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For Apple

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the experiences of twelve international students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in virtual learning communities in university and college courses. Specifically, this study explored how the students' identity in virtual learning communities was influenced by interaction within the virtual community. The research questions for this study were: (1) What are international students' experiences participating in virtual learning communities; and (2) How do international students' experiences in a virtual learning community influence their development of identity?

The findings revealed four themes concerning the "I" and the "Me" within the students' experiences with the virtual learning community. The first theme pertained to the ethnic "I" identity concerning how students viewed themselves. The second theme included the ethnic "Me" identity as it includes students' perception of how others view them. Theme three dealt with the virtual ethnic "Me" identity that consisted of the student's perception of how virtual peers view them. The fourth theme related to the virtual ethnic "I" identity that depicted how students see themselves online in the virtual learning community.

Three subthemes emerged from the findings. Together these subthemes influenced the virtual ethnic identity for international students. The identity sub-themes included the structure of the virtual learning community, challenges encountered in the virtual learning community, and change. Ultimately, the virtual ethnic "I" identity and virtual ethnic "Me" identity form the international students' virtual ethnic identity.

Through the interpretive framework of symbolic interactions, the research data was analyzed through the lenses of social presence, identity development, and acculturation. The analysis focused on four virtual barriers to identity development in the virtual learning communities. These virtual barriers included 1) virtual social barriers, 2) virtual cultural barriers 3) virtual learning tools barriers, and 4) virtual dialogue barriers.

Further analysis of students' experiences revealed virtual acculturation stressors when social and dialogue barriers were present. The stressors involved virtual dialogue stressors and virtual safety stressors. With meaningful interactions virtual stressors for international students were reduced. In summary, through the use of multiple theories, insight was gained into how students' identity development and acculturation experiences were impacted by community members as well as barriers and stressors experienced in virtual learning communities.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

International students come to universities and colleges in the United States each year from many cultures across the world. Open Doors Report for the 2013-2014 academic year reveals that 886, 052 international students attended colleges and universities in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2014). This number consists of an 8% increase, 66,408 more students, than the previous year. They face challenges associated with adjustments to a different culture in the U.S. as well as changes related to college life and an educational system different from their own. For international students, adjusting to college in the U.S. is more complex because they also negotiate cultural differences as well as learn how to access the academic and social resources at the university.

In addition, finding learning communities within the university structure can be difficult but important for international students' academic success and adjustments they must make in their host country. Learning communities in higher education advance the "collective knowledge" of students by supporting their knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994, 1996). According to Riel and Polin (2004) a knowledge-based community "seeks to advance the collective knowledge in a subject or field of inquiry, and do so in a way that supports the growth of each of the individuals in the community, that is, the intentional development of experts within a community" (p. 32). Learning communities have different purposes and goals based on their nature; their mission must provide a supportive and inclusive environment that promotes educational, intellectual, and social development for students. Their

goals “foster a culture of learning, where both individuals and the community as a whole are learning how to learn (Bielaczyc & Collins, 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, learning communities intend that members “synthesize multiple perspectives . . . collaboratively, solve problems and . . . come to respect and value differences within the community” (Bielaczyc & Collins, 2013, p. 4). Within the learning community a culture of learning develops whereby students are part of the collected effort of learning through discourse and “being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities” (Werner, 1998, p. 4). Numerous studies explored virtual learning communities especially in relation to the social presence that occurs within the virtual community. While virtual learning communities have been studied, virtual learning communities for international students in higher education have presented a new frontier for inquiry.

Background to the Problem

Learning communities within higher education are viewed as a way to enhance the learning experience for students and provide them an avenue for greater academic success. The National Resource Center for Learning Communities (NLCRC) (2013) maintains that effective learning communities “create a collaborative environment where students thrive, faculty and staff do their best work, and learning fosters the habits of mind and skills to tackle complex real-world issue” (n. p.). In support of the NLCRC, Vincent Tinto (2013) purports that in higher education “actions of institutions” at times “unintentionally excluded many people” and that learning communities in higher education “matter” (p. 2). Tinto maintains that educational communities “. . .

cross the borders of subjects and disciplines and advance the critical notion that we all learn better when we learn together” (p. 2).

Since the last decade of the 20th century, the goal of learning communities in colleges and universities has been to advance “collective knowledge” of students by supporting the development of individual student’s knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994). Research suggests that within this type of community, a culture of learning develops, whereby all students are part of the collective effort of learning in which discourse is the channel that students develop and discuss ideas. Through discussions reflections occur, and students raise and respond to questions, provide additional information, and form new ideas (Schofield, 1995). This form of discourse allows for both individual and collective comprehension.

A learning community involves a group of individuals with shared or common purposes, values, and goals. Peck (1993) defines a learning community as “a group whose members have made a commitment to communicating with one another on an even more deep and authentic level” (p. 23). Bickford and Wright (2006) assert that a successful learning community . . . “exists only when its members interact in a meaningful way that deepens their understanding of each other and leads to learning” (p. 4.2) According to Saragina (1999),

“Various kinds of individuals interacting in a common location for the purpose of gaining knowledge in, understanding of, or skill in a subject matter through instruction, study, and/or experience by the creation of a social state and condition that nurtures and encourages learners” (p. 2).

Learning communities within higher education are formed by individual faculty members. Levine Laufgraben and Shapiro (2004) highlighted the shared characteristics of successful learning communities. These include small classroom environments with facilitated discussion instead of larger lecture settings where students can become isolated. By engaging with each other through peer assignments and study groups, greater opportunities are provided for student-to-student interaction and student-to-instructor interaction (Jones, Laufgraben, & Morris, 2006). Also, subject-centered and student-centered discussions are promoted as a replacement for lectures (Brookfield, 1986, 2006, 2012; Palmer, 1998, 2002). Group projects and presentations that facilitated student-to-student collaboration and a sense of shared responsibility for the transmission of knowledge were recommended over papers and exams. Issues of mutuality and transformational learning tend to multiply as the development of learning communities grow across colleges and universities (Brookfield, 2012).

Virtual learning communities of the twenty-first century “interact in a common online environment” and build their knowledge through “interacting socially over a period of time” (Augar, Raitman, & Zhou, 2004, p. 302). Within the online course students “gain a sense of belonging and shared purpose” (Augar, et al., 2004, p. 302). Their research suggests that the interaction among students helps them feel connected and part of a community. These findings indicate that when students feel part of a group they construct new knowledge as well as gain a sense of purpose through active participation with each other (Augar et al., 2004).

Four criteria must be present for the virtual learning community to successfully evolve: social context, facilitation, technology, and shared goals (Rovai, 2002). With

respect to the first criterion, social context includes trust, interaction, and commonality of community expectations. In other words, the learners must be self-assured and confident enough to relate with others in the online course and develop relationships with classmates (Bonk, 2012; Rovai, 2002). Facilitation, the next criteria for successful virtual learning communities, is challenging to achieve yet vital for effective learning communities (Rovai, 2002). It involves assisting the learners as they work toward achieving their individual and shared goals (Justice & Jamieson, 1999; Kelsey & Plumb, 2004). Facilitation also allows a foundation to be established for the content-related part of a learning community and initiates the cultivation of positive mutual, interpersonal, and collaborative relationships (Cox, 2004). Guidance may require that one observes and assists with the conversational flow. Facilitation provides structure and guidance as needed and then fades back when members of the community begin to work in collaborative groups (Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Schwarz, 2002). Other studies show that shared community goals, the fourth criteria, are initially difficult to establish because not all students automatically have a goal to work in groups or participate in discussion forums. Therefore, motivating students becomes a concern (Bonk, 2012; Rovai, 2002). Nevertheless, when learners are committed to community goals they “. . . learn, grow, and develop in ways that individuals that are isolated from the learning community find difficult” (Christiansen & Ramadevi, 2002, p. 117). Shared goals form when a shared vision for the learning community is understood and experienced. By understanding collectively what the community will learn, what kinds of collaborations are possible, and how knowledge is constructed, students embrace shared goals (Augar et al., 2004). Finally, commitments to shared goals are embraced when students

comprehend the relevancy of what they are learning both in terms of the course content and their individual goals (Rovai, 2002). The third criteria, technology, involve a variety of platforms, including different tools used for social media. Ease of use and access has a positive impact on interaction within the virtual learning community (Hara & Kling, 1999; Bonk, 2012). According to the literature, the use of poorly designed virtual classrooms has resulted in unsuccessful use of online profiles and social media tools thus interfering with virtual learning community (Noddings 2005; Turkle 2005, 2012; Spender 1995). Turkle (2012) maintains that when used effectively new technologies provide a means of collaboration that increases online social presence, allows for facilitation and greater progress toward shared goals.

Learning communities within the context of university classrooms involve students from various backgrounds and cultures who may initially struggle with diversity (Karuppan & Baran, 2011; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2007). Stereotypes and discrimination compound these struggles that for some create barriers and oppression in the educational environment (Freire, 1965; Martin, 2011; Wood, 2012). However, with interpersonal and intercultural discourse students in learning communities may become more culturally aware, change assumptions and let go of stereotypes previously held (Martin, 2012; Wood, 2012). As a result of the interaction with learning communities, not only is knowledge gained, but cultural awareness increases as students' assumptions change and transform (Roland-Martin, 2007; Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Tinto, 2013; Wood, 2012).

With the rise of virtual learning in higher education, attention to interaction within virtual learning communities has emerged. Students “interact in a common

online environment” and build knowledge by “interacting socially over a period of time” with students from diverse backgrounds and cultures providing opportunity for students to “gain a sense of self, belonging, and shared purpose” (Augar, Raitman, & Zhou, 2004, p. 302). According to Turkle (2007), a professor and psychologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, virtual learning communities provide researchers with tremendous opportunities for exploring identity of those engaged in computer-mediated learning. In addition, the virtual learning community provides opportunity for awareness and developing students' identity through participation in virtual collaboration, a learning process of doing things together within the virtual environment (Trayner, Smith, & Bettonie, 2012). Also, social presence in online courses has been found to be fundamental to the virtual learning community (Garrison, 2009; Tu, 2002).

While research studies have investigated the nature of virtual learning communities in terms of identity development for the majority of students participating in virtual learning communities in their country of origin, there is a lack of understanding about how virtual learning communities facilitate identity development for international students whose cultures and linguistic backgrounds are different from their host country. According to Mead (1934), identity is constructed through interaction with others. Mead contends that interactions occur throughout one's life in many social contexts.

Virtual learning communities have provided a plethora of dialogical interactions in both social and educational contexts from which identity is explored (Turkle, 2007). International students from around the world participate in these learning communities

at an increasing rate and with greater frequency. Therefore, it is important to understand how identity develops for this group of students within the virtual learning community. According to Mead (1934), the self involves the “I” and the “Me” with each representing an aspect of oneself that occurs when one interacts with others in different social contexts (Mead, 1934). Research related to identity development for international students in the context of virtual learning communities has not occurred (Adams, 2013). Furthermore, no research was found that dealt with international student’s identity in relation to the development and changes of the “I” and “Me” in virtual learning communities. However, research reveals that 74% of those who register in the United States for Massive Open Online Courses, known as MOOCS, are international students (Kolowich, 2012). Even though the reported completion rates for international students in these courses range from 4.4% to 19.2 %, the initial participation indicates interest in virtual learning (Parr, 2013). While the increase of international students in these courses has been studied, the research focuses on retention, persistence, and course content not on student-to- student or student-to-instructor interactions or on student identity (Jordon, 2013). Emerging interest in understanding how and in what ways MOOCS attract and attempt to retain international participants has sparked dialogue about how universities in the United States can facilitate learning for international students who have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds other than English. International students studying at universities and colleges in the United States who are from different cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical traditions face challenges as they interact in a new culture, academic environment, and language (Curry & Copeman, 2005; Myles & Cheng, 2003). While inquiry has focused

on international students experiences in higher education courses in the United States in the traditional classroom environment; exploration involving international students' participation in university and college courses within virtual learning communities is needed (Trayner, Smith, & Bettonie, 2012). Furthermore, studies concerning identity development of international students who interact within virtual learning communities is also needed.

Problem Statement

International students, studying at universities and colleges grounded in different cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical traditions, face challenges as they adjust to a new culture, academic environment, and language (Curry & Copeman, 2005; Myles & Cheng, 2003). Perceived discrimination based on culture, nationality, race, and ethnicity negatively influences student engagement in the classroom and learning (Kobayashi, 2012; Jung & Hecht, 2008; Hecht, & Jung, Hecht, Wadsworth, 2008). Academic achievement for these international students also can be dependent on adaptation (Berry, 1997). When two or more cultural groups become involved in the learning process, the challenge of acculturation presents itself. Acculturation can be described best as the changes or adaptations that occur within the community of learners from different cultural backgrounds. It is important to note, however, that the dominant cultural group, in this case, domestic students, tend to adapt less than the international students in learning environments (Berry, 1997). With that said, for international students to learn effectively in a classroom with domestic students, both groups need to adapt (Hess & Mason, 2005). Furthermore, research reveals that international students who have English as a second language tend to feel less confident

communicating with their peers and instructors both in traditional academic settings and socially (Campbell, 2007). Lack of communication confidence can result in feelings of inadequacy, isolation from classmates, and inhibit their willingness to ask questions or express concerns with the instructors. In the traditional classroom, international students' sense of identity within the learning environment influences acculturation and learning (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). With the continual increase in enrollment of international students at universities and colleges in the United States, institutions of higher education are attempting to identify and address the unique challenges of this growing population (Deardroff, 2009). However, research on international students participating in higher education courses in the United States has focused on the traditional classroom environment and not on their participation in virtual learning communities. Research also has not focused on changes in identity that may occur for the international students in the virtual learning community.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how international students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds experience virtual learning communities in university and college courses. Specifically, this study will explore how and in what ways the students' identity in these communities is influenced by cultural factors, discourse through computer mediated communication with peers and instructors, and perceptions of learning. The research questions for this study are: (1) What are international students' experiences participating in virtual learning communities; and (2) how do international students' experiences in a virtual learning community influence their development of identity?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW ON BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Context of Virtual Learning Communities

A broad array of literature from various fields are reviewed to provide the background to this study concerning the context of virtual learning communities at colleges and universities in the United States. Virtual learning communities are examined in light of the context of learning communities as it intersects with issues of identity of international students with linguistic backgrounds other than English. Therefore, this chapter considers issues of sociocultural learning, discourse within learning communities, and digital literacy. The literature review does not involve the extensive scope of these areas. The intent of this review is to establish the context of virtual learning communities for international students

Social Context of a Virtual Learning Community

This portion of the literature review forms the social context of virtual learning communities in which international students participate. First, this section describes the growth of learning communities within higher education. In addition, this section explores the social aspects of virtual learning communities. Next, this review examines the sociocultural theory of learning and discourse within communities. Understanding these theories in learning communities is essential to understanding learning and discourse within the context of virtual learning communities. The review then turns to virtual learning trends. While the literature presented in this section of the review does

not pertain directly to international students, the literature is important to the context for identity development for international students within virtual learning communities.

Growth of Virtual Learning Communities

The literature revealed the continuous growth of online learning in higher education and the formation of virtual learning communities. Research revealed that 32% of university and college, more than 6.7 million students, take at least one online course (Allen & Seman, 2013). In fact, online learning has become an integral aspect of most institutions of higher education, globally. The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA, 2011) recognized that the success of online learning in higher education does not rest solely with the number of online courses offered and the students enrolled in these courses, but with the improved nature of online programs and the use of online learning communities across the university within courses and programs (Allen & Seman, 2013). Learning effectiveness in colleges and universities involved interaction, student-to-student interaction as well as student-to-instructor interaction (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

The literature revealed that many virtual learning communities created environments where diversity was not overtly apparent because of a lack of sophisticated online social networking tools and lack of cultural awareness (Hiltz, 2005). The literature reinforced that learners needed to embark on the journey of cultural awareness to become comfortable with culture and customs of those different than their own. Community members came together from different groups with different traditional customs outside the digital world as well as from separate groups

with different traditional cultural and ethnic groups within the digital world (Allen & Seman, 2013).

In 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning author Teresa Carpenter maintained that the book, *The Network Nation*, by Hiltz, S. R., and M. Turoff (1979) “. . . contained a fascinating vision. In it home computers are as common as the telephone. Computers linking person to person, shrinking, as the authors put it, “time and distance barriers among people, and between people and information, to near zero” (Carpenter, 1993, p.3). Reportedly, Hiltz (1979) conceived the idea of the book, *The Network Nation*. Then, in a collaborative effort with Turoff, explained the emerging phenomena of online learning. Their book was known as a perceptive, influential work on the emerging phenomena of online learning, and became a defining document and reference for computer-mediated communications. Hiltz and Turoff (1979) noted that, “although the medium seems inherently impersonal, there have been many cases observed or reported by the participants of the most intimate of exchanges taking place between persons who have never met face-to-face and probably never will (p 28).” With time and much resolve, Hiltz (2005) continued to maintain that virtual learning provides a platform whereby students are linked to one another, minimizing “. . . time and distance barriers, a place where thoughts are exchanged easily and democratically and intellect affords one more personal power than a pleasing appearance does. Minorities and women competed on equal terms with white males, and the elderly and handicapped were released from the confines of their infirmities to skim the electronic terrain as swiftly as anyone else” (Carpenter, 1997). Considering Hiltz and Turoff’s (1979) vision and observations of the virtual classroom, the online classroom could be viewed

through the lens of Dewey's philosophy where "the intermingling . . . of different races, differing religions, and unlike customs" can create a ". . . new and broader environment" (Dewey, 1916, p. 37). While a challenge, virtual learning could result in a meaningful interactive learning environment with recognition of cultural awareness and global interactions (Hiltz, 2005; Bonk, 2011). To understand better virtual learning communities, this literature review first examined aspects of social elements of learning communities and then turned to the sociocultural theory of learning in relation to identity. Next, the literature reviewed learning communities and discourse and their role in identity formation. Finally, the social context of virtual learning communities was reviewed in relation to discourse, trends, and identity.

Social Aspects of a Learning Community

Successful learning communities existed when students engaged in meaningful ways that enhanced students' understanding of the course material, of others and their own identity (Bickford & Wright, 2006). The use of learning communities at colleges and universities decreased isolation and engaged students with each other through class discussions, assignments, and study groups which heightened occasions for student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions (Jones, Laufgraben, & Morris, 2006). Furthermore, research asserted that as students participated in learning communities they engaged in significant identity development involving cultural awareness and acculturation.

Sociocultural Theory of Learning

While there are many learning theories, sociocultural learning theory related to this study because it involved interaction with others which according to Mead and

Erikson was essential for identity development. Vygotsky's theory of learning, based on both social and cultural interaction, was a primary theory of learning in the field of education especially in relation to identity. Vygotsky's theory included the basis of problem-based learning, cognitive apprenticeships, interaction, and use of language through dialogue; these are elements frequently incorporated in virtual learning communities.

Constructivist theory of learning. Constructivists asserted that individuals learn and understand from their environment. Vygotsky (1978) incorporated this belief into his sociocultural theory of learning by maintaining that social environments facilitate human development and learning. Vygotsky added that learners were also able to change their environment and create meaning from their experiences that influence consciousness. Vygotsky maintained that interaction with others and interaction with those from cultures other than their own “transform . . . experiences based upon their knowledge and characteristics and reorganize their mental structures” causing the meaning of concepts and ideas to change (Schunk, 2004, 294). Furthermore, Vygotsky contended that interactions with others in the learning environment “stimulate developmental processes and foster cognitive growth” (Schunk, 2004, 294). This was consistent with Mead's theory of identity development whereby change occurred through interaction. Vygotsky's theory was also consistent with the acculturation theory that explains the acculturation process where change occurred as individuals interact with others from the host country.

While Vygotsky discussed several factors in human development, the interaction between individuals was the most highly regarded and discussed among educators.

Vygotsky maintained that discourse that occurs in social interaction was essential and vital to the learning experience and contributed to knowledge that was “. . . co-constructed between two or more people” (Meece 2002 as in Schunk 2004, 295). The virtual learning community provided learners with opportunities to engage in inquiry and dialogue while permitting learning to occur, new insights to emerge, and perceptions to change (Garrison, 2002; Swan 2002; Bonk, 2009).

Interactive learning environment. Many contemporary learning theorists directly supported Vygotsky’s assertion that learning was a highly social experience that involves collaborative learning and interactive discourse. Schubert (1986, 2003), a curriculum specialist, supported a cooperative and collaborative learning environment that provided activities that encouraged dialogue. He maintained that this interactive learning environment allowed for rich learning experiences. Through active involvement in the learning process, Jerome Bruner (1986) proposed that individuals cognitively “use and exercise” the mind through interaction with others (p. 6). Elliot Eisner (1994, 1999, 2004) proposed that meaningful experiences are brought about through interactions using aesthetic tools which facilitates engagement with others, enhances conscious awareness, and allows for cognitive growth and development as well as personal identity. Many contemporary educators maintained that dialogue between students and students and their instructors reconstruct knowledge as well as facilitate social and personal identity development (Astin, 2002; Kolb, 2002; Martin, 2007; Maslow, 2007; Brookfield, 2004; and Palmer, 2005). These educators focused on the importance of the process of learning, which involved the value of interaction,

dialogue, and reflection on sociocultural experiences within the learning environment (Kolb, 1993, 2002; Maslow, 2007; Palmer, 2004).

Experiential learning theory and virtual learning. Vygotsky predated virtual learning, yet his theories were consistent with contemporary concepts of social and collaborative learning that occurs on the Internet and within virtual learning communities. Vygotsky knew that learning occurred socially and maximized in learning environments where peers were also involved in the learning process.

Vygotsky “viewed the cultural world as the source of development of higher mental functions” (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003, p. 214). Research revealed that those who are in virtual learning communities develop higher mental functions (Ebersol, 2003; Garrison, 2009; Jonassen, 2000). For example, students who was a participant in online learning communities through a course in higher education may enter the online environment with some computer experience and be accustomed to online interaction such as the use of emails, Facebook, and YouTube. However, students did not enter the virtual learning community with expectations of being socially aware, communicating their own reflections, or the degree to which they would engage with others online. In the online environment as part of the learning community, students discovered that they needed to make factual responses and encountered the need for reflective thinking, writing thoughts in an articulate, concise manner, and interacting with peers from different backgrounds, values, and cultures. Those who took the challenge to accomplish these things moved into what Vygotsky referred to as higher mental functions. These vital components of a learning community occurred through interaction with the content and each other (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). Likewise,

collaborative virtual tasks, reflection and dialogue were elements of Vygotsky's theory that promoted identity development and transformational growth and development (Mayer, 2001).

Interactive discourse. Continual interaction in the education environment is vital to the development of community. Dewey (1927) asserted that community members encourage "learners to be human" through interaction (Dewey, 1927, pp. 331-332). Dewey (1938) saw educational community interaction as continual and interactive. He contended that learners were empowered through interactive discourse as community members engaged in joint endeavors as they work, learn, and live. Dewey proposed that through continual interaction community members become committed to one another, and that commitment may enhance learning promoting the use of skills gained within the community to future situations. Christiansen and Ramadevi (2002) maintained that when learners are committed to a community they "learn, grow, and develop in ways that isolated individuals from the impossible" (Christiansen & Ramadevi, 2002, p. 117). Dewey (1934) suggested that the collective experiences of interactions within the community creates greater meaning over time as an awareness of others and the ability to make decisions about oneself increases.

Learning Community and Discourse

Discourse involves communication between two or more people through a variety of channels whether verbal or written (Woods, 2012). Dewey maintained that democratic education allows for full engagement and active dialogue. For Dewey, the foundation of democracy and education transpired through dialogue and discovering the

means to allow more individuals to contribute to problem-solving through discourse with others (1916).

Dewey maintained that discourse should not be considered simply as “self-expression” but an expression of one’s collective experience within a particular culture that contributes to understanding and insight (1934). Dewey contended that, “. . . all the members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters, educate other into slaves” (1916, pp. 97-98).

Lack of dialogue prohibits social interaction and may not only socially marginalize students but may also interfere with their learning efforts (Brookfield, 2004, Martin, 2007). Dewey maintained the importance of communication when stating “all communication is educative” (Dewey, 1916, p. 3). Failure to provide opportunity for discourse leads to social barriers that can corrode the value of the educational process by isolating students. Dewey claimed, “A separation into a privileged and a subject-class prevent social endosmosis. The evils, thereby, affecting the superior class was less material and less perceptible, but equally real” (Dewey, 1916, p. 98). In order to avoid isolation, Dewey (1916) advocated a “democratic ideal” (p. 100) that required open and free interchange between all members of a group. For this reason, an appreciation of the importance of dialogue and the multiple ways to provide opportunity for discourse from all students involved in a learning community is important.

Communication experts maintained that in order to engage in discourse we must understand the social environment and customs of individuals (Lucus, 2012; Wood,

2012). The medium in the online environment is digital, yet personal and used to facilitate dialogue which is vital to virtual learning community (Garrison, 1999; Ebersole, 2002).

Identity and Virtual Learning Communities. Virtual learning communities have also been the focus of research concerning identity development. Puddephatt (2005) contended that Mead's theory of identity contributes to the understanding of identity development and the used of the Internet by human communities (p. 358). (Mead's theory of identity is explored in detail in Chapter III, Literature Review of the Theoretical Framework) According to Puddephatt, individuals took the "role of objects and objectify their own action, and generated meaning through this ongoing dialectical relationship" within virtual communities (p. 372).

