The Presence of Learner Identity in Online Classes in UTAS-Rustaq

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Abstract
Learner identity has always been a crucial aspect in shaping learners' learning process. However, the unprecedented and inevitable shift to online learning increases the need to invest in learners' digital identities. Virtual classes are a new learning context for many Omani students, including the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Rustaq (UTAS-Rustaq) students, introducing them to new social norms and relatively new assigned roles. Despite students' current presence in the virtual classes, they are not new to the virtual world; many are already part of social networks. The present study, therefore, aims to investigate learners' participation in social media and whether such presence would have an impact on their acceptance and involvement in online learning. There is an urge to examine this area which remains unexplored in UTAS-Rustaq due to its past limited practices. A mixed-method approach was implemented to elicit data; the focus group interviews aimed to seek in-depth insights to illuminate the collected data from the survey. The participants were English language learners who have experienced online learning for almost a year. The results indicated a positive presence in the virtual world in contrast to a negative presence in the virtual classroom. Surprisingly, technical difficulties were not the reason for students' resentment of online learning; on the contrary, students reported that they elevated their technical skills due to the current situation. Rather, negativity arose from a lack of relational connectedness with the new context, which students kept referring to as a temporary situation and lack of teachers' support.

Keywords: digital identity, learner identity, online learning, social media, teacher support

Introduction

While psychologists are concerned about the development of self-identity, sociologists are interested in social identity, a concept that is heavily driving the focus of the current paper (Berlanga & Sloep, 2011). Online classes are a social community like any other social community, that to exist, interaction and participation among individuals is needed and through this interaction, learner identity emerges (Cunliffe, 2003; Hill, Watson, Rivers & Joyce, 2007 as cited in Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014). Coll and Falsafi (2010) asserted that learner identity as a concept should be given more attention in the education context. There is a consensus on the significant impact of learner identity on their learning and knowledge construction (Brown et al. 1989; Crichton & Kinsel 2003; Wenger 1998 as cited in Ke, Chávez, Causarano & Causarano, A., 2011). Building a digital identity can empower students to become part of a social network that ensures life-long learning. Lizenberg (2013) argued that understanding students' relation to technology and their presence in the social world should help teachers design classes that will foster their language learning. However, identity is still under-researched within the paradigm of online learning.

Though a great deal of research has been dedicated to investigating online classes and, to a lesser degree, learners identities, in general, worldwide, the same areas are under-researched in the Omani context, specifically UTAS-Rustaq. Before Covid-19, online classes were never held. Therefore, the pressing need to carry on education virtually, recently, has called for new measures in the area. Constructs of digital identity, learners' familiarity with their improvised roles, teachers' contribution to preparing learners for online classes and the impact of digital identities on promoting learning lent themselves to be investigated in the present paper. It is believed that the results generated will yield a better understanding of the current situation and will question the appropriateness of teachers' practices in promoting learners' identities and learning.

This paper seeks to link learners' presence in the online social communities and the online learning community. It aims to examine if students' positive presence in social media can influence or shape their digital identity. It investigates the existence of any relationship between students' presence in online classes and the matureness of their digital identity. It also aims to examine the challenges that the students face when fostering their presence and emerging identities in online classes. Thus, the current study seeks to answer the following questions;

How do Omani students describe their presence in the virtual world?

Do they transfer their established identities into virtual classes?

What are the ramifications of overlooking a learner identity in online classes?

Literature Review
Definition of Learner Identity

Identity is complex and multifaceted, which learner identity is likely to reflect. Gee (2000) stated that an individual has multi-identities depending on their performance in society. Thus, identity can be understood as a sense of belonging. Stet and Burke (2000) defined social identity as how individuals see themselves as members of a social group. They also elaborated and identified a social group as several individuals who belong to a particular social category (as cited in Shakouri, 2011). A university student is an individual and the higher education context is the social category to which s/he belongs. Gee (2000) identified identity as a tool that helps gain a deeper insight into schools and societies; thus, an individual identity reflects his/her social group

or context. Learner identity is found to be a temporary identity that is constructed in the social category as a result of the social interactions and its beliefs about its current social group (MacFarlane, 2018). Thus, learners' attitudes and beliefs about learning and the learning context influence how their identities are shaped. Wenger (1998) mentioned that learning is "an experience of identity" as learning assumes more responsibilities and participation in the community (as cited in Coll & Falsafi, 2010, p. 125). Coll and Falsafi (2010) similarly stated that "learning forms identities and identities shape learning (p.215). They also examined the broader educational context and the implications of participating in these communities of practice on constructing adequate identities.

