

GENDER PERFORMANCE IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION:
A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY BASED IN FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

GENDER PERFORMANCE IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION: A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY BASED IN FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURAL THEORY

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Drawing on a feminist poststructural theoretical framework, this study examined how students perform gender in the online classroom and how that performance impacts their understanding of and navigation of gendered power structures. There is a scarcity of feminist poststructural research in online learning; most online learning research relies on positivist assumptions. Using feminist poststructuralism ideas, such as Butler's gender performativity, and qualitative methods provided nuanced insight into the lived experience of online students. This study employed digital ethnography methods to understand the research questions. These methods included interviews, participant observation of asynchronous and synchronous class discussions, and analysis of written communications. Two online classes from an educational technology master's degree program were studied, one from early in the degree program and one from the end. The results of the observations indicated that many students obfuscated their identity, gender or otherwise, through adopting a formal register and revealing little personal information. However, students still found ways to manipulate their gender identity performance to increase or decrease their power in the classroom. The minimizing of one's personal identity performance in an online classroom is problematic as many best practices of online learning rely on authentic interpersonal interaction and personalization. In addition to working towards ameliorating the lack of feminist poststructural research in online learning, this study contributed to understanding of the experience of gender oppressed individuals in online learning. This population has frequently turned to online learning for its flexibility and security but is also vulnerable to

gendered power imbalances. This study explored the way gender performance can be used to navigate power dynamics in the online classroom.

Keywords: Gender, Power, Online Learning, Gender Performativity, Feminism, Poststructuralism, Identity

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Dedication

To my daughters, with all my love.

Chapter 1

Internet-based learning environments offer a platform for flexibility and premeditation in identity expression whether the identity is gender, race, sexual orientation, or any other.

However, since online learning is typically embedded in an educational institution, learners are subject to rules, structures, and hierarchies laden with identity politics and imbalances of power.

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore how learners express their gender identity in online classrooms and how their gender identity influences the navigation of power structures embedded in learning experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This research relies on a theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism emphasizing gender performativity theory. Weedon defined feminist poststructuralism as “a mode of knowledge production that uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change [as relevant to gender]” (Weedon, 1987, pp. 40-41). Poststructuralism questions regimes of truth and situates knowledge in power-laden social contexts (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). According to poststructuralism, there is no one objective truth, and hence any general categorization, such as gender, is reductive (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990). Knowledge and meaning exist, but they are plural. Understanding the plurality of meaning leads to the conclusion that the domination of certain meanings must be related to power (Alcoff, 1997). Within Western feminism, it is understood that dominant ways of thinking are a result of patriarchy; these meanings reflect and perpetuate male power.

Poststructural feminists have questioned the category of “woman” and other identities. The female experience cannot be generalized and is always contingent on the social and

linguistic context (Gavey, 1997; Wolff, 2007). Gender is a social construct rather than an identity, and poststructuralism calls for its reinterpretation following Derrida's idea of deconstruction (Di Stefano, 1991; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). This questioning of identity categories, such as gender, race, or heterosexuality, "destabilizes what has been deemed natural, normal, normative, and true" (Collins, 2000, p. 41). When this deconstruction is taken to a radical extreme, one finds the breakdown of the male/female binary such as in the work of Butler (Blaise, 2009; Davies et al., 2006). Deconstructing the categories of identity can reveal the underlying power structures of a given context (Wolff, 2007). In feminist poststructuralism, power is a process rather than something one possesses. This conceptualization of power derives from Foucault's understanding of power as something omnipresent and dynamic (Blaise, 2009).

One of feminist poststructuralism's unique theoretical contributions is the idea of gender performativity. If gender is socially constructed, it is necessary to interrogate how that construction happens. Gender performativity theory is an attempt to address that, and Goffman (1959), Butler (2006), and West and Zimmerman (1987) all provided insight into gender manifestation.

Despite not being a feminist and having a tendency to essentialize gender categories (e.g., Goffman, 1976; Goffman, 1977), Erving Goffman's ideas on dramaturgy and identity performance are foundational to the idea of gender performativity. Goffman (1959) compared people's everyday self-presentation to actors on a stage continuously managing their audience's reaction to them. According to Goffman, individuals manage their identity through the roles they play and the face they present.

Unlike Goffman's scholarship, most literature related to gender identity expression is situated in poststructural feminist theory such as West and Zimmerman's 1987 article, *Doing*

Gender. Drawing on Goffman's work, West and Zimmerman popularized the idea of gender as something that is done or performed rather than an inherent trait of a person. The act of doing gender is both the result of social arrangements and "a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). The idea that gender is performed in interactions and that those interactions reify gender is intuitive particularly to gender minority individuals. For anyone who has to "pass" as a particular gender or a specific incarnation of a gender, doing gender is common.

Butler (2006) built on the ideas of gender as an action and identity as self-presentation in her classic text, *Gender Trouble*, originally published in 1990. Butler took the idea of performing gender even further to interrogate ideas such as gender as a structure, phallogocentric language, and compulsory heterosexuality. She argued that there is no gender identity behind the performance; everything is performance.

A central tension in feminist poststructuralism is whether deconstructing the concept of gender eliminates the rallying point of feminism. Butler, West, Zimmerman, and others have pushed back against this critique. Even if gender is not fixed or an inherent trait, it is still unavoidable and a "powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated on sex category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 147).

Problem Statement

Online learning is a rapidly growing modality in higher education that has been praised as an opportunity for access for students who otherwise would not be able to participate in higher education. Additionally, the internet was expected by many to be a democratic environment where hegemonic power structures were made irrelevant by anonymity. With anonymity was thought to come an equal playing field for individuals regardless of race, class, gender, sexual

orientation, or any other identity typically subject to power imbalances. However, the community of inquiry model (Garrison et al., 2000), sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and connectivism (Siemens, 2004) all argue that high quality online learning is socially situated; it should be intimate, interactive, and networked. These best practices mitigate the possibility of a learning environment free of social imbalances. If an anonymous platform free of systemic inequity is incompatible with quality learning, we must abandon the utopian ideal of a neutral environment, and then we are left with a learning space where identity and its expression matter.

Gender identity expression is not a common topic in online learning research. The literature around gender and online learning typically is quantitative and focused on differentiation of student perceptions or learning outcomes based on gender differences (e.g., Zhai & Shi, 2020). This literature relies almost entirely on a gender binary perspective. Education research in general examines gender in the traditional binary form and relies heavily on categorization (Francis & Paechter, 2015). There is a need for gender identity research in online learning that avoids this reductionism and uses qualitative methods to explore the lived experience of students and instructors in the online classroom.

Study Purpose

The objective of the study was to use digital ethnographic methods to explore gender performativity in online higher education. Relying on a theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism, I examined the experience of education technology students in online classes to identify ways that they express, interpret, and perform gender identity and how the online modality moderates that experience. This exploration considered the experiences of students of varied gender identities and how their performance of gender impacts or is impacted by power

inequality.

Research Questions

The following research questions, pursued from a feminist poststructural viewpoint, will propel understanding of gender and power in online higher education.

RQ1: How do students of all genders perform gender identity in online higher education classes?

RQ2: How do students of all genders perceive gender-based power inequity in online higher education classes?

RQ3: How do students of all genders perform gender identity in order to navigate, maintain, and challenge gender-based power inequity in online higher education classes?

Rationale

This study relied on ethnographic methods, particularly critical digital ethnography. Ethnography is a method that uses participant observation, interviews, and other tools to describe and analyze a cultural organization (Wells et al., 2012). In ethnography, people are studied within their everyday context by a researcher immersed in the same setting. Critical ethnography uses the methods of traditional ethnography but interprets data through the lens of critical theory; social lives are understood to be embedded in power inequities (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Ethnography, whether critical or not, is a longstanding approach to interpretive research in the social sciences. Digital ethnography, however, is a newer phenomenon. Digital ethnography has been used as a label for many applications including the ethnography of digital environments and the use of digital tools to conduct ethnography of non-digital communities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Some scholars, such as Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) see digital ethnography as a continuation of traditional ethnography into the digital realm with few

differences other than platform. Boellstorff et al. agreed and stated, “what interests us about virtual worlds is not what is extraordinary about them, but what is ordinary” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 1). However, there are fundamental differences between digital and traditional ethnography. In particular, interaction with participants is mediated by the digital environment which can influence communication (Pink et al., 2016).

Critical digital ethnography is aligned with the relativist ontology of feminist poststructuralism and can provide rich detail describing and interpreting the gendered experience of online learning participants. I used it to approach the question of identity performance in online learning with more nuance and depth than would be possible through surveys or other quantitative means. Quantitative methods require simplifying input in order for analyses to be run, and some loss of complexity can be expected. Digital critical ethnography does not have to face the same limitations.

Significance

As will be demonstrated in Chapter 2, there is a scarcity of critical feminist research in online learning and even less that adopts a poststructural lens. Even the broader realm of qualitative inquiry in online learning is limited, which means that our understanding of the lived experience of participants in online learning is minimal. The research here provides unique insight into how that experience is moderated by gender and how gender tempers participants’ experiences with power.

This contribution is not only academic. Online learning in higher education is proliferating rapidly throughout the world. Within the United States, the percentage of undergraduate students taking some or all their courses online rose from 15.6% in 2004 to 32% in 2012 to 37% in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.b). In those same years, the

percentage of students enrolled in entirely online degree programs moved from 4.9% to 6.5% to 17.5%. At every year interval, the percentage of female students enrolled exclusively in an online degree program or taking some courses online was higher than the percentage of male students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.c). In other words, female students have been more likely to choose an online modality than male students. These trends expanded dramatically in 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic. In the fall of 2020, 74% of students enrolled in a degree-granting postsecondary institution took at least one of their classes online. 45.5% of students exclusively took online classes. As universities moved out of their pandemic modes of operation, the number of students taking online courses decreased somewhat. In 2021, 61% of undergraduate students took at least one online course; 28% were enrolled in exclusively online degree programs (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a). It is unlikely that these numbers will return to pre-pandemic levels.

Such a force in education cannot be left understudied or undertheorized. Nor can one assume that matters of power and identity occur in the same way online as they do in in-person classrooms. We cannot improve the online learning experience without understanding it. The research described here aims to help grow that understanding.

Definition of Terms

The following words or phrases are used throughout and merit definition or clarification.

Online Learning

While there are nuanced distinctions between them, in this study I use the terms *online learning*, *distance learning*, *distance education*, and *online education* interchangeably. I prefer *online learning* as it describes the most common modality in distance education and does not conflate geographic distance with interpersonal distance.

Identity

Drawing on Buckingham (2008) and Öztok (2020), I define identity as aspects of one's sense of self. Identity is heavily influenced by culture as identity categories often shape one's self-perception. Identity can indicate belonging in a group or uniqueness, but it centers on how one views themselves.

Power

Max Weber defined power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (Weber, 1978, p. 53). In other words, power is the ability of one person or group to impose their will over others (Warren, 1992). When considering gender, power typically refers to the position of privilege that cisgendered men hold over others.

Hegemony

Hegemony can be defined as the power of one state over another, but I use the term as defined by Gramsci as a form of cultural control. “It means political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class” (Bates, 1975, p. 352).

Gender

Butler defined gender as “the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes” (Butler, 2006, p. 9). This is aligned with more common definitions of gender such as that of the World Health Organization: “the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed” (World Health Organization, n.d.). In this work, I define gender as the socially constructed meaning typically identified as feminine, masculine, or a combination thereof (Rushton et al., 2019). In accordance with the World Health Organization's (n.d.) guidelines, I

add that gender varies between cultures and over time.

Sex

Sex is typically defined as the biologically based identification of an individual as male or female. In Western society, sex categorization is most commonly assigned based on visible genitalia at birth and may or may not align with the person's gender identity (Rushton et al., 2019). Butler posited that sex as a binary label is also a social construct (Butler, 2006). With Butler's argument in mind, I will use sex to refer to the male or female assignment of individuals at birth based on physical characteristics.

Gender Identity

I follow the World Health Organization's definition of gender identity as "a person's deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person's physiology or designated sex at birth" (World Health Organization, n.d.).

Gender Oppressed/Disprivileged

I use the terms gender oppressed and gender disprivileged to describe individuals who struggle with systemic discrimination because of their gender. In Western society, this includes women, gender minorities, non-binary, and any gender identity outside of cisgender men. While individuals suffer different levels of oppression, people with any of these identities are in non-dominant positions.

Men/Women

Following the approach taken by Koseoglu et al. (2020), I use words like men or women in full recognition of gender fluidity. Additionally, I use them to describe a gender identity that may or may not be consistent with an individual's biological sex.

Gender Minority/Cisgender/Gender Nonconforming

Gender minority refers to anyone whose gender identity is different from their sex at birth. These individuals are typically defined as transgender or non-binary. By contrast, cisgender refers to those whose gender identity matches their sex at birth. Gender nonconforming describes an individual whose gender expression does not match the societal expectations for their gender (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

Gender Binary

In Western society, gender has traditionally been limited to men and women only. This dyadic system that does not acknowledge gender as a continuum is the gender binary (Rushton et al., 2019). Non-binary refers to individuals whose gender identity does not fit into a male/female dichotomy.

Poststructuralism/Postmodernism

Though there is debate over the difference between, if any, poststructuralism and postmodernism, I will generally use poststructuralism in this study. Postmodernism is more commonly used to refer to cultural shifts that manifest in art, literature, popular culture, and elsewhere, and poststructuralism is often used specifically for academic theorizing (Gavey, 1997; Lather, 1991, 1992; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). As such, I will use poststructuralism in this study, but quotations from other scholars may conflate the terms.

Positionality

A researcher's positionality relevant to the research undertaken should be shared transparently to avoid hidden bias and help readers understand the author's perspective (Holmes, 2020). Like any scholar, my research is inextricably linked to my experience and identity. Aspects of my identity most relevant to this study include that I am currently cisgender, white,

heterosexual, Jewish woman. While I do not believe my own experience can represent all who fit those identity markers, my life experience empathetically connects me with some and disconnects from others. In other words, I do not speak for all women, as no one can, but I share life experiences with some women and generally not with men. My identity is imbued with privilege in terms of race, class, and sexuality, but I have experienced subjection through gender and ethnicity. Additionally, I define myself as a feminist both professionally and personally, and that can significantly impact others' perception of me.

My professional identity also merits mention. I studied and practiced anthropology for many years which has shaped my foundation for understanding culture. Currently, I work in instructional design, and I have devoted years to designing and building online courses in and out of higher education. I have taken numerous courses online, synchronously and asynchronously, including an entire master's degree program. I am as comfortable communicating and learning in an online environment as I am face-to-face. While I recognize that is not true for everyone, discomfort in an online context is not part of my own experience.

My positionality impacts my research indubitably. The students whom I interviewed come from a variety of identities, some of which I identify with more than others. They also were students in the same educational technology master's degree program that I graduated from years ago which led to comradeship and academic shared understanding. That does not mean that the learners under study, professors in those classes, and myself as researcher shared a common power status. I endeavored to maintain awareness of that imbalance when conducting analysis and developing conclusions.

In ethnographic research, the researcher becomes an important part of the community being studied. As such, the impact of researcher positionality must be understood. With critical

ethnography, the researcher is not expected to be an unbiased reporter; the critical ethnographer incorporates their biases into the research and the data and knowledge are co-constructed with participants (Wells et al., 2012). Interviews, in particular, are a social process of constructing knowledge together, and the researcher will impact the data significantly. There are power asymmetries between the researcher and subject in terms of who controls interpretations and data production (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Additionally, the specific positionality of a researcher should not be overlooked. When studying identity performance, in particular, the identity of the researcher will impact how participants perceive them. The researcher is performing identity themselves as they interact with participants, and this should be recognized. As discussed earlier, I identify as a woman. My own performance of gender is shaped by my life experience and ingrained hegemonic understanding.

Summary

In this chapter, I have explained the research being proposed here. This has included the theoretical framework, problem statement, purpose of study, research questions, rationale, significance, definition of terms, and positionality. The remainder of this dissertation is divided into four additional chapters. Chapter 2 includes a more in-depth exploration of the theoretical framework of this research as well as a review of existing literature in the area of gender identity and online higher education. In Chapter 3, I explore the methodology including the choice of sample, data collection methods, and data analysis methods. Chapter 4 presents the findings and results of my ethnographic research, and Chapter 5 includes the synthesis of the findings and conclusions.

Chapter 2

In this chapter, the academic literature relevant to gender and online higher education is reviewed. First, the theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism and gender performativity theory is explored historically and in depth. Second, the research specifically addressing gender and online higher education is synthesized. As there is minimal feminist poststructural research in online higher education, other approaches to research, such as positivist or interpretive, are included.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Poststructuralism

Feminism

Defining feminism is surprisingly challenging. In the hands of different scholars and activists, it is an epistemology, a social theory, or a political movement. The commonality is that it is focused on the experience of women, though the definition of woman is complex as well. Harding divided feminist theory into three branches: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint epistemology, and feminist postmodernism (Benton & Craib, 2011). Feminist empiricism does not challenge science or empiricism itself; it challenges the role women have played in the scientific pursuit of knowledge. Feminist standpoint theory and postmodernism have more direct applicability to the study of social relations in education.

Standpoint theory originated with the writing of Lukacs in the early 1970s and was quickly adopted by critically-minded feminists (Au, 2012). It is worth noting that Harding and other feminist scholars do not emphasize the role of Lukacs in the origins of feminist standpoint theory (e.g., Harding, 2004). Au's (2012) presentation of standpoint theory consists of five points. One, epistemology is shaped by our experience in the world. Two, the epistemologies of oppressed groups contradict the epistemologies of dominant groups. Third, the epistemology of

the dominant group is imposed on those in oppressed groups. Fourth, standpoints derive from fighting against hegemony or the perspective of those in power. Fifth, standpoints of the oppressed are emancipatory. While this theory has been propelled by feminism, it can be applied to any marginalized group. It can also be used in an intersectional way such as Collins' (2004) delineation of Black feminist standpoint theory.

Harding (2004) saw feminist standpoint theory as powerful because it can be used to bridge politics and epistemology. It is both explanatory and a guiding framework. It is also noteworthy that feminist standpoint theory injects a feminist perspective into the natural sciences instead of sticking to the traditional social sciences. However, feminist standpoint theory is not immune to critique. Hekman (2004) explained that the perspective suffers from its association with Marxism, its essentialism, and its lack of coherence with postmodernism or poststructuralism. The argument against standpoint theory, and feminism in general, as essentialist is a convincing one. When defining a feminist standpoint for the purpose of analyzing a context such as online learning, how does one decide whose feminist perspective is central? If epistemology is shaped by experience, as described by Au (2012), epistemologies should be as numerous as the many ways in which people experience the world. Hartsock (1996) provided the example of how white feminism assumed a split between private life and public life. However, Black feminists have argued that there is no private sphere in the Black community; state agencies infiltrate all aspects of life. This idea must extend to online learning environments. It seems presumptuous to assume that the experience of a Black woman in an online class is the same as a white woman or that of anyone else. The feminist standpoint perspective is particularly challenging when considering individuals with gender nonconforming identities. While feminist standpoint theory is important in the positioning of any feminist

research, its tendency towards essentialism is problematic.

Feminist Poststructuralism

Before exploring the depths of poststructural feminism, it is necessary to address the question of the difference between postmodernism and poststructuralism. There is no consensus on the difference between the terms or even if there is one. Collins (2000) described poststructuralism as one of the variants of postmodern theory; other variants included neopragmatism and contemporary Marxism. Alcoff (1997) considered poststructuralism to be “more philosophically perspicuous” (p. 25) and specific than postmodernism. She also described postmodernism as a term more easily recognized across disciplines and outside of the academy. Wolff (2007) complicated the matter by questioning if poststructuralism is postmodern at all. However, the most commonly seen distinction between the two terms is using postmodern to refer to cultural shifts that manifest in art, literature, popular culture, and elsewhere and using poststructural for academic theorizing (Gavey, 1997; Lather, 1991, 1992; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). I will follow this construct and use poststructuralism to refer to the academic theorizing of postmodernism, though quotations may conflate the terms.

Weedon defined feminist poststructuralism as “a mode of knowledge production that uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (Weedon, 1987, pp. 40-41). Poststructuralism questions regimes of truth and situates knowledge in power-laden social contexts (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). On its surface, poststructural feminism resolves the essentialism problem of feminist standpoint theory. Poststructuralism expects pluralistic perspectives and dismisses objective realities. However, this openness makes poststructuralism difficult to define and act upon. Certain ideas in poststructuralism do come to the forefront,

however.

According to poststructuralism, there is no one philosophy or one objective truth, and hence any general categorization, such as gender, is reductive (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990). This accounts for the varied narratives that come out of different standpoints. Knowledge and meaning exist, but they are plural. Understanding the plurality of meaning leads to the conclusion that the domination of certain meanings must be related to power (Alcoff, 1997). Within Western feminism, it is understood that dominant ways of thinking are a result of patriarchy; these meanings reflect and perpetuate male power. Feminist poststructuralism aims to disrupt the domination of androcentric knowledge including the commanding theories in philosophy and science (Gavey, 1997).

One of the central themes of poststructuralism, expounded by Lyotard, is the dismissal of universal grand narratives that explain society (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990; Wolff, 2007). Metanarratives that have been dismissed by poststructuralism include feminist theories of gender subordination, Black feminist intersectional theory, and Marxist theories of class exploitation (Collins, 2000). While some scholars, such as Gavey (1997), include Marxism within poststructuralism, Marx's theory of class exploitation is above all a grand narrative that claims universality. As such, it is refuted by feminist poststructural perspectives.

Similar to the stance against metanarratives, feminist poststructuralists stand against essentialism particularly the reduction of womankind to one viewpoint (Harrison, 2006). Fraser and Nicholson (1990) suggested that the universal association of woman with mothering is an example of essentialism common in feminism. Universalisms are problematic; feminist poststructuralism aims to be pluralist and intersectional. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work, such as "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), is an example of anti-essentialism in feminist

poststructuralism. Spivak, a postcolonial feminist, argued that the voices of colonized and oppressed women have been silenced through “epistemic violence.” According to Spivak, European poststructuralism essentializes the Other by not including non-Western perspectives generally and women are even further hidden from view.

