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African American College Students' Perceived Motivation and Engagement in Online Learning Environments

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Abstract

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

The current study delved into the problematic achievement gap between African-American graduates students and other groups, specifically in the online learning environment. African-American graduate students' lower achievement is problematic due to its lost opportunity costs and social subjugation of an entire group of Americans. The study's purpose was to improve our understanding of this problem in order to better inform the content and packaging of future academic delivery to this population. A qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design was used to cull the 1st hand experiences of African-American graduate students as to their online learning experiences. Self-determination and constructivism theories grounded this study. The guiding research question for this study was "How do African-American college students describe their online learning experiences?" Interviews were conducted with 10 graduate students. During these interviews participants described their subjective experiences and both facilitative and impeding factors in the online learning experience. A thematic data analysis was conducted. Results identified that among these participants their online academic experiences were varied and idiosyncratic. Emergent themes of importance for these participants included their online learning, subjective experiences, and time. Additionally, participants varied in independence, online platforms used, self-motivation, and goal-directed schoolwork. Knowledge acquired from this study could help positive social change via enhanced educational experiences (e.g., content and culturally sensitive delivery) for the population of interest.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents and daughter. My parents instilled in me the importance of education. I have been in school for quite some time; it has been quite a journey in all facets of my life. I stayed the course until the completion of this dissertation and have a way to go until I complete my degree. My daughter was born at the tail end of this process this year. She has been a source of strength and determination, and I am truly grateful for making it here.

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I want to express my deepest gratitude to my higher power, family, my academic advisor Dr. Johnson, my chair, Dr. Michael Johnson, and my co-chair, Dr. Daniel Parker, for this dissertation journey. It has been quite a learning experience and a labor of love. I couldn't have done it without them to stay the course until the completion of this dissertation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

According to Kizilcec and Halawa (2015), open online learning environments have led to a diverse focus on student noncontinuation and achievement gaps. Student attrition or noncontinuation can be caused by factors such as low motivation and poor assimilation to the online learning experience (Kizilcec & Halawa, 2015). The problem is an achievement gap for African-American college students in online learning environments. The data is scant in this area. I aimed to add first-hand information from African-American students attempting online learning that could inform policymakers and educational leaders. Thus, the knowledge acquired from this study could help achieve positive social change via enhanced educational experiences for the population of interest. I outlined some clear considerations around student engagement and motivation that needs researching under this population in response to the scant data on achievement gaps for African-American college students in online learning environments.

More research is needed on the perceived experiences of African-American college students. Some qualitative studies have researched engagement and motivation in online college education. They include studies done by Barak et al. (2016), Kim et al. (2015), Hew (2016); Cutis and Werth (2015), Kim and Frick (2011), and Song and Hill (2009). According to the National Center for Higher Education Statistics (2018, par. 1), as of Fall 2016, 19,841,014 students were enrolled in distance learning programs. About 2,588,211 were African American students (this category is defined as U.S. citizens who have an African background). According to the National Center for Higher Education Statistics, from 2015-2016, the percentage of African American students who completed their bachelor's degree was 10.6 %, for master's degree completion was 13.7%, and for Ph.D. degree program completion was 8.5%. These statistics for African Americans promote the importance of research into motivation and engagement in this population.

Background

Online learning has been extensively researched in recent years. Milman et al. (2015) concluded that students such as minorities have unique needs for online learning. For example, online community support can be pivotal in the pathway to program completion. Some other supports can also impact the experience of traditional versus nontraditional learning settings. I sought to identify essential factors promoting student engagement and motivation leading to degree completion. Milman et al. used a mixed-methods approach with first and second year master's-level students. Their focus areas were "perceptions of the importance of, and satisfaction with, administrative, academic, technical, and online community supports—also, personal factors and grade level" (Milman et al., 2015, pp. 1-2). Findings had shown differences in satisfaction with services such as technical support and differences between White and non-White students' access to career services. Many students' found course-level support rated high in engaging in social help. Milman et al. sought to determine what kind of resources and support master's level students sought for online learning success.

Barak et al. (2016) noted that open online courses allow learners an essential interconnected opportunity. In a mixed-method study, they sought to compare the online learning environment's motivation patterns of students, examine different modes of engagement, and explore completers for this area in learners' learning motivations. They found similar motivational patterns were present for English and Arabic-speaking participants and found that social interactions are essential to learning. A study completed by Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2018) included participants who were minority adolescents. Kumi-Yeboah et al. examined factors affecting the learning experiences of minority students attending high school online. Findings from the study proposed factors that "promote and or restrain online learning experiences and academic self-concept of minority students" emphasized (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018, pp. 1-2 & 12). Ashong and Commander (2012) encouraged further research exploring minority groups' perceptions of online learning, learning activities, and student communication. Instructors and designers of online learning environments should further consider such elements impacting students' experiences.

Curtis and Werth (2015) explored K-12 student achievement in an online environment and what effect parents had on student success. Findings indicated that much research on the topic is generalized to this population, and no single factor affects achievement. Wimms (2008), as cited in Maton et al. (2011), expressed there are multiple levels to student achievement and retention. A literature review summary notes different conclusions: "negative experiences that hinder student progress include lack of family and peer support in ongoing college-going behaviors, perceptions of merit, feelings of belonging and validation (p. 68)". Gunawardena et al. (2003), as cited in Green et al. (2017, p. 2), stated, "A neglected element in the research literature is a focus on cultural elements associated with students enrolled in online distance education courses and programs." Milman et al. (2015) noted students such as minorities and those abroad have unique needs for online learning. There are levels of online community support that need to be researched, and the needs of African-American college students expand in online learning environments. Some of the support needs are often for traditional versus nontraditional students. These are pivotal to this population's academic success or lack thereof.

Kim et al. (2015) researched aspects of course design and student perceptions. They collected data through an online platform where students posted to an online blog. Hybrid courses that infuse face-to-face and online instruction with Internet initiatives were examined. They looked at connectedness and motivation. Considering their findings, one question was whether this emerged in a more traditional class. Findings indicated the importance of understanding the web-based experiences of online learners, student feelings of connectedness, motivation, and learning community experience. So & Brush, 2008, p. 321 as cited in Allen et al., 2002, completed a review of 24 articles reporting student satisfaction responses. Results showed many students were satisfied with their online learning but the authors made the recommendation to better investigate dissatisfaction as some researchers have identified that “students in distance courses may be dissatisfied with unclear expectations from instructors, tight timelines, workload, poor software interface, and no synchronous communication" (So & Brush, 2008, as cited in Allen et al., 2002, p. 321).

Problem Statement

The problem is an achievement gap for African-American college students in online learning environments. Carey (2014) stated that achievement gaps are a widespread, ongoing educational issue. The achievement gap refers to student school success. This gap spans across different academic levels. There needs to be more research into the first-hand accounts of African Americans to graduate students, and such information, directly from the source, could help shift to more equity and equality. According to Kizilcec and Halawa (2015), open online learning environments have led to a diverse focus on student non-continuation and achievement gaps. Student attrition or noncontinuation can be caused by factors such as low motivation and poor assimilation to the online learning experience (Kizilcec & Halawa, 2015). More research is needed on the perceived experiences of African-American college students. Nguyen et al. (2012) stated that if America wants to be the first in the world in degree attainment, institutions must ensure that all their students, including African-American college students, graduate. In their study review of graduating trends for this population between 2004 and 2010, 41.2 % graduated college in 2004, and then in 2010, it was 40.6%. My study added to the literature to learn about participation challenges and social and individual influences on academic achievement gaps across different disciplines.

Purpose of the Study

I used the qualitative research method to address the purpose of this dissertation, which was to add first-hand information from African-American students attempting online learning that could inform policymakers and educational leaders. Thus, the knowledge acquired from this study could help achieve positive social change via enhanced educational experiences for the population of interest. In this study, I outline some clear considerations around student engagement and motivation that need to be researched under this population in response to the scant data on achievement gaps for African-American college students in online learning environments. Research on the perceived experiences of African-American college students is needed. There may be further impediments to learning based on students' perceived experiences that contribute to learning outcomes such as grades and completion of one's academics (Rovai & Gallien, 2005).

A qualitative method was suitable with the progression of massive open online courses (MOOCS) development to improve this population's knowledge and behavioral predictions. The research questions were associated with the critical concepts of student engagement and motivation. Hence, the questions have varied across the research into the study population. The study results of current and former African American graduate students who participated in their online learning experience could provide a course for better-improving aspects of student learning research in different areas, such as understanding the perceived psychological experiences that increase or decrease engagement and motivation for African American students.

Research Questions

I aimed to aid the understanding of engagement and motivation for African-American college students in online learning environments. This study's research questions included the following:

RQ1: How do African-American college students describe their online learning experiences?

RQ2: How do African American college students describe their motivation to complete their academics in online learning?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

I used constructivism theory as the conceptual framework to ground my study. Constructivism was introduced and espoused by Vygotsky from 1896 to 1943, Piaget from 1896 to 1980, Dewey from 1859 to 1952, and Bruner from 1915 to 2016 stated (Learning Theories, 2021., para. 1-3)." Constructivism, as a concept, suggests learning is an active and productive process. The learner is perceived as an information constructor, and the early learning theorist contributing to this research was Piaget's view. "People actively construct or create their subjective representations of reality. A person's knowledge is based on their personal experiences stated (Learning Theories, 2021., para. 1-3)." This includes a person's hypotheses of their environment. Learners continuously test these hypotheses through social negotiation and engagement with others. Each person constructs and processes aspects of knowledge differently. Vygotsky (1896) as cited in Learning Theories, 2021., para. 1-3, noted that social development includes social interaction, more knowledge of others, and a zone of proximal development. Bruner added that learning occurs within problem-solving instances in which learning considers past experiences and learns through other relationships (Learning Theories, 2021., para. 1-3).

According to Kop (2011), constructivism can be a framework for understanding learning. Further contributors to this theory include Siemens and Downes 2008-2009 added (Kop, 2011). They believed the learner connects to the learning community to find and share information with others. Learners build personal learning networks. This model frames a learner's relationship to networks of knowledge comprising many directions.

Covington (2000) noted that goal theory, motivation, and school achievement are other theoretical foundations. These were additional theories I could have used to inform this study. It has been shown that each person has their motives as drives, an inner state towards action is the premise of motivation. Achievement motivation theory, developed by Atkinson in 1957 and 1964 and McClelland in 1961, indicates that striving for success and avoiding failure comes before achievement noted (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Urdan, 1997; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). Further actions for an individual are often given meaning and purpose by the goals the individual seeks out. Achievement goal theory embodies motives as goal contributors (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Urdan, 1997; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). For individuals, this goal differs based on achievement goals and one's subjective purpose. Achievement goal theory is further based on one's cognitive self-regulation processes. This process is based on the student's active engagement in facets of their learning contributors as cited (Pintrich, 1999; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman et al., 1994). School achievement is a sub-area of achievement goal theory focusing on academic outcomes. Social goals and academic goals can contribute to empowering an individual to achieve more academically in school. Further, within goal theory, researchers identified that in understanding classroom achievement, the quality of self-regulation is linked to academic goals and achievement behaviors.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design was the best option to explore students' perceptions of factors of motivation and engagement that contribute to their learning outcomes. Qualitative study was justified because students can supply their subjective experiences about their online learning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants individually. Open-ended questions were used to speak to the literature gap areas and acquire students' narratives. Follow-up and probing questions were assiduously integrated into the interview process as needed. The data acquired was transcribed verbatim. Based on participants' responses, common themes arose and were identified via accepted and valued qualitative research techniques.

Definitions

Based on crucial search terms, there were variations in how engagement, motivation, and online learning are referred to. The articles involved different contexts of the topic, great tangible suggestions, and an emphasis on more research needed with this population of interest. In the literature review, key search terms revealed engagement, motivation, and online learning variations. Hence, these terms were most salient to the present study:

Academic Achievement: Academic achievement includes results following an exam or completing an assignment (Broadbent & Poon, 2015).

Autonomy: Autonomy describes "the need to experience oneself as the author of one's actions and for these aligned with one's values and goals" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2019, p. 100).

Competence: Competence "concerns mastery, a sense that one can succeed and grow" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 1).

Online learning: Online learning is described as access to learning experiences using technology (Benson, 2002; Carliner, 2004; Conrad, 2004, as cited in Morre et al., 2011).

Perceived Motivation: People have inherent psychological needs and growth tendencies (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Further, Gomez et al. (2010) found that perceived motivation is associated with perceived learning in that students' perceived learning experience could be associated with increased participation and higher learning levels

Relatedness: Relatedness delves into the need for the learner to form interpersonal relationships (La Guardia & Patrick, 2008 as cited in Martin et al., 2018, p. 37)

Self-determination theory (SDT): The current study was also grounded in self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT identifies three basic needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Student Engagement: Student engagement can include behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Student engagement includes teacher-student interaction, which can influence learning and retention (Furlong et al., 2004; Hew, 2016). Behavioral engagement includes participating in academic activities, such as completing an assignment. Emotional engagement includes students' feelings toward learning and others in their learning environment. Cognitive engagement has a task-specific focus on the student in learning activities (Hew, 2016).

Assumptions

I made several assumptions in this study. One assumption was that participants would provide their most honest answers. Another was that once policymakers and educational leaders are informed of the findings of this study, positive social change will occur. Findings from this study may promote an understanding of African-American students' perceived motivation and engagement in online learning environments. Thus enhance the educational experiences for the population of interest.

Scope and Delimitations

In this section I discuss the scope and delimitations of the study. All participants were African-American females, nine of whom identified as heterosexual and one as homosexual. Of the 10 participants, one was in her first year of graduate school, three were in their second year, three were in their third year, and the final three were in their fifth year or later years. A delimitation of the study is the omission of other individuals from other racial backgrounds. This study included specific participants engaged in participation.