It is essential to unpick which components make up learner identity. In their conceptualization of learner identity, Coll and Falsafi (2010) examined three aspects that analyze the nature of identity. These aspects are the activity that defines the content of the identity, the mode of construction which is related to the manner in which identity is being constructed and the recognition of identity which is an essential aspect to construct an identity. Osguthorpe (2006) asserted that learner identity is influenced by every learning experience, including new knowledge or overcoming problems to learn (as cited in Coll & Falsafi, 2010). This indicates that the provided knowledge and the mode of its provision to learners constitute essential elements of learner identities construction.

Reeves (2009) defined constructing identity as "a negotiation with self, with others, and within the discourses present in one's life" (p. 35). Reeves also pointed out that identity positions refer to temporary identities which are assigned to the person by the self, the others or discourse. This indicates that constructing identities is a maneuver and responsive process where the individual responds to all the interactions around. It also shows the vital role teachers play in constructing or positioning their learners' identities. Sinha (1999) stated that the learning settings have a crucial impact on learner identity (as cited in Coll & Falsafi, 2010).

Constructing a Learner Digital Identity
The dominance of technology and the digital age has necessitated that institutions begin to fully embrace change and modify their practices accordingly. This is particularly important so that both teachers and learners will successfully fulfill their designated roles. As previously noted, the proliferation of online learning adds a new dimension to learner identity. García-Pastor (2018) argued that the spread of information and communication technologies plays a significant role in transforming and shaping identity. Digital identity has been defined as representing some features of an individual's identity "in some processes of interaction with others in distributed networks for recognition of the individual" (Lizenberg, 2013, p.1). Babić, Krešić and Kućel (2014) asserted that digital identity is an essential part of e.learning which designates the need to assist students in constructing their digital identities. Specifically, Cochran and Antonczak (2015) asserted that instructors play a central role in forming students' digital identities. They alleged that students are cast as consumers of social media and are unaware of how to create or be active participants in online professional communities.

Costa and Torres (2011), addressing how digital identity is constructed, examined two perspectives; presentation which refers to how an individual creates their personal information

and interacts with others, and the perceptions which refer to other people's behavior about your online activities and interactions (as cited in Babić et al., 2014). Learners who were frequently going online for various reasons, including maintaining social relations, showed a better digital identity (Rodríguez, Hernández-Serrano & Tabernero, 2020). Composing and sharing information in the internet-mediated space also significantly improves students' language which is interrelated with the construction of their identities (Thorne & Black, 2011; as cited in García-Pastor, 2018). It was evidence that learners who were often online "achieved higher digital identity" (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Learners might not be aware that being part in all of these online activities is shaping their digital identity and as Babić et al. (2014) argued that a teacher has a crucial role in providing learners with "model behaviour" (p. 2). Conversely, Berlanga and Sloep (2011) compared online and offline identities, putting forward that online identity is easier to construct as it does not require face-to-face interaction. They indicated that the social web creates considerable opportunities for sharing and creating knowledge. Berlanga and Sloep (2011) also suggested that constructing a digital learner identity has valuable benefits to sustain lifelong learning. The first benefit is being part of a group where they can ask for help or advice. The second benefit is that constructing a digital identity helps us understand how our social network influences our learning. Thus, learners are encouraged to pay attention to their social network which plays an essential role in the process of sharing and creating knowledge. This is particularly important when forming an online identity in the context of navigating an increasingly complex online environment.