In alignment with anti-essentialism, poststructural feminists have questioned the category of “woman” and other identities. The female experience cannot be generalized and is always contingent on the social and linguistic context (Gavey, 1997; Wolff, 2007). Gender is a social construct rather than an identity, and poststructuralism calls for its reinterpretation following Derrida’s idea of deconstruction (Di Stefano, 1991; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). This questioning of identity categories, such as gender, race, or heterosexuality, “destabilizes what has been deemed natural, normal, normative, and true” (Collins, 2000, p. 41). When this deconstruction is taken to a radical extreme, one finds the breakdown of the male/female binary such as in the work of Butler (Blaise, 2009; Davies et al., 2006). Deconstructing the categories of identity can reveal the underlying power structures of a given context (Wolff, 2007). In feminist poststructuralism, power is a process rather than something one possesses. This conceptualization of power derives from Foucault’s understanding of power as something omnipresent and dynamic (Blaise, 2009).

Another hallmark of feminist poststructuralism is the blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private (Wolff, 2007). Yeatman argued that such a boundary, like that between personal and public, is inherently modernist and incompatible with feminism (Nicholson, 1990). This follows the disdain that feminist poststructuralists, such as Cixous and Irigaray, have had for binary oppositions (Tong, 2001).

The integration of the public and the private is part of a larger movement within

poststructuralism to interrogate subjectivity. Subjectivity and the subject-object dualism originated in modern philosophy with the work of René Descartes and was first substantially countered by Martin Heidegger (Çüçen, 1998). Descartes' concept of subjectivity describes a distinctly separate subject, the knower, and object, the known. Modernist feminism has argued that women have traditionally been seen as the object and the subject has always been male. Feminist standpoint theory argues for making women an equally valid subject; radical feminists consider women the only valid subject. The feminist poststructural position, however, is one of decentering the subject altogether. Poststructuralism denies the fixed nature of the subject and considers subjectivity to be socially constructed (Wolff, 2007). Rather than reposition women as the subject, feminist poststructuralism deconstructs the very concept of the subject (Gavey, 1997).

Like poststructuralism generally, feminist poststructuralism emphasizes the role of language in structuring society. Scholars, such as Foucault, rely on the concept of discourse to help parse language. Discourse, based in language, is the ideas and concepts that have been accepted as truth in a given context (Blaise, 2009). Discourse is seen in language, but it is based in power, local, and socially constructed. As it is unfixed, discourse can be challenged making language a site of resistance. Understanding the power imbued in language, or the way language is used to oppress, is an act of deconstruction. Deconstruction, posited by Derrida, is difficult and always partial, but it is revelatory for individuals and societies (Davies et al., 2006; Harrison, 2006).

Critiques of Feminist Poststructuralism

Critiques of feminist poststructuralism abound, particularly under the thought leadership of Nancy Hartsock (Sawicki, 1996). Criticism typically focuses in three areas: politics, theory,

and relativism. The political charge is that feminist poststructuralism lacks any coherent political agenda or actionable direction for social change (Di Stefano, 1990; Wolff, 2007). Complaints against theory center on poststructuralism's dismissal of grand narratives or overarching theories. However, Nicholson (1990) argued that this does not preclude the generating of localized theory.

The most frequent critique of feminist poststructuralism relates to charges of relativism and nihilism. If gender, like any societal structure, is contextual and fluid, what happens to the concept of woman? If the idea of woman is not fixed, how can scholars analyze power differentials between men and women? More urgently, how is political action that reacts to that differential possible? The fact that postmodernism could negate the existence of feminism has made feminist scholars reasonably suspicious. Di Stefano (1990) referred to numerous feminist scholars who have questioned the coincidental timing of the poststructural movement that negated the idea of a female perspective just as feminism was finding a voice. However, Flax (1990) argued that feminist theory is inherently part of postmodern philosophy and that this is not the root of an existential crisis. She claimed that the feminist conception of truth is at odds with the Enlightenment definition, and as such feminism cannot fit into modernism's schema.

Those who write about feminist poststructuralism frequently assume that this paradigm merges seamlessly with intersectionality and anticolonial positions. Poststructuralism's anti-essentialism can help alleviate the oft-noted problem of feminist theory representing the interests of white, Western cisgender women (Davis & Gergen, 1997; Nicholson, 1990). This form of feminism recognizes the differences amongst women including race, class, and nationality (Tong, 2001). However, feminist poststructuralism cannot be equated with anticolonial feminism or intersectional feminism, despite frequent attempts to do so (Di Stefano, 1991). Collins (2000) argued that the ideas of poststructuralism are not new to Black feminists, and the poststructural

critique does not offer new ways of thinking for them. She also raised a concern, similar to other accusations of relativism, that rejecting truth dismisses the discourse that has been used to justify oppression minimizing the potential for resistance. In other words, poststructuralism is not a means to escape the white bias in feminism. As stated by Di Stefano, "...as long as the academy is white-dominated, feminist theory is going to suffer. There is no theoretical cure for the problem of intellectual racism; we (meaning, primarily, white academicians) are not going to 'think' our way out of it (Di Stefano, 1991, p. 94).

Feminist Poststructural Theorists

Feminist poststructuralism derives from the broader movement of poststructuralism and postmodernism particularly the work of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard popularized the term postmodern; he was one of the few postmodernists who labeled his own work as such. Lyotard defined the postmodern as an era when grand narratives are no longer credible and legitimation is both plural and local (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990). Lyotard familiarized scholarship with the term postmodern, but the most influential postmodernists for feminist poststructuralism were Derrida and Foucault (Wolff, 2007). From Derrida, feminist poststructuralism adopted the idea of deconstruction (Harrison, 2006). Foucault primarily influenced feminist poststructural ideas of power, knowledge, and sexuality (Blaise, 2009).

Foucault's work was heterogeneous and did not always fall into typical poststructural patterns, and some feminists, such as Hartsock, refuse to adopt his ideas because of his ignoring of gender and his status as "yet another androcentric European man" (Hekman, 1996, p. 1). Foucault himself refused to self-identify with any particular philosophical or political ideology and even was "amused by the diversity of ways I've been judged and classified" (Rabinow &

Foucault, 2010, p. 384). However, his influence on feminist poststructuralism was immense. From Foucault, feminist poststructuralists took the view that sites of power are also sites of resistance and that universal truths do not exist beyond the influence of history and society (Rabinow, 2010; Wolff, 2007). Foucault's writing about sexuality has also been an aid to feminist poststructuralism. Foucault's claims that there is no sex without power, that being sexed is necessary to qualify as legitimately human, and that discourse, power, and sexuality are connected have been a foundation for feminist poststructuralism and queer theory (Butler, 1996; Cavallaro, 2003).

The work of the poststructuralists described above was adapted for feminist purposes first by French feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray. These matriarchs of feminist poststructuralism took poststructural conceptualizations of identity, power, and dualisms and reconstructed them through a feminist lens. Cixous, whose ideas centered on women and writing, and Irigaray, a linguist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst, relied on deconstruction to examine the dualisms of Western thought. For Cixous, dualism, where one concept is definitionally opposed to another, is the root of human oppression (Tong, 2001). She wrote that these binary oppositions always associate masculinity with power leaving femininity as a hallmark of the oppressed (Cavallaro, 2003). Irigaray agreed, arguing that femininity, feminine sexuality, and women's bodies more generally are defined only by their contrast to masculinity, masculine sexuality, and the male body. By this argument, the masculine is the only subject and the feminine are the Other (Butler, 1996; Oliver, 2002b). This claim is the basis of more modern theory such as the masculine default (Cheryan & Markus, 2020). Kristeva, also a psychoanalyst, linguist, and writer, brought a more positive light to poststructuralism (Oliver 2002a). She tackled the question of meaning of language by inserting dynamic subjectivity but

stopped short of chaotic relativism.

While Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva are often seen as the epitome of French feminism, it is important to recognize that their poststructural approach is not universal within French feminism. French feminism includes liberal feminism and radical material feminism as well as many other modernist approaches. However, the brand of French feminism associated with Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva is poststructural and serves as a foundation for future feminist poststructuralism (Cavallaro, 2003).

In addition to the French feminists already mentioned, there are many feminist poststructural theorists across disciplines. Some might reject the label of poststructuralist, but their ideas fit its overall scope. Others were skeptical of poststructuralism for some time but came to situate their work within it, such as Patti Lather. Lather, an education researcher, began her career as a neo-Marxist feminist. She was fiercely critical of the androcentrism of Marxism, but her work was still bound by Marxism's grand narrative of all oppression and power being rooted in materialism (Lather, 1984). Within a few years, however, Lather had embraced postmodernism as a powerful tool to interrogate political power. "It is this intersection of postmodernism and the politics of emancipation that I put at the center of my attempt to explore what it might mean to generate ways of knowing that can take us beyond ourselves" (Lather, 1991, p. 2).

Other prominent poststructural feminists include Patricia Hill Collins, Susan Bordo, and Jane Flax. Collins, a sociologist, drew on deconstruction in her intersectional approach to the empowerment of Black women (Collins, 2000). Bordo and Flax, like Butler, criticized the binary view of gender (Wolff, 2007). Flax considered poststructuralism necessary to the furtherment of feminism and the avoidance of essentialism (Flax, 1987). All scholars of feminist

poststructuralism emphasize different aspects of postmodern theory, but all center their work within the paradigm of poststructuralism.

Cyberfeminist Poststructuralism

One area of focus for some feminist poststructuralists, and of particular relevance for this dissertation, has been cyberfeminism. The cyberfeminism body of theory originated with Donna Haraway's classic "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" (1987). Cyberfeminism, both in Haraway's work and in other scholars' writing, tries to bring feminism to the internet age. However, the integration of feminism and technology varies across the body of theory and practice. Some cyberfeminists, such as Haraway or Plant (1997), saw technology as a possible utopia where gender and sexual orientation can disappear. Others have focused more on the reality of harassment online and the possibility of a women-only space online or the use of the internet for political gains (Hawthorne, 1999). Both have been approached with and without a feminist poststructural lens.

Haraway has been called the most influential person in cyberfeminism, and she approached the intersection of feminism and technology through a poststructural perspective (Daniels, 2009). She is most known for her conceptualization of the cyborg, an amalgamation of human, machine, and animal. Haraway's cyborg resists categorization and blurs the distinction between subject and object (Sawicki, 1996). Like Cixous and Irigaray, Haraway saw dualism as the root of oppression; her cyborg was an attempt to disrupt this philosophy (Haraway, 1987).

Haraway wrote that a cyborg future means that gender will become obsolete (Hall, 1996). Gender, according to Haraway, is socially constructed and responsive to systems of power. "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often

exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential” (Haraway, 1987, pp. 9-10). To Haraway, cyborgs derive from patriarchy but rise above it.

Haraway’s writing was not limited to the cyborg, however. She critiqued feminist standpoint theory and other modernist theories for their assumption of an essential unity. “There is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices” (Haraway, 1987, p. 16). Haraway wrote that essentialism is invalid for many reasons, not least of which is the erasure of women of color. While some have criticized Haraway for describing women of color as cyborgs, her statements were intended to increase the visibility of non-white women (Daniels, 2009).

Another scholar who applied a poststructural lens to cyberfeminism was Sherry Turkle. Like Haraway, Turkle wrote of the interaction between people and technology, though her descriptions were ethnographic rather than rhetorical. Turkle also blurred the boundary between human and machine as when she quoted an interviewee as saying, “real life is just one more window” (Turkle, 1995, p. 13). Turkle drew on poststructuralism to understand this and saw the internet as an opportunity to understand the abstract concepts of postmodernism. If humans and machines can be mistaken for each other online, what does this mean for subjectivity? This question is of particular import now as generative artificial intelligence has become commonplace (Lim et al., 2023).

One of Turkle’s key writings, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, explored the use of the internet for identity tourism (Turkle, 1995). Looking at early internet role playing games, Turkle studied gender-swapping and its impact on participants. Turkle argued that when online, the self is constructed through technology and identity becomes fluid. This

permeability of identity and the rapidity with which it can be modified online is unique to the internet context; this further supports the idea that identity is socially constructed. Turkle also explored how the manipulation of gender identity online impacts individuals' sense of self and the blurring of the boundary between online and offline. This has considerable implications for online learning and how students present themselves in that context.

Queer Theorists

It would be insufficient to review feminist poststructuralism's notable theorists without discussing Judith Butler. Di Stefano described Butler as "one of the most formidable voices in the postmodern assault on gender" (Di Stefano, 1991, p. 95). Butler is known primarily for her writing about gender performativity and as an early and prominent queer theorist. Queer theory extends the understandings of feminist poststructuralism to deconstruction of heterosexual discourse and identity (Blaise, 2009). Like other scholars have used feminist poststructuralism to interrogate the essentialism of modernist feminism with respect to race or ethnicity, Butler used a postmodern toolkit to give voice to non-heterosexual identities within feminism (Di Stefano, 1991). Butler's most significant contribution, her theory of gender performativity, is addressed below.

Theoretical Framework: Gender Performativity

One of feminist poststructuralism's unique theoretical contributions is the idea of gender performativity. Many of the scholars referenced above refer to gender as socially constructed, and it is necessary to interrogate how that construction happens. Gender performativity is an attempt to address that, and Goffman (1959), Butler (2006), and West and Zimmerman (1987) all provided insight into gender manifestation.

Erving Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory

Despite not being a feminist poststructuralist, Erving Goffman's ideas on dramaturgy and identity performance are foundational to the idea of gender performativity. Goffman (1959) compared people's everyday self-presentation to actors on a stage continuously managing their audience's reaction to them. According to Goffman, individuals manage their identity through the roles they play and the face they present.

A few nuances to Goffman's theory are worth emphasizing. One, Goffman argued that identity and its expression are not entirely separate. If an individual presents a particular identity regularly, they will eventually come to believe their own performance. At that point, the performed role becomes their actual identity. Not only does identity inform the interaction, but the interaction shapes identity. Two, Goffman spoke of the expression of identity both when an individual is "on stage" interacting with others and when they are "backstage" with no social constraints. It is in the backstage moments that an individual lives their identity rather than performs a manipulated version. Three, Goffman wrote about the connection between identity performance and societal values. "Thus when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole" (p. 35). In other words, individuals express themselves as they believe they are expected to.

Goffman did write about gender and its expression in articles published in the 1970s (Goffman, 1976; Goffman, 1977). His writing on gender was essentialist and reductive; some of it was pejorative towards the idea that women are disadvantaged in Western society (e.g., Goffman, 1977, p. 307). However, Goffman's own placing of gender within his theory of performance served as a foundation for feminists to build on.

West and Zimmerman, Doing Gender

Unlike Goffman's scholarship, most literature related to gender identity expression is situated in poststructural feminist theory such as West and Zimmerman's 1987 article, *Doing Gender*. Drawing on Goffman's work, West and Zimmerman popularized the idea of gender as something that is done or performed rather than an inherent trait of a person. The act of doing gender is both the result of social arrangements and "a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). The idea that gender is performed in interactions and that those interactions reify gender is intuitive particularly to gender minority individuals. For anyone who has to "pass" as a particular gender or a specific incarnation of a gender, doing gender is common.

The idea of doing gender is also appealing as its explanatory power is not limited to women. Cisgender men do gender as do transgender people and anyone else. West and Zimmerman's work is noteworthy because, while it referred to men and women, it is conceptually open to other gender identities. Their work is helpful in understanding how people do gender and where gender ideals derive from. It also answered the postmodern feminist's existential quandary over gender. Even if gender is not fixed or an inherent trait, it is still unavoidable and a "powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated on sex category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 147).

Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory

Butler (2006) built on the ideas of gender as an action and identity as self-presentation in her classic text, *Gender Trouble*, originally published in 1990. Butler took the idea of performing gender even further to interrogate ideas such as gender as a structure, phallogocentric language, and compulsory heterosexuality. In the 1999 preface, Butler explained that her primary purpose

was to critique the heterosexual hegemony in feminist literary theory (Butler, 2006, p. viii). She accomplished that aim, and *Gender Trouble* is considered a founding text in queer theory.

However, the text's legacy also centers on gender performance and the idea that even the body is culturally contextualized. While Butler questioned the ideas of postmodernism, as she questioned everything, she clearly derived her theory from a poststructural perspective. In essence, Butler took gender as a performance to its extreme conclusion arguing that there is no gender identity behind the performance; everything is performance.

Critiques of Butler's theories have been similar to most arguments against postmodern feminism (e.g., Digeser, 1994). Critics feel that breaking down the concept of gender eliminates the rallying point of feminism. However, Butler embraced the diversity of ideas about what woman is and sees this as a means to further expand self-understanding. She also argued that political action does not need a clear ontology to be effective. Di Stefano (1991) agreed that feminism only needs to be concerned with those that society defines as women regardless of the philosophical underpinnings of that idea.

Positivist Research on Gender and Online Learning

As stated earlier, the corpus of research into online learning and gender using a feminist poststructural framework is small, and it is necessary to explore positivist and interpretive research to see a full picture of what is known about gender and online learning. It is difficult to identify positivist research in online learning specific to the performance of gender, because the concept of gender as performance is inherently relativist. However, a significant body of literature exists that details positivist research related to online learning and gender in general. This literature typically relies on a modernist understanding of gender; men and women are seen as distinct and natural types in a binary system. Most positivist research related to gender and

online learning seeks to understand gender-based differences in perception, satisfaction, or success with online learning. While a variety of methods have been used, they can be considered under two categories. The first, survey-based methods, is most common. The second, methods related to learning analytics, is growing in popularity with the increased availability of computing power and big data.

Survey-Based Methods

The most common positivist approach to studying gender and online learning is through student surveys. Surveys can be administered large-scale or small and typically require participants to respond to questions using Likert scales or other numerical scores. The questions can relate to students' perception of their learning, their self-efficacy, their motivation, or any other topic. Many mixed-method studies have paired this with open-ended survey questions or interviews to enrich the quantitative data with more meaning. The specific research questions addressed and theoretical frameworks employed vary, but most look for gender-based differences in perception of online learning.

The tone of the articles using survey methods to examine gender in online learning has changed with time. Earlier work relied on assumptions of gender differences and often attributed those differences to either essentialist conceptions of each gender or women's discomfort with technology (McSporran & Young, 2001; Taplin & Jegede, 2001; Yukselturk & Balut, 2009). For example, McSporran and Young asserted that:

We expected that the women would score more highly on the group 'research project' which involves communication, report-writing and teamwork. We expected that the 'Webpage project', which is more technical, would favour the males. This turned out not to be the case, and in fact the females scored consistently better for both assignments,

except in the summer school. (McSporran & Young, 2001, p. 8).

With time, presumptions of women's discomfort with technology eased and more nuanced approaches to gender appeared. Research questions also moved beyond a focus on if online learning was as successful or appealing as traditional learning modalities. However, the positivist survey literature continued to look for concrete differences in achievement and perspective based on gender. With the sudden move to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, the online learning literature has proliferated with research conducted by those new to distance education who continue to debate if online learning can be successful and if it is preferred or not based on students' gender (e.g., Ramli et al., 2022).

Some positivist, survey-based studies have identified differences in how male and female students experience online learning. Lateef and Alaba (2013), Newsome et al. (2022), and Shao and Chen (2021), for example, all found significant differences between male and female perceptions of online learning. However, many studies have found no significant differences between men and women with regards to perception of the online learning environment (e.g., Al-Azawei & Lundqvist, 2015; Cancino & Towle, 2022; Ramli et al., 2022).

While positivism seeks an objective truth, the conflicting results of the above studies, and others, indicate that there is no simple answer as to if gender impacts satisfaction with online learning. There could be a variety of reasons for this. One, online learning includes a large number of variables that impact student experience such as the quality of instruction, specific course design elements, and interactions with peers. It would be unreasonable to assume that one would find a conclusive answer as to whether males appreciated in-person learning more or less than females as the answer depends on so many factors. Online learning is no different. Two, all of the studies discussed here come from different countries and educational contexts. A teacher

preparation course in Nigeria will be inherently different from a computer programming course in Turkey. Both the educational context and societal gender structures vary significantly. Last, and most important, no objective truth has been determined because no objective truth exists. Anti-positivist research would argue that reality is socially constructed and potentially unique to each individual. There cannot be one overall narrative averring positively that women or men, however defined, feel one unified way about online learning.

The survey-based studies rely on statistical measures to identify differences between groups of people. As such, they are almost uniform in their reliance on a fixed, binary scale for gender. Warfvinge et al. (2022) made one of the rare mentions of alternative gender identities. They acknowledged that the survey they relied on allowed students to identify only as male or female with no option for non-binary or to not disclose. Warfvinge et al. stated that they were aiming to rectify that, but they were limited by their current instrument. Even allowing for non-binary representation, surveys do not typically represent gender as a fluid identity or a continuous scale. As a result, the findings of studies based on surveys will also identify gender in discrete categories.

Learning Analytics Methods

Learning analytics is a nascent field with some ambiguity as to its definition (Viberg et al., 2018). Romero and Ventura (2020) defined learning analytics as “the measurement, collection, analysis, and reporting of data about learners and their contexts, for purposes of understanding and optimizing learning and the environments in which it occurs” (p. 2). Recent studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of these methods in understanding online learning environments (e.g., Tu et al., 2021). Sentiment analysis is one method within this area with relevance to the study of gender and online learning. It is a method for using individuals’ written

words to determine their opinions. “Sentiment analysis refers to the application of natural language processing, computational linguistics, and text analytics to identify and extract subjective information in source materials” (Batrinca & Treleaven, 2015, p. 90). A corpus of text is gathered and compared systematically against a known lexicon where words have already been identified as indicating particular feelings to generate sentiment scores for sentences or documents. For larger datasets, machine learning may be used (Feldman, 2013).

Only a few sentiment analysis studies have focused on gender and online learning. Sun et al. (2020) examined the differences in male and female behavior in online technology communities in China. Basing their research in social-cultural theory of gender differences, the authors relied on sentiment analysis because of the impossibility of conducting qualitative analysis on a dataset large enough to reach broad conclusions. Through topic-focused text mining, Sun et al. found that male users provided more help to others while female users focused on relationship building. They determined that female users expressed positive emotions more than male users, though both were overall positive, and that female users were more emotional overall. The authors argued that men and women are “constrained by social expectations” (Sun et al., 2020, p. 7) and that women likely express more emotions because they are expected to do so. While this perspective could be considered a feminist one, it is still entirely positivist in its assumption that quantitatively measured levels of emotions in one learning community can be generalized.