Limitations

This current study had some limitations. First, the current population participants were African American females; the findings from the study are from one gender of the population of the study. It may not be generalizable to students of the opposite gender and race. The study can be replicated with both genders within the population of interest, including multiple graduate programs. Given the scant data addressing the etiology of this engagement and motivation, this may be useful for the findings to be expanded upon longitudinally. The current findings warrant follow-up research.

Significance

There needs to be more data on achievement gaps for African-American college students in online learning environments. In this study, I addressed engagement and motivation for African-American college students who choose an online format. The focus was researching what motivates academic completion for African-American college students, areas of effective engagement, and the perceived psychological experiences of this population in online learning environments. The current study differed from previous studies because I sought to gain more data on one specific subpopulation on the perceived psychological experiences of African-American college students in online learning environments. This was a factor yet to be explored. The significance of the study is that it will fill a gap and outline some clear considerations around student engagement and motivation that may impede learning outcomes for African-American college students. The study results could provide a course for improving aspects of student learning research in different areas, such as understanding the perceived psychological experiences that increase or decrease African-American students' engagement and motivation.

The social change implications include assisting educational providers with the different delivery methods offered in programs for learning. This includes improving gaps around diverse learning needs. In the research, language and culture-bound concerns could arise within social change. This research could give insight into the pathway to assist student outcomes such as dropouts and improve retention strategies. This could include semester-based questionnaires sent by colleges inquiring about improving student experiences but monitoring students' academic pathways in response to the data received in this area. Curriculum and program markers can be developed to mediate and address nontraditional students' difficulties (Van Doorn & Van Doorn, 2014).

Summary

The topic of African-American college students' perceived motivation and engagement in online learning environments needs to be expanded. This study area will likely provide relevant stakeholders with valuable information in the fight against student attrition and underachievement. An overview of the literature, literature search strategies, and key concepts will be provided in Chapter 2..

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I discuss the literature review, search strategy, theoretical foundation, and research questions. African American college students who attempt online learning experience lower engagement and motivation than their peers (Cokley, 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Maton et al., 2011; Rovai & Gallien, 2005). This problem is exacerbated by the scant data addressing the etiology of this engagement and motivation. Data that helps curriculum developers address the online learning experiences of African-American college students needs to be included in future research. I aimed to add first-hand information from African-American students attempting online learning that could inform policymakers and educational leaders. Thus, the knowledge acquired from this study could help achieve positive social change via enhanced educational experiences for the population of interest.

According to Kizilcec and Halawa (2015), between-group differences exist in online learning environments. Students of ethnic minorities and majorities differ in attrition rates and achievement. Minority students tend to lag after other ethnic groups. Student attrition can be due to a lack of focus, poor student engagement, low motivation, and deficient acclimation to the online learning experience (Kizilcec & Halawa, 2015). A search of the literature review on the topic of students' perceptions of their educational experience identified very few articles. Some qualitative studies have researched students' engagement and motivation in an online college, and 10 are included in the literature review herein. These studies include those done by Barak et al. (2016), Curtis and Werth (2015), Hew (2016), Kim and Frick (2011), Kim et al. (2015), and Song and Hill (2009).

According to the National Center for Higher Education Statistics (2018), a statistically significant between-group difference (i.e., White students compared with African American students) exists when reviewing completion rates for master's and PhD degrees. The number of non-African Americans who completed advanced degrees was 611,182, and the number of African-American students who completed advanced degrees was 211,886. In Chapter 2, I explore the relevant literature in several sections, which includes between-group differences in motivation, engagement, online learning, and academic achievement in online learning environments. The chapter starts with the study's theoretical foundation and then moved to the literature review. The primary purpose of a review of the theoretical framework is to understand the themes underlying this study's topic and the emergence of these themes.

Literature Search Strategy

General search strategies involved in this literature review included developing a list of relevant search terms, including synonyms of the topic's main ideas. These terms included *African American*, *Black American, Blacks, online learning*, *distance education, virtual education, completion, retention, success, motivation, engagement, minority students,* and *academic achievement*. Databases used included search strategies included Thoreau, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, and ERIC. The years of investigation were 1985 and 2000 to 2021. These years were used because the initial topic appeared in a 1985 article.

Additionally, the search terms used over the last 22 years identified a plethora of research. Chapter 2 begins by sharing the theoretical foundation on which this study is based. A theory that fits a culturally appropriate online learning experience strengthens the veracity of this study.

Theoretical Foundation

Self-determination theory was an additional theoretical foundation that grounded the current study. SDT identifies three basic needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. *Autonomy* describes “the need to experience oneself as the author of one’s actions and for these aligned with one’s values and goals” (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2019, p. 100). Autonomy is the first need in learning how one internalizes regulations and is essential to developing values and goals. These regulations occur on a developmental continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Ryan and Deci (2000) noted that *competence* “concerns the feeling of mastery, a sense that one can succeed and grow” (p. 1). Martin et al. (2018) noted that competence describes a learner as working, for example, to build concepts and applications to master. *Relatedness* delves into the need for the learner to form interpersonal relationships, noted (La Guardia & Patrick, 2008 as cited in Martin et al., 2018, p. 37). Deci and Ryan (2008) stated: “The concept of human needs turns out to be useful because it provides a means for understanding how various social forces and interpersonal environments affect autonomous versus controlled motivation” (p. 183). Further, “an important aspect of motivation concerns the energization of people’s psychological processes and behaviors” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 184).

Martin et al. (2018) stated that in MOOCs, SDT had been a central concept in exploring the phenomenon of student engagement. Applied research on this phenomenon has included psychotherapy, organization studies, health, education, and other areas of psychology. A gap in the literature exists in the study of online education, as SDT has yet to be the grounding theory supporting research into educational motivations. There has yet to be an exact blueprint to prepare for student engagement in MOOCs. Empirical research has continued to expand upon the “psychological and social nutrients” related to this phenomenon (Martin et al., 2018, pp. 36–37).

Chen and Jang (2010) researched learning outcomes across six categories: demographic data, need satisfaction, motivation, and learning outcomes. They found that students’ needs are more critical than the number of supports. The learning atmosphere between student and instructor should be collaborative, and instructors can implement appropriate strategies as required. Student motivation in online experiences of the learning environment includes this dynamic. SDT is a foundation for understanding learner motivation in an online environment. Further, researchers have emphasized the conceptual link between autonomy and learning contexts (Tschofen & Mackness, 2012, as cited in Martin et al., 2018). They noted that SDT was used to research how engagement occurred in MOOCs. There was an exploration of intrinsic motivation in online learning.

Deci (1975), as cited in Martin et al. (2018), noted that competence and autonomy support sustain intrinsic motivation. Self-reported data from an engagement survey and other qualitative data indicated different themes. This approach to the research data collection was evaluated using web analytics for a course added (Deci, 1975 as cited in Martin et al., 2018). They included autonomy support, individual enjoyment, and interest, for example. Findings based on the learners' experience indicated they had a more positive outlook because they were engaged in the course's aspects. The elements of autonomy and learning contexts based on feedback were related to this transient population (Durksen, 2016, as cited in Martin et al., 2018).

Further, psychological needs and growth were interchangeable around concepts such as development conditions and personality integration (Marrone & Hutz, 2019). Ryan and Deci (2000) added that social conditions impact intrinsic motivational tendencies. Ryan and Deci explained that the framework for cognitive evaluation theory, a sub theory within SDT, indicates that social environments impact people's psychological needs. There is an aesthetic value around people's motivation, including activities of choice. To further understand intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, it was essential to delve into environmental conditions.

Ryan and Ryan (2019) explained that SDT research brought other focus areas around psychological needs, such as freedom and authenticity. Authenticity and freedom can influence motivation and engagement for students. Second, authenticity has existential tenets, such as actions considered enacted independently. Third, from this is fostered based on one's social conditions. Fourth, people enhance and restrict one's autonomy from a social context. A person can anticipate and adjust to perceived social constructs, including external pressures (Sisley & Smollan, 2012, as cited in Ryan & Ryan, 2019).

Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasized that autonomy is an essential psychological need in human functionality.

Ryan and Ryan (2019) stated that social interactions could dictate motivations and behaviors. They made several points. First, in time, a person will have variations in how they present themselves to others. Second, life span roles can shift one's sense of authenticity, which can be in a friend or student's position. Third, different facets are involved in integrating oneself in acquiring knowledge and learning. Fourth, this provides opportunities, basic psychological needs, wellness, interpersonal skill-building, and other personal encounters. Each of the three constructs found in SDT led to this study's research questions.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

In this section I provide an overview of articles related to the topic of this study. I discuss research on this topic in the areas of achievement, motivation, student interactions, acclimation, and engagement in online learning environments. In the literature review, key search terms revealed engagement, motivation, and online learning variations. The articles in the literature review showed broad topics and concrete suggestions for further research.

Motivation

Barak and Bandura (2006, as cited in Barak et al., 2016) stated, "Motivation to learn is conceptualized as an internal state that arouses, directs, and sustains goal-oriented behavior" (p. 50). In a case study with a mixed method design, analyzing diverse quantitative and qualitative data, Barak et al. (2016) noted that MOOCs allow for an essential international opportunity for learners. Research questions focused on participants' language and motivational differences, relationships among motivation, posts, and members online, and participants' characteristics in MOOCs. MOOCs are a learning context. A meta-analysis of 221 courses indicated that access could be low for completers, dropout rates were high, and completion rates averaged only 12% (Barak et al., 2016).

Barak et al. (2016) included research on English versus Arabic participants' motivations. Post means for motivation were higher among English than Arabic participants for completers and non-completers. Completers showed higher motivation than non-completers, whose motivation decreased over time. Self-efficacy was a mediating factor in completing the task for these two groups of participants. Online forum posts were documented from a survey given to English and Arabic participants, and a positive relationship was present in the study between motivation gain and forum posts on pre- and post posts. When research delved into forum activity, it was found that both groups of participants posted fewer than ten messages, about 70% of participants overall. The remaining participants posted up to one post. Posting more than twice was correlated with a person's motivation to learn. There were roughly seven participants' who posted up to 35 messages.

Further analysis of the two groups' posting amounts suggested that sharing knowledge and receiving feedback from peers was perceived as helpful, especially for participants' learning and motivation in online learning environments (Barak et al., 2016). These social interactions, coupled with motivation, suggest perceived factors for the learners' success. Lastly, there are five types of MOOC completers: networkers, problem-solvers, innovation seekers, complementary learners, and benefactors (Barak et al., 2016). Recommendations for further research include exploring dropout rates and retention for online student populations. The study's limitations included an exploratory case study with a small sample size, which may have impacted the results' generalization (Barak et al., 2016).

Kim and Frick's (2011) study were on changes in student motivation in online learning. They used a questionnaire to collect quantitative data to research learner motivation in self-directed e-learning courses. Research questions focused on factors that predict learner motivation across the learning experience and factors related to these motivational changes. Findings from the study indicated that learner motivation was affected by whether participants felt e-learning was a good fit for them (Kim & Frick, 2011). One predictor for motivation to learn was the importance of a course. When learning goals are relevant to the learner, they are more self-motivated to complete the courses. Competence in online technology, if acquired, was another motivation for completing learning courses. The study's limitations were that they did not have access to all participants and utilized a non-random sampling method (Kim & Frick, 2011).

Kim et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study researching aspects of course design and student perceptions. The study data collection had been through an online platform where students could post to an online blog. Hybrid courses that infuse face-to-face and online instruction with Internet initiatives were examined in the study. Kim et al. looked at the connectedness and motivation aspects of learning, measuring the interdependence and correlation of these concepts' development in an online setting compared to a traditional in-person setting. Connectedness in this study was the degree of relationship among learners concerning sharing their experiences, knowledge, and motivations as active participants online.

Kim et al.'s (2015) findings indicated that participants' feeling of connectedness was associated with greater collaborative learning motivation in online blog forums. Also, there was no connection between participants' connectedness and inspiration in the traditional curriculum presented to learners. Findings indicated that the more connected students felt, the more engaged they were with the online blog (Kim et al., 2015). Students' experience in the hybrid course strengthens the correlation between connectedness and motivation. Students built a level of connectedness during knowledge sharing in online forums. Learners' feelings of connectedness may have been essential to success in learning environments. A limitation of the study was that they used an open-source curriculum for classes. Suggestions for future research included using other web-based curricula focusing on online social space. Also, shared learning goals are an essential consideration for participants. Further suggestions in the study indicated the importance of understanding online learners' web-based experiences and their perceptions of connectedness, motivation, and learning community experience (Kim et al., 2015).

Gomez et al. (2010) used a mixed methods study to investigate team-based learning. The participants were from master-level information technology system courses and were provided a questionnaire for data collection. Research questions explored students' perception of learning within the team-based learning experience, preparedness in a computer-based learning environment, and whether students' motivation and liking this environment affect learning outcomes. The variables were analyzed using the structural equation model. This concept was an effective construct around the learners' perceived enjoyment, focusing on the learners' response to their learning experience—this increased the learners' classroom interactions. The findings of Gomez et al. (2010) indicated that team-based learning and computer support added to the learners' experience. Based on the computer-supported team learning experience, students enjoyed sharing their knowledge and wanted this learning platform.

The perceived enjoyment construct was integrated into the study to explore students' absorption of the learning materials. Gomez et al. (2010) found that perceived motivation is associated with perceived learning; students' perceived learning experience could be related to increased participation and higher knowledge. Also, students felt peer comments were helpful and that their learning time was valuable. Gomez et al.'s findings indicated that positive perceived team activities were associated with learners' perceived academic enjoyment. Student preparedness in an online learning environment and peer teamwork were not found to be significant due to instrument limitations.

The individual preparedness construct based on Gomez et al.'s (2010) results may need further investigation. Their findings indicated that the variance between perceived enjoyment and perceived learning was about 49%. This finding connects to the many conclusions related to the individual preparedness construct. Gomez et al. added that these findings could indicate a need for further scale items to explore this construct. Lastly, students' motivation and liking of their environment were associated with positive online learning success. A suggestion for further research was additional subscales for this construct to acquire more information (Gomez et al., 2010).