The Presence of Learner Identity in Online Learning

A prerequisite to fostering positive learner identity is the creation of an appropriate context. Online learning is defined as any learning experience which counts on the internet as the primary mode of delivering communication (Appana, 2008). Thus, in this context, teachers and learners are separated and an electronic device is a tool that enables them to meet and achieves the learning outcomes. Consequently, digital literacy has become an essential skill set that both learners and teachers need (Littlejohn, Beetham, & McGill, 2012). Appana also pointed out that many countries have been investing in online teaching for several reasons, including enhancing the accessibility of education. The current Covid-19 pandemic proves the need for well-structured distance education and many countries adopted it as the only mode of teaching. Joyes (2008) asserted that the development of e-learning should address the learning experiences and demands of learners, institutions and teachers should consider students' previous learning experience, their needs and preparedness for such new learning experience. Appana (2008) listed several advantages of e-learning that might encourage institutions to invest in this learning mode, including quality learning, lifelong learning, accessibility and affordability. Despite all these advantages, Appana mentioned some disadvantages mainly related to the accessibility and ease of use of technology, while Gallick (1998) emphasized the isolation of learners and teachers. Sulcic and Lesjak (2002) argued that students' readiness plays a significant role in the success of online learning as students need to be equipped with essential knowledge and skills. However, there were some cases where students possessed the necessary skills, yet they were cautious in trusting others in the network learning culture (Lee & Kim, 2014).

The presence of learner identity in online learning is still considered an emerging research area that focuses on students' involvement in "performing online interactions" (Ke, et al., 2011,

p.3). Sinha (1999) argued that learner identity affects and is affected by different learning settings (as cited in Coll & Falsafi, 2010). Consequently, online classes also affect and are affected by the learner identity. Joys (2008) emphasized that teachers can adjust the online learning tools to help construct learner identity. Given that online learning has been imperative during the current pandemic, the level of importance attributed to online tools development and consequently support in the construction of learning identities has been reframed. Hence, UTAS-Rustaq has shifted from blended into distance learning which brought with it some educational considerations, among which, students' readiness for such an experience.

In an attempt to understand the relationship between identity and online learning, research has revealed a few possibilities. Anderson (2008) asserted that learners' online identity is directly affected by some other identities—textual, visual and behavioral identities during online classes. Blake (2000), Burbules (2002), Smith, Ferguson and Caris (2002) and others highlighted that a sense of isolation and anonymity are witnessed during distance learning. Isolation and obscurity provide a safe place for shy students and therefore affect their discourse. For these students, the sense of physical invisibility positively impacts their learning experience resulting in participation and involvement in class. Joys (2008) supported the same notion and called for more personalized learning through which learners can construct meaning and be part of a community. Therefore, instead of focusing on their appearance, students are more attentive to the course content. However, research suggests that learners in favor of face-to-face learning, tend to lose interest in their studies during online learning. The same applied to learners who prefer to distance themselves from others offline. These learners showed withdrawal and passivity in online interactions (Nowland, Necka & Cacioppo, 2018). Whereas online identity can be positively affected during online classes, students who feel less comfortable with technology might not benefit from the same situation. According to Coll and Falsafi (2010), learners doubt their belonging when they fail to learn.

In face-to-face classrooms, learners' identities are articulated through their physical, linguistic and dynamic behavior. However, the situation is different in online classes in which the learners bring up with them only words and images. The latter condition makes it challenging for the learner to identify the available opportunities and hence construct a clear identity. Therefore, teacher intervention is critical to assist learners in developing their identities (Anderson, 2008). Structuring activities that foster interaction and build a sense of belonging in online learning should be one of the practices during online learning (Michinov et al., 2004, as cited in Ke et al., 2011). Thus, teachers play a crucial part in creating an online community where learners can express themselves and identify their roles.

Recent studies have examined the integration of technology in English language teaching in the Omani context. For example, Al-Busaidi, Al-Habsi and Al-Issa (2021) found out that if technology is effectively utilized in English Language Teaching (ELT), it can facilitate Second Language Teacher Education in Oman. Despite the previous study and many others addressing new media in education, there is one area of research that remains uncovered, how Omani learners shape their digital identities or use their identities in online learning. This is one of the questions that the present study aimed to answer.