Usart et al. (2022) conducted a gender-sensitive sentiment analysis of an online teacher education program. They stated that their study was the first to use sentiment analysis to examine gender differences in communication in a higher education context. Usart et al. used both discussion forum text and open-ended survey answers as sources of data to be rated as positive,

negative, or neutral. They examined their own method by conducting a qualitative content analysis of the survey results. The authors found that female participants expressed more negative sentiments about their own success and that socially focused discussion boards were more positive overall than task-specific boards.

All the research methods described above, including surveys and sentiment analysis, rely on a positivist paradigm. They assume that there is an objective reality as to the gendered experience of students in online learning. They mostly lack the nuance of interpretive research, the empowerment of feminist research, and the recognition of complexity of poststructural research. However, the results of these studies are valuable even from a relativist perspective. They speak to the experience of certain individuals in certain contexts, and they can be used to focus the research questions addressed through other paradigms.

Interpretive Research on Gender and Online Learning

The interpretive literature related to gender and online learning is not robust. It is growing, however, particularly with the surge in interest in online learning after the onset of Covid-19. Qualitative research related to online learning at all is less common than quantitative, which may be due to the dominance of the positivist paradigm in research overall or a result of the personal backgrounds of early adopters of technology. The qualitative literature that does exist related to gender and online learning has often still pursued the question of if women or men prefer online learning more (e.g., Khatoon et al., 2020). There are a few key studies that are helpful for understanding interpretive research related to gender and online learning; they are explored below.

Sullivan (2002) published one of the earliest interpretive studies of gender and online learning. In this straightforward study, the author emailed 125 female students who had taken at

least one online course at his college with an invitation to reply with any comments about their experience learning online. After receiving 21 responses, Sullivan identified positive, negative, and mixed opinions related to online learning and reviewed their content with positive comments being most common. Multiple students, nine of the respondents, wrote about the value of anonymity in online learning as a means to promote honesty, decrease bias, and decrease intimidation. In the titular response, one student wrote, “it’s easier to be yourself if you’re ‘invisible’” (Sullivan, 2002, p. 139). Such a comment has significant implications for the understanding of gender performance in online learning.

Relying on autoethnography principles, Adham et al. (2018) explored the use of animated avatars in online classes within the gender-segregated culture of Saudi Arabia. While the context of this study, a virtual world-based MOOC (massive open online course) about how to create a MOOC in Saudi Arabia, is unique and potentially difficult to apply to a study of university-based online classes in a traditional learning management system, Adham et al.’s insights are intriguing. Using thematic analysis of discussion board posts and survey responses, Adham et al. found that using animated avatars rather than video eased the learning experience for both male and female students as well as female teachers. Adham et al. explained that the study was not generalizable beyond its context and that the participants’ responses themselves could only be interpreted according to their context. This article demonstrated that interpretive studies are inextricably entwined with their context.

The distinction between critical and non-critical interpretive research can be fine. Freil-
Landau and Avidov-Ungar (2022), for example, used an intersectional approach to study equity issues during the emergency remote learning for Bedouin and Jewish female preservice teachers in Israel. While their article tackled questions of racial and gender equity and provided practical

suggestions for systemic melioration, the study itself was based on grounded theory. Grounded theory, an inductive approach where theory is generated from data, is inconsistent with critical research where the theory is largely predetermined. In this study, Frei-Landau and Avidov-Ungar interviewed first-year students with no prior online learning experience about their experience with the sudden shift to remote learning with the pandemic. They found that the Bedouin women, of a community with limited financial and infrastructure resources, struggled more initially with the logistics of online learning. However, once the initial challenges were overcome, they generally valued the flexibility of online learning. The Jewish women were able to transition more easily, but they reported more difficulty with the skills required to learn online. Women from both groups spoke of the difficulty of balancing domestic responsibilities with schoolwork and of being the lowest priority amongst family members in managing who had access to the computer. Like Adham et al. (2018), Frei-Landau and Avidov-Ungar acknowledged the specificity of their study but emphasized the use of triangulation of data sources and other means to enhance the trustworthiness of the research.

One of the most relevant interpretive studies to understanding gender and online learning is also one of the earliest. Krüger (2006) used virtual ethnography to examine the construction of social identity in an e-learning environment at a university in the United Kingdom. The author conducted active participant observation in her quest to become a cultural insider. Analysis also focused on discussion board postings. Krüger examined self-motivation and learner identity with an emphasis on gender. She noted that “the success of female participants in my research may have resulted from their ability more easily to adapt to new ways of learning, while at the same time to negotiate and renegotiate their identity” (Krüger, 2006, p. 4). In contrast, she argued that “perhaps male participants need to come to terms with an innate need or particular wish to

reaffirm their ‘real-life’ identity, marked by a particular professional status and masculine objectivity” (Krüger, 2006, p. 5). While Krüger discussed identity negotiation in a way that conjures the theory of gender performativity, her study was not explicitly feminist. Feminist, or other critical perspectives, research more commonly emphasizes improvement of conditions than the descriptive nature of non-critical interpretive research.

Feminist Research on Gender and Online Higher Education

The intersection of the online learning and feminist theory literatures is sparse. It is not unusual to see gender as a focal area in online learning research, but it rarely employs an explicitly feminist theoretical framework. The results of a recent literature search highlights this. When searching the Scopus database for a combination of the terms *online learning* and *feminist* or *feminism* resulted in 24 sources ranging in date from 2002 to 2023. Within this pool of literature, only three sources were published prior to 2010. It should be noted that these three sources were all focused on areas outside of the United States (Australia, Mauritius, and Canada) (Blackmore, 2002; Gokool-Ramdoo, 2005; Kelly et al., 2006). These references were also not high in popularity. Only three of the 24 sources have been cited more than 10 times. None of the results used *curriculum* or any related term as a keyword. It is more common to see literature exploring the structure of higher education or access to education within these search parameters.

My review of the literature found similar results as published ones (Jiménez-Cortés & Aires, 2021; Koseoglu et al., 2020). Koseoglu et al. (2020) used the Scopus database and the archives of the International Women Online Journal of Distance Education to search for literature that used the keywords *women*, *female*, *gender*, *feminism*, or *feminist* in conjunction with *open and distance learning*, *online learning*, *distance learning*, *open and distance education*, *online education*, or *distance education*. This broader search identified 58 studies

published between 1988 and 2018. This literature was split close to evenly between Global North and Global South contexts and in terms of methodological orientation. Most articles did not explicitly refer to a theoretical or conceptual framework, but those that did primarily referenced feminist pedagogy. Koseoglu et al. focused on the studies related to curriculum or instructional practices, but they found the literature to also include examinations of technology, professional development, funding, law, and more. Their findings align with my own that the intersection of feminist and online learning literatures is small but continuing to expand.

The early literature that connected feminist theory and online learning research focused frequently on issues of access. Gokool-Ramdoo (2005), for example, used standpoint feminist theory to determine if online learning democratized access to education for women in Mauritius. The question of if access to education is ameliorated by online learning has not been a straightforward one to solve, and it remains a focus of the literature (Koseoglu et al., 2020). The early feminist online learning literature also focused on other structural aspects of distance education such as its connection to the privatization and commercialization of higher education and the role of faculty in its implementation (Blackmore, 2002).

As the literature slowly moved towards matters of curriculum and pedagogy, most research emerged from faculty in women's studies departments as they examined their own experience teaching women's studies online (Eudey, 2012; Weinbaum, 2016). Findings showed that teaching women's studies online had significant advantages, though one might argue that only those who found it valuable stayed long enough to publish research about it. Eudey (2012) found that her online classes were popular with students who had additional responsibilities such as work or family; this supports the idea that online learning opens participation in education. She noted that the discussions in her online classes were more meaningful and that online

learning has potential for implementing feminist pedagogy more successfully than a traditional face to face classroom. The context supports participatory learning, validation of personal experience, development of critical thinking, and minimizing the power imbalance between teacher and student which are all feminist learning goals. Weinbaum's (2016) article reinforced these findings and added other ways in which women's studies classes are more successful online. She observed that the asynchronous and non-linear nature of online learning is more inherently feminist than traditional linear pedagogy. Weinbaum emphasized the disembodiment of cyberspace that alleviates pressures and constraints on female and male students and faculty and promotes equality.

As time progressed, the literature intersecting feminist theory and online learning moved beyond the women's studies classroom. Some of this literature focused on ways to improve online teaching for women students (e.g., Dichaba, 2017). Other literature explored online learning as an opportunity for emancipatory pedagogy. Collins and Oldham (2021), Jonet and Williams (2021), and Mizzi (2021) all invoked queer theory to identify ways in which online learning can empower women and those of non-majority genders and sexual orientations. Collins and Oldham (2021) specifically drew on the idea of queer as a verb to reconsider online pedagogy. As they explained, to queer something is to challenge the societally defined normalcy of it, to question the typically unquestioned. Collins and Oldham's queering of online pedagogy is akin to Klassen's (2021) call for the development of a cyberfeminist pedagogy. Cyberfeminist theory, discussed earlier in this chapter, originated with Haraway's (1987) *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*, but its popularity has waned in the 21st century. Klassen saw cyberfeminist pedagogy as a way to use the modality of online learning to subvert hierarchies and promote feminist pedagogical principles such as collaboration, ethics of care, and activism.

Feminist Poststructural Research in Gender and Online Learning

Feminist poststructuralism explores gender-based power relations through pluralistic perspectives and without essentializing gender categories (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). One of the earliest examples of online learning research following a feminist poststructural paradigm comes from Kelly et al. (2006). This study focused on informal learning contexts of girls as they explore their gender identity. The authors conducted interviews with 16 girls in Canada, and they described their methodology as “rooted in a ‘postpositivist’ paradigm of qualitative research interviewing” (Kelly et al., 2006, p. 7). The study’s basis in poststructuralism and gender performativity theory dictated the content of questions asked; this research was entirely deductive. Through the interviews, Kelly et al. determined that the girls were practicing different gender identities when online and using the empowerment of anonymity to fight against power inequality.

In 2008, Zembylas published the results of a year-long study of emotions in online learning. Zembylas used students’ monthly journals, semi-structured interviews, email correspondence with students, and extensive field notes as sources of data. The study looked at emotions around online learning generally, but Zembylas found certain patterns specific to gender. Beyond the intense emotions experienced by all students as they navigated work, home, and school responsibilities, Zembylas found:

However, women’s emotion talk also highlighted the effects of power and societal relations; that is, how online education might have indeed provided opportunities to these women to break out of domesticity imposed on them by their other roles and the expectations attached to them; yet studying ‘at home’ had heavy emotional demands as a result of conflicts with other responsibilities. The cultural and social context in which

these women found themselves – that is, a culture embedded with conflicting values, both values of equal opportunity/gender equality and strong, old family values of mothering and heavy responsibilities for their families and children – shaped intensely their emotional experiences with online education. (Zembylas, 2008, p. 83).

In general, Zembylas relied on a poststructural framework to identify issues of power in online learning specific to the local context and recognizing the uniqueness of individual experiences.

A recent example of feminist poststructuralism in online higher education is Hurley and Al-Ali's (2021) article on the transition to online learning during Covid-19 in the Middle East. The authors did not specifically refer to poststructuralism or postmodernism; they relied on feminist postdigital inquiry. However, their argument was in full alignment with feminist poststructuralism. Drawing on the metaphor of *mashrabiyya* windows, traditional Middle Eastern carved windows that deflect light, they explored how Arab women use avatars, filters, and silence to manage their identity and learning presence. Other examples of feminist poststructuralism in action and ideas about how it can be employed are described below in sections specific to the manifestation of power, identity, and gender performativity in online higher education.

Gender and Power Research in Online Higher Education

Most explorations of the manifestation of power in online higher education contexts has been through a critical but not poststructural paradigm. Houlden and Veletsianos (2019) explained how the flexibility of online learning was assumed to be accommodating to all and even democratizing. Like other critical scholars, however, Houlden and Veletsianos found that the inequity of society persists into virtual classrooms (Aneja, 2017). Houlden and Veletsianos determined that the capacity for someone to make use of the flexibility of online learning is

steeped in power and privilege. Being able to learn anywhere at any time assumes that there is autonomy in one's daily life.

Beyond the question of access that Houlden and Veletsianos addressed, Byrne (2018) wrote of the experience of women learning online. Like how online learning was assumed to be democratizing through access, Byrne explained how it was assumed to be an educational utopia because of the lack of bodily presence. However, she found that gendered power found in traditional higher education is also experienced online through silencing and disempowering critiques. Byrne's critical lens also unveiled how literature related to online learning uses a deficit mindset to describe female students. Men's participation is assumed to be the standard, and women's participation is measured against that.

Houlden and Veletsianos (2019) also articulated the ways in which racial or ethnic identity and gender identity interact in powered ways in online higher education. They placed online learning within the broader educational system and brought attention to that system's association with settler colonialism. Critical race theory and anticolonial literature has focused on the many ways in which online higher education does not democratize access or experience for racial minorities and even enacts epistemic violence (e.g., Eijkman, 2008; de Montes et al., 2002).

As mentioned, few explorations of gendered power in online higher education have adopted a feminist poststructural lens, and this at times results in essentialist descriptions of female students. Herman and Kirkup (2017) explored how feminist pedagogy could be used to meet the unique needs of women students. Feminist pedagogy calls for consciousness-raising, collaboration, and interaction, and Herman and Kirkup sought ways to replicate this traditional approach in an online setting and make feminist pedagogy and transactional distance theory

connect. Their concern with the power structures that silence or alienate female students follows a critical standpoint rather than a poststructural one.

A feminist poststructural approach to understanding the manifestation of power in online higher education should adopt a pluralistic view of how learners experience power. There is no single way in which women, or any group of students, are disempowered. While power-laden bureaucratic and social structures may be in place for all students, how each student constructs their experience of those structures varies. The student creates their subjectivity in response to experiences of power as they learn.

Identity in Online Higher Education

Identity is a complex subject, particularly when viewed through a poststructural lens (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). The concept of identity implies a similarity and solidarity between individuals that is questioned by the pluralism of poststructuralism. However, it remains a useful analytical category and one of meaning to those experiencing it.

Identity in online higher education, from the feminist poststructural viewpoint, is socially constructed as all identity is. Öztok (2016) described identity as enacted or performed in a way that varies depending on the situation within an online learning context. Individuals display different aspects of identity for different reasons. Since identity is constructed as students participate in the online classroom, there is room in online higher education for conscious manipulation of identity. Öztok (2016), Bruestle et al. (2009) and Vander Valk (2008) drew on Turkle's concept of identity tourism (1995) and designated the online higher education classroom as a site of identity play. Bruestle et al. quoted Turkle in saying that "information technology is identity technology" (Bruestle et al., 2009, p. 2). Yoon (2021) went further to argue that technology shapes gender identity and gender identity shapes technology.

Despite the potential for online higher education to offer a site for students to play with identity, many researchers have found that students enact their offline identity when online (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Bruestle et al., 2009; Öztok, 2016; Vander Valk, 2008; Yoon, 2021). Vander Valk (2008) looked specifically at the use of immersive virtual environments in education and found that typical patterns of power in identity are even accentuated when online. Even when anonymity options are available, individuals tend to re-embody themselves when online (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008). Language, in particular, demonstrates the reenactment of traditional gender identities (Yoon, 2021).

Some researchers have explored how identity relates to silencing and othering in online higher education. Atkinson and DePalma (2008) expected to find anonymous online forums would offer more opportunity for identity expression, but they found that the lack of identity markers exacerbated issues of alienation. With no specific indications of identity, students assumed the default. Individuals identifying with traditionally disempowered identities remained silent and those of dominant identities continued to control the conversation. According to Phirangee and Malec (2017), students who experience identity incongruence with the rest of the class are less likely to participate. The silencing of certain parts of one's identity to feel more comfortable in an online classroom, and in alignment with the hegemony of the space, was referred to as *social absence* by Öztok (2020). Similar to how students reconstruct their "real life" identities when learning online, students bring their assumptions and biases that lead to the othering of students with different identities.

Understanding how identity manifests in online higher education can be illuminated through feminist poststructural perspectives. Ryu and Jeong (2019) drew on this paradigm when noting that identity is fluid and negotiable and the boundaries between contexts are becoming

increasingly blurred. They wrote that the act of learning online impacts one's identity as much as the identity impacts the learning experience. Feminist poststructuralism helps researchers see identity as not fixed and informed by historical and social contexts.

Feminist Poststructural Ethnography

Ethnography is one method used by feminist poststructural researchers to explore questions of gender. These scholars have relied on traditional ethnographic methods to collect information, but they have wrestled with the interpretive components. The traditional ethnographic method was created within a positivist ontology and presumes a knowable and explicable reality. Poststructural theorists, such as Britzman (2003), have questioned the idea that ethnography results in a narrative recreation of a culture. The act of writing ethnography is inherently subjective, intertwined with multiple realities, and in the voice of the researcher (Bolf-Beliveau, 2018). Britzman also wrote of the power of the ethnographer in deciding what matters as well as the power of the ethnography reader in interpretation. Knowledge is power, and only through describing multiple knowledges can ethnography avoid the temptation of empiricism. Britzman (2003) and Moon (2016) add that poststructural ethnography should embrace the non-linearity of experience rather than being restricted to linear expressions of time.

Gender Performativity in Online Higher Education

Butler (2006) argued that we are always *doing* gender. It is reasonable to assume that this occurs online as well as offline. As the internet became more ubiquitous, van Doorn (2011) drew on the work of Deleuze, a prominent poststructuralist, in his observation that the virtual world is an integral part of reality. As a part of reality, the internet and its virtuality are a "form of agency or potential: effectively but not formally or materially existing within the interstices of everyday life" (van Doorn, 2011, p. 533). Van Doorn saw this intertwining of the virtual and nonvirtual as

a blurring, though not erasing, of the boundary between the physical and cyber bodies.

What is unique in the online environment is the heightened opportunity to consciously manipulate that performance (Morales-Martinez et al., 2020; Turkle, 1995). Kivijärvi and Katila (2022) examined how female gamers modify their identity performance in order to attain agency in male-dominated contexts. In this instance, women use the hegemonic male discourse for their own benefit by reproducing it and then subtly making adjustments. Virtanen (2021) conducted a linguistic analysis of social media to identify performative elements. She identified how text can be used to perform action and emotion in a virtual setting. As online learning is heavily text-based, the understanding of how text can be used to perform identity virtually is helpful.

A growing number of scholars have looked at gender performativity in the context of online higher education (e.g., Bruestle et al., 2013; Gachago, 2016). As early as 2008, Vander Valk interrogated how people present their physical form in virtual learning environments. He cited surveys that found that the majority of adults recreate their everyday gender when given the opportunity to experiment online. However, the opportunity described by Turkle (1995) for identity tourism remains. Vander Valk (2008) noted that individuals use performativity to perfect, by their own standard, their preferred identity when online. He noted that this raises questions of ontology that should not be ignored when creating virtual learning environments.

Koole (2014) combined Goffman's self-presentation theory with Foucault's technologies of the self to create a Web of Identity model for understanding identity performance. She used this framework to examine the experience of learners when encountering challenges to their concept of self or sense of belonging. Koole argued that learners struggle with how to represent themselves online and how to understand others, and online learning tools and pedagogies need to support learners in this.

Even though formal online learning is rarely anonymous, researchers continue to use settings of anonymity to understand how students perform their identity whether anonymous or not. Morales-Martinez et al. (2020) explored how anonymity impacted student interaction in online learning environments. The authors argued that identity in online contexts is controlled and managed by participants. They found that the more identity was revealed, the more students were prone to nationality and gender biases.

One way to explore gender performativity online is through the lens of embodiment. Yoon (2021) challenged the notion of the virtual being gender-neutral, recalling Haraway's cyborg. Rather than see virtuality as disembodied, Yoon proposed the idea of digital flesh; "the body matters in cyberspace because it is a matter of digital flesh, rather than an object of instructional design" (Yoon, 2021, p. 589). According to Yoon, the online learning environment is embedded with the heterosexual, normative gendered embodiment process, and considerations of this must be made when planning online higher education.

The scholars referred to in this section have begun to show how Butler's concept of gender performativity persists in online higher education. However, additional research is needed to understand how learners perform gender online, the extent to which they are aware of it, and how it impacts their learning experience. The period of life spent in higher education is often one of exploration of gender identity for students, and it is intriguing to consider how that manifests in performativity online and how the online learning experience impacts students' identity construction.

Summary

Feminist poststructuralism offers a way of understanding gender that is inclusive and nuanced. While Western society has typically seen gender categories as strictly binary and

inherently linked to biology, this approach has not met the needs of all. It has propagated patriarchy where men are in positions of power over women and gender minorities do not exist. To truly support all gender oppressed people, feminism needs to push beyond women's empowerment and explore the gendered experience of all people. Gender performativity theory is an invaluable tool in this mission. Feminists generally understand that gender is a social construct, but gender performativity helps us see how that social construct happens.

Research in online learning conducted through a feminist lens is a slowly growing corpus. Feminist poststructural research is even smaller. Most concerning, Koseoglu et al. (2020) described the feminist research in online learning, and social justice research in online learning more generally, as “staying on the margins of the ODL (open and distance learning) literature” (Koseoglu et al., 2020, p. 8). At this rate of growth and this level of peripherality, it feels as if feminist online learning research will not mature for some time; this is problematic considering the rate of change in education technology tools and practice. The research described in this dissertation is one step towards centering feminist research in online learning.

Chapter 3

This chapter will explore the proposed methodology of this study in more detail. Information described in this chapter includes the research questions, research design rationale, population and sample selection procedures, sources of data and data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. Additionally, considerations of trustworthiness, credibility, and ethics will be addressed. The information presented in this chapter will set the stage for understanding the research results that will be presented in Chapter 4.

Research Questions

As stated in the introductory chapter, this study addresses the following research questions, pursued from a feminist poststructural viewpoint, to propel understanding of gender and power in online higher education:

RQ1: How do students of all genders perform gender identity in online higher education classes?

RQ2: How do students of all genders perceive gender-based power inequity in online higher education classes?

RQ3: How do students of all genders perform gender identity in order to navigate, maintain, and challenge gender-based power inequity in online higher education classes?