Kizilcec and Schneider (2015) conducted a quantitative study and developed the Online Learning Enrollment Intentions Scale. This scale allowed for open-ended responses to acquire learners' perspectives. Research questions explored learner motivations, differences between demographics and across courses, and to what degree motivations were predictive of behavior in MOOCs. The focus was on variations of activities related to behavior. Some of this included re-enrollment and credits acquired. Kizilcec and Schneider's findings indicated that enrollment and academic motivations are associated with student success. There were different needs for learners, such as social engagement and accessibility of course content. Their findings indicated that those who enrolled with friends were more engaged in coursework. Learners involved in meeting new people were participating more in discussion forums. These behaviors can parallel student engagement in courses. For example, learners who earned a degree certificate were more motivated to participate in the lectures, watch suggested videos, and be more engaged during their time (Kizilcec & Schneider, 2015).

Kizilcec and Schneider (2015; v) also found that learners regarded the learning environment as a resource for looking content up in a textbook. Motivation to improve English was a factor associated with enhancing learning in a language course. English language learners' showed less engagement in online forums or comments on assigned online videos. This may have been related to African-American college student learners' need to improve their English skills. Engagement in course content could be associated with the learners' geographic location. Per Kizilcec and Schneider's suggestion, English learners could benefit from additional support to facilitate their understanding of course content. Some limitations of the study included the survey being optional, the survey being submitted to participants in the first three weeks of the course, and the attentiveness and truthfulness of learners' responses (Kizilcec & Schneider, 2015).

Song and Hill's (2009) qualitative study addressed self-regulated learning (SRL) for adults in online graduate school. Research questions explored resource effectiveness, learner strategies, and motivations to participate in learning activities. Song and Hill found that learners reported using a variety of resources to support their learning experience, including instructors and peers, both of which were found to be essential to comprehending the nature of the work. Five significant factors were reported among learners to motivate their participation in course activities: desire or passion for knowledge, monitoring learning progress, social interaction, seeking course information, and course requirements. Suggestions for future research include a more in-depth exploration of SRL and how it might improve learning in this environment (Song & Hill, 2009).

Engagement

There are different types of student engagement, including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Student engagement includes teacher-student interaction, which can influence learning and retention (Furlong et al., 2004; Hew, 2016). Behavioral engagement includes participating in academic activities, such as completing an assignment. Emotional engagement includes students' feelings toward learning and others in their learning environment. Cognitive engagement has a task-specific focus on the student in learning activities (Hew, 2016).

Hew (2016) explored instructors' approaches to engaging students in MOOCs using a qualitative multiple-case study approach. Research questions explored learners' prior subject experience, comparative course experience, and impressions of the system. Hew's findings indicated several design factors that may contribute to learners' engagement, such as active learning and peer interaction. Learners perceived peer interaction and sharing knowledge to encourage engagement. Active learning and students applying what they learned were perceived to reinforce engagement. Attention can increase when the learner understands simple instructions of concepts. A limitation of the study was that students needed to be more open to discussing their reflections on the course.

Hyllegard et al. (2008) conducted a quantitative study, collecting data with an online survey. They examined course completers and students who dropped out of the courses. Research questions included: "Does the academic and demographic profile of students who officially and unofficially differ from one another, and online students in general?.. Do these students have different reasons for leaving their online courses?" (p. 429). Hyllegard et al. (2008) found that those who withdrew had more contact hours in the course and attended full-time; conversely, they needed more time to complete coursework. Further, those who withdrew had lower academic performance, such as a lower GPA at the beginning of courses. There was another subgroup of participants who did not complete courses because of academic dismissal due to their GPA. Additional factors associated with dropout included navigating the online format, course load, and personal concerns. A limitation of the Hyllegard et al. (2008) study was that attrition rates had been a primary indicator of education initiatives for learners' falling short. Considering that motivated individuals have busy lifestyles could be an area of research in academic courses, including student populations that drop out along their educational path.

Kizilcec and Halawa (2015) conducted a study using self-reporting and behavioral data from 100,000 learners across 21 studies. They examined learner attrition in online learning environments and used a survey to collect quantitative data. Research questions investigated learners' performance in courses, satisfaction, persistence, and the factors associated with their disengagement from systems. Kizilcec and Halawa (2015) found that performance was related to geographic location. For example, learners in the United Kingdom had higher diligence with lectures than those in North America. Also, female learners in Asia, Africa, and Latin America scored lower in diligence and performance than in North America or the United Kingdom.

Kizilcec and Halawa (2015) explained that learner motivation is related to success in online learning; likewise, lack of motivation is a barrier to success. Students who had a higher level of watching educational videos were more engaged. Those who disengaged in this aspect of learning found course satisfaction to be lower. Further findings indicated many gaps in the literature in understanding student satisfaction across different genders and geographic locations. Also, older learners' had more diligent lectures and assessments but did not score higher than younger learners.'

According to Kizilcec and Halawa (2015), a learner's mindset and goal setting are factors in online learning success. For example, many learners were disengaged because of a lack of time or an inability to meet deadlines. Setting goals and striving toward completion allowed successful students to achieve higher learning. A growth mindset is correlated with students' higher learning goals, which alludes to a difference in learner behavior and perception of their experiences. A limitation of Kizilcec and Halawa's study was that they needed to provide more evidence on achievement gaps. They speculated that traditional schooling's psychological processes were present (Kizilcec & Halawa, 2015).

In a panel data study, Bacolod et al. (2018) compared distance learning courses with traditional courses on several outcomes, including completion rate. Their findings indicated a lower completion rate for online courses. Also, males in distance learning had a lower completion rate than females. African-American people had a lower completion rate than White or Latin learners'. A limitation of Bacolod et al.'s study was that they could not provide a rationale for achievement gaps. They proposed this was due to psychological processes such as social belonging (Bacolod et al., 2018).

Athens (2018) conducted a study to establish a baseline for instructional data and potential retention efforts to better engage students in online learning. The findings indicated that student perceptions of learning and engagement were positively correlated with grade outcomes and, based on a two-way MANOVA, had multivariate effects in areas such as age, disability, race, and ethnicity. Engagement and learning were found to influence students' grades regardless of demographics. Also, Hispanic and African

American students were engaged more, but grade outcomes were lower than White students. Further, a qualitative analysis was conducted with an open-response question. There were many subareas for this qualitative analysis, and the study will highlight some findings. Students indicated that various course content helped them understand the course content. Time spent with content also increased course success: consistent course materials, organized shows, and orientation with learning outcomes. A limitation of the study is that it was conducted during a semester at one institution. This may only be representative of some populations that participated in the study. They said a baseline could be acquired further across more than one semester.

Online Learning

Online learning is internet-delivered with different levels integrated into the learning platform (Ashong & Commander, 2012). So and Brush (2008) conducted a quantitative study to explore collaborative learning, social presence, and online learning satisfaction. Research questions investigated the relationships between learners' perceived social education, cooperative learning, satisfaction, and essential factors related to students in these areas. A goal was to understand factors of learners' perceived experiences, such as social presence. So and Brush's (2008) findings indicated a positive association between students' satisfaction with online learning and collaborative learning. Also, there was a positive association between online learning and student motivation—students with more distance courses perceived satisfaction with education as positive (So & Brush, 2008).

So and Brush (2008) found that factors promoting closeness and trust, including the choice of individualized learning and social presence, were associated with higher student engagement. Those doing independent studies were found to have a lower social presence than those working collaboratively. The study's limitations included the effect of psychological distance and the fact that the researchers could only give a postulated view of the relationship between social presence and collaborative learning (So & Brush, 2008).

Ashong and Commander (2012) conducted a quantitative study on the association of ethnicity and gender with online learning perceptions. Research questions addressed whether there is a difference in perception between African American and White students, a difference in perception between African American and other students, or a difference in perception between African American male and female students. Ashong and Commander's findings indicated a positive perception of online learning across ethnicity and gender. Their results showed little difference in online learning perceptions among African-American, White, and other students. Ashong and Commander's study was limited by its unequal sample size, as they could not acquire a representative sample for each ethnic group and gender. Also, the survey did not allow participants to detail their responses (Ashong & Commander, 2012).

Academic Achievement

Academic achievement includes results following an exam or completing an assignment (Broadbent & Poon, 2015);. Wimms (2008, as cited in Maton et al., 2011, p. 68) expressed that there are multiple student achievement and retention levels. Their literature review summary concluded that "negative experiences that hinder student progress include lack of family and peer support in ongoing college-going behaviors, perceptions of merit, feelings of belonging and validation" (Wimms, 2008, as cited in Maton et al., 2011, p. 68).

Curtis and Werth (2015) conducted a qualitative study that explored "student achievement in a K–12 in an online learning environment and the effect parents had on student success" (p. 163). A primary question was: "What factors affect student achievement in a K -12 online school?" (Curtis & Werth, 2015, p. 165). This question focused on parental participation and perception of student success. Their findings indicated that much research is generalized to this population. No single factor was perceived to affect achievement, but parental communications of hopes, dreams, and educational expectations all factor into children's academic success. Curtis and Werth's study was limited by its lack of a representative sample for the ethnic population. Another limitation was that participant feedback was given mainly by parents and not students (Curtis & Werth, 2015).

Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2018) conducted a study that included minority adolescents, examining factors that "promote or hinder the learning experiences and academic self-concept of minority students attending online high schools, and qualitative interviews with a sample population of African American and Hispanic students" (p. 14). Qualitative studies do not allow for the interpretation of casual relationships. Findings from this study included seven factors that promote online learning experiences and academic self-concept, including collaborative learning activities, knowledge-building opportunities, and access to resources. Kumi-Yeboah also found that two factors constrain online learning experiences and academic self-concept: lack of social presence and cultural inclusion.

Broadbent and Poon (2015) explored how students could "best apply self-regulated learning strategies to achieve academic success within the online learning environment" (p. 2). Findings included a weak association between effort regulation strategies and academic achievement. Broadbent and Poon did a review of peer-reviewed articles over the last decade "that reviewed these strategies with learning outcomes" (p. 2). In this study, no specific questions were asked. The authors found both advantages and disadvantages to online learning and promoted further research into SRL and academic achievement. Broadbent and Poon's conclusions emphasized that, with the increase of online learning, understanding students' SRL approaches would help their success. Increased peer learning is another factor explored in the context of online learning (Broadbent & Poon, 2015).

Eugene and Clark (2012) emphasized that students of African descent face challenges in STEM fields, including online learning platforms. Byars-Winston et al. (2008, as cited in Eugene & Clark, 2012) noted that social dynamics and cultural and individual influences could inform retention decisions. Investigating these areas in e-learning to promote student success and close achievement gaps is worthwhile.

Acclimation

Kuo (2014) studied student interaction, satisfaction, and performance in accelerated online learning environments using an online learning course management system. In online learning, student interaction can occur through different technology means while learning. Interaction is essential to student success, persistence, and satisfaction (2008, as cited in Bray et. al.). In the study, they wished to determine how student interaction was connected to student satisfaction in online learning. Findings indicated that learners' had a certain amount of interaction with instructors, course content, and other learners. Students were moderately satisfied with online learning. They utilized a survey entitled to assess interaction and learning effectiveness. Respondents scored on three types of interaction: satisfaction and internet self-efficacy. The authors found satisfaction that student-learner-content interaction was a significant predictor. A positive correlation between internet self-efficacy and interaction was found in learners' confidence level in utilizing the internet. Further recommendations for research included the impact of interaction on learning outcomes of satisfaction and performance.

Yilmaz and Karatas (2018) expressed that learner interactions included learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-instructor (1989, as cited in Moore). It encourages learners, researchers, and institutions to have interaction as an essential component of learning. Interaction comes before collaborations in learners' education (2014, as cited in Zhao et al.). Learner-to-learner interaction consists of learning and information sharing with others (2001, as cited by Chou; 2012, Hawkins et al.). Learner-content interaction relates to cognitive structuring and understanding of content (1989, as cited in Moore). Learner-instructor interaction occurs before, during, and after the learning process. The instructor guides, instructs, and supports the learner (1993, as cited in Moore).

Perceptions of interaction is another concept that notes perceptions of interactions in the environment. The study focused on developing a measurement tool for determining learners' interactions in online learning environments. A scale development method was used with no specific questions used. Findings related to a confirmatory factor analysis found that all factors were related. The data analysis was determined with a rotation operation to assess correlations between factors and variables (2013, as cited in Tabachnick & Fidell).

Samayoa et al. (2016) conducted an article review examining the potential of open online courses (MOOCs) at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The prompting of the review was how HBCUs could participate in the conversation of distance learning technology, current literature, and data on technological structures. The premise is that they could advocate the racial digital divide nationwide. The review was divided into three areas. The first was MOOCs' emergence and integration in HBCUs, which examined the roles and needs of faculty, the student, their learning experience, and the adoption of the MOOCs at HBCUs. Findings indicated that many short stops in national data give an accurate view of institutional resources and integration of MOOCs. There is a digital divide with the connectivity of this learning option. There are disparities. Further recommendations for research included connecting online learning with securing opportunities such as jobs and partnerships (2008, as cited in Vohra).

Summary and Conclusions

The topic of African-American college students' perceived motivation and engagement in online learning environments needs to be expanded. This study area will likely provide relevant stakeholders with valuable information in the fight against student attrition and underachievement. Literature has shown that there needs to be more research on the perceived experiences of African-American college students. Qualitative studies conducted on engagement and motivation in online college education are few. They include studies done by Barak et al. (2016), Curtis and Werth (2015), Hew (2016), Kim and Frick (2011), Kim et al. (2015), and Song and Hill (2009).

