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SOCIAL PRESENCE AND SOCIAL ABSENCE: SOCIO-CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF SELF IN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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The concept of social presence has long been employed to study identities in online learning environments. However, the process of identification in digitally-mediated experiences is not only articulated by what is represented but also defined by what is filtered-out in that particular representation. I shall term these consciously filtered-out identifications social absence. Therefore, I regard social absence as the extent to which particular identifications are not represented in one's social presence. The idea of social absence suggests that individuals may hide behind their relative anonymity. This research, therefore, introduces the concept of social absence and illustrates the ways individuals experience social absence in online learning.

Introduction

Defined as the degree to which individuals represent themselves and perceive others in digitally-mediated environments, social presence has long been employed to study human experience in online learning environments (Oztok & Brett, 2011). I argue, however, a comprehensive understanding of identities in digitally-mediated environments should go beyond how individuals represent themselves depending on their perceptions of self in relation to others and further includes the qualities and cultural background that individuals consciously filter-out when they create their online existence. That is, the process of identification in digitally-mediated experiences is not only articulated by what is represented but also defined by what is filtered-out in that particular representation. I shall term these consciously filtered-out identifications social absence. Therefore, I regard social absence as the extent to which particular identifications are not represented in one's social presence. Social absence is not the opposite of social presence; rather, one's social presence and absence are always related to each other and both are situated in and defined by Discourses.

In digitally-mediated environments, one's social presence or social absence operates as a site for the process of identification since individuals use their presence in conveying who they are to other people. This process of identification is called impression management (Goffman, 1959), whereby individuals write themselves into online beings. The process of impression management can be thought of as the process by which

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certain individuals from certain cultural groups hide their differences since the difference is the primary point of othering, constituting a fixated form of representation for both the dominant and the subaltern (Spivak, 2012). Social absence, therefore, is the degree to which individuals hide their differences in digitally-mediated environments through the process of self-monitoring.

Current Research

This study explores how individuals manifest and utilize their identities in online learning environments. Data are gathered through discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews from two randomly selected graduate level online courses offered at a public research university at Canada. Both courses were taught by the same instructor, and used the same institutional online learning environment. A total of 37 students (17 in the first course and 20 in the second) were enrolled but with some overlap, the total number of distinct students was 28.

Producing Self in Between Social Presence and Social Absence

Here, I present data from 2 individuals due to space limitations. Johanne identifies herself as a “Caribbean-Canadian” who was born in a Caribbean country and grew up in Canada. Johanne suggests that she is a very active participant who is not shy in bringing her perspectives in discussions. She claims that, compared to face-to-face courses, she engaged more with her peers. In a classical sense, she is socially present in discussions. However, when I ask her if she believes that she truly represents herself, she answers with no hesitation:

No! Although I have always been genuine in my self-representation, I don't truly represent myself. No! And here is why. Ok, for example, they would know which university I got my degrees, they would know what TV shows or music I like. They, wouldn't know how really I am because there are other aspects of me that I don't talk about. It is only half of me. For example, they wouldn't know what it means to be different because I never talked about it, I think what you present about yourself is only the half of it, right?

Johanne's answer suggests that even though her social presence is a genuine and true representation of herself, there is more to her identification than what she represents. According to Johanne, her online self is “only half of” who she really is. I ask her to explain what was missing in her online self. She says: “funny but my ethnicity was definitely absent. I am Canadian, right? But I was Caribbean in the [online] course. So, it is funny because I was not Caribbean-Canadian but I was simply Caribbean. So, my ethnicity was not there”. In the two online courses I study, what it means to be Canadian is available to certain individuals; that is, being Canadian means to be White. Thus, Johanne believes that she was identified as Caribbean even though is Canadian. Johanne continues:

My ethnicity was absent because I didn't even have a chance to bring it in. I wasn't Canadian whose ethnic background is Caribbean; I was just Caribbean. So, if I had a chance to be who I was, I would probably use my ethnic

background. But, um, now I am not this person, so I don't use my ethnicity. How can I use my ethnicity if I am not using my ethnic background? I am Canadian-Caribbean. Not just Caribbean. So, if you make me Caribbean, you erase my Caribbean-Canadian background.