Research Design Rationale

Interpretive research explores the lived experience of individuals within a specific context, and this approach can help build understanding of identity performance in online courses. The online classroom is unique in social structures; it is not equivalent to traditional classrooms or informal online environments. While studying identity performance in those other contexts may offer ideas into how it occurs in online learning, a localized lens is necessary for

precise understanding.

One way to pursue questions of identity performance in online learning is through ethnographic methods, particularly critical digital ethnography. Ethnography is a method that uses participant observation, interviews, and other tools to describe and analyze a cultural organization (Wells et al., 2012). In ethnography, people are studied within their everyday context by a researcher immersed in the same setting. Critical ethnography uses the methods of traditional ethnography but interprets data through the lens of critical theory; social lives are understood to be embedded in power inequities (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Ethnography, whether critical or not, is a longstanding approach to interpretive research in the social sciences. Digital ethnography, however, is a newer phenomenon. Digital ethnography has been used as a label for many applications including the ethnography of digital environments and the use of digital tools to conduct ethnography of non-digital communities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Cleland and MacLeod (2022) defined digital ethnography as research of online practices and communications that involves humans studying other humans. The final part of that definition is meant to distinguish digital ethnography from data mining. Some scholars, such as Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) see digital ethnography as a continuation of traditional ethnography into the digital realm with few differences other than platform. Boellstorff et al. agreed and stated, “what interests us about virtual worlds is not what is extraordinary about them, but what is ordinary” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 1). However, there are fundamental differences between digital and traditional ethnography. In particular, interaction with participants is mediated by the digital environment which can influence communication (Pink et al., 2016).

Digital ethnography fills a need for a way to study our modern culture that exists both in

person and online. Cleland and MacLeod (2022) argued that ethnography must include a digital component as few aspects of society are unaffected by the online space. Higher education is not an exception to this. Even face-to-face classes have digital components; observation would not be comprehensive without examining the online environment as well. However, the use of digital ethnography in research on higher education has been minimal (Jensen et al., 2022). What research has been done has been successful in generating detailed accounts (e.g., Borkovich et al., 2021), but Jensen et al. concluded that the research has rarely made use of the full potential of ethnographic research. They criticized much digital ethnography for not being participatory. Cleland and MacLeod also explored the ethics of non-participatory observations though did not reach conclusions.

Note that both virtual ethnography and digital ethnography terms have been used, often interchangeably, to describe ethnography occurring online (Bhattacharya, 2017). In the research proposed here, digital ethnography will be used. This term highlights the online nature of the research site, but it does not conjure a virtual world as the term virtual ethnography does. Online classrooms, or other online communities, are reality-based contexts affecting and affected by the non-online world.

Population and Sample

The population of this study is education students in higher education taking online courses. Education students constitute a unique population for gender research as the field of education is female-dominated with the gender imbalance continuing to grow, however leadership positions both in K-12 schools and higher education are still male-dominated (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Kahn & Gorski, 2016). Women are the majority and yet are still disempowered.

The population was narrowed to a sample of students from two classes within the educational technology master's degree program at a four-year university in the southwest of the United States. The educational technology program students are a unique sample, because this program continues to be one of the most gender diverse programs in the college of education (third of all programs with more than twenty students enrolled in the fall of 2022) and offers all of its courses online. The courses in this program emphasize collaboration and interaction which provides a ripe environment for understanding gender performance.

Two classes in particular were studied, though students frequently spoke of their experience in other courses in the program. One of the courses, Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration, is one that students complete early in their degree program, and the other, Creating Technology Learning Environments, is typically taken at the end. This ensured the sample included both students familiar with online learning and those who were not. I reviewed material from the first course from when it was offered in the fall of 2022, and I participated in the second course in the spring of 2023. All consenting enrolled students were part of the study through their discussion board posts. Eight students served as interview subjects; some were in only one of the observed classes and some were in both. All students in both classes, regardless of gender identity, had the opportunity to volunteer for interviews.

This research was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board prior to recruiting participants (see Appendix A). After obtaining approval, I recruited participants through email (see Appendices B and C). All participants returned a secure form indicating their informed consent. The informed consent documentation for both interviews and observations can be seen in Appendices D and E. I began participant observation of Creating Technology Learning Environments at the beginning of the course term upon receiving consent from

participants and review of Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration after obtaining consent. I interviewed students throughout and after the offering of Creating Technology Learning Environments using the semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix F).

Sources of Data

I employed three primary methods of data collection: participant observation, interviews, and analysis of discussion boards. Participant observation is considered “the cornerstone of ethnography” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 65). Boellstorff et al. described participant observation as the emplacement of the researcher in the field site as a social actor. In an online class, the researcher would participate similarly to students completing course readings and participating in discussions; studying a discussion board is a form of participant observation. It should be noted that the researcher would need a sufficient level of comfort with learning management systems in order to participate fully. In virtual worlds, such as an online classroom, observation is typically in the form of reading; one must be an astute “textual listener” to make sense of the social dynamics (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 101). Additionally, Pink et al. (2016) noted that participant observation can be difficult in virtual activities that may be solitary.

Both Cleland and MacLeod (2022) and Jensen et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of participation as a digital ethnographer, rather than “lurking.” For the first course, Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration, I made observations using the class site after the conclusion of the semester. As the class was not in session, observation was static but not lurking. The study of this learning experience was more closely aligned with document analysis than live observation. Any gaps resulting from this were addressed through interviews. In the second research site, Creating Technology Learning Environments, I observed the class as it

occurred and participated as described above. Observations of the research site were captured through fieldnotes (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Delamont, 2012; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

The central method employed in this exploration of identity performance in online learning was interviewing. Interviews are important because they capture the differences between what people say and what they do, and because participants are experts of their own experience (Boellstorff et al., 2012). A variety of interview types can be used, such as open-ended or structured interviews, but the most beneficial in this context were semi-structured (Bhattacharya, 2017; Schensul, 2011). This allowed for predetermination of some questions so that the needed data was obtained but also encouraged open communication without limitations. Questions were both descriptive and probing and emphasized how participants present themselves online. The structured questions can be seen in the appendices.

The last data source was the discussion boards and other communications within the online course. Discussion board postings are the center of whole group interaction within an asynchronous online course, and they provide insights into how students communicate. Informal discussions such as ones where students introduce themselves to the class are particularly valuable. Relevant class assignments were examined as well. In *Creating Technology Learning Environments*, most assignments were shared on discussion boards, transparent to both me and classmates. This course also included a set of synchronous, videoconference-based professional development sessions hosted by groups of students. I attended those sessions participating along with the class and observers.

The duration of the study is important in ethnographic research. Many scholars, such as Bhattacharya (2017) and Boellstorff et al. (2012), have argued that ethnography takes time and should last at least a year. They aver that a culture cannot be fully known in a shorter time span.

However, in the realm of digital learning, communities do not typically persist longer than a semester. The length of the course is the maximum duration that a group of students will interact. Some students may come to class with prior experience with each other, particularly if a cohort of students takes similar coursework, but the field site of the online class is bounded by academic semesters. As such, my participation lasted as long as the class did.

Analysis Procedures

Analysis of both discussion board posts, journals, and interviews were conducted using coding methods. Codes are “labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles et al., 2020, p. 62). Berg (2003) delineated the process of coding analysis as (1) establishing categories of analysis, (2) reading the data, (3) determining codes for sorting data, (4) sorting data into codes, and (5) looking for patterns. Miles et al. (2020) described a similar process but focused on first cycle coding, where data is initially summarized, and second cycle coding, where summarized data is organized into categories or themes. I identified codes to use both deductively based on the theoretical framework (a priori codes) and inductively based on the data (Miles et al., 2020).

Once the coding was complete, I determined themes by looking at patterns. These themes are discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. During the analysis phase, I also relied on analytic memos to capture insights as they occur (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The process of generating displays and of writing narratives served as their own form of analysis in addition to generating this final product.

Ethnography is both a method and a product, and the result of ethnographic research is that ethnography (Wells et al., 2012). An ethnography serves two related purposes. One, it provides a richly detailed picture of the social actions of the community being studied as will be

shared in Chapter 4. In this instance, it includes “thick description,” as defined by Geertz (1973), of the interactions and attitudes of students and instructors in the online class. Two, it offers theoretically grounded interpretations of the meaning of events, the structures of the community, and the actions of individuals. For the research described above, interpretations included how participants perform identity in online classrooms and how that performance impacts others.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The concepts of credibility and trustworthiness in interpretive research speak to research quality (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). There are a variety of ways to approach credibility in qualitative methods. For some, member checking is considered an important step to ensuring credibility. Member checking asks study participants to review transcripts, reports, or final analyses to verify that they agree with the interpretations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Schensul, 2011). This concept is complicated, however. While there is tremendous benefit to member checking as participants may have additional background knowledge or other insights that give them unique ability to assess conclusions, participants’ contributions are not always accurate. Social action can be largely subconscious; a participant not being aware of their motives does not mean the motives do not exist. While I originally intended to conduct member checking, the participants, many of whom graduated shortly after the Creating Technology Learning Environments class, were largely unavailable.

Another way to maximize credibility is through triangulation. Triangulation refers to using multiple data sources, participants, or methods to generate conclusions. If multiple sources of information lead to the same conclusion, researchers can be confident in their interpretations. However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) argue that differences in results between sources or methods can be as important and informative. I triangulated data whenever possible, but the

subjectivity of the research made this difficult. I considered it important to honor all voices even if their views did not align with others'. While I sought patterns in the data as a means to understand the gendered experience of students learning online, I did not consider any patterns to be entirely explanatory. Every student's experience was unique and deserved to be described as such.

Ethical Considerations

Because this research involved human subjects, the proposed research was submitted to the university's institutional review board (IRB) for approval. This review served as the official arbitration of ethical research, but certain aspects require additional consideration. While the questions to be asked in interviews and other research probes were neutral, participants may have felt uncomfortable discussing their identity particularly as it related to gender and sexual orientation. As gender identity, and other identity markers such as sexuality or ethnicity, can be the basis of prejudiced behavior or speech, it is not surprising that some participants were concerned about the research. I was purposeful in being transparent about the research topics, and I spoke individually with many students about their concerns with confidentiality and consent. While this may have narrowed the sample of students that I could use in the research, I felt it ethically imperative to ensure that all participants were comfortable with their role in the research.

The ethical considerations were complicated by the online modality. Not only was the research conducted digitally (e.g., interviews using videoconference technology), but the communication being researched was also computer-mediated (e.g., discussion boards). Internet-based research faces unique ethical challenges particularly related to consent and confidentiality (Esposito, 2012). For example, online students can be situated in different international contexts

where cultural expectations related to privacy may be different.

Confidentiality and privacy are complicated when conducting research online (Kanuka & Anderson, 2007). Some researchers, such as Kanuka and Anderson, have argued that absolute privacy and confidentiality is impossible when using the internet for research. In addition to potential security breaches, research conducted through a state university which is subject to freedom of information requests can be potentially compromised (Mahon, 2014). Above all, it is imperative to communicate all risks to participants transparently particularly when researching a sensitive topic such as gender. Individuals' expectations of privacy when communicating online is different than offline, even in a formal learning context, and this must be considered (Convery & Cox, 2012).

Chapter 4

Using a feminist poststructural lens, I conducted ethnographic research to explore these research questions.

RQ1: How do students of all genders perform gender identity in online higher education classes?

RQ2: How do students of all genders perceive gender-based power in online higher education classes?

RQ3: How do students of all genders perform gender identity in order to navigate gender-based power in online higher education classes?

The findings described below provide insight into these questions in the context of online courses in the educational technology master's degree program.

General Observations

As an ethnographer, my role is to participate and observe, to become part of a culture in order to draw conclusions about its structure and the experience of those in it. That is a challenge when the culture under study is not a coherent one. Culture is a difficult term to define with little consensus (Jahoda, 2012), but most define it as a collective concept. Culture is something inherently shared between people. However, in any culture, the individual members experience their society uniquely; any one person's perception of their culture is different from others'. In a digital culture held together temporarily, such as an online learning culture, that paradox is magnified. Not only do individuals experience the culture uniquely, there is little transparency into how others experience it. One student, alone in their home, staring at a computer monitor has no intuitive sense of how their classmates are participating. In asynchronous online classes, students do not even participate in their shared culture at the same time. One student can even be

the only person actively experiencing the culture at a given moment. Yet even in their isolation, that student is contributing to the creation and maintenance of a shared culture. They do so with metaphorical blinders, creating a collective culture with only indirect observation of the others in it.

Occasionally students find their way past the blinders and engage directly with other students beyond the requirements of coursework. This happens in pairs or small groups that come together to study or socialize outside the classroom environment. It is not surprising, considering their inherent isolation, that the primary focus is typically checking to see if others experience the class or degree program in the same way. One pair who worked together frequently, Rosa and Miguel (all names throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms), even compared comments from their instructor to see if they received similar feedback. They were not concerned with fairness; they wanted to make sure that what they were experiencing was common to someone else.

What Rosa and Miguel discovered, like others who performed similar temperature checks to ensure they were not unusual in some way, was that their experiences were not significantly different. While everyone is unique, the similarities were considerable. Students tended to struggle on similar assignments, reached frustration at the same points of the semester, and felt comparable respect for their instructors. To some extent, this was surprising because of the demographic variety of students in these classes. The students in the educational technology master's degree program differed in age, gender identity, sexual orientation, economic class, religion, and race. Some students were young, only a few years away from their undergraduate experience, while others were established professionals considering retirement. Of the students I interviewed, only about half described themselves as heterosexual with the others identifying as

pansexual, asexual, lesbian, or “what they would consider straight, I guess.” They had varied family dynamics including being newly married to single to having children, and they were white, Latinx, Native American, and other races.

One area of diversity of particular interest relevant to their experience in this degree program was their educational background. All of the students were enrolled in the masters degree implying they had completed an undergraduate degree at minimum. However, what they studied, where they studied, and how they felt about it ranged. Some students, typically but not exclusively those in K-12 teaching, had successful academic careers including other masters degrees. Others had a bumpier journey to the educational technology program. Dan, an educator in emergency medical services, was unsuccessful pursuing a degree in pharmacy. Tammy completed a masters in astrophysics but left her program before completing the PhD due to a variety of factors. Natalia, now a high achiever, struggled with motivation in high school and college; she described herself as a below average student. Rosa had pursued law before moving into educational technology. She openly explained that she has always been intimidated by academics because of her status as a first-generation college student. While she found success in the educational technology program, she maintained her sense of lower status as someone without a professional background in education.

Unlike the already mentioned aspects of identity like education, sexual orientation, age, and more which are frequently invisible in the online classroom, the students in the educational technology classes wore their professional identities proudly. Introduction discussion boards centered on their current jobs and sometimes their professional aspirations. This is not surprising considering the tight interweaving of personal and professional identity amongst educators (Kamenarac, 2019). Their current roles varied between K-12 teacher, educator in emergency

medical services or fire departments, government accessibility specialist, instructional technologist, academic advisor, library worker, and more. Some were hoping to use the degree to move into an instructional design or other educational technology role, but many were planning to stay in their current career.

The aspect of identity of most interest to my research was that of gender. Every student I interviewed identified as cisgender, though some expressed some questions about that aspect of themselves. Natalia explained as follows.

I've always been female....and that question, it's because it's not a simple one, really. I mean that yeah I can go, yeah female. But oh, I've always been...like I grew up as a tomboy. I mean by my choice. You know, I was just into boy stuff, what we consider boy stuff which really isn't boy stuff which is really stupid, you know, because I like guns, I like motorcycles, like, you know, working on motors, and I still do...I ride a motorcycle now, I love it. I love cars. If I had all the money in the world, I'd have a bunch of different cars...So but you know, typical male stuff, that's me. Yeah, I love it. And so you know, it makes me kind of wonder sometimes, you know, if...but I don't have a feeling like I want to be male, or need to be male, or need to change, or anything like that.

As Natalia said, the question of gender identity is not a simple one. Outside of interviews, students did not state their gender identity explicitly, and indirect references did not reveal any transgender or nonbinary students. However, information that personal was rarely shared so it may have been hidden. From indicators like first names, occasional pronoun use, photos, or prefixes (e.g., "Mrs."), it appeared that the students in both Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration and Creating Technology Learning Environments were predominantly female at an approximate 3:1 ratio. This is unsurprising; education is heavily female and based

firmly on a feminized, heteronormative view of the teacher (Kahn & Gorski, 2016).

Despite the heterogeneous nature of these groups of students, they did experience online learning in comparable ways. As I mentioned earlier, they struggled with the same assignments and thrived in others. They created lasting relationships with classmates often choosing to work with the same individuals in group projects from class to class. While online learning can be, as many of the students described to me, an isolating and independent experience, they formed a loose consociation with a shared culture. I sought to understand that culture and explore the power structures within it.

Gender Performance

“Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the ‘essentialness’ of gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Those who espouse gender performativity, such as Judith Butler (2006), see gender as something one does rather than a state of being. Humans do gender as they interact with others or exist in the world, and the online classroom is not an exception. In the educational technology courses, I observed both explicit and implicit performances of gender.

Explicit Performativity

Other than in isolated ways, such as pronouns and names discussed below, the students in these courses rarely referred to gender or performed gender in an obvious fashion. Similarly, they rarely mentioned any aspect of identity beyond minimal references in introduction discussions. Generally, the tone and words used by students conveyed professionalism exclusively. While my own experience as a student in online courses was rife with classmates conveying emotion and speaking casually, the students in this study were generally formal when

conversing and revealed little about themselves.

To some extent, the difference in tone between the online discussions in these courses and in a typical face to face classroom could be explained by the medium. For example, this statement by Miguel in a discussion board is not unusual for a written statement but would be out of place in a face-to-face conversation.

As I grow and try to gain a better grasp of these concepts, in this case ML (machine learning) and open communication, my mind is opened to possibilities that I had not considered before with my traditional image of education. I realized how closed off I have been without even knowing it.

However, the degree of formality, particularly in the Creating Technology Learning Environments class, was striking. In the introduction discussion board, Liz wrote this message in response to Yuritizi's introduction where Yuritizi mentioned attending school in multiple countries. "Thank you for sharing so much information about yourself. Your educational history is interesting, what comparisons could you make about your experiences in each of these educational settings? I look forward to working with you again." Comments such as these could lead to authentic conversation, but they typically were met with similarly unforthcoming responses.

Another interesting example of formality in class discussions is in Rosa's use of her full name. When ending a discussion post, some students included their first name as a signature and others included no name. There is no technical reason to include one's name as the learning management system shows who authored any post. However, Rosa's closing oscillated between her first name only and her first and last names. Even when responding to Miguel, who she had worked with in a small group for multiple semesters and had developed a relationship with, she

signed her messages with her full name. While I did not observe other students using their full name, this was a striking example of formality in a classroom discussion.

For some students, the privateness and formality were a matter of professionalism. When asked about conflict between students, Rosa explained, “I think it is a professional setting where we should respect each other.” Tammy agreed that discussions were professional and reserved. She noted that she was willing to be more personal and occasionally that was reciprocated, but that conversation was less casual than in a physical classroom. Natalia also remarked on the tone of discussion, referring to it as “professional” or “superficial.” She commented that no one shared anything “in depth” and that she was satisfied with that. “(There’s) nothing that I needed to know either!” The students saw the formal tone of the discussions and valued it as a form of professionalism.

The students I spoke with rarely recalled sharing personal information, particularly about gender identity, in class. Whenever I asked if they had shared anything related to gender in their posts, including class introductions, they believed that they had not. Only one student, Jessica, recalled making a video for Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration, and she was aware that her gender identity may have been apparent in some ways there. Some students, like Jessica, recognized that they may have revealed aspects of their identity inadvertently in their messages, but most felt their communications were entirely devoid of personal information.

The sense of privacy was not limited to text-based interaction. As part of my observation of Creating Technology Learning Environments, I attended virtual presentations hosted by the students using video conferencing software (Zoom). Video conferencing software allows participants to share their webcam feed so as to replicate face-to-face interaction. In the

presentations, few participants turned their camera on. Even presenters left their cameras turned off. Only one student, Dan, kept his video on for any session as a non-presenter. When someone in a Zoom session does not turn their video on, other participants see either a black box with their name in it or their profile picture and name. Most students did not use a profile picture. Of those that did, the pictures were typically headshots showing little background. The headshots were not typically posed, other than Miguel's professional photo in his captain uniform and American flag, but they maintained a sense of formality. There are a variety of reasons that participants in a video conference would leave their video turned off; most reasons are unrelated to gender or identity. However, in this prime situation for developing personal relationships with classmates, students passed on the opportunity. The students chose to hide their identity as much as possible which is its own form of performance.

In Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration, students were asked to introduce themselves via video. The directions for the assignment required students to include their preferred name and pronouns, their profession, where they live (optional), what they wanted to accomplish in the course or program, picture(s) or videos of themselves (optional), and anything else they wished to share. The videos were short, under three minutes, and were made through a variety of technologies. Despite the directions to share a variety of things about themselves and an open and welcoming video from the professor, the videos focused mostly on students' professional identity. With lengthy explanations of their workplace, the students only occasionally shared more personal information. Claudia shared pictures of her children and information about them and her husband, Lola and Lauren shared pictures of their dogs, and Yuritizi mentioned her grandmother's upcoming 100th birthday. Even in these moments of personal disclosure, however, the tone of presentation was formal and stoic. In one of the few

moments of levity, Yuritizi described her love of cats and smiled and laughed. This stood out because of the lack of amusement in the other videos.

While the video introductions were formal and inauthentic, some students did confide emotions and vulnerability. Rosa noted that she had not been in school for a long time and would have to work to become used to being a student again. Claudia spoke of concern over her children leaving for college, and she admitted that recording herself was “terrifying.” Troy, in a worried tone of voice, spoke of the stress of being a teacher. While some students did reveal their authentic self in these moments, they did so while maintaining professional and formal mannerisms and speech. Using Goffman’s theatrical metaphor, the students were performing their role but revealing little of their characters to the audience.

Based on their conversations with me and their discussion posts about topics in online learning, the students were aware of their formality and how it hid their personality. They also recognized that they were not privy to their classmates’ authentic selves. Miguel said, “That’s the thing with online. You don’t see people as much. So when it’s the written word and the discussion board, sometimes you don’t see things that might be there that you might observe if you were in face-to-face classes.” Jessica echoed those sentiments:

No one's really easily available...like if I have a question, and I'm in person, I can ask the professor because they're right there. It feels more personal. It feels like there's more actual discussion. Some of the discussions online are very formulaic, you know. I'm answering this because I have to, because that's what the syllabus says.