The literature revealed that collaboration and online engagement with course content as well as "non-subject-matter-specific discussion boards" contributed to the online learner's sense of identity and social presence by connecting with other students (Wood & Ebersole, 2003). This phenomenon has been reinforced by research concerning identity formation through virtual interaction with individuals' worldwide (Adrian, 2008). Researchers advocated that virtual communities gave individuals opportunity to explore their identity beyond what they explored in the real world in such a way that "the structure and design of virtual worlds allows its users to explore freely many facets of their personalities in ways that are not easily available to them in real life" (Cabiria, 2008,). According to Junglas, Johnson, Steel, Abraham, and Loughlin (2007) interaction in virtual communities provided opportunity for identity development: "In regards to the formation of an individual's identity in virtual worlds . .

. motivates such formation, may play a more dominant role than it does in the real world” (p. 94). A reason provided was that one’s identity could be more easily “self-defined” (Adrian, 2008, p. 367). Virtual communities gave individuals the ability to be free from stereotypes of friends and family and the pressure of social norms they confronted in face-to-face interactions (Adrian, 2008; Junglas et al., 2007). Recent studies of identity and online learning in the age of social media revealed that many shared the belief about the power one could have by virtually sharing their thoughts with others (Bonk, 2012; Ebersole, 2012; Turkle, 2012). According to Donath (1999) and Turkle (2005, 2012) virtual communication could have a significant impact on identity as experiences, beliefs, and values were expressed. Virtual learning communities facilitated by social networking provided an opportunity to share, engage, and find their sense of self as they engaged with others in an environment conducive to mutuality and learning (Bonk, 2011; Turkle, 2012).

In one study, a woman stated that she felt her identity was best reflected online because she was heard online unlike face-to-face discussions where she felt her voice was often lost to those who were less shy (Daine, 2011). She maintained that “a large part of my identity comes from my mind and heart – how I think and feel. [O]nline...I am able to express my thoughts and feelings, and people get to “hear” me speak from my true, inner voice” (Daine, 2011, p. 12). This woman continued to describe how being soft-spoken interfered with her participation in face-to-face discussions, but online she felt that she had the opportunity to share her ideas and her point of view became part of the discussion. Research revealed that this sentiment was shared by many individuals who when comparing their face-to-face participation in discussion to

an online discussion, felt that they become more themselves online (Bonk, 2012; Donath, 1999; Ebersole, 2012; Wood & Ebersole, 2003). Individuals who participated in the virtual communities also reported developing a greater sense of self which allowed them to have greater self-confidence, more autonomy, and ability to communicate more freely at other times (Ebersole, 2012; Woods, 2012).

Virtual learning trends. Digital technology was responsible for revolutionizing education. It increased continuity and participatory interactions along with innovation in the online learning environments. Curtis Bonk (2011) maintained that students engaged in learning communities not only experienced continuity and participatory interactions but came to expect continuity and participatory interactions. Bonk (2011) asserted that students anticipated virtual learning to allow for "... more democratic participation, continuity, and personalization." He claimed this had to do with "culture... as much as technology" (p. 53). Bonk (2011) claimed that the rapid movement toward a participatory learning culture has given rise to virtual learning communities. Bonk suggested that universities embrace virtual learning community to maximize learning potential and opportunities. Bonk (2011) proposed ten key learning trends in formal and informal education that are occurring globally in learning communities (pp. 49, 51). Among these trends there were five trends that relate to this research: 1) Increase in virtual learning communities, 2) increase in participation in open information communities, 3) virtual collaboration and interaction, 4) real-time mobility, and 5) networks of personalized learning (p. 51). These trends may be important to the identity and acculturation process of international students because each of these trends have potential to impact the nature and frequency of interaction with students and faculty.

For the purpose of this study when international students have an opportunity to interact in virtual learning communities, will the acculturation process be facilitated?

The first trend that relates to this research involves the increase in e-learning and blended courses from which many virtual communities evolve. Initially, writing papers and independent submission separated the learner by “time and distance” from the instructor and other students (Bonk, 2009, p. 91). Bonk (2011) depicted how “each wave” of technology forms a response by educators allowing greater instructor-student interaction as well as student-student interaction (p. 92). “From the printing press, telegraph, phonograph, radio, television, satellite, computers and now the Internet” education was transformed by new and different channels of delivery regardless of geographical location and time (Bonk, 2011, p. 91). Technology has provided flexibility so that learners are now capable of learning anytime and from anywhere. These benefits to learners have transformed learning and allows for virtual learning communities to form.

The second trend involved learner participation in open information communities as well as virtual learning communities for specific courses and organization. Bonk (2011) contended that more and more educative information is available to those who want to learn. The international student learner could move beyond transportation concerns, language barriers, and stereotypes to course content and the process of learning. Podcasting, wikis, and blogs provides tools that could be used by all members of the virtual learning community. Learning communities use of free and open software benefited many students by providing platforms for creativity, innovation, and sense of voice outside of cost, access, and transportation.

The third trend involved electronic collaboration and interaction. Bonk (2011) maintained that that the Internet has allowed the focus of education to move away from competition and toward collaboration and teamwork. Bonk (2011) contended that “. . . we have moved from working in silos to collaborative work teams” (Bonk, 2011, p. 249). Therefore, Bonk promoted virtual learning communities and asserted that interaction in virtual learning is vital to the education and contends that “. . . learning success is often dependent on communication, collaboration, and conversation (p. 249). Bonk speculated that online collaborative tools will multiply with time providing virtual learning communities with a surplus of ways to collaborate and interact.

The fourth trend included real-time mobility. Bonk (2011) declared that “With mobile devices, the educational event or activity follows the learner, instead of the learner having to arrive at a designated place. . . .” (p. 293). Bonk (2011) contended that this pervasive, continual access will allow for greater “learner participation” within communities rather than “learner consumption” (p. 267). This trend in itself multiplies opportunity for interaction with member of the virtual learning community.

The fifth trend involved networks of personalized learning. Bonk (2011) asserted that education has moved into a “networked information environment” has changed the culture of education (p. 51). Bonk (2012) maintained the following: “We have stepped into a new culture of learning where we assume radically new perspectives of ourselves as learners and what it means to participate in the learning process. The culture is now one of participation and personalization” (p. 327).

Students contributed to the learning process rather than being consumers. In virtual learning communities, students have the ability to collect, create, and share

information as part of engaged learning community members. Bonk maintained that in virtual learning communities “learners participate” and are not passive learners, but rather active learners engaged with the process of learning and change (p. 328).

For international students, research concerning what virtual learning communities may provide is lacking. Educators speculate that virtual learning communities provide flexibility of learning anytime, anywhere decreasing certain barriers that international students may experience in university courses. The edifice of virtual learning provides learners with solutions to environmental barrier as related to transportation, control over time change, and pace of learning new material in a language other than their own as well as certain communication barriers related to participation; however, it is unknown if these benefits are helpful for international students in a host country.

Digital literacy. Digital literacy involves specialized language in a virtual environment and is an integral part of the social process. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) maintained that digital literacy involves “...changing ways of producing, distributing, exchanging and receiving” information through “electronic means” (p. 16). Digital literacy represents a person’s ability to effectively receive, produce, and communicate information in a digital environment and includes the ability to read and interpret text, audio, and images as well as the ability to assess and apply new knowledge. Jones-Kavallier (2006) contended that digital literacy “depends on understanding the multiple media that makes up high-tech reality and developing the skills to use them effectively” (p. 8). Digital literacy also pertains to the social interaction within online teaching and learning. Generation Tech interacts in many virtual communities. However, many other

people lack digital literacy in learning communities which tends to impede communication with others in the learning community. Digital literacy establishes the foundation for successful facilitation of virtual learning communities. Advances in computer-mediated technology as well as virtual learning communities have created an environment for individuals with varied digital literacy skills. Studies suggested that instructors and students alike expect each other to be digitally literate when participating in a virtual learning community; however, research revealed many who join or lead virtual learning communities are not digitally literate especially with advanced technologies for computer-mediated communication and social media tools (Bonk, 2012). This situation was increasingly problematic because some students were more digitally literate with social media than the community facilitator or instructor. In addition, while international students may be digitally literate using technology in their country, they may lack understanding of specific technology tools in their host country. When members are unaware of others' level of digital literacy, difficulty in communication may occur creating differences or lags in responsiveness. As a result, communication barriers may form. However, effective virtual learning communities provided a "homogenous and balanced environment" (Bonk, 2012). Dewey (1930) maintained the importance of communication and stated that "all communication is educative" (p. 6). In this quote, Dewey suggested that all who engage in communication have an experience or interaction that is meaningful. In education, the desire of communication is for a positive interaction that leads to learning, growth and development. With this in mind because of the social nature of virtual learning communities, faculty and students need to communicate effectively with those in the

learning community. Effective communication in virtual learning communities involves digital literacy. Therefore, the balance of digital literacy in the twenty-first century classroom must be redressed to create an interactive learning community with varying degrees of digital literacy.

Digital native and digital immigrant. Digital native and digital immigrant are two terms that relate to digital literacy (Prensky, 2001, 2011). Digital native, is one who was born into the digital age and accustomed to the use of computers, the Internet, and virtual communication because it was always part of their life and education (Jones, et al., 2010). A digital immigrant is someone who implements the technology later in life and had to learn how to use computers, the Internet, and computer mediated communication (Jones, et al., 2010). Prensky (2011) and others maintained that an individual may be a digital native, yet lack digital literacy in the virtual learning community if technology was not used for education or communication purposes (Jones & Shao, 2011). Research indicated that students who are digital natives may “speak an entirely new language” than educators and other adult learners in the community (Prensky, 2011). Therefore in learning communities, digital natives often help digital immigrants learn digital literacy (Prensky, 2011). As a result, with time, dialogue within a community increased as digital natives became more digitally literate. International students may enter a learning community and also be a digital immigrant who may increase the communication barrier. On the other hand, international students may be digital natives, yet may also experience communication barriers if others in the community are digital immigrants (Prensky, 2011).

Embracing the Digital Culture with Virtual Learning Communities

Universities across the United States, as well as globally, are being encouraged to embrace virtual learning communities. Bonk (2011) maintained that we can no longer neglect the opportunity to use virtual learning communities as educational agents in online teaching and learning. The virtual environment utilized its own language, and further relies on variations of communication in different online contexts whether in asynchronous or synchronous chat, blogs or any number of online participatory tools. Bonk (2011) asserted that higher education must be willing and prepared to bring students together from not only different groups with different traditional customs within the digital world, but also from separate groups with different traditional customs within the digital world to participate in joint activity in virtual learning communities.

The culture of virtual learning communities with goals and critical thinking. For those who have only had limited access to or experience using the internet and digital technology such as websites, blogs, and chats, the culture created by this technology can be somewhat alien. In many respects, computer/digital technologies are a culture with unique boundaries, rules, customs, rituals, and even language. One realm of technology can be a digital culture within what Dewey (1916) referred to as the “cultural whole” (p. 34). Virtual learning communities embody one such culture. Today, the language of social media and online learning communities is pervasive, complex, and interactive, yet, necessary for effective and meaningful interaction (Bonk, 2011).

The digital culture of virtual learning communities is a culture unto itself bound to two cultural wholes; one may need to make both an internal and external culture

crossing. If one was not digitally literate, they may experience an external culture crossing when moving to the virtual learning environment. Because education is a culture unto itself, an internal culture crossing may occur as virtual interactions shift to a learning environment with community learning goals and activities (Bonk, 2009). According to Giroux (2012), the most critical aspect of the digital culture is the ability to use critical thought about what is viewed or exchanged online. As the community becomes immersed in online interactions in multiple ways, critical thinking should become more prevalent within the community (Giroux, 2002). Jones-Kavallier (2006) concurred with this viewpoint, stating that digital literacy presents “another realm with which to apply elements of critical thinking (p. 9).

Digital culture for international students. For international students, the digital culture adds a third element to the culture crossing they are already experiencing within their process of acculturation. Two strategies that helped international students with navigating two cultures can also help with virtual culture crossing. These strategies included strategies for language and social support. Communication is crucial to the adjustment process, and language acquisition is fundamental in effective communication (Wood, 2012). This communication is an important tool for social interaction and retrieving information in daily life. Understanding and speaking the language of others in the learning community can provide opportunity through greater communication (Yeh Okubo, Ma, Shea, Ou, & Pituc, 2008). Research revealed that understanding and using the language of the learning community can positively influence self-esteem. Research also revealed that by increasing social support, there is an increase in communication opportunities (Yeh et al., 2008). Also, research indicated

a negative correlation between interaction with others in the community and sociocultural adjustment problems. In other words, the more interaction an international student has with others in the learning community; the less the international student experiences adjustment problems (Sam & Berry, 2006).

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL LENS FOR THE STUDY

This chapter explores the literature concerning the theoretical framework of symbolic interaction, social presence, and identity development including aspects of acculturation. Symbolic interaction is used throughout the study as the guiding framework to understand the identity development of international students in virtual learning communities. While symbolic interaction can include participant observations as a way to study interactions and the identity of individuals (Blumer, 1969), this study does not include observations. Instead, the use of symbolic interaction for this study considers conversational interactions as described by individuals in relation to their sense of self and their “I-Me” identity. Specifically, this review addresses symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1986) and aspects of social presence theory (Garrison, 2006), identity development theory (Mead, 1934), and acculturations theories (Berry, 2004) to form the context for how students view themselves in virtual learning communities.

Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interaction addresses identity and “I-Me” interactions. Herbert Blumer (1986), influenced by Mead’s (1964) theory of identity and “I-Me” interactions, presents a distinction between the “I” and “Me.” In other words, Blumer (1986, 2004) distinguished between how one sees oneself and how one is perceived by others. Blumer contended that internal conversations occur that involve questions such as “What should I say? How does this look? Will this be funny? Will I look stupid?” Blumer identifies this self-talk as an ongoing dialogue between the “I” and the “Me.” To engage in the conversation, one must take the position of another person as though

they were looking at themselves through their eyes. The response to the questions, then in turn shapes how one interacts with another (Blumer, 1969, 2004).

Principles of Symbolic Interaction: Meaning, Language, and Thought

According to Mead (1964), three concepts are central to interaction: Meaning, language, and thought. First, meaning involves an individual's act toward people according to the meanings. Symbolic Interactionism places meaning as the fundamental aspect of all interactions with others. Interactions between a person and others occur with respect to anticipated responses (Blumer, 1969; Mann, 2008). The interpreted meaning of how one responds depends upon what the action may mean for future interactions. Second, language provides the symbolic means to negotiate meaning. Through discourse, individuals communicate meaning (Calvin, 1986). The interaction involves dynamic verbal exchanges, in which one rehearses the possible responses of the other (Blumer, 2004). Third, thought modifies the interpretation of the communication. Interaction requires an individual to consider various points of views to interpret the social environment; therefore, an action is thoughtfully selected and remains intentional rather than reactionary (Blumer, 2004; Mann, 2008). Griffin (1997) refers to the "looking glass self" whereby the self is formed by the interpreted viewpoint of other (p. 23). With each of these three principles, a person forms an interpretation to imagine how they appear to others. The interpretations are used to predict expectations of others and to explain one's status or role.

Symbolic interaction and community. The core principles of symbolic interaction give rise to an interactive community where responses and expectations are derived from interactions within the community (Mead, 1969). In other words,

thoughts of community members are shaped by the social interactions and the conversations that are part of the interactions. The meaning results from critical thought concerning the interaction. The meanings derived from the forms of communication provide the basis for specific action and interaction. Modifications of the meanings come from the interactions within the community. These modifications occur through the interpretation of interactions. Modifications also occur because individuals interact with themselves to make interpretations for future interactions. The individual gives meaning to social interactions, responds based on these meanings, and revises the meanings to guide their future action. The individual uses their internal conversation to determine the meanings of the interactions by questioning oneself about how others will respond (Snow, 2002).

Interaction, social structure, and identity. Sheldon Stryker (1989) concurred with Blumer's theory of symbolic interaction whereby social behaviors are constructed by symbols and their meaning and are carried out in social interactions. However, Stryker (1991) maintained that interactions do not necessarily sustain existing forms of interactions within groups because the content of the interaction can change based upon different types of social structures, expectations, and commitment. Identity change is dependent upon the type of social structure of the interaction. The structure can be closed and rigid or open and flexible (Stryker, Serpe, & Hunt, 2005). When interacting with others these two structures may impose limits or allow possibilities depending upon the social structure in which the interaction occurs. Stryker (1994) maintained that one's identity is related to the positions individuals occupy within various social contexts. Different social contexts allow for changes in identity because of the roles that

an individual plays within the social structures. Therefore, identity forms a vital connection between the individual and social structure. In addition, the social structure plays an important role in the interactions that occur in a community. Consequently, the social structure of the community influences the identity of the community members (Stryker & Serpe, 1994).

Identity and social structure of community. Identity is capable of change; however, change relates to the social structure of the community. Stryker (2004) also contended that when interactive situations are flexible and isolated from a rigid social structure, individuals have more options in terms of identity. However, when a social structure is rigid, the changes in identity are limited when interacting with others. Stryker maintains that commitment provides the link between social structure and identity (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Commitment involves how relationships to others depend on one's identity. When an individual reveals commitment to an identity within a social structure of a community, one's sense of self becomes dependent on the successful portrayal of one's of identity (Stryker, Serpe, & Hunt, 2005). With identity tied to specific values, beliefs, and traditions, self-esteem becomes dependent on the successful implementation of an identity. In this way, cultural expectations impact identity. As a result, the social structure that has specific norm and traditions limits interaction and change of identity. If the social structure is flexible, the opportunity to change identities is more available; however, change is dependent upon the level of commitment to one's social structure (Stryker, Serpe, & Hunt, 2005). At the same time, different social structures allow one to develop multiple identities (Stryker, 2000, 2004).

Identity and disclosing stigmas in virtual communities. Erving Goffman (1963) considered how the self is shaped through concepts used in dramatic performance. The central theme describes techniques individuals use to maintain specific images when interacting with others. These techniques involve concealing certain things from others. To manage identity, issues of stigma are addressed. Goffman (1963) contends stigmas occur when there is a gap or breach between a person's perceived identity and actual identity. Goffman (1963) maintains that one's social identity and actual identity includes these gaps. Two forms of stigma are identified: Discredited stigmas and discreditable stigmas. Discredited stigmas include stigmas that are apparent to others without disclosure such as the loss of a leg. Discreditable stigmas involve stigmas others are unaware unless disclosed. According to Goffman (1963), everyone possesses stigma. However, in virtual communities, most discredited stigmas must be disclosed for others to be aware of the stigma.

Use of front and back stage. Goffman (1963) also used terms from the theater to discuss social interactions used to hide or disclose stigmas. The terms used are front stage, personal front, setting, appearance, manner, and back stage. According to Goffman, fronts are consciously selected rather than created. Personal fronts entail appearance or expressions and communicate what one expects to be in a particular situation. The "back stage" is where actors engage in informal actions that are suppressed when on "front stage."

Two options for presenting ourselves to others encompass the two concepts of "front stage" and "back stage." "Front stage" option infers one is "on" for others. The "back stage" option is chosen when one wants to reveal more than is revealed on the

front stage. In terms of ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage,’ many social media and instructional technologies allow for multiple conversations with multiple parties to occur at the same time. Therefore, it is not complicated to create multiple “back stages” that are invisible to other participants. In fact, the “invisible mode” is an option for learning management systems as well as other social media sites. The “invisible mode” allows users to disappear from “front stage” while they continue to interact “back stage.” “Back stages” can include links open to only those allowed in a specific stage. This “back stage” access reveals different aspects of one’s identity including personal details that may expose a “stigma” that are not revealed to the entire community.

Symbolic Interaction and Transactional Analysis

One form of symbolic interaction uses transactional analysis to examine and improve the conversation between individuals (Berne, 1964, Wood, 2012). It involves a model concerning how two people communicate. The model proposes that verbal communication is the core to all interactions. According to this model, when individuals communicate a *transaction* occurs. Berne (1964) contends that individuals play roles in transactions. He categorizes these roles as parent, child, or adult roles.

The parent role can assume two forms: The nurturing parent and the critical parent. The nurturing parent communicates with care whereas the critical parent communicates with control and criticism. The adult role involves the “ideal self” and communicates with reason and assertiveness without aggression. The child role consists of three types: Adaptive child, the little professor, and the natural child. The adaptive child makes changes to fit in. The little professor displays curiosity. The natural child is playful and open to suggestions often unaware of others’ viewpoints (Berne, 1964).

Many problems are identified as unsuccessful transactions when two people communicate at different levels. Problems occur with *cross transactions* such as adult to child, parent to child, parent to adult. Transactions are considered successful when *complementary transactions* occur such as when both individuals communicate adult to adult or parent to parent. Berne (1964) also contends that individuals have internal conversations with themselves such as adult to adult (Wood, 2012).

Symbolic Interaction also provides a theoretical lens, whereby individuals construct themselves through continuous transactions (Ford, 2009). It focuses on the process of understanding interactions within a community by studying the transactions that occur. Researchers use this theory to consider how participants interpret interactions with others and how these transactions impact identity. As a result, symbolic interactionism is linked to transactional analysis within qualitative research designs (Ford, 2009). The major assumption of symbolic interactionism pertains to how individuals act on the basis of their interpretations of transactions. Denzin (2005) emphasizes the reflective nature of interactions and how individuals reflect on transactions that occur with others.

The concept of social presence is also crucial to understanding how symbolic interaction works as a theoretical framework since social presence is essential for transactions to occur (Ford & Vaughn, 2011). As a result, for the purpose of this study, the social context of identity development within the virtual learning communities, identities are explored through the interpretive lens of symbolic interaction. The role of social presence is also considered in relation to international students' experiences in virtual learning communities as well as how international students' experiences

influence their development of identity.

Social Presence and Virtual Transactions

Social presence consists of the “the ability of participants to identify with the students in the course of study, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of protecting their individual personalities” (Garrison, 2009, p. 96). Social presence includes a sense of community and is reliant upon the continuation of social presence through transactions that occur within the community (Ford, 2009). In fact, the sense of social presence directly relates to students’ virtual learning (Swan, 2003). It is viewed as a “level of awareness of the co-presence of another human-being or human Open communication consists of reciprocal and respectful exchanges. Group cohesion denotes a sense of group commitment as they engage in online activities. Group cohesion also refers to a sense of belonging. Intelligence” (Biocca & Nowak, 2001, p. 28). Garrison (2000) defined social presence within the virtual learning community as students’ ability “to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people” (p. 94). According to Picciano (2002) social presence consists of student’s perceptions of being in and belonging to an online community. Three categories of social presence include expression of emotion, open communication, and group cohesion (Garrison et al., 2000). Emotional expression includes humor and self-disclosure. Open communication consists of reciprocal and respectful exchanges. Group cohesion denotes a sense of group commitment as they engage in online activities. Group cohesion also refers to a sense of belonging. Garrison and colleagues (2000) maintain that students feel comfortable interacting with each other. Therefore, social presence is vital for the virtual learning community of learners.

While extensive research reveals that social presence through expression of emotions, open communication, and group cohesion helps explain students' virtual interactions and discourse (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison, 2009; Swan, 2003; Tu & McIsaac, 2002), research does not focus specifically on social presence for international students in their virtual learning communities. The assumption is that social presence facilitates interaction, which in turn supports identity development for all students (Adams, 2013; Ford, 2009). Though it appears social presence has been explored in relation to international students, the conclusions were generalized to international students from samples where no distinction was made between international students and non-international students. Hence, specific exploration of how international students perceive social presence or reflect identity within a virtual learning community is lacking.

Community of Inquiry. The awareness for the need for a sense of community with feelings of belonging and interaction for online learning has given rise to the study of social presence in virtual learning communities (Garrison, 2009). A community of inquiry encompasses a community of learners who interact with each other to construct meaning and understanding. Research shows that a variety of virtual platforms for communication prompts an increase in student-to-student and student- to-teacher interaction (Garrison, 2009). Research findings have indicated a positive relation between number of communication platforms and interaction as well as interaction and learning. Further studies have supported that effective use of instructional technology for communication purposes leads to learning that is interactive within virtual learning communities (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

The Community of Inquiry as a theoretical framework denotes a multilayered process of creating complex yet meaningful collaborative learning experiences through three interrelated elements of presence that occurs in online transactions in virtual learning. The three elements involve the social, cognitive, and teaching. Each presence is interrelated and contributes to the educational experience. *Social presence* involves the “the ability of participants to identify with the students in the course of study, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships. . .” (Garrison, 2009, p. 78). More specifically, in the model, social presence is defined as “the ability of participants in the community of inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to others as real people” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). *Teaching Presence* involves the “design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, 54). Social presence of the instructors was seen as essential for teaching presence to occur (Garrison, 2009). Garrison and others have found that cognitive presence encompasses “. . . the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2011, 57). According to the Community of Inquiry Model, an element of social presence resides within teaching and cognitive and is critical to the transactions that occur in the virtual learning environment.

Importance of social presence to identity. The social presence aspect of this model involves the ability of virtual learners to depict personal characteristics to the virtual community environment in such a way that they reveal themselves as 'real

people' (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2011). The use of pictures in the profile provides the first opportunity to reveal themselves. A second opportunity frequently presents itself with initial discussion forums where students introduce themselves to other members of the learning community. Informal discussion forums or chat rooms can become additional places where community members can engage each other outside of required discussion forums. Some instructors provide "cyber cafes" to provide opportunities for social presence (Ebersole, 2012, p. 34). Research suggests that "non-subject-matter-specific discussion boards" contribute to social presence and an online learner's sense of identity by connecting with others (Woods & Ebersole, 2003; Ebersole, 2012). Likewise, Akyol, Garrison, and Ozden (2009) assert that social presence is important to students because they have the opportunity "to share ideas, to express views, and to collaborate" (p. 76).