African-American college students learning online experience lower levels of engagement and motivation than their peers. This area represents a gap in the literature that this study saught to address. Milman et al. (2015) concluded that minority students have unique online learning needs. A significant theme from the literature was learner motivation. Kim and Frick (2011) indicated that learners' are more self-motivated to complete courses when learning goals are relevant to them. Learners' feeling of connectedness is essential to success in online learning environments (Kim et al., 2015).

It is important to understand online learners' web-based experiences, feelings of connectedness, motivation, and essential experiences (Kim et al., 2015). The study by Gomez et al. (2010) investigated team-based learning. Students enjoyed sharing their knowledge and wanted this platform of understanding based on the computer-supported team learning experience. Also, they felt peer comments were helpful and their time in education was proper (Gomez et al., 2010). Researchers have been exploring different predictive factors in student success in online learning. MOOCs are increasing in number as learning platforms expand. Student attrition in online environments has led to a need for interest groups to understand further diverse program options (Martin et al., 2018).

Motivation and engagement are factors in students' online learning experience and their success (Kim & Frick, 2011).

According to Bacolod et al. (2018), Hew (2016), Kizilcec and Halawa (2015), and Mehay and Pema (2018), research on learner engagement has shown that factors such as instructor interaction and peer connections can impact student motivation. Students' perceived learning experiences can be met with some barriers, including distance, navigating online platforms, satisfaction, and even language obstacles (Bacolod et al., 2018; Gomez et al., 2010; So & Brush, 2008). There have been other research studies, including those employing a quantitative approach and surveys for data collection, that showed a decrease in engagement can be due to a lack of time for student participation (Kim & Frick, 2011). Learners have different learning goals and life responsibilities that they navigate while in their programs. During academic progression, poor academic performance can impact course completion. Learning online versus face-to-face can be an adjustment for many (Hew, 2016; Hyllegard & Deng, 2008; Kizilcec & Halawa, 2015).

Kizilcec and Halawa (2015) and Bacolod et al. (2018) noted some factors that can increase student engagement, including collaborative learning and feeling connected to the experience. Student satisfaction can come from joint work with peers, and this can increase engagement in online forums. There are many levels to student achievement and retention. Factors affecting retention include ethnicity, gender, and social and cultural dynamics. African-American students' self-concept in learning can be diverse. Individual influences can also influence their academic progression (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018).

As discussed in Chapter 3, the rationale for choosing the research design included how active learning can reinforce engagement. Following this, Chapter 3 will address the researcher's role, sample group, methodology, recruitment process, data collection approach, research analysis, and ethical considerations. Investigating these areas in e-learning to promote student success and close achievement gaps is worthwhile. According to Learning Theories (2021), different conceptions inform the course of this study. An overview of the qualitative approach, using grounded theory to research further in this study, will be provided in Chapter 3.

This dissertation aimed to add first-hand information from African-American students attempting online learning that could inform policymakers and educational leaders. Thus, the knowledge acquired from this study could help achieve positive social change via enhanced educational experiences for the population of interest. Moreover, the information acquired from this study focused on helping educational leaders and curriculum development specialists achieve positive social change goals via enhanced educational experiences for the population of interest.

Chapter 3: Research Method

In this chapter, I delve into various areas of the research method. I aimed to add first-hand information from African-American students attempting online learning that could inform policymakers and educational leaders. Thus, the knowledge acquired from this study could help achieve positive social change via enhanced educational experiences for the population of interest. I explain the rationale for choosing the research design, including how active learning can reinforce engagement. I also address the my role as the researcher, the methodology, and trustworthiness issues.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research questions were used to guide my study:

RQ1: How do African-American college students describe their online learning experiences?

RQ2: How do African American college students describe their motivation to complete their academics in online learning?

The study's topic was African-American college students' perceived motivation and engagement in online learning environments. People have innate psychological needs and growth tendencies which form the foundations of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT suggests that personality integration and environmental situations that arise for people promote growth tendencies. The research questions connect to the theory because the theory is about self-determination. People have various idiosyncratic experiences that play a role in those persons' motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Individuals: As discussed in the theory, individuals' perceived experiences related to motivation and engagement may reflect those persons' needs. Thus, students' perception of their experiences in online learning is an essential area of study.

The current study is grounded in constructivism theory. Constructivism was introduced and espoused by many theorist such as Vygotsky, Piaget, Dewey, and Bruner. Constructivism, as a concept, suggests that learning is an active and productive process added (Learning Theories, 2021., para. 1-3). The learner is perceived as an information constructor, and the early learning theorist contributing to this research was Piaget's view. "People actively construct or create their subjective representations of reality. A person's knowledge is based on their personal experiences stated" (Learning Theories, 2021., para. 1-3). This includes a person's hypotheses of their environment. Learners continuously test these hypotheses through social negotiation and engagement with others. Each person constructs and processes aspects of knowledge differently. Vygotsky (1896) noted that social development includes social interaction, more knowledge of others, and a zone of proximal development. Bruner added that learning occurs within problem-solving instances, considers past experiences, and learns through other relationships (Learning Theories, 2021., para. 1-3).

According to Kop (2011), constructivism can be a framework for understanding learning. Further contributors to this theory include Siemens and Downes 2008-2009 added (Kop, 2011). They believed the learner connects to the learning community to find and share information with others. Learners build personal learning networks. This model frames a learner's relationship to networks of knowledge, which can be comprised of many directions.

Covington (2000) noted that another theoretical foundation is goal theory, motivation, and school achievement. These are additional theories that informed this study. It has been shown that each person has their motives as drives; an inner state towards action is the premise of motivation emphasized (Covington, 2000). Achievement motivation theory, developed by Atkinson in 1957 and 1964 and McClelland in 1961, indicates that striving for success and avoiding failure comes before achievement. Further actions for an individual are often given meaning and purpose by the goals the individual seeks out. Achievement goal theory embodies motives as goal contributors and, as cited by (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986 Urdan, 1997; Urdan & Maehr, 1995).

For individuals, this goal differs based on achievement goals and one's subjective purpose. Also, this is further based on an individual’s cognitive self-regulation processes. This process is based on the student's active engagement in facets of their learning contributors, as cited (Pintrich, 1999; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman et al., 1994). School achievement is a subarea of achievement goal theory focusing on academic outcomes. Social goals and academic goals can contribute to empowering an individual to achieve more academically in school. Further, within goal theory, researchers identified that in understanding classroom achievement, the quality of self-regulation is linked to academic goals and achievement behaviors.

Role of the Researcher

I, as the researcher, designed, conducted, and was a participant observer in this study. In the study, I performed all interviews and then processed the data. To remain unbiased, I recruited participants with whom I had no prior relationship. I maintained professionalism in my body language and tone of voice during interviews. In regard to myself, I am half African American, a graduate student, and engaged in online learning are potential biases within the study. I engaged in self-reflective journaling following each interview to help maintain any ethical bias so there is no conflict. My lived experience while conducting the study is aligned with the process of reflexivity. I found this helpful for me to gauge being unbiased and aware of blind spots that could arise. A reflexive stance will also assist in meditating any power differential that could arise in a study (Hanson, 1994 as cited in Tufford & Newman, 2016).

I used bracketing to avoid influencing participants' explanations of the phenomena with my own experiences. Bracketing in research with participants is taking notes on their comments and feelings and or analyzing the data obtained from one's impressions that could arise stated (Rolls & Relf, 2006 as cited in Tufford & Newman, 2016). This is helpful to increase the researcher's clarity and engagement with participants' experiences and further understand the capacity of their experiences noted (Rolls & Relf, 2006 as cited in Tufford & Newman, 2016).

I have had the opportunity to gain supervised clinical experiences, including engaging in observing clients and active listening. This further involves being open-minded with clients, unbiased and non-judgmental. Also, developing interview skills included a crucial element in counseling, such as open-ended questions, building rapport, and demonstrating empathy (Prout et al., 2021). These skills were implemented and informed in approaching the participating interviewing and ethically collecting information regarding their experiences. In a short time, it aided me in building rapport and trust with participants during the interview.

Methodology

The methodology below describes the population of interest and sampling procedures to determine the appropriate sampling size. This section also includes descriptions of how the data was collected, including the process of obtaining University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and participant consent.

Participant Selection

The target population consisted of male and female African-American college students at both the master's and doctoral levels attending an online university. According to the NCES National Center for Education Statistics (2021), a large online university in located in the United States annually serves 49,695 students. Of those students, 19,314 are full-time, and 22,719 are part-time. Students enrolled by race vary, with the highest being 39% of students were Black or African American, 37% were White, and 10% of students' race is unknown.

Procedures For Recruitment

The sampling procedure applied to the process used to select participants. Participant selection criteria included participants who were 18 or older, self-identified as African American, already had their bachelor's degree, and were enrolled in a graduate school program online. Once I received approval from the IRB to recruit participants, I placed a post in a virtual participant pool. The participant pool department assisted in setting up my virtual bulletin board post for students to learn about my study. This was a virtual bulletin board, and graduate students were asked about their availability to participate in the semistructured interviews. They were provided an email associated with the research study to contact me about their interest in participating. I worked with the participant pool administration on the engagement of participants.

Sampling Frame

In this study, the sampling units were African-American graduate students who participated full or parttime in online education. The online programs constituted the sampling frame. The participant eligibility criterion included adults ages 18+ who were African-American college students in an online graduate program. Participants were pooled from the first and second year in their graduate programs for the study. The consideration was that they were at the beginning of their degree course. Also, the interviewing questions were more salient in inquiring about participants' perceived experiences. This was considered as those participants had yet to complete their degrees. Participants who have completed their degrees and those with years past degree completion were excluded as they may need help to recall difficulties in their past degree pathway. This category is considered because of participants: The inclusion criterion was graduate programs participants attended in college. The exclusion was those not enrolled in a graduate program from this population of interest. The additional exclusion in this study was the race of the population of interest. Participants from the sampling units were African-American college students.

Sample Size

The minimum sample size was six to12 participants for in-depth interviews that describe the phenomenon of interest. Saturation was in mind as respondents' opinions in the analysis framework were given a code. The focus is that the phenomenon of interest addresses the research question (Shetty, 2021). As an interviewer, based on note taking, thematic saturation was an indicator that saturation had occurred. In the interviewing process, no new themes or concepts from subsequent interviews would be considered or noted (see Guest et al., 2020). The transcription process would allow me to note the themes arising from each interview.

Participation

The sampling strategy used was purposeful selection. In qualitative studies, purposive, quota, and snowball sampling are the most common sampling strategies noted (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In purposive sampling, participants are selected based on the researcher's perspective on who would be most informative. Snowball sampling involves the researcher receiving referrals from previous participants. During theoretical sampling, the researcher's selection of participants is an ongoing process based on emerging findings. This ensures that the theoretical concept has adequate representation in the data collected. In many grounded theory studies, purposive sampling is used. The premise is that data collection and analyses are being conducted concurrently (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Many factors were considered in selecting the appropriate sampling strategy for this research. First, upon enrollment, many participants know that transitioning from a traditional brick-and-mortar school to an online university is their choice. Second, this education offers some flexibility. Third, there are various degree options based on the population of interest. Fourth, no specific list is readily accessible to a broad cross-section of learners' representative sample of the identified target population.

Data Collection

In this study, I explored several concepts of engagement and motivation in online learning of African-American college students. Recruitment occurred through a participant pool virtual bulletin to engage potential participants. Participants were initially sought across a 2–4-week period. This time frame was considered based on the participant to acquire participants for the study**.** This was extended as the participant pool interest slowed down and additional participants were needed. The process from recruitment to data collection took about 10 weeks. The recruitment bulletin post included the type of research study, eligibility requirements, and a link to the study's description. I completed the necessary documentation for IRB approval for participant recruitment. This was essential for the participant pool to assist in how viewed potential participants.

Participants were interviewed; sub-questions were included, and follow-up questions provided direction during the semi-interviews. Before their interviews, participants had to permit an audio recording of their interviews. Permission was requested in writing and verbally from participants. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes, allowing ample time to complete. I completed these interviews. The instrumentation used for the study was semi-structured interviews, which were conducted through an app platform Google Hangouts as students are distance learners. The interview questions are found in the Appendix A.

In a semi-structured interview, knowledge of students' perceptions of their online learning experiences could be better understood. The data obtained was audio recorded, improving the data's validation. These recordings were transcribed verbatim. The data collected was secured on a laptop with password protection and encrypted. The computer has complete Windows security. This computer is only accessible to the researcher. This was secured in a non-accessible location to be locked in the researcher's home office space during data collection based on participants' subjective experiences. Common themes that arise were compiled. Audio-recorded information was transcribed. An online transcription service, Nvivo.com, was utilized. Then, this information coded utilizing this software tool. The documents for this are saved in a password-protected folder.

Data Analysis Plan

A qualitative methodology with a descriptive phenomenological design was used. The qualitative design of this study is an essential design used to explore African-American college students' engagement and motivation in online learning. The design was explored further this phenomenon of individuals using semi-structured interviews **(**Rabionet, 2011). This was the central tenant of collecting data. The transcribed interviews were reviewed before beginning data analysis. Categories that materialize allowed me to identify broad themes. I itemized these terms and highlighted important themes that were completed. The data collection had a step-by-step process. There was an open code to list participants' exact comments, words, or phrases to identify concepts. Thematic coding allowed the emergence of the analysis of identifying concepts. The data was narrowed down to fewer themes. The data was uploaded into Nvivo.com, a data analysis software. I analyzed the research study's connection and interview questions related to the research questions.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The accuracy of the findings was explored based on the four components of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited by Korstens & Moser, 2018). For credibility, saturation, member checking, environmental, and data triangulation will be attended. For transferability, the findings were meant to be generalized to other populations. In the study, a complete description was aligned with themes derived from the data acquired following the study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit multiple participants with different views. The participants were pulled from various graduate programs early in their academic pathway. The thick description allowed me to feature the intersectionality of beliefs, relationships, context, and other details that may arise.