The study context

This study was conducted in UTAS-Rustaq which offers an English Language teacher education program. The program lasts for four years to obtain a BA in education (English language). Before joining the program, students are placed in a foundation program after being streamed into four different levels based on the results of the placement test. All courses are offered on campus except two school-based practicum courses where students must practice teaching in an authentic context. This year, due to the current Covid-19 pandemic, all courses are taught online using different platforms, including Blackboard, Google Classroom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams. Teachers were provided with online workshops on how to activate the uses of these platforms during the online learning process. Most of these platforms were not active before the need to shift to online teaching and students reported the teachers' insufficient incorporation of technology in their classes. However, despite the considerable number of workshops given to teachers, students were provided with none. They were not provided with any manual or general instructions on how to run through this new process of online learning. Teachers were responsible for introducing students to the platforms they were using in their classes. The students' inadequate technical skills left teachers with pressure on how to present the course content interactively.

Methods

The present study examines the participants' presence in the virtual world and social media and whether such presence facilitated the acceptance and involvement in online learning. To meet the research purposes, a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection tools was implemented.

Participants

The participants in the current study were randomly selected for both the survey and the interview. The survey data was collected from 89 students from the department of English Language and Literature. All participants had experienced online learning for almost two academic semesters at that time.

The focus-group interviews, on the other hand, were run with 50 students in four groups. It was believed that the interviews would call for transparency and provide more in-depth views of the apparent changes undergoing their learners' identities and perceptions on online learning.

Instruments

The data were generated using a survey and focus group interviews. A survey, which is one type of quantitative research methodology, was used to inform the research about students' conceptions regarding online learning. The survey represents an efficient and timely tool to collect data from diverse respondents and consists of three parts. The first part investigated students' perceptions of online learning. Whereas students' digital identity in social media was explored in the second part, the third part of the questionnaire examined students' digital identity as language learners. The three sections of the survey measure the responses on an agreement-Likert scale. The questionnaire was designed based on themes to facilitate the analysis of the data.

The second research tool used in the current study is the qualitative research strategy focus group interviews. Interviews lay the ground for making connections and interpretations between the different variables (Sarantakos, 2013). The interview items aim at exploring more in-depth

students' perceptions about their recent online experiences and investigate their views about teachers' involvement in enhancing the experience and improving better learner digital identity.

Procedures

The UTAS-Rustaq shifted to online learning toward the middle of the Spring semester in 2020. The survey was conducted at the end of the Fall semester in 2021 and the focus group interviews took place at the beginning of the following semester. This time gap enabled the researchers to closely scrutinize the collected data from the survey and reformulate the questions of the focus groups. The survey was designed using Google Forms and distributed to all the ELT students via email. The focus groups were conducted using Google Meet and both oral contributions and written contributions were welcomed from the participants. The discussion was merely focusing on their current online experiences in an attempt to understand the factors which contributed to their relatively negative attitudes towards virtual classes.

Results

The data collected from the survey were clustered using frequency-based analysis generated automatically by google forms. A qualitative descriptive analysis was implemented to highlight some factors generated from the focus groups discussions which hindered the active presence of the participants' digital identity in the online learning environment.

Table one (see appendix A) revealed significant investment in social media identity reported by many participants. More than half of the students (67%) have active social media accounts, which indicates that digital technical skills are part of the respondents' identity. The percentages fluctuated between 37%, those who would not experience discomfort if not accessing their accounts for a few days, to 33%, feeling uneasiness when not accessing their accounts for the same duration. Having established grounds for students' familiarity with the cyberspace apps, it is time to consider their reaction to certain aspects of these accounts, including use, anonymity and security. Around two-thirds of the respondents (66%) established that social media can be a good source of information. It is evident that the majority heavily rely on the knowledge they receive from these applications. This may also suggest that many students are coping with the changing platforms of information. Less resoundingly, only 43% of the respondents expressed their willingness to share and exchange information via the aforementioned platforms and applications, while 31% opposed the same idea.