Importance of social presence to understanding. In their research on virtual learning environments, Garrison and colleagues (2011) have pointed out the relationship between social presence and the occurrence or development of cognitive presence and teaching presence. Social presence occurs with online chats that create a pattern of conversation in synchronous discussions within a community of virtual learners (Stein, Wanstreet, Glazer, Engle, Harris, Johnston, Simons, & Trinko, 2007). Stein and colleagues (2007) found patterns among virtual learners that involve familiarizing themselves through social presence and positioning themselves to understand subject content. Individual students expressed that meaning occurred as each person contributed to the dialogue. Students expressed that as they saw the text within the chat and responded to it in real time through questions, they gained increased

understanding. This study concluded that group exploration through online chat enabled shared understanding (Stein et al., 2007).

Importance of social presence in discussion forums. Social transactions that occur in online discussion forums give rise to social presence and cognitive acquisition (Garrison, 2009). Akyol & Garrison (2011) maintained that cognition is not simply an isolated, internal mental activity but involves social interaction. The purpose of their research involved assessing metacognition in online discussions. The results revealed evidence of metacognition indicators in discussion postings. The frequency of discussion posting increased over time as students continued the discourse with others in the virtual community (Akyol & Garrison, 2011). Akyol and Garrison (2011) and other studies suggested that as community of learners engage with each other through the discussion forum they gain new knowledge and understanding (Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2003; Garrison, 2007).

Importance of social presence to critical thinking. A study, Archibald (2010) research found that engaging in online discussion promoted students' knowledge and facilitates critical thinking. A quantitative study using multiple regression analysis predicted the effects of social presence and the social aspect of teaching presences on the development of cognitive presence. In addition, hierarchical multiple regression assessed the ability of the teaching presence and the social presence in predicting the cognitive presence, after controlling for self-directed learning readiness, prior online learning experience, and prior collaborative learning experience. Qualitative data was later collected from online course transcripts and interviews that supported the quantitative findings. Discourse among community members was further assessed using

content analysis. The study revealed that teaching and social presence explained approximately 69% of cognitive presence. Both teaching and social presence continued to make significant contributions to cognitive presence. Critical discourse research also revealed that the collaborative learning experience, the social interaction motivated students to engage in dialogue, to maintain interest, and increased understanding (Richardson & Swan, 2003). As correlational design study including 2000 students found correlations that corresponded with the socio-cognitive literature that learning is a social activity involving discourse and that individual learn more from their interactions with others than from reading course material (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Importance of social presence to student persistence. Research on Community of Inquiry Model confirms that online learners choose to join learning virtual communities in the future because of the social connections that occurred within the prior communities with other learners. A study explored the relationship between the three elements of the Community of Inquiry Framework and student persistence. The analysis of over 28,000 student records and survey data of online students revealed that re-enrollment in other virtual learning communities was accounted for by indicators of social presence (Boston, Diaz, Gibson, Ice, Richardson, & Swan, 2009).

Social presence and the role of immediacy. Social presence allows a sense of community to develop (Ford, 2009). Various studies have demonstrated the importance of immediacy in creating a greater sense of social presence and eventually community among learners (LaRose & Whitten, 2000; Ford, 2009). Larose and Whitten (2000) developed a model for online learning that incorporated instructor, student, and computer immediacy. This model provides a social cognitive framework, which

included three frameworks of immediacy for online learning. Immediacy from three sources helps students feel a sense of belonging and helped outsiders feel like insiders. The three sources of immediacy involve: 1) Instructor immediacy, the interactions between instructor and students 2) Student immediacy, interactions between students and 3) Computer immediacy, interactions with the computer system that delivers the course. These three sources of immediacy form “instructional immediacy” (LaRose & Whitten, 2000, p. 336). When instructional immediacy occurs, lack of belonging is reduced (Eberson, 2012). Eberson and his colleagues found use of instructional immediacy gives rise to social presence and facilitates the development of identity in a virtual learning community. However, the research concerning instructional immediacy and whether or not it facilitates the development of identity for international students has not been studied. Therefore, the question remains if instructional immediacy reduces a lack of belonging.

Social presence and the role of Netiquette. Use of Netiquette enhances positive social presence in the virtual learning communities. Netiquette involves linkage between the Internet and etiquette. Emily Post (1922) wrote that “Etiquette must . . . include ethics as well as manners and essential to one’s decent behavior, just as clothing is essential to one’s decent appearance” Etiquette is described as behaviors prescribed by society that are required in social or professional settings. In other words, etiquette involves a set of rules for behaving and interacting properly. Likewise, Netiquette involves a set of cultural rules for behaving and interacting properly online (Turkle, 2012; Wood, 2012).

Rules of Netiquette. Rules of Netiquette and the explanations of the rules

provide a set of general guidelines for virtual behavior within virtual learning communities. In terms of etiquette it has been observed that "Rules of good behavior have been built up over hundreds of years; worthless ones are continually being discarded and those proven to be useful are kept and improved upon" (Post, 1967). However, rules of Netiquette for virtual learning communities are fairly recent. They involve an emerging culture, and currently there are certain rules that have come to the forefront and are considered to be best practice in virtual learning communities today (Shea, 2012). While the rules do not cover every virtual learning community, they do provide basic principles for use (Ebersole, 2012). Thus, Netiquette rules may vary from one virtual learning community to the next, and rules for one culture may be different for another culture. Nevertheless, establishing Netiquette rules in virtual learning communities is encouraged (Shea, 2004). Simply assuming that the rules are previously known by all members of the community can result in misunderstandings and create communication barriers (Shea, 2004; Turkle, 2012). Leh (2001) and others found that safe, mutual interaction occurs when leaders of virtual learning communities establish and model rules of Netiquette and virtual community members understand and interact in ways that are consistent with Netiquette guidelines (Bonk, 2012, Ebersole, 2012; Filipovic 2007; Turkle, 2012).

International students and use of Netiquette. Each culture operates under a system of rules that may not be explicitly stated but are expected and enforced all the same. When in a new culture, unless one knows the rules, one will more than likely say or do something that is misunderstood or stands out as offensive or inappropriate offending others within the culture without intending to offend anyone. Even when an

individual is fluent in a language other than their own, understanding communication in a virtual environment involves its own cultural understanding. For all participants, the rules on the Internet are inherently unlike those of everyday life because the Internet presents a unique environment where nonverbal communication is not present (Wood, 2012). The nonverbal signals of gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and laughter are absent. These nonverbal signals help inform our understanding of others (Lucas, 2011). Research on international students and the use of Netiquette has not been conducted; however, there is research on the impact of culture and communication on student interaction in online courses. While the relationship between culture and Netiquette does not specifically pertain to international students, it is possible that the lack of Netiquette may present unique challenges for international students in virtual learning communities. Moreover, when Netiquette issues are presented and adopted by the community rather than assumed, the international student's ability to interact may be enhanced.

Identity Development

This section of the theoretical framework examines identity development as a lens to understand how and in what ways the international students' identity in virtual learning communities is influenced. Research has found that identity changes when two cultures come into contact (Berry, 2004). These changes may be the result of the process referred to as acculturation. Acculturation is defined as the complex interaction between these two cultures in which changes occur (Gibson, 2001; Hernandez, Cohen, & Garcia, 2007). Because the change occurred during the acculturation process, acculturation impacted identity (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2013).

The assumption is that an individual's identity changes as they interact with people from cultural and social influences different from their own identity (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007; Schwartz et. al., 2010, 2013). This interaction and its consequences on individuals has been studied in sociological, psychological, and anthropological fields (Berry, 2003; 2006; Castro, 2003; Padilla, 1980). An understanding of these issues is essential to understand how international students' identity is impacted when they participate in a virtual learning communities. This review begins with identity development as described by Mead (1934) and continues with identity development of international students based up acculturation and ethnic identity theories.

Identity in Relation to International Students

According to Mead (1934), identity developed in relation to the "I" and "Me" and was constructed through interaction with others over time. Mead contended that interactions occur throughout one's life in many contexts including social and educational contexts. The twenty-first century has given rise to the context of virtual learning communities for identity development. It provides opportunities for a plethora of dialogical interactions in both social and educational contexts from which identity can be explored (Turkle, 2007). International students from around the world participate in these learning communities at an increasing rate and with greater frequency. As a result, cultural identity development for international students is vital to understanding identity development in virtual learning communities; however, there is limited research concerning identity development for international students in virtual learning communities.

Identity Development throughout the Lifespan

“I-Me” Identity development is viewed as stages of personal thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that relate to others and oneself occurring over the lifespan (Mead, 1934; Erikson, 1959). Mead (1934), a philosopher and social theorist, is best known for the study of the nature of the self. He maintained that the self is essentially social and cognitive and begins and develops as one interacts with others. Mead went on to explain that self occurs in relationship to specific “generalized others” and is referred to as “Me” (Mead, 1934). Generalized others “reflects the shared values, experiences, and understanding of the particular society or social group” (Wood, 2012, p. 49). Mead identified the “I” and “Me” as phases of the self whereby “The two are separated in the process, but they belong together in the sense of being parts of a whole” (Mead, 1962, p. 178).

The “Me” functions as an object holding a mediating role within an experience or action and the “I” functions as the “self in the disintegration and reconstruction of its universe,” and the “Me” functions as the “the point of immediacy that must exist within a mediated process” (Mead, 1964, p. 166). According to Mead, the self is not only a “Me” but is also an “I” since each self is unique with respect to responsiveness that occurs as one interacts with others in one’s community. Mead (1962) contended that “There is a demand, a constant demand, to realize one’s self” (p. 205). Therefore, each individual is a product of society or in Mead’s terminology, each person’s identity is a product of “social construction” (p. 206). For example, a person brings their “I” into every interaction. In addition, with each interaction, a person has the perception of the other person’s “Me” (Mead, 1934, 1967). The response to the other person’s “Me”

forms a new “I” as a result of the interaction. This response is identified as a “creative response” (Mead, 1967, p. 197). As a result, identity change occurs allowing a new identity to emerge (Mead, 1934). In relation to international students studying in a virtual learning community, this literature is important: Will a student’s “creative response” to other students’ “Me” forms a new “I” as a result of the interaction that occurs? Applying Mead’s theory to the international student’s interactions in virtual learning communities, one would expect the student’s identity to change as part of the creative response allowing a new identity to emerge as interaction with other students occurs. However, the new identity that appears to emerge for international students as they engage in a learning community in the host country has not been researched.

Mead asserted that the self is not an essential core but is constructed by society through interactions. Once constructed, the self, in turn, joins the process of constructing society. According to Berger & Luckmann (1966) this social interaction is a “dialectical operation” and is fundamental to the development of the self (p. 162). Through this social interaction, one begins to understand and take on the perspective of others. Mead (1982) identified this as an “emergent property” and explained that “We are conscious of our attitudes because they are responsible for the changes in conduct of other individuals” (p. 348). According to Mead, individuals come to know themselves through interactions with others. She claimed that interactions influence the development of the self through reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the ability to place oneself into the place of others and mirror how they act. In other words, reflexivity involves the ability to “walk in someone’s shoes.” This expression implies that patience and open-mindedness of others are how the self develops. Accordingly, the self emerges

through the social experiences of “walking in someone else’s shoes.” The "I" is the immediate response of an individual to another. It involves the unpredictable and creative part of the self as one mirrors another. The "Me" then becomes the set of attitudes of others that is incorporated into the self. This process is how society governs the individual self and remains the basis of social control of values, beliefs, and traditions.

Based upon Mead’s theory, the international student’s “I” consists of the response to the other student in the learning community, and the “Me” becomes a set of attitudes of others within their leaning community. While there has been research concerning immigrants’ and minorities’ identity development (Berry, 1980, 2006; Castro, 2003), studies exploring the “I-Me” for international students is scarce and pertains to younger K-12 students who have English as a second language instead of university students who study in the host country for a period of time.

Identity and stages of development. Mead (1934) credited the development of the self as a process that involves specific stages that every person experiences. The initial stage focus the *preparatory stage*, whereby imitation occurs. The next stage involves the *play stage*. This stage focuses on assuming the role of another person. The third stage encompasses the *game stage* where one considers several roles at the same time and how those roles interact with each other. At this stage, one learns to understand interactions involving a variety of individuals performing diverse activities, and takes on these roles. Finally, one understands and learns the idea of the “*generalized other*” which involves the behavioral expectations of society (Wood, 2012). At this stage of development, an individual considers how they are viewed by

others; it is at this point one has a sense of “self” (Mead, 1934; Mead, 1964).

Stages of acculturation are studied through the stages of acculturation for international students. Considerable research has been conducted concerning the identity of international students as part of acculturation. When two cultures come into contact, such as an international student with university students and faculty from the host country, the process of acculturation occurs. It is the complex interaction between new cultures in which changes occur (Gibson, 2001; Hernandez, Cohen, and Garcia, 2007). Due to the change that occurs during this process, For the purpose of this study, acculturation impacts one’s sense of self (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, 2013). An individual’s identity changes as s/he interacts with people from cultural and social settings different from their own identity (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007; Schwartz et. al, 2010, 2013). For the purpose of this study, the interaction was between international students, their identity, and interactions they experienced in virtual learning communities in their host country. As a result, an understanding of acculturation and ethnical identity were essential to recognizing how identity is impacted.

Acculturation and Ethnic Identity

The term acculturation originated with anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth- century the definition was broadened due to the immense amount of migration that was occurring. By the 1930s and throughout the twentieth-century researchers in psychology, anthropology, and sociology conducted extensive research on acculturation. In addition, the fields of economics, education, linguistics, communication, and technology contributed to the body of research on acculturation

(Castro, 2003). Within these fields, specific researchers made distinctions, deconstructing acculturation based upon the nature of acculturation at both the individual level and societal level. As a result theoretical models of acculturation were developed and refined as researchers learned more from the numerous studies conducted within and across fields of study (Berry, 1980, 2006; Tadmor, Tetlock, & Peng, 2009). In the twenty-first century research on acculturation continued to broaden focusing on reasons for immigrating, specific groups of people, changes in identity, and specific types of interactions. Acculturation as related to an ever-increasing cross-cultural society is identified as one of the most essential issues for applied research (Rudmin, 2009). This portion of the literature review explores the definitions and models of acculturation and then examines what the literature reveals concerning acculturation related to identity, education and learning communities. Specifically, this literature review draws from the vast knowledge of information concerning the meaning and strategies of acculturation to better understand how and in what ways the international students' identity in virtual learning communities is influenced by acculturation through discourse with participants using computer-mediated communication and interaction. To understand how the international students' identities in virtual learning communities are influenced, these acculturation issues are explored.

Defining acculturation. Simply described, acculturation involves the process whereby the member of one cultural group identity changes as one adopts the beliefs and behaviors of another group while retaining aspects of their own cultural group (Berry, 2006). Acculturation involves the cultural interaction between an individual from one country with individuals in a new host country to which the person has

immigrated (Castro, 2003). More specifically, acculturation is described as the process of cultural and psychological change of one's identity as the result of the interaction between cultures (Schwartz et al., 2010, 2013). Berry defined acculturation as "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). J.W. Powell (1877) was the first to coin the term acculturation. He later reported to the United States Bureau of American Ethnography on acculturation changes that were occurring in Native American languages (Powell, 1880). Powell (1880) asserts that acculturation refers "to the psychological changes induced by cross-culture imitation" (p. 4). Powell also stated that acculturation occurs in antagonistic societies with domination of one cultural group and the oppression of the other as with Native Americans. W. J. McGee (1898), an anthropologist also at the Bureau of American Ethnology, maintained that "Human development is essentially social, and may be measured by the degree in which devices and ideas are interchanged and fertilized in the process of transfer..." (p. 243). In essence, McGee identified acculturation as the processes of exchange and mutual improvement.

Powell along with many others believed acculturation did not have to involve interaction between antagonistic cultures. Berry identified four categories of individuals who move to other countries: asylum seekers, refugees, voluntary immigrants, and sojourners. *Asylum seekers* include individuals who seek sanctuary in a new country due to fear of violence, oppression or power related to political or religious reasons. *Refugees* include individuals displaced by events outside of their control such as the effects of natural disasters or war. (The refugees are relocated to a new country often

with the assistance of governmental agreements and international agencies). *Voluntary immigrants* include those who leave their home country by choice for economic opportunities, cultural opportunities, employment, marriage, or to reunite with family members who immigrated at an earlier time. *Sojourners* refer to individuals who relocate to a new country for defined time and purpose. (Sojourners relocate with the intention of returning to their home countries at the end of a designated time.) They include international students who come to study at colleges and universities of the host country. For the purpose of this literature review, we will explore acculturation for all immigrants but then turn to sojourners, specifically as related to international students.

Process of acculturation. Acculturation is described as a two-way process of change. First, enculturation consists of cultural learning that includes observation and understanding. The second phase of the process includes acculturation in which identity conflict begins to occur when the individual from the minority culture begins the process of assimilation, displacing their own culture with the host groups' culture (Schwartz et. al, 2010, 2012). Acculturation has also been identified as cultural learning that encompasses the capacity to function with a different culture while retaining one's own culture but not without a struggle with one's sense of self (Weinreich, 2009).

A novelist described acculturation in relation to research for her novels as a "relationship between the self and the place they were transported which leads to a "crisis of identity" (Kanal, 2008, p. 50). It is the ability to function in one society, trying to retain important aspects of one's own culture while confronted with the adoption of new beliefs, values, and practices. Kanal stated that the crisis of identity resembles

Erikson's (1968) description of an identity crisis that occurs as the result of identity development as one interacts with others. In relation to this study, acculturation would then involve the identity crisis one might experience due to adjustments and changes an international student makes through the relationships that occur while studying in the host country.

Acculturation Models

McGee (1897) was the first to describe types of acculturation. He identified martial, commercial, and educational acculturation. Martial acculturation w exchange of weapons and religious symbols; whereas, commercial acculturation refers to an “exchange of goods” and educational acculturation referred to an “exchange of ideas and technology production” while marital acculturation includes cross-cultural marriages (pp. 244-249). McGee's categories were the first of many conceptual models; however, his categories served as the foundation for additional research. Therefore, McGee's models of acculturation are essential to understanding the body of research concerning acculturation.

Uni-dimensional model of acculturation. The models of acculturation were divided into two theoretical positions. The first position refers to one of the earliest view of acculturation, which involves a person entering a new culture and ultimately assimilating the customs of the new culture and reflecting the new culture's beliefs and values. The goal of this uni-dimensional model of acculturation is assimilation. The uni-dimensional model of acculturation often is referred to as the “melting pot society” in which the new or host society is embraced as one surrenders their traditional culture. According to the uni-dimensional model assimilation and acculturation are essentially

the same. This position includes adopting the more dominant customs and values of the host country.

Bi-modal Model of Acculturation. The other branch of acculturation is the bi-modal conceptualization. A primary bi-modal model involves John Berry's (2003) concept of acculturation strategies (Castro, 2003). Berry (2003) formulated a fourfold model that sorts acculturation strategies along two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the preservation or rejection of an individual's native culture. The second dimension concerned the acceptance or rejection of the host culture. From these two dimensions, Berry presented four acculturation strategies: Assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. *Assimilation* consists of the process of the acculturating and forgoing ones traditional customs to immerse in the culture of the host country. *Separation* occurs when one seeks to maintain their cultures and traditions and avoid interacting with the host culture or activities. *Integration* strategy explains a balance between assimilation and separation as a medium in which the migrant maintains their traditional culture but also actively engages in activities and traditions of the host culture. *Marginalization* includes the migrant's disregard for maintaining their own culture as well as engaging in the host culture. Marginalization occurs as a result of failed opportunities at assimilation or experiencing discrimination in the host culture. Research revealed that the integration strategy best facilitates adaptation and indicated that marginalization is the least adaptive strategy (Barry, 2006). Assimilation and separation are regarded as transitional strategies. Research also suggests that an individual's acculturation strategy may shift depending upon who is present (Castro, 2003). For example, an international student may utilize the separation strategy

rejecting the values and norms of the dominant culture when with other students from their own country; whereas, a student appears to use the integration or assimilation by adapting to the cultural practices in the host country when in communities that do not include individuals from their own culture. (Castro, 2003).

Acculturation and Ethnic Identity as Facet of Identity Development

Ethnicity is a central facet of the acculturation process whereby identity development occurs as the result of the cultural change. Ethnicity refers to a relationship with a specific group who shares a particular set of cultural traditions, values, and beliefs (Phinney, 1996). During the last decade of the twentieth-century and into the twenty-first century research emerged concerning ethnic identity and how it pertains to one's sense of self and the acculturation process (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Initially, ethnic identity two aspects *exploration* and *affirmation* of one's ethnic identity after living in a new culture (Phinney, 1990). Later, researchers considered the idea of *resolution* as a third aspect (Umaña-Taylor, Yazadjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004). Exploration refers to the extent that one explores what their ethnic group means at a very personal level. One may have an ethnic identity when they are residing within their culture. Once the sojourner lives within a new culture or in the host country, they explore their ethnic identity again at times in more depth. Affirmation of ethnic identity pertains to the values and attachment one feels to their ethnic group. Resolution involves what one's ethnic group means to the individual following the process of exploration and affirmation. In the process, the sojourner begins to experience conflict and confusion regarding loyalty to his/her cultural group as well as personal preferences and autonomy in relation to the host culture's values and cultural practices. During the

resolution phase of ethnic identity, the individual resolves personal preferences and autonomy given their experiences with both cultures. Internal identity conflict is most profound, as one struggles to find a balance based on personal desires, values, needs, and aspirations. This struggle can lead to either a positive or negative ethnic identity. Studies reveal a positive correlation between ethnic identity and resolution. That is, when resolution occurs, ethnic identity, after being in the host country for a period of time, is associated greater self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, & Guimond, 2009). Resolution has also been associated with a sense of well-being which contributes to a positive sense of self (Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2009). Other studies have found that when resolution does not occur within the ethnical identity process for refugees and asylum seekers, negative psychological and social behaviors emerge such as over-use of drugs and alcohol and sexual risk taking (Bruce & Waelde, 2008; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007). When resolution does not occur for the voluntary immigrants and sojourners, a sense of dissatisfaction with the host country emerges as a longing for their home county increases. Ultimately, the sojourner may return to his/her own culture earlier than anticipated. They may also immerse themselves with their own cultural communities in the host country choosing not to participate in events and activities with those from the country. When this occurs for international students, studies show that poor grades, sporadic attendance, and difficulty functioning in school can result (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002). Continuous difficulty also occurs with communication and establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships with peers and faculty as well as difficulty with resolving conflicts (Woods, 2012). Consequently, there is a higher incidence of not completing university courses and leaving the host

country before completing their education.

Acculturation Stress

As a result of changes due to living in a new culture, international students encounter stress that involves difficulties adjusting to life in a new country. These difficulties are identified as acculturation stressors (Mori, 2000; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008). The stressors are identified as language, educational, sociocultural. Other stressors include discrimination and racism that may be experienced in the host country (Dao et al., 2007). Language is identified as a major acculturation stress because it can create barriers concerning communication about housing and transportation needs and safety or health issues (Zang & Goodson, 2011). As a result, language stressor correlates with education and social stressors. Language barriers also interfere with academic success because of the impact language differences have on understanding instructors, lectures, written and oral directions. Language barriers also impact written and oral exams (Mori, 2012). Adjustment problems were associated with low academic performance among international students with low levels of English proficiency (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Duru & Poyrazli, 2007). This finding was consistent with other research showing a relationship between English proficiency and academic performance for international students (Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Socially, language barriers made it difficult to make friends and establish other important relationships (Zang & Goodson, 2011). English competency of international students was a predictor of their adjustment, which included ability to relate to others (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, and Pisecco, 2002).

Discrimination and racism have also been experienced as acculturation stressors.

International students often report significant discrimination. As a result, students reported feelings of fear and inferiority from verbal insults and physical assault (Lee & Rice, 2007). Students from Africa, Asia, India, and the Middle East report being treated differently than domestic students or to European students (Hanassab, 2006; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Students reported that experiences of discrimination and racism lead to depression, anxiety and feelings of marginalization (Atri, Sharma, & Cottrell, 2006; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007). In addition, experiencing discrimination discouraged international students from trusting others and building relationships in the host country (Mori, 2000).

Community and Acculturative Stress. Research has shown that community provided social support as a variable that can decrease acculturative stress and aid adaptation (Berry, 2006; Safdar, Lay, & Struthers, 2006). Also, social support in learning communities decreases acculturative stress and lack of engagement in the learning community (Arends-Toth & van de Vijver, 2006; Woods, 2012). Other research suggested that there is a protective effect of social support from the community on issues related to acculturative stress. Yeh and Inose (2003) sampled 359 international students in universities in the United States. Their findings revealed that international students who experienced positive social connections with university students and faculty demonstrated lower acculturative stress. These research results were consistent with studies demonstrating a negative association between lack of social support and acculturative stress (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004; Sumer, et al., 2008; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). High levels of acculturative stress were correlated with little social support. Lower levels of

acculturative stress occurred when the international student experienced greater social support. Studies also found a positive association with psychological well-being (Atri, et al., 2006). As social support within a community increased so did an international student's sense of well-being. Research also showed that international students utilized a variety of social support sources (Sawir et al., 2008). Initially, students drew on support from family in their home country; however, Sawir and colleagues argued that this was not adequate support. In fact, the study revealed 65% of international students who had experienced isolation and did not engage in community interaction developed additional barriers when attempting to make friends or interact with faculty at the university. This finding was compared to 36% of those who had positive community interactions and who did not experience difficulty socializing with other peers and faculty (Sawir, et al., 2008). The study suggests that interaction with faculty and peers at the host university were important in reducing loneliness and overall success at the university.