For dependability, the data acquired from the findings enriches further research. The data acquired includes reflections on the emergence of the findings. To further analyze the transparency of the data. Participants were interviewed on days that were conducive to their availability. Participants were interviewed via Google hangouts. This ensured dependability and credibility in the study of the transcription process. To ensure that persistent observation occurs in the coding, interpretation, and data management. For confirmability, I used the journal to document concerns, noting assumptions that may arise and impact the trustworthiness of this study. This is discussed further in the role of the researcher in the areas of reflexivity. Confirmability incorporates that the interpretation of the data is grounded and not based on personal preference (Korstens & Moser, 2018).

Ethical Procedures

The American Psychological Association ethics code (2017) outlines the rules of conduct for a psychologist. The five general principles and ten sections apply to research in psychological work. In section eight, 15 ethical considerations apply to the area of research. These were the basis of ethical procedures in the study. In research, ethical dilemmas are sometimes difficult to predict. Some mediators were informed of consent, which gives how the research is conducted, participant access, and data storage. Ethical principles were considered and integrated by the researcher, specifically in autonomy, justice, and beneficence (Orb et. al., 2001). Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was acquired before reaching out to potential participants. In the study, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, there were no repercussions for not participating, their data was secured, and informed how it was secured (appendix will be provided). Informed consent was acquired, and an incentive was provided upon completion.

Summary

Discussed in Chapter 3 was the rationale for choosing the research design, including how active learning can be a reinforcing approach to engagement. This dissertation aimed to add first-hand information from African-American students attempting online learning that could inform policymakers and educational leaders. Thus, the knowledge acquired from this study can help achieve positive social change via enhanced educational experiences for the population of interest.

Investigating these areas in e-learning to promote student success and close achievement gaps is worthwhile. According to Learning Theories (2021), different conceptions inform the course of this study. An overview of the reflections on this study and an account of the growth in the research process was provided in Chapter 4. Reflexivity was something to keep in mind regarding the role of the researcher in the process and being self-aware. Research bias can impact study outcomes. Further, reflexivity is the process of self-reflection about oneself as a researcher. This includes examining one's assumptions, preoccupations, and values and how these affect research decisions during the study. These areas were discussed further, including possible biases (Korstens & Moser, 2018).

Chapter 4: Results

With this dissertation, I sought to add first-hand information from African-American students attempting online learning. This information can inform policymakers and educational leaders. The knowledge acquired from this study could help achieve positive social change via enhanced educational experiences for the population of interest. There are considerations around student engagement and motivation that need to be researched surrounding this population. There needs to be more data on achievement gaps between African American and other college students in online learning environments (Rovai & Gallien, 2005). Moreover, there needs to be more research on the first-hand perceived experiences of African-American college students. There may be further impediments to students for whom this study could contribute (Rovai & Gallien, 2005).

The following were the study's research questions:

RQ1: How do African-American college students describe their online learning experiences?

RQ2: How do African American college students describe their motivation to complete their academics in online learning?

In this chapter, I describe the study's setting and the demographic data of the 10 participants interviewed for this study. Then, I share how the data was collected and analyzed. Following this, I share the study's evidence of trustworthiness and the qualitative results. I then wrap up Chapter 4 with a summary leading into Chapter 5.

Setting

The interviews for this study took place online via Google Meet, formerly named Google Hangouts. I collected data from my home office. An audio recording was made during these meetings, but no video recording. Ten participants emailed me in response to recruitment from bulletin board post. I sent each participant a follow-up email to review the consent form, and all 10 participants responded, "I consent" to participation. During the interviews, both I and the participants were audio recorded with cameras off. The participants and I were in different locations. Participants were not visible to me and could join from any place of their choosing. These settings did not impact my data collection.

Demographics

Ten participants were interviewed for this study. The participants were all African-American females, nine of whom identified as heterosexual and one as homosexual. Of the 10 participants, one was in her first year of graduate school, three were in their second year, three were in their third year, and the final three were in their fifth year or later years. And the last demographic data to report is the participants' college program. One participant said they were enrolled in an arts and science program, three in a business program, two in a communication program, two in nursing, and two in education programs.

Data Collection

Data collection began when the IRB approval was granted (Approval # 01-20-23-0588154). The process from recruitment to data collection took about 10 weeks. I used a participant pool bulletin board to acquire participants. Research data was collected from 10 participants who consented to participate. At the start of each interview, there was a briefing on the privacy and consent processes. At that point, participants completed the interviews via Google Meet audio recordings. I collected data from my home office. Participants participated in interviews through Google Meet.

Participants could participate from any location of their choice online. Participants and I discussed an agreed time for the interview via email. Ten primary questions were presented to participants during the interview. Participants, even when the interview presented a sub-question or follow-up question asking if they had more to say, gave their subjective responses in the time frame range for the interview. I attributed the interview duration to the participants who felt they gave adequate responses during the interview. All interviews were done as planned, as explained in Chapter 3. Interviews ranged from under 20 min (two participants) to 60 min, with the average interview taking 30 min. No deviation from the interview plan occurred.

After interviews, participants were provided with a resource list of mental health national sites and helplines. Additionally, each participant received a $25 Amazon gift card following participation. Participants were engaged in follow-up interviews to provide each with their verbatim transcripts for 7-10 days from the interview. At this point, each participant was given copies of their transcript. Every participant gave their final comments on their time in the study. I then uploaded the participant interviews into Nvivo transcript software, and a random number code was assigned to each participant to track each participants’ unique interview.

Participants were engaged across 21 days following interviews for follow-up to provide each participant with the researcher's interpretation. Only two participants responded via email to confirm their transcripts. These two reviewed areas of interest they had and gave me feedback. The remaining participants did not respond and were not provided with a copy of their transcript. I followed the steps described in Chapter 3 to engage the remaining eight participants. I chose not to send transcripts to these eight participants to avoid sending unnecessary participant emails that lacked the potential for interpretation, feedback, or revision. I engaged each participant for member checking. In member checking, participants can be seen as co-researchers in the collaborative process to give feedback on their interviews (Koelsch, 2013). Member checking for researchers can present challenges such as participants going into different topics, seeking to protect themselves, rationalizing behaviors, and or interpreting the data reviewed positively. Participants' feedback can add to the researcher's reflection on misinterpretations and other areas discussed as a part of reflectivity emphasized (Koelsch, 2013). I did my part to engage participants in this process.

Data Analysis

The 10 interviews served as the primary source of research data. After every three interviews, I conducted a review of the data to identify themes with the use of Nvivo. The themes that emerged from the data were analyzed. Following this approach, I ensured the constructivism theory methodology was present throughout the research.

The qualitative research data analysis was thematic. Thematic analysis is defined as describing implicit and explicit aspects of data. These are summary points for later analysis (Guest et al., 2012). This approach is valuable and flexible when producing themes in qualitative analysis from large amounts of data (Braun & Clarke, 2008, as cited in Jones, 2022). The phases that aligned with this process were familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting. Each phase is described next.

The thematic qualitative approach is helpful for inductive and deductive studies. Deductive studies have predetermined themes when approaching the data. Inductive studies let the data determine the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2008, as cited in Jones, 2022). Tables 1 and 2 describe the phases of the data process with Pt, short for the word "participant." Each participant was given a number based on the order of participation. This allowed me to keep track of participant data across the study.

Phase 1: Familiarization with The Data

I familiarized myself with the data by listening to the audio recordings following each interview. The interviews were analyzed in batches of three participants. I reflected on the interviews, initially coding ideas and becoming more familiar with the data. This assisted me with the later coding and analysis. I kept the participants responses to the interview and research questions in mind. The analysis was consistent with the constructivism theory methodology and how the study links back to the interview and research questions. Audio recordings were uploaded into Nvivo 10 computer transcription software for further analysis. Nvivo transcription pulled key terms from participants that helped me learn more about the emergent themes in the study.

Phase 2: Generated Themes Reviewed

In the Nvivo software, I used paragraph word mentions, which generated themes by those most frequently mentioned across the interview to assist with analysis.

See Table 1 for the word query example for Pt2. Participants were given a number from one to 10 in the study, which is included in the theme analysis to follow. Hence, the participants were referenced as “Pt1” in the study. These codes were categories based on the operational definitions in Chapter 1 of my research.

