

A STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS  
TAKING ONLINE COURSES: GROUP AND ORGANIZATIONAL  
SOCIALIZATION THEORY AND SENSE OF  
BELONGING/ISOLATION

by

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study sought to (1) identify and describe the experiences of international students participating in U.S. cohort- and text-based asynchronous online courses and to 2) analyze perceptions of belonging/isolation within online environments through group and organizational socialization theory. **Research Methods:** Data from interviews with international undergraduate students were collected at a U.S. institution of higher education offering asynchronous online courses. Targeted sampling methods were used to seek a broad sample within a greater university international student population base by time of participation in an online course, gender, and major. Discussion board asynchronous communication text was reviewed after the interviews were conducted to better understand the context of the interview data and to inform the ongoing analysis process. The data were analyzed by determining open and axial codes that emerged as categories, themes, and findings. **Implications for Research and Practice:** This study helps curriculum designers, teachers, administrators, and policy decision makers better understand and appreciate the implications of an expanding enrollment of international undergraduate students within U.S. based online courses.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background and Statement of the Problem**

The demand for international higher education is estimated to increase from 5 million international students in 2009 to 8 million or more in 2025, with the United States being the top supplier (Bohm et al., 2004; Fischer, 2009). In addition to the increase in international student enrollment in U.S.-based institutions specifically, online interaction in higher education has also significantly expanded over the last several years, where one study estimated that the growth of online course enrollments was 10 times that of the overall growth rate in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Dykman & Davis, 2008). As more international students participate in traditional and online interaction mediums, there is an increased frequency of academic and social interchanges between international students and U.S. students (Albritton, 2006; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Barclay, 2011; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009).

Classes composed of students from different countries have been observed to pose interaction challenges in both traditional and online modalities (Conceição, Antrop-González, & Kline, 2011). Particular challenges include understanding individually unique approaches to textual discussion communication, negotiation of meaning, affective and psychobiological predispositions (Zull, 2002), stereotype tendencies,



cognitive models of interaction, and inter- and intrapersonal reactions to and awareness of a sense of belonging/isolation (Akintunde, 2006; Cruz & Domingues, 2008). These challenges have been described as an ongoing dialectic between change and continuity within the classroom, where different participants navigate evolving identities at the class-wide, small group, and individual levels and experience a simultaneous conflict between peripheral participation with attendant isolation as well as occasional intermittent experiences of deeply embedded contribution and sense of community and belonging (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Picciano (2008) specifically related a sense of community to the online social presence of a student, a feeling that someone 'real' is on the other side of the text-based communication, as directly connected to a sense of belonging. This sense of social presence has been found to be correlated with several positive outcomes such as higher student satisfaction, fewer feelings of isolation, and increased persistence (Picciano, 2008).

Students from different countries may be influenced by such interactions, specifically regarding personal goals for successful community connections or a sense of fit and belonging (Huett, Kalinowski, Moller, & Huett, 2008; Kostelecky, 2009; Puzziferro, 2008; Scripture, 2008). In particular, one study found that a small sample of international graduate students experienced greater levels of isolation in both their traditional and online spaces than other students at U.S.-based institutions of higher education (Sanner et al., 2002). Of all the obstacles to international students' positive sense of belonging within higher education (i.e., confusing enrollment procedures, difficulty understanding native enrollees, etc.), isolation was the top ranked challenge (Roberson et al., 2000).

Pimpa (2003) found that the experience of international students at one university influenced potential future international student enrollments through word of mouth, especially for undergraduates. In addition to the research regarding the isolation that international students generally feel when participating in a foreign university (Roberson et al., 2000), the online interaction literature suggests that isolation is a common perception of many participants across demographics and student characteristics when participating in online higher education (Sanner et al., 2002; Zhao et al., 2005). Combining the findings of international student isolation with the isolation perception findings from online interaction research in general might compound the isolation factor especially for international students (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study sought to: (1) describe international student experiences in U.S. text-based asynchronous online courses; 2) explore international students' perceptions related to sense of belonging or isolation; and 3) analyze these perceptions of belonging/isolation through the conceptual framework of organizational and group socialization theory. There are several critical variables for studying students' online interaction experiences including persistence and motivation, especially as they relate to sense of belonging (Sanner et al., 2002). However, these variables are beyond this study's scope and may be a next step in the future directions of the research literature. In summary, this study emphasized international students' experience of taking online courses and their sense of belonging or isolation.

### **Research Questions**

- 1-How do international students experience and make meaning of belonging or isolation in an online class or group?
- 2-Specifically, how do international students perceive their interactions with other students and the instructor, in both class-wide and small group asynchronous text-based group work discussion mediums regarding sense of belonging or isolation?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Organizational and group socialization theory (Kuezynski & Parkin, 2010) formed the theoretical framework for analyzing sense of belonging or isolation of international undergraduate students within an online environment. Organizational socialization has been described to include institutional, group, interactional, and situational processes that intersect with information and values (Van Maanen, 1977; Schein, 1971). Organizational and group socialization theory was appropriate given that this study focused on class-wide and small group interactional influence upon international undergraduate students' sense of belonging.

Socialization in general has been described as a two-way street, where the term "assist" is a key word, and where all members of a social group, socializers and socializees, are active in the socialization process of increasing a sense of belonging (Gecas, 1981; Jones, 1986; Louis, 1980). Other aspects of socialization include the acquisition of rules, roles, standards, and values across social, emotional, cognitive, and personal domains, both from a group and organizational structural level and an individual self-actualization level, also known as agency within structure (Kuezynski & Parkin,

2010; Settersten, 1999; Tierney, 1988). This framework underpins how a sense of belonging develops for the individual within a larger group and class setting across reciprocal and simultaneous change (Goslin, 1969; Jones, 1986; Louis, 1980; Settersten, 1999).

Organizational and group socialization theory serves as a foundation for exploring how international students react within online classroom and group work norms that exist at an U.S. institution offering the course. Group and organizational socialization theory helped frame the study's purpose of describing and analyzing international student perceptions of their level of isolation or belonging when navigating the acquisition of such rules, roles, standards, and values. The level of perceived isolation or belonging influences positive or negative group socialization between international students and other classmates and the instructor in cyclical ways (Sanner et al., 2002; Zhao et al., 2005). This study explored the evolution of international students' sense of belonging or isolation (Fox, 2003) at the classroom and small group levels. This framework will scaffold the analysis of meaning making in the context of an online classroom and smaller group work as international students, students from the United States, and instructors from the U.S. interact with each other.

### **Definition of Terms**

Sense of belonging is defined in this study as the perception by international students of group or class-wide acceptance and emotional connection through an online asynchronous text-based environment (Shin, 2002).

Organizational socialization theory is defined as the way in which individuals are assisted and through self-actualization assist others in becoming members of a social group specific to a sense of belonging (Jones, 1986; Kuezynski & Parkin, 2010; Schein, 1971; Stettensen, 1999; Van Maanen, 1970).

A cohort- and text-based asynchronous online course is defined as a course that provides discussion boards for group work where students post text-based reactions to course content, other student and instructor views, at different times convenient to each student, within a traditional semester timeline with associated deadlines.

### **Methodology**

My research worldview and perspective mainly included an interpretive approach and sought to understand the subjective meanings that individuals gave to their social worlds (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This included identifying, describing, and analyzing perceptions of international undergraduate students regarding their interactions with other students and the instructor and the influence of these interactions on a sense of belonging or isolation. As an interpretive methodology, this followed inductive and deductive methods of approaching the data collection, analysis, and interpretation process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Interconnecting terms, concepts, and themes around these assumptions in order to form unique and complex implications required a qualitative methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Litchman (2006) suggested that making meaning of student experiences by telling stories is not any better or worse than other forms of analysis. This was another

confirmation to me of the difficult challenge of determining what counts as legitimate knowledge when considering interviewing international undergraduate students and how certain questions might lead to personal stories and descriptions of how they perceived the interaction at class-wide, small group, and dyad levels (King & Horrocks, 2010; Kuezynski & Parkin, 2010). Listening to and trying to interpret the stories of international students provided the motivation to persevere in this topic, for their stories can support discussion points for curriculum designers, educators, or policy decision makers attempting to understand how the literature on sense of belonging in online environments is influenced through an international student lens.

Qualitative data gathered from international students within a context of online discussion environments during group work and class-wide communication settings were analyzed to isolate and explore perceptions and experiences related to a sense of belonging and community. Data were collected through postcourse interviews with international undergraduate students who have taken one or more online university classes. Text from discussion board interactions was also reviewed after the interviews were conducted to better understand the context of the interview responses. Targeted sampling methods were used to seek a sample within a greater university international student population base by gender, major, and by participating in an online course within the last two years (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This ensured that the research questions were thoroughly answered by a diverse sample of international student participants who have had recent experiences with online group and class work and interactions.

### **Significance of the Study**

Much has been written on community building and sense of belonging within online environments and courses (Blanchard, 2004; Butler, Sproull, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2007; Iriberry & Leroy, 2009; Lee, 2003; Wighting, Liu, & Rovai, 2008). However, an analysis of within-class community building specific to international undergraduate students' sense of belonging through an organizational and small-group socialization theoretical framework has yet to be fully explored and described using rich qualitative description (Moore, 2006; Wang & Reeves, 2007). Stettersen (1999) suggested that if we assume that socialization across peer groups and across different settings (i.e., educational settings) is similar, we miss the subjective perceptions and variability between actors within the socialization process. Thus, there is a need to research international undergraduate students' diverse perceptions to better understand sense of belonging within the unique environment of online text-based interaction.

International students often inform peers from their home country of their experiences, difficulties, and satisfaction studying within U.S.-based institutions of higher education (Lee, 2008, 2010). If their experience is negative, future potential enrollees will be less likely to participate (Pimpa, 2003). This study can help decision makers better appreciate the complexities within unique online interactions as defined by international undergraduate students themselves and the influence of these interactions on perceived sense of belonging or isolation. Therefore, it is critical to identify, understand, and appreciate the complexities within international student online community experiences to help instructors, curriculum designers, and administrators navigate and effectively support the dynamic interactions and needs of international students. Because

international students are increasingly participating in U.S.-based online courses (Sanner et al., 2002), it is critical for instructors to incorporate international students' views in their understanding of interconnected social interaction experiences. Understanding the views of international students can help instructors identify and contextually implement suggestions for an improved online interaction experience.

Redden (2009) estimated that by 2020, from a 2000-year base, the global international higher education market will double to 200 million. With this increase in international students, online higher education participation will be especially impacted (Rovai & Downey, 2010). In the online medium, potential for misunderstandings and a sense of isolation have been identified to increase the risk of students withdrawing from classes and programs (Rovai, 2009; Rovai & Whiting, 2005). At the intersection of the increase in international students and the increase of interchange online, it is necessary to understand how this experience influences international students' sense of community and belonging, which has been noted in the literature as a critical factor in student motivation and persistence (Albritton, 2006; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009; Zull, 2002).

### **Chapter Summary**

Because online education has expanded significantly, more international students are participating in online social and interaction communities (Albritton, 2006; Altbach & Barclay, 2011; Knight, 2007; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009). This interaction introduces new challenges in understanding varied approaches to communication and community building within an online environment (Akintunde, 2006;



Cruz & Domingues, 2008). These challenges may influence international students' perceptions of belonging or isolation within an online class in unforeseen ways that can influence other critical factors noted in the literature such as motivation, persistence, and completion (Huett, Kalinowski, Moller, & Huett, 2008; Kostecky, 2009; Puziferro, 2008; Scripture, 2008). This qualitative study emphasized and illuminated the group and organizational socialization process (Jones, 1986; Louis, 1980; Schein, 1971; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) of interaction between international undergraduate students and U.S. students and instructors to support educators, curriculum designers, and vested stakeholders in their understanding of how to better encourage community building within online courses.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Review of Context and Purpose of the Literature**

Online interaction in higher education has grown significantly over the last few decades (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Brown & Adler, 2008; Nagel, 2009). Concurrent with this growth, international students are increasingly participating in online learning environments (Dykman & Davis, 2008; Sanner et al., 2002). Students at large have been observed to develop a sense of belonging or isolation depending on online interaction experiences (Sanner et al., 2002). In order to effectively study international student participation in online communities, a thorough literature review is needed to frame the background research that supports and connects the purpose of this research and its questions. The relevant literature for this study can be summarized into three overarching areas: (1) research related to group and organizational socialization theory as a conceptual and theoretical framework; (2) research on the challenges and benefits of student-student and student-instructor interactions and their influence on sense of belonging or isolation within an online community; and (3) research on the complexities of social presence, affective reactions, and emotional connections.

## **Theoretical Framework: Group and Organizational Socialization Theory**

Although an overarching socialization theory interconnects with issues of broader societal stability, power, struggle, conflict, and control maintenance (Durkheim, Parsons, & Merton, 1980), this study focused on group and organizational socialization as a process of acquiring and maintaining perceptions through shared meaning making by individuals and social groups, meaning how people define the situation that influenced their perceptions (Blumer, Mead, & Goffman, 1995). Often, organizational socialization refers to work groups and their collective performance (Dion, 1985; Moreland & Levine, 1982). Although performance and learning may be indirectly important to and interconnected with a newcomer's group socialization experience, this study's emphasis was on sense of belonging through several stages or phases of socialization.

Group and organizational socialization theory (Allen, 1990; Bauer & Morrison, 1998; Fisher, 1986; Jian, 2009; Kuezyński & Parkin, 2010; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) has been described as a way to explain customary perspectives and behaviors based on the group or organization's values and how individuals navigate these emphases. For example, newcomers entering a new organization or group adjust to initial perceived role expectations (Jones, 1986). Both the newcomer and the individuals already participating in the established group or organization interact within a broader socialization process where newcomer behavior is monitored and influenced according to established organizational values (Caplow, 1964).

Several definitions and explanations of group and organization socialization were given in the literature. Bauer and Morrison (1998) defined organizational socialization as

a dramatic and overt ritualistic event or transition a newcomer experiences, whereas Tierney (1997) emphasized implicit and subtle forces of socialization upon individuals. The dichotomy between dramatic and subtle forces was also recognized by Van Maanen (1970). Dramatic ritualistic transitions are referred to as significant events (i.e., graduation ceremonies). Subtle forces of socialization are defined as the changes in understanding and interpretations by participants in a group or organization of interactions and any symbolic or attribution labels placed upon such perceptions by participants (Silverman, 1970).

Tierney tried to simplify the vast and different definitions of organizational socialization by asking, “What do we need to know to survive/excel in the organization (1988, p. 8)?” or group. Jones (1986) and Louis (1980) tried to simplify socialization by defining the process as the acquisition of rules, roles, standards, and values across social, emotional, cognitive, and personal domains. I believe Kuezynski and Parkin (2010) offered a more balanced view of organizational socialization theory defined as a way in which individuals are assisted, and in turn assist others, in becoming members of a group or organization. This suggests a more bidirectional, reciprocal, cyclical, ambiguous, indefinite, and unbounded process between an organization or group and the individual (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Jones, 1983; McDermott & Vareene, 1995). I agree with Burbules and Smith in their review of interactions between individuals and the communication scenarios they engage in as generating more questions, not answers, especially referring to the complexity of these interactions and their influence on socialization:

...for educators especially, these insights about how a form of life is constituted; about the role of learning...and rule-following as constitutive of the distinct

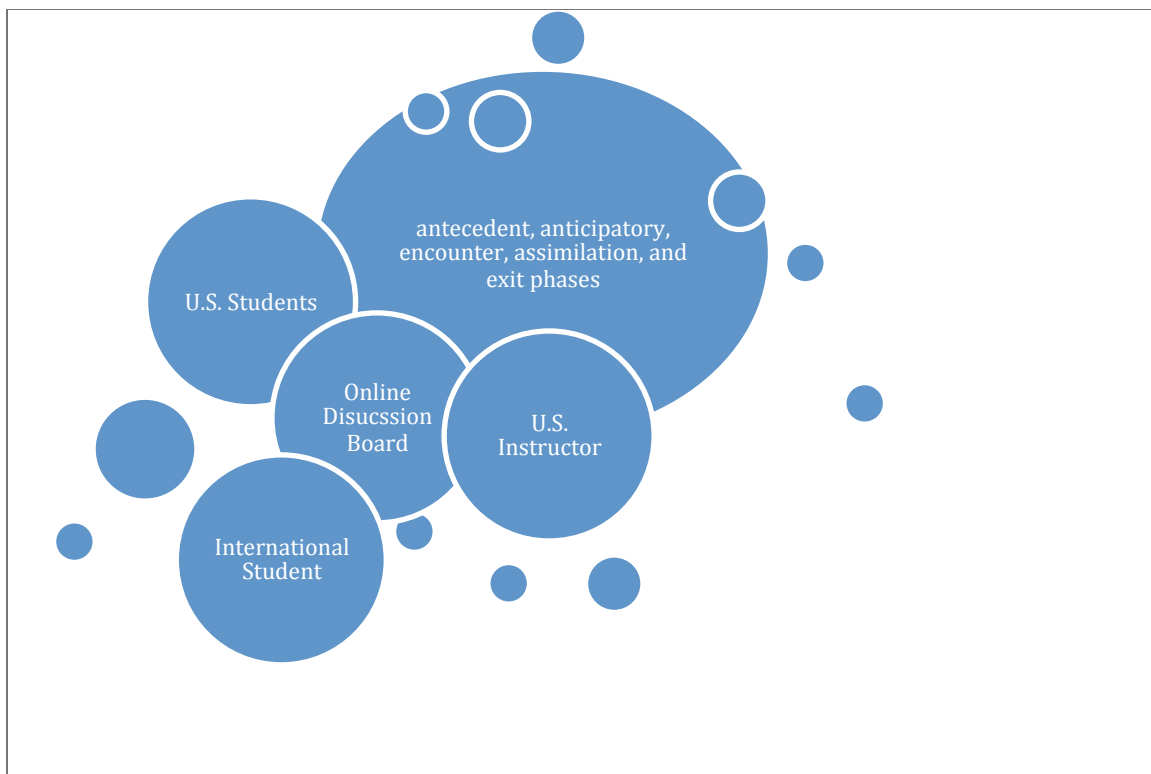
character of a form of life; and about the complex and indeterminate task of initiating the young (and other novices) into that form of life, all together present a mosaic of questions—puzzles—that challenge the simple-minded models of socialization often given to us by the social sciences (2005, p. 429).