Summary of the Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework involves the process of understanding interactions within a community by studying the transactions that occur. Researchers use this theory to explore interactions with others and to explain how these transactions impact identity. Therefore, this study drew on the theoretical lens of symbolic interaction to explore: (1) What are international students' experiences participating in virtual learning communities and (2) How do international students' experiences in a virtual learning community influence their development of identity. The major assumption of symbolic interaction pertained to how individuals responded

to interactions according to their interpretations of transactions. Within the social context of virtual learning communities, a limited form of symbolic interaction was used for the purpose of analysis to examine students' identity and guides the analysis through the theoretical lens of social presence, Mead's identity development theory of "I-Me" and theories of acculturation. I used symbolic interaction to consider how the international students in this study interpreted interactions with others in virtual learning communities and how these transactions impacted their identity development.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative research approach for this study involved Interpretivism as a form of meaning-making to explore international students' experiences in virtual learning communities in university and college courses. Interpretivism involves the study of experience through the conscious description of lived experiences (Denzin, 2013). Interpretivism describes individual's experiences from the point of view of that person. In other words, Interpretivism explores everyday experience from the point of view of the individual who experienced (Denzin, 2007). Interpretivism claims to achieve meaning about the nature of one's consciousness, an intimate form of self-awareness and identity (Denzin, 2005). Interpretivism also addresses the meaning of lived experiences, particularly, the meaning of events, interactions, and occasions as well as the self as experienced in life-events (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). Experiences require careful descriptions of participants' perceptions, memories, decisions, feelings, judgments, as well as their actions, sense of self, intention in action, reflections, interpretations, and social interactions (Schwandt, 2005).

Interpretivism maintains three major ideas. First, individual experiences are meaningful. Second, researchers are capable of exploring life events, and that it is possible to study individuals' experiences in an objective manner. Finally, the researcher is also able to reconstruct the meaning of the individual's experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Symbolic Interaction Lens

Drawing from Mead's (1934) theory of identity, Blumer (1969, 2004) developed the theory of symbolic interactionism. The purpose of this interpretive research is not to simply identify the behaviors of the actors or describe the contexts, but to examine the process that takes place and the meanings of the actions of those individuals involved within the social context. This interpretive use of symbolic interaction strives for meaning-making by understanding the multiple layers of interactions that occur within the social context represented by the actions and the interpretations of those involved.

According to Blumer (1969), symbolic interactions take place in response to others' actions and in relation to others' actions. Interactions involve a process that occurs within the social context. In addition, interactions consist of the social context. As a result, the interactions are responsive and creative; therefore, the context occurs from past interactions and futures interactions. Because reflexive relationships exist between context and interaction, the interaction cannot be separated from the social context. Therefore, for this study the actions involves the symbolic interactions that occur in the social context of a virtual learning community. This research explored both the international students' actions and their interpretations of their actions as well as the meaning or interpretation of the actions within a virtual learning community.

The lens of symbolic interaction was used to understand the identity of international students in a virtual learning community. The inquiry included the following questions: How to students view themselves in the virtual learning community? How did students renegotiate their identity in response to others in the virtual learning community? How do they revise their own self perceptions? In other

words, when considering the “I,” how did students view themselves in the virtual learning community? When considering the “Me,” how did students renegotiate their identity in response to the view of others in the virtual learning community to form their new “I” by revising their own sense of self?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how international students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds experience virtual learning communities in university and college courses. The research questions for this study were: (1) What were international students’ experiences participating in virtual learning communities; and (2) How did international students’ experiences in a virtual learning community influence their development of identity?

Therefore, I explored the experiences of international students in virtual learning communities in courses in higher education who have participated in virtual learning communities. I analyzed the experiences through the interpretive lens of symbolic interaction to understand the experience of students in the virtual learning community through inquiry and meaning making (Ford, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln 2005, 2010; Guba & Lincoln 1994). Therefore, through the lens of symbolic interaction and by way of emergent design, I considered how students viewed themselves in virtual learning communities. I also considered how students changed their identity in response to transactions in the virtual learning communities. In other words, I considered how students revised their sense of self.

Protocol of the Study

Characteristics of the sample population. Participants were undergraduate international university students who have a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and have completed at least two courses delivered online within the last year. The students who participated in this study ranged from age eighteen to thirty and were from ten different countries. At the time of the study, the twelve students had been studying in the U.S. for one to three years (See Appendix A).

Sampling procedure. The sampling procedure involved purposeful sampling. International students enrolled within the last year in at least two courses that were delivered online that use multiple forms of student-student and student-instructor methods of computer-mediated communication as a form of interaction will be asked to participate. The courses had to meet specific criteria to qualify as a virtual learning community. First, to be a virtual learning community, the course had to meet criteria of a virtual learning community as discussed in Chapter I. The criteria included: Social context, facilitation, technology, and shared goals (Rovai, 2002).

First, the technology criteria required that the courses were delivered online using a learning management system (LMS) that included multiple forms of interaction as part of the LMS. Next, the course had to have a social context that provided opportunity for interaction among the community members. As a result, the virtual learning communities were designed with multiple modes of interaction. The modes of communication that were required were a course profile, weekly discussions, chat, and email. Rosters for the course were also required with emails available to the community. Some students also identified additional Q&A discussions and “cyber café”

forum. Online courses that were used for delivery of content with dropboxes for submission but without discussion forums or discussions that were optional did not qualify as virtual learning communities. In addition, to be considered a virtual learning community, the course had to be taught by a facilitator. That required that the instructor was intended to be an active participant in the learning process and not simply the designated grader. Finally, in order to be considered a virtual learning community rather than simply an online course, the students had to have shared goals. Shared goals were required instead of individual goals. The nature of the online course was described and confirmed before students were accepted as participants. Students responded to questions concerning virtual learning community criteria used in the online course before they were selected to participate in the study and signed the consent form.

Recruiting participants. Students from specific courses from colleges of Arts and Sciences, Liberal Arts, Business, and Education in universities were included as participants. Recruitment for this study included students who responded to recruitment fliers as well as students who heard about the study by word of mouth from other international students. The students were from a variety of universities and departments within a metro area in the Midwest. Students that were selected had taken at least two courses delivered online. Use of at least one discussion per week was required with a minimum of five posts per week. Twelve undergraduate international students who have various linguistic and cultural backgrounds volunteered to participate in this study.

Method of Inquiry

The primary intention for the use of Interpretivism within scope of this study was to allow each participant to express their experiences from their own unique

perspectives without influence from others; therefore, the method of data collection included in-depth interviews. Each interview was individual and not shared with other participating in the study. The specific method of inquiry involved semi-structured in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). With each interview I attempted to understand the students' point of view and elicit details and examples that illustrated the students' experiences within a virtual learning community. Open-ended questions (See Appendix B) were used as a part of a general plan of inquiry to provide participants opportunity to describe and explain experiences involving their virtual learning communities. I paid close attention to participants' comments with a focus on the specific context in which the students lived to understand the social, ethnic, and cultural environment of the participants.

Interview settings. The interviews consisted of traditional, in-person, face-to-face interview setting and face-to-face interviews by way of computer mediated communication such as Skype or Facetime (See Appendix B). The use of computer mediated technology is known as Internet inquiry (Markham & Baym, 2009). Internet inquiry was used to follow-up on previous interviews (Mann & Stewart, 2000). For the purpose of this study, after asking the participant to provide demographic information, I began a traditional face-to-face interviews to establish rapport and initiate the interview with open-ended questions. These questions were followed by naturally occurring questions to elicit information and details (Newton, 2012). Following the face-to-face interview, use of Internet inquiry was be used to gain further comments from the participants had the opportunity for reflection concerning their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and ideas concerning their experience within their virtual learning community

(Jones, 1999; Johns, Chen, & Hall, 2004; Hine, 2005; Mann & Stewart, 2000). The location for the initial face-to-face interview involved a mutually agreed upon location conducive to conversation and privacy.

Data collection. Research data was collected through a two-part interview process. First, demographics were discussed in terms of the student's culture, ethnicity, and education. Then, each respective participant was asked to describe their experience in at least two virtual learning communities. The descriptions students provided were important because they helped “. . . reveal new questions” (Boyd, 2009, p. 29) regarding the students' experience within the virtual learning community as related to their identity, learning, and discourse. The interpretations students provided regarding their interactions with others were also of value because it provided insight into the students' identity. Students were asked to provide examples of specific interactions within the virtual learning community. The interviews focused on students' responses to how discourse occurred within the virtual learning community through various computer-mediated communication, and how their experiences influenced their identity within the virtual learning community.

Based on the interpretive nature of symbolic interaction as a methodology, the goal of the interviews was to trust the participants' perception, understanding, and insight regarding the experiences that were addressed in relation to the research questions. Rubin and Rubin (2012) maintain that through in-depth interviews “. . . researchers explore in detail the experiences motives and opinion of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own” (p. 3). This is consistent with symbolic interaction idea that interpretation is often done using “looking glass self”

whereby the self is formed by the interpreted viewpoint of other (Griffin, 1997). With the three principles of symbolic interaction, meaning, language, and thought, each person forms an interpretation to imagine how they appear to others. The interpretations are to provide a “the definition of the situation” and are used to predict expectations of others and to explain one’s role, the stigmas, and the definition of the self.

The structures of the questions were broad so that the research participants can express the meaning as it relates to personal experiences and reflections. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to express themselves without restrictions and allowed the researcher opportunity to listen carefully to participants. The meaning is idiosyncratic and often the personal subjective meanings occur from the context of social, cultural or historical experiences. Because of this, I paid particular attention to participants’ comments with focus on the specific context of the students’ social, ethnic, and cultural environment (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Types of interview questions. The questions involved three types of questions: Main questions, probing questions, and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, pp. 6, 131, 149). The main questions opened the research terrain and identified relevant issues concerning the different aspects of the research questions. These main questions were used to focus the student’s thoughts on particular topics or concepts related to the research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, pp. 131-148). The probing questions were used to widen the perspective for a rich description of details or and context (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Probes elicited examples and details and encouraged the participants to continue talking (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, pp. 138-148). The students responded to the main questions and probes about their experience in the

virtual learning community that then shaped subsequent follow-up questions. The follow-up questions were used throughout the initial interview and during possible subsequent discussions. The follow-up questions were used to elicit continuation, clarification, elaboration, and exploration (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, pp. 149-170). (See Appendix B)

Responsive, semi-structured interviews. The semi-structures nature of the interview pertained to the structure of the overall in-depth interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Prepared main questions consisted of relevant questions that related to distinct aspects of the research questions that relate to the participants' experiences with the virtual learning community and their perceived identity and identity changes within the learning community. Prepared questions were used as a guide, but these questions were asked in the interview when the researcher believed it was appropriate to inquire. In addition, probes and follow-up questions were asked when they were appropriate to the flow and content of the participants' responses and description of experiences within the virtual learning community (Creswell, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The semi-structured interviews involved responsive interviewing techniques (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Responsive interviewing allowed for flexibility to occur within the interview whereby the researcher “. . . changes[s] questions in response to what he or she is learning. Responsive interviewing accepts and adjusts . . .” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 7). Responsive interviewing helps bring forth information that may have been unspoken and contributes to a greater depth. According to Rubin & Rubin (2012), responsive interviewing is “. . . gentle and cooperative, feels respectful, and is ethical” (p. 7). The flexible nature of responsive interviewing provided an excellent format for

the in-depth interviews in which a variety of values, personalities, cultures, and ethnicities were involved. The responsive interview was also consistent with the symbolic interaction and the importance of dialogue to constructing meaning (Blumer, 2004). Mead (1934) contends that dialogue is fundamental to interaction and understanding one's identity. Through the responsive nature of the interviews, participants described experiences through which I identify the "I" and the "Me" as described by Mead (1934, 1967).

As a result, the meaning of students' experiences in the virtual learning communities came from students' interpretation of their experiences. The meaning they communicated regarding their identity revealed the "I" and The "Me" and the process of change with the virtual identity as part of their virtual learning communities. The interview process also navigated students' through the thought processes through which students made sense of their identity online in relation its meaning, the language and the interpretation of interactions within the virtual learning community (Blumer, 2004).

Process of Analysis

Qualitative analysis was initiated with the interviews and continued throughout a multi-phase process. Stake claimed that "there is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to the first impressions as well as to the final compilations" (p. 71). I began the analysis process as listened to students' experiences that were relayed through the interviews. As I engaged with the students through the interview process, I asked questions, listened, and made note of information that students shared. The process of analysis was continued with the reading and review of the transcriptions and through the reflective inquiry of the information within the

transcriptions. The transcripts, audio recordings and notes taken during the interviews were then used to craft the vignettes of each participant. Next, I engaged in a process of coding and theming the transcripts and vignettes. From this process, themes and subthemes emerged. Finally, emerging patterns were apparent and were considered through the lens of the theoretical framework. Following is a description of the progressive nature of the analysis.

Transcriptions and reflections. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions provided verbatim quotes in context. I studied and reflected upon used the transcribed interviews to understand the meaning of what the students described in their interviews. Seidman (1998) contends that researchers must ask: What have I learned from doing the interviews, studying the transcripts, marking and labeling them, crafting profiles, and organizing categories of excerpts? What connective threads are there among the experiences of the participants they interviewed? How did the students interpret and explain these connections? What do the students understand now that they did not understand before they began the interviews? What surprises did they have? What confirmations of did they have? How have the interviews been consistent with the literature? How inconsistent? How did the interviews go beyond the literature? (Seidman, 1998, pp. 110-111). These were the questions, I asked as I reviewed the transcripts of the students' interviews.

Findings. Vignettes were written to define the context from the participants' perception and experiences action in context to be explored (Barter & Reynolds, 1999; 2001; Renold, 2002). Vignettes can be used to define participants' situations in their own terms (Finch, 1987; Ford & Vaughn, 2012). In this study, I used vignettes as

textual description to convey a textual snapshot of the participants. The vignettes provided written snapshots to help explore the experiences of the international students. This method was chosen to develop a sense of the participants' identity, culture, and learning experiences as online students and how they perceived themselves in their virtual learning community as well as any changes they experienced.

When writing the vignettes, I listened to the interview, re-read the transcript, and reflected upon my notes. The purpose of my writing was to portray the participant as they described themselves. I first described the demographic information. For these vignettes, I include the student's pseudonym, their gender, age, country of origin. I also included information concerning their major and classification. I also included their religion if they included it as part of their identity. I then portrayed the student according to how they described themselves. I described what they valued and what they wanted. I also described any frustrations or concerns they shared about themselves and/or their interactions with others. Then, I conveyed their thoughts and ideas about their experiences in online learning communities. Specifically, I described how they viewed their interactions with others and their sense of self in the virtual community

Coding and theming the findings. I used the transcribed interviews to identify the "I" and detect the "Me" within the students' description of themselves and within students' experiences with the virtual learning community. Using symbolic interaction as a theoretical lens, "I"- "Me" to guide the data analysis, themes emerged from the transcriptions. The "I" consisted of how the students viewed themselves. As a result their "I" was all the student told me about themselves. The "Me" consisted of how they view themselves through their interactions with another person. In other words, the

“Me” consisted of how the student renegotiate their identity in response to how others viewed them in the virtual learning community. Their new “I” emerged by revising their sense of self.

Themes and sub-themes were also drawn from the vignettes to reveal the patterns among the students’ responses to consider the “I,” how students view themselves in the virtual learning community and the “Me,” how students renegotiate their identity in response to the view of others in the virtual learning community to form their new “I” by revising their own sense of self.

The interpretive nature of the study permitted meaning to be derived from the students’ experiences, comments, and interpretations of their experiences in virtual learning communities. Dimensions and categories of experiences were then organized into subthemes. A recursive process of constant comparison was used to generate new subthemes or move information to themes already developed. I made every attempt to portray the participants’ experiences and reflect their identity in the virtual learning community with accuracy through rigorous analysis that involved sorting, classifying, and arranging the qualitative information gathered in this study to identify themes and develop sub-themes. The recursive nature of my analysis continued with my persistent consideration until the themes and sub-themes appeared to capture the true nature of the students’ experiences.

Analysis of emerging patterns: Use of theory. Once the themes and subthemes were developed, emerging patterns in the data were analyzed according to theory triangulation (Gall & Borg, 2002, Denzin & Guba, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2006). This process allowed the data to be analyzed through multiple lenses (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2005). The interpretive framework of this study drew first from the theory of symbolic interaction. Consequently, the interpretive framework of symbolic interactions allowed me to analyze the findings through the lenses of social presence, identity development, and acculturation. This permitted me to focus on the importance of social presence to the students' identity development, especially to their virtual "I-Me." Through the use of multiple theories, I also gained insight into how and in ways students' identity development and acculturation experiences were impacted by barriers and stressors they experienced in virtual learning communities.

Strengths and Limitation of Methods

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) research involves valid and reliable knowledge collected and presented in an ethical manner. In qualitative research, instead of internal and external validity as vital issues to consider, consistency and conformability are considered (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2002; Denzin, 2012). Merriam contends that internal validity of a study considers the "question of how one's findings match reality" (Merriam, 1991, p. 166). To "match reality," Merriam asserts that the qualitative researcher address issues of trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness in a qualitative study is enhanced with credibility and objectivity. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) maintain that value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality enhance trustworthiness. Trustworthiness of findings is dependent on demonstrating how the interpretation was reached. Guba and Lincoln (2001) identify "credibility as the interpretive parallel to validity" (p. 72). Because of this, to increase the credibility I implemented strategies of peer debriefing, member checks, and triangulation (Merriam, 1991). Reliability is traditionally associated with

positivistic research (Creswell, 2005). As a result, Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that with qualitative research researchers focus on “dependability or consistency of results” rather than reliability (p. 288). I employed several strategies suggested by multiple experts (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, 2001, 2007; Denzin, 2005, 2008; Merriam, 1991) to facilitate the dependability of study results. One strategy involved stating my position including my assumptions and my “I” and the “Me” within the interview and interpretive phase of the research. The second strategy involved discussing the use of multiple data collection and analysis methods with colleagues. The third strategy involved audit trails that clearly identified how decisions and conclusions were made in the study.

Minimizing threats to trustworthiness. Trustworthiness does not simply occur; it requires conscious awareness and deliberate actions on the part of the researcher. Trustworthiness involves capturing the phenomena of the study by revealing the experiences of the research participants. Threats to trustworthiness occur when the phenomena is not effectively depicted. Researcher biases, respondent bias, and reactivity are several reasons the phenomena are not adequately described (Guba & Lincoln, 2001).

Researcher bias occurs when the researcher’s judgments and perceptions influence the observations and interpretation of findings. Multiple interviews were used to avoid the threat of distorting data by asking follow-up questions for clarification, explanation, and exploration. Peer review and participant review were utilized to ensure that I did not misinterpret students’ experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Respondent bias transpires when participants withhold information or do not tell the truth. To reduce participants' desire to mask information or provide distorted information, participants were assured anonymity and the ability to withdraw from the study upon request. My aim was to establish rapport and trust with participants to put them at ease and encourage openness.

Reactivity refers to participants' tendency to react due to the presence of the researcher. To reduce this tendency, I was sensitive to the timing of questions in the interview and to when and how best to ask probing and follow-up questions. I also provided opportunity for students to clarify, expand, and or explain any aspect of their interviews through follow-up questions in the initial interview as well as the follow-up discussions.

Locating the researcher. One unexpected but important factor concerning trustworthiness was my established reputation and credibility among the local international student community. Since I am known and well respected in the international student community, international students in the area recognized my name and had feeling of trust prior to the interviews. As a result, students from an array of countries volunteered to participate in the study. In addition, the students and I were able to establish rapport with greater ease and students were comfortable discussing their experiences in virtual learning communities.

Furthermore, to maintain appropriate focus and position in relation to the participants and data, I recurrently reexamined the question: "What is the purpose of this study?" I focused attention to the meaning of the observations and experiences communicated during the interviews. The meaning that students made of their

experiences continually propelled my observations and inquiry I was mindful of my actions, my comments, and their consequences and was straightforward and transparent by providing a sincere account of interactions including notes pertaining to my interactions with the participants.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS: VIGNETTES, THEMES, AND SUB-THEMES

This study explored how international students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds experience virtual learning communities in university and college courses. Specifically, this study aimed to illuminate how and in what ways the students' identity in these virtual learning communities was influenced by cultural factors, discourse through computer mediated communication with peers and instructors and perceptions. From the perspective of twelve international undergraduate students with a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds other than English, this study explored the following questions: 1) What are international students' experiences participating in virtual learning communities? 2) How do international students' experiences in a virtual learning community influence their development of identity?

The findings revealed how and in what ways students' identity in virtual learning communities were influenced by cultural factors, discourse, and perceptions through four "I-Me" themes associated with their identity and their interactions in the virtual learning community. Each theme involved three sub-themes involving the student's acculturation process and the learning management context in which their virtual learning experiences occur. The themes included the ethnic "I" identity, identity, ethnic "Me" identity, virtual ethnic "Me" identity, and the virtual ethnic "I". These themes are referenced as identity themes because each relates closely to experiences of participants' identity. Within each of these identity themes, the three related identity sub-themes are acknowledged as community, challenges, and change.

This chapter consists of three parts in order to deal separately with the distinct nature of students' sense of self, the identity theme as well as the specific sub-themes associated with these experiences. Section one of this chapter portrays vignettes of each participant. Section two presents the themes, identifying the various identity themes drawn from the vignettes. Section three presents the learning dimensions of the experiential themes. Sections two and three of this chapter draw from the perspectives of international students' experiences participating in virtual learning communities and how the experiences in a virtual learning community influence their development of identity as they live in the United States as university students.

Vignettes: International Students and Their Experiences in Virtual Learning Communities

Vignettes are provided as a snapshot of each student who was interviewed for this study. The participants for this study were undergraduate international university students who have a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Each student completed at least two courses in a virtual learning communities within the last year in which student-student and student-instructor methods of discourse occurred within a virtual learning community. The students studied in the U.S. for one to three years and ranged from age eighteen to thirty. The students represented ten different countries, and six different religions (See Appendix A).

Norah, an International Student from Saudi Arabia

Norah arrived in the United States nearly three years ago from the east coast of Saudi Arabia. She decided to study in the United States after her husband received a scholarship from her government. She has always been passionate about her education

so when the opportunity to further her education presented itself she embraced it wholeheartedly. She was awarded her own scholarship and is now a sophomore in college. The past few years have been quite busy for Norah, not only did she just get married a few months before her arrival in the U.S., but she also delivered her first child, a daughter, 9 months ago. Norah's younger sister joined her growing family in the U.S. so she too could further her education and help care for the new baby. Being a new mother, hosting her younger sister, and studying for her courses keeps the 28 year old Norah very busy, as does her ever-changing role as a wife. She had studied English for nearly ten years before beginning her studies in the U.S.; a fact that she attributes to her success juggling her many roles in a new country. However, her proficiency in English contributed to her husband's dependency on her as a translator in some of the courses they share. She admits to continuously encouraging him to the point of "pushing" him to communicate with his classmates and instructors on his own to develop his English skills. Since Norah is older and able to communicate with others in the U.S., she sometimes feels that she is the "head of the family", a role typical for many Saudi wives in the home when it comes to the children and "taking charge of the house", but atypical outside the house. She had first viewed herself and her husband as equals when they arrived in the U.S., he was the "King" and she was the "Queen", but now she describes it as a matriarchy. Assuming this new role has created discord in her home, discord she hopes will resolve over time.

Norah describes herself as smart, intuitive, deep, patient and loyal. She is a "mother first" and a "wife second." Her family and Islam are very important to her. Norah believes most people see her as quiet. People also make the assumption that she

is oppressed because she is from Saudi Arabia, but she does not feel oppressed. Rather, she has embraced her cultural norms, including the role of women. That is not to say that she is “subservient” to her husband, she is not. That assumption is what many people believe; a “judgment” she finds offensive and misguided. She believes that people should take time to get to know each other. When people get to know her their opinions change; they begin to see her as “positive, funny and strong.” The assumptions people make when they meet her face-to-face are equally as misguided as the assumptions others make when interacting with her online. She feels that people in online communities view her as “picky” and “angry,” because she is detailed oriented. The viewpoint that she is “angry” is one that she does not fully understand, but she admits it might be because students online “don’t really get to know” her. She, herself, is admittedly uncomfortable making friends online because they mostly talk about the “subject” and not themselves. She wants to get to know others but since so little time is spent “on the individual” that is not possible. Norah believes to truly “know” someone that in a community “with people from around the world” time needs to be spent learning about “others’ cultures; secrets from other cultures that no one” outside the culture can know without learning about it from a person of that culture.

Because Norah does not feel she “knows” the people in the virtual learning communities she has been involved in and does not feel that they “know” her, she feels “used” in the community. To Norah, a virtual learning community only partly supports a “real community.” While students do “help each other with the homework and talk about the subject”, helping feels more like an obligation and less mutual. She insists that other students “use” her knowledge for “help” but that they don’t take an interest in her

as a person. For Norah, communication “not about the subject” is essential to knowing someone and essential to building trust.

Eduardo, an International Student from Venezuela

Eduardo, from a bustling city in Venezuela, first visited to the United States to see his sister who lives and works in the U.S. At age 30 he decided to he wanted his life to go in a different direction, not for lack of success back home, but because he desired to pursue his “full potential.” To achieve his potential, Eduardo left behind a successful career as a yoga instructor and owner of a yoga studio. He credits his past successes to hard work and determination, since he had neither the “official training” nor credentials to be a yoga instructor. After arriving in the U.S., he enrolled in yoga training courses and is currently pursuing the required certificates to be a yoga instructor in the U.S.