Regarding social media use, just over one-third (34%) of the respondents indicated that they use it to exchange pictures, videos and some sort of play, which might indicate use prioritizing other purposes. When addressing the security and anonymity of the candidate in the different social media platforms, 62% declared that they feel at ease to use their real name and display personal information, while (30%) disagreed with the same aspect. Significantly, 62% of the respondents disagreed with using their pictures as profile pictures, eliciting the most negative response among the items. It can be concluded that many respondents showed a wide use of the social media mentioned. Consequently, this knowledge can aid their social presence as well as their technical potential.

Table two (see appendix B) illustrates the degree of students' digital literacy awareness and their presence in the virtual world to enhance their English language learning. The results indicate that students broadly demonstrate sufficient knowledge of digital literacy; however, they are commonly less satisfied with the guidance provided by their teachers. The analysis of the discrete items leads to the conclusion that online learning has served students well. Precisely 50% of the respondents revealed that they have accounts on some educational websites relevant to language learning. About 30% of them are not quite sure about this item. The majority of the respondents (73%) indicated that they carry out online searches using English instead of their first language. Respondents show more flexibility and comfort in sharing knowledge and information on language learning. 36% of the respondents feel this flexibility, while the majority are either reluctant to do the same or not well aware of how to do that. Similar rates were elicited when respondents were asked about teachers' guidance and assistance in introducing the respondents to necessary educational websites. Only 31% agreed that teachers play a vital role in this, while the same number also disagreed. Just over half of the respondents (54%) declared that it was them, learners, who managed to get access to these websites. Some respondents also indicated that they benefited from the websites. The improvement in their English was a clear sign that the websites were beneficial. Almost 42% of the respondents have witnessed this positive impact; whereas, 25% have not. Further, about 65% of the respondents indicated that they would continue to use these websites after graduation to assist them with their language. However, 28.5% of the respondents were not sure whether they would keep the practice or not.

As it can be clearly seen from the data featured in table three (see appendix C), students were, on the whole, not optimistic regarding the online learning experience. Just one-fifth consider online learning as good as traditional learning. A case in point is how, 60% students indicated that they were not active participants during the online classes, even though respondents feel much more comfortable interacting through the chat box during the same classes (36%). Also, 67% reported that they are not focused on online classes. This could be partially attributed to learners' isolation during the online classes; almost, 24% and 28% were unsure. Surprisingly, most students also mentioned that they were less comfortable practicing their English online than in class (64.7%), while only 27.3% were more comfortable. The collected data showed that the majority of the students took a passive role in the learning process. A high percentage of students (42%) reported that less peer interaction minimized their opportunities to improve their English and academic skills. This negative attitude toward online learning could be attributed to the loss of commitment from students' side to improve their technical skills; around, 19% and 36% were not sure. It may also be connected to the insufficient involvement of the teachers to prepare students to cope with the online learning experience as over half (60.4%) were either unsure or unhappy with the level of their teachers' involvement.

The Presence of Students' Digital Identity in Online classes

The survey reveals that the respondents were not fully satisfied with the online learning experience despite the fact that many have a good presence on social media and different language learning platforms. The focus groups aim to reach a deeper understanding of the relation between the online learning experience and learners' digital identities. When asked about whether online learning assisted them in gaining new technical skills, the majority of the participants agreed that they had increased opportunities to enhance their technical skills to cope with the demands of

online learning. A student noted, "We do have more free time to search through different apps and websites since we don't need to go to college," and another student mentioned that "we need to learn about different programs to complete our assignments." They also pointed out that they were curious to search for programs to help them improve their English skills and teach English. One student stated that "there is a great amount of good knowledge and educational websites available," and another student reported the following: "I think that I have gained many skills that allow me to be a better learner and I discovered so many websites and apps that I haven't seen before such as canvas. It is true that we indeed struggled at first dealing with online learning, but now I feel that we are getting used to it." Despite the consensus of the positive impact of online learning on fostering their technical skills and self-reliance, students were still not describing it as a satisfactory experience.