Johanne's articulation is quite powerful. Precisely because her Caribbean-Canadian background is "erased", Johanne believes her online self does not represent her. Thus, Johanne's social absence is her ethnic background.

Race, ethnicity, and nationality are common points of juncture between presence and absence for those who were not positioned on top of the hierarchy of privilege. Nalini, who self-identifies as "Indian-Canadian", suggests that her ethnicity was absent. I ask her why and she answers:

I don't know. I think it just didn't come up. I mean, I thought it is ok not to mention it. I mean, parts of me were missing. You know, like my culture and cultural background. I could have put more of myself and wrote about myself. But in terms of what I shared with people, I was accurate. But, yes, there were some parts missing. So, I did not reflect myself fully. You know ... Honestly, I thought people do not care about it or take that into account; I thought they don't want to know about it. So, um, I thought ... I thought I should not mention it because I am not a typical Canadian.

Nalini echoes Johanne in many ways. Most importantly, she believes that her ethnicity is absent through being accepted as Indian rather than Indian-Canadian. In a preview interview, however, Nalini suggested that she had to be Indian because it is the role that was expected of her. Her contradictory explanations suggest that she is caught in a dilemma that she feels her identification as Indian is absent, yet she feels like she is expected to be Indian. Spivak (2012) calls this dilemma "double-bind"; an irreconcilable binary in which two subject positions can simultaneously oppose yet construct one another. For Nalini, double-bind is the dynamic interplay between Discourses and her social absence. I wonder what Nalini meant when she said "because I am not a typical Canadian". Nalini explains:

Well, you have limited social cues in online learning, right? So people fill in those cues they make guesses, they stereotypify you depending on their dominant ideology. So, let's be honest. They stereotypify me depending on what they think of me. They do; they start guessing. So, my picture was up there, and my name was there, right? So, they guess that um, they assume that I am brown and I have a different name, so I am not Canadian or White. (laughs). YAnd if you don't represent yourself according to the image they have in [their] mind, they think you are fake.

According to Nalini, people try to make sense of their peers and stereotypify each other by using meanings that are defined and delimited by the very same Discourses. This explains why Nalini is caught in a double-bind: she is Brown and has a different name; therefore, she cannot be Canadian, otherwise her peers may think she is "fake".

Consequently, for Nalini, her social absence is a matter of race, ethnicity, and nationality.

Yet, similarities between Nalini and Johanne are quite interesting. They both believe that their ethnicities are absent from their online selves because they are identified as who they are not: not Canadian but Caribbean and Indian. Furthermore, they both believe that their absence is the direct result of stereotypification that is originated from macro-level societal Discourses. Such effects can have dramatic outcomes for them, such as isolation, disengagement, or veiled acceptance for the purposes of a parsimonious online experience with peers.

Discussion

The dynamic interplay between social presence and absence provides means to explore the effects of identification in digitally-mediated learning environments. For those who I interviewed, their online self captures only a partial representation of themselves. For them, social absence is part of their identification: race, ethnicity, or nationality.

For those “non-whites”, social absence means disconnection. They believe that they are being stereotyped and that their perspectives are devalued; therefore, they articulate that the communication process breaks down. Nalini says: “It means that you have no choice but follow the path that is already put there for you. You just pretend”. Johanne answers the same questions similarly: “You can't stop thinking that you could have said more or done more. For me, it is living with “could haves” or “would haves” (she makes quotations marks with her hands). Their answer is at the heart of this manuscript: being present in online learning environment does not mean that individuals have same learning experiences; some people may experience more absence than presence.

Conclusion

Identification is an ongoing reconstruction of self; it requires articulation, embodiment, personification, acknowledgement, and engagement. I conceptualized identification as a relational concept that is composed of social presence and social absence; as such, identification is a dialogic construction that is situated within Discourses. The findings suggest that certain individuals, particularly those who are identified as non-white, are caught in the double-bind of their social presence and social absence. This means that the process of identification have implications on how individuals experience online learning.

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