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Melika Kordrostami & Victoria Seitz

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## FACULTY ONLINE COMPETENCE AND STUDENT AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE LEARNING

Melika Kordrostami and Victoria Seitz

Marketing, California State University, San Bernardino, United States

### ABSTRACT

This research aims to address the gap in the literature about instructor's role in increasing students' affective engagement (with their peers and instructor) in an online class. Since marketing students will eventually fulfill roles that engage consumers with the firm's communication mediums, it is important to understand the impact of student engagement and peer-to-peer communication in marketing classes in building this skill. Additionally, because of the pandemic, majority of higher education was migrated to online and virtual formats, investigating techniques that can improve the quality of online teaching is more important than ever. The impact of instructor competence in designing and facilitating online classes has been studied before; yet we establish that instructor online competence has an indirect positive effect on students' impression of the quality of their online learning experience. Further, this relationship is mediated by how students are engaged in class through communication with peers and instructors. This research clarifies the effect of instructor affective engagement skills as a contributor to marketing student perceptions of quality and offers several recommendations that act as guidelines for instructors delivering online courses.

### Clarifying the Mediating Role of Affective Engagement for Online Marketing Students

The global COVID pandemic brought disruptions to every community, but none more so than the educational community. The shift to online education from face-to-face was immensely challenging for faculty and students alike. In a matter of days, classes that were delivered face-to-face went online. However, according to Kozimor (2020) the pivot to remote education was even more pronounced given that only 16% of students attending institutions of higher education were enrolled in distance learning prior to the pandemic. Faculty who never thought of teaching online were now being forced to do so. This resulted in a knowledge gap for faculty unaccustomed to online learning management systems and various types of software available for online teaching. According to Wu (2020), faculty experienced emotional, psychological, pedagogical, and technological challenges in pivoting to online instruction. As if moving to online instruction was not challenging enough, the pandemic adversely affected the access to professional development opportunities from inundated pedagogical training systems.

Online education can have a multitude of benefits for students, faculty, and institutions of higher education. Traversing distance for students and faculty costs time

and travel expense, which can act as a barrier to class attendance (Nguyen, 2015; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). Additionally, online learning is particularly convenient when conducted in an asynchronous mode so students are able to access learning modules that fit their schedules (Song et al., 2004) from anywhere in the world (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). As well, online learning reduces the need for brick-and-mortar space thus reducing operational costs for an institution (Miller & Ribble, 2010; Traynor-Nilsen, 2017). Online learning also increases digital skills among students, as in student presentations, that ultimately enhance students' employment opportunities in today's digital age (Hernandez-Lara & Serradell-Lopez, 2018). Majority of the evidence shows that technical learning achievement as represented in tests and end-of-semester indicators is equivalent in well-conducted online settings to face-to-face settings (e.g., Bernard et al., 2004; Nguyen, 2015). Finally, there is evidence that faculty training in online teaching improves face-to-face teaching and allows the integration of online resources in face-to-face settings (Joyes & Frize, 2005; Kearns, 2016).

Of course, there are a large number of well-known obstacles to be mitigated on one hand, or deftly be turned into advantages on the other (Chow & Croxton, 2017). Some of the obstacles from students' perceptions

**CONTACT** Victoria Seitz Marketing  [vseitz@csusb.edu](mailto:vseitz@csusb.edu)  California State University, San Bernardino, United States

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include: lower satisfaction levels (Asoodar, Vaezi, & Izanloo, 2016; Piccoli, Ahmad, & Ives, 2001), a strong sense of a less “rich” experience and isolation (Martin, Wang, & Sadaf, 2018), instructors’ ability to navigate in online settings and master a variety of evolving online tools (Jung, 2011), instructor responsiveness (Hodges & Cowan, 2012), and a sense by students that there is too much self-teaching in the online setting (Oncu & Cakir, 2011).

Training university faculty is often considered key to producing consistent quality in online programs (Young & Duncan, 2014). However, until recently, most university faculty have had limited training in teaching methodologies to deal with these and other issues except as an auxiliary activity in their doctoral studies, largely learning by what they perceived as successful practices of their own instructors rather than through a conscious plan of teaching skills development (Baran & Correia, 2014). This works well in face-to-face settings, but less well in online settings (Burke & Fedorek, 2017; Phillip & Cain, 2015). First, faculty may not have had extensive experience with online learning, or it may have been with old technologies or of poor quality (Porter & Graham, 2015). Second, since online teaching uses the “flipped classroom” more than face-to-face settings, it may require additional but less-obvious skills (Burke & Fedorek, 2017; Lancellotti, Thomas, & Kohli, 2016).

With the onset of the Coronavirus, online education has taken a front seat in higher education with a renewed focus on quality. Optimally, when well designed by the institution, online education reduces costs through decreased demand for physical infrastructure and greater use of shared digital resources (Kushnir & Berry, 2014). But this has not always been the case as a multitude of issues arose outside of teaching with the onset of the virus.