When asked about whether attending virtual classes helps them to improve their learning skills and experience self-directed learning, a student said "maybe we learned a lot like we searched and found a lot of things, and we improved our personality but unfortunately we don't have real classes to practice," and another students said, "it didn't help me with my communication skill but in the other hand it improved my self-learning skill." Another participant lamented, "We learned a lot, but we will not need it when we go back to college." Asked to clarify her comments, she continued, "This is a temporary situation! We will go back and we will count on our teachers; they are the source of knowledge." The participants were asked if their teachers were concerned about introducing them to different language learning platforms, and the majority reported that there is a lack of guidance and support. It can be concluded that despite the potential gains, students' short sight of what they have acquired, and the lack of guidance might lead to a quick drain when they return back to normal classes.

Discussion

In recent years social media has dramatically impacted educational institutions and teaching-learning platforms. Instructors, students, and others involved in the construction of knowledge in the learning and teaching environments were influenced by its rapid dominance (García-Pastor, 2018; Selwyn, 2012). The analyzed data shows that, overall, students are widely using social media that is shaping their digital identity. Through social media applications, learners can exchange information and carry discussions. This finding was also evident in Boyd and Ellison (2007), who concluded that social media enables learners to identify other users who share the same interests. The results illustrate that students embrace social media and its different uses, with a significant proportion comfortably sharing pictures, videos and messages. The same point was asserted by Boyd (2007) and Flad (2010), who addressed the significant impact of social media on students' academic lives. However, despite the students' openness in sharing the content of interest, some students find it challenging to share their true identities on these sites. Issues of anonymity and privacy remain unresolved for some. Livingstone (2008) attributes the preference to remain anonymous online to the students' struggle with internet literacy. Lack of awareness about the different appropriate uses of the internet, along with the insufficient knowledge about privacy matters drive students to choose to be anonymous and mere followers of the social media content without minimum contributions at times.

Students' participation and presence in the virtual world can be classified under two patterns which are friendship-driven and interest-driven (Ito et al., 2010). The participants' engagement in various online activities was not for the sake of building social relations only but it was also driven by the shared interest which is English language learning. The frequent access to the online materials facilitated the sharing of information obtained via different platforms and apps. This active involvement in the learning process referred to as active learning, was found to enhance learning (Sarason & Banbury, 2004; as cited in Smart & Capple, 2006). Maintaining such positive practice will, to a large extent, increase their information knowledge and their independence as learners in the virtual world, which eventually foster their digital identity (Rodríguez et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the findings do not fully match the optimism of the literature, suggesting perhaps that online information sharing for learning is an aspect that instructors must actively promote among their students.

The unprecedented shift to online learning in the current context has constituted challenges and opportunities for new experiences. Therefore, the emergence and deployment of technology and different web-based practices have, to a large extent, affected the norms of social interaction (Vuorela & Nummenmaa, 2004). Unlike their positive presence in social media, the data above reveal how variable students' enthusiasm towards online learning is. This can be explained, partially, according to Hughes and Lewis' (2003) findings, which illustrated how feelings of belonging to institutions, programs and newly introduced technologies affect students' participation, and involvement in online learning. Students showed more willingness to interact and participate in traditional classes compared to online classes. This lack of belonging could be driven by the learners' feelings of isolation which was emphasized by Gallick (1998) and Nowland et al. (2018). Online learning has somehow enlarged the gap between the two parties and students sometimes feel isolated and detached from the rest of the group. Although learning that results from building experiences shared by other students can improve the learning outcomes (Davis & Roberts, 2010), learners are exposed to fewer chances of learning from one another. The insufficient employment of peer work can be traced back to teachers' inadequate knowledge of how to incorporate it in distance learning, an aspect to be investigated in future studies.

The data also illustrates the importance of teachers' guidance and support to facilitate virtual learning. Joys (2008) asserts that teachers have a significant role in supporting students to cope with the online learning experience and establish their learner identity. Cochran and Antonczak (2015) also indicate the valuable role of instructors in building their learner digital identity, which is essential for the success of online learning. Despite a significant onus on the students themselves, the instructors nonetheless have a responsibility to provide learners with the opportunities to develop their own learner identities (Little, 2007). Unfortunately, students expressed their concern with the amount of guidance they receive from their teachers. Lack of teacher guidance might be attributed to them being novice online instructors. Choi and Park (2006) argue that new online teachers face many challenges, including the workload, students-teachers interaction and technical difficulties. This also indicates the imperative to support teachers while transforming to online learning, which should be further investigated in our context. Teacher competence and readiness to prepare and deliver online courses will undoubtedly impact the quality of students' learning.