This mosaic of questions as puzzles offers a way of approaching this literature review in not trying to put boundaries around a conceptual framework (Figure 1), but to intermingle prior literature with an unbounded and open gate for the recognition that sense of belonging for international students will be situated by context and fluid movement of influences. Smeyers and Burbules (2006) argued that interaction between students and instructors is in itself an agent for conceptual change. In other words, neither conservative (linear) nor relativistic (totally amoeba like) extreme views of initiation or socialization for newcomers is adequate to understand the flux between continuity and change embedded within the phases of socialization overall. Despite the ongoing redefinition of conceptual frameworks that deal with group and organizational socialization, communication and interchange, and relationships and sense of belonging as a dynamic process, scholars have tried to describe a model of group socialization phases discussed next.

### **Conceptual Framework: Model of Interaction and Group**

#### **Socialization Phases**

Anderson, Riddle, and Martin (1999) reviewed five phases or stages of small group socialization: antecedent, anticipatory, encounter, assimilation, and exit phases. Jones (1983) provided a review of organizational socialization as stage analysis, similar to phases of Anderson's. All of these phases or stages tend to overlap in a reciprocal and cyclical manner (Figure 1), meaning that students can engage nonlinearly in several



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**

phases at once in the progression of the socialization process (Anderson, Riddle, & Martin, 1999). In Figure 1, international students, U.S. students, the instructor, the discussion board, and other ongoing and shifting factors influence and are influenced by others within small groups and the class community as a whole throughout the timeline of the course, both in structured and unstructured manners (Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett, 2010).

The first antecedent phase includes a newcomer's experience within a group or organization before formal membership is initiated. For example, in this study's context, international students will register for a course and are required to participate in a class-wide introduction discussion board. This happens before formal small group membership is assigned for specific projects. This first stage has been associated with a sense of shock

or a breakpoint because of the ambiguity of the newcomer's experience, where research emphasizes the role that the organization or group plays for the newcomer (Hughes, 1958; Van Maanen, 1977). It is important to remember the interactional process of both the group on the newcomer and the newcomer on the group. Jones (1983) and Schutz (1967) emphasized the influence of the newcomer's past biography on the psychological orientation of how they perceive the new situation. Given that each international student has a unique biographical background before becoming a member of a formal online class, group, or dyad, Jones' emphasis is critical. This initial ambiguity was theorized to influence a newcomer to better clarify their identity within the group and their associated role (Schutz, 1967). This first stage reflected an informal interaction between the newcomer and others in the group (Van Maanen, 1977).

The second stage is labeled as anticipatory (Anderson et al., 1999). During this phase, group members decide what they expect from participating in the group and from other group members. For this context, international students and other small group members have no history with each other prior to participating in the group. Van Maanen (1976) theorized that the closer the group meets a newcomer's expectations, the greater the likelihood of successful socialization occurring. Louis (1980) emphasized how unrealistic expectations influence the perception of stress and anxiety by participants before actual work is distributed among group members. Sanner et al. (2002) found that international students experienced feelings of anxiety and isolation when navigating a new country and a new university environment. This study will help develop understanding of international students' expectations and sense of belonging throughout group socialization processes.

The next phase or stage is called the encounter phase (Anderson et al., 1999). This is where individuals come together and begin establishing roles and goals. Gouran (1994) divided goals into categories such as personal, group, task, and relational. Adjustment and accommodation are discussed in this phase for individual members who may or may not fit neatly into a role within a specific personal, group, task, or relational goal established by a leader of the group. In my analysis, Louis (1980) referred to a stage similar to the encounter phase, which he called initiation, where formal membership is acknowledged by the newcomer and the group. For international undergraduate students entering an online course with predominantly U.S. classmates and a U.S. instructor, the encounter phase includes the interactions that deal with setting goals for the group, their academic work to be accomplished, and their goals to build more deeply embedded relationships within the socialization process.

The next stage is called the assimilation phase (Anderson et al., 1999). This stage is theorized as the time when newcomers begin to identify with the group and its members. This stage includes the negotiation between newcomers and group members of their cyclical definition of the evolving identity of the group. This cyclical defining process entails both the newcomer and other group members influencing one another back and forth in ways that generate an identity broader than just the individual members. Swogger (1981) suggested that during this phase, common communicative behaviors are established exclusive to making sense of what the group does. Moreland (1985) explained that the group as a whole influences each member, but that each member also can try to change the direction of the group's processes and relationship quality. For me, the title assimilation implies one direction of influence, from the group to the member.



This stage might better be labeled as the cocreation of group identity, to reflect the bi-directional influence the group and newcomer have on each other, especially when recognizing the recreation of group identity found in some studies of online environments (Akintunde, 2006; Cruz & Domingues, 2008). For this study, the assimilation phase of group socialization will be emphasized when discussing a sense of belonging for international students as newcomers to a group. It is also necessary to understand other phases, although potentially secondary in importance, because the entire process influences the quality of the sense of belonging in newcomers (Anderson et al., 1999).

The last phase is called the exit phase (Anderson et al., 1999). Sinclair-James and Stohl (1997) described how an exit phase influences attitudes about future group expectations. Specifically, they explained the process of a group member ending the experience of a formal membership and how this experience influences generalizing and projecting assumptions and perceptions onto future individuals within a different group or organization. The international students' experience of these various phases of group socialization may not be smooth (Glaser, 1968). This unsmooth process can contain nonfunctional and dynamic difficulties, especially when trying to adapt and adjust to developing new relationships and transitioning perspectives within evolving and contingent contexts and processes (Hall, 1976; Shibutani, 1962).

These phases have historically been conceptually modeled as linear stages occurring in step-wise fashion, meaning one phase or stage does not start until the preceding stage is completed (Lock, 2002; Moreland & Levine, 1982). Through time scholars have extended this conceptual model to be a more iterative and cyclical process, meaning that phases can start and stop congruently at similar or different points in the

progression of the socialization process (Anderson, Riddle, & Martin, 1999). For the purpose of this study, an iterative and cyclical model of group socialization is more appropriate than a linear one, given that online student participants influence and are influenced by others within small groups and the class community as a whole, both in structured and unstructured ways throughout the timeline of the course (Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett, 2010). Given the nonlinear nature of a reciprocal group socialization process, international and U.S. students and instructors may navigate several challenges and opportunities.

### **Challenges and Opportunities of Group Socialization**

Socialization can allow creativity and differences to flourish, where new individuals are included in the creation of norms, rules, and values, and are not just recipients of socialization plans, thus expanding our understanding of organizational and group fit and belonging (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003; Tierney, 1997). International undergraduate students in this study have participated in an online class with a majority of U.S. students that was designed by a U.S. institution and taught by a U.S. instructor. The organizational and group socialization process intersects with values and norms of the instructor, course, small group, and individual international student levels. At the intersection of these different levels, international undergraduate students navigated certain challenges in the socialization process such as understanding individual and group identity, navigating uncertainty and anxiety, sense of belonging or isolation, inconsistency of socialization phases, and trying to predict and react to the responses of other group members.

Hansen (1990) described socialization challenges as the conflict between forces from students to maintain the conservation of their individuality and the tendencies of all participants to redefine classroom, group, or dyad identity and community. Strategies that individuals adopt to navigate uncertainty or anxiety (Van Maanen & Shein, 1972) and other challenges depend on the way they have historically learned to deal with new situations, so that personal past psychological factors interact with perceptions of others within the greater group or organizational socialization process (Bandura, 1978; Jones, 1986; Reichers, 1987). For example, Katz (1978) suggested that individuals with more anxiety and less confidence about the new situation focus more on the task instead of relationships and boundary spanning. If the individual continues to neglect relationships and group members reinforce this sense of distance, sense of shared membership and community may follow a cyclical pattern of declining relational and embedded forms of bonding (Ashford & Black, 1996; Turner, 1969). If the group and organization values efficiency of performance completion as primary, whereas the individual primarily values a bonding experience in the group, future beliefs about sense of belonging may be influenced negatively (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007). In other words, when a group or organization focuses on efficiency and conformity, an individual may desire to successfully navigate any affective experience dealing with anxiety, ambiguity, or self-doubt through task mastery, role clarity, and group integration thus reinforcing a secondary priority on sense of belonging and emotional bonding (Louis, 1980; Morrison, 2002).

Schein (1971) explored the anxiety of an individual navigating a new organizational socialization process for the first time, specifically the process' promotion

of feelings of loneliness and isolation, and the performance anxieties of having new duties and assignments, with intermittent success and failure at predicting responses of others to oneself. Erickson (1959) added to this aspect of socialization by describing the ambiguous process of joining a new group as a series of psychosocial crises while navigating different stages in development. Erickson included a discussion of the interaction of biological traits and societal and environmental influences. Specifically he described the physical, emotional, and psychological backgrounds of individuals and their influence on group development stages. Van Maanen and Schein referenced ongoing challenges for individuals to navigating the socialization process:

...traditional ends and norms of practice are accepted by the newcomer, but the person is troubled by the existing strategies or technologies-in-use for the achievement of these ends and perhaps is troubled too by the degree to which the traditional norms are circumvented in practice (1979, p. 32).

Because group socialization processes influence perceptions and expectations of isolation, anxiety, and other distancing factors such as what a groups says it believes in versus what a group appears to do in practice, processes of socialization may or may not be completely identifiable (Hall, 1976). Due to these dynamic interactions between many factors in the socialization process, socialization is anything but consistent (Shibutani, 1962).

In order to understand group or organizational socialization in the context of an online course environment, it was critical to understand the literature on student-student and student-instructor interactions and the influence of these interactions on perceptions of belonging or isolation within an online community setting. As these interactions became the nexus and connecting links as triggers to communication between

international students and other students and the instructor, the next section of the literature review became more relevant.

### **Student-Student and Student-Instructor Online Interactions**

Sadykova and Dautermann (2009) provided a theory suggesting that as institutions of higher education increase online offerings, ease of access will expand cross-border student-student and student-instructor interaction situations such as international student-U.S. student interactions. Student-student and student-instructor interactions, communications, and perceptions of understanding and authentic relationships as a sense of belonging, have long been researched in traditional face-to-face environments (Frisby & Martin, 2010). For example, Burbules (2008) reviewed student perceptions of student-instructor interactions as influenced by what the instructor does more than what an instructor says or tries to communicate, more by unintentional or “ill-structured” rather than intentional communication domains, where interaction happens “organically, seamlessly within an ongoing pattern of activity during” ordinary interchange between students and instructors (p. 667). In other words, student perceptions are influenced by how other students and instructors communicate and the students’ perceptions of this communication, not only by what they try to communicate.

Burbules compared face-to-face interaction experiences between students and instructors to online text-rich environments and concluded that both present similar and different opportunities and challenges:

...it can be extremely useful to have the distance and impersonality that online interactions afford. Some students speak up more under such circumstances; there is more time to reflect on what one is writing or reading in an online discussion, as opposed to the rapid flow of live conversation; students are required to be more

independently motivated, and to find other sources of feedback and support than immediate teacher recognition or approval (2002, p. 389).

Burbules (2002) reflected on the interaction potential for authentic relationships to be just as, if not more, challenging for face-to-face environments as it is in online environments. He emphasized that the face-to-face medium of instruction can be difficult for sharing meaningful relationship building opportunities in lecture hall style classrooms. Burbules emphasized that the medium of interaction is a means to an end, where in this context the means refers to online or face-to-face, and the end references authentic relationships.

Another challenge to student-student and student-instructor interaction online and sense of belonging is labeling or stereotyping students who write differently or have views that are different from group norms (Lee & Rice, 2007). Specific to student-instructor interaction, certain stereotypes of international students by faculty (i.e., assumptions about collectivist work ethic, introverted disposition, passive participation, or comprehension and communication abilities using English) have been found to influence international students' self-confidence and sense of belonging (Fox, 1994; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Vollmer, 2000). Ward, Masgoret, and Gezentsvey (2009) found that international students were also stereotyped by other U.S. students, where the U.S. students were also observed to experience intergroup anxiety when interacting with international students. Both symbolic and perceptual anxiety provoked previously held stereotypes and attitudes, depending on the amount of quality contact between international students and the U.S. students. These references are based in a face-to-face environment. For the purpose of this study, quality contact may need to be defined differently, as those interactions that build authentic relationships, where the international

student senses that a real person is on the other end of the text-based communication dyad as a bidirectional interaction.

Specific to student-student interaction, however, Hessler and Humphreys (2008) argued that genuine communication may be easier in the virtual environment because of the inability of students to attach any assumptions or stereotypes to classmates based on appearance or ethnicity, thereby allowing interconnectedness and understanding to occur more quickly than in person. Even with the protection of the virtual environment, the quality of student-student and student-instructor interaction has been found to be more significant with more experienced and motivated faculty who emphasize appropriate structure for interaction activities, not usually obvious to newer online instructors (Epp, Green, Rahman, & Weaver, 2010; Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011; Mayadas, Bourne, & Bacsich, 2009).

Moore (2006) described the transactional processes between student-student and student-instructor as the central components of online interaction environments. Several theories explored why student-student and student-instructor interaction are both critical to and challenging for online interaction contexts, particularly as students and instructors primarily communicate through text asynchronously (Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett, 2010; Simpson, 2002; Van der Wender, 2002).

Many online courses are designed with a heavy reliance on text-based discussion board environments, where student participation in interactions complicates styles of writing, communication, norms, and expectations (Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett, 2010). This challenges institutional decision makers in the adaptation of policies and assumptions about student-student and student-instructor interactions as more

international students participate in online text-based interactive environments originally designed for U.S. students (Van der Wender, 2002). Specifically, as an increasing number of students from different international origins participate in text-based interaction environments, student peers navigate new approaches and perspectives to the learning material as well as observe different approaches to communicating with the instructor (Vonderwell, Lian, & Alderman, 2007).

Student-instructor interaction within a text-based environment has been described as requiring a different set of communication techniques and assumptions (Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett, 2010; Swan, 2001). Some students have documented frustration with instructors and the meaning of their written text, where intention of meaning and assumption of meaning are misaligned (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999). For example, an increased likelihood of misunderstanding between student and instructor was observed because of the text-based environment with limited nonverbal cues (Zhang & Carr-Chellman, 2001).