With the pivot to online, instructor competence has become paramount. Previous research has provided different classifications for online instructor competencies. Salmon (2000) grouped instructor competencies into five areas: understanding online processes, technical skills, online communication skills, content expertise, and personal characteristics. Similarly, Reid (2002), after identifying over 500 online competencies, grouped them into technical knowledge, content expertise, process facilitation, evaluation, and course management. In asynchronous instruction Shank (2004) grouped instructor competencies into five areas: administrative, design, facilitation, evaluation, and technical. Dennis, Watland, Piroette, and Verday (2004) identified four areas of competency for online instructors as pedagogical, communicational, discipline expertise, and technological. Arbaugh et al. (2008) and many others (e.g., Shea

et al., 2014; Fiock, 2020) use the simple tripartite teaching, cognitive, and social presence domains; however, teaching presence is often divided into design skills and class facilitation skills. While six basic sets of competencies can be extrapolated from their analyses, we sort them into three overarching categories for the purposes of our research. Those categories are basic instructor competence (comprised of content expertise, technical skills in using online tools and technologies, process skills to use those tools effective in online environments which often require methodological adaptation, and faculty motivation to follow through on different online teaching requirements such as increased feedback), student engagement skills related to ensuring that students feel their inclusion and contributions in classes are genuine and useful in their learning achievement, and evaluation skills related to reflection of the online teaching process itself (Frass, Rucker, & Washington, 2016). See Table 1 for a conceptual comparison of the skills sets discussed by various scholars. As shown in Table 1, while other authors have focused extensively on content/discipline expertise, technical skills, administration, and evaluation skills there have been few studies addressing instructor’s competence in engaging students in an online environment, which is the focus of the current study.

The role and importance of basic online instructional competence has been generally supported vis-à-vis students’ perceptions (Sadaf, Martin, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019; Song et al., 2004; Tanner, Noser, & Totaro, 2009). The research supporting these roles will be addressed in the literature review. However, several overarching generalizations can be offered about the challenges for researchers in the meantime. First, concepts, related nomenclature, and their operationalization in online teaching research vary and overlap extensively, making research comparisons challenging. Second, teaching is a complex pedagogical activity which can be successful by multiple alternative approaches. For the researcher, the question is often not if a method, tool, or strategy can work sometimes, but when it works well and how effective it is in comparison to alternate uses of time. Third, online education takes place in a multitude of contexts, which affect the applicability of specific teaching methods and strategies as reflected in the differences in teaching a massive introductory class versus an upper-level seminar, or in a biology class versus a marketing class.

The role and importance of instructional engagement skills has been an article of faith for the Community of Inquiry researchers (Arbaugh et al., 2008), and is supported as significant in many online studies (e.g., Asoodar et al., 2016; Marks, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005;

**Table 1.** Different ways that researchers have classified the skills needed by online instructors.

Skill groupings	Different Research Groupings					
	Salmon, 2000	Reid, 2002	Shank, 2004	Dennis et al., 2004	Frass et al., 2016	(COI): Arbaugh et al., 2008; Shea et al., 2014; Kozan & Caskurlu, 2018; Fiock, 2020
Instructor Competence						
Content expertise	Content expertise	Content expertise	Design	Discipline expertise	Instructional designer	Cognitive presence
Online technical skills	Technical skills	Technical knowledge	Technical	Technological	Technical	Teaching presence: preliminary design
Online process skills	Understanding online processes	Course management	Administrative	Pedagogical	Pedagogical (assumed)	Teaching presence: class facilitation by instructor
Faculty motivation	Personal characteristics and motivation	(assumed)	(assumed)	(assumed)		
Online engagement skills	Online communication skills	Process facilitation	Facilitation	Communicational	Facilitator Social Management	Social presence
Evaluation		Evaluation	Evaluation			

Sebastianelli, Swift, & Tamimi, 2015). However, some researchers find its importance significant but modest (Clayton, Blumberg, & Anthony, 2018; Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Schroder, 2013; Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, & Yeh, 2008) and other studies do not find various types of engagement significant (Joo, Lim, & Kim, 2011; So & Brush, 2008). Hence, the purpose of the present study is to investigate how student engagement skill competence and basic online instructional competence affect perceptions of online learning quality among marketing students.

## Literature Review

Today most college students are digital natives who regularly consume digital media (Smith & Sodano, 2011) and are comfortable employing different digital technologies in online classes. This ease with technology and its use are likely to drive increased interest in student learning. However, the foundational aspects of teaching in online environments – expertise, technical competence, pedagogical skills, and instructor follow-through – are hugely important for an acceptable learning environment to be created (Van Wart et al., 2020).

Furthermore, beyond basic instructor competence, many researchers have pointed to the importance of student engagement (Asoodar et al., 2016; Marks et al., 2005; Sebastianelli et al., 2015). This research focuses on students in the marketing major, so it is especially important to consider the learning practices that are essential for future marketing professionals. Since marketing students need to facilitate company/brand/product communications in their future careers, it is

important for them to practice interactions with their peers and their instructor. Therefore, we investigated the role of the instructor in creating an online learning environment that goes beyond providing fundamental technical elements (including basic structural engagement components routinely built into nearly all classes) of the educational experience by encouraging robust student engagement. That is, we investigated the affective rather than just the activity-driven aspects of engagement.

