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## The influence of learner characteristics on social presence

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### Abstract

Social presence is one of the more important constructs for determining the level of interaction and effectiveness of learning in an online environment. The purpose of the present study is to determine what individual learner characteristics can influence student ratings of their online social presence. The results build on previous research reported but with a larger sample size drawn from practicing teachers enrolled in online postgraduate courses. The study also affirms that the revised Computer-mediated Communication Questionnaire (Tu, 2005) is an adequately reliable measure of the construct social presence.

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## 1. Introduction

The genesis of social presence lies in the conceptualization from social psychology of immediacy (Weiner & Mehrabian, 1968) and intimacy (Argyle & Dean, 1965) surrounding face-to-face communication. In face-to-face communication, immediacy refers to the psychological distance between two speakers, whereas intimacy is the closeness obtained, verbally and non-verbally, among individuals and maintained by immediacy behaviours (Rettie, 2003). When applied to computer-mediated communication, (i.e. CMC) Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) report that the social effects experienced are caused by the degree of social presence afforded users with Gunawardena (1995) further noting that immediacy behaviours enhance and maintain social presence.

To frame good pedagogical practices for online learning, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) developed the community of inquiry model to recognize the transactional relationship between instructors and learners through the interaction of cognitive presence (of the learner), teaching presence (i.e. the structure and process), and social presence (i.e. affective interpersonal communication). According to Garrison et al. (2000), these elements, which define the community of inquiry model, are fundamental to a successful higher education learning experience. A key component in the model is the concept of social presence, which refers to the affective domain as it relates to interpersonal communications.

In assessing social presence within a text-based, asynchronous environment, Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2001) identified three categories of communicative responses: affective indicators (i.e., values, beliefs, feelings, and emotions); cohesive indicators (i.e. group presence and commitment); and interactive indicators (i.e., attending in a socially meaningful way). Although Rourke et al. recognize that the coding and analyzing of CMC text-based transcripts using the aforementioned indicators provides a measure of the density of social presence, they also contend future exploratory studies including factor analysis would aid in further defining the construct.

The construct of social presence is the critical affective ingredient for online learning. Several researchers have demonstrated that social presence is a vital concept to be facilitated, developed, and sustained as it encourages and supports communication-based learning (Garrison et al., 2000; Kim, Kwon, & Cho; 2011; Lobry de Bruyn, 2004; Rourke et al., 2001; Tu & McIssac, 2002). However, learner characteristics including age and sex (Packham, Jones, Miller, & Thomas, 2004); one's readiness for e-learning (Smith, Murphy, & Mahoney, 2003); and computer self-efficacy (Hayashi, Chen, Ryan, & Wu, 2004) can also influence the persistence and motivation of online learning among students.

## 2. Purpose

The objective of the present study then is to determine what if any individual learner characteristics that include sex, age, teaching experience, number of online courses courses taken, years using the internet, years using email, and self-rated computer-mediated communication (CMC) proficiency can influence teacher ratings of their online social presence. A valid and reliable measure of social presence was administered (CMCQ: Tu, 2005) and demographic variables including age, sex, number of years teaching, number of online classes taken, and readiness for online learning (as measured by CMC proficiency) were determined. This research provides the opportunity to better assess what individual learner characteristics affect the degree of social presence experienced within an online learning environment.

## 3. Method

The participant sample is derived from students (i.e. practicing teachers) enrolled in postgraduate special education online courses offered at the University of Saskatchewan. The postgraduate program is comprised of 9 courses that are offered over a two-year period. Using convenience sampling, 275 students enrolled in the postgraduate program participated with a 90 percent response rate attained. Those enrolled in the program were varied demographically in age, proficiencies with computer mediated technologies, years of teaching experience, and experience with online learning. Participants in the study voluntarily completed the computer-mediated

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