Eduardo also enrolled in university and is now a freshman in college. Having studied English since he was in fourth grade, he felt his English skills were quite good but still does not consider himself fluent in English. But, he jibes, that he does not feel fluent in his first language, Spanish either, because no one is “ever completely fluent” in a language. In addition to adjusting to living in the U.S., actively pursuing certification in yoga, and being a first-time college student, he spends time creating artwork in several mediums. Eduardo is confident that by once again working hard and being determined he will be a successful student, yoga instructor, and artist in the United States.

Eduardo describes himself as creative and eager to learn. He is committed to both in equal measure and believes that he cannot be one without the other. His commitment to learn about different artistic mediums, for one, has inspired his newfound passion for film and 3D animation. Eduardo is proud and feels very

connected to his Columbian and Spanish heritage. However, since coming to the United States, he feels that most see him as “simply South American,” a label that does not fit who he is. For this reason he has become more passionate about sharing his culture and traditions with others. He insists that it is important to learn about and respect other people’s beliefs, desires, and human rights. Eduardo is gay, a fact that he felt compelled to hide back home, but is open about in the United States. People make the assumption that he is “spoiled” and “not friendly,” when in truth he has worked hard for what he has accomplished and loves to make new friends. Eduardo believes that these assumptions are partially grounded in the belief that if someone pursues the arts they must have the “means” or financial backing to do so and because he is confident, people assume he is arrogant and thus not friendly. When Eduardo meets people online he feels they get to know him better more quickly, because they can read his thoughts in the news feed, see pictures, and events he attends. The “barrier online” is often broken down for him when fellow students can learn about his “story.” Unfortunately, not all online communities allow him to share his story, so the barrier is in a sense, erected after initial greetings.

Raj, an International Student from Malaysia

Raj first came to the United States from a large city in Malaysia just over three years ago. He speaks English and Malay in addition to his native language Tamil. Though others in his family speak English, he is the first to study in an English speaking country. The now 24 year old came to study actuarial science even though he once thought he would be a pilot for a large airliner. Before coming to study in the U.S., Raj visited popular tourist attractions in Los Angeles and New York City. Despite

having visited the U.S. prior to moving to the States, he was unprepared for how informal people are with each other in the U.S. As a senior in college, he admits that being more “formal” for interviews comes quite naturally for him since he was raised in a culture where treating elders and superiors with additional respect is quite common. Raj hopes to get a job in the U.S. after graduating and is actively pursuing career prospects in addition to completing his studies.

Raj describes himself as “imaginative young gentleman” who loves to read and has an aptitude for academic study. He also loves to explore, which prompts him to read literature from around the world and motivates him to travel. He feels that most people do see him for who he is. Others also view him as a “close and loyal friend.” Raj wants people to know that though he is committed to his studies, he is also “easygoing.” But, he adds, that just because he is easy going and a good friend that does not mean he wants to listen to people’s gossip. When interacting in a community online, Raj believes that he comes across as strict or too opinionated. The discussions encourage students to express their viewpoints, but he knows that people get offended when his point of view differs from the norm in the community. He strongly wishes that there was more opportunity to share about his culture since this would, in his mind, undoubtedly enable others to see why he believes as he does. If discussions about culture and personal experience were encouraged, Raj insists that people online would share the same opinion about him that others do “offline.” Since he feels “judged” online, he is hesitant to call the other students he interacts within the learning communities’ friends.

Kitti, an International Student from Hungary

Kitti is a 23 year old aspiring artist from a large city in Hungary. Kitti wanted to study in the U.S. to “achieve dreams” by becoming an artist and so far feels that she is on her way to doing just that by enthusiastically experimenting with new artistic mediums like metalwork and clay. She began her studies in the U.S. by joining her much older sister and brother-in-law nearly 2 years ago. Kitti enjoys having family close but since she lives with them, hopes to have more privacy in the future. In addition to privacy being a constant issue, she is adjusting to living with her sister who was already an adult when she was born; this is their first time living together. Kitti considers her nieces to be “totally American.” She considers herself fluent in English since she began studying the language when she was just ten years old in school. Though she speaks English fluently, she has grown to appreciate her Hungarian accent. Kitti says that people find it intriguing so they use it as an “icebreaker” when getting to know her and she feels it makes her seem “mysterious.” In addition to embracing her accent she has embraced what she calls her “unique” appearance. Often wearing motorcycle boots, all black clothes and a twelve inch tall multicolored Mohawk hairstyle in a “conservative” community, she feels that she “fits right in.”

Kitti describes herself as “a little rebellious” and gay. Kitti is gay and refuses to use the term lesbian since men and women “don’t need different titles to describe who they are.” Kitti’s sexuality was an “open secret” back home, but has found that she is freer to be open about her sexuality in the United States. Even her family in the U.S. is more supportive and embraces her more fully in the States than they did in Hungary. She also believes that her appearance reinforces her inner self. She is deeply connected

to her outward appearance and embraces the feedback she receives from people when they meet her. She knows that some people assume that she is “trouble” and that they sometimes rely on stereotypes to categorize her when they see her, even so, her commitment to reflect her personality in her wardrobe remains steadfast. She wants people to know that what she shows them and what she reveals is real. She has to trust what people say only and hopes they trust her as well. Trust is important in an online learning community, and Kitti belongs to many both in school and outside of school. Kitti feels that less of her personality comes across in online communities at first because they usually “can’t see” her or view her art. She feels that she can’t fit her whole personality in one profile picture. She feels more a part of a community when she can express herself through images.

Mulenga, an International Student from Zambia

Mulenga is a 23 year old who arrived in the United States from Zambia nearly four years ago. She always knew she wanted to attend college and worked hard in primary and secondary school so she could have her choice of colleges. She was accepted to college in the U.S. and due to her hard work received a scholarship. Mulenga’s good work ethic did not waiver when she began her college studies; her next goal was already present on her mind and in her heart, a successful career in finance. She admits that her fluency in English helped her focus on her studies rather than be distracted by language acquisition. She also speaks Njanja, Bemba, and Laamba, her family often spoke several languages at once in her home. Family is very important to Mulenga so being far away from them has been hard. They were finally able to visit for the first time this past year, a visit she cherishes. Since her family is in Zambia, she

found a “new family” in the U.S. This “new family” does not replace her family in Zambia, but rather adds to her family; they have become an “extended family” so to speak. She met and became close to her new family by attending church near her college. Mulenga credits her Christian faith and family in the U.S. with keeping her focused, grounded, and positive as she looks to the future.

Mulenga describes herself as kind, not easily angered, and quiet. She is smart and uses her intelligence combined with her kindheartedness to help people. Mulenga says she is a “typical Zambian girl.” In the United States, others view her as African American. They assume that if a person is black in America then they must be African American. To her, this is very close-minded. She has also observed and learned more about stereotypes and racism in America. Mulenga says that when she is stereotyped, people assume that she is angry and loud. However, she does not get offended that people think she is African American, she is offended that such negative assumptions associated with what it means to be African American persist. Yet, she insists that Americans need to understand that just because someone is black does not mean that they share the same beliefs, culture or heritage. There is depth to people. Each person has their own story to tell if others are willing to listen. In online learning communities it is even more difficult to “make people listen” to help them know her better. She often encounters prejudice online and feels powerless to stand up to herself due to the lack of support from instructors. She believes instructors rarely get to know her online so they “don’t care” and if they do care they do not “pay attention to what is happening or understand” so they are unaware that they need to intervene. Mulenga wants to work

more with her classmates online as a group but finds that she has become more withdrawn and shy online because of her experiences in past online interaction.

Amarraj, an International Student from Malaysia

Amarraj left his job in a sprawling urban firm for the opportunity to study in the United States. The 26 year old proudly states that he has been in school in the U.S. for “two years and counting.” His first language is Malay, but he also speaks Punjabi, Hindi, Tamil and English. He credits the diversity in his country with not only his ability to speak five languages, but also with interest in learning about other cultures. Amarraj was interested in studying in the U.S. because of the opportunities that would be open to him once he returns to Malaysia, though he admits to wanting to work in the U.S. “for a time” before returning home. The decision to prolong his stay in the U.S. after graduation is not one he came to lightly. It has been challenging adapting to the “lack of religious diversity” in the U.S. Amarraj is Sikh. In Malaysia, he describes Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Confucianism, and Islam being practiced “side by side.” Many even practice traditional holidays that are affiliated with religions other than their own. In Malaysia, being a Sikh, did not isolate him from non-Sikhs. In the U.S. it does and in ways he never imagined.

Amarraj describes himself as very straightforward. He does not hesitate to share his point of view and does so honestly. He believes that “everything happens for a reason,” even though that reason may not be clear. He has a strong desire to help people, a desire that comes from his faith. Because of this, he tries to “apply meaning to everything” he does. He believes that people often see him as “aggressive” or as a “terrorist” because he is “tall, big, dark, bearded and wears a turban.” He wants people

to know that their assumptions are ignorant because “Muslims are not terrorists” just like not everyone who wears a turban is Muslim. He wants to be seen as a “human first.” Online he faces less prejudice because people can’t see him so they do not make judgments before getting to know him. Amarraj feels “more free” online. In online learning communities, Amarraj does make friends easily but not through directed discussions but rather through online communication with classmates outside of class about the schoolwork. He believes working together voluntarily and “at random” builds relationships.

Lee, an International Student from China

Lee, a junior in college, first came to the U.S three years ago to pursue a degree in Graphic Design. This will be his second degree in design, his first was received from a university in China. He was motivated to earn a second degree after graduating with the first and realizing that he couldn’t get a “good job with not very good grades” on his vitae. He hopes to improve his grades while studying in the U.S. as well as return to China with proficiency in English. At 25, he yearns to complete his second degree so he can return to China and begin a career. He also misses the “huge friendships” he had back home. Lee describes the friendships he has made in the U.S. as “simple.” Since he does not have family in the U.S., having close friends is very important to Lee but deep friendships have been hard for him to find. He says the friendships in China are “collaborative,” unlike the friendships in the U.S. where more often than not one or two people decide where the group of friends should go and what they should do. Lee also has felt that many friendships in the U.S. are fleeting, as the semesters change so does the bond between friends. Yet, he still hopes to make lifelong friends in the U.S.

Lee describes himself as “an interesting boy.” He says “boy” because he feels he is not yet a man since he is not yet completely independent. He is loving and funny. Lee takes a lot of pride in his sense of humor and his ability to put others at ease. He admits that he has “no idea” how others perceive him and he does not “really care.” Likewise, Lee does not believe in making friends online so he does not “think too much” about who he is communicating with in an online learning community and does not know how they perceive him. This is in stark contrast to his online interactions with friends and family on social media platforms like Facebook and WeChat where he displays his “best self” through carefully composed photos and status updates. But, he adds, that all his friends online were first friends he met face-to-face. He believes communities, both on ground and online, are grounded in friendships that are developed through face to face interactions like joint activities such as sports and service.

Chaeyeon, an International Student from South Korea

Chaeyeon decided to come to the United States from South Korea to study, having never visited the U.S. before she arrived. Her first thoughts upon arrival were that the U.S. was not very “developed.” Chaeyeon had seen images of the U.S. online and on film in popular movies and television shows and thought that most cities, like her hometown, are large metropolitan areas. She was surprised that her university was located in a small suburban town and that the nearest “city” was “so quiet.” At 17 the journey she embarked on was quite different from what she expected. She had studied English since she was in elementary school, but soon found that while she had basic English skills, she was not fluent. In the beginning she found herself being quiet herself, like the town she had moved to. At first, she was also intimidated by the distance from her

home in South Korea, the new food, and by the prospect of being completely independent. Now 20, Chaeyeon has grown fond of the quiet and safety she feels in her new town. Finding a local church to practice her Christian faith helped put her at ease and gave her a sense of “home.” Making new friends at her local church has also helped her improve her English. Chaeyeon feels more like herself now.

Chaeyeon describes herself as “brave and strong.” Characteristics she attributes to her upbringing. Her courage helped her and continues to provide her with the will to move forward and succeed in school. She believes people see her as happy and healthy. She always tries to have a smile on her face. For her, even when she is not happy she smiles so people will smile back. When people smile at her, she begins to actually feel happier herself. She does not know for sure how people view her personality online. Chaeyeon thinks she comes across shy online but that is because she is hesitant to reveal much about herself in online discussions and chats. She does not feel “safe” online because “it is hard to know other people’s personalities unless you meet them eye to eye” and she has been warned about the “dangers on the Internet.” She has noticed that when she does share her thoughts online, other international students listen to her more than students from the United States. Chaeyeon insists that if she felt “heard” in an online learning community she might let down her guard a bit. She believes that for her to really feel “community” she needs to be a part of the “decision making”. In order for that to happen, she must first be heard.

Yechan, an International Student from South Korea

Yechan chose to leave South Korea to study in the United States so he could pursue his education in the hopes of one day using his newfound English language skills

to propel his career. He is very career-minded. Having no family in the U.S., at 18 years old he has had to discover what it means to be independent. Yechan is fully embracing life in the U.S., but with his comfort in the U.S., he also has “discomfort.” He knows that his studies will have to be interrupted for his required military service back home. He is not only concerned about the impact his time away from school will have on his success in college and newfound relationships, but also the impact it will have on him as an individual. He describes himself as easygoing, relaxed, and a lover of music, literature, and philosophy. Yechan is concerned he will not “fit in” once he joins the military. This concern is also accompanied by the fear he feels for his safety in a “warzone.” He knows most students attending university in the U.S. are not required to serve in the military so he rarely discusses his feelings about the topic with others since he feels that they will not understand. He also does not want “the future” to interrupt his experiences now. He chooses to focus his attention on his studies, “adventures,” and his “dream career” after college. Though he admits he does not know what career he desires after he graduates.

Yechan describes himself as a “disciple of Christ before all things.” Though he prefers not to discuss his religious views with others. For Yechan, his beliefs are “personal thoughts” that he prefers to “keep inside.” He is a “lover of the arts.” While he loves the arts he is adamant that he is “not an artist,” but loves learning about the arts. He loves the arts so much he wishes he could major in the liberal arts, but he chose engineering because he has a talent for math. People believe that he “talks a lot” and when he isn’t talking they think “something is wrong.” He is comfortable talking to people online and is not shy about sharing his opinions. He knows that what he thinks

“may be wrong,” but he is not afraid to say what he thinks and knows that what he believes may change over time as he talks with others. As long as members of the online learning community communicate, are passionate and have the same goals, then “being wrong from time to time is alright.” While Yechan is not hesitant to share his opinions, he is careful not to “reveal too much” about himself. Specifically, he does not discuss his religion or family online. This is due to the fact that he does not consider other members of an online community friends, but does consider them peers who are working together to achieve the same goal.

Noor, an International Student from Iraq

Noor, unlike many international students who come to the United States because they desire to study in the U.S., fled Iraq at 18 years of age for fear she would be killed because her father worked as a translator for the U.S. Army. She is now 19 years old and a sophomore in college. Her family, mother, father and two younger sisters, have joined her in the U.S. She was overwhelmed with joy and “relief” when they made it safely to the U.S. Her family has been reunited and they all share a home a few minutes’ drive from her college. Noor knows she can never return to Iraq so she is adjusting not only to life in the U.S., but also the knowledge that her future will forever be different than what she had dreamt of as a child. For now, she is focused on her studies at college and her studies for the citizenship exam. She hopes to become a U.S. citizen. At 18 years old, Noor is more mature than most students her age, having already lived “two lives”; one as an Iraqi citizen and one as an “American.” She and her mother work at a local grocery store to support the family since her father has health problems. Noor takes her “duties” as an older sister very seriously, duties she feels “privileged” to

have. When she works on her homework she is also helping her sisters with their schoolwork. She wants to set a good example for them.

Noor describes herself as shy. She prefers “media to other people” and does not go out a lot because her family is “worried” for her. However, she is not shy with her family and tells them everything. There are no secrets between her and her parents. Her family was always protective of her in Iraq and continue to be protective of her in the United States because in the States people can make assumptions about her since she is Iraqi and Muslim. She wants to trust people and is beginning to. Others often think she is strict and “not nice.” She believes this is due to the fact that she is guarded and nervous around new people. She wants people to know that she is guarded because of her life experiences. While she feels more comfortable online and feels more secure sharing her thoughts with classmates in an online learning community, she is cautious not to show a picture of herself online. When she first participated in online communities in the United States she felt free to express herself both in writing and in pictures, but other people, especially men, from the Middle East started harassing her because she showed her face online. It is “taboo” for a woman to show her uncovered face online in many Middle Eastern cultures. While this is not her family’s point of view or her point of view, she now finds herself having to post a “picture of an avatar” rather than her own picture so she does not offend other Middle Eastern Muslim men in the community. She wants to find a husband from her own culture; therefore she has become more restrained in her online communication. After she started posting an avatar, Noor discovered that she received respect from not only other international

students and American students but also students from the Middle East. Now, the online communities make her “feel free in limited ways.”

Angelina, an International Student from France

Angelina, an international student from France, considers herself to be an athlete first and a student second. She chose to study in the United States because she was offered a full tennis scholarship. She “loves Paris,” her hometown and misses the “sounds of the city” and the “smell of fresh baked bread.” After arriving in the U.S. and beginning her studies she realized that her work ethic and dedication to her sport could be adapted to work in her favor as a student. Angelina has been on her school’s honor roll for two consecutive semesters, though she admits she did not know what the “Dean’s List” was when she first received praise for her accomplishments. In fact, she was uncomfortable with the recognition because with each invitation to join an honor society she thought she was invited to a “secret society like the Illuminati or Priory of Sion,” since she had never heard of honor societies before. As far as she knows, France does not have honor societies like universities in the U.S. This is one of the many things she was shocked to learn after she began her studies. Another was that people in the U.S. are “far less prejudice.” She describes being raised to believe that people of races other than white are “often dangerous and should be avoided.” This is an opinion she no longer agrees with and is surprised she ever did. In fact, she now considers those views “racist”, whereas before she thought they were fact. To her, racism was the norm. Angelina is quick to point out though that while the U.S. may “embrace people of all races”, most people in the U.S. are “very ethnocentric.” While continuing her studies she has decided that she not only wants to pursue academic and athletic excellence but

also has a desire to become more knowledgeable about other cultures. She hopes too, that by learning about other cultures she can share her culture with others to help “Americans develop a worldview.”

Vi, an International Student from Vietnam

Vi, a freshman, is from Hanoi, Vietnam. Having never visited the United States before arriving to begin her studies, she always knew she wanted to attend university in the United States. She believes in Karma, or as it is known in Vietnam, “luet nhan qua.” So, she tries to behave in way that will bring her good fortune. This extends to the effort she puts forth in her studies as well as how she treats those around her.

She has not decided what she wants to major in, but knows that she loves studying foreign languages and history. She is currently enrolled in her second Spanish language course. Though learning a new language while still learning English and adapting to speaking English on a daily basis is challenging, she feels empowered in her Spanish language course because she can help her classmates understand best practices for learning a new language. Vi says that she expected some “culture shock” when she began life in the U.S., but was surprised since arriving that the two most shocking differences between Vietnam and the U.S. are food and what people ask to get to know each other. First, the food in the U.S. is, especially on college campuses, is “covered in cheese,” fried or both “fried and covered with cheese.” She tries to find healthier options, but has discovered that healthier food is often more expensive in the school cafeteria and that people assume she is dieting if she chooses to eat fresh fruit and soup for lunch. When it comes to getting to know other students and instructors, she learned rather quickly that people often took offense when she asked newfound acquaintances

about their age, income and family. To her these were “normal questions” she was accustomed to asking to get to know people better in her home country. However, in the United States, these questions seem to her to be taboo. While she is committed to learning how best to meet and learn about her peers, she does not think she will ever fully adapt to the food served at university cafeterias.

Vi describes herself as serious about her studies and “chill” with her friends. She takes a lot of pride in her academic accomplishments, spending much time studying in the library. While she works hard, Vi feels others think that she is “lazy.” When people first meet her they think she is friendly and approachable, but her close friends know her to be “goofy.” She has a good sense of humor. She wants people to know that while she is “chill” or easygoing, she knows when to be serious and is very trustworthy. When she is online in a virtual learning community she is always cautious at first, mostly because she does not know how “formal or informal” to be in the community. She thinks that at first, other community members may feel she is quiet and too formal, but if they talk to her online one-on-one they begin to understand her personality and her “heart.”

Identity “I” – “Me” Themes

The purpose of this interpretive research was not to simply identify the behaviors of the international students or describe the context of the virtual learning community, but to examine the process and the experiences of those involved within the social context. Through the students’ vignettes and the interpretive use of symbolic interaction, multiple layers of interactions within the social context described by students and how they interpreted their experiences were considered through the lens of

symbolic interaction. Through this lens four themes emanate from the students' stories depicted in the vignettes about themselves, their experiences in the virtual learning community that are part of their university courses, and how these virtual learning communities impacted their sense of self.

The findings revealed students' "I" and the "Me" within the interview and within the students' experiences with the virtual learning community. The first theme involves the ethnic "I" identity as it pertained to how students view themselves. The second theme addressed the ethnic "Me" identity as it encompassed students' perception of how others viewed them. Theme three deals with the virtual ethnic "Me" identity which involves the student's perception of how virtual peers view them online. Finally, the fourth theme relates to the virtual ethnic "I" identity which depicts how students see themselves online in the virtual learning community. Each theme encompasses issues unique to the theme as well as interconnects with issues associated to the other themes.

Blumer (1986) drawing from Mead's (1964) theory, developed a distinction between the "I" and "Me." The theory provided distinction between how one sees one's self and how one perceives one is seen by others. The findings confirmed this distinction and revealed that the distinction between the "I" and "Me" in the virtual community. The distinctions were separate yet intermingled with the "I" and the "Me" in other non-virtual contexts.

Theme One: Ethnic "I" Identity

The first theme, the ethnic "I" identity, refers to how students view themselves. The "I" is the immediate response of an individual to another. It involves the

unpredictable and creative part of the self. The findings revealed that as students interact with others from their own culture in the U.S. as well as with others in their host country they brought their “I” into every interaction. Students’ “I” was influenced by cultural factors, discourse, lack of discourse, and perceptions of interactions in various social context. In addition, their response to the other person formed a new “I” as a result of the interactions. As illustrated below, identity changes occurred allowing for development and a new identity to emerge.

Students’ ethnic “I.” In this study students’ “I” involved how the students sees themselves. This consisted of the students’ identity as students. In other words, it encompassed how students saw themselves as students.

Lee, a student from China working on his second degree in graphic design, saw himself as motivated to do well with his university studies. He viewed himself as a “dedicated student” working to make good grades so that he could procure a “good job” in China upon graduation.

Yechan, a student from South Korea, saw himself as a “committed student” devoted to “learning the English language” to help secure his future career. While committed to the completion of his degree in the U.S. he realized his commitment could not override the responsibility he had with his country to complete the required military service. While Yechan viewed himself as a student, he realized his identity as a student would be interrupted to be a soldier. Angelina saw herself first as an athlete and then as a student. She perceived herself as dedicated, disciplined, and committed to hard work. Her accomplishments were synonymous with her identity.

Students' new "I" develops. As students interact, development begins to occur with students' sense of self forming a new "I." Lee transformed from a student not concerned about grades during his first degree to a student devoted to academic achievement. Lee's "I" was influenced by the response he received by others concerning his poor performance. His ethnic "I" was also influenced by the discourse he had with others about the importance of academic success and the lack of discourse concerning his potential in his country's workforce. His perceptions of his "I" developed as a result of the interactions in various social contexts. His goals changed as a new "I" formed as a result of the interactions. Consequently, Lee's ethnic "I" changed allowing for the development to occur and a new identity to emerge: A dedicated student committed to academic success.

Yechan's ethnic "I" as a committed, goal oriented student described himself as "easy going" and "relaxed" values his identity as a student, yet due to his country's military requirement that will be interrupt his studies for a period of time Yechan was more serious and less easygoing while remaining dedicated to his academic goals. As a serious student his new "I" held his goals close, and recognized that the impending military experience would bring new changes for him.

Angelina, a student from France, viewed herself as an athlete first and a student second. With time, this view of herself began to change as she experienced success as a student. Angelina did well with her studies, had positive experiences with her peers and instructors in class, and was recognized for her academic achievements, Angelina came to view herself as a "student athlete." The development of the new ethnic "I" has allowed Angelina to embrace her studies with dedication and pride. Angelina's new "I"

included her student role. She was more than an athlete who recognized her capacity to learn and academically achieve.

These examples from the vignettes revealed the ethnic “I” of these students and how their “I” was influenced by cultural factors and how their perceptions of themselves developed after interactions in various contexts. It was important to understand the ethnic “I” in order to better understand the students’ virtual ethnic “I” and how it changed to form a new virtual “I” as a result of the interactions.

Theme Two: Ethnic “Me” Identity

The ethnical “Me” identity involved students’ socialized self and represents students’ attitudes, behaviors, perceptions and expectations of others. The findings revealed that the student’s ethnic “Me” identity was developed by interactions with others. Students reported being aware of respecting or defying social norms as well as creating and complying with the social boundaries of the others. The “Me” exerted social control. Students revealed that they know when they respected or challenged boundaries and social norms. The ethnic “Me” for international students pushed students to discover the social norm in their host country and in the communities they engaged. The ethnic “Me” also was aware of how others thought and how they establish, challenge, or maintain social boundaries.