## Instructor Competence

Basic instructor competence was defined broadly above as content expertise, technical skills, process skills, and faculty motivation. Having content expertise is a fundamental need for all instruction and is not reported to have different characteristics in different teaching modes. For example, course goals are not normally adjusted by medium. While the fundamental principles of teaching are similar across the array of face-to-face, hybrid, synchronous online, and fully online modes, the tools, skills, and practices do vary substantially (Dolezalek, 2004; Granitz & Greene, 2003). Largely oral instructions may be translated into detailed written instructions with examples; tasks become embedded in learning management systems; methods for monitoring small groups may shift spot-checking by physical movement among groups to after-the-fact review of complete discussions in an online medium, etc. Technical skills in managing the class become crucial such as the skillful use of videoconference software and

prerecorded videos. Finally, while all students learn better and faster with customized feedback, the burden on instructors is consistently reported as greater for online instructors whose face-to-face instruction time is generally much reduced (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010).

Content expertise is generally assumed and considered antecedent to the opportunity to instruct a subject in the first place, but it has important teaching ramifications because it can crowd out other instructional competencies for newer instructors or those who do not develop a more robust sense of relating the content to the students themselves. Yet, such a narrow focus often leaves students feeling “disconnected” (Cappel & Hayen, 2004; Otter et al., 2013). Content expertise in this sense is often referred to by researchers as clear structure (Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006; So & Brush, 2008), as well as student expectations (Palmer & Holt, 2010), resulting in the articulation and achievement of course and student goals and their implementation through clear instructions regarding course requirements.

While technical expertise is an important auxiliary skill set in the face-to-face classroom, it becomes fundamental in the online medium where all instruction is technologically mediated (Asoodar et al., 2016; Van Wart et al., 2020). First, it involves the basic learning management system competence which is relatively complex and intimidating and has many functionalities that may remain undiscovered without training. Examples of the important nuances of learning management systems include setting up effective small groups and accessing the extensive and powerful participation metrics embedded in them for those that can find and use them. Second, there are many embedded and auxiliary tools that are important, not just to learn, but to master. Instructors who are not proficient in videoconferencing technology may have “tinny” sound, odd camera angles, inability to switch screens smoothly, lack of awareness of the multiple methods for getting instant feedback via the chat or response functions, etc. While students may be amused by instructor’s clumsy technical skills, they rarely rate them directly but tend to evaluate instructors at how they use them to achieve content and process goals. As a simple example of instructor competence, Smith and Sodano (2011) found that students who are provided lecture-capture options in addition to synchronous online lectures are significantly more likely to assimilate their learning in future education and career opportunities.

Process skills involve ensuring that students are involved in the technical/intellectual process of learning. That is, process skills *strongly encourage or require* students to participate in ways that will foster learning. At the most basic level, requiring students to complete assignments and tests is a process skill. For example, because of the nature of online learning, more assignments and a larger number of tests that are smaller might be suitable in many cases (Burke & Fedorek, 2017). A prime example is the use of small group discussion in which participation is required, monitored, and graded (Hernandez-Lara & Serradell-Lopez, 2018). Another is the use of attendance tracking and participation monitoring through learning platform statistics (Drehmer & Gala, 2021; Sadaf et al., 2019).

Faculty motivation from a student’s perspective is sometimes referred to as teaching presence (Eom et al., 2006; Otter et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2008). At a basic level, it has to do with the degree to which the instructor is perceived as actively coordinating and facilitating learning. In poorly implemented courses or where the student-instructor interaction is less apparent, students feel they do more than the instructors in the educational process (Otter et al., 2013). For example, when instructors cut down on passive lectures and devote more time to time-consuming monitoring of active learning elements, students may perceive less instructor presence even though they are experiencing deeper learning. Because of the nature of the medium and the frequent use of a flipped classroom approach, feedback that is both customized and timely becomes more important for students. Hodges and Cowan (2012) found that students’ perception of instructors’ presence in class depends on the timeliness of responses, clear instructions, and instructor availability. Similarly, Sheridan and Kelly (2010) found that clarity of course expectations and instructor responsiveness is critical for student satisfaction.

In sum, examples of how basic online instructor skills are perceived by students include clear course goals and timelines, followed up with well-articulated instructions about how to participate, focused discussions and time-on-task, and ultimately receiving timely and customized instruction about their contributions and performance.

### ***Affective Student Engagement Competence***

Student engagement skills were broadly defined as those practices and strategies meant to ensure students feel



their inclusion in discussions is safe and comfortable, their contributions in classes are a part of a learning community, and ultimately the medium itself provides a positive, affective climate in the course. If basic instructional competencies ensure that the course is well constructed and implemented in technical terms, instructors who are strong in student engagement competence create learning environments that provide positive *emotional* experiences.