Natalia expressed similar feelings about the authenticity of relationships in online learning.

They don't know me. And they don't get very much information. So all those things that I said...gender...well, gender they know. But how tall I am, really the color of my skin and

my hair. Yeah, you can see it, but not really. And sometimes we don't...most of the time we don't have the cameras on, so no one's seeing me. They don't know my weight. They don't know my height. They don't know the color of my skin or my hair. They just know my name. And they can't even go by name anymore. Because, you know, you don't know if I'm married and then if it's a Hispanic name, you really don't know, if you know...anyway, you don't know the race. So I think it...online levels things out a little more, I think...You know, as an online learner, I kind of feel like we're hidden. The learner's hidden from the instructor, and they only learn...they only know the name. And so you don't know the whole person.

While online learning research indicates that authentic connection and personalization is important for learning outcomes (Tu et al., 2021), the lack of social presence in online learning was not seen negatively by all the students. As Natalia said:

I love learning online. The uncomfortableness being in a classroom with people in the very beginning. It's like going to a party and not knowing anybody. And then, later, everybody starts to fit in, and you know, you get to know each other. Oh my God, I'm glad I didn't have to go to school in person.

Pronouns. In recent years the gendered nature of personal pronouns has become a popular topic, though the call for gender-neutral pronouns has been long standing in feminism and the LGBTQ community (Wayne, 2005). Research, along with popular culture, has demonstrated that the use of a preferred pronoun contributes significantly to the emotional well-being of nonbinary and transgender people (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2021). To honor this, many people of all genders choose to share their preferred personal pronouns to both help gender minorities feel comfortable sharing their own and to disrupt the idea that one's gender is

knowable from physical appearance, though this practice is not universally advocated for (Magolda et al., 2023).

The sharing of personal pronouns is an explicit form of gender performance. When one introduces themselves and avers that they prefer she/her/hers pronouns, they are openly declaring their status as a female-identifying person. In hopes of creating an inclusive classroom, some faculty ask students to share their pronouns when introducing themselves. Whether asked or not, some students purposefully include their pronouns in an introduction while others do not. Those who do not may be uncomfortable with the concept, may be unaware of the interest of others in pronouns, or may not think of gender identity expression as significant.

Jim described one class where the professor asked students to include their preferred pronouns in the introduction discussion board. Jim stated that he did not experience this in any other class. He described all of the responses as he/him or she/her; he clearly thought more unique pronouns would be shared. He found this practice illuminating both for getting to know his classmates and as a trend in modern communication. He was unfamiliar with the idea of announcing preferred pronouns but explained that he has observed it increasingly since this class. In other words, the request for students to share a gender identifier raised Jim's awareness of gender identity in all aspects of life.

Other students put less notice into pronoun sharing. I asked Rosa if she made her pronouns known, and she thought it was likely but did not remember specifically. She did remember some classmates sharing and noted that she tried to be particularly conscious of pronouns when students state a preference for they/them/their pronouns. In *Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration*, the professor directly asked students to include their pronouns in their introductions. Most students complied, but Rosa did not. Tammy, Jessica, and

Lola were similarly blasé about pronoun sharing. Lola explained that she shared her pronouns if asked but otherwise was likely to omit them. Miguel, a heterosexual cisgendered man, acknowledged his own shortcomings in considering pronoun sharing.

I haven't really thought much about it. I know a lot of people are using that in their...in their signatures and stuff like that. And I never have gotten into that. Again I'm old fashioned, and that wasn't really a thing that we focused too much on. But it is an area that, especially as an educator, we need to be a lot more informed and accurate with our...with our comments with people.

As explained earlier, I attended virtual sessions in the Creating Technology Learning Environments class. These occurred in Zoom, a video conferencing system. Zoom allows users to change how their name is displayed in the program, and many use this feature to add their preferred pronouns (e.g., Jill Smith, she/her/hers). In the virtual presentations, very few students made use of this feature. I included my pronouns though I was unsure if I should, considering it could impact others' behavior. Across the sessions, I only observed one student, Tammy, including pronouns in their display name. Given this opportunity for explicit gender performance, most of the students elected to not disclose their identity.

Names. Names are another opportunity for explicit gender performance (Hamilton et al., 2011). While most people use the name they were given at birth, it is common for transgender people to select a new name in alignment with their gender or one without obvious gender coding. No students disclosed to me that they used a name different from their birth name, and few students even used nicknames. Only one student, Natalia, used a nickname (Nat) that could be of ambiguous gender.

Elizabeth. While first names are more commonly associated with gender identities, last

names have their own implications. One student, Elizabeth, wrote at length in her introduction to the class about her name and its connection to her identity. She referred to her name as being “instrumental in building the identity I currently align with.” Liz is a woman in her 30s who is deeply committed to her job as a teacher and who is engaged to be married. She did not disclose her gender identity or sexual orientation, but she referred to her fiancé with masculine pronouns. Interestingly, both her fiancé and best friend have gender-neutral first names. Elizabeth explained that she uses different names in different contexts of her life. She typically uses Liz in her everyday life, though her fiancé and family call her Lizzie. In her work, she is referred to by her last name as is common with teachers. To her students, she is Ms. Campbell. “After a few years of teaching, I realized that because I rarely get to talk to anyone other than my students, it started to feel like Campbell was my whole name, nothing more, nothing less.” Her last name is closely tied to her identity as a teacher.

Liz explained in her introduction that she is set to marry her fiancé in a few months. As many engaged individuals do, she faced the idea of adopting her spouse’s last name with trepidation. In the United States, approximately 70% of women entering heterosexual marriage adopt their husband’s surname (Savage, 2020). While she did not indicate any chance that she would not change her last name, she was openly anxious about taking her husband’s last name.

In seven short months, I am marrying Drew Carr after eight years of dating and the idea of taking his last name after spending 33 years as a Campbell and aligning so much of my identity to this name has me feeling a bit anxious about legally becoming a Carr, and the potential identity crises I might face as a teacher.

The implications of Liz’s post for gender performance are significant. Stating that she will soon marry and adopt a man’s name revealed many identity markers including sexual orientation,

gender identity, and, more ambiguously, political orientation. Keeping one's name after marriage is not an absolute indicator of progressive political stances, and changing it does not directly speak to conservatism. However, those who keep their name are more likely to be politically liberal.

In discussing her name change and its impact on her identity, Liz performed gender explicitly. She also exhibited reflectiveness and openness that I did not see often in these classes. Beyond one or two congratulatory messages, Liz received few responses and none, other than my own, addressing her name change. Liz's moment of explicit gender performativity was seen by the entire class, but it was not acknowledged.

Implicit Performativity

Performance in an online learning environment is not limited to what participants say or do not say. How a student communicates is another opportunity for performance. When an actor plays a role, their character is conveyed through costume, speech patterns, choreography, and posture as much as through their spoken lines. In a learning context, a student conveys as much about who they are through their clothes, body language, and tone of voice as they do through what they say. In an online learning environment, some performance indicators are hidden behind the computer screen or the textual nature of the classroom, but other indicators are still visible. Some of these indicators are tied to gender identity.

Font. The classes that I studied were housed in the Blackboard Learn (BBLearn) learning management system. Like most learning management systems, there is a default font in the system for student and instructor writing. To change that default font requires intentional action; any font other than the default (Arial) must be chosen by the person writing a message. Yuritizi was the only student in the educational technology courses who manipulated her font regularly.

Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration was one of Yuritizi's first classes in the educational technology program. In her first message to the class, she left the default font in place. Within hours, in her subsequent posts or replies, she adjusted the font to Comic Sans. Throughout this semester, she varied her fonts between the default, Comic Sans, Arial Black, and Andale Mono and used both black and green colors. The font size varied as well from the default (10 pt) to large (14 pt). By the time Yuritizi reached the Creating Technology Learning Environments class, her font choice had stabilized; she consistently chose Comic Sans in a large size.

Fonts, both style and size, may be adjusted to accommodate problems with vision or dyslexia. However, Yuritizi's frequent changes and the use of unique fonts indicates that her choice was aesthetically driven. An in-depth analysis of typeface personality is beyond the scope of this study, but research has shown that Comic Sans, in particular, is considered to be casual and "less serious" because of its similarity to handwriting (MacKiewicz, 2005). Yuritizi's use of color also indicates playfulness. While seriousness is not equated with a particular gender identity, the students I spoke with often associated direct and nonfrivolous communication with masculinity. Whether intentional or not, Yuritizi's unusual stylistic choices were likely associated with femininity. How that was perceived by others is worth considering. Tammy brought my attention to Yuritizi's style and explained:

And there was one person in (Creating Technology Learning Environments), who used a different font in their discussion boards that I found, like, strangely off-putting. And like it...I was like I don't even know whether I would agree with anything that she says. I just...I look at the font, and I suddenly...just don't want to respond to that.

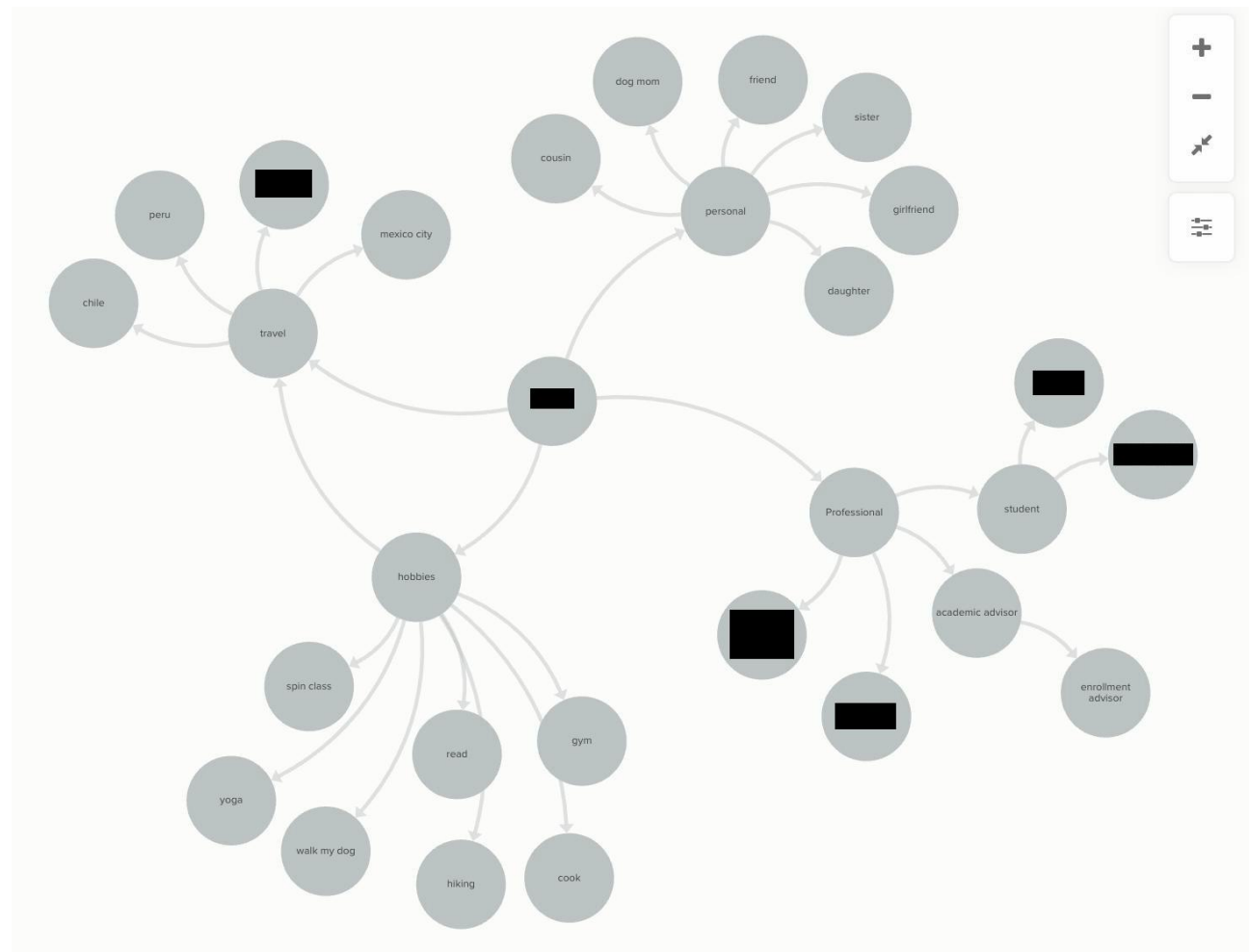
Tammy did not have an explanation for why Yuritizi's font choice was "off-putting" to her. On a

conscious level, Tammy was supportive of female students and sensitive to gender-related oppression from her own experience as a female astrophysics student. However, Yuritizi's feminine styling was discomfoting to Tammy, likely because of its unconformity and its departure from the default, masculine style.

Imagery. While asynchronous online learning is text-based, there are opportunities for imagery. When students are asked to introduce themselves, some professors require or suggest that they include photographs. In *Creating Technology Learning Environments*, the students created a "Personal Identity Chart" for their introduction which was a network map of different elements of their lives that they wished to share. The tool that they used, Kumu, allows users to use images for the nodes on maps. Some students chose to use personal photos, many chose to include logos or symbols as representations, and others omitted imagery entirely. Lola, for example, used no images or color at all. Her chart is gray and uniform throughout (see Figure 1). In contrast, Liz included a coherent color scheme and professional photos to present her personal identity (Figure 2). The large text, warm colors, and smiling photos conjured a feel of openness and welcoming. While not directly gendered, the softness of the chart features and predominance of shades of pink could be associated with femininity by those viewing it. Miguel's chart was the opposite (Figure 3). Using angular shapes and minimal connectors, Miguel's chart felt harsh in contrast to Liz's. The only picture Miguel included was himself in uniform staring seriously at children gathered around him. The chart conveyed directness, strength, and sharpness; these are traits often associated with masculinity. The stylistic choices students made serve as subtle forms of gender performativity.

Figure 1

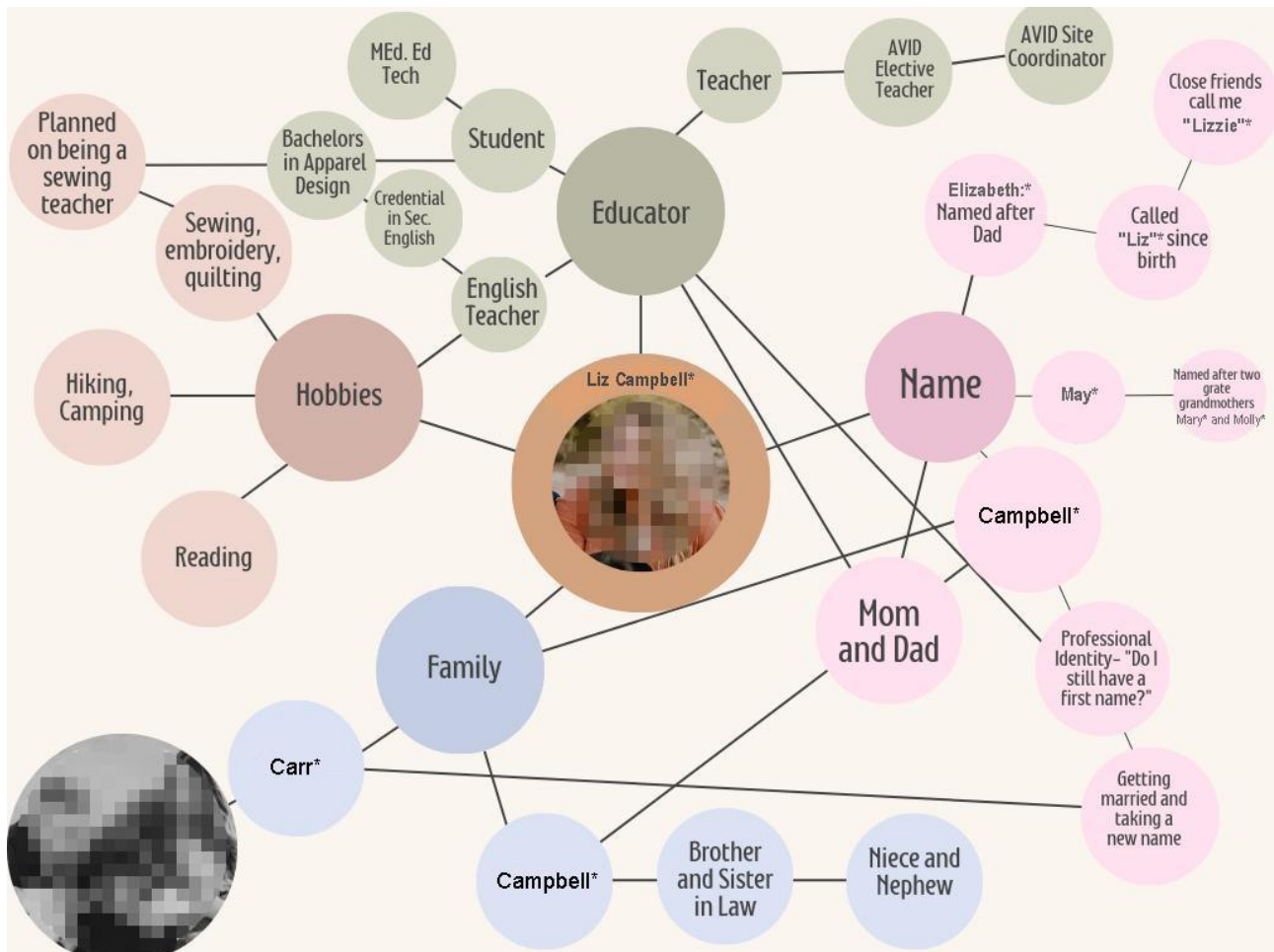
Lola's Personal Identity Chart



Note. Black boxes are used to cover personally identifying information such as names, places, and employment details.

Figure 2

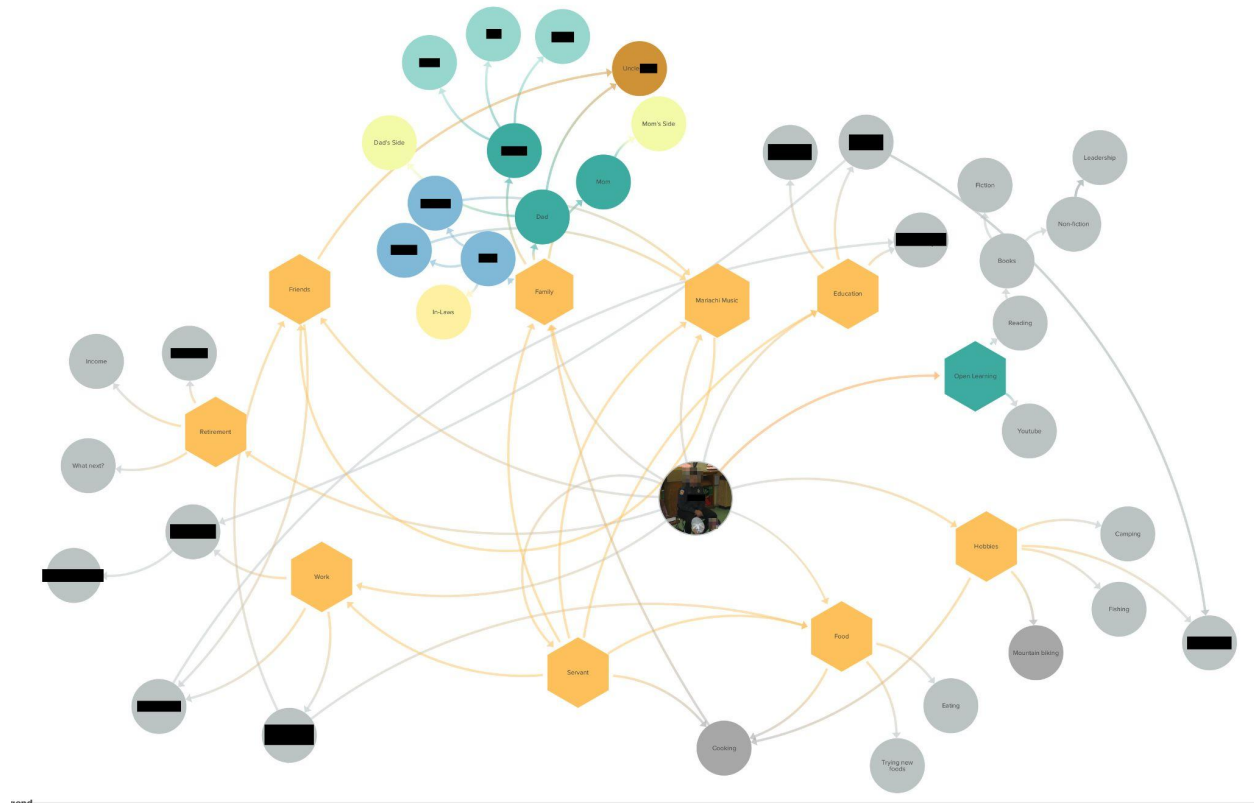
Liz's Personal Identity Chart



Note. Names have been replaced with pseudonyms as indicated by asterisks.

Figure 3

Miguel's Personal Identity Chart



Note. Black boxes are used to cover personally identifying information such as names, places, and employment details.

Natalia was the only student to include photos in her introduction that were not part of her personal identity chart. She included three photos (Figure 4), two showing her with her motorcycle and one focused on bicycling. Natalia, who identified as a lesbian female and lifelong “tomboy”, shared photos that were significant to her sense of self. In two of the photos, Natalia herself was difficult to see, but her motorcycle and interest in military history are prominent. Natalia prioritized a visual performance of gender over her own representation.

Figure 4

Photographs Shared by Natalia in the Introduction Discussion Board



In Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration, students introduced themselves over video. This was a ripe opportunity for gender performance. Gender can be performed in video in setting, how someone styles themselves, what imagery they show, and through vocal characteristics. Sociolinguists consider speech to be a prime example of gender performance, and uptalk, the raising of the voice at the end of a sentence, is considered to be a feminine pattern (Linneman, 2013). Lauren's video contained numerous examples of uptalk as her sentences conveyed the feel of questions. In her video, Lauren emphasized her professional experience and authority with her words, but her questioning tone indicated a lack of surety. In this example, Lauren's gendered performance has implications. She performed femininity in such a way that her expertise was undermined.