Rovai and Downey (2010) suggested that text-based online discussion communication has both benefits and challenges for overcoming misunderstandings between student intents, where the student from a different country, the student from the U.S., the instructor from the U.S., and the online context all interact to form an experience based on shared and dissimilar perceptions of the sense of community experience. When the text-based environment presents frustration instead of satisfaction, Shi-xu and Wilson (2001) described online interactions perceived by participants as communication breakdowns. These breakdowns may be symbolically connected to a sense of isolation or belonging depending on the perceptions of both international and



U.S. students. Text-based interactions between students are influenced by the designed opportunities for collaboration through group work, joint presentations, and group and class-wide discussion boards (Shi-xu & Wilson, 2001). Understanding the literature on online interactions and sense of belonging for international students specifically is discussed next.

### **Online Interactions and Sense of Belonging for International Students**

As international students' expectations of their interactions with the instructor and other students match their experiences within the online classroom, a sense of fit and belonging within the class community is more likely to develop (Sanner et al., 2002). Other authors emphasized the importance of faculty awareness in providing a quality online environment to support student-student interactions for students from different countries (Wiesenberg & Stacey, 2005). Faculty awareness entails an understanding, recognition, and acknowledgement of the diverse ways that students from different backgrounds approach text-based communication. Developing this awareness provides faculty with an opportunity to address and possibly prevent misunderstandings in student-instructor and student-student interactions (McNaught, 2003).

Even with these supports, international students face interaction challenges within online modalities that other students may not face (Conceição, Antrop-González, & Kline, 2011). Challenges that all online students face that are possibly even more challenging for international students included navigating a predominantly text-based online environment, understanding text-based intentions and influences on

communication, negotiating meaning, dealing with affective predispositions regarding self and others, managing stereotype tendencies, and capitalizing on inter- and intra-personal awareness (Akintunde, 2006; Cruz & Domingues, 2008). Zull (2002) expanded the discussion of how affective predispositions later influence student(s) in a cyclical manner. A cyclical manner entails two variables interacting together back and forth. For example, affective predispositions influence an individual's perception of an interaction and the perception of the interaction then in turn influences and transforms the individual's affective disposition in cycles. This cyclical process contributes even more factors to complex online interaction challenges, such as potential emotional reactions to a variety of written presentation styles including the difference between active and passive voice (Conceição, Antrop-González, & Kline, 2011). Accepting that the emotional reaction of students influences memory, motivation, and classroom experience adds to the nuanced challenge of interaction between students within an online environment (Zull, 2002). The process through which these challenges are addressed may influence an international student's sense of belonging or isolation through the current online class and into future courses (Sanner et al., 2002; Zhao et al., 2005). However, it is important to note that belonging or isolation may be experienced differently by international students who are in a unique circumstance of being away from their native country and the social community in which they are accustomed (Roberson et al., 2000).

Cruz (2008) reviewed the challenges within text-based online interaction environments as an evolving mixture of complexities, meaning that as interactions progress, students' characteristics influence and are influenced by others in complex ways. Cruz also referred to students developing their sense of belonging from these

interactions in a cyclical pattern, where one student influences another and that participant changes their interaction approach towards the first student and so on.

Because of the variety of differences and perceptions among participants, what is defined as successful communication and interaction between students varied significantly (Cruz, 2008; Tella, 1995).

Specifically, processes of negotiation and representation of interactions influence how students feel about effective communication and sense of belonging or its opposite, isolation, as they navigate new ways of interaction with other students within a U.S.-based class (Byram, 2000). Also, interaction objects, such as a particular presentation or group activity within the online course, can be influenced by and influence affective reactions and perceptions of students who have different worldviews than U.S. students and instructors (Byram, 2000). These reactions and perceptions may influence how students make sense of their place within the online community, thereby influencing future perceptions and approaches to interaction with classmates. Students then need to simultaneously navigate new pedagogical and interchange environments, thereby compounding the challenge of managing affective reactions, emotional bonds or connections, both intertwined with perceptions of the social presence of group and class members and an active or passive instructor within an online environment (Keegan, 2007).

### **Complexities of Social Presence, Affective Reactions, and Emotional Connections**

Since international students may have beliefs, habits, and values that reside in different dimensions from those of U.S. students, satisfying communication moments of social presence may be difficult within the online interaction environment (Cruz, 2008; Liu, Hodgson, & Lord, 2011). Social presence was defined as the sense that someone real is on the other end of the communication experience or a sense of togetherness in sharing time and space (Shin, 2002). Satisfied communication moments of social presence referred to interactions between students that generate positive emotional connections, even if the communication is in a virtual context, rather than face-to-face (Cruz, 2008). One dimension of social presence might include differing views, attitudes, or reactions to a communication interchange shared by students who perceived the online experience differently (Taylor, 2001). Yet another dimension might include those interaction beliefs acquired through the influences of students' prior virtual and face-to-face experiences with perceptions of belonging and fit versus isolation (Fox, 2003).

These differing views and approaches to interactions online can lead to positive outcomes, if leveraged appropriately (Shin, 2002). For example, differences and similarities between group members offer opportunities to mentally awaken classmates to potential opportunities for interpersonal closeness and emotional connectedness development (Hrastinski, 2008; Pruitt, 2011). However, if the online discussion context provides a fragmentary experience for students, continuous reconstruction of meaning may be challenging given the briefness and incoherencies of a text-based online medium (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Green et al., 2010). Depending on the perception

of the briefness of the online interaction as positive or negative, students may increase their interest in real versus virtual interaction opportunities (Byram, 1997; Edwards, Perry, Janzen, & Menzies, 2012). The implications of students perceiving their online experience as disjointed has been found to influence attitudes towards future approaches to joining new groups generally and contributing to online groups specifically (Picciano, 2008).

Psychobiological factors interact with perceived emotional connectedness and affective reactions (Erickson, 1959). Psychobiological influences include students' prior experiences with interaction stimuli that influence changes in the brain, such as anxiety or confidence, which cyclically influence future perceptions of similar or different interaction stimuli. In the context of this study, the stimulus was the interchange between students and the instructor and their perceptions of belonging and community (Zull, 2002). Merryfield (2003) reviewed student data specific to online interactions between students from different backgrounds. Specifically, Merryfield explored how online interactions influenced student and teacher navigation of and obstacles to increasing the quality of developing dispositions of unity and community. However, in my opinion, Merryfield's (2003) research did not focus enough on how online interactions can support positive relationships and better emotional connections, which may influence critical outcomes such as sense of belonging and motivations to engage more deeply with other students and the instructor.

One benefit of interactions in an online environment includes developing supportive relationships that may influence positive psychological and emotional engagement in the satisfaction and likelihood of continuing to engage in present and

future interaction (Hewsom & Hughes, 2005). However, Rovai (2001) found that when an authoritative tone is used in online discussions, the sense of community could become vulnerable, which affects personal perceptions of fit for students from different countries. Recognizing the extensive diversity between participants in the online classroom is a start to appreciating the complexities of social presence, affective reactions, and emotional connections. Recognition of within-student differences due to psychobiological diversity, such as brain change experiences from different interaction stimuli, expands the variability of factors influencing emotional connections and affective reactions (Zull, 2002). These changes in the brain then influence future interactions and emotional connections. The research by Merryfield (2003) and Zull (2002) illuminated the depth of differences between and within students and how they make sense of their online environment. This provided a summary of the challenges and complexities of the literature specific to online interactions and its fit within the framework of group and organizational socialization theory.

### **How the Research Questions Are Informed by the Literature Review**

Sanner et al. (2002) described a trend for students in general experiencing a sense of isolation within their online class experiences. This informed the first research question, “How do international students experience and make meaning of belonging or isolation in an online class or group?” Wiesenberg and Stacey (2009) researched the role that instructors and U.S. students play in providing a quality online environment to support online interactions for students from different countries. As international students navigate a text-based interaction environment between other U.S. students and

instructors, the role of the instructor is critical to international student perceptions of sense of belonging or isolation.

McNaught (2002) researched how instructors' levels of awareness influenced student understanding, recognition, and acknowledgement of the diverse ways students from different backgrounds approach text-based communication. This informed the second research question, "How do international students perceive their interactions with other students and the instructor, in both class-wide and small group asynchronous text-based discussion mediums regarding sense of belonging or isolation?" Conceição, Antrop-González, and Kline (2011) summarized how students from different countries face interaction challenges within online modalities that other students may not face. International students navigated online environments, issues of isolation, misunderstanding, affective predispositions, and other potential challenges that influenced their experience with other students and the instructor (Akintunde, 2006; Cruz & Domingues, 2008).

### **Chapter Summary**

Sense of community and belonging (Boulos, Taylor, & Breton, 2005), and their associated interaction in online environments were discussed at length in the literature. Some literature focused specifically on student perceptions of online text-based mediums and how they influenced their sense of isolation (McCombs & Vakili, 2005). Specifically, international students bring their own preconstructed worldview and knowledge to their small groups and classes. Because of these background worldviews, forces from expectations of fit and belonging from past experiences may conflict with

influences and tendencies of the continuing redefinition of an evolving online classroom community (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Hansen, 1990).

Similar to face-to-face interactions that influence a positive or negative sense of community and belonging (Richardson & Swan, 2003), representations of community between students are preconstructed and coconstructed with other students (Cruz, 2008). Preconstructed expectations of community and sense of belonging evolve when transferring into a coconstructed domain where shared digital spaces are varied in direction and strength (Lo Presti & Sabatano, 2010). Yu (2010) explained that each learner experiences a variety of reactions to such interactions by outlining how learners experienced variable measures of satisfaction with such interactions, variable preferences for an activity's requirements for collaboration, diverse familiarity or unfamiliarity with text-based collaboration processes and technologies, and variable perceptions of different partners within a communication experience. These experiences influenced representations of self- and classroom-identity and an associated sense of belonging or isolation when students interacted both within and outside of project groups or the class as a whole within an online discussion (Cruz, 2008). This may particularly be the case when we recognize that informal norms of community belonging consistently fluctuate across communication experiences between students (Kelly & Moogan, 2012).

Online interactions in higher education have grown significantly over the last few decades, and more international undergraduate students are participating in online interactions (Brown & Adler, 2008; Dykman & Davis, 2008). Because of this significant increase in online interchange, a study that connects the various facets of international



student research with online community, socialization, and sense of belonging or isolation is needed.

These topics helped prepare my understanding of which methods to pursue to answer the research questions through an analysis of within-class experiences as perceived by international students in an online discussion environment and community. Specifically, it has been suggested that this research is needed and has yet to be fully explored and described using rich qualitative description (Moore, 2006; Wang & Reeves, 2007). To address the lack of qualitative research on this topic, the following chapter describes methods and methodology that can more fully explore international undergraduate student experiences and perceptions of sense of community and belonging or isolation.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction to Qualitative Methods**

The purpose of this study was to: (1) identify and describe the experiences of international students participating in a U.S. text-based asynchronous online course; 2) explore international student perceptions of sense of community and belonging or isolation; and 3) analyze perceptions using socialization theory as a framework in order to inform curriculum designers, instructors, administrators, and students of the complexity of international student online interaction. In order to identify, describe, and analyze student perceptions of online interactions, interpretive qualitative methods were used.

Qualitative methods include interpretive approaches to understanding the subjective meanings that individuals give to their social worlds (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Particular to this study, the goal was to understand and interpret the subjective meanings that students from different countries make from online interactions with students and instructors predominantly from the U.S. In seeking to understand these subjective meanings, inductive and deductive methods of approaching the data collection, analysis, and interpretation process were implemented (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). An inductive method of approaching data collection and analysis refers to utilizing data to generate expanded interpretation, whereas a deductive method refers to narrowing data

down to particular themes. Using both approaches helped interconnect perceptions of international student participants, associated concepts, and themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Glesne (2011) described an interpretive approach as emphasizing the utility of the interpreted findings to support educators in their understanding of subjective perceptions of interactions. Glesne suggested that supporting educators in their understanding of application could be accomplished by describing words and experiences that lend themselves to interpretation by readers, accepting that these experiences are complex and difficult to measure quantitatively. The implications for such a qualitative study include illuminating the group and organizational socialization process (Jones, 1986; Louis, 1980; Schein, 1971; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) of interaction between international undergraduate students and U.S. students and instructors. A qualitative approach can better highlight the nuances within this process to support educators, curriculum designers, and vested stakeholders in their understanding of how to better support preferences for community building among diverse students within online course environments.

### **Methodology Justification**

This was an interpretive study of the subjective experiences of international students, the influence of these perceptions on their sense of community and belonging, and what this meant to them. Erickson (1986, 1992, 2004) described an interpretive approach as not only investigating what happens between participants within a classroom, but what the interactions mean for participants. Erickson highlighted the importance of

integrating individual meanings with larger patterns of interaction and meaning making across multiple participants. Because this study involved international students, an interpretive qualitative methodology facilitated the development of findings that are nuanced and rich in detail (Moore, 2006; Wang & Reeves, 2007). Nuanced and rich details of student perceptions provided a contextualized understanding of and an expanded interpretation from international student experiences.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described the process of navigating different methodological approaches when studying subjective views and perceptions of individuals. These nonquantifiable subjective views were critical to a study of international students interacting with other U.S. students in the online environment. Exploring these subjective factors required describing and explaining interconnections of words, trying to retain as much meaning as possible through participants' descriptions, and not summarizing them quantitatively. Although quantitative research through various methods such as surveying may have its use for particular research questions, I found that the types of information typically collected through surveys would be somewhat decontextualized and insufficient to answer the study's research questions.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions aligned with the purpose of this study, which was to interpret and analyze international student perceptions and themes specific to online interactions and sense of community and belonging. These perceptions were related to their experiences interacting online and the influence of these experiences on a sense of belonging or isolation.

1-How do international students experience and make meaning of belonging or isolation in an online class or group?

2-Specifically, how do international students perceive their interactions with other students and the instructor, in both class-wide and small group text-based discussion mediums regarding sense of belonging or isolation?

### **Study Context (Site Context)**

The study's participants were selected from a group of international students who are enrolled in a U.S.-based institution of higher education in the Northwestern United States called University Campus (UC) (pseudonym), where participants have taken at least one online course. The institution is a private not-for-profit, 4-year or above undergraduate institution of higher education that provides Associate's and Bachelor's degrees, eight entire degrees online, and has an enrollment of approximately 14,900 students. The international population includes over 600 students from 67 countries. Nearly 10,000 students have taken at least one online class. All online classes have text-based discussion environments and other online tools for communication and interaction.

Since the interview questions emphasized international students' interactions with U.S. students and instructors in an online environment, the focus was on communication interactions through a learning management system, an online collaboration technology that provides a central virtual space for a specified group or class to interact through discussion board, grading, web page, chatting, and other tools. The learning management system utilized by the University Campus had a discussion board environment, with options to respond to a particular post or thread of posts class-wide between students with

intermittent participation by the instructor, and some ability for small group interaction as well. A thread is a link that contains multiple discussion posts. A discussion post is a single submission of text, a video/audio/text attachment, link, or other information from an individual student. Different sets of small groups can be organized by the instructor to allow access for particular students to a specifically assigned discussion thread. This setting provided the desired context for studying international students' interactions with other students and the instructor within a group setting in order to answer research questions that addressed perceptions of sense of belonging within the online community.

### **Methods**

Data from international undergraduate students within a context of online discussion environments were collected and analyzed to isolate and explore student perceptions and experiences. Data examined came from postcourse interviews specific to students' experiences in an online class. Online text-based discussion interactions were reviewed to help me better understand the context of interview responses during analysis. To help gain insights from international students and gain student trust within a non-public confidential setting, postclass interviews were conducted with individual students in-person for a specific purpose and strategy (Markham, 2005). The strategy of seeking interview data allowed students to share information that they may not likely share in a public, class-accessible, online discussion board. Integrating the review of online discussion board interaction text with interview data helped establish greater rigor and context during the analysis process (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

## **Participant Selection and Sampling**

Targeted sampling methods were used to select a sample of international students within a greater university population base by country of origin, gender, major, and by having participated in an online course during the last 2 years (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Since the criterion included a specific target of international students who recently participated in an online course within the last 2 years, targeted sampling seemed appropriate. A broad selection by country of origin, gender, time of participation, and major helped create a diverse sample of representation of perceptions for answering the research questions.