Student engagement (in both its technical and affective aspects) is supported as significant in many online studies (e.g., Asoodar et al., 2016; Bolliger & Armier, 2013; Joo et al., 2011; Marks et al., 2005; McGee, Windes, & Torres, 2017; Sebastianelli et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2008). However, some research indicates that student engagement has only a modest impact on technical learning achievement (e.g., knowledge acquisition, tests, etc.), but has a much stronger impact on student satisfaction (De Simone, Schmid, & Lou, 2000, April; Johnson, Hornik, & Salas, 2008). In fact, some research find that student engagement is one of the key attributes regarding satisfaction with online learning (Blakey & Major, 2019; Martin & Bollinger, 2018). Faculty are not only concerned about student satisfaction as a professional goal but are also concerned about it as a measure of performance when it is low (e.g., course evaluations).

Safety and comfort are generally considered antecedents to the various types of student engagement. Students need to feel that their privacy is respected (Chih-Hsiung & McIsaac, 2002) and their anxieties are addressed (Al-Gahtani, 2016). Students also highly value efforts to enhance inclusiveness “icebreaker/introduction discussions” and similar activities (Martin & Bollinger, 2018) and “emotional support” (So & Brush, 2008). In many disciplines, the comfort to debate alternate perspectives is critical (Boyd, Baliko, & Polyakova-Norwood, 2015).

A variety of strategies have been reported to improve engagement by creating an inviting, emotionally rich, and humane environment. For example, Arbaugh (2001) found that when instructors employ teaching techniques in online instructions that imply humor, emoticons, and referring to students by name, students are more satisfied with the course. Similar findings by Blakey and Major (2019) pointed out that student engagement was significantly higher when instructors used emoticons, figurative language, color, cohesion, visual imagery, and audio in course design. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2003) found that when instructors provide opportunities for students to build community in an online setting to reach robust learning goals (peer-to-peer learning), engagement of students was

much enhanced. Research also shows that students’ comfort is enhanced in courses when instructors’ responsiveness to student needs is perceived (Sebastianelli et al., 2015).

Another aspect of student engagement is enhanced by a sense of belonging, social connections, and collaboration. Being actively engaged in a virtual learning environment enhances feelings of connectedness and leads to higher academic success (Johnson et al., 2008; Piccoli et al., 2001; Thurston, 2005). Connectedness is about students’ feelings of belonging to a social community and having personal or professional relationships with others in an online platform (Bolliger & Armier, 2013). There are different ways to build collaborative learning in classes. For example, research shows that when instructors create podcasts for students, students will engage with the course material (Taylor, McGrath-Champ, & Clarkeburn, 2012). If this method is combined with team-based learning, students are more prepared to study a new concept (Taylor et al., 2012). One way to increase interactions and build an online community is through collaborative examinations that result in enhanced perceptions of learning and student satisfaction (Shen, Laffey, Lin, & Huang, 2006). Another way that students’ interactions can be fostered and implemented is by creating and distributing student-generated audio assignments. These lead to more student engagement and in turn, better communications with peers and enhanced learning (Bolliger & Armier, 2013).

Creating a sense of comfort, belonging, and collaboration, in turn, creates a sense that the online medium is being useful as a social learning interaction. For example, Brewer and Klein (2006) state that the number of students’ interactions and their quality in an online class has the potential to exceed that of a face-to-face environment, building opportunities for interaction between students. Many online tools and strategies are possible. Blakey and Major (2019) suggest that instructors use active learning strategies such as student-led discussions one week, completing activities such as WebQuest, and developing authentic projects such as portfolios. For marketing students, online discussions, blogs, polling, simulations, as well as the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are beneficial tools instructors can employ to encourage student engagement in online courses. Martin and Bollinger (2018) found that real world applications were perceived as valuable in different ways, such as searches for information. They recommend wikis, group tasks, peer assessments, chat sessions, and blogs, as well as the

use of web-based applications such as Twitter feeds, Google applications, and audio video technology such as Wimba Collaboration Suite. Research with marketing students has shown engagement increased through online media employing teaching tools such as simulations (van Esch, von der Heide, Frethey-Bentham, & Northey, 2020), active learning projects (Manzon, 2017), and multisensory exercises (Purinton & Burke, 2020).

In sum, examples of how instructors' affective engagement skills are perceived by students include their comfort in online classes and discussions, their sense of belonging, connectedness to other students, and collaboration, and overall belief that the online medium adds to their educational experience.

In this research, we hypothesize that instructor's basic online competence directly impacts quality of online learning perceptions by students, but it is augmented by affective student engagement. Given this, the following two hypotheses were developed.

*Hypothesis:* Instructor's online competence will be positively related to students' perception of quality with an online class when mediated by students' engagement

## Methodology

This research is part of a study on online teaching that was conducted at a business college in a public university in Southern California over a period of 18 months (Van Wart et al., 2020). Current research focused on the marketing students' data from this sample to investigate the unique needs of students in the marketing major.