In this study students were aware that their interactions involved the assumptions about how their community perceived them. They also contended that the assumptions were dependent upon their appearance as well as their country of origin. Students maintained that assumptions concerning race and ethnicity, religious practices, and socio-economic factors were made about them from their introduction to others in

the community. Accordingly, the international students were aware that the U. S. students have stereotypes about them. It was their hope that as they interacted, others would get to see beyond the stereotypes. International students' ethnic "Me" were aware of how thought about them.

Race and ethnicity. Eduardo found that he was not responded to as Venezuelan, but was viewed as a Columbian of Spanish descent based upon appearance rather than any factual information about his ethnicity. Norah from Saudi Arabia and Noor from Iraq was treated as though they were oppressed because they wear the hijab and burqa. Noor from Iraq sought asylum in the U. S. because her father worked as a translator for the U.S. Army. While she will never return to Iraq and is preparing for the U.S. Citizenship exam, she was approached as an oppressed female from the Middle East. Norah realized others also think she was oppressed, because women in Saudi Arabia do not drive. Because Amarraj is dark and large others appeared to have concerns that he might be a terrorist. Amarrai felt others responded to him with these perceptions because of his Middle Eastern appearance and his size even though he is not Middle Eastern and is mild mannered.

Religious prejudice. Noor, Norah and Amarrai are all viewed as Muslim who are therefore, oppressed or radical and perhaps dangerous. Norah believed others viewed her as oppressed and angry. Amarraj reported that others viewed him as a Muslim and assumed that he may be a terrorist. However, Amarraj is Sikh. He found that he was isolated in the U. S. because of the lack of religious diversity and understanding. Chaeyeon felt less isolation because she was Christian and felt embraced by a local church in the U.S.

Socio-economic status. Assumptions were also made about socio-economic status of students. Because Eduardo, from Venezuelan, was studying the arts, it was assumed he was privileged, and he was treated as pretentious. Noor reported that because she was from Iraq others assumed she had money. However, Noor and her mother work in a grocery store to support her family. She relied on academic scholarships and worked to be able to study at the university. Noor's reported that work ethic is part of her identity, but felt it was not acknowledged by others because of others' assumptions about the wealth of Iraqi nationals.

Students revealed that when they are seen by others in different communities they are seen through the filter of prejudices and stereotypes of race and ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status. They also contended that often the assumptions are more immediate, more judgmental, and remain longer than in communities with others from their own culture. They realized that they were not seen for who they are. They maintained that this changes how they respond because they must consider the assumptions others have. They realized that responded to social boundaries and social norms cautiously because of the stereotypical views of others. Interacting in their own country or with others in the U. S. from the same culture allows them to include their personalities. The ethnic "Me" for international students forces students to discover the social norm in their host country and in the communities they engage through the lens of others suspensions and assumptions. Also, their ethnic "Me" is aware of how others think they establish or challenge social boundaries. With time the students sensed that others began to see them as individuals rather than through stereotypes; however, the international students were aware that to some degree people in the host country

continued to view them through the stereotypes. Nevertheless, as interactions increased students believed that their classmates and instructors began to recognize there was more to them than the stereotypes. Noor believed others began to view her as a hard worker dedicated to her family and to her education. Eduardo recognizes when others removed the “barriers” of stereotypes and saw him as a serious artist rather than one of privilege.

Theme Three: Virtual Ethnic “Me” Identity

The virtual ethnic “Me” identity involved students’ socialized self in the virtual environment and represents international students’ attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions with online interactions. The findings revealed that the student’s virtual ethnic “Me” identity varies in relation to how students were viewed by others. The findings also revealed that students were aware of how others viewed them. Students recognized when their virtual peers were responding to them based upon assumptions. International students also revealed that they made conscious choices about what they disclosed online. In addition, students revealed that how others viewed them created limitations in virtual learning communities.

Assumptions about appearance. In this study international students discussed how they were generally aware of how the virtual community viewed them. They maintained that how they were viewed by peers included assumptions, but some of the international students contended that in virtual learning communities’ assumptions about appearance were less than in their non-virtual learning communities. While classmates may learn that international students are from other countries through introductory discussions the immediate interactions involve less stereotypical

assumptions based upon race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religion. Most international students felt they were not as immediately seen through the stereotypical lens based upon their appearance and began to have more opportunity to get to know other students.

Amarraj felt welcomed and less restricted online with others. He claimed it was because others do not see him and make automatic stereotypical assumptions. Amarraj connected with his virtual peers in the virtual community through online communication outside of class about the schoolwork. He believed these interactions helped others to know who he was and built relationships and that by working together on school work his peers began to trust who he was and saw that he was a helpful, kind person. Amarraj claimed that he must search out other ways to communicate virtually with members of the virtual learning community rather than to rely on the discussion board in his class for interaction. Other social media tools helped Amarraj establish relationships with those in the virtual community.

Eduardo felt empowered when interacting with others in the virtual learning communities. He asserted that when he interacted with virtual peers they came to know him better. This was especially true in virtual communities that allowed or provided opportunity to share personal information, websites, and new feeds. The “barriers” that Eduardo referred to were not present when virtual peers could read about “story” and could see from his website that he was an accomplished artist. Eduardo regretted that some virtual learning communities focus entirely on the course content and did not have provisions for personal interactions. In these virtual learning communities the “barrier”

occurred with the introductory discussion and were more difficult to overcome than in non-virtual communities.

Choices with self-disclosure. Most of the international students thought it was harder to change initial impressions in non-virtual communities. As a result, international students appreciated that they had control over what virtual classmates learn about who they are. This allowed the international students to make choices about what was known and what was unknown. In other words, international students appreciated choices about what they disclosed about themselves in the virtual learning community.

Yechan maintained that how others viewed him online was limited to what he chose to reveal. Initially, Yechan reported he was hesitant to share his opinions about social issues with others online. He claimed that in non-virtual communities he was not hesitant. In his virtual learning communities, he was careful not to “reveal too much” about his personal life. However, he was comfortable talking to peers online about the shared assignments and subject matter. Yechan believed he was seen as talkative and opinionated by others because he was not reluctant to share his thoughts and opinions with his virtual peers. When Yuchum’s virtual “Me” identity realized his ideas were valued by others, he renegotiated his virtual “I” identity and began to share his opinions about social issues.

Noor decided not to disclose her picture in the virtual learning community, but to use an avatar instead. When Noor was initially in virtual learning communities in the United States she freely expressed herself in text and with pictures, but other virtual community members, especially men, from the Middle East viewed her pictures as

contrary to her religion and culture. While this was not consistent her viewpoint, she realized how others from her own culture where viewing her pictures. Once Noor began to use an avatar to visually represent herself, she was viewed by others as respectable and hard working.

How others view me: The limitations in virtual learning communities. Lee claimed to not see how others saw him and did not “make friends in virtual communities.” He shared that he completed his work but did not want to “visit” with others. He only wanted to do what was required to complete the group learning activity. Lee found that most online class require “minimal interaction.” Since he did not seek out interaction in the virtual learning community, he was able to complete assignments without collaboration or interaction. While Lee claimed he did not know how others saw him, his descriptions indicated that others saw him as eccentric and unfriendly. Lee’s virtual “I” was distant. His first instinct was to try not to interact. When Lee interacted with others in the community his virtual “Me” realized that others viewed him as “unfriendly” and “eccentric.” Because peers viewed him as “unfriendly” instead of someone who wanted to focus on the course’s content, his virtual “I” became more recluse.

Norah was not allowed to post pictures of herself online because of her Muslim religion. In some ways she felt restricted, but in other ways it allowed virtual peers to respond to her based upon her ideas and work rather than making stereotypical judgments because of her ethnicity and the hijab she wears. However, she found that people in her online communities view her negatively, as “picky” and “angry,” because she was meticulous when it came to academic work. She maintained that her peers

“don’t really get to know” her since the virtual classmates almost exclusively had discussions regarding assignments and course content. She wanted to be “helpful to others” but often felt “used” for assignments, and did not understand why others thought she was “angry.” She claimed she wanted to know her virtual peers and was “frustrated” that virtual learning communities focused on content at the exclusion of relationships. Because she was viewed by others as negatively, she renegotiated her “I” from being “helpful” to being “reluctant” to help others with course work because she felt others viewed her simply as an academic resource than an individual with interests, feelings, and ideas.

Kitti also maintains that peers in her virtual learning communities did not know her. She felt restricted by initial introductory discussion and a profile picture because “profile pictures limit how I can express myself.” Kitti confessed that she initially preferred “little to no interaction with others” who were part of the virtual learning community, because virtual learning community members “were not interacting with who I really am.” Since the virtual community could not see Kitti, she maintained they could not know her. Kitti said that she liked to interact in virtual learning communities and liked knowing how others saw her, but admitted that she wanted the learning communities’ platforms to provide more ways for her to be seen as well as more ways to use images to communicate with her virtual peers. Slowly Kitti found ways to express herself with images to others online. When she did others showed interest and support for her unique style. In turn, Kitti began to feel less isolated to a member of the community. Her virtual “I” shifted from a person that almost always distrusted others

and anticipated judgment to a person that trusted others more and looked forward to opportunities to interact.

Mulenga denied true or “real” interactions online making it impossible for her to know how people see her. In fact, Mulenga admitted to feeling “powerless” because others do not always understand what is being said in the discussions, and peers as well as the instructors often do not “pay attention to what is being said online. For example, Mulenga may experience difficulty explaining something in the discussion and then struggles with clarifying or getting peers to respond to her clarification or explanations. When no one is responsive to this, including the instructor, Mulenga feels “powerless” and claims she is not aware of how others see her. In fact, she felt as though she was not actually seen by others.

Theme Four: Virtual Ethnic “I” Identity

International students brought the ethnic “I” into the interaction with other students in the virtual learning community. However, international students did not initially bring a virtual “I” into their first online learning community for universities or colleges. Students developed their virtual “I” over time in their virtual learning community. In students’ first online virtual learning community, the ethnic “I” students conveyed in virtual interaction mirrored their ethnic “I” identity. As students began to interact with virtual peers, the students’ virtual “I” began to differ from their ethnic “I” in some ways. Students’ virtual ethnic “I” was modified after interactions with peers in the virtual learning community and the “I” for future interactions changed based upon previous interactions. While the international students were aware, at times, of their new “I” in non-virtual interactions, they were keenly aware of their new “I” in the

virtual community. Development of the virtual “I” occurred as a result of the interactions within the community. The response to the virtual “Me” formed a new virtual “I” as a result of the interaction. This response was identified as a virtual creative response whereby an identity change occurred allowing a new virtual identity to emerge for the international student.

Students’ virtual ethnic “I.” The virtual “I” occurred in response to the virtual “Me.” As the international student saw themselves the way other virtual peers saw them. Ethnic virtual “I” was intertwined with the virtual “Me”. How they saw themselves online was how other saw them. As a result, a new virtual “I” formed. For example, Raj viewed himself as “serious and opinionated” in the virtual learning environments because the discussion forum required students to express opinions. In the virtual learning community, Raj did not see the opportunity to be the “easy going or creative” person he knew that he was.

Noor was comfortable in virtual communication. She enjoyed dialogue with virtual classmates and she saw herself as a serious student who worked hard to do well with online learning. She was more confident sharing her ideas in the virtual learning environment than in non-virtual learning communities. Finally, Lee continued to view himself as motivated and dedicated in the virtual learning community and was not interested in social communication with his peers. This was in contrast to his active use of social media with friends outside of his virtual learning community.

Students’ new virtual “I” develops. Originally, Noor saw that others from her culture viewed her as violating cultural norms by posting her pictures in the virtual learning community. Therefore, in subsequent virtual communities Noor’s virtual “I”

was represented by an avatar. While the original picture did not conflict with her own beliefs, she did not want to be rejected by those in her culture. As a result, she changed her virtual “I” to be more consistent with traditional Muslim beliefs. Noor viewed herself as becoming “more confident” in virtual learning communities. She saw herself as an active member and enjoys discussing concepts and ideas.

Yechan’s virtual “I” was similar to his non-virtual “I” in that he remained a committed, goal-oriented student, yet he viewed himself as more serious and focused on the content of the course rather than on how other virtual learning community members viewed him socially. Online, he saw himself as a “serious student” and a virtual “leader in discussions” who is not interested in establishing virtual friendships.

Mulenga viewed herself as “withdrawn and shy” in the virtual learning community. She saw herself wanting to work in groups but was uncomfortable in discussions. As a result of her interactions with others in previous virtual learning communities, Mulenga was fearful and felt “unsafe” in these interactions. She claimed she “guarded” what she said out of fear it would be judged or misunderstood. As a result, Mulenga’s virtual “I” was not outgoing and reserved.

Discussion of Virtual Identity “I”–“Me” Themes

The students “I” and “Me” revealed themselves as parts of their self, yet as distinct aspects of their self (Mead, 1962). The students brought their “I” into their interactions with others. At the same time, with every interaction the student had a perception of other person’s “Me.” Likewise the “Me” was the identity that was perceived by the other person. The response to the other person “Me” formed a new “I” as a result of the interaction. Students interacted with others in their community with

their virtual “I”-“Me” identity. Mead identified this responsiveness as a “creative response” (Mead, 1967, p. 197). Findings revealed that international students formed a “creative response” to other students’ “Me” and formed a new “I” as a result of the interactions that occur. The findings also revealed that the international students’ “creative responses” were different in face-to-face interactions than those interactions within a virtual learning community.

As a result, the new face-to-face ethnic “I” was distinct from the virtual ethnic “I.” Findings also revealed that the international students were aware of the differences in their ethnic “I” and their virtual ethnic “I.” In addition, the difference did not create internal conflict regarding loyalty, but rather created personal desires and aspirations for different forms of communication and interactions with those in their virtual community. Students’ identity in these virtual learning communities was influenced by cultural factors, lack of opportunity for discourse in the virtual learning community, and perceptions they have experienced in other learning communities or within the virtual community.

Identity Sub-themes: Influences on the Virtual Ethnic Identity

The findings revealed three subthemes that together influence the virtual ethnic identity for International students. The identity sub-themes included: Structure, challenges, and change. Each of these funneled through the filter of the Ethnic “I” identity and Ethnic “Me” identity forming the international students’ virtual ethnic identity.

Structure in Virtual Learning Community

Students identified a learning community as a “gathering place” where “everyone has the same goals.” For virtual learning communities within online university classes, the place to gather involved the learning management system such as D2L. Students maintained that effective learning communities needed to be well structured and have an atmosphere conducive to interaction.

Structure with virtual learning. Students asserted that virtual learning communities needed to include a code of behavior, a defined purpose, and provide a range of roles.

A code of behavior. According to the students’ experiences in virtual learning communities, a code of behavior was often ambiguous if the instructor was not active in the class, and if standards for behaviors were not discussed or at least posted. Students reported that when standards were available and when the instructor was seen in the course, they were more comfortable, fewer stereotypical assumptions were made, and they felt like they could not state their ideas and opinions without judgments, misunderstanding, and ridicule. For the most part, students asserted that when there was a code of behavior, they were able to be more themselves and were “less timid.” The students maintained that specific code of behavior was especially helpful to international students because they were in the process of learning appropriate standards of behavior in a culture other than their own.

Defined purpose. Several students maintained that the purpose and goals of virtual learning communities for university courses was often tied to individual assignments rather than an overarching community goal. Students also had different

reasons for being in the course. Completion of the course often appeared to be the purpose of being a part of the virtual learning community rather than an interest in the learning community itself. The international students revealed that when the purpose of the virtual learning community is explicitly stated, it helped to focus their attention and manage expectations. They understood that their expectations could be different based upon their culture. As a result, having the purpose and goals of the virtual learning community was very helpful. Some students believed they should limit their interaction to academic interactions and completion of assignments, because the only stated goals in virtual learning communities for university courses often involved the objectives in the syllabus.

Range of roles. Students maintained that in virtual learning communities, there were generally only two roles: Instructor and students. Students maintained that this was different than in other communities where leaders emerge. The virtual learning community was less likely to have a “note taker,” “class clown,” or “the politician.” Students believed that the discussion forum allowed for some academic roles to emerge as related to the subject of the discussion. The roles tended to consist of the “first to respond,” the “challenger,” the “cynic,” the “encourager,” and the “academic leader.” Students contended that the instructor role in the discussion was often “absent.” They asserted that the role of the instructor was generally limited to the “grader.” International students appreciated when an instructor took on the role as a member of the community in the discussions. In addition to participation in discussions, international students asserted that when instructors included videos or audio messages,

the instructor role was closer to the “teacher” or “encourager” role and was an active member of the learning community.

The atmosphere in virtual learning. International students also purported that an effective learning community, one that they embraced and wanted to be fully engaged, was one that provided an atmosphere that was “safe” and “respectful.”

A safe atmosphere. With respect to a safe environment students revealed that they wanted to express who they were with photos without fear of how they are perceived. One student stated that he wanted to be able to post his picture “without fear that that they will think I am a terrorist.” However, sharing photos often involved stereotypical responses from others. Students were willing to avoid posting pictures of themselves especially initially in the virtual community to avoid the stereotypes based upon appearance. In most situations, whether or not they posted a picture of themselves was considered a safety choice they could make.

In the discussion forum the international students revealed that the leadership of the virtual learning community contributed to safety, and that lack of leadership made them feel unsafe and extremely guarded. Students contended that virtual learning community for university courses, the instructor created the safe environment within the virtual community. When the instructor was available online and assumed a visible leadership role, students maintain that they felt safe and less likely to be concerned about the perceptions of others both from within and outside of the virtual learning community.

A respectful atmosphere. Students maintained that they wanted to be part of virtual learning communities where a respectful environment was maintained so that the

virtual learning community is free from rudeness and impolite behavior. They desired a community where each student in the virtual learning community contributed to the atmosphere of kindness and mutual respect so that diversity was embraced.

Challenges within the Virtual Learning Community

Students discussed the challenges they face in virtual learning community that are different for their non-virtual learning communities. Students maintained that certain challenges interfere with their opportunity to be themselves online and prevented their virtual peers from knowing who they were and knowing what others thought of them. The international students maintained that if their virtual learning communities for their university courses more closely resembled their other learning communities they would be able to interact better with their virtual classmates. They claimed that “barriers” integral to most virtual learning communities associated with university courses presented challenges. The students maintained that the challenges in virtual learning communities promoted stereotypes, lack interactive tools, and interfere with communication within the virtual learning community.

Stereotypes found within the virtual learning community. Several students revealed that they were confronted with content within the virtual learning community that did not take into account people from other cultures or countries.

Lack of diverse images and example. Often the images and examples with the learning management system represented white, middle-class Americans. Images that were included were primarily white young men and women. Examples used to represent the typical American, student, family, or setting. For example, in the First Year College experience courses, the images and examples involved young, traditional students

moving into the dorms with their families help. The examples also depicted young students meeting students much like themselves rather than meeting students different from themselves. Examples did not include international students moving across continents and traveling to school. The examples did not include non-traditional students traveling with their families to the U.S. nor did the first year course include non-traditional students who had children and spouses. Students stated that these type of images and examples seem to deny who they are and where they are from and their experiences.

Lack of diversity in discussion forum. Students reported a lack of awareness of diverse experiences in the discussion forums. Students described specific questions they were to respond to in the discussion forum, could only be responded to by students from the United States. For example, many questions begin with “From your experience” and were often questions one would experience only in the United States. An example of a discussion prompt that Noor provided from one of her virtual discussions was, “From your experience when you were in school and saying the pledge of allegiance every day, what” Nora explained she and the other international students did not have a frame of reference for this type of question. Noor shared that she tried to respond to the questions by relating it to something similar in their country. She reported that was met with harsh criticism from other students. In other discussion forums, the students shared they would be asked to share their opinion. But when they did share their opinion, others in the community would be upset if their opinion was difference from the norm. The international students reported that while they would be willing to explain or clarify, other students did not respond or appear to hear them. They believed the

instructor was either not aware of the bias or did not care. In either case, students realized that most often there is a lack of understanding cultural differences and cultural differences are never discussed. As a result, students recounted they are frequently reluctant to share their opinion. They conveyed that they begin to respond how they think they should respond rather than genuinely responding to the question. Students reported that these types of situations contribute to why international students feel that other member of the virtual community do not know really them and why they say they do not care how others see them.

Lack of interactive tools. The international students in this study conveyed that they use social networking to connect friends and family on a daily basis when they are in the U. S. All of the students convey that they belong to learning communities that are not associated with university courses to inform and connect with a variety of communities, As a result, learning communities for these students were not a new occurrence for them. Each of them admitted, however, that university learning communities were more restrictive with less opportunity for interaction than other learning communities. All of the students in this study commented on how difficult it was to communicate with others in the learning community.

Dialogue through discussion forum. The students maintained that dialogue in virtual learning communities for university courses is challenging. The students reported that interactions are basically limited to the discussion forums where they are to post responses to questions which limits communication to the subject matter. Students also reported feeling as those the majority of students are interested in posting the required posts that truly engaging in a conversation. Few questions were asked.

International students expressed that it was challenging to explain or clarify a point. Even when they attempted a response that would explain or clarify a point, no one would respond to their post.

Interaction through the chat. In a few virtual communities, students reported they may use the chat tool, but in most other online courses the tool is not available. When the tool is available, it is challenging to “catch” other students who are willing to chat. While students liked using the tool, other students must be logged into the virtual learning platform to reach another student. In addition, invitations to schedule an online chat were rarely accepted.

Social media outside the virtual learning platform. Students conveyed that a major challenge they encountered while engaged in online learning communities in college is inconvenient tools for communication as well as a lack of understanding by their peers and instructors about commonly used methods of communication by international students. Additionally, students mentioned that “how” they use the tools, including how they set up their profile, is often different than domestic students, so their peers often do not find their profile online.

Discussion of Social media tools used by international students. The international students interviewed discussed their use of social media both independent of the online learning community and as a part of the communities they participated in. All students interviewed are currently engaged in social media, though levels of engagement and the purpose of engagement varies, each student related how and in what ways their use of social media impacted their experience in and expectations of online learning communities in college.

First, it is important to note that while all students are now using social media, some did not use social media in their home country and few used what is commonly used in the U.S. like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. For instance Lee, Norah, and Noor conveyed that in China, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, access to these sites is monitored, limited or they are entirely blocked. Because of the lack of access and monitoring, some students used other social media sites such as WeChat and QQ or free unrestricted communication apps like WhatsApp and Tango. Students suggest that just like Facebook is the most popular social media site in the United States, Renren and Weibo are the most commonly used in China. Norah conveyed that in Saudi Arabia, social networking is restricted by strict laws and is often monitored so communicating via apps like WeChat is the next best thing. Students can create a profile and communicate unrestrictedly with friends and family via group chat and individual messaging. Though Facebook is used in Saudi Arabia, students confess that they only publish what is socially acceptable. Women do not show their faces, and in the United States, where students feel more free to post their thoughts, women from Saudi Arabia use pseudonyms to mask their identity in case someone from their home sees the posts to protect themselves, their reputation, and their families.

Social media and the online learning community. Students explained that they were surprised by the lack of social media being used in online learning communities in college courses. The only methods for communication within the online learning community itself were chat and discussion forums. Students stated that this created a disconnect between themselves and their peers since chat, the one form of synchronous communication, was rarely available and the discussion forums did not provide an

opportunity for active dialogue. Students within the learning community did try to connect via social media platforms, but international students were rarely included in the discussions. The international students interviewed said that they were often unaware their classmates had searched for them on Facebook until the end of the course. As a result, much of the dialogue about the course, including group projects and even discussions about the topics, was unavailable to them. Many international students interviewed did not use Facebook, since they use social networking sites common in their home country, and some use pseudonyms when they do use Facebook. Because the international students were often left out of ongoing dialogue since their peers did not know how to find them on Facebook and suggestions for social media were addressed by the instructor. Only one student interviewed, Vi, mentioned social media being used as a recommended part of the course to engage community participants. The instructor for Vi's Spanish Language course required all students to download the free app for Tuenti, a social media app similar to Facebook but used primarily by Spanish speakers, to engage each other in Spanish and other Spanish language speakers. Using this app, students could talk to each other about the course, help each other with assignments, work on group projects, and just talk to each other about their lives while practicing Spanish. Vi described Tuenti as having heavily contributed to her learning and helped her build relationships with other students in the class. Many students from this particular learning community still engage each other on Tuenti.

Changes International Students Experienced in the Virtual Learning Community

International students in the virtual learning communities experienced change as a result of their experiences in the community. Students revealed that at first they were

eager to share their thoughts and opinions on the subject. They were thrilled to have the opportunity to write their thoughts in text format, so they can more clearly and articulately explain their points of view. This type of communication put the students interviewed at ease since they felt, initially, that there might be less chance for miscommunication to occur. They described situations in traditional college classrooms where they were hesitant to speak or were misunderstood when they did speak up, because they had to respond impromptu without having the opportunity to translate what they wanted to say from their thoughts to English. Posting in discussions and chat allowed them the chance to use translation apps and thoughtfully compose what they were going to say and double check it before their classmates and instructor read it. However, the international students that were interviewed stated that though this appealed to them at first, oftentimes they were judged more harshly in the virtual learning community than in a classroom setting.