First, a list of all international students who completed an online course from the university within the last 2 years was obtained for a total of 40 students. These were then categorized by country of origin, gender, and major. Next, they were contacted through email with an invitation to participate in an interview with information about the estimated time commitment and other necessary details. The students were then contacted by phone and text message as needed for follow-up. For those contacted by phone, the call reminded them of the contents of the email already sent. If the student recognized the email, but had not yet responded, an invitation to participate was extended. If the student wanted to participate, a time and place was scheduled for a face-to-face interview. The consent form (Appendix B) was sent to them by email before the interview so they could prepare themselves appropriately. A total of 11 international students out of the total 40 students identified accepted the invitation to be interviewed (see Table 1). Each interview lasted from 30-60 minutes. No translation was necessary since UC requires English competency for international students. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Table 1: Sample Demographics**

<b>Participant Pseudo-name</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Semester(s) Taking Online Class(es)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Major</b>
<b>Scott</b>	Brazil	Fall 2011, Winter 2012, and Fall 2012 (7)	Male	Business Management
<b>Ryan</b>	France	Fall 2011, Winter 2012, and Fall 2012 (9)	Male	Political Science
<b>Dan</b>	Germany	Spring 2011 (4)	Male	Biology
<b>Christina</b>	Chile	Spring and Fall 2012 (3)	Female	Business Management
<b>Samantha</b>	France	Winter 2012 (1)	Female	Biology
<b>Brian</b>	Hong Kong	Spring 2012 (1)	Male	Music
<b>Rachel</b>	Zimbabwe	Fall 2012 (1)	Female	Political Science
<b>Brittany</b>	Brazil	Spring 2012 (2)	Female	Interior Design
<b>Melanie</b>	Russia	Fall 2012 (2)	Female	Exercise Science
<b>Peter</b>	Portugal	Spring 2012 (3)	Male	Psychology
<b>Ben</b>	Mexico	Fall 2012 (3)	Male	Political Science

Recordings and transcriptions were saved to a password-protected computer to ensure confidentiality of students' interview data.

The purpose of interviewing international students was to collect data until reaching saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mason, 2010). Saturation is defined as a point in data collection where data become redundant and conducting more interviews leads to a diminishing return (Mason, 2010). The sample must be large enough to obtain the diversity of perceptions from participants, but not so large that findings become repetitive and superfluous. Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained that as more participants



are added to the study, potentially new findings might continue to emerge. Since the scope of this study was exploratory and narrowed to international students' sense of belonging or isolation in an online environment, a proposed goal of 20 participants was a starting point. Since many of the 40 identified participants were away from University Campus during the time period for interviews, 11 international students were interviewed. Some authors point out that qualitative data are often collected in excess, where conclusions for the study do not need more data, but more specification within the overabundance of data (Creswell, 1998). This was the case for this study in that the amount of interview data seemed to reach saturation after several interviews, even before 11 interviews were completed. Green and Thorogood (2009) suggested that little that is new comes out of interviewing more than the number needed for saturation.

### **Data Collection**

A total of 11 undergraduate international students who were enrolled in an online course at University Campus (UC) were interviewed. Semistructured interviews included specific questions aligned to the study's overarching research questions, while also allowing the interviewer and participants to explore other directions that might arise during the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Some examples of interview questions were: When did you take an online course or courses? What was your overall impression of taking this course online? What group activities do you remember participating in? Were there any differences in your sense of belonging/isolation with the class wide community compared to the small group community? How did the instructor help you feel like you belonged? How did the instructor not help you feel like you

belonged? (For a full list of interview questions see Appendix C.) After the students were contacted, selected, and interviewed, text from discussion board interactions from all online courses taken was accessed and reviewed to help me better understand the context from interview responses. Transcription data was uploaded into a free qualitative analysis software application called Weft QDA to generate categories, themes, and findings.

### **Data Analysis**

Fereday and Muir-Chochrane (2006) recommended using open and axial coding to analyze narrative data and understand constructed meanings of experiences and perceptions of participants. In this study, open coding was conducted, defined as a first level of coding that initially attached a summary statement based on actual phrases/terms used by the participants joined to a summary phrase/term applied by the researcher. Next, axial coding was conducted, defined as connecting open codes/summaries into identified themes and categories, and further analyzing subthemes into rich detail and connections.

The coding process included identifying socialization and sense of belonging/isolation experiences and attaching a summary code to each sentence(s), meaning a phrase of text that attempted to describe the meaning of the sentence, preferably a phrase used by the student in the interview. This was done before any formal interpretation of data to ensure that none of the rich contextual data was left out. This process organized the data to identify themes and subthemes as findings from the student participant data. In order to allow further contextual exploration and analysis of the data, themes and subthemes were then joined into categories or patterns, as interrelationships and connections (Scott & Howell, 2008). Participants' description of how they made

meaning of their online interaction with students and instructors included common ways of describing online interaction moments across multiple participants (McCray, 2004). It was challenging to determine which parts of participants' narratives to include as evidence to support the general themes and categories presented in the findings. Often several narratives from different individuals coded towards one category or theme. Sometimes it made sense to include two or three of the narratives to clarify a category and at other times it made more sense to select the narrative that provided the richest description as a representative of other international students' narratives. The differences in participants and the realities of discussion board text being mostly about content and no personal interaction are thoroughly apparent in the findings. Text-based discussion board data were initially reviewed and analyzed for further evidence to add to participant interview response data. However, since all the discussion board data were specifically about the content of the class with no direct relation to sense of belonging or other relations to the research questions, the discussion board textual data were used for context and support in the analysis process, not directly used within the findings

### **Limitations of the Study**

This is a study of the subjective experiences of international students and the influence these experiences have on their sense of community and belonging/isolation. Each international student brought to the online community a diverse cultural, biological, and psychological background potentially influencing a wide array of different interaction and social expectations and processes (Akintunde, 2006; Cruz & Domingues, 2008; Grusec & Hastings, 2007; Zull, 2002). Being an interpretive study, the nature of

the findings makes it difficult to generalize or prove validity to a broader audience in the traditional sense (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This traditional approach seeks to generate findings that apply to other locations and samples with consistency and predictability throughout the greater international student population, assuming homogeneity between a sample and a wider population, which consists of potentially millions of international students at thousands of other higher education campuses throughout the world. Concepts of catalytic validity, transferability, and catalytic validity as inference (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Toma, 2011) may be useful for understanding how the findings, interpretation, and discussion of this study can be utilized to ignite increased understanding. Specifically, increased understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions can further enhance dialogue, communication, and potential policy restructuring for decision makers to include in their decision processes concerning the ongoing unique and changing circumstances of international students and their perceptions of belonging or isolation.

Markham (2005) reviewed how conceptions of identity, culture, race, ethnicity, interchange, and communication are influenced and mediated through information and communication technologies such as online text-based classrooms and other virtual spaces. She specifically mentioned how lenses of online participants shift and how subjectivity and objectivity take on new meanings. Specifically, Markham related that some view a combination of participant postings online as an objective view of the world as it is in reality. In other face-to-face settings, where the dialogue is spoken without being recorded into text, this may be viewed as subjective. In other words, as long as it is written down and published online, there may be a greater sense of legitimacy, different

from verbal communication. Recognizing that the majority of the study's participants interacted with other students through text-based asynchronous online discussion threads and very few video/audio or chat through technologies such as Skype and Adobe Connect, this provides further limitations and potential liabilities for understanding exactly how international students conceptualize their online experiences with other students. Recognizing this limitation, however, does not discount the utility of such a study for an environment in which online interactions will continue to increase and will need to be continually analyzed and discussed by educational leaders to inform decision making.

### **Trustworthiness of the Methods**

Guba (1981) included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as constructs to help explore the trustworthiness of qualitative methods. I sought to develop credibility by implementing strategies to help ensure participant honesty (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Participants were given the opportunity to refuse to participate in the research as well as encouraged to be frank to ensure that the data collection interview sessions involved only those who were genuinely willing to participate. Peer scrutiny was employed to allow different individuals within the field of online learning dealing with international students to review the findings and give feedback to the researcher as to any potential bias or misjudgments of interpretations (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). A reflective commentary in the form of a journal was visited often as the themes and categories emerged during the analysis (Toma, 2011).

Revisiting the journal influenced me, as the researcher, to monitor my own developing constructions throughout the study.

I sought to establish transferability by providing sufficient contextual information about the site and environment of the research study (Guba, 1981). Developing transferability was accomplished by giving thick descriptions of not only the university, but also the online environment in which international students as participants engaged in. Such thick description allows future readers to be enabled to compare the phenomenon described in the research study to their personal situations. Dependability was established by providing enough information on the methods by which the research study was carried out so that any future reader could repeat the study in a new context as desired, while also aware of the unique context of this study. I sought to develop confirmability by using more than one data source to better understand the perceptions of participants within the study. During the analysis, each time a participant mentioned an experience within their online course, I accessed the assignment or discussion board text referred to in order to understand the context in which the comment was given. Admission of researcher beliefs and assumptions was also important to give other readers an idea of why such directions in methods and interpretations were taken (Lichtman, 2006).

The purpose of this study is not to prove a hypothesis or to show that the sample is precisely representative of a broader population of international students at-large across the U.S. or the world. This study is limited in its scope in that it provided information and context around a specific sample of students and their interpretations of their experiences. The purpose is to provide catalytic findings and information to help students, educators,

and policy decision makers make better decisions (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). To ensure that findings are indeed catalytic, the study's results were discussed and validated with online learning administrators, curriculum designers, and instructors who interact with international students online frequently. This study is open to magnification of its scope, depending on its use as a tool to expand the views and dialogue of practitioners when seeking to improve online discourse and interchange among international students. Because human meaning making and the perspectives of participants are changing at the personal as well as the group level, a qualitative approach was essential to capture at least some of that change (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Recognizing the context of student experiences and interviewing international students implied a critical need to understand how qualitative methods are limited and/or are not limited in their trustworthiness. Wolcott (2001) suggested avoiding wordiness, using active and simple language, to ensure that the listener/researcher does not misconstrue the intended as well as written meaning of participant experiences and perceptions as much as possible. Wolcott also emphasized the need to stay balanced between focus and open room for flexibility. Qualitative methods allowed for both focus and flexibility. To avoid wordiness and misconstruing the intended meaning of participant experiences, focus is provided by the purpose of the study along with targeted and prepared semistructured interview questions. Adding specific criteria for obtaining the sample, such as taking an online class within the last 2 years, equal representation by gender and a wide variety of majors and countries, allowed for focus in the direction of the study (Le Grange & Beets, 2005).

### **Researcher as Instrument**

Personal interactions as an instructor and student with other online students ignited my preliminary curiosity about the online social process. Although I recognize to some extent how my personal lens and background affect my conception of reality, I am humbled by how much I do not know concerning how this background affects the types of research questions I pursue and the analysis decisions I make (Glesne, 2011). Recognizing that my background influences my interpretation of the findings and analysis, I admit that I come from a specific lens of viewing the literature, findings, and analysis through the eyes of an administrator and online instructor at an institution that has a growing enrollment of international students.

Recognizing the multitude of choices I made concerning which qualitative methods to implement, I hope I do not fit within the label of what some refer to as an “embarrassment of choices” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 20). I had to choose which aspects of the possible multiple directions I thought were important and what I thought I should accept, which might have left me in a state of flux throughout the study, although still informed by the broader literature on qualitative methodologies (Lichtman, 2006).

Given this state of flux and my subscription to qualitative inquiry, I felt I needed to justify the rigor of qualitative methods throughout my study, not only to other readers, but especially to myself, a prior quantitative methods inductee through the field of psychology as well as a practitioner dealing with accreditation using primarily quantitative facts to argue for a stamp of approval for the universities in which I worked. Litchman (2006) however, gave me permission to increase my understanding and not remain in a constant defense position of an apologist for using qualitative methods. Using



this permission, I accepted that qualitative methods can be rigorous and valid by study and by faith and moved on to discuss how my values might influence the analysis and interpretation of the findings and research.

My personal value is that all students should feel and perceive an equitable sense of acceptance and respect within any environment and an equitable opportunity to access online learning without feeling that other students are putting them down, using perceived authoritative approaches (Rovai, 2009), or patronizing them. For example, in an online class I taught previously, a student from Sudan felt that another female student from the United States was belittling her by pointing out where the native Sudanese student was not fulfilling the online discussion board rubric from the syllabus. In my view, it was counterproductive for the U.S. student to point out where the Sudanese student was lacking. It became such a sore spot, in my perception, that I changed the small groups so these two could experience, in my limited perception, a sense of community differently as the semester progressed.

After reading through their online discussion text, I wondered how an experience like this would influence the Sudanese student's desire to continue to reach out and engage with the class community in future group work/discussion. Even if I assume that the U.S. student was giving such direction through good intentions, this made the online discussion board an uncomfortable space for the Sudanese student for the rest of the term. Even after separating them into other groups, the perception of an unsafe space or potential isolation by the Sudanese student carried over into other groups. This created my personal perception as a teacher that the online interaction space was no longer equitable or at least not appealing to the international student's background preferences

and expectations. During this time I assumed that the U.S. student was naturally aware that the other student in her group was an international student. However, after pondering this experience through this research, I now wonder if the U.S. student really had any idea that this other student was international.

This experience helped me understand what Litchman (2006) meant by stating that making meaning of other student experiences through telling stories is a legitimate way of capturing research. This story of the Sudanese student became more memorable and influential on my understanding of the phenomenon than any research study from the literature review. It was another confirmation to me of the difficult challenge of deciding what counts as legitimate knowledge (King & Horrocks, 2010). The findings from this study provide legitimate sources for educators and curriculum decision makers to utilize when trying to understand online interchange specific to an increasing enrollment of international students. From this experience and others, I developed the purpose of this research, which influenced which research questions I asked.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In general, considering that I am a graduate student and have studied formal processes of interviewing, I am reminded of my experience being an interviewee in a different research study similar to the participants of this study. I felt that the interviewer seemed to know more than me. I also assumed and believed that the interviewer sought a particular answer to their questions. When considering ethical considerations of interviewing, I sought to acknowledge the possibility of unintentionally influencing the participant as well as the possibility of misrepresenting or misunderstanding their

intentions. Even more potentially damaging would be to somehow unintentionally identify them in the study because of inadequate precautions to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Participants were international students with potential characteristics similar and unique such as financial, family, or other pressures. I tried to ensure an essential and clear explanation of the informed consent process. In addition I tried to set the expectations that participants were free to share their opinions or drop out of the study at any time as preferred. Also, I tried to remember to not overly influence them intentionally or unintentionally to attain findings that fit my preconceived direction of the study, its findings, and interpretations. This was somewhat challenging because the first several participants seemed to fit into one theme of preferences and expectations and the rest of the participants had other nuanced answers to the questions of the study. This made it difficult to decide when to summarize the findings into themes and when to branch back out to respect, appreciate, and ensure that I captured the uniqueness of each international student's intended meaning. I used direct quotes as much as possible to avoid over-interpreting intention of meaning.

There are specific ethical concerns when conducting research related to online interaction environments. If this study were isolating data through only online mediums, features of technology might influence privacy protection, identity, and informed consent (Girvan & Savage, 2012). However, since this study utilized in-person interview methods and text from online discussion boards that included informed consent forms and in-person explanations, I believe that I have conscientiously attempted to address ethical concerns. Another body of support to address ethical concerns included the Institutional

Review Board at the University of Utah, which approved the study methods. Participants gave their written informed consent before participating in the study. See Appendix B for specific precautions utilized to ensure that the research was conducted in an ethical way.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study's research questions focused on international undergraduate student perceptions of their sense of belonging or isolation within an online class. Qualitative methods best answered these types of research questions because they allowed an interpretation of the subjective meanings of individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). An interpretive methodology filled a gap in the literature, where organizational and group socialization and international students' sense of belonging or isolation in online courses has mostly been studied at the theoretical level. Moore (2006) and Wang and Reeves (2007) specifically called for research about online learning that could fill the gap in findings that are rich in qualitative content. The findings section is based on the collection and analysis of data as discussed in this methodology chapter. The emphasis is on how these interpretive qualitative methods can establish rigorous findings and interpretation.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

Interview findings offered insights into organizational or group socialization theory within the context of interactions in an online environment for international students. The following chapter outlines categories that emerged from the content, code, and thematic analysis of interview transcript data. Overarching categories included international students' 1) expectations of online group interactions, 2) preferences for belonging/isolation in an online environment when interacting with other students, and 3) perceptions of interacting with the instructor. Several themes emerged within each category (see Figure 2).

All of the study participants described their expectations, preferences, and perceptions of group interactions and sense of belonging during their online course. Understanding how international students make meaning of their preferences and expectations, specific to belonging and isolation, helped provide a framework for identifying, describing, exploring, and analyzing themes and patterns across student perceptions of their online interactions with other students and the instructor.