In her video, Rosa performed gender differently from Lauren. Rosa's video opened with a photo of her against a forest background (Figure 5). In the photo, Rosa was staring straight at the camera, not smiling, and she held her hands on her hips. Her pose was strong and defiant. Rosa is performing stereotypical masculine characteristics of aggression, strength, and directness. As explained elsewhere in this chapter, Rosa described herself as uncomfortable in

the academic setting and sometimes intimidated by male classmates and professors. In this moment of introducing herself to her classmates, Rosa performed masculinity in an attempt to take power for herself.

Figure 5

Still Frame from Rosa's Introduction Video



Other students used the video as an opportunity to perform their own gender identity rather than adopt another. Yuritizi, for example, presented herself with a high degree of femininity. Her hair and makeup was arranged so as to make her appear girlish. Troy, a male student, presented himself with stubbled facial hair emphasizing his masculinity. His background included wall posters of science fiction scenes and a lit light saber; these evoke a science fiction fandom that is typically associated with men (Midkiff, 2023). Both Yuritizi and Troy used their introduction videos as an opportunity to emphasize their gender identity while Rosa used hers to play an alternate identity.

Student Perceptions of Implicit Performance. Are the students aware of the way they perform gender or other aspects of their identity in the online classroom? Some are not, and they

told me that they communicated the same no matter who they spoke with. They also did not see any patterns in communication based on gender in others. Natalia said, “how I communicate with females and males are the same for everything.” She considered herself hidden as an online learner and felt no one could know her as a whole person when in an online classroom. Miguel also saw the lack of body language or other visible signifiers online as a mask of true identity. Sara noted that others only know what you want them to know about you, and she limited that specifically to one’s name and potentially a picture. To these students, there was no gender performativity online for themselves or others nor any other identity performance.

Other students, like Jim and Tammy, were aware that gender might impact how others conduct themselves online. By looking at the traits they associated with particular gender identities, one can see the components of performance. For Jim, women “communicate more and just have more of a presence online.” He observed that women’s posts were longer than men’s and they included more citations. He considered his own posts to fit the masculine standard, as he defined it. Did he internalize his assumption that women were more loquacious and make his writing more terse in a subconscious effort to assert his masculinity? Or did he interweave his own reticence and masculine identity and use that as the basis of his assessment of gendered communication patterns? Either is possible, but regardless his writing style was a key element of gender performativity and affirming his masculine identity.

Tammy also believed men to be more forthright and direct in writing, however she associated herself with that trait. She saw her straightforwardness as fitting into a male stereotype. While Tammy did not assign a value judgment to that, she was aware of her own gender performativity. She also tried to control her performance in online discussion boards. She was concerned about how she would be perceived for her directness.

I'm...I think, more cognizant...so the bias against women who are very direct for instance. The whole idea of like a female CEO coming off as bossy compared to a male CEO. I'm definitely cognizant of kind of that interpretation. I don't. I don't think I really rein in my thoughts, but the way that I phrase things, or how direct or circumspect I'm being about it, I think, alters slightly depending on who I'm talking to.

For example, Tammy noted that she spoke differently when talking to Miguel.

There was one classmate, who was an older male, who was perfectly polite, but I felt, I think, more of a need to be...subservient is not the right word...but like a natural inclination to like, not step authoritatively on his toes. And not for I think anything he explicitly did. Just more older male.

When I asked how she adjusted her communication to speak to Miguel or other men, she explained that she phrased more statements as questions using phrases like “do you think...” instead of “in my experience...”. For Tammy, gender performance was more about the audience than the actor. She felt less confident when speaking to older men, online or in real life, and so she adjusted her performance in anticipation of their responses. This concern over expected reactions was not unique to Tammy. Jessica also explained that she spoke differently to male classmates than females.

I feel like I am more formal when I'm emailing a male professor or a male classmate. I've worked with a lot of like male supervisors and tried, you know, it's like feeling like I have to have them take me seriously in order to have my point valid. So I definitely realize that, like my approach is more...not...assertive, I guess, not like aggressive, but very like to the point. No fluff. Like here's what I need, or here's what I'm saying. And then a little less so with female instructors or female classmates.

Jessica and Tammy took different approaches when communicating with men; Jessica became more direct and Tammy became circumspect. However, both used their communication style to influence how they would be received by men. Neither spoke of changing how they communicated for female recipients, but both adjusted their performance for a male audience. They performed for a known audience rather than for themselves.

Perceptions of Gendered Power

Insignificance of Gender in Power

As I interviewed students, there was one refrain I heard repeatedly. Gender does not matter. When I probed deeper, some students would concede that maybe gender does matter but to other people or in other contexts. Before I began this study, I worried that participants would overemphasize gender in an effort to tell me what they expected I wanted to hear. However, that was rarely true. According to the educational technology students, gender is insignificant to their learning experience and largely invisible. Gender does not contribute to power dynamics; it does not impact communication patterns. They accounted for differences in how people communicated to personality or authority instead. While that was the case for their experience in the educational technology courses, they were attuned to issues of misogyny and other forms of oppression elsewhere in their lives. Tammy, Natalia, Jessica, Miguel, and Jim all spoke of misogynistic incidents in past educational experience or their lives generally. However, they were mostly adamant about the insignificance of gender in their current classes.

Lola. Lola was one of the first students I spoke to in this research. Lola was a Hispanic, heterosexual, cisgendered woman in her 20s about halfway through her masters degree. She was a soft-spoken student who preferred to keep to herself in an academic setting. When given the opportunity, she elected to work independently on projects in Creating Technology Learning

Environments, only joining a group if required. While she did not communicate in quantity, she did well in classes earning A's without much difficulty.

More than any other student I spoke with, Lola had no sense that gender impacted her learning experience. For any question asked about the impact of gender, Lola's response was "not really" or "I don't think it had an impact." She did note that gender may have been relevant in communication patterns or group work, but she "didn't notice if it did." Lola recognized that gender might matter, but she did not observe it directly. When asked specifically if gender impacted her participation in discussion boards, she replied "I don't know if it does, I don't. I don't really know. I've never thought about that. I don't think it does. Or if it does, I really don't know how." Lola's unawareness of gender was not surprising as she approached interaction in class as a means to an end rather than part of the learning experience. She met all requirements, but her level of social presence and her statements about her classmates did not indicate that she saw her classmates as relevant to her experience. When I asked about how she selected groups to work in, she described choosing groups randomly because "I don't really know these people." Lola's distancing of herself from her classmates led to her blindness to gender, or other aspects of identity.

Rosa & Miguel. Rosa and Miguel were two students in Creating Technology Learning Environments who worked together frequently. They had been partners in a previous class together, and they chose to stick together in this class. Other than sharing Hispanic heritage, the two did not have much in common. Miguel was approximately two decades older than Rosa; he had a lengthy professional career in education and the fire department and was now approaching retirement. While Miguel spoke frequently of his two daughters, Rosa was more likely to speak about her parents and their impact on her. Both intimated that they were intimidated by the

academic environment at times. For Rosa, this was due to being a first-generation college student. For Miguel, the time lapse between his undergraduate studies and this program made him feel old fashioned. Despite their differences, which included gender, this pair formed a strong working relationship. While their bond did not stretch beyond course boundaries, they did confide in each other about academic concerns.

Considering their close working relationship, I was curious to see if their perceptions of their small group and how gender impacted it were consistent. As was common in interviews, both Miguel and Rosa deemphasized gender as a dominant concern. However, Rosa was more aware of gender-based differences and how gender impacted their dynamic.

Miguel's approach to gender inequality was reminiscent of colorblind racism. Those who demonstrate colorblind racism "don't see race" or consider themselves not racist because they consider all people to be the same (Doane, 2017). However, ignoring the race of individuals also turns a blind eye to systemic racism and other ways that those of oppressed races struggle in society. Miguel's beliefs about gender echoed this concept.

But I wouldn't say...trying to think back to all the different instructors I've had. I mean, I've had excellent instructors that were both male and female, so I don't really...it's not something I think about when when I see who my instructor is, you know it's not something (where) I gravitate to this class because if you have a choice between multiple instructors I'm going to pick one that's only because it's a male or female. Yeah, no, I really don't think in terms of that.

Miguel, like Lola, frequently repeated that gender was insignificant at least to the extent of his awareness. While he considered that there may have been undercurrents that he was unaware of, Miguel assumed that his experience was similar to most students.

I would think at least I'd like to think that my answers are pretty much in line with what most people would say. I know that's probably not the case all the time. But I would think the vast majority of students in this day and age in higher education would be more, you know, open to either gender.

Rosa was attuned to the idea that one's identity impacted their experience in a classroom. She drew frequently on her undergraduate experience in political science courses where sensitive topics were often discussed and noted occasional discomfort for herself or others. However, she did not think that gender mattered much in the educational technology courses because the subject of discussion was not gender-relevant. She also did not think gender or other identity aspects played much of a role because of the small class size. While small groups can still demonstrate inequity, the high requirements for participation, particularly in Creating Technology Learning Environments, did lead to a sense of pervasive communication; there was no opportunity to avoid individuals for any reason.

While Rosa did not see gendered or any other forms of power at play in the educational technology courses, she was conscious of how identity impacted one's experience in online learning. When I asked if she would recommend online learning more or less to someone based on their identity, she thoughtfully responded.

...there are a lot of individuals depending on either what could be their sexual orientation, maybe their sex, or even their ethnicity, who feel more comfortable behind a screen really. Because it...maybe you won't suffer as much racism as you would if you went to in person classes or sexism, or whatever it may be, right?

It was apparent that Rosa's confidence had grown throughout the educational technology program. She spoke of her discomfort with academic environments particularly in her political

science major and alluded to concerns at the onset of this degree, but she clearly had developed a sense of trust in her ability to navigate the classroom and succeed academically. She explained that in the past, she would “unless absolutely necessary” only communicate with other female students whether in conversation or in group projects. “I don’t want to say I was scared, but I was intimidated by those other male students,” she confessed. She attributed her progress in this area to her work with male students particularly Miguel.

While I was not privy to their one-on-one interactions, both Rosa and Miguel emphasized how strong their working relationship was. They commiserated over frustrations or workload and shared their wins. As I described earlier, Rosa and Miguel compared feedback from the instructor to see if they were on track for success. The similarity they found in the types of feedback they received made them feel safe, and both spoke of this similarity when noting that their instructor held no gender-based bias. As to how they worked together, Miguel saw no influence of gender at all and found everything to be egalitarian. Rosa’s perspective was more nuanced. She observed that early in their relationship, she assumed that she would need to be the organizer. She would have to set meetings up and ensure they were making progress. She assumed her male partner would do his part but that she would have to nurture the relationship. She slowly realized that “we’re all adults, and we can all take part in what needs to be done.” She stepped back from that role and their partnership remained successful. While she did not expect to have additional classes with Miguel, she did acknowledge that she would be more likely to work with men in the future. Not only did she not have to take the bulk of the responsibility, she found, “I can hold my end.” While Miguel enjoyed his working relationship with Rosa, it did not impact him as significantly as it did Rosa. At the onset, though he may have been unaware, he was in a position of power over Rosa. With time, she reclaimed her power

which altered her approach to education going forward.

Rosa revealed the most about gender influencing her learning experience, but at first response she also dismissed gender's importance. None of the other students I spoke with saw gender as significant, and they were largely unaware of or unconcerned with matters of equity or power as it related to their own education. However, they did acknowledge that it might be influential for others.

Gender Matters...To Other People

One question that I asked in all interviews was about how they decided who to respond to in an online discussion board. The diversity of answers surprised me. Like any other opportunity for communication, individuals approach the task in their own way, and that process often reveals their priorities. Some students responded to posts that they saw first regardless of who wrote them or what they were about; these students were fulfilling a course requirement only. Others reviewed many posts and chose to respond to those that they could most easily find a way to respond to. These students avoided lengthy or intellectually challenging posts in favor of simpler ones. Some spoke of taking this approach to save time, but others admitted to not wanting to appear intellectually inadequate. Other students, such as Jim, purposefully looked for posts that had not received any responses already. These students are concerned about others' success and the success of the discussion in general. This likely derived from their professional identity as a teacher. Of all the people I interviewed, only Rosa indicated ever responding specifically based on gender identity. Natalia and Jim alluded to feeling more comfortable responding to those of their own gender, but they did not see this as a driving force in their decisions.

While the students did not think they based their own discussion board decisions on

gender, they were confident that others did. Sara, Natalia, Rosa, and Tammy all referenced men responding more to men and women to women. None of them asserted this as a fact; they described it as a feeling or general hunch. My own observations of Creating Technology Learning Environments had similar results. While it could be explained away by personalities or common interests, there was a general feeling of men responding more to men and women to women. When I examined this more closely, it became clear that there were two loosely aligned groups frequently responding to each other. While there were no absolute gender divides to this, one group of common cross-respondants was more male and the other female. The “male” group included Miguel, Tammy, and other male participants in the class. Tammy’s inclusion in this group was unsurprising considering her background in more male-dominated fields. This group was prominent in discussion and typically elevated conversation to more philosophical topics. The “female” group was more diverse in gender composition, and it felt more perfunctory. These posts were made to meet course requirements; the first group’s posts engaged more deeply with the topics. The small class size and high participation requirements meant that all students engaged with each other frequently, but the pattern of the two groups emerged in every discussion.

Sara & Jim. Prior to the launch of the Creating Technology Learning Environments class, I interviewed two students who had taken the educational technology courses recently. Because of their progress through the program, they were not in classes with the other participants of my study other than each other. Sara and Jim both described gender as something that impacts others but not themselves.

Sara was a cisgender, white woman in her 20s. She was approximately halfway through coursework for her masters degree in educational technology, and she was an elementary school

teacher. Through the course of the interview, Sara explained that her own communications and interactions in online classes are not heavily shaped by gender, but she was aware that this is untrue for others. Rather than focus on gender, Sara believed that she connected to other students based on common interests and professional identity.

Sara saw herself as outside of the gender dynamics present in online classes. When I asked about interactions with her male professor, she noted that she feels comfortable with him but she did not think other female students would agree. She did not consider the professor excessively authoritative, but she framed his expertise as intimidating to female students. She referred to the relative ease with which male instructors and male students typically communicate due to their shared identity. However, Sara did not consider herself as subject to the same dynamic; she repeatedly stressed her comfort with male instructors and students.

Additionally, she declared a sometimes preference for working with male peers because of their shared task-oriented nature and direct communication styles. She did note that she communicates differently with male peers because of the need to demonstrate evidence of expertise related to the subject. With female peers, Sara could speak with less thought and calculation because of their “sensitivity.” With male peers, she felt she must prove her points. Regardless, Sara preferred working with male peers largely due to reduced family commitments. She expressed frustration with students, typically women by her estimation, who balanced classwork with family obligations. It is interesting to note that she did not see the balance between work and school as an issue in the same way as the balance with parenting. Sara did not describe this as a gender issue, but the linking of family obligations with women and work obligations with men is culturally inescapable.

Jim was a cisgender, white male student who had recently completed his master’s degree

in educational technology. He was in his 30s and spent the beginning of his adult life as a special education teacher. He described himself as a friendly class participant who tried to get along with everyone though he referred to himself as shy. Jim worked in small groups with male and female students and seemed at ease with both. He described himself as more comfortable communicating with men, but his open speech indicates little difficulty talking to anyone including myself. He did observe differences in communication and work styles between male and female students. Jim described male students as direct and simple. When writing a discussion board post, “(men) just send it.” By contrast, Jim saw the female students as more loquacious and that they “have more of a presence online.” The female students expanded on their ideas and made connections between topics. He observed that female students are more likely to use a variety of sources as evidence. Jim also described women as more task-oriented and the drivers of group work. While he and other male group members may get distracted, they relied on their female group members to ensure that the work was completed.

Interviewing both Jim and Sara early in my research led to interesting comparisons. Both had insightful observations regarding online learning and student gender. However, their insights were different and even opposite at times. Both participants made generalizations about women or men. For example, Sara saw men as more task-oriented and productive, while Jim used similar words to describe women. Sara’s generalizations were more in line with societal stereotypes; Jim’s assumptions were often counter to cultural norms. This may reflect his experience as a lone male teacher in a school of women. It also may indicate that Sara, as a woman, had internalized archetypes defined by society.

When discussing interactions between students and instructors, Jim saw no impact of gender on these interactions in his graduate school career. Sara did recognize a gendered power

dynamic, though she considered herself outside of it. Both saw gendered power dynamics between students and instructors as something that happened elsewhere with other people. Though not asked specifically about providing evidence in discussion posts, both Sara and Jim noted that female students use more evidence and sources when making a point. Sara saw this as a peremptory response to any challenge that may come from a dominant classmate. She explained in the following.

I feel like with a male I have to kind of assert more dominance on my end, if that makes sense, to make sure, saying why my reasoning or what evidence supports the way I'm thinking in that kind of way.

Jim agreed with this sentiment.

The women in the groups do tend to expand more on their ideas and connect it to other things. I'll just kind of be like x, y, z, all right, good and go on to the next thing. And they'll be pulling from different sources and all that good stuff.

Unlike Sara, Jim did not have an explanation for this difference. To him, providing documentation of reasoning was an inherent trait of women. To her, it served as a defense against patriarchal power.

Stereotypes

Gender stereotyping, holding a predetermined and oversimplified expectation of a person based on their gender, is both problematic and inevitable. Stereotypes rely on categorization of people into discrete groups which dismisses the idea of a gender continuum, and they often render invisible those who do not fit expectations (Ellemers, 2018). As such, stereotypes perpetuate inequality limiting the power of those assumed to be inferior. However, stereotypes help us make sense of the world by limiting the cognitive overload of seeing every new person

with no preconceptions (Ellemers, 2018). It is not surprising that gender stereotypes would be unearthed in my conversations with students.

At times, students were quick to point out that others may hold certain gender stereotypes, but they did not believe them. Like other questions of gender, stereotyping was something that others might do, but they considered themselves above such matters. What was particularly surprising was the types of gender stereotypes they mentioned. My own positionality of being typically surrounded by other liberal, reflective individuals led me to assume that current gender stereotypes were nuanced or subtle. I expected stereotypes like women are more nurturing than men or men are more confident. However, the stereotypes described by students like Natalia or Miguel were broader and blatant. “Males are supposed to be smarter, whatever. You know this whole thing. I don’t even know why we think that still.” In this statement, Natalia expressed an understanding that women are believed to be intellectually inferior. Miguel described similar stereotypes:

That stigma of, you know the old way of thinking that you read about, that you know women just their way of thinking is not...does not lend itself to math and science and higher level thinking...we know that to be false. We know that’s not true.

Neither Natalia nor Miguel agreed with the stereotypes they described, but they saw them as widely held.

It should be understood that Natalia and Miguel were two of the oldest students in the educational technology program. Natalia was 61, and Miguel was 48. Miguel also may have been influenced by his career working in a fire department. He spoke openly about the gender inequality in his workplace; he may have been more frequently exposed to prejudiced opinions about gender. However younger participants in other contexts still spoke of stereotypes. For

example, Tammy spoke of the belief that the same behavior is considered confident in a man but bossy in a woman.

Despite most students proclaiming themselves to be immune to gender stereotyping, certain assumptions showed. Sara, for example, explained that “you have to be patient” when working in a group with a woman who has children because they are not in the same “work kind of mentality.” Jessica described male classmates as less communicative and shared an assumption that male students would tend to overshadow others with their expertise. A variety of students referenced typical “guy stuff” like motorcycles, sports, military, rock-climbing, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, or hard sciences. Even when using them as examples of women defying expectations, the listing of these as masculine interests is inherently stereotyping.

Instructors

The most obvious power structure in any class is the teacher’s authority over students (Schwartz, 2023). Regardless of, though inherently complicated by, personal identity, teachers hold power over students as they dictate the terms of the class. Even when classes are run more democratically, they are operated as such by decision of faculty. Students do not have the agency to mandate their own say in class structure. When that hierarchy is interwoven with the status quo of most education students being women, there is potential for significant inequity and power imbalance.

Despite that expectation, no students confided in me about equity or power concerns with instructors. Some spoke of professors from other programs as potentially problematic, but they were adamant that gender-based power was not at play in their educational technology courses. There are a few potential explanations for this. One, the educational technology faculty is small, so there are not enough faculty of different genders to reveal a pattern. This aligns with the

common assertion from students that any inconsistency between professors was likely due to personality differences rather than gender. Two, the students that I spoke with were all aware of my own connection to the educational technology faculty and that the faculty we were discussing served as my advisors. Despite my promise of confidentiality and anonymity, it is likely that students were cautious of being critical of faculty in front of me. Another possible reason for an unawareness of power is the isolated nature of online learning. Jim, when I asked if gender impacted his interactions with his professors, explained, “I think it might be hard to realize if my gender has impacted it because I don't see the interactions the teacher has with the other students as much either.” Except when students directly compare faculty interactions with each other, like Rosa and Miguel did, they do not have grounds for comparison. Last, a possible explanation is that there truly was no gender-based power imbalance in the educational technology courses.

My own observations agreed that the faculty of these courses treated students similarly no matter their gender. The amount and tone of feedback was consistent no matter the gender of students. However, there were subtle indications that students saw their instructors differently based on gender. First, students were more eager to share gender-related concerns about instructors from other programs. Tammy was forthcoming, both to me and other students, about the struggles she had as a female student in a physics program. She noted that all of the students who, like her, left the program before finishing their doctorate were either women or gay men, and she associated that with faculty and program-level inequity. Jim alluded to preferential treatment that he received in high school and undergraduate programs because he was male.

While none of the students I spoke to thought they interacted with instructors differently because of gender, they did assign this to others. Lola, who was quick to dismiss gender as an influence in any communication, noted that “maybe people feel a little intimidated if...the

professor is a man. They might be direct. Maybe the woman might feel a little intimidated going to them for help or talking to them.” Sara recalled that she often took responsibility for asking questions of the professor because other female students might be nervous to do so. Rosa was the only person who admitted to being intimidated by male professors, but she confined that admission to when she was younger. In some interviews, students observed that male students were more likely to communicate with male faculty than female students were, and they included discussion boards as evidence to that. However, in reviewing discussion boards, I found that not to be true. While there is no clear evidence that male students respond to professors more in discussions, it was a belief held by both male and female students. Comfort in interaction implies a decreased power gap. While male students did not exercise this privilege, its perception is still an inequity.