## Instrument

After a thorough literature review, the researchers developed a questionnaire to measure instructor competence in online instruction, students' perceptions of quality, and engagement. There was a need to create an instrument that best suited the study since the research focused on measuring instructor's competence in facilitating affective student engagement. Available scales measuring instructor's competence (e.g. Arbaugh et al., 2008) lacked relevance for the present study since they did not focus on affective student engagement. Similarly, to measure student engagement, available scales (e.g. Martin et al., 2018) emphasized instructor's engagement with students, rather than students' engagement with course materials and their communication with their peers. The first part of the questionnaire sought demographic characteristics such as age and ethnicity.

Instructor competence was comprised of a scale of eight statements measured on a Likert scale from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Questions related to content expertise, online technical skills, online process skills, and faculty motivation. Previous research showed that shorter questionnaires lead to higher response rates (Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, 2013). Additionally, when the questions are easy to understand, single-item measures may have the same validity as longer questionnaires (Jovanović & Lazić, 2020). See Table 2 for the questions.

To measure student engagement, a six-item scale was developed. Statements included questions about belonging, comfort and collaboration using a 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

To measure students' impressions of online learning, two statements were developed based on the literature reviewed: "My overall impression of online learning is very good;" and "I enjoy online learning." These were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree

**Table 2.** Questions related to skill groupings.

Overarching skill groupings	Specific skills and related questions
<b>Instructor Competence</b>	<p><b>CONTENT EXPERTISE</b></p> <p>"Online instructor clearly communicates important course goals"</p> <p>"Online instructor provides feedback that helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses relative to the course's goals and objectives"</p> <p>"Online instructor encourages course participants to explore new concepts in this course"</p> <p><b>ONLINE TECHNICAL SKILLS</b></p> <p>"Online instructor provides clear instructions on how to participate in course learning activities"</p> <p>"Online instructor clearly communicates important due dates/time frames for learning activities"</p> <p><b>ONLINE PROCESS SKILLS</b></p> <p>"Online instructor helps keep the course participants on task in a way that helped me to learn"</p> <p>"Online instructor helps to focus discussion on relevant issues in a way that helped me to learn"</p> <p><b>MOTIVATION</b></p> <p>"Online instructor provides feedback in a timely fashion"</p>
<b>Online engagement skills</b>	<p><b>BELONGING</b></p> <p>"Getting to know other course participants gives me a sense of belonging in the course";</p> <p>"I am able to form distinct impressions of other course participants";</p> <p><b>COMFORT</b></p> <p>"I felt comfortable participating in the course discussions";</p> <p>"I felt comfortable disagreeing with other classmates in online courses while still maintaining a sense of trust";</p> <p><b>COLLABORATION</b></p> <p>"Online discussions help me to develop a sense of collaboration."</p> <p>"Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction";</p>
<b>Evaluation by students</b>	<p>"My overall impression of online learning is very good;"</p> <p>"I enjoy online learning."</p>

(5) to strongly disagree (1). Reliability analysis for the newly developed scales was conducted once the data were collected and revealed a Cronbach alpha for the instructor competence scale  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $\alpha = .84$  for the student engagement scale, and  $\alpha = .81$  for students' impressions of online learning scale. All three scales demonstrated high levels of reliability of the items according to Nunnally (1978) that stated that Cronbach alpha minimally should be .70, yet better if closer to .80.

### Sample

This paper draws evidence from a sample of students enrolled in the marketing program at a business college in a public university in Southern California over a period of 18 months, specifically, fall 2018, winter 2019, spring 2019, and fall 2019. A Qualtrics survey link was distributed to five instructors of online marketing courses to share with students in their classes. To ensure comparable learning outcomes, online classes and face-to-face classes in marketing are similar in size and are capped at 60 for survey courses and 30 for seminar courses. Approximately, 600 students were contacted and asked to complete the survey. A total of 119 undergraduate marketing major students participated in the study representing a 20% response rate. The researchers calculated the G\*Power to verify the sample size resulting in a sample size of 115 to have a .80 power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). The majority (63%) of respondents were between 17 to 22 years of age and were of (60.5%) Latino ethnicity.

### Analysis

To analyze the mediation and test the hypothesis, PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017) was employed. The researchers tested whether (1) there was a positive direct effect of instructor's online competence on students' impression of online learning; (2) there was a positive direct effect of instructor's online competence on students' engagement; (3) there was a positive direct effect

**Table 3.** Means and bivariate correlations among key variables (n = 119).

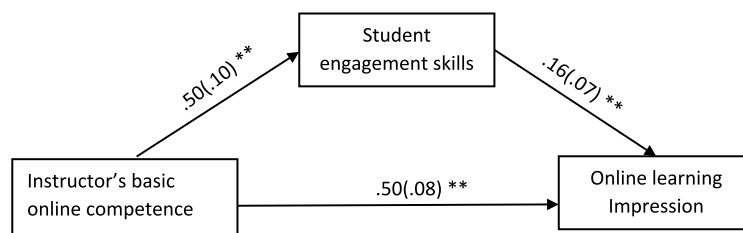
	1 Instructor's online competence	2 Student engagement	3 Online learning impression
Mean (SD)	4.13(.73)	3.50(.86)	4.09(.74)
1		.408**	.584**
2			.381**

SD: standard deviation, \*\*p < .01

of students' engagement on students' impression of online learning; and (4) there was an indirect effect of instructor's online competence on students' impression of online learning, mediated by students' engagement. Table 3 provides a summary of the descriptive statistics and correlations between core variables. Together, these three variables (instructor's online competence, students' engagement, online learning impression) accounted for 36% (Adj. R<sup>2</sup> = 0.36) of the variance in the model.