Expectations for and Navigation of Online Group Interactions with Other Students	Preferences for Belonging/ Isolation Interacting with Other Students	Perceptions of Interacting with the Instructor Online
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First-time taking an online class</li> <li>• The online interaction environment and lack of emotional connection</li> <li>• Focus on assignment material, not group connections</li> <li>• Prior experience with emphasis on individual academic learning, not group work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preferences for getting to know other students in an online setting</li> <li>• Online group work is a hassle</li> <li>• Technology medium influencing preferences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connections with an online instructor</li> <li>• Changing views of instructor interactions</li> <li>• Perceptions of group connections compared to online instructor interactions</li> </ul>

**Figure 2: Categorization of Themes**

### **Expectations for and Navigation of Online Group Interactions with Other Students**

Study participants were asked about their expectations for, as well as their navigation of, online group interactions. They responded by describing their perceptions of their interactions with other students. The following themes emerged from an analysis of international students' expectations and subsequent navigation of their online course: 1) taking an online class for the first time; 2) feeling a lack of emotional connections; 3) sensing a focus on assignment material over group sense of belonging; and 4) contextualizing prior educational experience within the online experience.

#### **First-Time taking an Online Class**

A frequent response to the question about students' expectations of group interactions was that international students were navigating an online class for the first time at University Campus (UC) and really did not have many solid expectations. This

theme is defined as taking an online class for the first time, not just in higher education, but in their entire educational careers. Christina, a business management major from Chile, described an absence of expectation or anticipation: "I never took online classes where I went to school. I wasn't really expecting anything."

Brittany, an interior design major from Brazil, described her lack of expectations of online classes before taking her first one. She was not aware of the structure or even that there would be group work until she was in the middle of a group assignment within the sequence of the course: "I don't think I had expectations, cause I didn't even know we would be put into groups." Other international students reiterated that it was difficult to have any expectations given that this was their first time taking an online class, but remembered a few things they had heard from friends about online courses in general. Their expectations were influenced slightly by what they had heard from friends, but not related to group work or a sense of belonging. For example, Dan, a biology major from Germany, described what he had heard from others before taking his first online class and how this affected his expectations: "You hear things on campus about online classes, and people are normally like 'yah, they're much harder than in class, whatever'."

Christina's response was similar in that she referred to what she had heard from others: "People always said that it's...a lot of work." Brittany described her initial expectations before taking an online class and then compared this to her actual experience:

It was interesting. I've never taken an online class before. I thought...it's going to be convenient because...I was in Brazil at the time and I could get some credits while I was there. But then, I didn't know it would be a lot of work. It seems like there's more work on an online course...it required me so much time. Probably more than a class would require here on campus.

In summary, before taking their first online class international students did not have any detailed expectations, but those they did have were influenced by statements they had heard from others about the amount of work required in online classes. In addition to the perceptions related to the amount of work in online classes, international students also observed a lack of emotional connection with other students.

### **Lack of Emotional Connection in the Online Interaction**

#### **Environment**

Another theme within the category of expectations for and navigation of online group interaction was a perceived lack of emotional connection with other group members. Lack of emotional connection is defined as how participants perceived their interactions with other students and how these interactions did not create any sense of emotion or bonding. For example, Brian, a music major from Hong Kong, emphasized the lack of emotional communication capability he noticed as he navigated the online environment:

...if a girl started crying...online, they might type just a small little part and there might be a technical problem that might get in the way of the full emotional experience...one thing I have experienced is...a computer problem... right in the climate part, it just stop everything...When you are in person you can build build build build everything up and just make everyone cry but in online courses, that's really really hard to do...there could...possibly [be an emotional connection], but unless you are super in tune with the other person...it takes a little more time, like one semester might not be enough...online course is really hard to get emotional connections, so okay click, you can time, you can get along well, but not quite there, there's still like a level different.

Brian's description of the lack of an emotional connection in his online class was similar to another response from Rachel, a political science major from Zimbabwe.



Rachel described her experience of connecting with other students in the context of her online math course focusing primarily on assessments and how these made her feel:

...it would have been helpful to communicate with the students...But, the design is really kind of hard to make online as close or almost as close as on campus experience because it's different learning in the classroom with students there and then on the same level, learning the same thing than online where you are alone on the computer, and if you don't talk to anyone, you just feel like you're just getting everything done and waiting for the instructor to talk to you.

Rachel then compared her online math course, which emphasized assessments, to an online education course, which she helped evaluate as a student employee. The education online course implemented discussion boards with video introductions that required not only a discussion of the content, but also conversation around how the content influenced students' personal lives. Specifically, Rachel described how the structure of this course influenced the connection potential differently than the one-time introduction discussion board assignment mentioned by other participants when discussing their online classes. The education course syllabus structured and stated how collaboration and group work would be implemented in detail with high expectations in order to complete the major project of the course, which was different from the structure and syllabus in Rachel's math course:

...from the [Education] course, they had discussion boards, and they would create not just about course material but also about themselves because they had a week where they write down summaries of what they are, their families, and people put up pictures and some create videos and you can see. So with them, throughout the course, they build friendships, they don't just say, "Hey you're in my group, let's do this and that." They ask personal questions; "Hey how's your family?" They communicated like friends...so you could put a face to the voice, you could put a voice with a face...I think that also made it feel personal...and then that is how you build a conversation... It built that personal relationship that continued throughout the course.

Although Rachel highlighted the positive aspects of a unique potential emotional connection, Scott clarified his view of the role of the discussion board as being pointless.

He described in particular how he navigated each online course he has taken:

...there's a discussion board or a place you can submit news or a little bit about yourself. I hate putting it as this, but I have the same thing written and I just copy/paste to all the classes. It's so generic. I just don't necessarily think online on these classes particularly is the place to like go and meet friends. I don't...it's so automatic for me already that I don't mind it but I think it's kind of pointless. Maybe the way it's done. I just know that I'm going to get that so I have my little paragraph and I just copy and paste.

Exploring how emotion is communicated online compared to face-to-face as well as analyzing how the structure and the interaction environment used within different online courses underscored this theme of emotional connections or lack thereof. Brian gave an analogy of the emotional sense of connection between online and face-to-face environments. He summarized his view of the purpose of online environments in reference to emotional connections:

I think for my understanding for my online courses is mainly to impart the information to you and get them to study, take their test and be able to learn more. So maybe Science...or American Foundations, those would be really good courses for them, they're just straight information...you take the test and then you're done...I would rather...take a course...where every Wednesday...in the morning is half online and half class only meet once a week, the other time online. So that might work the best for me...it seems online information but you can go to class to share.

Brian's response is one example of how an international student perceived their experience taking online classes specific to communicating any emotional connections. The next theme focused on how international students responded to efforts to organize and structure online interaction environments and intended collaboration between students.

## **Focus on Completing Assignment Material, not Personal**

### **Group Connections**

Several students described how their approach to activities within the online class that were designed for group work mostly focused on the assignment, not on building a sense of belonging or any emotional connection. This theme connected with the previous theme of not feeling much emotional connection with other students in that the rush to complete assigned work contributed to a lack of emotional connection when engaging in online interactions. Christina described an example of seeing the potential group interaction as a means to completing assignment material. She highlighted in the following the ineffectiveness of the interaction environment for establishing a sense of connection or community with other group members over the course of the semester:

The thing is that maybe in the first class I took, maybe I cared a little and I was like "Oh I am going to read [other student posts] just because I have time," kind of thing. But after a while you realize that you don't really get anything by reading other people's unless you are looking for an answer... I never feel like we are a group or a team or that I am ever going to meet them or we are friends, no, no.

Christina's statement was representative of several other participants' comments about the role of discussion boards within group assignments and other class wide interactions; they were primarily a means for finding an answer to complete an assignment. In another example of using group interaction opportunities as a means to an end, Ben, a political science major from Mexico, explained his personal view on the substance of collaborating online as a group:

Every week we had to come together and answer some questions as a group and discuss some terms and ideas. It was difficult for me, I don't know that person. Like a brotherhood kind of thing, no...we just mentioned very briefly where we were from. We were pretty much like, "Let's do this."

This theme of focusing on completing the assignment over improving a personal group connection naturally connected to the following theme, which emerged as international students explained why they tended to use the group collaboration opportunity as a means to complete their assignments. International students described their prior experience with education in general and how that influenced their expectations for, and navigation of, interactions with other group members within their online class.

### **Prior Experience with Emphasis on Individual Academic Learning, not Group Work**

Connected to the previous theme of focusing on an assignment over group interactions was how participants' educational experiences before taking an online course influenced this focus. Prior experience referred to international students' educational engagement before starting their first online course in postsecondary education, mostly secondary/high school and before. Peter, who was from Portugal and attended high school in Brazil, described his previous school experience:

I haven't really thought about it that much, that's a good connection to think about. Coming from a very diverse background, I didn't find that high school or even middle school ever pushed for group work like [University Campus] pushes for group work...I think what I am is unique in that way. So, I do come from a sort of an individualistic education background.

In another example similar to Peter's description, Dan, a biology major, who had attended school in Germany and Switzerland, compared his high school education to that of his other classmates who were predominantly American:

That might have to do with the mentality, because all the high schools are completely different. We don't have all the social aspects of school...we go to

school to learn and go home and they keep us busy with homework all night long...so we don't have high school sports, or music, orchestra going on... it's more like a job, school, for us, less social aspect.

Dan's description of not having any social aspects in the schools he attended before starting postsecondary education helped provide more context to the following response from another international student, particularly in relation to how prior educational experience influenced affinity for group work. Ryan, a political science major from France, compared his prior expectation of group work to his actual experience with group work in his online class in a more positive tone. He described his views of group work in the context of his past experience in education and then explained how his group experience was different from what he originally expected. Again, however, he emphasized that the purpose of the group work is to accomplish academic outcomes over feelings of belonging:

I don't like group work in general...it was bearable. I usually hate it. We had one group discussion every week...discussion boards. Those don't even count because you don't work together. The issue in group work is that some people work a lot and because they want an A in the class, some other people do not really work hard because they don't care about the grade. So I was afraid I would even have to work even more because I want to get a good grade and some people wouldn't...I didn't expect my best friend on the online class because I knew I wasn't able to be doing this.

This theme of prior experience with an emphasis on individual learning over group work meshed with the next category and subthemes highlighting participants' experiences, expectations, and preferences. In the next section, I discuss participants' preferences within the context of interacting with other students.

## **Preferences for Belonging/Isolation Interacting with Other Students**

Every international student was asked about their preferences for belonging and community within an online class, specifically regarding interactions with other students in group and class wide work. This general category of preferences for sense of belonging was multifaceted with several themes. International students had initial preferences for not getting to know and connect with other students, not just in online courses, but also in their education in general. The following themes emerged from the analysis: 1) preferences for getting to know other students, 2) online group collaboration is a hassle, and 3) technology medium influences preferences.

### **Preferences for Getting to Know Other Students in an Online Setting**

Several participants mentioned their preference for avoiding group work online, especially in the context of lacking an interest in getting to know other students. Lack of interest referred to their interaction with other students and also the nature of the online environment in general. For example, Christina clarified her reasoning for why feeling alone is okay within the broader lack of interest in getting to know other class and group members in the online setting:

I think it is OK to feel lonely. I think it is totally OK. But at the same time you make it seem like it's so important to get friends in the class. I don't think it's important... You never get a friend...when you go to the online class, that is the least thing you should expect. Because you are not even seeing them, you don't even know their real names, maybe the names they have there are not even real. And then the pictures also, it's on-line... I think that is the way it should feel because it is independent. It is you in your house doing your homework, caring about yourself. If you get to know somebody by chance and getting to be friends,

good, but that is not the purpose. Your purpose is to only you, only the teacher, only your homework. So maybe some people do connect, I don't. I don't. I haven't reached out to anybody, I haven't asked anything and I haven't answered anything to anybody to help them... I haven't been willing or able to do it.

Christina's preference for isolation over belonging was similar to Peter's. When asked about preferences for belonging versus isolation, Peter described his reaction to two opportunities for group work in his online class:

I think that's part of who I am, I don't think I had an interest in getting to know the other group members... For example, that assignment she encouraged for students... here to get together here [at University Campus]. I emailed her, "'look, is there anything else I can do from home and I opted that course.'" Because I do feel like a lot of these people... naturally are social and want to get to know each other and I don't want to get to know anybody.

Peter's request to opt out of getting together with other students at University Campus is an example of a preference to not get to know anybody in the online class. In another example, Melanie, a political science major from Russia, generalized how any student, international or not, might struggle with gaining a sense of belonging or community within a group or online class. Her preferences were different from those of Christina and Peter:

I am kind of a shy person but I do know the group... I just feel comfortable. Sure, if I didn't know things then I would be shy. Because I would feel isolated, my own self... I would like to have friends in the class if I e-mail, call and we can decide over and it helps but some people from [the] other side... that's different so I think there is more than to get to know someone. I don't have to get to know each member of the class just a few that are in my group.

Melanie's preference for interacting with other students was unique in that she thought it would be helpful to have a few friends to go to for help. Peter's preferences leaned towards isolation. He did mention the necessity of learning how to work in online teams for future work experiences, but held to the isolation preference nonetheless:

I can see how some courses can do that but just as an individual, I don't tend to seek after that sense of community in any of my course work. But, I think that's a fault of mine, I understand how important group work is not only in school but outside of school, so that's an individual preference... I know that group work is essential in the work force, the people interaction is unavoidable and it's an important part of our life.

Like Peter, Ryan from France responded to a question about preferences for interacting with other group members online in this way. His response was similar to those of Peter and Christina in that isolation is not seen negatively, but actually preferred:

I don't mind isolation. I think I learn well just by myself reading, answering the questions. Sometimes in class, people ask questions and sometimes it's really bad, I'm like, "why you ask this?" So at least in that class, because I am working at my own pace, although it is regulated, I don't have any other persons, it's only me. I'm a hermit (laughs) probably... It's good because I can work by myself and also work in discussion boards and group projects that still get people and my work done... I don't want to... bonding. There is no point because I'm not going to hang out with them... I don't understand what the point is. So I don't see the whole socialization thing.

Several findings that emerged included unanticipated preferences specific to isolation and distance as defined by international students, specifically about where they choose to focus on developing a sense of belonging. For example, several international students responded that they could get any needed sense of belonging outside of their online class. This referred to other social circles such as family and friends unaffiliated with their course work. Dan mentioned his response to the introduction week discussion board, which was designed to help students feel a sense of community within the online course:

I don't really think, though, I felt alone while taking those online classes. I still had... friends at home, family... I may be not sitting in the classroom but I still felt like a good learning experience in general... there are some pieces missing from the full experience I think. I guess if you go by the philosophy of the school, it's not just about learning, it's about everything else that you can ... learn and experience, the skills you acquire... for the learning, the class is really



good...social aspects, I mean, I don't really know how to improve that online, but and normally wherever you go, you have some family, some friends, so it's okay.

In summary, some international students preferred isolation to belonging in their online class or group assignments, while others preferred to connect with other students in different ways. A few individual participants desired a group connection, but for varied reasons. A pattern of isolation and independence emerged across the interviews. Not only was there a preference for independence and isolation, but there also seemed to be a perception of online group work as a hassle.

### **Online Group Work Is a Hassle**

Several online international students mentioned that connecting with their online group was seen as a challenge and even a hassle thereby increasing their sense of frustration with group work. The term hassle mostly referred to scheduling group work, but also included other components of organizing assignments and feeling any sense of collaboration. This perception of group work as a hassle connected with the theme of not having an interest in getting to know other students in that the frustration with scheduling and organizing work reinforced a certain immediacy to overlook efforts towards personal connections. The first example of this theme is from Scott. He emphasized his feelings toward group work online compared to working in teams face-to-face:

Tell you the truth, I hate it. The interaction part with other students. The reason why I choose online usually because I don't have any extra time because if I did it would be on campus. I love, if I could I would, I love working with teams, I love working with groups but online I think it's a hassle more than a benefit...you're meeting with other students that are so different in so many different ways. Their schedules are different; they're in different time zones. Right now on my...class, I've simply ignored the group assignments. I've given up on trying. I've emailed the professor and said I tried a couple of times to reach out to people and I don't

know it doesn't work, I mean I could be better at it, but it's just a hassle. I don't like it (laughs).

Similar to Scott, Brian contrasted the experience of trying to organize group processes and practices face-to-face with his group experience in the online environment:

...for me personally, I would rather take the course in person, because I love social and interact with people. Online course, it seems like you can get to know them, but not really. Since you can't really see them and you can't really pick them out. You can't really go hang out with them. So I would rather take an actual course.