Gender Performance as a Manipulation of Power

Gender performance is not a neutral act. As people perform gender identity, they are manipulating the ways they are perceived by others which disrupts the preexisting dynamics of an environment. As power pervades learning environments, students’ gender performance alters the systems of power. The students whom I observed in the educational technology program adopted behaviors, whether consciously or not, that modified their gender performance hence disrupting systems of power.

Safety

As I spoke to students, it became apparent that they were concerned with safety. With far more frequency than I expected, the students talked about unease over safety and privacy matters. Some comments about safety occurred in the course of class discussions; this was not out of place as the classes focused on the role of technology in learning including the use of data.

Tammy's safety concern centered on data privacy and vulnerability. She described discomfort with her personal data being accessed by large companies without her explicit consent, and she extended that concern to others. Dan and Liz both expressed concerns with "the dangers of social media" and that "the internet is not always a safe place." These worries were centered on the possibility of predatory behavior online, especially targeting children. Rosa shared her fear of such behavior with me when describing her social media use. She explained that she purposefully used a different tone when online to protect herself:

I do feel that I might come off as a little bit stronger individual...like don't mess with me. Just because there's...I've been on social media, since, like I was like in sixth grade, right? So there's definitely been uncomfortable conversations on social media, or even individuals who may not...might not have been, or should have been, contacting you and stuff like that. So avoiding those kinds of situations. So I've kind of kept up that persona throughout the years throughout like since I started middle school and high school and college and stuff like that, to kind of avoid people who were trying to contact me who have no reason to contact me.

Rosa was purposefully performing an assertive character when communicating online in order to mitigate her lack of power and risks to her safety. While she did not describe this online persona in gender terms, her adoption of traits like toughness, strength, and terseness speaks to using stereotypically masculine characteristics to disrupt a system where she lacked power. This is reminiscent of her pose in her introductory video in the Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration class (see Figure 5).

When conducting interviews, I asked students if they would recommend online learning to others and if that recommendation would change based on someone's identity. All of the

interviewees recommended online learning to some extent, and many focused on academic identities to predict others' success. They felt that online learners needed to be focused, goal-oriented, self-motivated, and technologically-savvy if they were to succeed. However, Rosa and Jessica approached my question from a safety perspective related to personal identities. Rosa said:

Honestly there are a lot of individuals depending on either what could be their sexual orientation, maybe their sex, or even their ethnicity, who feel more comfortable behind a screen really. Because it...maybe you won't suffer as much racism as you would if you went to in person classes or sexism, or whatever it may be, right? I'm not saying that that should deter anyone. Right? That's a different story. But it could be. I think it could be.

While Rosa emphasized the possible safety of anonymity, Jessica emphasized the dangers to some people in learning in person:

I don't know if I would recommend online or in person based on identity. I guess it depends too, like...which school you're trying to attend. I'm thinking about a lot of the trans laws that are being passed right now, and so like...you know. I have students who identify as trans, and you know they'll talk to me about being freaked out, and they're in seventh grade. So like, you know, they're worried about coming to school, using the right bathrooms or the "right" bathrooms, but using the bathrooms like which one's in school compliance, which one you know with my gender. So like I see how difficult that is for them. And so, if, I guess, if there's a situation where, like the school that you are set to attend is in person but is in an area that is leaving you open to more vulnerability and danger in that regard than I would recommend online. But that's so...that's such a shitty alternative, like, you know, like, oh, you don't feel safe. Stay in your house and learn.

Like that sucks. It's so bad...Or even to like think about evening classes, I guess. So I used to bike home and take the light rail home from campus at like 11:30 at night, and it was scary. I wouldn't do it now. I had some sense of like 21 year old bravery back then. That was dumb, and I was absolutely stupid. I would take my bike and like, go to the alleyways like I'm on a roll. I would never do that now...There's scary situations, and so you know I guess also, if the class that you're set to take is super late at night, and, like you don't have a car, or you, like the transportation is on foot or on public transport, and it's just easier and safer. And you're a woman. Or if you're vulnerable, like someone who's in like a vulnerable population, then probably yes, online would be better for you.

Both Rosa and Jessica saw online learning as a possible safe haven for people who faced persecution in their daily lives. Is this because online learners are, as Natalia said, “hidden” from instructors and classmates? Or is it because there is opportunity online for manipulating one’s performance so as to portray a non-oppressed identity? It is likely a result of both the potential for invisibility and the opportunity for identity manipulation, plus the impossibility of physical harm, that makes the online classroom a respite for people of oppressed identities.

Responsibility for Others

In social constructivist or connectivist learning environments, students play an active role in both their learning and others’ (Siemens, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). The faculty whose classes I observed designed their classes to draw on these principles. Creating Technology Learning Environments, in particular, uses group work, network learning sessions, and omnipresent discussion boards to encourage the collaborative construction of knowledge. In light of this, it is not surprising to find that the students developed a sense of responsibility for each other’s learning. However, the extent of this phenomenon surprised me and has implications for gender

performativity.

Throughout the classes, I observed numerous instances of students taking responsibility for another's learning. Jim described his approach to discussion boards and explained that he purposefully chose to respond to students who had not received many responses:

I think there are a couple people that like usually have some pretty good ideas that I like to read about and so I'll look at theirs, but don't always respond to them kind of because a lot of them do already have like five responses...We got enough.

His phrase, "we got enough," showed how he felt his participation was pivotal in creating a strong learning community. Similarly, Sara and Tammy both claimed responsibility for others by offering to email the professor for students who were less comfortable with the task. Dan and Yuritizi took responsibility for others' learning beyond the classroom; they both expressed wanting to be helpful to colleagues to spur their development.

On the surface, the helpfulness of students to each other may be a simple byproduct of collegiality and a social constructivist environment. Alternatively, Sara described responding to a diversity of other students as a means to please her instructor because he "really enforces the community aspect and the community feel." Another possibility is that teachers do not stop being teachers when they become students; helping others to learn is natural to them. However, the students helped each other even if it became burdensome, and their caretaking took on a maternal tone. When describing her expectations for small group dynamics, Rosa explained, "I was like the mom of the group, right? So I'm constantly like, let's get this done." Jim also saw women in small groups as the one responsible for work being completed. "Women seem to take charge a little bit quicker to get things done...I feel like me and the other guy were a little bit more laid back...but our female groupmate was like, no we gotta work." Whether intentional or

not, female students often fell into the mothering role while male students were recipients of the care.

Tammy. Tammy was a white, asexual, cisgendered woman in her early 30s married to a man. She identified as female but noted that her gender was not a significant part of her identity. She described herself as an overachiever to the point of “a compulsive inability to know when to stop,” and her actions reinforced that statement. As I described earlier, she took a circuitous route to educational technology. She was earlier a graduate student in astrophysics but declined to complete the doctoral program after earning her master’s degree. She partly associated this change with the lack of support in her field for those who were not cisgendered, heterosexual men. Following that, she became a teacher at a charter school, but she left because of “a mismatch of values...one of which being me, I value me.” She currently worked in a public library but had aspirations of teaching at a community college upon graduation.

Tammy was a prominent member of her educational technology classes. She was prolific in discussions, and her classmates frequently turned to her for help. Tammy proactively assisted others, not out of an urge towards leadership, but out of a concern for those less capable. If someone missed a group sign-up opportunity or was confused about an assignment, she helped. When starting Creating Technology Learning Environments, Tammy found the course format confusing, so she spent multiple days copying and pasting all of the content, assignments, and directions into an alternative program, Evernote, so that she would not miss anything. According to Tammy, some students asked her for “her version” of the course because of their own confusion. While I was not privy to those interactions, it was apparent that Tammy shared her reformatting of the course with other students without being asked.

Tammy’s efforts were not ignored by her classmates. When describing small group

activity, Natalia said about Tammy, “She's a go-getter, you could tell. She was like bam, bam, bam and if you didn't do it she would do it. So I think she's the person that takes up the slack, and that's me, too.” Natalia elaborated that:

She organized, I guess. Somebody's taking the the reins and organizing how we're gonna do something, you know, and working with us, you know, with input, of course, and most of us are happy to let somebody go ahead and take the reins and go, okay, let's do it this way, you know, and then you can go, no, I don't want to do it that way.

Miguel responded directly to Tammy in a discussion post:

Thank you Tammy! Your response provides a lot of insight about the type of person you are, extremely methodical and detailed in your thinking. I'm not surprised at all based on the substance and depth of your posts. Personally I really appreciate what you add to the courses!

Miguel and Natalia frequently showed their appreciation for Tammy with comments in discussion boards; they found her to be pivotal in their own learning.

Tammy's work on behalf of others came partly out of concern about the quality of learning in her classes. She described one class, outside of the educational technology program, where the instructor “didn't teach their class very well...from a purely pedagogical standpoint of someone who's been teaching for ten years, like, it was pretty awful.” While she was less judgmental, at least when speaking to me, of the educational technology faculty, she did have concerns with the Creating Technology Learning Environments instructor's course design. Not only did she reorganize the course into Evernote, but she also posted on an early discussion board:

I look forward to our first discussion this session. I just wanted to leave some quick

feedback. I appreciate that you have listed the readings and discussion questions directly in the discussion board (as above). I find this format much easier for tracking assignments and ensuring that I understand the requirements. Thank you!

While Tammy's efforts may have derived from her concern over pedagogical quality or sympathy for those less capable of thriving in the learning environment, she played the archetype of female as caretaker. In Western society, women have been seen as the caretakers of others as exemplified in their roles as mothers, nurses, and teachers (Mijares, 2021; Tuna et al., 2023). Tammy did not take on a simple female caretaker archetype; she specifically embodied the concept of the 'mama bear.' The 'mama bear' archetype is one of caretaking with aggression conjuring the protectiveness of maternal bears (Feldman, 2021). When Tammy cared for her classmates, it was done in a tone of defiance and righteous indignation. She helped her classmates because she wanted to protect them from the risk of a confusing assignment or a missed opportunity. Tammy's approach to the learning environment, no matter the motivation, served as a means for performing a specific type of femininity, that of aggressive nurturing.

Tammy's past experience in a physics graduate program was one of disenfranchisement and lacking power. She attributed her leaving the field to both a problem accessing appropriate data for her preferred area of study and the lack of support for female students. She could not overcome the challenges in her way, both gender-based and logistical. When in a graduate program in education, Tammy was not disempowered in the same way. However, as a means of compensation, she performed femininity, as described above, in order to claim power. It was effective; her classmates saw her as a leader and an indispensable part of their own education. Her gender performance secured her power.

Miguel. As described earlier, Miguel was a Hispanic, cisgendered, heterosexual man in his late 40s. With a polite and pleasant demeanor, Miguel was eager to please his professors and classmates and be successful in his graduate program. While his ethnicity was one oppressed in American society, he was otherwise privileged. This status was not overlooked by his classmates. As described earlier in this chapter, Tammy referred to Miguel as “perfectly polite” but felt a “natural inclination to like, not step authoritatively on his toes.”

While Miguel did not speak directly of his privilege to me or in class, he showed awareness of it. While his perspective on gender was sometimes dated (see section on stereotypes), he spoke earnestly of a need for gender equality. He chose to focus one assignment on increasing the representation of women in sciences. In the overview of that assignment, Miguel wrote, “Being a father of two daughters, I see the underrepresentation of females in many STEM-related fields. I want them, and other interested and talented females, to consider these fields as options at a higher rate than they are now.” He lovingly spoke to me often of his daughters; he clearly wished them to be as successful in life as possible. He also spoke of the evolution of gender dynamics in his professional environment. Being in emergency services, most of his coworkers were male. However, women were becoming more common in the field which led to conflict and resentment from both men and women. While Miguel largely omitted his own identity from those conversations, he clearly wanted to be a champion for gender equity.

Miguel’s approach to the collaborative learning environment was different from Tammy’s. While he was willing to help anyone who needed assistance, he was far more likely to be the one receiving help from others. “Am I on the right track?” was a common comment in Miguel’s discussion board posts. In a discussion board post to Rosa, Miguel wrote:

I am behind the curve so to speak when it comes to social media literacy and am learning.

How would you describe the academic and learning benefits of social media platforms to one of those stubborn people, like I was, and to convince them to consider using social media in order to grow our social network?

His frequent openness to assistance was complemented by his appreciation of his classmates. Miguel did not hesitate to thank others for their role in his learning often in effusive ways. He wrote to Tammy in one post:

I am always excited to see what you present to us! This journey you have been on has been complex and I imagine has provided you with an immense amount of knowledge and wisdom from your experiences. You provided an excellent example of how to build an amazing model of a (assignment). I love the interactive version that allows us to easily see the connections. I learned a lot from your model and have a much better idea of how to improve my design.

Miguel's eagerness to receive assistance from others seemed counter to his privileged gender identity. Research in a variety of disciplines has shown that masculinity in Western society is frequently associated with strength, capability, and infallibility (Staiger et al., 2020). That association also fuels the concept of *machismo*, the stereotype of Latino men as hyper-masculine and dominant over other genders (Walters & Valenzuela, 2020). With Miguel's intersectional identity as a Hispanic man, it would be unsurprising for him to be assertive and dominating in class. However, his awareness of gender inequality led him to deemphasize his masculinity to lessen his position of power. His willingness to show weakness in front of his classmates, performing a decreased form of masculinity, decreased his privilege.

Conclusion

In the next chapter, I will synthesize these findings further in the context of the research

questions. The observations of and conversations with the educational technology students offered me insight into how they performed gender, how they perceived gender-based power, and how they used gender performance to navigate power structures. While students were largely unconcerned with gender as it pertained to themselves, they were aware of its impact on others' learning experience. Their surface level disregard for gender was undermined by their actions and assessment of others.

Chapter 5

Throughout this dissertation, I have focused on the following research questions in hopes of propelling understanding of gender and power in online higher education.

RQ1: How do students of all genders perform gender identity in online higher education classes?

RQ2: How do students of all genders perceive gender-based power in online higher education classes?

RQ3: How do students of all genders perform gender identity in order to navigate gender-based power in online higher education classes?

In this chapter, I aim to provide satisfactory conclusions to these questions within the local context of my research. First, I will summarize the results of my ethnographic research that was described in depth in the previous chapter. Second, I will synthesize these results and consider their implications for gender and power in online higher education. Third, I will explore the significance of the implications and if recommendations for future research and practice can be made.

Findings

Through the course of my ethnographic research, I observed patterns relevant to each of the research questions. I will discuss them in order.

Gender Performativity

In the classes that I observed, the students performed their gender in both explicit and implicit ways. Gender, like other aspects of identity, was performed cautiously and generally subconsciously. The students' performance priority was professionalism. They wished to be seen as serious students who could contribute meaningfully to their field. In an effort to appear

professional or academic, they typically adopted a tone of formality with little identity expression. When introducing themselves, students shared what they were required to include, but they made little effort to expose their personal lives or identities. Conscious effort was put forth, however, at maintaining privacy. In synchronous video conferences, cameras were left off and conversation, which was minimal, happened largely in chat windows rather than audibly. In discussion boards, students discussed their professional experiences, but they talked little about their feelings towards those experiences. Above all, they maintained formality whenever possible using full names and academic language.

There were exceptions to the impersonality of class interactions. When Elizabeth wrote about the personal and professional significance she attached to her name and her worries about the impact her upcoming nuptials and name change on her identity, she spoke with significant vulnerability. When Yuritzi chose to adopt an alternative font, she was rejecting the call to conformity and showing her personality. When students made their personal pronoun preference known, as observed by Jim, they were revealing their gender identity without equivocation. However, these moments were rare within the overall learning experience.

Gender performance, or any form of performativity, is less significant without an audience receptive to the production. By and large, the students who I spoke to were unaware of any identity performance happening in their classes. As Natalia said, “They don’t know me. And they don’t get very much information.” However, when asked more probing questions, many of the participants described communicating differently with individuals of different genders. They manipulated their own gender performance in anticipation of their reception.

Perceptions of Gendered Power

Much like how the students generally did not feel they revealed their gender identity in

class, many did not think gender mattered. As students like Lola told me, gender does not impact their learning. At first, they claimed that gender had little impact on how they perceived others or how they interacted with others. Natalia claimed, “how I communicate with females and males are the same for everything.” They dismissed the idea of an imbalance of power based on gender or any identity marker other than authority. A professor’s power relative to students made sense to them, but a man’s power relative to a woman’s was harder to recognize.

While many of the students did not see how gender mattered to them, they did observe that it impacted other people. Multiple female students told me that they took responsibility for asking questions of their instructors because other female students were intimidated. Jim explained that he was comfortable working with women because he was accustomed to being surrounded by women in his profession, but he did not expect other male students to feel the same. Miguel was hopeful that he was not alone in his egalitarian attitudes, but he noted instances of misogyny from others in his profession and life experience. In general, the students were more comfortable recognizing the impact of gendered power on others than on themselves.

Two of the more surprising findings related to gendered power. One, students held to more traditional stereotypes of gendered behavior than I anticipated. I expected an awareness of more benign stereotypes like *women communicate more* or *men are more reserved*; I did not expect stereotypes like *men are smarter than women*. The students who mentioned these stereotypes considered them to be false, but they considered themselves rebellious for not adhering to them. The second surprising finding was that no student felt that the gender of their instructor impacted their learning experience. There were mentions of professors in other departments or schools who might be more intimidating or unapproachable because of their gender, but the students largely found this irrelevant in the educational technology program. The

students may have been cautious in sharing any concerns because of my connection to the educational technology faculty, but that did not appear to be a major consideration for them. There was an assumption, however, that male students felt more comfortable with male faculty which implies a decreased power gap between male students and male faculty compared to between female students and male faculty. While Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration and other educational technology classes were taught by female faculty, a similar connection between female students and female faculty was not made.

Gender Performance as a Manipulation of Power

When I considered power and gender in online learning, I thought about systemic oppression, emotional damage, and decreased opportunities for learning; I did not consider physical safety. However, the students I spoke with did not overlook it. When students like Rosa spoke of the dangers of online interactions, their formal tone was more understandable. Rosa used language and privacy as a defense against predation when online, and she subconsciously carried that with her into classroom behavior.

Rosa and Jessica both spoke of online learning as an educational refuge for those whose identity put them at risk in traditional classrooms. Students who might be harmed by actions fueled by racist, homophobic, transphobic, or misogynistic attitudes could be safe behind the computer screen. Not only could the dangers of physical assault not reach them, but they could also hide behind anonymity. For example, a male student who portrays stereotypically feminine characteristics may be bullied in a traditional environment, but he may choose to only share his name in an online class. Other students would not be privy to his clothing choices, vocal inflections, or body language. While gender performativity is largely unavoidable in any context, it can be controlled more consciously in an asynchronous environment.

The other finding related to how gender performance impacted power in online learning related to students' feelings of responsibility for others. There were many examples in the classes of students helping each other and supporting their learning. However, for some students, such as Tammy and Miguel, giving or receiving help was entangled with gender performance. Tammy, for example, adopted an aggressive nurturing role, the 'mama bear' archetype, as a means of seizing and maintaining her position of power. Miguel performed masculinity in a unique way as a means for navigating his own power. He threw off the expectations of *machismo* and exaggerated helplessness in order to lessen his position of power.

Implications

Research Question 1

My first research question asked how students perform gender identity in the context of an online higher education class. The interactions I observed indicated that students felt a schism between their identity inside and outside of class. The identity they held outside of class felt like their true identity, the "me" in "They don't know me." This divide echoes Goffman's (1959) conception of identity "on stage" versus "backstage." The classroom interactions equate to the on-stage component of identity while the learner's internal view of themselves is the backstage. Students enjoyed the role they played on stage continually seeking to improve their portrayal of their learning character as serious, professional, and impersonal. Even in their conversations with me, outside of the learning environment, students played their on-stage role in questions I asked about their class experience. When I asked about their lives outside of class, even in serious questions, they began to expose their other self; their eyes lit, their smiles grew, and their posture relaxed. However, as Goffman would argue, this interaction was its own stage performance. I was not truly backstage with them as no one ever is. I was on a secondary stage, perhaps a "meet

and greet” where the audience and actors interact but the pretense is not fully dropped.

It is not enough to understand that students are playing a role as they interact in class. There are implications that must be considered. Goffman (1959) argued that the consistent act of playing a role or presenting a particular identity leads the role to become part of the actor’s actual identity. The mannerisms they adopt and the words they say are internalized. In this way, the act of performing on stage shapes the backstage existence. Without a longitudinal study deeply embedded in the academic and personal lives of the students, I cannot claim the extent of this occurrence. However, it is worth considering the implication for those entrenched in academia.

West and Zimmerman (1987) and Butler (2006) extended Goffman’s thinking to focus entirely on gender performance. They argue that gender is performed in interactions with others, and, similar to Goffman’s claim, the portrayal of gender serves to reify it. However, West, Zimmerman, and Butler extend this to claim that the portrayal of gender codifies it both in the individual and society. Butler went even further with her argument that there is no inherent gender identity behind the performance; everything is performance. For Butler, the backstage is its own performance even if there is no external audience.

Through the lens of Butler’s gender performativity theory, the students I observed were not hiding their identity in the online classroom. “They don’t know me” is a fallacy; they do know “me” but only the “me” that is performed. When students do not share their sexual orientation, for example, they are not creating a void of unknown identity. They will be assumed heterosexual, and they are contributing to the heteronormative default. The same is true of gender. If a student masks their gender identity completely, their classmates are left with their own assumptions based on their experience or stereotypes.

However, it is impossible to mask one's identity completely. Either in moments of disclosure, like Elizabeth's discussion of her name, or subtle and implicit ways, such as Yuritzi's font selection, gender is performed. That performance matters; it shapes others' perceptions of individuals and even of entire gender identities. Natalia told me that she thought women thrived online and that it was obvious how smart and competent they were when not hampered by in person power dynamics. She based this on the little identity information she had, their names, and their class performance.

Research Question 2

While most of the students told me that gender does not matter to them when online, negating the idea of gendered power in an online learning environment, they perceived some elements of gendered power impacting others' learning experiences. They assumed that communicating with male faculty or other classmates was easier for male students and that stereotypes against women were disenfranchising. However, if gendered power was observed, it was assumed that it was decreased online. Jessica and Rosa spoke of the physical and emotional safety for minoritized people when learning online. Natalia explained how women thrived when freed from the in-person classroom dynamics. These ideas align with those of Eudey (2012) and Weinbaum (2016) who felt that online classes provided unique opportunities for feminist pedagogy and increased access for women. Weinbaum's belief that the disembodiment of cyberspace promotes equality aligns closely to Natalia's conclusion on the success of women online.