Digital literacy, on the other hand, is another concern for the students. They clearly understand the vital role of their knowledge of using technology and dealing with it to facilitate their learning. Therefore, when addressing digital literacy, it is essential to consider the three dimensions of the term. Digital literacy not only refers to the ability to read and write online materials but also targets the power to effectively function within the community and the capacity to transform the thinking skills (Martin & Grudziecki, 2006). The results showed that students possess the required technical skills to exchange ideas and search for relevant materials. However, they still cannot be considered as digitally literate. Students' reluctance to negotiate with others through the different platforms and their preference for anonymity, indicate that they are digitally immature. Nevertheless, the results suggest that students benefit considerably from their knowledge of navigating the internet. Their searching skills have been enhanced as well as the effective use of the information. A similar finding was evidenced in Ukwoma, Iwundu, and Iwundu (2016), who reported that aspects of students' academic performance had been positively affected by knowledge and use of appropriate sources learned online. Consequently, more attention should be paid to establish a solid ground for an efficient digital literacy environment, demonstrating the respective roles of both instructors and their students.

Technical difficulties, an essential variable of virtual learning, have always been presented as one of the challenges of online learning; insufficient familiarity with different online programs and platforms might hinder the learning process (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh 2004; as cited in Song & Hill, 2007). Laurillard (2002) also referred to the essential awareness of the new technical knowledge. He emphasized the value of online learning in promoting such awareness and offering an alignment between the technological advances and the educational system or context (as cited in McLoughlin & Luca, 2011). The participants' argument is not different where they said that online learning granted them better awareness and, therefore, opportunities and accessibility to other educational websites unknown to them before virtual learning. They reported that developing their technical skills was in response to the new demands of the online learning tasks and assignments. In addition, Laurillard (2002) stated that online learning promotes learner autonomy and provides an opportunity for self-directed learning (as cited in McLoughlin & Luca, 2011), which appears to be essentially the case for many participants in the present study to a greater or lesser degree.

Students' passive presence in online learning in comparison to a more active presence in social media has been justified by Norton and Toohey's (2011) description of digital learning, identifying a digital identity as "changing, context-dependent, and inextricably linked with the variable practices and resources of specific settings" (as cited in Lee & Kim, 2014, p. 151). Thus, learners' engagement in the virtual world will not ensure a similar engagement and level of presence in online classes. It is a new context with new social roles where the social norms should be clearly expressed and modeled to learners. Unfortunately, the participants reported that they "don't have real classes to practice", which indicates that students do not visualize online classes as real context; instead, a temporary situation. On the contrary, online classes were described to offer opportunities for students to lead their learning which was only facilitated by the teacher who was seen as a coach (Ekhaml, 2001; as cited in Appana, 2008). Costa and Torres (2011) emphasize the value of interaction to build learner digital identity. Instructors should be motivated to create a stimulating environment where students feel a sense of belonging. Instructors also need to strongly

familiarize themselves with learners' online activities since one central aspect of constructing identity is recognition (Coll & Falsafi, 2010). It would be interesting to examine the conditions that promote the active presence of a student digital identity in social media and the various language learning apps and emulate these conditions in the online learning context.

Conclusion

This study has investigated students' digital identities presence in online classes. It has also examined whether achieving a high level of digital identity in social media is met by the same degree of involvement in virtual classes. However, the study has shown that despite the regular social presence that learners display in some social media contexts, they expressed a reluctance to commit to the same degree of presence in virtual classrooms. In addition to that, it was witnessed that students' digital literacy, although vastly improved during the shift to online learning has not stimulated learners to interact or adopt more active roles in online classes. Students' sense of belonging in this new context should therefore be addressed so that students can adopt active roles. The findings indicate little change in the learner identity in the present context. However, the occasions in which students showed presence of digital identity, suggested a more promising impact on learning. Insufficient support from teachers in promoting digital identities and enhancing learning was another area the research found.