Rachel, who happened to also be a student employee in the university curriculum development department, shared her opinion of the University's efforts to emphasize group work, while also recognizing why online students, such as Scott and Brian, struggle with this goal:

So we are trying to apply [group work] into one of our courses. I don't see how you can take a course without having group work. Because it's important to learn something and then apply it and then when you applied it, you see the picture made and then you learn from that and improve upon that and then teach someone else and that person can help you understand more than you would alone. So I know it's tedious trying to meet up with people online and trying to schedule, you know making schedules work with everyone, but I see, I really see the importance of it.

Dan also highlighted group work as a hassle after being asked what the biggest challenge in his online group experience as an international student was:

I think that the biggest thing for me would have been group work, because in the one class we had two students who really didn't do anything so it was two of us doing everything, [if you could] put them in a group and be good learners together, I think it would have been less frustrating for me...we emailed the instructor too. I mean...you would have it in the work situation too so it can teach you something.

Scott elaborated on and compared his feelings towards online group work to his experience on campus:

Assignments where you have to work with each other to get things done...I don't really like it...a couple of semesters ago I took a class online and every project we had different responsibilities. But, it was horrible. It was horrible...I don't see the point. I can understand the school policy and getting people to interact but I honestly think it's kind of pointless... So I don't think it's ever going to be everyone's on the same page, I don't. And I've taken so many classes, it's always the same, I've never been surprised, I've never been proved wrong...If you're in a group, you and I are talking, we can discuss... It's like these pieces that don't fit together and it takes so long to get a hold of people... I don't even do it anymore (laughs).

Some of the participants took an online class while doing an internship in their home country. Dan mentioned the time zone difference and the challenges of organizing group work online:

...depended on the people...[It] was afternoon for me, where it was really early for them, or really early for me...sometimes they met on the evening and I was already on the next day...people always do it last minute then you have to wait last minute to do other responses. How do you force people to turn in assignments before time?

Online group work across all participants was either directly criticized as a hassle or at least indirectly acknowledged as a difficult situation without any clear solution. One of the themes that emerged in connection with the theme of group work as a hassle was how technology influenced participants' overall preferences and perceptions of online group work.

### **Technology Medium Influencing Preferences**

The theme of how technology influenced participants' preference towards group work is connected to the previous theme of seeing online group work as a hassle. Specifically, international students described varied technology mediums used for group work and class interaction, including the discussion board, video, and chat environments. The first example of this theme came from Brian. He mentioned that even when using a

video tool, Skype, the emphasis still reverted to a focus on the assignment without a deeply embedded sense of belonging: “Do I [feel] attached or belong? Not really, seems like one of the members...cares a lot, like how's your day, and the other student...not really like a connection.” Dan highlighted a positive experience in contrast to Brian’s comment when he described another communication technology called Adobe Connect, which had options similar to Skype for video, audio, and chat with both the instructor and other group members. Dan contrasted how online group work was a hassle before implementing these added features:

I think it was a big difference between different groups...where we actually, the Adobe Connect sessions. We always started out sharing a few things happening during the week... The other classes, discussion boards were sometimes were really good, everyone gave meaningful feedback.

Ben also summarized how the features of video in combination with the asynchronous discussion board positively influenced his connection with group members and the group’s interaction:

I had an online class which we had to come together and share our papers, give our feedback, answer questions, and stuff like that...you start to get a sense of belonging. I was able to see [the instructor] face to face and we work it out outside of school. So yeah, when it was a visual I had a sense of belonging. But when it was just [text discussion], it was nothing.

Like Ben and Dan, Christina described her experience with added audio for the instructor and real-time chatting for group members:

No we don't talk. We only listen to the teacher. We don't see him either. He only talks and we only have the chat box. I like the chat box... It is just to [text] while the teacher is talking...you can be quiet the whole time. I would totally use [chat in a discussion board]...with the discussion board you have all the conversations there and sometimes people ask others, "hey so what do you mean by saying this," and the other person answers later because it is always there you can have a chat box.

Samantha gave a different and more negative impression of using Skype where the entire class was trying to listen and communicate with the instructor at the same time:

I didn't like how we... had a meeting once a week on Skype. The whole class would meet. It was just too complicated and I couldn't figure it out. And once I finally got on-line with everyone else... I could hear the voice of the professor and all the students trying to ask questions at the same time. I didn't like it. So I dropped that one.

Melanie shared an experience from one week when she had only the asynchronous discussion board to communicate about a presentation with her group: "I think it would make it harder to do some presentations. It was easier to talk... We tried one time when the Adobe [Connect] wouldn't work. We tried to the discussion board but it didn't work. It was too many words, too slow, it took forever."

Ben, a political science major from Mexico, talked about trying to work with other students online through the available tools given in the course including Adobe Connect and Skype. Ben described what his group tried to do instead:

I already took a class that was supposed to be group work on-line through Skype and it was a little difficult. Adobe Connect wasn't completely helping us out. So we tried to find other ways to do it... There were different factors. We couldn't have video because you have to pay for that feature in Skype. So we thought, let's go for Google because they have everything else and we could have five people hear each other but they didn't have g-mail accounts. So basically we were just writing like normal.

The preceding analysis focused on participant perceptions and preferences related to interacting with other group members and classmates within an online class. However, interactions with peers are only one aspect of the online class experience. The next category focuses on students' perceptions of a sense of belonging when specifically referencing their online relationship with the instructor.

### **Perceptions of Interacting with the Instructor Online**

Of all the categories and themes, the findings relevant to the student-instructor connection varied the most across participants. A few students felt they were not very connected with the instructor, while others felt a deep connection with the instructor. The following themes emerged from the analysis: 1) connections with an online instructor; 2) changing views of instructor interaction; and 3) perceptions of instructor interactions compared to group member connections.

#### **Connections with an Online Instructor**

Several participants responded that they naturally expected to have a connection with their online instructor. A natural expectation of connection was defined as not only the desire of participants to connect with their instructor, but also the implied probability that they would have a positive experience interacting with their online instructor. These expectations influenced their later perceptions of their interaction with the instructor.

Christina explained her motivation to log in to a weekly synchronous Adobe Connect session that is not required, but encouraged by the instructor:

I just love the teacher! He is so nice... I want him to know that he is a great, great teacher...super nice and have a ton of patience and you can ask them... He seems to always have his phone...because every time I ask him something...in an e-mail... five minutes later I have an answer... And doing that, I really appreciate that he is trying to, he is not disconnected ever... I don't know how nice it is to him to have this job that is 24/7... To me, I really appreciate it and I always tell him, I really appreciate his time and that he really cares about me and the students.

Christina emphasized her expectation and actually welcomed personal connection with the instructor. However, Brian described his online instructor as someone who gave him a grade, not necessarily feeling any connection with the instructor: “I don't think

so...The instructor they give me a grade. But I don't really know him and he doesn't really know me that well. But, I would rather him see me in person.” Rachel described how she had limited contact with her instructor through occasional emails specific to math content and exams. However, she also shared a unique perspective regarding her interpretation of the desires of the instructors whom she worked with to create another nonmath course online:

We go into the course... We have to integrate their work, and I talk to the instructor about it and think about how the students feel... every course we've built so far has group work. [The instructors] try hard to put them in so the students don't think it as busy work. They try very hard, every week, to give them an opportunity with group work but, when we gathered the course evaluations at the end of the semester, every single student complains about group work...it's getting better now, because when I first started working here, every single student complained about it, but now it's just a few... With the instructor, they try hard to initiate it into every course, they try making the activities fun and complete students to see that it's important.

In summary, several participants preferred and desired to connect with their instructor, but understood the limitations of these relationships. What stood out in the analysis across all interviews was participants' responses to having or not having a personal connection with the instructor, which is explored next.

### **Changing Views of Instructor Interaction**

As international students progressed through the course their views of online instructors changed. This was the case not only within an online class, but also between online classes, evidenced by several participants who took multiple online courses either during one semester or over multiple semesters. Samantha took two online courses and had different experiences based on different instructors. She dropped one online course because of the instructor, explaining, “I didn't like it at all. The professor was just...too

detached, too far to do, you know what I mean. I like actually being able to ask the professor questions, and to see his face, or her face.” In another example of the changing view of her instructor, Brittany described the contrast between an instructor from her English online class and the instructor in another online class:

I took English online and...there was kind of involvement, but the teacher she was really good at posting videos herself so in the beginning of the semester she talked about her family, and who she was, how long she has been teaching that, and where she got her degree, every week she would post little videos for us... So that felt like a lot more interaction versus my [other] class.

Like Samantha, Ben summarized the complex variance between feeling alone in one online class versus feeling like he had a personal connection and relationship with the instructor in another one:

Overall there were pretty good aspects of it... In science there was a weekly class which we just saw the professor and I didn't feel very alone. The bottom line I felt the majority of the time I was isolated...I was able to ask questions. And the other one it was pretty nice because they answered the questions that I had but no relationship teacher student... Besides the science, I couldn't get the feeling that I would know them later. It seemed like both of us were just trying to get the class done... Yeah, so it would be pretty good if we had a program where we could see each other, kind of like Google chats and then we could have some more interactions.

Like other participants, in response to a question about the variation between online instructors in different online courses, Brittany described her gratitude for one online instructor specific to her responses through grading and answering questions:

She sent emails, saying like "this is what we're going to study, this is what is due, you can read this, you can read that...she was always emailing like, "I'll give you another retry...these are some things I noticed." Sometimes she would email me saying, "I got your paper, I haven't had a lot of time, but this is what I've noticed"... She was really nice and fast and on top of things.



In line with the theme of changing views of online instructors, Ryan described his views of the interaction experience he had with his online instructors generally across several online courses:

[It] depends on the instructor actually. Some are very quick answer emails and very helpful, some you don't even feel like they care about you. This semester I've had both. Some are happy...some they say they couldn't help, but it didn't even seem like they wanted to help. It's usually the professor that has chat, some have you raise your hand and then they turn on your mike. Of course, because you are directly interacting... You feel like you are really talking to a human being, it's just that sounds more real when you are talking.

The changing views of online instructors were a common theme across the interviews. For the most part participants welcomed the interaction with the online instructor, while also recognizing that some of their online instructors were better at connecting than others. This theme of changing views of the instructor was often compared to participants' perceptions of group connections.

## **Perceptions of Group Connections Compared to Online**

### **Instructor Interactions**

Many participants perceived their interactions with the instructor differently than their interactions with other students, especially regarding preferences for such interactions and sense of belonging. Several participants noted their expectations and choices to develop a deeper relationship with the instructor than with group members.

When I specifically asked about the instructor Christina became excited:

Yes I do feel isolated but I don't care because as long as I am not isolated from the teacher it is fine. I think that is the only thing that really matters. I don't care about feeling lonely. I don't care about that. As long as the teacher knows that I exist and he helps me, that is all I need. They care so much. They take from their time to have a discussion board and the Adobe Connect and to answer questions whenever you ask.

Similar to Christina and her positive review of her online instructor versus her preference to not connect with other class members, Dan also previously described in his interview a preference for and reality of a disconnected experience between peer group members. When asked about his relationship with the instructor, there was a noted difference:

...most of them were really good at sending out at least a weekly email or doing emails or podcast...to introduce the week's material, whenever we email them a concern or a question, they respond really fast so it was good. Even some of them interacted with the discussion boards really well, and like "Hey that's a great comment or insight or something" and you felt like they were reading and taking the time to actually know what I do. I really appreciated that.

Previously, Peter highlighted his social circle outside of the online class and expressed that he did not want to make friends with group members online. Peter then gave a mixed review of his relationship with an online instructor, where his preference for a sense of independence from others within the online course remained:

...mmm, that's different, I actually look forward to having a...connection with the instructor. Unfortunately I feel like, not all online instructors, a lot of online instructors where they are part time and the kind of connections I want to have with professors, will not only last, but will, you know, be beneficial, and frankly, I don't think any of these online instructors have anything to offer other than perhaps a network or knowing someone else, but it's hard as well to make that connection. I also didn't seek out office hours as much as probably I should have...I think it was a personal distance that I already saw, or an expected distance that I knew that was going to happen, and, you know, was fine with that.

When asking about sense of belonging and connectedness in reference to online instructors most participants expressed an expectation and feeling of a personal connection. In summary, participants often highlighted the difference between their expectations and preferences for connecting with group members and their preferences for interacting with online instructors for a sense of belonging.

### **Chapter Summary**

Through the analysis and interpretation of the interview transcription process I learned that there were several complexities that problematized my original assumptions about online discourse between the study participants and their preferences for interacting with other group members and their instructor. The following chapter discusses how these findings interweave with existing research and introduces implications for policy, research, and practice.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction**

Prior research has emphasized the challenges that international students may or may not navigate within online environments (Akintunde, 2006; Cruz & Domingues, 2008). These challenges were noted as potentially influencing international students' perceptions of belonging or isolation within an online class in unforeseen ways that influence other critical factors noted in the literature such as motivation, persistence, and completion (Huett, Kalinowski, Moller, & Huett, 2008; Kostecky, 2009; Puziferro, 2008; Scripture, 2008). The research on international students within online classes was helpful for framing an analysis of their experiences and perceptions (Bohm, et al., 2004; Fischer, 2009). Knowing that past research highlighted the increased number of academic and social interchanges between international students and U.S. students justified further research into this topic (Albritton, 2006; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Barclay, 2011; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009).

The most significant findings emerging from this dissertation include participants' preferences for individual isolation rather than emotional connections or sense of belonging when engaging with other group members online either through group work or other interaction opportunities. These findings, connected to the review of existing

research, form the basis of this study's importance and relevance for curriculum designers, online instructors, policy decision makers, and other administrators working with international students. The existing research influenced my assumptions and expectations of international students before starting the interview process. These assumptions and expectations were different from what I found in this study's findings as discussed in the next section.

### **Discussion**

The following discussion of this study's connections to the extant research is presented in three sections: 1) international students' agency and preferences; 2) the conceptual framework of group socialization in light of the most significant findings; and 3) relational connections and task completion.

#### **International Students' Agency and Preferences**

Even as the literature review highlighted several challenges that international students face specific to student-student and student-instructor interactions, the emphasis was the role of the instructor, other students, the course structure, and other influences targeted towards international students with little to no emphasis on the role of the international student within these interactions (Conceição, Antrop-González, & Kline, 2011). For example, Picciano (2008) related a sense of community to the online social presence of a student, a feeling that someone real is on the other side of the text-based communication, as directly connected to a sense of belonging. Again, the implied logic within such interpretations is on the environment and the appearances of other students in

the class and how these influenced the perceptions of international students, not how individual international students' past and present preferences influence the environment or sense of belonging and community.

Going into the study, I assumed that international students would prefer a group structure and environment that promoted the sense of belonging and community that the literature highlighted as important (Conceição, Antrop-González, & Kline, 2011; Picciano, 2008). The research literature identified social presence and sense of belonging as key influences on student satisfaction within online courses (Akintunde, 2006; Cruz & Domingues, 2008). I believed that these challenges would influence personal goals for successful feelings of belonging, especially if international students associated any negative experience with the online format or other group members particularly (Huett, Kalinowski, Moller, & Huett, 2008; Kostecky, 2009; Puzziferro, 2008; Scripture, 2008). However, what emerged through the analysis of interview transcriptions is that participants' preferences before, during, and after online group experiences, within and outside of the online environment, seemed to carry through and influence their perceptions of group socialization and instructor connections. Specifically, participants' preferences influenced their interactions with other group members with a focus on academic outcomes over a sense of belonging or community. Since the findings specific to the participants' approach to their education reorient the implied assumptions and focus of the broader research on socialization theory, it may be helpful to highlight the authors who emphasize the role of agency within structure in group socialization theory (Kuezyński & Parkin, 2010; Settersten, 1999; Tierney, 1988).

The Sanner et al. (2002) study found that a small sample of international graduate students experienced greater levels of isolation in both traditional and online spaces than other students at U.S.-based institutions of higher education. This research influenced my supposition that international students would embrace the chance to experience a sense of community if they had the right conditions and encouragement from group members, whether during formal group work assignments or during informal opportunities to learn more about one another on a personal basis. In other words, my assumption was that isolation as a top-ranked challenge could be resolved by gathering improvement suggestions from participants about what the instructor and other group members could do to maximize a sense of belonging for them (Roberson et al., 2000). However, this study's findings suggest that international student self-actualization and agency within structure had more of an influence on sense of belonging than external influences. The divide between my assumptions and the study findings is significant. For example, if decision makers in online or face-to-face courses focus primarily on instructors and other group members to improve sense of belonging as a means to increase satisfaction and persistence, their efforts might be ineffective given that international students may continue to hold deep personal preferences for isolation and individualism and not respond to such support efforts as intended.