However, these perspectives from students and researchers alike tend towards essentialism. They consider women, or other gender identities, to be a monolithic entity where all experience power in the same way. This ignores the subtlety of gendered power and the many

ways that individuals of all gender experience it. Feminist poststructuralism provides a way to view gendered power without this (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). A feminist poststructural approach to understanding the manifestation of power in online higher education must adopt a pluralistic view of how learners experience power. There is no single way in which women, or any group of students, are disempowered. While power-laden bureaucratic and social structures may be in place for all students, how each student constructs their experience of those structures varies.

While every student's experience is unique, there is still a standard power basis where masculine behavior is privileged over feminine, heterosexual behavior is privileged over queer, white perspectives are privileged over those of people of color, etc. That is evident in the way researchers and students alike argue for the benefits of online learning for women and other minoritized people. As Byrne (2018) explained, women's participation is measured against that of men. There is never a question of if men perform better academically online or in person; theirs is the standard no matter the context. As such, women remain the object rather than the subject of study. It is through their gender performance that women, and others, create their subjectivity.

Research Question 3

How students perform gender identity in order to navigate gendered power in online classes matters. As van Doorn (2011) argued, drawing on the ideas of Deleuze, the virtual world is an integral part of reality. Similarly, online learning is a key component of the educational ecosystem. Not only does the navigation of power in online learning matter, but the nature of the online modality also provides unique opportunities to use gender performance for that wayfinding.

The online classroom offers unusual circumstances for the manipulation, intentional or

not, of gender performance. Hurley and Al-Ali (2021) found the use of avatars, filters, and silence by Arab women to be a means for managing identity and learning presence in online classrooms. In a different online context, Kivijärvi and Katila (2022) discovered that female gamers used and manipulated hegemonic male discourse to empower themselves. The reliance on text in an online environment is particularly significant for the conscious manipulation of gender performance (Virtanen, 2021). Interactions in the online classroom are rarely spontaneous; they are always mediated by a submit button.

In the particular context of the educational technology courses I observed, most students used this opportunity for performance manipulation to emphasize formality in their communication. The students typically saw this as a form of professionalism. However, their effort to be more professional equated to a stripping away of personal identity. As Yoon (2021) described, the online learning environment is embedded with heterosexual, normative gendered embodiment. To be blank is not to be gender neutral. Faced with no specific identity, the recipient of communication defaults to assumptions of the unknown as masculine, heterosexual, white, able-bodied, etc. (Cheryan & Markus, 2020). While the female students may see their non-gendered performance as a means of professionalization, they are performing an act of identity tourism (Turtle, 1995).

The effects of performing a neutral identity impact those not participating in this act. It silences, and hence disempowers, those who want or need to share their gender identity. For example, a transgender or non-binary student may wish to be known by the name and pronouns they choose rather than the legal name listed in a class roster or in a learning management system display. To make this preference known is difficult in any circumstances (Goldberg et al., 2019); to do so in a classroom culture of anonymity and detachment is more arduous. The choice by

other students to conceal their gender identity can lead to the silencing of those for whom simple acts like sharing their name or pronouns is important for well-being.

Not all students that I observed opted for neutrality. When students do manipulate their gender performance, like Tammy or Miguel did, they are perfecting, by their own standard, their preferred identity (Vander Valk, 2008). This identity may be unique to the learning environment. Miguel, for example, spoke of his role in his family in more traditionally masculine terms. “My kids, my wife, my family are very important to me, so a lot of what I do is to, you know, improve myself, better myself, so that I can better support them and what they want to do.” He saw himself as responsible for supporting his family, a common masculine gender role. However, in class, Miguel adopted a gender identity that emphasized helplessness so as to decrease his privilege. Like the students who adopted a mask of impersonality and consequently masculinity, Miguel used his gender identity performance to disrupt existing or perceived power imbalances.

Significance

Online learning has grown in recent years with 61% of undergraduates across the United States taking at least one of their classes online and 28% of undergraduates enrolled exclusively in online classes in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a). In the same year, 56.4% of graduate students took at least one class online (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.b). The students that I observed were not unique; they were part of a majority of graduate students who take online classes.

It is difficult to obtain reliable data regarding student gender identity beyond the male-female binary at any education level. However, when looking at data grouped in a binary gender system, certain patterns are apparent. Within the field of education, graduate students are overwhelmingly female-identifying. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 78.6% of students earning

a master's degree in education were female (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.d, n.d.e). Across all fields, women enroll in online degree programs at a higher proportion than male students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.c). The online education graduate level classroom is majority female, and it is imperative that we understand what can make the online modality a successful learning environment.

Online Learning Best Practices

With the advent of web 2.0 and web 3.0 technologies, high-quality online learning has evolved to be dynamic and interactive. The online classroom is no longer a repository of content and a place for submitting assignments. Instead, it is a locality for the meaningful exchange of ideas and personalized instruction.

This complex learning context is beneficial when viewed through sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and its high-tech successor, connectivism (Siemens, 2004). Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist from the early 20th century, adapted Marxism to understand the way people learn (Cole & Scribner, 1978). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of culture and interactions with others in learning; meaning is made by individuals through interaction with others. While Vygotsky focused on child development in his theories of learning, his ideas have been applied to learners of all ages (Poehner, 2017). No matter their age, learners can do more with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978) than they can do alone, and that support will push their learning forward. Vygotsky certainly predated consideration of online learning. However, his ideas about learning still guide the design and implementation of online learning.

In the early 21st century, Siemens (2005) developed the theory of connectivism. The principles of connectivism include that learning happens through diversity of opinion and is

about connecting information sources more than consuming the information. According to Siemens, the networked nature of communication and the diminishing lifespan of knowledge means that learning happens in fundamentally different ways than in the past. Connectivism's biggest departure from other learning theories was Siemens' conceptualization that learning is not an individual act. Connectivism has been an impactful conceptual framework in the field of online learning (Goldie, 2016). It has been used most extensively in MOOCs, but it has played a role in other forms of online learning as well.

From sociocultural theory and connectivism, we understand that course designers cannot use online learning platforms as a content delivery system only. Learners benefit from communicating with their peers and instructors more than if they interact only with the content itself. Online classes need to provide the infrastructure for human interaction so that learners can collaborate in meaning making. Many scholars of online learning have built models based on sociocultural theory such as community of inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000) or wisdom communities (Gunawardena et al., 2019).

A common framework for assessing the quality of online learning comes from the community of inquiry framework. This framework, proposed by Garrison et al. (2000), described three forms of presence, social presence, teacher presence, and cognitive presence as the foundation of online learning. Garrison et al. defined social presence as the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally as real people through the medium of communication being used. In other words, the degree to which students perform their identity authentically is considered to be a measure of the quality of an online learning experience.

Wisdom communities are an example of a connected and personal online learning

environment with high social presence (Gunawardena et al., 2019). Wisdom communities are an instructional design model based in sociocultural theory and the idea of social presence. These communities are small groups of learners engaging in collaborative inquiry through distributed co-mentoring and technology-based communication to achieve transformative learning. Wisdom communities are about meeting learners where they are and supporting them with more knowledgeable others. Gunawardena et al. interpreted sociocultural theory as defining learning as distributed, interactive, and contextual. Learning depends on social and cognitive context as individuals make meaning based on group culture. The wisdom community framework was built on this conception of learning and, above all else, emphasized learner support.

In wisdom communities and other examples of best practice in online learning, learning is personal, and interactions are authentic. However, in the educational technology classes I observed, many students purposefully adopted inauthentic personas in the guise of professionalism. As discussed earlier, this was a form of masculine gender performance and an act of empowerment. It is reasonable to assume that increased power equates to improved learning outcomes generally. However, through their act of seizing power, these students sacrificed the quality of their learning.

Recommendations for Practice

It would be academic presumption to take the findings of this study and make recommendations for online learning design broadly without consideration. How the students I interacted with performed gender to navigate their experienced power was unique to them. Other students in different contexts would likely react differently to their learning environment. While other students may perform differently, it is also possible that they would adopt similar performativity strategies.

With that caveat, how can the results of this study inform instructional design and online instruction? Individuals seizing power is beneficial to them as individuals and to the culture of the class broadly. However, doing so through depersonalization has negative effects on the learning experience. It is important to guide students to seize power in ways that do not disrupt learning. Koole (2014) argued that learners struggle with how to represent themselves online and how to understand others. She suggested that online pedagogy and learning technology should support learners to develop this skill set. In an educational technology program, this would have a secondary benefit of helping future educational technologists understand how to support their own students in this way.

There are a variety of ways that a combination of instructional design, technology, and instructor presence can support students in representing themselves online. Introduction videos, rather than standard discussion board posts, as was practiced in the Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology Integration course can promote social presence. Including discussion opportunities for students outside of course content allows for them to interact less formally. Gunawardena et al.'s (2019) wisdom communities are an excellent way to humanize the online classroom and generate authentic interactions.

Practices such as these reduce the opportunity for students to strip their gender identity, or other forms of identity, from their performance in the online classroom. However, they do not inherently mitigate power imbalances. Conscious effort at democratizing the classroom is required either in the context of these practices or others. Learning activities such as collaborative wiki creation (Pratesi et al., 2019) and sharing of personal narratives (Migueliz Valcarlos et al., 2020) can be effective, anti-oppressive practices. Both Freire (2018) and hooks (1994) wrote of the importance of student reflection for democratizing the classroom; this is a

straightforward strategy to implement in an online classroom.

Gender performativity is inevitable in any context (Butler, 2006). Any communication or its omission can be considered an act of identity performance. As students navigate gendered power in class, it is inevitable that their gender performance will adjust to optimize their power. This is not something that should or could be eliminated. It is an important act of self-care that allows students of all gender identities to use their agency to self-empower. However, the implementation of anti-oppressive instructional design practices can reduce the burden of disempowerment allowing students to learn while performing their gender in their preferred way.

Recommendations for Research

In this research, I aimed to alleviate the paucity of research on the lived experience of participants in online learning as it is moderated by gender. The nature of student's gender performativity and its use to navigate power structures is a topic that cannot be satisfactorily understood through positivist research frameworks. The feminist poststructural lens is vital for grasping the nuance of students' experiences. However, the deep contextualization of this research means that one study does not fill the gap in research. More studies in a variety of academic localities are needed. This research would also be improved by increased gender diversity of student participants. The inclusion of nonbinary or transgender students would reveal the complexity of gender performativity. The sample of students who consented to participate in my research did not include any such individuals.

Conclusion

As I pursued this research, I was continually faced with the refrain, "gender does not matter." Students, such as Lola, stated it baldly. Scholars who criticize feminist poststructuralism aver it as well. If gender is not fixed and it is continually reinterpreted through performativity,

what is its import? Despite these claims, this research continually reminded me why gender does matter. Even if it is not an inherent biological state, gender has real-life repercussions for all individuals. Whether a student identifies as female, male, or non-binary, that status defines their experience in society generally and the online classroom specifically. For gender oppressed people, gendered power impacts all aspects of life including education.

Higher education is intended to be transformative for students. It is a time of learning and growing regardless of the age of the student. Gender identity development is part of that experience like other aspects of personal identity. Despite the opportunities for dehumanization presented by online learning, gender performance persists in this environment. As students perform their gender identity online, they are navigating the complex systems of gendered power that impacts their learning experience. Online learning offers students an opportunity to use their gender performance to manipulate power imbalances in their favor.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval Documentation



Office of Research Compliance

Institutional Review Board for the
Human Research Protection Program

525 S Beaver St
PO Box: 4062
Flagstaff AZ 86011
928-523-9551
<https://www.nau.edu/IRB>

To: Alexandra Miller
From: NAU IRB Office
Approval Date: March 9, 2023

Project: Identity Expression in Online Learning Environments
Project Number: 1771237-4
Submission: Revision
Action: APPROVED
Project Risk Level: MINIMAL RISK
Approval Expiration Date: July 15, 2026
Next Report Date:
Review Category/ies: **The project is not federally funded or supported and has been deemed to be no more than minimal risk.**

This project has been reviewed and approved by an IRB Chair or designee.

- Northern Arizona University maintains a Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (FWA #00000357).
- All research procedures should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the guidance.
- The Principal Investigator should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that affect the protocol and report any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others. Please refer to Guidance Investigators Responsibility after IRB Approval, Reporting Local Information and Minimal Risk or Exempt Research.
- All documents referenced in this submission have been reviewed and approved. Documents are filed with the HRPP Office within IRBNet. If subjects will be consented, the approved consent(s) are available within IRBNet upon approval notification from the HRPP Office.

Important

The principal investigator for this study is responsible for obtaining all necessary approvals before commencing research. Please be sure that you have satisfied applicable external and University requirements, for example (but not limited to) data repositories, listserv permission, records request, data use agreement, [conducting University surveys](#), [data security](#), [international](#), [conflicts of interest](#), [biological safety](#), [radiation safety](#), [HIPAA](#), [FERPA](#), [FDA](#), [sponsor approval](#), [clinicaltrials.gov](#), [tribal consultation](#), or [school approval](#). IRB approval does not convey approval to commence research in the event that other requirements have not been satisfied.

Appendix B: Recruitment Email for Creating Technology Learning Environments

Re: Research Study on Identity Expression in Online Learning Environments

Dear students:

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a voluntary research study about gender identity in online classes. I am a PhD student at Northern Arizona University working under the guidance of Dr. Chih-Hsiung Tu.

For this study, I will be participating in and observing your class in discussion boards, class assignments, and class communications. With this message, you are also receiving an informed consent form. Signing the form and returning it indicates your agreement to participate in the study.

Additionally, I am asking students to participate in virtual (Zoom-based) interviews with me about your experience as an online student. This is optional as well, and participation in either part of the study does not require participation in the other. The interview will take no longer than one hour. If you participate in the interview, you will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card. All of your responses will be kept confidential and identifying information will only be accessible by myself. For more complete information about confidentiality and procedures, please see the attached consent form.

Any online students are welcome to participate including any gender. The questions are about your experience in this and recent online classes and may include questions about your gender identity.

If you would like additional information about this study, please contact me at aem432@nau.edu as soon as possible. If you agree to the observation of your class activity, please return the informed consent form as soon as possible via email.

Thank you for your consideration, and once again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in learning more about this Institutional Review Board approved project.

Alexandra Miller, M.Ed., M.A.

Doctoral Candidate, Curriculum and Instruction

College of Education

Northern Arizona University

Appendix C: Recruitment Email for Instructional Theory and Strategies in Technology

Integration

Re: Research Study on Identity Expression in Online Learning Environments

Dear students:

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a voluntary research study about gender identity in online classes. I am a PhD student at Northern Arizona University working under the guidance of Dr. Chih-Hsiung Tu.

For this study, I will be reviewing the discussion boards, class assignments, and class communications from the fall session of ETC 547. With this message, you are also receiving an informed consent form. Signing the form and returning it indicates your agreement to participate in the study.

Additionally, I am asking students to participate in virtual (Zoom-based) interviews with me about your experience as an online student. This is optional as well, and participation in either part of the study does not require participation in the other. The interview will take no longer than one hour. If you participate in the interview, you will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card. All of your responses will be kept confidential and identifying information will only be accessible by myself. For more complete information about confidentiality and procedures, please see the attached consent form.

Any online students are welcome to participate including any gender. The questions are about your experience in this and recent online classes and may include questions about your gender identity.

If you would like additional information about this study, please contact me at aem432@nau.edu as soon as possible. If you agree to participate in an interview, please return

the informed consent form as soon as possible via email.

Thank you for your consideration, and once again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in learning more about this Institutional Review Board approved project.

Alexandra Miller, M.Ed., M.A.

Doctoral Candidate, Curriculum and Instruction

College of Education

Northern Arizona University

Appendix D: Institutional Review Board Approved Informed Consent for Interviews



Office of Research Compliance

Project Number: 1771237-4
Approval Date: March 9, 2023
This stamp must be on all
consenting documents



Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Identity Expression in Online Learning Environments

Principal Investigator: Alexandra Miller

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

This research is a study focused on how students express their gender identity in an online learning environment and how their gender identity impacts their learning experience. The results will be used to identify additional research questions for exploration in later projects.

Participants in the study must be current online students. Students of all genders are welcome to participate.

There are no expected risks to you as a result of participating in this study. You will not benefit directly from participating in this study. The expected time commitment is approximately one hour for an interview. For your time spent, you will be compensated with a \$20 Amazon gift card following the completion of the interview regardless of how many questions are answered.

Your name will not be used in any report. No Northern Arizona University faculty will have access to the names of participants or any other identifying information. No information linking your name or identity to the information will be shared.

With your permission, I would like to record this interview so that I can make an accurate transcript. Your oral consent to participate will be recorded separately; that recording will be stored separately from the interview. Once I have made the transcript, I will erase the interview recording. Your name will not be in the transcript or my notes. It is your choice as to if you wish to turn on your camera.

The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. Northern Arizona University Institutional Review Board may review the research records for monitoring purposes.

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you may contact Alexandra Miller (aem432@nau.edu; 480-650-1993) or Chih-Hsiung Tu (Chih-Hsiung.Tu@nau.edu; 928-523-0671).

NAU Adult Consent Non-Federally Funded

V Mar 2020

Consent Version: 03/09/2023

Page 1 of 2



Office of Research Compliance

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Human Research Protection Program at 928-523-9551 or online at <http://nau.edu/Research/Compliance/Human-Research/Welcome/>.

Please keep a copy of this document for your records.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I am not giving up any legal rights by agreeing to participate.

Appendix E: Institutional Review Board Approved Informed Consent for Observations



Office of Research Compliance

Project Number: 1771237-4
Approval Date: March 9, 2023
This stamp must be on all
consenting documents



Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Identity Expression in Online Learning Environments

Principal Investigator: Alexandra Miller

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

This research is a study focused on how students express their gender identity in an online learning environment and how their gender identity impacts their learning experience. In order to examine this research question, the investigator will participate in, observe, and record discussion board posts, class assignments, and other class communications.

Participants in the study must be current online students. Students of all genders are welcome to participate.

There are no expected risks to you as a result of participating in this study. You will not benefit directly from participating in this study. No time commitment is required beyond your class participation. Choosing to participate or not participate will have no impact on your grade in the class. If you choose to not participate, the investigator will not access your assignment submissions, and your discussion board posts will not be included in analysis.

Your name will not be used in any report. No Northern Arizona University faculty will have access to the names of participants or any other identifying information. No information linking your name or identity to the information will be shared.

The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. Northern Arizona University Institutional Review Board may review the research records for monitoring purposes.

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you may contact Alexandra Miller (aem432@nau.edu; 480-650-1993) or Chih-Hsiung Tu (Chih-Hsiung.Tu@nau.edu; 928-523-0671).

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Human Research Protection Program at 928-523-9551 or online at

NAU Adult Consent Non-Federally Funded

V Mar 2020

Consent Version: 03/09/2023

Page 1 of 2



Office of Research Compliance

<http://nau.edu/Research/Compliance/Human-Research/Welcome/>.

Please keep a copy of this document for your records.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form.

I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Clicking below indicates that I have read the description of the study and I agree to participate in the study.

Appendix F: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Thank you for joining me for this research interview. As a reminder, this interview is part of my research into how students express their gender in online classes and how gender impacts student learning experiences. I am going to ask you a variety of questions, some are straightforward and some more complex. Please answer honestly, but there is no correct or incorrect answer.

As discussed, I will be recording this interview to help in my analysis and note-taking. I am the only person who will view the recording or have access to it. While I may use quotes or data from your responses in reports, I will use pseudonyms and not link the information to any identifying information about you. If there is any question you are not comfortable answering, you do not have to. Do you agree to be recorded?

Preliminary Questions

- What is your age?
- How do you identify yourself in terms of race and ethnicity?
- How do you identify yourself in terms of gender?
- Has your gender changed during your life?
- How do you identify yourself in terms of sexuality?
- How many online classes have you taken before this one?

General Questions

- How do you describe yourself as a student? For example, do you think of yourself as a high achiever? As someone who barely gets by?

Self-Introduction Questions

Think about the first week of the course when you were asked to introduce yourself in the discussion board.

- Did your introduction refer to your gender in any way? If so, how did gender come up?
- What types of responses did you get from other students to your post? What topics did they focus on?
- How would you describe the introduction discussion board itself? Were people forthcoming with personal information? Was there much mention of gender or sexuality related topics (e.g., pronouns, relationships)? Did any of this stand out to you for any reason?
- How did you decide who to respond to? How did gender play a role?
- What topics did you focus on in your responses?

Communication Questions

Now consider your communication in the course in general either in discussion boards, small group conversations, or any interactions with students or your professor.

- What are your preferred pronouns? How do you make this preference known in class?
- How do you decide who to respond to in discussion boards?
- How do you feel that your gender impacted your communication on discussion boards?
Did you observe anyone else's gender impacting communication?
- Did you observe any conflict, obvious or not, between people in the class? Who was involved? What happened?
- How do you feel that your gender impacted your interactions with your professor?
- How do you feel that gender impacted others' interactions with the professor?

Small Group Activities Questions

- In this class, what small group assignments or activities were there? Did you work with others beyond the assigned group work?
- Describe the group formation process for both formal group work and informal. How did gender influence any decisions you made in forming groups?
- What was the gender composition of your small group(s)? How do you feel that impacted the group dynamics and communication? Was there a differentiation in roles taken on because of gender?

Prior Experience Questions

I want to ask a few questions about your experience in online classes in general, not just the most recent one.

- Thinking about your experience in any online class, how do you feel that your gender impacted your communication with other students?
- In your previous online classes, did you notice any patterns in communication or participation based on gender?
- Have you previously experienced a time when your gender impacted your interactions with an instructor in an online class? Can you describe the situation?
- How do you think your answers to any of these questions might differ from your classmates' answers?
- Think about how you present yourself online and communicate with others. How do you think it compares to what you portray elsewhere? Such as at work, at home, with friends, etc.
- Overall, how do you think your identity has impacted your experience as an online student?

- Would you recommend the online format to a future student? Would your recommendation change depending on their gender or other identity aspects?