### Results

Findings indicated that the relationship between instructor's online competence and online learning impression was mediated by students' engagement. As Figure 1 illustrates, the standardized regression coefficient between instructor's online competence and students' engagement was statistically significant at  $p < .001$ , as was the standardized regression coefficient between students' engagement and online learning impression. The standardized indirect effect was  $(.50)(.16) = .08$ . The researchers tested the significance of this indirect effect using bootstrapping procedures. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of 10,000 bootstrapped samples, and the 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was .08, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from .01 to .17. Thus, the indirect effect was statistically significant.



**Figure 1.** A model of the relationship between the instructor's basic online competence and online learning impression partially mediated by student engagement skills. \*\*p < .01



## Discussion

Online learning initially began as a means to reduce rising expenses of traditional education, aid in enrollment management issues, and take advantage of developments in distance education to provide greater accessibility (Eastman & Swift, 2001). Today, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities globally have had to embrace online teaching along with its benefits and challenges. Even after an eventual return to “normalcy,” the trajectory for the growth of online education will likely be much accelerated from pre-pandemic levels (Dennis, 2020; Fox, Bryant, Lin, Khedkar, & Nguyen, 2021). It is important to understand the ways that improve the quality of online teaching perceptions by students.

The current study investigated the impact of instructors’ basic online competence on marketing students’ impressions of online instruction and found that when instructors offer clear communication, provide focused students’ discussions, and provide timely, customized feedback, as expected there was a direct, robust effect on students’ overall impression of the course. These findings are supported by such researchers as Van Wart et al. (2020), and suggest that students’ first interest is in a well-designed course taught by faculty who are paying attention to students. However, our primary interest was in getting a better sense of the role of providing student engagement skills such as online social comfort, connectedness, importance of collaboration, and an overall sense that the online medium was proficient in supporting the educational experience from the students’ perspective. While many previous studies (Bolliger & Armier, 2013; Marks et al., 2005; Sun et al., 2008) have found student engagement to be significant, the findings have been mixed and some researchers (Joo et al., 2011; So & Brush, 2008) have even been unable to find a concrete effect. This study used the perceptions of marketing students whose future careers hinge on related engagement functionalities.

Affective student engagement skills also mediate the relationship between basic online competence and the ultimate online learning impression. While basic online competence predicts the bulk of students’ qualitative impressions, the mediated effect of affective engagement skills on students’ impression of online learning is also significant but more modest. These findings support those of Clayton et al. (2018), Kuo et al. (2013), and Sun et al. (2008) who found the importance of

engagement significant but modest. This makes sense when considering the nature of students’ online learning impressions.

Online learning impressions by students are composed of multiple factors such as good design, learning achievement, and satisfaction. That is, when students perceive a course to be well run, it includes good design, learning achievement and satisfaction. While Clayton et al. (2018), Kuo et al. (2013), and Sun et al. (2008) found engagement to be an important factor in student impressions of satisfaction, they found a weaker connection to perceptions of design and learning achievement. Moreover, findings showed that students’ higher-level engagement resulted in an increased positive evaluation of their online learning experience. This finding is supported by Blakey and Major (2019) and Martin and Bollinger (2018) who found that student engagement is one of the key attributes regarding satisfaction with online learning. The present research expands theory in terms of investigating the mediating role of student engagement. Although instructors’ roles and students’ engagement are studied in previous research (Bolliger & Armier, 2013; Hodges & Cowan, 2012), the current study sheds additional light on the relationship between these two variables and indicate that instructors’ basic online competence is crucial, and that instructor engagement skills augment that impression about online instruction for marketing students.

## Recommendations to Consider

Our overall recommendations are that student perceptions achievement (overall impression) and satisfaction (enjoyment) are largely driven by an instructor’s content expertise, online technical skills, online process skills, and displayed motivation. Gaps in any of these basic competencies will negatively impact student evaluations. When these basic competencies are achieved, student perceptions of courses are significantly enhanced when instructors are successful at fostering emotional elements as well, related to a sense of belonging, comfort, and collaboration.

What do these general recommendations mean more concretely? As stated earlier, there are numerous ways to build and implement a course, so our 15 concrete recommendations can be implemented differently, and in some cases may be situational depending on the type of marketing class.

Because different media have different strengths and weaknesses, direct conversion of face-to-face classes is unlikely to maximize student satisfaction and learning. Faculty need to be more conscious and explicit about the design of the course and its relationship to students (Baglione & Tucci, 2019; Drehmer & Gala, 2021). For example, faculty may find that extended large group class discussions lack the same level of effectiveness and may need to convert instructor-led Socratic approaches into small group or individual discovery activity assignments (Lee & Rha, 2009).

