussion board post/conversation) that you found to be meaningful and/or memorable. The interview will be conducted individually and will take place via the course WebEx tool in Canvas. The audio from each interview will be recorded via a hand-held audio recorder to ensure that spoken responses are accurately documented. In addition, I will also save a screen shot of the interaction discussed in my research notes so that I may reference the interaction throughout the study. It is important for you to know that your participation in this study will not affect your grade for the course. To further ensure that your participation in this study will not impact your grade, the interviews will be scheduled after the completion of the course. In addition, the instructor will not have access to the audio recording, screen shots, or transcript of the interview and will not be informed of your participation in the study.

Voluntary Nature: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without explanation or penalty. Your decision to participate or to decline participation will NOT affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University. Your decision about whether to

participate will not affect your grade or class standing. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

Incentive: If you volunteer and participate in an interview, your name will be entered in a drawing for the chance to win one of four \$25 gift cards to Falcon Outfitters. I am accepting up to 10 participants. If the maximum number of students volunteer and participate, those students will have a 4 out of 10 chance to win a gift card. This chance will increase if there are fewer participants. The drawing will take place upon completion of the interviews and the winners will be notified before the end of the semester (December 13, 2019).

Confidentiality Protection: I will make every effort to ensure that your participation in this study remains confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, I will use a hand-held audio recorder during the interview and will not use the WebEx recording feature. The audio file, screen shots, and transcript of the interview will be saved using a pseudonym and will be stored in a password protected file on a biometrically protected computer. If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to create your own pseudonym. Throughout the interview, I will call you by your selected pseudonym instead of your name. Any personally identifiable information shared throughout the interview or visible within the screen shots will be removed from the transcript and redacted to maintain confidentiality. It is also recommended that you clear your internet browser and page history to further protect confidentiality.

Risks: The risk of participation in this study is no greater than that experienced in daily life. While there is no risk to your physical or mental health beyond those encountered in the normal course of everyday life, some questions might raise uncomfortable or distressing memories. You may choose not to answer any questions that may make you uncomfortable; refusing to answer any questions will not result in negative consequences.

Contact information: If you have any questions about the research or your participation in the research, please contact me, Kristen Hiding via email (khiding@bgsu.edu, 419-575-2604) or my advisor, Dr. Kenneth Borland (kborlan@bgsu.edu, 419-372-9397). You may also contact the Chair of the Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board, at 419-372-7716 or orc@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research.

I appreciate your participation in this research and thank you for your time.

Indication of Consent to Participate

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

Participant
Signature

BGSU IRB - APPROVED FOR USE
IRBNet ID # 1426994
EFFECTIVE 10/22/2019
EXPIRES 09/17/2020

APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

A Phenomenology of Peer Interaction and Community in an Accelerated Online Course

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is Kristen Hidingier; I am a Ph.D. student in the Higher Education Administration program. Your responses today will help me develop a description of peer interaction and what it is like to interact with peers in a 7- Week online course. Throughout the interview I will ask you to describe your experiences interacting with peers and to share your perceptions of community in online learning. I will also ask you to show me an example of the most meaningful/memorable experience of interacting with a peer throughout the course.

This is a semi-structured interview and my goal is to have a conversation with you about your experiences. I have 11 pre-determined questions and will ask follow-up questions throughout our conversation to help me better understand your experiences and perceptions. I expect that our conversation will take approximately 60 minutes.

As you read on the informed consent form, our conversation will be audio-recorded. However, I will use a pseudonym when saving and storing the audio-files and remove identifying information from any screen shots or notes that I take throughout our conversation. Do you have any questions before we get started? Do you still consent to participate in this study?

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself and why you took this course.
2. How would you describe the way you interacted with your peers throughout this course?
 - a. How would you describe peer interaction to someone who has never taken an online class before? (*your routine, your process, and/or your approach*)
3. What were some of the ways that you interacted with peers in this course that helped you connect with them? (*tools, strategies, etc.*)
 - a. How did your interactions with peers make you feel like you were part of a community? (*Why do you think that is? How so?*)
 - b. What were some ways you felt interacting with peers was enabled or limited throughout this particular course?
4. Please tell me about a time when you felt that you could be *real* in your interactions with peers.
5. Please tell me about a time when you felt a sense of community in any of your online courses.
 - a. How did the sense of community impact your experience in the course?
 - b. What are some factors that contributed to your sense of belonging/community?
 - c. How was your experience in this course similar or different? (*referring to the example provided*)
6. What were some factors that made you feel like a part of the class even though you were physically separated from your peers and instructor?
7. Please show me an example of an interaction/post that you specifically remember or that you found most meaningful. (*can be a discussion post you wrote, read, and/or responded to*)

- a. Why do you think you remember this specific interaction? What is it about the interaction that made it memorable?
 - b. How is this example different from other interactions?
- 8. How have different course durations (7, 8, 12, 15-weeks) impacted your sense of community in online classes?
- 9. Please describe your ideal interaction with peers in an online course. (*scenario, project, feeling, etc.*)
 - a. Do you think this would make you feel a sense of community and/or more connected to your peers? If so, how?
 - b. In what ways would this be beneficial for you?
 - c. How would your ideal interaction change based on the duration of the course (7, 8, 12, 15-weeks)?
- 10. In your opinion, how important is it to feel a sense of community in an online course?
 - a. How would your answer change based on the duration of the course (7, 8, 12, 15-weeks)?
 - b. What are other factors that may change based on the duration of the course?
- 11. Lastly, would you please share some demographics about yourself?
 - a. Would you mind sharing your major, age, gender, race/ethnicity, military affiliation?
 - b. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Conclusion

That concludes the interview. I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me today and want to thank you for sharing your experiences and perceptions with me. Please feel free to reach out via email if you have any questions or concerns regarding our conversation today.