Based on the previous findings, new considerations are worth noting. It is important to draw an understanding of students' perceptions of their learner identities in face-to-face classes. This may form the threshold for a new understanding of digital identities and better implementation of them. Teachers' preparedness for the shift is another important variable impacting the construction of digital identities and promoting learning. Virtual education, although emergent during the current period, might be sustainable afterward. Efforts should be made to create a better understanding of digital identity and prepare both teachers and learners to embrace increasingly active roles during this type of teaching and learning.

Limitations of the Study

Although the present paper attempted to approach the concept of digital identity from various aspects, several other aspects remained unexplored. Learners' recognition of their digital identities in virtual classes was mediated through their active presence in social media only. However, learners' identity before virtual education is an aspect to be investigated to bridge the gap between the two types of identities. Teachers' practices during virtual education and their impact on promoting learner digital identity must also be considered. The design of virtual classes and the amount of interaction it promotes constitutes another area for further investigation.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Table 1. Students' digital identity in social media

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I have accounts on different social media.	39.3%	28.1%	23%	5.6%	3.4%
2.	I would feel uncomfortable not accessing my accounts for a few days.	18%	15.7%	28.1%	23.6%	14.6%
3.	Social media is a good way to get information.	29.5%	37.5%	17%	8%	8%
4.	I like to share information or discuss topics on these sites.	15.7%	28.1%	24.7%	20.2%	11.2%
5.	My online activities are for the sake of playing, taking pictures or sharing videos.	13.5%	20.2%	40.4%	12.4%	13.5%
6.	I am using my real name and displaying my real information.	26.4%	26.4%	16.1%	17.2%	13.8%
7.	I display my own pictures in my accounts profile.	15.9%	12.5%	9.1%	14.8%	47.4%

Appendix B: Table 2. *Students' digital identity as language learners*

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I have account(s) on some websites that focus on language learning.	20.5%	29.5%	23.9%	17%	9%
2.	I used English to search for knowledge.	35.5%	37.5%	15.9%	8%	3.4%
3.	I create and share knowledge related to language learning.	13.5%	22.5%	37.1%	20.2%	6.7%
4.	My teachers assist me in finding websites that help me to English language and academic skills.	10.1%	21.3%	37.1%	22.5%	9%
5.	My English has improved because of these websites.	7.9%	34.8%	31.5%	21.3%	4.5%
6.	I found most of these language and academic	18%	36%	36%	7.9%	2.2%

	websites by myself.					
7.	I will still use these websites after graduation to improve my language knowledge.	34.8%	30.3%	28.5%	5.6%	3.4%

Appendix C: Table 3. *Students' reaction toward online learning*

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	Online learning is as good as traditional learning.	4.5%	14.6%	23.6%	29.2%	28.1%
2.	I am a more active participant in online classes than traditional classes.	7.9%	11.2%	21.3%	21.3%	38.2%
3.	I prefer to interact in the chat box in online classes.	12.4%	23.6%	25.8%	22.5%	15.7%
4.	I am more focused in online classes.	6.7%	10.1%	15.7%	25.8%	41.6%
5.	I feel more comfortable practicing my English online than in class.	9.1%	18.2%	17%	32.9%	31.8%
6.	I feel less tense attending online classes than traditional classes.	13.5%	21.3%	32.6%	16.9%	15.7%
7.	I feel isolated and disconnected during online classes.	14.6%	19.1%	28.1%	21.3%	16.9%
8.	Less peer-interaction in online classes reduces the chance of improving my English and academic skills.	15.9%	26.1%	27.3%	17%	13.6%
9.	I am more committed to develop my technical skills to ease the process of online learning.	15.7%	29.2%	36%	12.4%	6.7%
10.	My teachers play a main role in helping me to cope with the online learning.	9%	24.7%	30%	18%	12.4%