Because online classes lose some presentation richness, students can lose sight of their learning goals even more easily than in face-to-face classes. Using brief metacognition activities to enhance student-content presence such as process surveys to see how students are perceiving the course, and “what did you learn” activities become more important – while also simultaneously keeping students more engaged “in the moment” (Cacciamania, Cesareni, Martini, Ferrinic, & Fujitad, 2012).

Most students care relatively little about the knowledge of the instructor *per se*; they care about the concrete ways the instructor uses their knowledge to inform students and improve their performance. While monitoring activities is good, students really expect comments at the individual, group, and/or class level to provide expert guidance (Johnson, Cascio, & Massiah, 2014; Martin et al., 2018; Rippé, Weisfeld-Spolter, Yurova, & Kemp, 2021).

In a technology-mediated environment, it should not be surprising that the quality of the use of technology is a major concern for students (Asoodar et al., 2016). Because faculty do not get immediate questions or non-verbal cues when students struggle in navigating an online course, it is important to have others review course navigation to ensure that it is simple and intuitive (Sadaf et al., 2019).

It is understandable that faculty do not feel that entertaining students is a job requirement, but that should not be confused with providing an appropriate variety of techniques (Asoodar et al., 2016). In the case of online teaching, that may mean selectively learning and using more technologically advanced teaching tools such as “glass board,” polling, small group breakout, online simulation, and other techniques for effectiveness, interest, and communication modeling.

Technology offers advantages as well as challenges. In order to provide the level of customization that students crave to make up for the more two-dimensional experience, faculty need to take advantage of technical

opportunities such as the ability to re-use high-quality lectures many times or the capability of extensive self-practice auxiliary exercises and “games” to provide immediate feedback to innumerable cohorts of students (Hernandez-Lara & Serradell-Lopez, 2018; Koppitsch & Meyer, 2021). Taking advantage of these re-use opportunities generally takes planning and substantial advance effort by instructors (Lloyd, Bryne, & McCoy, 2012), but the amortization of effort over time provides dividends.

Initially in the development of online curricula, many universities employed self- and peer-grading techniques to reduce faculty workload by having to carefully monitor blog discussions and evaluate individual participation in projects. While the usefulness in terms of accountability and self-assessment has been supported, the accuracy for actual grading purposes has not (Tara, 2015). Students also perceive that many faculty assign work to turn in but do not review it, or only check to see if it was submitted (Cook & Babon, 2016). Therefore, faculty need to avoid or reduce “busywork” which students think of as required assignments in which there is no concrete information about their performance or individualized performance tips.

Because potential problems with online teaching can involve some students’ sense of anonymity and lack of customized communication (Rippé et al., 2021), rapid means of identifying time-since-log-in, overall time-on-the-course, time-on-specific-tasks, timing of small group participation (e.g., last minute responses), etc. can be quite powerful. Therefore, the use of learning platform tracking data to monitor, prod, and recognize ongoing performance in the course is recommended (Drehmer & Gala, 2021).

Faculty motivation is demonstrated to students by the alacrity of response and demonstrated interest in student learning. Perhaps the most frequently cited demonstration of faculty motivation for students (or lack of it) is timeliness of responses to questions and grading (Alqurashi, 2019; Baglione & Tucci, 2019; Boling et al., 2012; Eom et al., 2006; Rippé et al., 2021). Most students expect responses in hours, not days, when taking online classes. Another important demonstration of faculty motivation for students is active presence demonstrated by frequent messages, enthusiasm, cheerfulness, and recognition of distinct student identities (Arbaugh, 2001; Asoodar et al., 2016; Blakey & Major, 2019). As we emerge from the pandemic, Rippé et al. (2021) suggests that faculty employ instructor-control giving techniques such as sending several announcements per

week, individual zoom sessions, offering classes in a live synchronous format, sharing relevant articles and information as it becomes available, remaining approachable, as well responding to students e-mails and questions.

While structuring content and contact-with-instructor engagement are important aspects of instructional competence, facilitation of emotional engagement is generally important to take a class from “good to great.” As is well known in the team-building literature, “forming” a learning community should be an invitation to join as much as an expectation (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Xie, Miller, & Allison, 2013). Provide inviting class functionalities such as a “welcome-and-start-here” video or short module, or “tips for success in this course” can make a class feel significantly “warmer” (Chlup & Collins, 2010; Sadaf et al., 2019).

Similarly, marketing instructors should be conscientious about providing short ice-breaking activities in various class settings with the aim to build student camaraderie as well as occasional team building moments in which the focus is on the community of individuals rather than the content. (Arbaugh et al., 2008; Fiock, 2020; Kozan & Caskurlu, 2018; Shea et al., 2014). This is particularly true in “qualitative” marketing classes (Eastman, Aviles & Hanna, 2017).

Online discourse can be efficient and effective, but it also has the potential to be misread without the aid of nonverbal cues, or, in worst cases, lead to unpleasant virtual arguments that would be quickly checked in a face-of-face classroom (Xie et al., 2013). In classes with student-to-student components, it is important to provide adequate “netiquette” guidelines without chilling robust discussion (Martin et al., 2018; Sadaf et al., 2019).