Figure 1

Word Frequency Query: Tree Maps Pt1

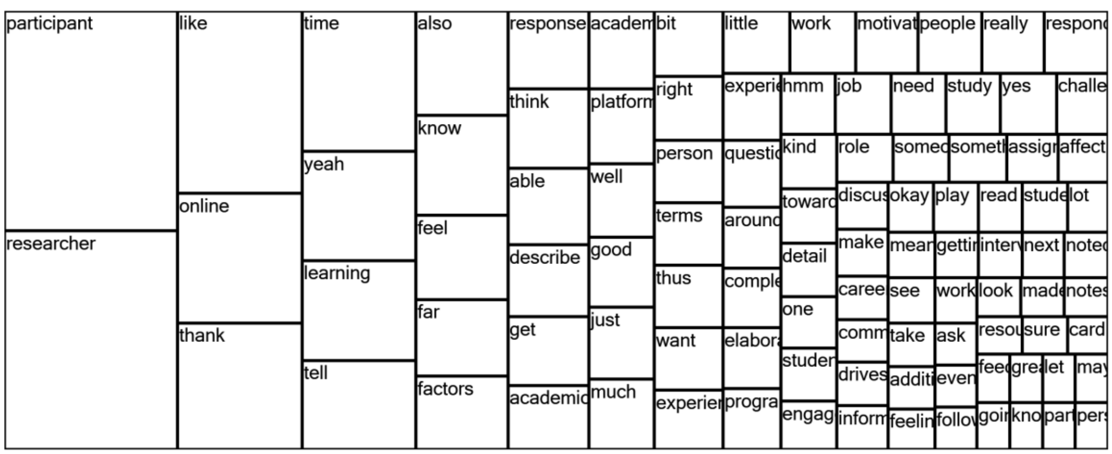


Figure 2

Word Frequency Query: Tree Maps Pt2

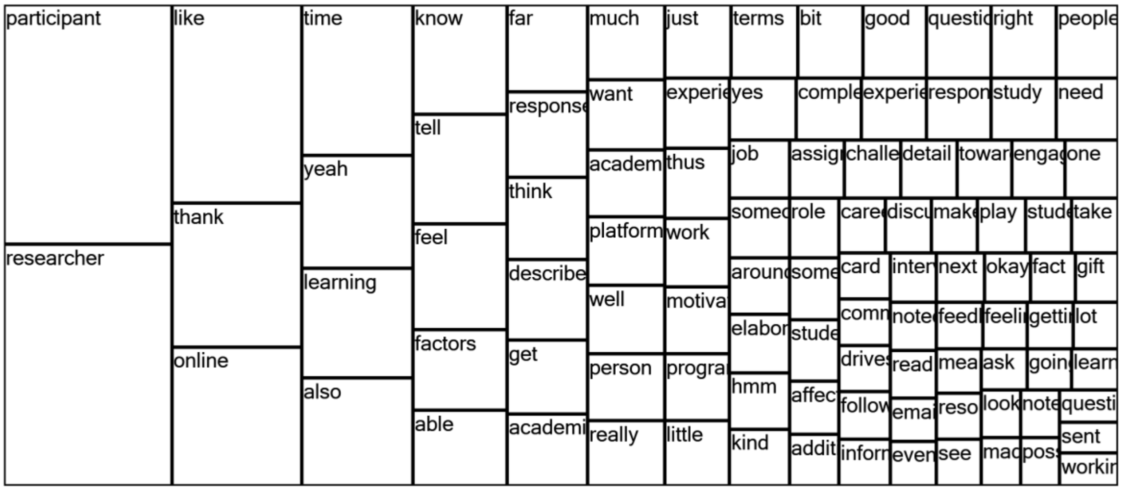


Figure 3

Word Frequency Query: Tree Maps Pt3

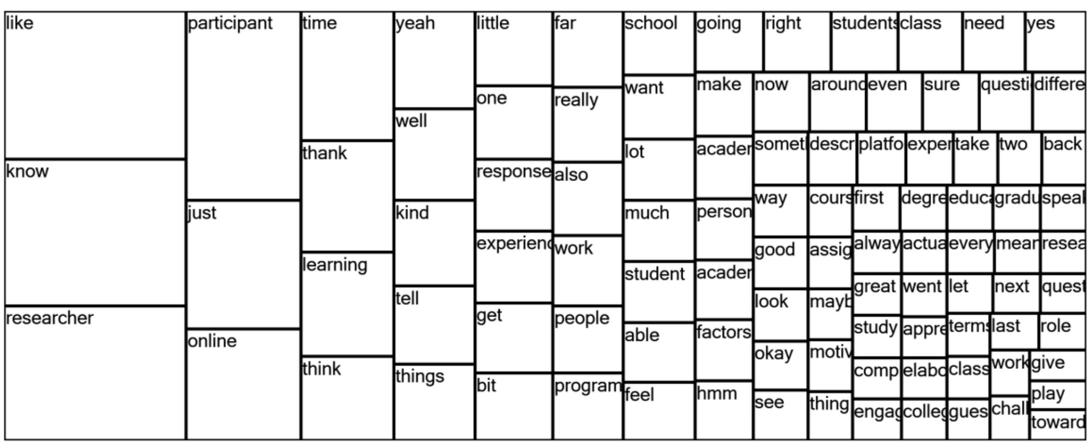


Figure 4

Word Frequency Query: Tree Maps Pt4

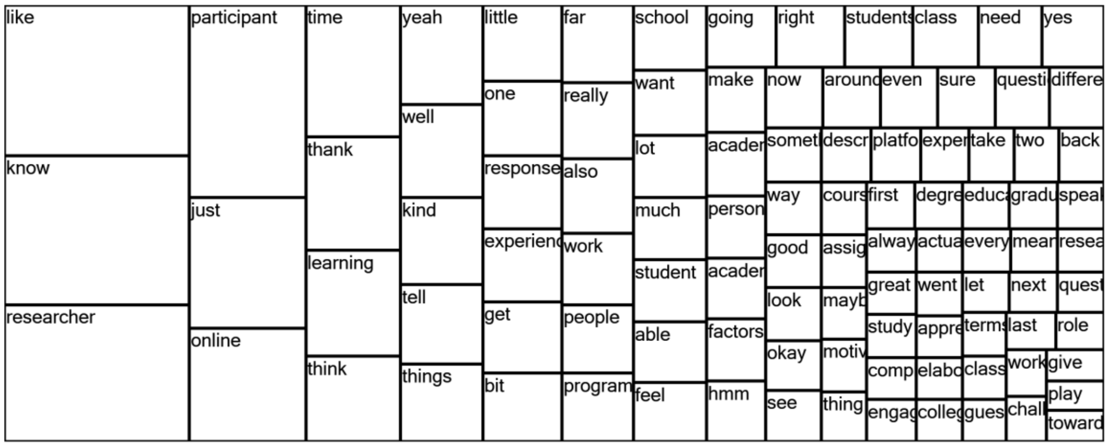


Figure 5

Word Frequency Query: Tree Maps Pt5

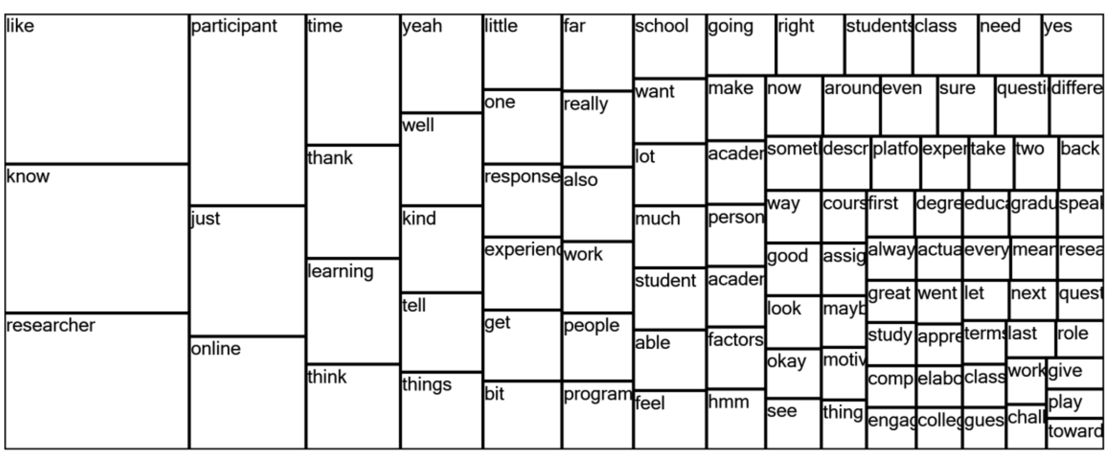


Figure 6

Word Frequency Query: Tree Maps Pt6

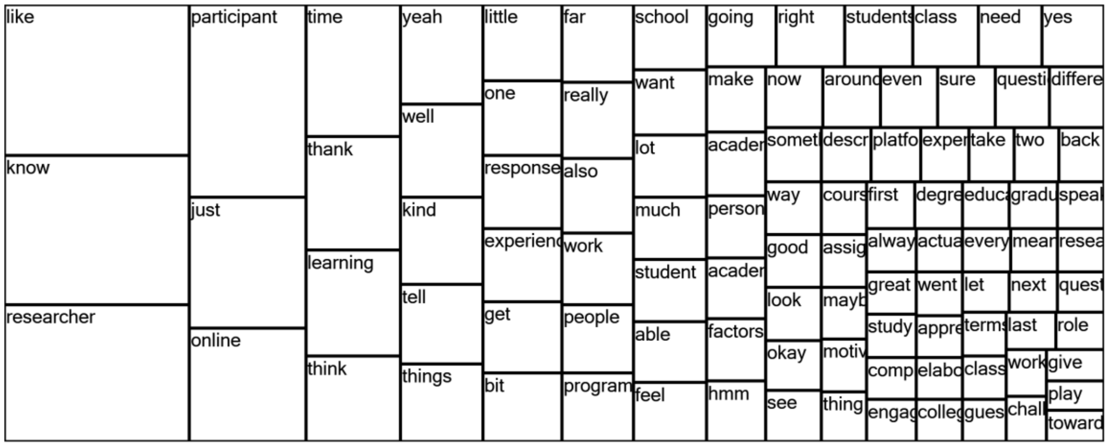


Figure 7

Word Frequency Query: Tree Maps Pt7

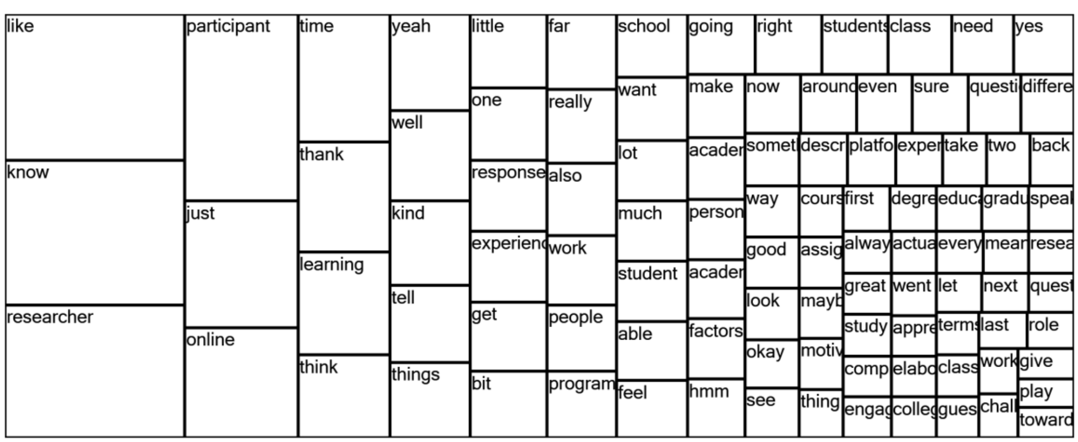


Figure 8

Word Frequency Query: Tree Maps Pt8

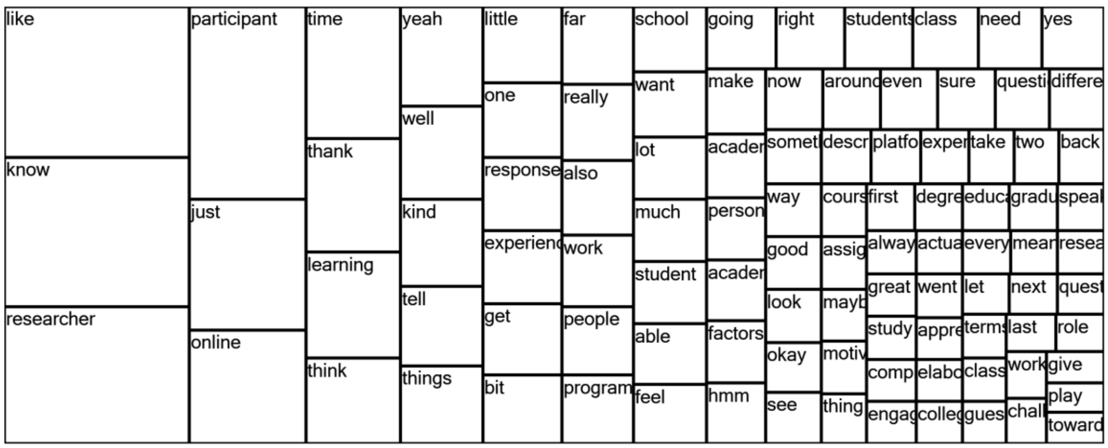


Figure 9

Word Frequency Query: Tree Maps Pt9

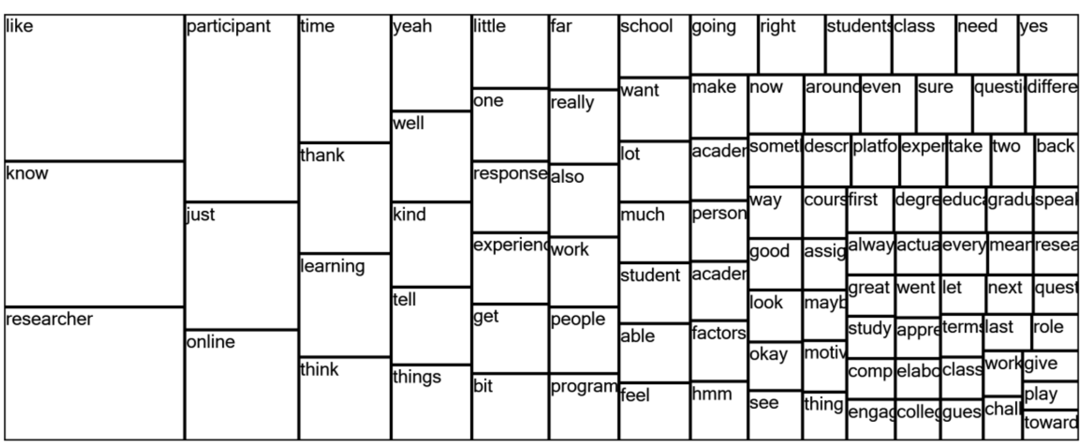
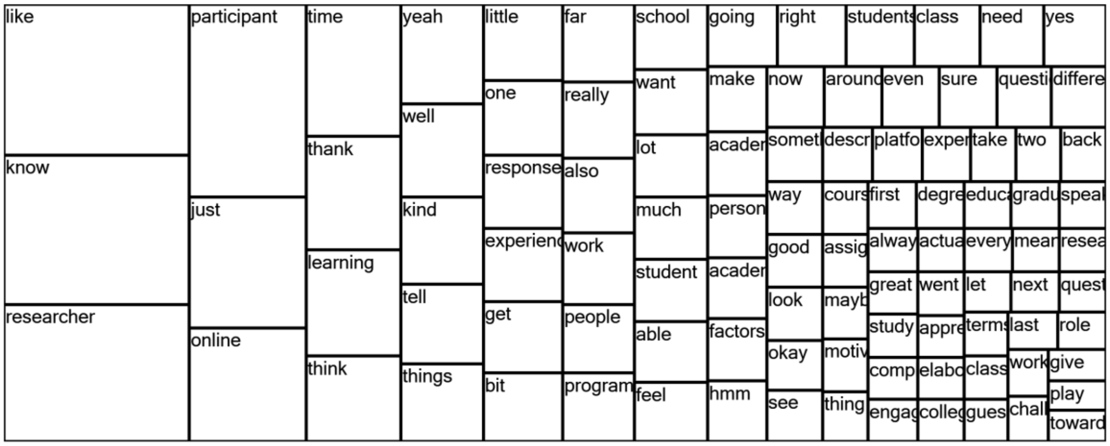


Figure 10

Word Frequency Query: Tree Maps Pt10



Phase 3: Reviewing Themes

There were 74 codes that emerged from Nvivo across the interviews. I narrowed down the most frequently mentioned words across 10 interviews by reviewing them across the 10 participant interviews, noting those most used. The following themes emerged: online learning, program, student, online platform, a little bit, research, time, experience, and learning as the most across the interviews. Additionally, themes outside of the Nvivo coding across the interviews included an additional theme of the academic pathway. Themes were narrowed down in Table 1 based on frequent mentions across participant interviews. Examples of the coding are in Tables 1 and 2. The participant coverage indicates the most frequent words of the participant across the interview. Figure 11 shows Participant 1, and Figure 12 shows Participant 2. The premise of showing these examples is to highlight the process of acquiring the major themes noted above. Some of these codes were similar to other participants'; hence, frequent word mentions were narrowed down to five themes in Table 1 and grouped in Table 2.