They attributed the harsh criticism to a lack of understanding of different cultures and a lack of respect for others as human beings. Since much of what they post in a virtual discussion is based on their understanding of the course material in relationship to or through the lens of their culture, including traditions and beliefs, their points of view were often radically different than domestic students in the virtual learning community. In a physical classroom, the fact that they were an international student was more obvious due to accent and classroom introductions. Also, since they were “looking their classmates in the eye”, they felt they were “shown more kindness and respect.” Whereas, online, they were not. As a result, students reported that they changed how and with what frequency they communicated. Many began to not express

their personal opinion and expressed what they thought others would agree with. They also responded less to their classmates, opting to only respond to the minimum number of posts required in the course. Students revealed that this created an atmosphere where they did not feel they could be themselves online for fear of criticism. The few students that continued to share their unfiltered opinions often developed resentment for their peers and for their instructor, who they felt was not supportive.

Summary of Findings

The findings revealed four themes concerning the “I” and the “Me” within the students’ experiences with the virtual learning community. The first theme involved the ethnic “I” identity concerning how students viewed themselves. The second theme involved the ethnic “Me” identity as it included students’ perception of how others viewed them. The third dealt with the virtual ethnic “Me” identity, which involved the students’ perception of how virtual peers viewed them. The fourth theme related to the virtual ethnic “I” identity, which depicted how students saw themselves online in the virtual learning community.

The findings also revealed three subthemes that together influenced the virtual ethnic identity for International students. The identity sub-themes included: Community, challenges, and change. Ultimately, the virtual ethnic “I” identity and virtual ethnic “Me” identity formed the international students’ virtual ethnic identity. This formation was seen through the issues involved with the community, the challenges that were confronted online, and the changes students made due to the challenges they encountered.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Interpretive Analysis of the Identity of International Students in Virtual Learning Communities

The analysis of the findings focuses on international students' experiences in virtual learning communities. Specifically, this chapter analyzes how international students' experiences in virtual learning communities influence their identity. This chapter analyzes how and in what ways the students' identity in virtual learning communities is influenced by social factors, cultural factors, and discourse through computer-mediated communication with peers and instructors.

The findings from the interview are analyzed according to how students made sense of their identity in relation to their interpretation of interactions within the virtual learning community (Blumer, 2004). Symbolic interaction is used to understand the identity of international students in a virtual learning community by identifying the ethnic "I" identity and detecting the ethnic "Me" identity.

Given the findings of international students' ethnic virtual "I" identity and virtual ethnic "Me" identity, the analysis reveals four barriers to identity development in the virtual learning communities. These barriers include 1) social barriers, 2) cultural barriers 3) virtual learning tools barriers, and 4) dialogue barriers. More specifically, the analysis suggests that social barriers influence how acculturation occurs in virtual learning communities similar to how it does in other communities; however, specific aspects of acculturation barriers are brought to the forefront in the virtual learning community. In addition, the analysis reveals additional barriers concerning virtual tools within the learning management system. The virtual platform often lacks tools or has

features that go unused for virtual interaction. These tools could facilitate an interactive learning environment that is vital to the virtual ethnic “I-Me.” In addition, the analysis of the findings reveals that these barriers occur because dialogue and transactions are vital to identity in virtual learning communities as it is with other learning communities. Further analysis of students’ experiences reveals virtual acculturation stressors when social and dialogue barriers were present within the virtual learning community. The stressors involve virtual dialogue stressors and virtual safety stressors. However, quality interactions within the virtual learning community can reduce the virtual stressors for international students.

Virtual Barriers to Identity Development in Virtual Learning Communities

Cross (1981) identified three main barriers to adult participation in higher education. The barriers involve situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Cross developed the well-known chain-of-response model to demonstrate how learners respond to internal and external events connected with participation in higher education. Silva and colleagues (1991) also revealed barriers to education for working adults. These barriers included lack of time for education, family responsibilities, scheduling the course in a location, and the cost of education. Ritt (2008) summarized barriers to education for non-traditional students as location, family commitments and activity schedules, work schedules, inconsistent childcare services, financial limitations, past experiences in college, and fear of returning to school. Overall, these barriers involved issues concerning caregiving for a child, grandchild or elderly parents, funding for care giving services, funding for college, paying for student loans, time away from family, and accessibility factors related to location and time. For traditional students, barriers

reportedly involved concerns about personal ability to time management and money (Mbilinyi, 2006).

The analysis indicates specific virtual barriers that pose challenges to students attending colleges and universities. These barriers have been shown to impede persistence and success, especially for non-traditional students. The analysis of this study reveals four barriers to identity development in the virtual learning communities in higher education. However, these virtual barriers for international students in virtual learning communities differ from the barriers identified in the literature for traditional and non-traditional students.

In relation to international students' virtual ethnic "I" identity and virtual ethnic "Me" identity in virtual learning communities, the analysis reveals four barriers to identity development in the virtual learning communities in university courses. The virtual barriers for international students include 1) virtual social barriers, 2) virtual cultural barriers, 3) virtual learning tools barriers, and 4) virtual dialogue barriers. Each virtual barrier encumbers students' "I"- "Me" development, especially their virtual "I"- "Me" development.

Virtual Social Barriers

The interactive nature of the "I"- "Me" development, requires the opportunity for social interaction (Mead, 1934, 1967). With the three principles of symbolic interaction, meaning, language, and thought, each person forms an interpretation to imagine how they appear to others. For international students, when others in the virtual community fail to respond or briefly respond to introductions, discussion posts, or assignments it becomes difficult or not possible to form an interpretation of

how they appear to others. According to transactional analysis, what occurs between people is more important than within individuals (Berne, 1964). According to the transactional model, when individuals communicate a transaction occurs (Wood, 2012). Because of this, the opportunity to interact with others within a community is important. The interpretations that one makes when a transaction occurs provide the definition of the situation and are used to predict expectations of others as well as form the identity of one's self. Interpretations also help explain one's role in the community, dispel stereotypes, and help create alternate definitions of one's self. The stereotypes that community members made concerning Norah were derived from the fact that she was from Saudi Arabia. Others assumed she was oppressed, but through transactional interactions assumptions changed amongst her classmates that interacted with her; they began to see her as "positive, funny and strong." Through transactions and reflections on those transactions, Angelina's role in her communities transformed from "student athlete" to an academic leader who achieved for "academic excellence."

Furthermore, the structure of the community needs to allow for flexibility about how transactions take place. Stryker (2004) contends that when interactive opportunities are flexible, individuals have more options in terms of identity. Within a social structure of a community, students' sense of self becomes dependent on the successful portrayal of their identity (Stryker, Serpe, & Hunt, 2005). This analysis reveals that in the virtual learning community the flexibility of how and what ways transactions occur impacts the students' sense of identity. Amarraj made friends easily in his virtual learning communities. Amarraj friends were made not only through the

directed discussions in the learning management system, but friendships were formed through online communication with classmates using social media tools that allowed for more flexibility to maintain the continuity of the conversations.

The virtual learners' sense of identity that forms by connecting with others is impeded initially in the virtual community when others do not respond to their introductions. Virtual international students also have difficulty predicting expectations of others when there is little to no opportunity for social interaction with non-subject-matter discussion forums in addition to few responses to their comments on the discussion board. Mulenga admitted to "feeling powerless online" because she felt she is not listened to when others do not respond to her replies or posts in the discussion forum. Akyol, Garrison, and Ozden (2009) maintain that students value social presence as a means to "share ideas, to express views, and to collaborate" (p. 76). For international students' identity development, lack of social presence creates a barrier to social interaction, but also interferes with the development of the "Me" with little opportunity to experience how others viewed them. Mulenga wants to work more with her classmates online as a group but because of limited social presence of her classmates and instructors she becomes more withdrawn and shy because she felt she was "not known by others." As a result, limited social presence interfered with the development of Mulenda's "Me" with little opportunity to experience how others viewed her.

In addition to limited interaction, critical interaction takes the form of judgment and criticism. As a result, unsuccessful transactions occur where individuals are communicating at different levels rather than engaging in successful complementary

transactions (Bernes, 1964). To illustrate unsuccessful transactions, Mulenga often encountered prejudice online and felt powerless to stand up to herself when others did not respond to her explanations or clarifications. Also, Mulenga felt powerless because she perceived lack of support from her instructors. She believed instructors “don’t care” and if they did care they did not “understand what was happening” so they were unaware of the need to intervene. Raj, who described himself as “imaginative young gentleman,” is another example of the cost of unsuccessful transaction. Raj expressed the desire to have opportunity to share more about his culture since this would enable others to see more of who he was and why he believed as he does. This analysis revealed that limited social presence with unsuccessful transactions influenced Raj’s development of the virtual “Me” and his ability to form a new virtual “I” because how he was viewed by others online was limited.

Discussion of virtual social barriers. As discussed in the literature review, social presence involves the “the ability of participants to identify with the students in the course of study, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of protecting their individual personalities” (Garrison, 2009). Social presence creates opportunity for students to establish a pattern of interaction within a virtual learning community among a community of learners (Stein et al., 2007). Stein and colleagues (2007) contend that students familiarize themselves through social presence and position themselves to understand better the subject content as each person contribute to the dialogue. When this social presence occurs, the transaction between students in the virtual community is an example of complimentary transactions where individuals communicate adult to adult.

In addition, students appreciated the opportunity to interact with text, chat, or video conference and responded to it in real time through questions to gain increased understanding. According to Stein and colleagues (2007) group interaction enables shared understanding. Based upon the finding of this study, international students in the virtual learning community appreciated opportunity for interaction. Opportunity for transactions gave these students the opportunity to experience how they were viewed by others, thus contributing to the development of the “Me” within the virtual learning community. Likewise, lack of interaction or complimentary transaction limited identity development.

In this study, when students experienced limited virtual transactions or interactions, social barriers for international students in virtual learning communities occur. The literature concerning virtual learning communities revealed a model of instructional immediacy for online learning that incorporate instructor and student immediacy (LaRose & Whitten, 2000). Immediacy involves the interactions between instructor-students and students-student presence within the virtual community. This study indicates that instructor and student immediacy provide transactions among students within the virtual community. The literature indicates that interactions among students gives rise to social presence and facilitates the development of identity in a virtual learning community (Eberson, 2012). Virtual immediacy transactions, as described by the international students, provide interactions for students that give rise to social presence and facilitates the development of identity in a virtual learning community. This study also suggests that limited virtual immediacy transactions creates social barriers for social presence and impedes the development of identity in

a virtual learning community.

Virtual Cultural Barriers

The literature reveals that students may become more culturally aware and change assumptions previously held with ample student interactions in learning environments (Martin, 2012; Wood, 2012, Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Tinto, 2013). This study suggests that when international students have opportunity to interact with other students in the virtual learning community, the students in the community become more culturally aware, change assumptions and let go of stereotypes previously held. They not only gain knowledge within the community, but cultural awareness increases as assumptions change, transformation occurs as students' sense of self evolves. Eduardo realized that virtual peers often made the assumption that he was "spoiled" when in truth he has worked hard for what he has accomplished. Eduardo believed that this assumption was partially grounded in the stereotype that when an international student pursues the arts they must have the "means" or financial support from their family. When Eduardo met people online, he felt they get to know him better because of how he introduced himself in text and shared the links to his website with pictures that revealed his art. For Eduardo, the stereotypical judgments are often dispelled when fellow students can learn about his "story."

While the analysis reveals that interaction can have a positive impact, the analysis more predominately reveals that the lack of opportunity to increase cultural awareness and change assumptions creates virtual cultural barriers. We know that learning communities involve students from various backgrounds and cultures who may initially struggle with diversity (Karuppan & Baran, 2011; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung,

2007). Struggles are compounded by stereotypes and discrimination that create barriers and oppression in the educational environment (Karuppan, 2011; Martin, 2011). This study confirms that virtual cultural barriers emerge when stereotypes and discrimination occur. Kittie, from Hungary, felt stereotyped by her appearance and sexual orientation. She realized that these stereotypes created barriers that prevented people from getting to know and trust her. Norah is Muslim from Saudi Arabia and realized she is most often viewed through the stereotypical lens of being “oppressed” and “subservient” to her husband. Norah believes these assumptions interferes with others getting to know that she is intelligent, earned an academic scholarship, and has ambition of her own, with intuitive and perceptive ideas that form opinions of her own. Also, Norah is married and objects to the assumption that she is “subservient” in her marriage. She asserted that she has a strong voice in the relationship. Raj, a student from Malaysia, often experienced prejudice in virtual learning communities, which hindered his ability to collaborate on assignments. Amarraj, another student from Malaysia who practices the Sikhism, felt that stereotypes and discrimination created barriers and oppression in his learning communities. Amarraj reported that he was viewed as “aggressive” and an extremist because he was “tall, big, dark, bearded and wears a turban.” Because he wears a turban, he is considered a Muslim. Being considered a Muslim often seems to support the stereotype that he is a possible terrorist. Amarraj, as well as the other students who confronted stereotypical beliefs and discrimination in the virtual learning communities, conveyed that assumptions about who they are created cultural barriers that interfered with interactions in the virtual learning community and prevented others from knowing who they truly are.

While analysis of this study confirms these issues, it also reveals that interpersonal and cultural issues also arise from others within their own culture. Bonk (2011) contends that those involved in virtual learning communities within higher education need to be prepared to bring students together from not only different groups with different traditional customs within the virtual community, but also from separate groups with similar traditional customs within the digital world to participate in joint activity in virtual learning communities. Noor, an international student from Iraq was confronted with cultural barriers from those within her culture. While Noor was initially comfortable online and felt secure sharing her thoughts with classmates in the virtual learning community, she became careful about what she posts online. She does not show pictures of herself online since men from the Middle East harassed her because she showed her face online. In many Middle Eastern countries, it is “taboo” for a woman to show her uncovered face. For example, Noor was scrutinized by other students from Middle Eastern cultures. While her culture does not believe her face should be covered, she now uses an avatar rather than a picture of herself so that she does not offend other Middle Eastern Muslim men in the community for fear it could intervene with her prospects for marriage as well as her sisters.

Discussion of virtual cultural barriers. While some virtual communities give individuals the ability to be free from stereotypes and the pressure of social norms they confront in face-to-face interactions (Adrian, 2008; Junglas et al., 2007), international students are often confronted with additional pressures from those within their own culture who are concerned they may abandon their cultural values and traditions. These cultural barriers greatly impacted students’ identity development in

virtual learning communities.

For example, some of the cultural barriers were due to the use of formal and informal language. Often, students relied on the use of formal greetings and responses when communicating with their peers. Use of formal greetings was usually met with their peers confronting them, telling them they sounded angry or pretentious. Since the international students, many of whom come from cultures where formality is a sign of respect, did not understand some of the unwritten guidelines of communication with classmates, they either retreated from further dialogue, were hurt and offended, or tried to communicate more casually. Those who communicated less with their classmates felt that because they were not sharing their thoughts as often, they were not heard in the online community. Students who took offense to being called out, so to speak, by their classmates began to act more defensively which exacerbated the situation, leaving them feeling isolated and increasingly misunderstood. In both scenarios, international students' virtual ethnic "Me" identity became so dramatically different than their ethnic "Me" identity, that continuing in future virtual learning communities seemed daunting since the ethnic "I" was inconsistent with their virtual ethnic identity. Their "I" was no longer a part of their virtual ethnic "Me" identity and their new virtual "I" that formed.

Many students became concerned about their reputation with other students and faculty outside the community. When some students attempted to speak more casually with their peers, they were usually accepted back into the fold but were still left feeling shocked by the experience. They were trying to show respect to their peers and instructor by using formal language, yet when the virtual community concluded,

they felt that they had been disrespected. Others, after having recognized it as a cultural misunderstanding and adapted to a more casual way of communicating online, began to feel that their virtual ethnic “I” identity and their virtual ethnic “Me” identity were more closely related. However, it is important to note, that regardless of how the international students responded to the situation, all agreed that more dialogue would have facilitated their identity development. More specifically, if they had been able to reveal themselves more fully through increased dialogue, their virtual ethnic “I” identity would have in turn helped develop their virtual ethnic “Me” identity. Consequently, community members’ reactions to cultural misunderstanding would not have been as severe and would likely not have interfered with their identity development.

This study suggests that when cultural norms and values are not known and understood by members of the virtual community misunderstandings may create cultural barriers. As Bonk (2009) contends, the virtual or “digital” culture of virtual learning communities is a culture unto itself, which at times requires culture crossing. Similarly, in this study when the community members have difficulty with internal and external culture crossing as discussed in the literature review, international students experience cultural barriers. This study suggests that international students experience an external culture crossing when they initially try to interact in discussions in the virtual learning environment. Also, because education is a culture unto itself, an internal culture crossing is even more cumbersome for international students when virtual interactions are limited and understanding of learning goals and activities are unclear. According to Giroux (2012), the most critical aspect of the

digital culture is the ability to use critical thought about content viewed or transactions exchanged online. As the virtual community becomes immersed in online interactions, critical thinking about the comments that are posted and dialogue that occurs is vital to students' ability to avoid stereotypes and discrimination. These ideas suggest that when social presence gives the opportunity for meaningful interaction but can expose the participant to discrimination.

Virtual Learning Tool Barriers

As discussed in the literature review social presence is defined as “the ability of participants in the community of inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to others as “real people” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). However, an analysis of the findings reveal that certain tools within the virtual learning community create barriers for international students. The analysis confirms that some virtual courses provide students with sophisticated interactive tools. For many of the interactive tools, such as online profiles and discussion forums, interfere with the development of the virtual learning community for international students because of how the profiles and discussions are used. In addition, the analysis suggests that the lack of use of familiar social media tools such as Twitter, blogs, Facebook, and other apps utilized within a virtual learning community creates barriers.

The use of communication tools within the learning system platform such as discussion forums and profiles are what Goffman (1963) referred to as the “front stage.” Different apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp, FaceTime, and WeChat are considered the “back stage.” According to Goffman (1963), fronts are consciously generated while the

back stage is more responsive. The “back stage” is where international students appear to engage in informal dialogue. The “back stage” is also where students view their virtual “I-Me” that they suppress on “front stage.”

Discussion of virtual learning tool barriers. The analysis also revealed that international students in the virtual community felt confined by virtual learning tool barriers. Turkle (2012) maintains that social media tools, when integrated effectively, provides an increased online social presence and allows for greater interaction for online students. The analysis reveals that international students within the virtual learning communities desire the use of social media tools to engage in dialogue. Specifically, international students want to have tools available that allow for them to connect to other classmates so they can get to know other virtual members. Chaeyeon, a student from South Korea, maintains that she is not “heard” in an online discussion forum and chat room. Yechan admits limiting communication with community members because the online discussion forum does not allow him to know his peers. Likewise, Lee insists that in online discussions others do not try to “know” him or “really care” about what he posts. Lee maintains that this is in contrast to his online interactions with friends using other multiple social media tools such as Facebook and WeChat where he can be himself through texts, photos, and status updates. Amarraj uses multiple forms of social media outside of the learning management system to connect with others in his virtual learning community, because the use of the discussion forum provided by the virtual learning community limits communication and does not allow for explanations and questions as well as the opportunity to come to know one another.

In relation to virtual learning communities, it would be useful if student profiles could represent the “I.” Instead of standing in isolation, profiles could receive “likes” and “comments” could function as “signals” that inform students that interactions are taking place. In addition, homepages in virtual learning communities can easily be transformed by embedding links to other forms of social media that facilitate the interaction. In a virtual learning community, web links to the social media tools such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts specific to the community, and personal webpages could also be embedded as interactional places. If instructors, acting as facilitators in these communities, provided links and encouraged the use of specific social media tools, then the students in the community could have access to ongoing dialogue by community members. These links can allow community members to increase interaction that may facilitate identity construction. By doing this, students’ homepages can more accurately represent the “I” that anticipates the other community members’ reactions while also creating the “Me.” When these tools are used to strengthen the “I,” the homepage does not rest in isolation but becomes part of the virtual identity development process. Selecting what links to include and what is disclosed within homepage and through the various internet tools, the user can decide what to disclose.

With this in mind because of the social nature of virtual learning communities, faculty, facilitators, and students must have better access to virtual learning tools that allow them to communicate with those in the learning community. Effective communication in virtual learning communities involves access to the tools, integration of the tools within the virtual learning environment, and integration of the tools in the

formation of the assignments. Therefore, in the 21st century virtual classroom the use of different forms of social media must be increased and made more available in order to create the interactive educational environment that facilitates communities of learners who are accustomed to easy access to social media tools.

Virtual Dialogue Barriers

The analysis reveals that students perceive barriers to dialogue within the virtual learning community. This analysis is consistent with symbolic interaction theory and the importance of dialogue to constructing meaning (Blumer, 2004). Researchers maintain that virtual communities give individuals opportunity to explore their identity beyond what they may explore in face-to-face dialogue because the virtual learning community allows members to explore freely many facets of personality (Cabiria, 2008; Ebersole, 2012). According to Junglas and colleagues (2007), interaction in virtual communities provides opportunity for identity development. However, according to the analysis of this study of international students, dialogue needs to be safe, responsive, and continual, as well as include more opportunity for inquiry.

Safe dialogue. The analysis reveals that in order to feel safe in virtual interactions in the virtual learning community they need a code of conduct. The code of conduct appears to relate to guidelines about how students are to respond to one another, address each other, and disagree with each other, as well as when and how often students should respond to each other. These issues relate to discussion guidelines and rules of Netiquette that are occasionally communicated to participants in the virtual learning community, but are not always posted. For international students, the Netiquette guidelines need to be included in the virtual learning community, and the

instructor must reinforce the guidelines in order for international students to feel safe. In the learning communities where rules for behavior online were made clear and reinforced, international students felt informed about how they should communicate, because they had a sense of security when talking to other students. This is not to say, that issues did not arise because of differing or opposing viewpoints about the topics being discussed or that misunderstanding did not occur, but rather that when a situation did arise they felt empowered to refer to the guidelines and request assistance, if needed, from an instructor. However, often times, the instructor did not enforce the Netiquette guidelines or responded to the situation with such delay that the international students' virtual ethnic "Me" identity was so damaged that resolution of any kind came too late. This caused the virtual ethnic "I" identity and even the ethnic "I" identity to suffer. With instructor presence, the instructor supported the international students by holding other students accountable to Netiquette, their virtual ethnic "I" identity and their virtual ethnic "Me" identity continued to positively develop over time in the community since they felt that they could safely engage in the dialogue, clarify their point of view and pursue the opportunity to be understood. Yechan acknowledges that when the members of the online learning community have the same goals and understand the guidelines for the community then he is comfortable to being actively engaged in discussion where he shares his thoughts freely and is not concerned about "being wrong from time to time." However, he admits that when the code of conduct is not clearly outlined, he is reluctant to "reveal too much" and remains guarded. Mulenga contends that rules of conduct are not clearly outlined, discussed, or enforced. She insists that instructors remain too aloof and allow students to impose their prejudices

online. Because of this she interacts as little as possible and describes herself as “withdrawn” in the virtual learning community. The rules provide these students with a sense of safety which is particularly important for students who come from countries in which different forms of social media are restricted and monitored. As a result, knowing the rules concerning how to engage in a discussion forum is very important for international students.

Responsive dialogue. Students in this study indicated that rather than brief responses more conversation is needed with opportunity to have others respond to what they say. The international students come to the U. S. to study but also to interact with others from their host country. As a result, when international students’ discussion responses do not receive a response, it frustrates them. International students learn from the interaction they receive from others in their host country. Therefore, the number of posts and the associated grades often means less to them than it does for other students from the host country. Instead, international students look forward to others’ responses to their posts. In fact, international students yearn for a response to what they post and feedback about how they did in their assignments. They are interested in what their peers think about their papers, projects, and ideas. Without responses to their post, the international students’ virtual ethnic “I” identity and their virtual ethnic “Me” identity do not develop in the virtual community since interaction is required. Likewise, limited responsiveness caused the virtual ethnic “I” identity and the ethnic “I” identity to withdraw or draw conclusions about their sense of self based upon rejection and negative assumptions. Norah feels that in virtual learning communities members do not “truly know” each other and do not come to “know” her. She contends that interactions

focus on task completion rather than true responsiveness to thoughts and ideas. Mulenga shares that oftentimes students and instructors provide little response and sometimes do not reply at all to her comments or questions. She often finds it difficult to “make people listen” and to help them understand what she was communicating because of the lack of response she receives. Amarraj maintains that overcoming prejudice and interacting on any subject cannot occur through directed discussions where there are little to no meaningful replies to what was posted or when others do not respond to what was said. Because of this Amarraj pursues building relationships with community members through social media where his peers freely respond. Lee also finds that discussion forums lack responses that are conducive to showing genuine care and interest because of limited to no response to comments in discussion posts. However, Lee like Amarraj maintains that he freely engages with others in social media. Amarraj, Lee, and Eduardo maintain that social media provides platforms where others can respond freely anytime and anywhere on mobile devices. It appears that the process of logging into learning management systems and lack of user-friendly apps in the learning management system interferes with the responsiveness.

Continual dialogue. In addition to their need for more responsiveness, international students want opportunity for continual dialogue in the virtual education environment. It appears that continual dialogue is vital to the development of identity for international students. The more dialogue that ensues the more international students feel known, the more they understand how others perceive them, and the more they can reflect on others perceptions. While the structure of virtual learning provides many learners with solutions to barriers as related to transportation, control over time change,

and pace of learning, the international students feel that the virtual learning community creates barriers. Since they come to the host country for an education, the asynchronous pace and lag in response time creates communication barriers that impede their desire for a more engaged, continuous dialogue. As a result international students are not able to gauge what others are thinking about them and their ideas making it difficult to form a new virtual ethnic “Me” which they need to form a new virtual ethnic “I” from their experiences in the virtual community.