Given that isolation is a common experience in online classes in general, before collecting the study data I believed that international student isolation would be compounded (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). Given this, I sought to analyze participants' perceptions of belonging/isolation through the conceptual framework of organizational and group socialization where the international student would equate to newcomer

(Louis, 1980) perspectives found within the broader literature on socialization theory. In review, organizational and group socialization theory (Kuezynski & Parkin, 2010) has been described to include group, interactional, and situational processes that intersect with information and values for all group members, but with a particular emphasis on how newcomers are impacted, where the concept of newcomer was interpreted to reference international students taking an online class for the first time (Schein, 1971; Van Maanen, 1977).

Other authors added that socialization could be described as a two-way street, where all members of a social group, socializers and socializees, are active in the socialization process of increasing a sense of belonging (Gecas, 1981; Jones, 1986; Louis, 1980). Implied in this perspective, socializees would equate to international students and socializers would equate to the other group members as the primary socializers. However, according to the findings, the socializer would more naturally equate to the online instructor, specifically taking into account that participants as socializees preferred a connection with their online instructor over other group members.

Other aspects of socialization include the acquisition of rules, roles, standards, and values across social, emotional, cognitive, and personal domains, from a group and structural level and an individual self-actualization level, also known as agency within structure (Kuezynski & Parkin, 2010; Settersten, 1999; Tierney, 1988). I do not fully believe that participants in this study are completely unique given the extensive literature that says sense of belonging is crucial for college students' persistence. It is not necessarily the case that the participants in this study stymie the more established theory that sense of belonging is crucial for college students' satisfaction and persistence. Sense



of belonging may be just as important for the persistence of these international students as any other students already studied in the existing research. I would highlight that the study of persistence is outside the scope of this research study. In fact, it will be critical for future research to study how international students persist assuming that some international students studied in the future may or may not share the preference for isolation in their online courses similarly.

This study underpinned how a sense of belonging may develop for the individual within a larger group and class setting across reciprocal and simultaneous change (Goslin, 1969; Jones, 1986; Louis, 1980; Settersten, 1999). I assumed that the agency of participants, as newcomers, and other U.S. students as socializers would form a setting where socialization stages (antecedent, anticipatory, encounter, assimilation, and exit phases (Anderson & Riddle, 1999)) would naturally occur and contribute to an understanding of how instructors or other group members, predominately from the U.S. might improve or inhibit sense of belonging for international students. Given that the participants in this study largely preferred isolation over a sense of belonging, the theory's reference to agency was used in an opposite direction than previously thought. In my interpretation of socialization theory, the theory implied an overemphasis on the external influence of group members on the newcomer, or international student (Schein, 1971; Van Maanen, 1977). I believe that the theory does not put equal importance on the role of the newcomer and their prior biography, background, and preferences.

The acquisition of rules, roles, standards, and values was unique in this study, given that agency was used to establish preferred isolation and focus on getting the academic work done over any efforts to create a sense of belonging with group members

within the socialization process. The group work context was the only setting in which interaction occurred. We cannot make group work synonymous with sense of belonging, but we can analyze the setting of group work as a means for interaction in which participants' preferences became more apparent.

Within the group work setting, there was an emphasis on the purpose of education primarily as a means to learn course content, not necessarily as an opportunity to socialize with other students or become socialized within a group setting and develop a sense of belonging. Because the curriculum and the structure of the online courses emphasized academic outcomes over a sense of community, the content of these interactions mainly focused on academic assignments, with little to no emotional connection or sense of social presence. In essence, all group members were viewed as newcomers to the online setting, with no clear identification of leader, member, or newcomer roles.

Several participants emphasized that a sense of isolation within an online or other educational setting is an appropriate and welcomed experience, something they liked about online learning, which fit their preferences and expectations. Participants emphasized that learning within group work settings, developing as teams, and gaining a sense of belonging are not expected nor even desired within the online setting and can be gained in other ways outside the online environment. Sanner et al. (2002) and Zhao et al. (2005) both suggested that the level of perceived isolation or belonging influenced positive or negative group socialization between international students and other classmates and the instructor in cyclical ways (Sanner et al., 2002; Zhao et al., 2005). This study helped problematize and more deeply explore the evolution of international

students' sense of belonging or isolation as a function of agency and preference at the class, instructor, and small group levels of connections. How can we possibly determine whether or not international students felt class-wide acceptance and sense of belonging, when the a more focused question might have been, "Do international students value and want to feel a sense of belonging in the first place?"

An analysis of the findings suggests that Bauer and Morrison's (1998) definition of organizational socialization as a dramatic and overt ritualistic event or transition a newcomer experiences is too general. Tierney's (1997) emphasis on the importance of the implicit and subtle forces of socialization upon individuals is better suited to this study. These subtle forces of socialization, such as international students' preferences towards socialization, can change the understanding of, and interpretations by, participants in a group and any symbolic or attribution labels placed upon such perceptions of participants (Silverman, 1970; Van Maanen, 1970). For example, participants generally focused on how their preferences influenced how they made sense of the meaning of interactions with other group members. These preferences within the overall approach of making meaning of such interactions are an example of these more subtle forces within the overall socialization process.

Tierney (1998) summarized organizational and group socialization by asking this question, "What do we need to know to survive/excel in the organization?" (p. 8) This question, asked through an international student lens, was answered with an emphasis on using the group as a means to get academic work done. The common theme was that participants had a social life with their family and friends outside the online course and that the purpose of the online course and the connections to the instructor and other

students was to gather information and receive the credit. Kuezynski and Parkin's (2010) work resonated with this finding in that group socialization theory might better be explained as a more bidirectional, reciprocal, cyclical, ambiguous, indefinite, and unbounded process between a group and the individual (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Jones, 1983; McDermott & Vareene, 1995). I agree with Burbules and Smith (2005) in their review of interactions between individuals and the communication scenarios they engage in as generating more questions, not answers, especially referring to the complexity of these interactions and their influence on socialization as "...all together present[ing] a mosaic of questions—puzzles—that challenge the simple-minded models of socialization often given to us by the social sciences." (p. 429) This mosaic of questions as puzzles offers a way of approaching the findings that does not put boundaries around a conceptual framework. Recognizing perceptions as unbounded is necessary to understand that preferences for sense of belonging are fluid and unique.

### **Conceptual Framework of Group Socialization**

Again, the majority of participants responded to the question about belonging and community in ways that were contrary to my assumptions as an online instructor and my assumptions based on the literature review. As an online instructor I assumed that students would naturally want a sense of emotional connection with other students. However, the findings indicate that even if there were a way to improve the group experience online, some if not many participants would still prefer isolation. I found that this preference was deeply held by several students for all settings, not just online classes. This led me to believe that these personal preferences may be more influential on the

socialization process than the design of the online course, the group structure, or other efforts to build a sense of community, all of which are prevalent in the existing research.

Smeyers and Burbules (2006) argued that neither conservative nor relativistic extreme views of initiation or socialization for newcomers is adequate to understand the flux between continuity and change embedded within the phases of socialization overall. This is a helpful argument in the context of the finding that international students in this study had preferences and expectations before initiation or socialization that disoriented the linear view of group socialization processes discussed in the literature review (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

In the extant research, the first antecedent phase included a newcomer's experience within a group or organization before formal membership is initiated (Anderson & Riddle, 1999). Most of the participants suggested that their antecedent expectations for group work online were that it would be difficult and mostly unwelcomed. The introduction board was seen as a step to complete and receive a grade, not as a means to initiate a greater sense of presence and belonging with other students. However, in the aggregate participants mentioned that the introduction board and ongoing announcements from the instructor were seen as helpful for a sense of connection between the instructor and the student. In other words, international students welcomed the role of the introduction board and other avenues to better connect with the instructor, but not so much with other students, especially assigned group members. This most likely had to do with the fact that participants viewed the instructor as a key socializer in the online course, whereas group work was not related to a sense of belonging or community. This influenced me, as the researcher, to question the degree to

which group work might be connected to a sense of belonging in general. This will be discussed in more detail in the recommendations for future research section below.

The extant research referred to the antecedent stage as associated with a sense of shock because of the ambiguity of the newcomer's experience. Again, the emphasis was on the role that the organization or group plays for the newcomer (Hughes, 1958; Van Maanen, 1977). The anticipatory phase, defined as the expectations newcomers have of other group members within the group's first gathering, seemed to meld with the antecedent stage when analyzing interview data in this study in that participants attributed their expectations and first encounters with other group members and the instructor in simultaneous time descriptions. The findings aligned with what Jones (1983) and Schutz (1967) identified as the influence of the past biography of individuals on the psychological orientation of how they perceive the new situation. This initial ambiguity was theorized to influence group members to clarify their identity within the group and their associated role (Schutz, 1967; Van Maanen, 1977). After an analysis of the findings, I both agree and disagree with the premises of Schutz (1967), Van Maanen (1977), and Jones (1983). I agree that participants were influenced by a sense of ambiguity about how group processes would progress within a new experience of an online environment. However, I disagree that they necessarily tried to clarify their role and identity as much as they sought to simply clarify how to get the academic assignments done so they could return to other preferences in life, predominantly those of spending more time socializing with family, friends, and activities outside of the online class or group.

The students in this study did not care as much about others in the group or their role within the group as much as their relationships with others outside the online

environment. Participants seemed not to view themselves as newcomers, but just another member of the group, with a preference for avoiding group socialization altogether, at least in the online setting. Van Maanen (1976) theorized that the better the group meets a newcomer's expectations, the greater the likelihood of successful socialization. Louis (1980) emphasized how unrealistic expectations influence the perception of stress and anxiety by participants before actual work is distributed among group members. The participants seemed to experience little anxiety due to their preferences for and expectations of group work that was focused on task and course completion.

The encounter phase (Anderson et al., 1999) suggested that individuals come together and begin establishing roles and goals. Gouran (1994) divided goals into categories such as personal, group, task, and relational. Adjustment and accommodation are discussed in this phase for individual members who may or may not fit neatly into a role within a specific personal, group, task, or relational goal established by a leader of the group. In this study, participants entering an online course for the first time and participating in group assignments either through a discussion board or through an online chat/video/audio connection platform were not singled out as newcomers or leaders in any observable way. The emphasis on task completion as the means and ends of their goals seemed to negate the formation of more deeply embedded relationships within the socialization process.

The assimilation phase (Anderson et al., 1999) is theorized as a time when newcomers begin to identify with the group and its members. This stage includes negotiation between newcomers and group members in their cyclical definition of the evolving identity of the group. When asked specific questions about the identity and

function of the group, participants often referenced the group as a means to an end; completing an assignment. When asked if they could remember any of the group members' names, none were able to do so. It seemed that the study participants did not fit neatly within the definition of newcomer as mentioned in the research literature (Jones, 1983). According to participants, they considered other students as newcomers as well, with little to no influence on one another in the generating of any sense of group identity.

The exit phase (Anderson et al., 1999; Sinclair-James & Stohl, 1997) is described as the process of group experiences influencing attitudes about future group expectations. Specifically, these authors explained the process of a group member ending the experience of a formal membership and how this experience may influence generalizing and projecting assumptions and perceptions onto future individuals within a different group. For study participants who took more than one online course, interpretations of the curriculum structure were fairly uniform. Their experiences with various phases of group socialization and learning were influenced more by individual preferences in approaching group work than the structure of the group work itself (Glaser, 1968). When participants were asked how to improve the online group structure for a greater sense of belonging, many responded by referring to developments in video, audio, and chatting functions of technology. However, many also gave a caveat that these technology advances in communication would only be helpful as a tool for doing assignments better, not necessarily as a means to create a greater sense of belonging.



### **Relational Connections and Task Completion**

Katz (1978) suggested that individuals with more anxiety and less confidence about the new situation focus more on the task instead of relationships and boundary spanning. If the individual continues to neglect relationships and group members reinforce this sense of distance, sense of shared membership and community may follow a cyclical pattern of declining relational and embedded forms of bonding (Ashford & Black, 1996; Turner, 1969). In this study's findings, noninternational group members and participants all contributed to the values of efficiency of performance completion as primary, whereas the values of bonding with the group were secondary, if present at all (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007). This reinforced the cyclical pattern of declining relational and embedded forms of bonding, but not necessarily because of added anxiety or lack of confidence about a new situation. Participants preferred independence in educational contexts both within online and face-to-face environments.

The research of Louis (1980) and Morrison (2002) aligned with the findings. They suggested that when a group or organization focuses on efficiency and conformity, an individual may desire to successfully navigate any affective experience dealing with anxiety, ambiguity, or self-doubt through task mastery, role clarity, and group integration thus reinforcing a secondary priority on sense of belonging and emotional bonding (Louis, 1980; Morrison, 2002). However, I do not believe that participants in this study sought task mastery to avoid anxiety or self-doubt, but sought task mastery by preference to get back to their own personal social circles, outside the online group or class, such as family or friends.

Schein (1971) explored the anxiety of an individual navigating a new organizational socialization process for the first time, specifically the process' promotion of feelings of loneliness and isolation, and the performance anxieties of having new duties and assignments, with intermittent success and failure at predicting responses of others to oneself. Because group socialization processes influence perceptions and expectations of isolation, anxiety, and other distancing factors such as what a groups says it believes in versus what a group appears to do in practice, processes of socialization may or may not be completely identifiable (Hall, 1976). The findings seemed to support research that suggested that due to these dynamic interactions between many factors in the socialization process, socialization is anything but consistent (Shibutani, 1962).

The research further emphasized the influence of a heavy reliance on text-based discussion board environments, where student participation in interactions complicates styles of writing, communication, norms, and expectations (Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett, 2010). Specifically, student-instructor interaction within a text-based environment has been described as requiring a different set of communication techniques and assumptions (Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett, 2010; Swan, 2001). One study documented frustration with instructors and the meaning of their written text, where intention of meaning and assumption of meaning are misaligned (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999). However, this did not seem to be the case through my review of discussion board textual interchange between international students, group members, and the instructor. For the most part, even after international students identified themselves online, other group members and the instructor seemed impartial related to the writing presentation and style of international students compared to other students.

Other authors emphasized the importance of faculty awareness in providing a quality online environment to support student-student interactions for students from different countries (Wiesenberg & Stacey, 2005). Faculty awareness entails an understanding, recognition, and acknowledgement of the diverse ways that students from different backgrounds approach text-based communication. All participants mentioned that in their perspective the faculty did not respond any differently to them or their text-based submissions than they would with any student. There was no sense of misunderstanding as argued by McNaught (2003), who emphasized a great need for an awareness by faculty to address and possibly prevent misunderstandings in student-instructor and student-student interactions (McNaught, 2003).

Since international students have beliefs, habits, and values that reside in different dimensions from those of U.S. students, satisfying communication moments of social presence may be more difficult within the online interaction environment (Cruz, 2008; Liu, Hodgson, & Lord, 2011). Social presence is defined as the sense that someone real is on the other end of the communication experience or a sense of togetherness in sharing time and space (Shin, 2002). Several participants mentioned the assumption that pictures next to other group member profiles might not even be a real picture. Yu (2010) explained that each learner experiences a variety of reactions to such interactions by outlining how each learner experiences variable measures of satisfaction with such interactions, variable preferences for an activity's requirements for collaboration, diverse familiarity or unfamiliarity with text-based collaboration processes and technologies, and variable perceptions of different partners within a communication experience. These experiences influence representations of self- and classroom-identity and an associated

sense of belonging or isolation when students interact both within and outside of an awareness of project groups or the class as a whole within an online discussion (Cruz, 2008; Kelly & Moogan, 2012). In this study, informal norms of community belonging consistently fluctuated across communication experiences between international students and other group members and the online instructor, sometimes because of group members, the design of the online environment, or the instructor, but also because of the agency exercised by participants based on their preferences for belonging or isolation.

Specific to student-instructor interaction, certain stereotypes of international students by faculty (i.e., assumptions about collectivist work ethic, introverted disposition, passive participation, or comprehension and communication abilities using English) have been found to influence international students' self-confidence and sense of belonging (Fox, 1994; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Vollmer, 2000). This was not the case within this study's findings, at least according to the perception of participants broadly. International student preferences within the conceptual framework of group socialization theory highlighted how emotional connections were second in importance to work completion. This overall interpretation influenced which recommendations I focused on for instruction, curriculum development, institutional policy, and research, which is discussed next.