Table 1

Coding of Terms Pt1

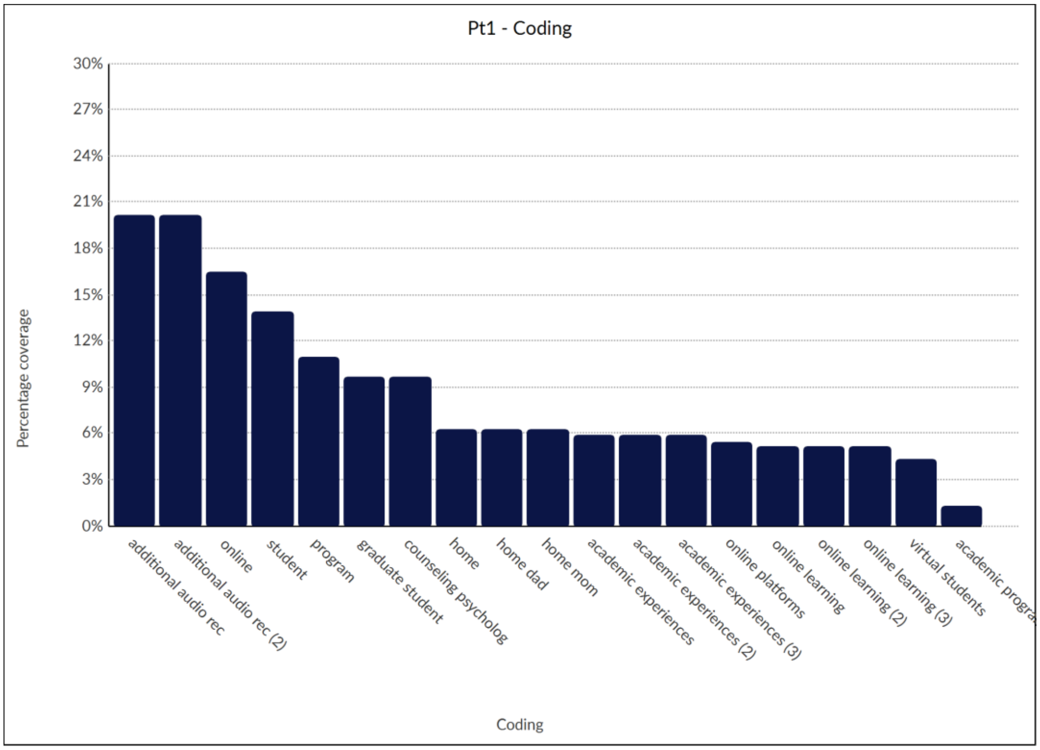


Table 2

Coding of Terms Pt2

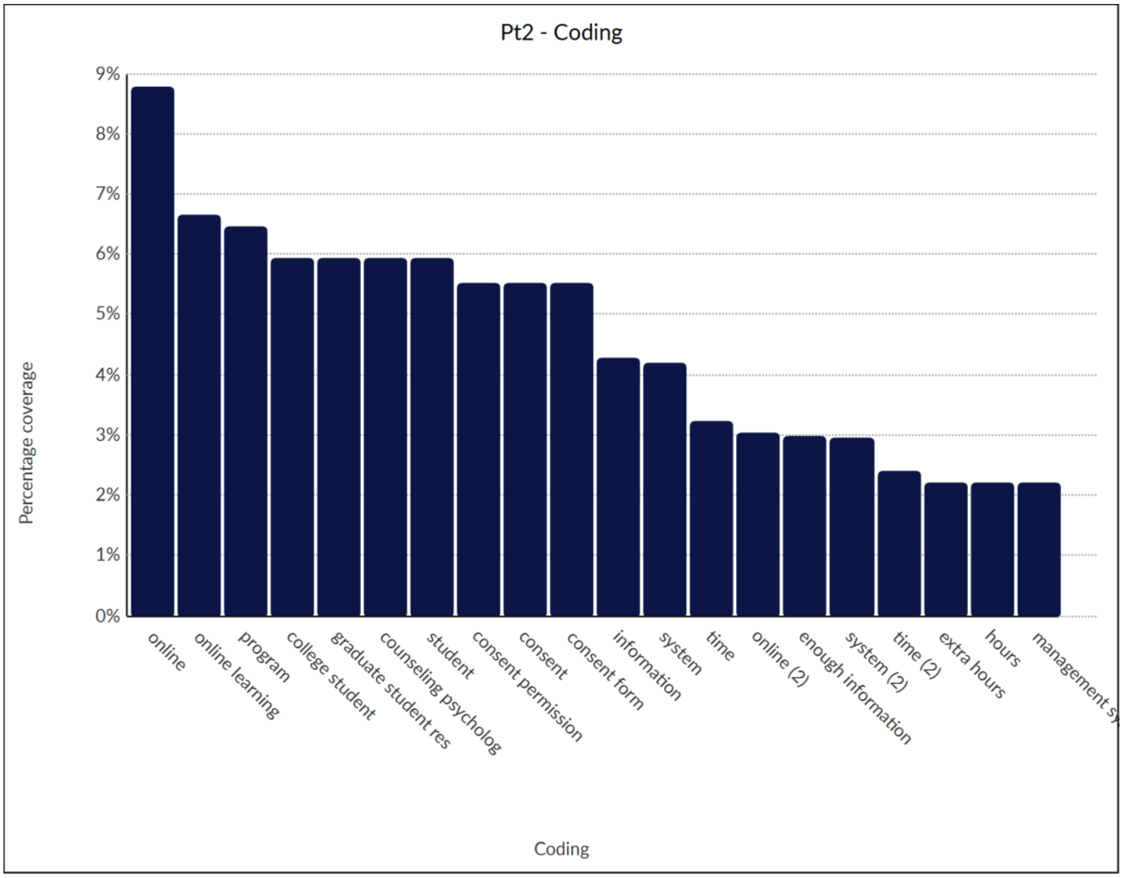


Table 3

Selective Coding Results

Online	Experience	Student	Time
Online learning	Learning	Little bit	Program
Online platform		Research	

Table 4

Grouped Codes

Online learning
Experience
Student
Time

Phase 4: Final Theme

Final themes emerged, narrowed down from participants one through 10, using Nvivo. A review of 74 codes across the interviews resulted in nine frequent phrases. The most used phrases include online, online learning, online platform, program, student, a little bit of research, academic achievement, time, and experience. The Nvivo program appeared salient in the review of the above codes to assist in narrowing down themes. There were no discrepant cases, which was part of my analysis.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

As noted in Chapter 3, the accuracy of the findings would be explored based on the four components of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited by Korstens & Moser, 2018). For credibility, saturation, member checking, environmental, and data triangulation were attended to, and these areas were discussed below.

Purposive sampling was used to increase the trustworthiness of data collection in recruiting multiple participants with different views. The participants were from various graduate programs. The participants' thick descriptions of their academic experiences allowed me to identify intersectionality, defined as the sociological view of these students' beliefs, relationships, context, and identities (Guest et al., 2020). Intersectionality occurred with participant responses in their academic experiences, such as peer interactions, student-professor, subject experience, support, and impressions of the online learning platform. Several participants emphasized in their online learning that their motivation is using their degree and opportunity in the future.

To further analyze the transparency of the data. Participants were interviewed on days that were conducive to their availability. Participants were interviewed via Google Meet. This ensured dependability and credibility in the study of the transcription process. To ensure that persistent observation occurs in the coding, interpretation, and data management. As an interviewer, based on notetaking, thematic saturation indicated that no additional information could be obtained from additional participants. In the interviewing process, no new themes or concepts from subsequent interviews arose (Guest et al., 2020).

A complete description was aligned with themes derived from the data acquired following the study. Transferability from results was reviewed the participants were all African-American females, nine of whom identified as heterosexual and one as homosexual. For transferability, the findings were meant to be generalized to other populations based on the population studied. Environmental and data triangulation occurred by reviewing participant interviews to identify common themes. Member checking included engaging participants for transcript review and feedback to increase the validity of findings following the study. Intersectionality looks at the integration of people's social and political identities.

For dependability, the data acquired from the findings enriched further research on intersectionality. They further explored the data collection of participants' experiences and perceptions around their motivation and engagement in online learning. Participants were recruited through the Walden participant pool, and interviews were conducted via the Google Meet app. This improved the dependability and credibility of the study. A review of the coding, interpretation, and data management for confirmability was done to further the dependability and credibility of the data. The researcher journaled to document concerns, noting assumptions that may arise and impact the trustworthiness of this study. This is discussed further in terms of the researcher's reflexivity. Confirmability incorporates the fact that the interpretation of the data is grounded and not based on personal preference (Korstens & Moser, 2018).

My lived experience while conducting the study is aligned with the process of reflexivity. I found this helpful for me to gauge being unbiased and aware of blind spots that could arise. A reflexive stance assisted in meditating any power differential that could arise in a study (Hanson, 1994 as cited in Tufford & Newman, 2016). I engaged in self-reflective journaling following an interview to help maintain any ethical bias so there is no conflict. The journaling aimed to note what I thought or felt while analyzing the data following the interviews. I noted in my reading journal my dual role as an interviewer-student and some of my shared experiences as a student. I related to instructor/student engagement, platform, expectations, and motivation, as well as aspects of academic completion participants strive towards.

Results

The following are the study's research questions:

RQ1: How do African-American college students describe their online learning experiences?

RQ2: How do African American college students describe their motivation to complete their academics in online learning?

I used a qualitative methodology with a descriptive phenomenological design to answer these questions. This qualitative design explored African-American college students' engagement and motivation in online learning. 10 participants were interviewed for this study; below are responses to interview questions provided in Appendix A. The questions are aligned with the RQs: The following research questions (RQs) guided this study.

The interview questions were:

1. -What drives you to complete your academics?
2. -Could you describe in as much detail some of your academic experiences online?
3. -Could you describe some of your feelings towards learning online?
4. -Could you describe your commitment in completing your academic program?
5. -Think of a time when you experienced challenges in your online learning and describe that in as much detail as possible.

6. -What factors do you feel play a role in your engagement in online learning?
7. -How do those factors affect your engagement in online learning?
8. -What factors do you feel play a role in your motivation in online learning?
9. -How do those factors affect your motivation in online learning?
10. -What inspires you as you look ahead towards your academic pathway?

Below are verbatim responses provided by four participants. These statements describe some of their online academic experiences The theory that informs participant responses is constructivism. That is, learning is an active process. The learner is perceived as an information constructor. "People actively construct or create their subjective representations of reality. A person's knowledge is based on their personal experiences stated" (Learning Theories, 2021, para. 1-3). This includes a person's hypotheses of their environment.

Participant 1 stated,

I feel like I have had good academic experience in terms of interacting with other virtual students on the same platform and also in terms of getting to learn on my own. This creates a sense of independence and the fact that you can get feedback. For me, I feel like these are important parts (Pt1).

Participant 3 stated,

> “My academic experiences online have been in terms of having to learn the platform through the orientation face this first and also having to submit assignments online. It has also helped me improve my typing skills, so I feel like learning these lessons as my stated” (Pt3).

Participant 6 answered,

OK. So, I kind of gave an overview. I started off in a path that wasn't for me. It was very difficult to manage home life and work life at a brick and mortar school. One of my co-workers was going to Grand Canyon issues like, you know, you really want to finish, you want to get your teaching license. Here's what I think you should do. And I was very, you know, apprehensive because of my failed attempt to get the Masters. And she was explaining to me, like, It's nothing like that. They're here to help you. They're going to do this. They're going to do that. They're going to support you. And after talking to the academic advisor, I talked to a student advisor and she kind of explained to me almost the exact same thing. Your assignments are at your own pace. They give you a due date. You just have to be good at time management, which is, as a teacher, my forte, because that's what we do in the class all the time is manage our time, manage so many students and all their needs and make sure we get them to lunch on time and stuff like that (Pt6).

According to Participant 9,

Well, initially I didn't have any expectations. Well, let me rephrase that. There was usually at some point in time, there was a negative connotation of someone who completed our online education as opposed to a more traditional school than online education was supposedly easier. And it was more so paying your money and you finished. So that is something I heard, but I did not. That was not my expectation going in to this. Once the initial contact person helped me, I did the, you know, the research on my own to. OK, what's the level, you know, a pass fail rate? What is? Or rather. Other persons who have attended the school, I knew a person who was actually working on faculty and I talk with them and able to gain their perspective. So from there? I expected to. Encountered the rigors of going back to school because it was a bit different. It was a bit challenging to even return back to school, especially being out of school so many years and to to to go into an online education. And so. I think because initially the initial contact persons were were so kind and so helpful with every aspect would tell me as far as to, you know, how did I want to pay financial aid or different things, just providing a roadmap on what I should do and how I should do whatever was going to be best for him and to talk it out as an individual and just and people to people on an individual basis noted (Pt9).

Below are verbatim responses provided by three participants who describe some of their feelings towards learning online. This RQ1: How do African-American college students describe their online learning experiences? Guided review of the interview questions. Highlighting three of the participants responses. The theory that informs the participant responses, according to Kop (2011), constructivism can be a framework for understanding learning. Further, contributors to this theory include Siemens and Downes 2008-2009. They believed the learner connects to the learning community to find and share information with others. Learners build personal learning networks. This model frames a learner's relationship to networks of knowledge comprising many directions (para. 5-10) :

Participant 3, stated I feel like when you are learning online, you are at street or liberty, it's about to. Decide in terms of the resources to. Inasmuch as the resources are there, there also said resources that are suggested are recommended. So, you cannot be forced to like. Well, some websites and not others, so it's up to you up to (Pt3)

“Amazing way of getting information very flexible and the fact that it doesn't take a lot of time to be like have to travel so that better than attend in person. It's quite permissive to evolve “different areas noted (Pt2).”

So I really enjoy it, like I've said, and the only thing that I feel like is a little bit of the issue is a lot of the people I've spoken with, that ask are you finishing school with good to. So I go to Walden Walden. I've never heard of Walden and I'm still online school as kind of like a backhand comment or an insult. And I'm like, Yeah, it is, but you know, you always see me busy. These are the kind of things I'm doing, stuff like that. And so it always is funny how they kind of change your tune when they see my, you know, 10 page paper and you're like, Oh, wait, that's that's what. Or something like. Just the other day we were talking about annotated bibliography, and we have read a paragraph and you're like, I've never did a annotated bibliography to be a girl. I feel like that. You always choose one or the other. You don't have to do all three. But this is quote I do air quotes high school. Well, they're asking for triple the work that an average brick and mortar or that you had to do at GQ or wherever they went to. And so she was just a little bit, you know, taken aback that I was I was a little bit aggressive because I just thought of it all. And I just had to prove my point that just because it's online does not negate from the quality and it's just like any other school you get out of it what you put into it expressd (Pt6).”

I'll say like, I personally prefer the online learning becuase it really gives me, It helps me, you know, to manage my time better. It really helps in a reduction of cost, for instance. And it's really flexible to me. Yeah. It imposes some sort of self-discipline added (Pt7).

Another participant described an academic experience and feelings further on the matter:

Once I got the hang of it. Well, let me say this. At first, I was somewhat apprehensive. Because you don't have that. Colleague interaction. More so just within the classroom, that was somewhat different. You interact to introduce yourself initially, but there may be like a cafe, so to speak, to say, Hey, I'm this or that I would have liked to have had some more of some video interactions where we went wild and you can do, I think it's cafeteria or counter. Excuse me that you can have at least those video interactions that I had that with one class that I took with public health because I was thinking about changing my major to public health. And I really enjoyed that class. It was extremely challenging. But just to have that interaction, to have a, you know, it was on line, or maybe it was just a video that was positive expressed (Pt9)."