It has become easy and routine for people in meetings and classes to turn their cameras off, look into the camera while doing other work on the screen, turn the volume off, and practice other masquerade behaviors. Therefore, making participation a social expectation so that passivity and pseudo attendance are minimized is crucial for whole-of-class engagement (Rahman, 2021). Faculty can use the learning platform polling and breakout functions, require responses in the chat function, urge use of reaction buttons to gauge student perceptions or opinions, use higher-end lecture recording technologies that embed questions (e.g., Camtasia, PlayPosit, VoiceThread), coordinate exercises in scheduled class time, use discussion boards in real time (Ackerman & Gross, 2021), or require short end-of-class assignments.

While allowing relatively open-ended or “discovery” assignments may work with better students, longer-timelines, and when face-to-face discussions allow a free flow of information, open-ended assignments have been found to be less effective in many online environments and situations (Martin & Bollinger, 2018; Martin et al., 2018; Sadaf et al., 2019). Therefore, faculty should generally ensure adequate structure and instructions for activities, projects, and group presentations, as well as a willingness to repeat instruction, or provide auxiliary instructions. Part of the structuring can include grading rubrics where possible (Brookhart, 2018). Rippé et al. (2021) suggests that when structuring courses, instructors consider providing options to students such as choice on assignments with the same learning outcomes, videos and live lectures, optional zooms, or provide students with the option to participate in live classes or watch the video later. Additionally, instructors can consider providing due date extensions, exam time flexibility and extra office hours to enhance student success in the course (Rippé et al., 2021)

Student summative feedback – from good, average, and struggling students – is invaluable to provide long-term improvement in course design and implementation. However, formative feedback aids instructors in immediate course modifications, and just as importantly, provides students with a sense of inclusion. This becomes all-the-more important in the online teaching environment to combat alienation and undisclosed problems (McCarthy, 2017). Faculty should try to ensure there are genuine student feedback opportunities throughout the course, preferably with some of them being anonymous, and that students know the faculty member takes their feedback seriously. A summary of these 15 recommendations is offered in Table 4.

### Limitations and Future Research

First, the study was confined to a sample of students in the marketing major. Future research might compare students in other majors to focus on disciplinary differences more sharply in teaching and learning in the online environment. Additionally, since this study focused on students’ impressions of online learning, future research may look at faculty perceptions of online learning and engagement to investigate whether similar mediation effects exist.

**Table 4.** Summary of 15 specific recommendations to consider.

Overarching skill groupings	Specific Recommendations
<b>Instructor Competence</b>	<p>CONTENT EXPERTISE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be more conscious and explicit about the design of the course and its relationship to students</li> <li>• Use metacognition activities to enhance student-content presence such as process surveys to see how students are perceiving the course, and “what did you learn” activities</li> <li>• Monitor and comment on most activities at the student, group, and/or class level in order to provide expert guidance</li> </ul> <p>ONLINE TECHNICAL SKILLS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have others review course navigation to ensure that it is simple and intuitive</li> <li>• Selectively learn and use more technologically advanced teaching tools</li> <li>• Take advantage of technical opportunities such as the re-use of high quality lectures, well-organized self-practice auxiliary exercises</li> </ul> <p>ONLINE PROCESS SKILLS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid “busywork” which students think of as required assignments in which there is not concrete information about their performance or individualized performance tips</li> <li>• Use learning platform tracking data to monitor, prod, and recognize ongoing performance in the course</li> </ul> <p>MOTIVATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most important demonstration of faculty motivation for students is timeliness of responses to questions and grading; the second most important demonstration of faculty motivation for students is active presence (e.g., frequent messages), enthusiasm, cheerfulness, and recognition of student identities</li> </ul>
<b>Online engagement skills</b>	<p>BELONGING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide inviting class functions such as a “welcome-and-start-here” video or short module, or “tips for success in this course”</li> <li>• Be conscientious about providing short ice-breaking activities for various class settings, as well as occasional team building moments in which the focus is briefly on the individuals rather than the content</li> </ul> <p>COMFORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide adequate “netiquette” guidelines without chilling robust discussion</li> <li>• Make participation an expectation so that passivity and pseudo attendance are minimized</li> </ul> <p>COLLABORATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure adequate structure and instructions for activities, projects, group presentations, etc. Include grading rubrics where possible</li> </ul>
<b>Evaluation by students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure there are genuine student feedback opportunities throughout the course and that students know you take their feedback seriously</li> </ul>

Second, we measured student’s impression of online learning and whether they enjoy the class in the context of their current education. Future research might reexamine these concepts in light of students’ experience in online education to determine its effects after employment or advancement in their careers. Finally, additional research would be useful in the utility and effectiveness of specific engagement tools. Engagement tools are in a state of rapid evolution in the marketing profession itself, so fine-grained studies of how teaching techniques can model future career skills would be timely and useful. Finally, future research might want to conduct studies employing the newly developed scales with larger datasets to further test the validity of scales.

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