### **Recommendations for Practice, Policy, and Research**

Understanding that international students may uniquely prefer isolation in an online environment can support discussion points for any decision maker, educator, or policy maker attempting to understand how the literature on sense of belonging in online

environments is influenced through an international student lens. Stettersen (1999) suggested that if we assume that socialization across peer groups and across different settings (i.e., educational settings) is similar, we miss the subjective perceptions and variability between actors within the socialization process. This was a helpful framework for developing recommendations for this study. The uniqueness of the study participants' comments added complexities that may help prevent others from making the broad conclusions often made in educational settings (Stettersen, 1999). I have several recommendations for instructors, curriculum designers, and institutional policy decision makers involved in online courses that include international students.

### **Recommendations for Online Instructors and Curriculum Designers**

First, I recommend that instructors incorporate international students' preferences specific to online group work. Because international students are increasingly participating in U.S.-based online courses (Sanner et al., 2002), it is critical for instructors to incorporate international students' views in their understanding of the interconnected social interaction experience. I recommend that instructors accept that international students want and desire their outreach, but recognize and adapt to international student preferences specific to their unique student history, especially as some may avoid group interaction with other students, particularly if the individual international student is accustomed to an individualized education background, where team work is seldom used as a pedagogical approach. Understanding these views of international students can help instructors identify and contextually encourage any student who might perceive their online interaction experience uniquely.

Second, I recommend not overestimating the influence of other group members on international students as newcomers. The literature suggested that group and organizational socialization theory (Allen, 1990; Bauer & Morrison, 1998; Fisher, 1986; Jian, 2009; Kuezynski & Parkin, 2010; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) is a way to explain customary perspectives and behaviors based on the group or organization's values and how individuals navigate these emphases. The research argued that newcomers entering into a new organization or group adjust to initial perceived role expectations (Jones, 1986). However, the findings in this study showed that a newcomer participating in a group might not be as influential on international students as argued. Because of preferences for isolation, group socialization processes may never get out of the gate, let alone improve any socialization embeddedness particular to a sense of community or emotional connection between group members.

Third, I recommend creating a vision of the benefits of group interaction and model positive online emotional connections and interactions between international students and instructors before expecting international students to naturally want to participate in group collaboration online. Instructors should focus on the relationship between international students and themselves as a model in the beginning weeks of the semester, because of the finding across participants of the natural expectation for a personal connection with their online instructor as compared to other group members. It was interesting to find that, for the most part, students changed their demeanor when asked about sense of belonging between other students versus sense of connection with the instructor. It seemed that students naturally wanted to connect with their instructor.

I recommend and include this perceived and actual authority figure, the instructor, in starting a group on the right track for a sense of belonging between international students and other students. I also recommend that online instructors and course designers first identify and acknowledge any international students who may have a propensity towards preferring isolation over knowing more about other students. One way to do this would be for online instructors to gradually welcome and monitor whether group interactions are accepted or appreciated as something of worth to the international student. A possible approach to monitor and identify international students with a propensity towards preferring isolation could be a preliminary survey in the introduction week as well as a structured syllabus instruction for students that includes preferences specific to group work within the introduction discussion board. Online instructors could then contact and interview each international student specifically asking them about their perceptions of group interactions and highlight benefits from group work. This could be done to see if the one-on-one relationship between the international student and the instructor might carry over to participants' preferences for interactions with other group members.

Last, if at first, the focus for the majority of international students is getting a grade, then to incentivize creating a sense of belonging, it might be helpful to offer a two percent grade incentive to formalize these connections. Once the interactions are more formalized, an evaluation of the influence on later informal socialization and international student preferences for belonging/isolation with other group members and the instructor should occur. I conclude that if group connections are left to chance sense of belonging most likely will not happen, especially after an international student becomes accustomed

to the introduction week and learns to pass over, which several participants described in the findings chapter.

### **Recommendations for Institutional Policy Decision Makers**

First, I recommend that institutional policy decision makers involved in developing online courses that include international students conduct student and online instructor interviews and focus groups to increase their awareness of the complexities of group socialization practices within online learning. After reviewing the extant research and broader theoretical framework of group socialization and sense of belonging, the unique international student voices represented in this study provided a more complex picture of University Campus as an institution. Several of my assumptions influenced by the extant literature were reoriented after interviewing international students. I highly encourage institutional policy decision-makers to conduct these interviews and focus groups of students and instructors in parallel with reviewing other research and to utilize the data collected to inform institutional decisions and policies.

Second, I recommend that institutional decision makers cautiously criticize institutional attempts to keep up with other institutions that implement centralized and uniform curriculum for an increasingly variable audience of students and instructors. I discourage the wholesale adoption of latest technological trends, fads, or fashions within the broader population of institutions of higher education. Participants in this study navigated online courses in unique ways. In order to understand complex differences between students and instructors, I specifically encourage institutional policy decision



makers to conduct student and instructor interviews and focus groups *before* purchasing, outsourcing, or adopting centralized curriculum packages/vendors.

Last, I recommend that institutional decision makers seek and apply respective strengths from both face-to-face and online mediums when designing quality-learning experiences for students, instructors, and groups. Participants in this study interacted with other students and instructors according to preferences that stemmed from educational experiences in general, whether within online or face-to-face environments. Several opportunities are available to assist institutions with integrating online learning tools that help students prepare and assess one another better before coming to class. Other strengths from online learning tools such as group work platforms are available to help groups work with each other throughout the week. These tools, in addition to instructor expertise, can provide a contextual and unique experience for students and adapt to the changing needs of the variable student populations that enter and complete different online, face-to-face, and hybrid courses (Stone & Perumean-Chaney, 2011).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study sought to provide findings that would help practitioners, instructors, curriculum designers, and institutional policy decision makers understand the complexity of international student participation in online courses. Participants in the study highlighted their preferences for interaction, perceptions of group socialization, and emotional reactions to these interactions. However, significant research is still needed to further explore this area of research. Recommendation for future research include: 1) studying the implications of the impact of social media on group socialization processes

within online class environments and 2) researching the complexity of international student interactions by interviewing online instructors from their viewpoint about the interactions they have with international students. In the extant research interactions between students were found to be influenced by the designed opportunities for collaboration through group work, joint presentations, and group and class-wide discussion boards (Shi-xu & Wilson, 2001). Most of the social interactions students have within online classes are within a pre-established discussion boards through a learning management system, not primarily through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc (McGlouglin & Lee, 2010). However, recently more and more online instructors use social media to provide a community interchange environment for their students (Dabbagh & Kisanas, 2012). As social media start to cross over into the online space for instruction and formal education group work, it will be critical for future researchers to ascertain how real and potential negative/positive comments by students within online person spaces using social media might impact group cohesion and sense of belonging.

More study is needed considering the increasing enrollments of international students in online courses. Especially needed is research on how other group members and instructors perceive international students within the online group socialization interactions (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009). For future analysis, I would like to ascertain in depth a critical understanding of how international students' online experiences may evolve from other group members' and online instructors' perceptions, especially as new dynamics, technologies, and structures are implemented into group and class-wide interaction processes online. In other words, for future analyses, a broader

sample from other universities and group structures within a longitudinal study of these relationships is needed.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was not to prove a hypothesis or show that the sample is precisely representative of a broader population of international students at-large across the U.S. or the world. The purpose was to provide a thick description of information to help students, educators, and policy decision makers make better curricular and instructional decisions (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). I believe I was able to provide such a description for practitioners to magnify the study's implications and scope, depending on its use as a tool to freshen the views and dialogue of curriculum designers and online instructors when seeking to improve online discourse and interchange among international students.

This study's research questions focused on international undergraduate student perceptions of their sense of community and belonging or isolation within an online class, interacting with other students and the instructor. Qualitative methods best answered these types of research questions because they allowed an interpretation of the subjective meanings of individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I sought to interpret and understand the subjective meanings that international students give to their social worlds (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This included identifying, describing, and analyzing perceptions of international undergraduate students regarding their interactions with other students and the instructor and the influence of these interactions on a sense of belonging or isolation.

The findings in this study suggest that the roles of agency, past biography, and self-actualization are at least as important to group socialization as the influence of external variables such as group member or instructor influence (Kuezynski & Parkin, 2010; Settersten, 1999; Tierney, 1988). The categorization of themes was difficult because all participants described nuanced perceptions with new observations of the evolving and rapidly changing nature of their experience online. The rapidly changing nature of their experience online influenced my recommendations for future research, specifically the need to interview international student views in combination with other U.S. students and instructors. Many comments were different from a simple binary positive or negative category as interpreted by me, the researcher. Through interview data analysis, perspectives of values within group processes seemed to realign with many of the predetermined preferences of participants even after they engaged in course assignments and interacted with instructors. In summary, it seemed that the participants' agency was a greater influence on perceptions of sense of belonging than the curriculum or others within the online class.

Several implications based on the data analysis and findings can inform new questions for the field of international student education, thereby problematizing general views in trying to make comparisons. These findings may also influence how decisions are made concerning approaches to instruction and curriculum design, with a focus on not only the structure of the materials but more emphasis on how group work is explained, presented, and envisioned for international students participating in higher education. Given the preference of international students to connect with the instructor over peer

group members, the sequence of establishing and presenting this vision targeted to international students will need to be restructured.

This problematizing process can inform faculty, administrators, and policy decision makers at all educational levels who focus on efforts to improve the experience of a continually evolving and diversified online class structure further emphasizing the convoluted, nonlinear, and dynamic realities within institutions of higher education that offer online programs and courses. Decision makers need to remember that this is not a yes or no issue. This is an issue that deals with different levels and different degrees of implementation and recognition for international student agency and preferences.

APPENDIX A

CONSENT DOCUMENT

**BACKGROUND**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. The purpose of this research study is to identify perceptions of international students and their experience in an online discussion environment. This research is being conducted to help instructors and administrators better improve the online experience for students from different countries.

**STUDY PROCEDURE**

This study involves an interview between you and the researcher. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete. You will be asked questions about your personal experience in your online class(es). This study may also include a discussion or review of online discussion posts in which you have interacted with other students in the class.

**RISKS**

The risks of this study are minimal. The questions asked of you will be about your experience within the online class. The review of your online discussion posts may be used to help the interviewer better understand your experiences. If any question reminds you of something that upsets you, you can tell the researcher and he will tell you about resources available to help.

**BENEFITS**

Possible benefits of your participation will be in helping administrators decide how best to support international students in future online classes that are in similar situations as you.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

The interview will be recorded, transcribed, and saved to only one computer that is password protected. Your identity will only be known to the researcher. Any quotes from the interview or discussion board will be identified as 'student', not by your name.

**PERSON TO CONTACT**

If you have questions, complaints or concerns about this study, you can contact Jacob Adams at 801-888-1929 or [Jacob.adams@utah.edu](mailto:Jacob.adams@utah.edu).

**Institutional Review Board:** Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints or concerns which you do not feel you can discuss with the investigator. The University of Utah IRB may be reached by phone at (801) 581-3655 or by e-mail at [irb@hsc.utah.edu](mailto:irb@hsc.utah.edu).

**Research Participant Advocate:** You may also contact the Research Participant Advocate (RPA) by phone at (801) 581-3803 or by email at [participant.advocate@hsc.utah.edu](mailto:participant.advocate@hsc.utah.edu).

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

It is up to you to decide whether to take part in this study. If you want to withdraw at any time, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. This will not affect your relationship with the researcher.

**COSTS AND COMPENSATION TO PARTICIPANTS**

There will be no compensation for participating in this study. Costs of participating will be in taking time out of your schedule to speak with the researcher for 45-60 minutes.

**CONSENT**

By signing this consent form, I confirm I have read the information in this consent form and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I will be given a signed copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## APPENDIX B

### RESEARCH SUMMARY

**BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION:**

Classes composed of international students face several interaction challenges within online modalities (Conceição, Antrop-González, & Kline, 2011). Particular challenges have been identified to include understanding specific approaches to communication, negotiation of meaning, affective predispositions, stereotype tendencies, sense of isolation, and inter- and intra-personal awareness (Akintunde, 2006; Cruz & Domingues, 2008). General student perceptions of interchange in online discussion boards have been studied to determine aspects of course related variables, particularly sense of belonging (Seo, 2007; Zhang, Koehler, & Spatariu, 2009). However, an analysis international students' sense of belonging within online courses through a theoretical framework of group and organizational socialization has yet to be fully explored and described using qualitative methods (Moore, 2006).

**OBJECTIVES:**

This study seeks to (1) identify and describe the experiences of international students participating in U.S. text-based asynchronous online courses and to 2) analyze perceptions of belonging/isolation within online environments through group and organizational socialization theory. This study may help curriculum designers, teachers, administrators, and policy makers better understand and appreciate the implications of an expanding enrollment of international undergraduate students within U.S. based online courses.

Several themes that might emerge from an analysis and synthesis of interview data and potential analysis of discussion board text and discourse may include unforeseen experiences and perceptions that offer possible explanations as to how international students perceive online interaction and interchange and sense of belonging.

**PARTICIPANT SELECTION CRITERIA:**

A total of 20 international undergraduate students will be selected from a database to seek a broad presentation by recent time of online course participation, gender, and major. The criteria for selection include students whom were enrolled in an online course that included an online discussion board component.

**DESIGN:**

Qualitative data from international students within a context of an online class will be collected and analyzed to isolate and explore student perceptions and experiences. All data examined will come from post-course interview data and text-based discussion board interactions.

**STUDY PROCEDURES:**

Participants will be selected through a student database of international students. 20 students will be identified that have completed an online class through an institution of higher education, with the purpose of identifying a broad representation by gender and

major. 20 students will be contacted by email with explanation of study and invitation to be interviewed in person. Before the interview, I will discuss more of the background and intentions of the research and explain the appropriate measures to ensure confidentiality of their comments and interviews. I will then send the consent form by email or in person with student option to sign, scan/email or fax signed response to me. If available, I will request to obtain online discussion posts from one class they have taken online. Then I will schedule in-person interviews with each student. If any participant decides to withdraw from interview or study, I will seek for a replacement participant that qualifies with similar criteria. I will then type up transcripts of recorded interviews.

### **METHODS, DATA ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION:**

The qualitative data analysis will include narrative content analysis of both interview and discussion board data through open and axial coding. Open and axial coding of themes from interview analysis has been found to be one way to understand constructed meaning of experience and perceptions by students (Fereday & Muir-Chochrane, 2006). After ascertaining themes from the interview transcript data, this will allow a natural discussion into implications and recommendations for future improvement of the quality of experience for international students within the online environment. Data from interviews with international undergraduate students will be collected at a U.S. institution of higher education offering a common asynchronous online course that most international students take as a general studies requirement.

### **ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSIBILITIES:**

**Study Resources:** Resources available will include a digital recorder and a laptop computer that is password protected. Any quotes of participants in the final published dissertation will be de-identified and labeled as ‘student’.

**Recruitment:** All students will be recruited from a private university pseudo-named, “University Campus” through a targeted sampling approach of international students that have completed an online class before.

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APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview questions will include the following with additional exploratory questions in a semi-structured interview format:

- When did you complete an online class?
- Tell me a little about your experience with interacting online with other students.
- When did you take any of these classes online?
- What was your overall impression of taking this online?
- What group activities do you remember participating in?
- How would you describe in your own words a sense of community in your class?
- Please describe your first experience with initiation into the class wide community.
- Please describe your first experience with the initiation into the small group community.
- How would you describe a sense of belonging in your online class?
- How would you define a sense of isolation in your online class?
- Were there any differences in your sense of belonging/isolation with the class-wide community compared to the small group community?
  - Why do you think that is?
- What descriptions would you give to your sense of community and belonging or isolation experience with other students specifically?
- What about your experience with the instructor?
- How did the instructor help or not help you feel like you belonged or felt isolated for any reason?
- How did your personal background and preferences influence your perception of other students and their discussion posts? (Personal background and preferences will be further explained as their past experience with interacting online or in person with other students from previous classes)

- How did this perception of other students and their discussion posts influence your sense of belonging or isolation as the semester moved forward over time?
- How was the class similar/different to your expectations of the experience?
- Talk about how you contributed to others' sense of belonging in the discussion board? Why do you think your contributions influenced or were influenced by others' contributions to your personal sense of belonging?

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