Lack of continual dialogue that occurs in virtual learning communities at colleges and universities was a factor for each of the participants. Rather than the nature of the dialogue driving the continuation of a dialogue, it appears that the required number of posts, if there were any, dictated how often students responded or if they responded at all for most online discussions. Brief responses, abrupt end to the dialogue, and no responses to their posts do not allow students to know what others are thinking. When interactions are not continual in a virtual learning, the process of virtual identity development, forming a new virtual “Me” to form a new virtual “I,” is difficult. Forming the new virtual “Me” with opportunity to form a new virtual “I” came primarily for the students who pursued continual dialogue outside of the virtual learning platform with use of social media tools with other members of the virtual learning community.

Inquiry. In relation to the opportunity for continuous dialogue, the international students want more opportunity for inquiry. They want the opportunity to ask questions and have their questions answered. Virtual learning communities involve discussions aimed at providing students with the opportunity to engage each other on the topics

being explored. However, according to the international students interviewed most of the discussions fall short of dialogue with little chance to ask questions or have questions answered. This appears to be due to several factors, such as a requirement for responses to other students' discussion posts that only oblige a comment to each other's posts rather than questions to illicit further discussion as well as narrowly focused discussions that do not provide students with the opportunity for inquiry on topics of personal interest related to the community's goals. International students have a strong desire for the opportunity to ask questions, and want their classmates to pose questions to them about their opinions or experiences. This would give international students the opportunity to share how they came to believe what they do. Sharing their culture, religion and experience with politics provides international students with the opportunity to have more control over their virtual ethnic "Me" identity and would help develop a virtual ethnic "I" identity that is more reflective of their ethnic "I-Me" identity. International students engaged in the virtual learning communities desire not only the opportunity to discuss the course material through actual dialogue where they can ask each other questions and respond to the questions posed by their peers, they want this exchange to occur in a timely manner. Since discussions on the discussion board are asynchronous, students want their classmates to be encouraged or required to respond to others' posts within a shorter timeframe so the dialogue can be continual and responsive.

Positive identity development was evident among the students who took initiative to use social media tools with other members of the virtual learning community. To illustrate, Eduardo's virtual ethnic "Me" identity of being viewed by

others as a hardworking, talented artist developed his virtual ethnic “I” identity of being a capable artist pursuing a career in art. His virtual ethnic “I” identity was reflective of his virtual ethnic “I-Me” identity of an emerging artist with a valued work ethic. When interactions are not continual in virtual learning, the process of virtual identity development, forming a new virtual “Me” to form a new virtual “I,” is difficult.

Discussion of virtual dialogue barriers. Dewey (1938) sees educational community interaction as continual and interactive. Christiansen and Ramadevi (2002) maintain that learners with a community “learn, grow, and develop in ways that isolated individuals” find impossible (p. 117). According to the analysis of this study, students develop as they engage in dialogue with others in the virtual learning community because they can know what others think about what they say and how they live as well as learn about others from what they say about what they think, do, and believe. Without this opportunity, the students maintain that they do not grow and learn from their experience within the virtual community. Berry holds (2004) that instructional immediacy reduces the barrier associated with a lack of meaningful interactions which is critical to the acculturation process for international students. With respect to the virtual learning community, it appears that communication immediacy would allow for greater identity development. The assumption is that identity changes as individuals interact with people from cultural different from their identity (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007; Schwartz et. al, 2010, 2013). It appears international students appreciate the interaction. They also miss interaction when it is not available. It appears that their “Virtual Ethnical “Me” lacks opportunity to sense how others perceive them; therefore, a new “Me” is not allowed

to form, and as a result the virtual “I” is impacted as well.

According to Mead (1934), identity develops in relation to the “I” and “Me” and is constructed through recurrent interactions with others. Mead maintains that the self is essentially social and cognitive which begins and develops as one interacts with others. Berger & Luckmann (1966) maintain that dialogue is fundamental to the development of the self and through the interaction that occurs with dialogue one begins to understand and take on the perspective of others. Mead (1982) identifies this as an “emergent property” and asserts that we consciously are aware of how the interaction forms our attitudes and actions with others. Interactions with others are how students come to know themselves. The international student self occurs in relationship to specific “others” and is referred to as “Me,” which in turn forms the new “I.”

International students in virtual learning communities search for these virtual interactions. It is the dialogue from one time to the next that international student’s desire. Mead (1962) maintains that there is “. . . a demand, a constant demand, to realize one’s self” (p. 205). In relation to international students studying in a virtual learning community, student’s “creative response” of the “Me” forms a new “I” only when the virtual learning community provides opportunity for continuous dialogue that allows for inquiry and responsive to the dialogue process. Based upon Mead’s theory, the international student’s “I” consists of the response to the other student in the virtual learning community, and the “Me” becomes a set of attitudes of others within their learning community.

Virtual Identity Stressors

As a result of changes that occur when living in a new culture, international students generally encounter stress that refers to difficulties international students come across as they adjust to living in a new country. These difficulties are identified as acculturation stressors (Mori, 2000; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008). The stressors are identified as language, educational, and sociocultural stressors that include discrimination and racism that may be experienced in the host country (Dao et al., 2007). International students in virtual learning communities who experienced social connections through compute-mediated communication with others experienced fewer acculturation stressors. However, analysis of students' experiences reveals virtual dialogue stressors and virtual safety stressors when social and dialogue barriers were present within the virtual learning community.

Virtual dialogue stressors. In this study, language difficulty was not identified as a barrier for international students. Rather, limited opportunity to engage in dialogue in virtual learning communities appeared to be a major virtual acculturation dialogue stressor for international students because of the barriers in engaging in dialogue with the instructor and other students in the virtual learning community. Dialogue stressors involve limited discussions, the lack or limited feedback, lack of inquiry, the lack of response to questions, the lack of continual dialogue, and limited responsiveness by other community members. The dialogue stressors appeared to be due in part to lack of virtual learning communication tools or limited use of social media. The dialogue stressors also appeared to be due in part to lack of cultural awareness on the part of international students as well as non-international students. Lack of instructor presence

seemed also to contribute to dialogue stressors. As a result, the dialogue stressor contributes to other education and social stressors. The virtual barriers interfered with academic success because of lack of continual and responsive dialogue creating social and cultural barriers. It appears that academic performance in virtual learning communities had less to do with English proficiency and more to do with opportunity for interaction in the virtual learning community. When instructor presence was experienced in introductions, discussions, and weekly messages, the international students felt less stress in virtual learning communities and more connected to the community. With increased social presence throughout the virtual learning community, the international students experience less stress. With limited social presence, the students experienced more dialogue stressors.

Virtual safety stressors. Discrimination and racism have also been experienced as acculturation stressors. As a result, students report feelings of fear and inferiority (Lee & Rice, 2007). International students reported that experiences of discrimination led to anxiety and feelings of marginalization. The analysis revealed that instructor presence in the virtual learning community reduced the stress. Another factor that reduced anxiety in the virtual learning community was a “code of conduct” that is discussed by the instructor or established within a discussion. When instructors acknowledge how students within the learning community are to interact with one another, it was easier to trust others and build relationships in the virtual learning community. International students who had instructors who established Netiquette guidelines felt less stress than they did when Netiquette guidelines were not discussed or enforced.

Virtual Barriers and Stressors in Relation to Social Presence

The analysis reveals four virtual barriers to identity development in the virtual learning communities: 1) virtual social barriers, 2) virtual cultural barriers, 3) virtual learning tools barriers, and 4) virtual dialogue barriers. Further analysis of students' experiences revealed virtual acculturation stressors when social, cultural and dialogue barriers were present within the virtual learning community. The stressors involve virtual dialogue stressors and virtual safety stressors. The analysis also revealed how interaction within the virtual learning community can reduce the virtual stressors for international students. It appears that each aspect of the barriers and stressors in virtual learning communities for international students involves the extent of social presence in the virtual community.

Recall, social presence involves a sense of community and is reliant upon continual interaction among community members. According to Garrison (2009), social presence involves “. . . the ability of participants to identify with the students in the course of study, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal” (p. 96). Social presence is described as a “level of awareness of the co-presence of another human, being or intelligence” (Biocca & Nowak, 2001, p. 28). Garrison (2000) defined social presence within the virtual learning community as the ability of students “to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people” (p. 94). Picciano (2002) maintains that social presence involves student's perceptions of being in and belonging in an online community. In this study, lack of social presence gave rise to barriers and stressors for international students that impeded students' identity development.

Identity development for international students who have different cultures and linguistic backgrounds other than their host country require social presence within the virtual community since identity is constructed through interaction with others. Mead (1934) contends that interactions occur throughout one's life in social contexts. Social context in the virtual learning communities requires social presence. According to Turkle (2002), virtual learning communities can provide an abundance of opportunity for dialogical interactions in both social and educational contexts from which identity can be explored. However, if the virtual communities lack social presence dialogical interactions are limited. Since identity, according to Mead (1934), involves the "I" and "Me" as segments of the self that occurs when one interacts with others in different social contexts, social presence provides the opportunity for identity development for international students in the context of virtual learning communities. This research indicates that international student's identity development and changes of the "I" and "Me" in virtual learning communities is restricted by virtual barriers and stressors that occur when social presence is limited. Likewise, international student's identity development in relation to the "I" and "Me" in virtual learning communities is supported by social presence and as a result limits or reduces the effects of virtual barriers and stressors.

Virtual Barriers and Stressors in Relation to Acculturation

The process and the effect of acculturation is an important factor in a multicultural society, especially in universities. This study confirms that acculturation is also an important factor in virtual learning communities. Acculturation can be seen at multiple levels for international students. At the societal level, it often results in

changes to culture, customs, and social institutions; ". . . changes induced by cross-cultural imitation" (Powell, 1877, p. 8). This interaction is seen at the individual level such as the international student studying in the host country. The contact between how the international student is received in the host country and how the international student perceives their new host country is the process of acculturation. For instance, an international student might be welcomed and embraced by a community of other students at the university interested in mutual cultural exchange making the transition to the host country's customs with greater ease than the student who might be expected to join in the customs and values in order to be part of a community of the new country. When a student not feel that the virtual community does not see them for who they are but sees them through stereotypes the renegotiate virtual "I" withdraws making the process of acculturation a difficult one. This can have a negative impact on identity develop. On the other hand if a student's virtual experience is interactive, the student renegotiates the virtual "I" as part of a community in their host country.

Conclusion and Implications

International students studying in the United States who have linguistic backgrounds other than English face various challenges and barriers when participating in virtual learning communities. These challenges create barriers that can slow, interrupt, and at times impede students' identity development. The virtual ethnic "I" identity development is dependent on the virtual ethnic "Me" identity. If the "Me" identity in the virtual learning community is not present or is in direct conflict with the ethnic "I" identity, then the virtual ethnic "I" identity cannot evolve. To facilitate the

renegotiation of the virtual ethnic “I” identity, social presence must be encouraged, supported, and continuous within the virtual learning community.

To enhance social presence, instructors need to create an environment where trust is established to foster a sense of safety online in the community. To do this, a clear set of Netiquette guidelines is required. This set of guidelines is best determined by the instructor, taking into account the goals of the community, methods of communication, and duration of the course. That said, the guidelines need to include descriptions and examples of how to communicate, which online mediums to use, and by what frequency.

Developing trust includes guidelines regarding respect for differences and inquiry. These guidelines must be stated and enforced. Rules for respect of differences can include but are not limited to criteria for respect of differences of points of view, cultural norms, and appearance. Points of view can vary widely based on experiences at home, in the community, and in society at large. Students need to be aware that others in the learning community may have experiences vastly different than their own that inform their understanding, opinion, and application of course content. In addition to awareness, respect for others does not mean they must concede their beliefs or fain agreement, but instead they need to listen, ask non-judgmental questions, and consider new information. This can contribute to critical thinking since this process allows students to learn, question, reevaluate, and develop or maintain their beliefs before applying what they know. Basically, they can consider how they know what they know, in short their epistemology. Consequently, cultural norms will be more easily discussed when students feel comfortable discussing their experiences. Reevaluating assumptions

about race, culture, and religion, to name a few, can come about more naturally when students feel free to share their life experiences and how said experiences impact their lives. Applying critical thought to assumptions about cultural norms can aid in dispelling stereotypes. New information about other cultures can also contribute to greater understanding and a more comprehensive worldview. By understanding cultural norms, the way in which students appear or not appear to each other in online profiles may be more understood. For instance, in some cultures, women cannot appear in online photographs beyond puberty. Consequently, they use an avatar to represent themselves instead of a picture of themselves in online profiles. This is not an attempt to hide or an act of shame. Rather, they are respecting their own culture by not posting a picture of themselves online. In other cultures, it is not typical to smile in a picture. Without knowledge of cultural differences and respect for what is different, others may think students are unfriendly when they are not smiling in their profile picture. It is important for instructors who request a profile picture or other picture of their students to let the class know that students are not required to post a picture of themselves. Give students the option to post a picture of themselves or a picture that they feel represents who they are. In addition to giving students an opportunity to more freely choose how they are seen, giving students the chance to discuss the picture they selected in the introductions allows them to talk about the photograph they chose, which gives others the chance to ask questions, this promotes inquiry from the start of the course. Inquiry is important to the success of identity development in virtual learning communities. For international students, it is vital. Students need to be encouraged to ask questions beyond questions about content. Asking questions about experiences, points of views,

and application can contribute to a greater understanding of the course material as well as a greater understanding of others in the class and, in turn, a greater understanding of the virtual ethnic “Me” identity. The inquiry can be guided to further exploration of course content, but should not be restricted to questions about the readings in the course. Instead, inquiry should be a combination of questions about the course texts and the process of understanding and interpreting the content. Continuous dialogue, a stream of comments and inquiry, should be non-judgmental in nature. To encourage this, instructors must set criteria that informs students how to ask questions in a way that promotes discussion rather than disputes by stating upfront that students can ask questions to help them understand, for example, a point of view from the perspective of the author. Instructors must also monitor the discussion forums and guide inquiry, by posing questions to students posts in a discussion forum that will not only help expand the conversation but also serve as an example of how to ask questions. While it is more challenging, and sometimes not possible, to moderate discussions using other forms of chat in the virtual community, the examples and rules set in the discussion forum can facilitate an understanding of how to communicate when students use other mediums.

Mediums for continuous communication should not be limited to discussion forums, course chat in the learning management system and email. According to Rather, using social media and communication apps can encourage continuous synchronous and asynchronous dialogue, while not replacing the preset methods of course communication. It is important to describe to the class which types of apps are encouraged and why those have been selected. Keep in mind that many international students do not use apps that have become popular and common in the United States.

As a result, informing all students in the class which apps they can use to communicate with each other as a community is vital to ongoing collective dialogue. Consider also, using apps that have become widely popular and free for international communication so students feel that the relationships they build in the virtual learning community have the ability to continue to grow over time regardless of distance from the host university or host country. Such apps include but are not limited to WhatsApp, Tango, and WeChat. To illustrate, Facebook Messenger is quite common in the United States and other countries, but can be unavailable in some countries where restrictions on Facebook are enforced. An app like WhatsApp is free to download and is not subject to the same restrictions, laws, and regulations as Facebook Messenger. When notifying students which apps you recommend so that they can find their classmates online, also give them the opportunity to share their username for that particular app which by preference, such as a preferred nickname, and sometimes necessity, due to social media taboos and/or surveillance, may be different than their given name.

The use of communication tools within the learning system platform such as discussion forums and profiles are what Goffman (1963) referred to as the “front stage.” Different apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp, FaceTime, and WeChat are considered the “back stage.” According to Goffman (1963), fronts are consciously generated while the back stage is more responsive.. The “back stage” is where international students appear to engage in informal dialogue and appears to be where students are able to view their virtual “I-Me” appear suppressed when on “front stage.”

Summary Comments

This study presents five findings that have noteworthy implications for international in virtual learning communities. Understanding these findings should help educators facilitate virtual learning communities that have international students as community members. Knowledge gained from these international students' experiences can be used to make improvements within virtual learning communities for international students. Moreover, the knowledge can be used to better understand identity development for international students within virtual communities

The first significant idea pertains to the four criteria that must be present for the virtual learning community to evolve successfully include the social context, facilitation, shared goals, and technology (Rovai, 2002). As discussed in Chapter I these criteria establish the foundation for effective virtual learning communities by providing an interactive learning community. This study builds on the concepts by revealing the how and what ways these criteria are relevant to international students. The social content must allow the community members an environment to relate with others in the online course and develop relationships with classmates. For international students, the social context must be safe, responsive, continual dialogue that allows for inquiry. While facilitation cultivates positive mutual, interpersonal, and collaborative relationships, international students require facilitation must foster a safe and respectful atmosphere that helps to increase understandings of culture difference and help avoid discrimination and stereotypes. The structure of the virtual learning community must not only have shared goals must also have a shared code of behavior, a defined purpose, and a range of roles. Finally, the technology criteria must consider incorporating “back

stage” communication apps where students can interact at a more personal level since the “back stage” is where international students engage in informal transactions that are suppressed on the “front stage.”

Another significant contribution of this study involves the understanding of the virtual barriers international students’ encounters in the virtual learning community. The literature discusses barriers to learning for traditional and non-traditional students. It has been known for some time that adult students experience situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Educators are also aware that lack of time, family responsibilities, location, and the cost of education are barriers for many students. Acculturation theories discuss barriers of language, cultural adjustments, and discrimination. This study adds to the literature concerning barriers. Specifically, this study shows that international students are faced with virtual barriers in learning communities. The four virtual barriers include social, cultural, dialogue and learning tool barriers. These findings are significant because the barriers interfere with interactions within their learning community and also negatively impact the identity development of students’ virtual “I-Me.” Educators who understand the potential for these barriers can perhaps help international students navigate within the learning community

A third substantial finding includes virtual identity that include virtual dialogue stressors and virtual safety stressors. Acculturation theories discuss stressors international students encounter as they adjust to their host country (Mori, 2000; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008). The stressors are identified as language, educational, sociocultural. Other stressors consist of discrimination and racism that may be

experienced in the host country (Dao et al., 2007). This study adds to the knowledge about acculturation stressors by revealing stressors that impact identity development in virtual learning communities when social and dialogue barriers are present. This study reveals that dialogue barriers are present in the virtual community instead of language barriers. From this study we students want more opportunity to interact with other community members. They want the opportunity to ask questions, clarify, and exchange ideas. In addition, the social barriers allow stereotypes to prevail. As a result, international students do not feel they are truly known by others. The more educators understand the potential virtual stressors that can occur within the community, perhaps these stressors can be minimized for international students.

This study also contributes to the knowledge about the development of the virtual “I-Me” identity for international students. While much is known about the “I-Me” identity, there was not research concerning international students’ identity development in the virtual learnings community. The focus of this study on international students’ identity development in virtual learning community reveals that students have a virtual “I” and form a response to other students’ virtual “Me” to forms a new virtual “I” as a result of the interactions within the learning community. This study also shows that when interactions within the community are limited, identity development is impacted. Furthermore, this study shows that international students’ virtual “I-Me” are different than their “I-Me” in their face-to-face interactions. In addition, this study supports the importance of continual and responsive transaction among members in the virtual community for identity development to occur.

Finally, this study indicates that the role of social presence plays a crucial role to international students' experiences in virtual learning communities as well as their identity development. This study confirms that instructional immediacy gives rise to social presence and facilitates the development of identity. In addition, the use of Netiquette for international students increases positive social presence and allows for increase dialogue among students. In summary, social presence is important to international students because it provides students with the opportunity to share who they are and their ideas. When they have the opportunity for transactions with others, they consider how others view them and develop a new virtual "I."

Suggestions for Further Research

The findings of this study reveal issues that impact educators, virtual learning communities, and the identity development of international students. Research can be conducted to explore which interactions within learning communities reduces or increases virtual barriers and stressors. Considering that the findings of this study show that students' identity development was facilitated by continual and responsive dialogue as well as immediacy, research can be conducted concerning the nature of the "creative response" of the "I" to the response of others' virtual "Me" to form a new "I." Research might also be conducted to explore the types of "back stage" interactions that can facilitate greater interaction among students and how "back stage" interactions influence the virtual "I-Me identity.

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APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

International Student	Home Country	Sex	Age	University Classification	Religion	Years in U.S.
Norah	Saudi Arabia	Female	28	Sophomore	Muslim	3 yrs.
Eduardo	Venezuela	Male	30	Freshman	Catholic	1 yr.
Raj	Malaysia	Male	24	Senior	Hindu	3 yrs.
Kitti	Hungry	Female	23	Sophomore	Atheist	2 yrs.
Mulenga	Zambia	Female	23	Senior	Protestant	4 yrs.
Amarraj	Malaysia	Male	26	Senior	Sikh	4 yrs.
Lee	China	Male	25	Junior	Atheist	3 yrs.
Chaeyeon	South Korea	Female	20	Freshman	Protestant	4 yrs.
Yechan	South Korea	Male	19	Freshman	Protestant	1 yr.
Noor	Iraq	Female	19	Sophomore	Muslim	1 yr.
Angelina	France	Female	19	Sophomore	Catholic	2 yrs.
Vi	Vietnam	Female	18	Freshman	Atheist	1 yr.

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The questions from the interview protocol were not always asked directly, but were asked throughout the semi-structured interview as needed and appropriate. These questions facilitated the interview process. Explanation and examples were provided as needed to assist students with terminology if the student was not clear of the meaning.

Students' name, email and university were not asked at the interview as this information was gathered when the consent form was signed at a previous meeting

Demographic Questions

1. What name do you use in the United States, if different from your given name?
2. What is your age?
3. What country are you from?
4. What is your primary language?
5. What other languages do you speak?
6. Are you fluent in English? How long have you spoken the English language?
7. Why did you come to the United States?
8. How long have you lived in the United States?
9. Have you been to the United States before this visit?
10. Do you have other family members in the United States
11. What is your classification?
12. What is your religion preference?

Interview Questions

1. Describe your cultural norms.

2. Describe your Traditions.
3. How they think those differ than what they have experienced in the United States?
4. Describe yourself.
5. What do you believe?
6. What do you value?
7. What does “identity” mean to you?
8. Describe your identity.
9. How do think others see your identity?
10. What do you want others to know about you?
11. How do you like to spend your time?
12. Do you like to spend time with other people, alone, or both?
13. Have you made friends at school?
14. Have you made friendships with American students?
15. Have you made friendships with other International students?
16. Have you made friendships with International students from countries other than your own?
17. Have you made friends with others through a virtual learning community?
18. How would you describe the friendships you have made?
19. What courses have you taken that have a virtual learning community?
20. Describe the virtual learning communities you have been involved in at university.
21. What does “community” mean to you?

22. What does “virtual learning community” mean to you?
23. Describe your experiences in a virtual learning community.
24. How do you introduce yourself in these communities?
25. How do you get to know each other?
26. What do you reveal about yourself?
27. In what ways has what you reveal changed over time?
28. How do you communicate with the other students in the community?
29. Which method of communication do you prefer and why?
30. Describe what you discuss with the other students.
31. How do these discussions make you feel?
32. How do these discussions make you feel as a student?
33. How do these discussions make you feel as a person?
34. Do you feel that your voice is heard?
35. Do you feel that other students get to know you through these discussions?
36. What do you think they know about you?
37. Does that represent who you are?
38. How do you communicate with instructors?
39. Which method of communication do you prefer and why?
40. Describe what you discuss with the instructors?
41. How do these discussions make you feel?
42. How do these discussions make you feel as a student?
43. How do these discussions make you feel as a person?
44. Do you feel that your voice is heard?

45. Do you feel that the instructors get to know you through these discussions?
46. How do think others in the virtual community see your identity?
47. What do you want others in the virtual learning to know about you?
48. What do you think those in the virtual community know about you?
49. Does that represent who you are?
50. How is your identity revealed in the virtual learning community?
51. What did you learn about yourself while engaged in virtual learning communities?
52. What did you learn while involved in the community?
53. What did you learn about identity while involved in the community?
54. How did what you learned impact your values, beliefs and/or customs?
55. What did you learn about how others perceive you in virtual learning communities?
56. How might these perceptions change over time?
57. What surprised you the most about your interactions in the virtual learning community?
58. What did you like best about your interactions in the virtual learning community?
59. What did you find to be most difficult in your interactions in the virtual learning community?
60. How did interactions change over time within the virtual learning community?
61. What type of interactions was most comfortable or enjoyable within the virtual learning community?

62. What type of interactions was most challenging within the virtual learning community?
63. How would others in the virtual learning community initially describe you?
64. How would others in the virtual learning community initially describe you now?
65. How does that make you feel?

Examples of Possible Probing or Follow-up Question

1. Could you please tell me more about ...
2. I'm not quite sure I understood ... Could you tell me about that some more?
3. Could you give me some examples?
4. Could you tell me more about your thinking on that?
5. You mentioned... Tell me more about that? What stands out in your mind about that?
6. What are some of your reasons for liking/disliking it?
7. You just told me about.... I'd also like to know about
8. This is what I thought I heard... Did I understand you correctly?
9. Why was that important to you?
10. Why does that stand out in your memory?
11. So what I hear you saying is..."
12. Give me an example of...
13. Why makes you think/feel that way?
14. Why do you think you noticed that?
15. Why is/was that important?
16. What motivated your response?

17. How did you feel about that?
18. What was significant about this to you?
19. Have you always felt this way?
20. Do you always respond in this way?
21. What made you respond differently?
22. How has your approach changed over time?
23. What motivated this change?
24. Can you say something about why this issue generated so much emotion?
25. What aspects of this issue do you think prompted these feelings?
26. How does this issue relate to the topic we started with?
27. Can you recall the associations that led you from our original topic to this one?
28. I'd like to understand more about how this relates to your virtual learning community (or identity).