Below are verbatim responses provided by three participants who were enthusiastic when asked what drives you to complete your academics expressed. RQ2: How do African American college students describe their motivation to complete their academics in online learning?. Guided review of the interview questions. Highlighting three of the participants responses. The theory that informs participant responses is Covington (2000) noted that goal theory, motivation, and school achievement are other theoretical foundations. These are additional theories to inform this study. It has been shown that each person has their motives as drives; an inner state towards action is the premise of motivation. Achievement motivation theory, developed by Atkinson in 1957 and 1964 and McClelland in 1961, indicates that striving for success and avoiding failure comes before achievement. Further actions for an individual are often given meaning and purpose by the goals the individual seeks out. Achievement goal theory embodies motives as goal contributors and as cited by (Ames, 1992 Dweck, 1986 Urdan, 1997 Urdan & Maehr, 1995):

Pt4, stated What drives me is the need to have academic results so that I can be able to fit in the job market and for being able to also. I would say in terms of academics I realize you have, purpose to get employed, so that you could get the job that you want, and that needs that you want.

I am looking I first got into lobbying for a pay bump just for that increase in salary, but now that I'm here, I'm very interested. It's a lot different than my master's program, and so I find myself being way more interested in the assignments and just the level of thought that has to go into. My assignment is much more motivated and feel like I'm getting a lot more out of it for this program versus my masters noted (Pt6)."

The desire to learn, and kind of the desire to kind of be the best, I've always been pushed in my family to just be the best at what I do to go the farthest that I can education wise. Not every member of my close family or extended family had the opportunity to either go to college or to really achieve all the things they wanted to achieve academically. And I've always had a passion for learning, and that's just kind of where I am is just quite continuous drive to learning about specific in each topics expressed (Pt8).

Below are verbatim responses provided by three participants who shared varying views when ask to describe their commitment in completing their academic program. This RQ2: How do African American college students describe their motivation to complete their academics in online learning? Guided review of the interview questions. Highlighting three of the participants responses. The theory that informs participant responses achievement goal theory embodies motives as goal contributors and as cited by (Ames, 1992 Dweck, 1986 Urdan, 1997 Urdan & Maehr, 1995). For individuals, this goal differs based on achievement goals and one's subjective purpose. Achievement goal theory is further based on one's cognitive self-regulation processes. This process is based on the student's active engagement in facets of their learning contributors as cited (Pintrich, 1999; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman et al., 1994). School achievement is a sub-area of achievement goal theory focusing on academic outcomes. Social goals and academic goals can contribute to empowering an individual to achieve more academically in school.

Pt2, stated I read as much as possible to be on the right. Contract so that I am able to eventually complete the program successfully, and I know it was a lot of time and sacrifice and commitment for that to happen. Oh, you have to be very disciplined learner, so that because no one is pushing you. Yeah, the one thing that we need to look to make do the learning, but and it was the time.

Pt6 noted I'm very committed. Like I say, I enjoyed my first class so much that I wanted to say too. And I just was find myself Googled. How many classes can I take as a graduate? And just because I want to get the coursework out of the way for two years and then hopefully move on to the coursework for the doctoral program? And then from there start the dissertation, which seems like such a long road. And I am just a little bit ambitious when it comes to academics. Mm-Hmm.

And so I'm definitely for sure going to finish. I've already got the date marked on my calendar the last day in November, and it's like November 11. It's finished with this part of the program ready to move on to the next. And like I said, I've already started researching what is required doctorate classes, writing time, commitment, other people's opinions just. So when I say commitment, I'm like there. And that's. Pretty much always been my personality is to start what I finish. And so, yeah, I can see the light in its own way at this point noted (Pt6)."

As far as my academics. I'm committed to it as a teacher. I'll say this. I finished my aunt. I'm a teacher, has been at it for young people that look like me. I'm a be honest because I asked, not only taught in other school districts where the students didn't look like me, I feel and asked a lot of time to transfer into those districts. But I obtained my master's degree online in area of special needs because I had student, and even though I could not teach her, I took her career path. I had a lot of students in my class that were special needs students, and I wanted to better. I'll make sure I was meeting York needs and knew where I needed to go in all of those other wonderful things. So I got my message for that. I think National Board certification as a career teacher. Who show you in the south? Yes, we just. You know, this is something you do because you don't want to go to college, but you chose to do it because I love what I do. And so my academics is very important to me. My children even understand activity is important to me expressed (Pt10).

Summary

This chapter contains analysis results, connects them to the research questions, and demonstrates consistency in a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design. This was used to explore best students' perceptions of factors contributing to their learning outcomes. Hence, presenting data from participant responses. A qualitative study is justified because students supplied subjective perceptions about their online experiences. 10 participants were interviewed for this study. Interview questions were structured to understand the personal experiences of participant's motivation and engagement in online learning environments. The participants were all African-American females, nine of whom identified as heterosexual and one as homosexual. Of the 10 participants, one was in her 1st year of graduate school, three were in their 2nd year, three were in their 3rd year, and the final three were in their 5th year or later years. And the last demographic data to report is the participants' college. One said to be enrolled in an Arts and Science program, three in a business program, two in a communication program, and two in nursing and education programs.

Participants had diverse motivational differences as they looked ahead toward completion. Their goals and oriented behavior were different based on work, life, and educational experiences. This is highlighted in the above responses to participants' questions about motivation. Participants expressed that their educational experiences and sacrifices were salient in their academic pathway. Three participants engaged in course content, support, and learning strategies with similar tenants. This is highlighted in the above response from participants' engagement. Participants shared their academic experiences, such as peer interactions, student-professor, subject experience, support, and impressions of the online learning platform. Several participants emphasize in their online learning that their motivation is using their degree and opportunity in the future. Chapter V includes a summary of the analysis and discussion of findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this chapter, I describe the study's interpretation of findings, limitations, recommendations, implications, and conclusion. The research questions for this study were RQ1: How do African American college students articulate their online learning experiences? and RQ2: How do African American college students express their motivation to excel in online learning? In this section, I delve into the participants' responses, emerging themes, and conclusions that address these research questions. I reviewed the data to identify the commonalities among the participants' lived experiences and to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Several themes were clustered, and these keywords emerged: online learning, experience, student, and time. I combined the keywords online, online education, and online platform to encapsulate the students' diverse educational environments and experiences. Four participants shared their online experiences. Four delved into their academic experiences online. Two participants explored independence, learning online platforms, self-motivation, and goal-directed schoolwork.

Interpretation of the Findings

The results of this study underscore the fact that perceptions of relevance and interest in academic areas are varied among this population. Students' motivations in online learning environments are nontraditional; they have alternative social networks and responsibilities to balance. For some academic and social communities for students, online learning can foster shared experiences, informal discussions, and goal-directed experiences toward one's academic course completion (Shephard et al., 2024).

Furthermore, internal and external factors can influence students' persistence in an online environment (Milman et al., 2015). Internal factors include social and academic integration. External factors could be a life crisis that can occur at any point during their academic course (Milman et al., 2015). In addition, students' perceived experiences in online environments, such as social support, are another factor in academic courses. Asian students' distance learning in external environments, such as social support, similar to that of African American students, can be addressed holistically (Jung & Hong, 2014). Richardson (2012) added that white students in online learning have to adjust to social support, and there are differences in academic attainment across ethnic groups.

I combined the key terms experience and learning to capture academic engagement in online learning experiences. All participants discussed engagement across different academic areas. Three participants discussed in depth factors they feel play a role in their engagement in online learning. All three delved into work-life balance, reflecting on the supports needed to succeed and inner dialogue about priority importance. All participants discussed their motivations. Four participants highlighted some salient areas of motivation in online learning. Three highlighted self-determination, financial gain, and career progression as motivations in their online learning course.

I combined the terms student, little bit, and research to capture participants' feelings towards academic experiences online under the essential term student. Three participants captured feelings towards online learning and three highlighted educational resources and school work experiences. Combined were the key terms time and program under pivotal term time. All participants discussed various commitments to completing their academics. Three participants shared varying views when asked to describe their commitment to achieving their academic program. Three highlighted current professional promotion and familial and academic success in finishing their degree.

The study results align with the literature review. This population has unique experiences and journeys in their academic course. With this study, I have contributed to the literature by delving deeper into the unique experiences of this population in various areas. Gaza and Hunter (2014), as cited by Milman et al.. (2015), emphasized that many factors contribute to students' success, such as individual characteristics and socialization. Students' persistence in program completion can be impeded by self-motivation, support, and their learning environment (Ivankova & Stick, 2007, as cited by Milman et al.., 2015). In the study, this was common among participants' engagement and motivation during their academic course. The unique needs and challenges online graduate students put forth the importance of supported services and strategies for students stated (Milman et al.., 2015).

Exploring participants' experiences and perceptions around their motivation and engagement in online learning extends knowledge in the discipline. In the interviews, 74 codes emerged, which were narrowed down to 11 themes and clustered into four themes. These findings are crucial in understanding the experiences of African American college students in online learning and can significantly inform future research and policy decisions.

Based on the conceptual and theoretical framework noted in the literature review of Chapter 2, the current study was grounded in constructivism theory. Constructivism, as a concept, suggests that learning is an active and productive process (Learning Theories, 2021, para. 1-3).". The learner is perceived as an information constructor, and the early learning theorist contributing to this research was Piaget's view. "People actively construct or create their subjective representations of reality. A person's knowledge is based on their personal experiences (Learning Theories, 2021, para. 1-3)." In this study, learners continuously tested these hypotheses through social negotiation and engagement with others. Vygotsky noted that social development includes social interaction, more knowledge of others, and a zone of proximal development. Bruner added that learning occurs within problem-solving instances in which learning considers past experiences and learning through other relationships (Learning Theories, 2021., para. 1-3).

Further, according to Kop (2011), constructivism can be a framework for understanding learning. Contributors to theory include Siemens and Downes 2008-2009 (Kop, 2011). They believed the learner connects to the feeding connectivism of information in a learning community. The learning process is cyclical. Learners will connect to a network to find and share knowledge with others. Learners build personal learning networks. These areas are further fostered in learners' connection to their learning community. This model frames a learner's relationship to networks of knowledge comprising many directions. I discovered that participants must be self-motivated to seek out, engage, and maintain support for one's academic course. Further exploring this framework can inform policymakers on academic students' social and personal learning networks.

The lived experiences of African-American graduate participants in this study were highlighted in terms of engagement, motivation, and online learning. Student engagement can include behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects (Furlong et al., 2004; Hew, 2016). Some unique challenges around participants' engagement included life attainments, feelings toward learning, and course completion of one's degree.

Covington (2000) recommended goal theory, motivation, and school achievement as theoretical foundations. It has been shown that each person has their own sense of motivation. A person's motivation in the learning environment vary. In academics, learners continue to balance working around success and failure experiences. One's drive and goal direction can change in the pathway toward achievement. I needed to remember this when considering achievement behaviors in this study. "The basic contention of achievement goal theory is that depending on their subjective purposes, achievement goals differentially influence school achievement via variations in the quality of cognitive self-regulation processes" (Covington, 2000, p. 174). People have inherent psychological needs and growth tendencies, which are defined as perceived motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Further, Gomez et al. (2010) found that perceived motivation is associated with perceived learning in that students' perceived learning experience could be associated with increased participation and higher learning levels. Some unique challenges students discussed were around online learning, including the experience of learning platforms as a student.

In these three areas for this population, asynchronous learning networks can be uniquely different for African-American and Caucasian graduate students. For example, to explain the academic underperformance of African-American college students, scholars have proposed understanding this population's educational and cultural environments. (Rovai & Ponton, 2005). Ogbu indicated that students can enter a classroom with their home culture that can conflict with the school culture. Establishing teaching and learning communication is essential, and learning style preferences differ between African-American and Caucasian students. African-American students may improve relational, people-oriented, and community approaches to learning. Caucasian students may implore independent and analytical approaches to learning. Cultural backgrounds and social values connect, which may cause barriers such as academic achievement (Rovai & Ponton, 2005).

Limitations of the Study

As with all social sciences research, the current study had limitations. In recruiting participants, those who participated were primarily female African-American college students. Additionally, future studies to add to learning about this population would include African-American males, which could extend the scope of the study. This study had limited generalizability, with 10 African-American female participants. The results may be different from a larger sample of this population. Based on the participant's gender, understanding student satisfaction across different genders and geographic locations was impossible for participants in these areas. Through Google Hangout, we were able to join virtually from anywhere. More information might be yielded if the study were to be extended to a specific area, state, and country based on the student population who participated.

Recommendations

The current study adds to the need for more data on engagement and motivation for African-American college students who choose an online format. The focus is researching ongoing areas: (a) Motivations of academic completion for African-American college students, (b) areas of effective engagement, and (c) the perceived psychological experiences of this population in online learning environments.

This study stands out from previous research as it delves in on a specific sub-population, namely African-American college students, and their psychological experiences in online learning environments. Previous research was done on adolescent minority students, traditional HBCUs, as well as white, black, and Hispanic learners. This unique focus is a crucial area for further exploration. As noted in the literature review, Athens (2018) conducted a study to establish a baseline for instructional data and potential retention efforts to engage students in online learning better. The findings indicated that student perceptions of education and engagement were positively correlated with grade outcomes and affected areas such as age, disability, race, and ethnicity. Also, Hispanic and African American students were engaged more, but grade outcomes were lower than White students.

The study's findings highlight the crucial role of engagement and learning in students' academic progression, particularly in online learning environments. Participants' experiences underscore the need for further research to explore the aspects of engagement for this population, which could broaden existing constructs and enhance our understanding of online learning experiences. The study was based on participants' responses to students' perceptions of their learning experiences, which are subjective and met with other mediating factors, whether academically, professionally, or personally. There is a difference in learning perceptions within the population of interest. Future research into these factors should explore differences across gender, learning perceptions, engagement, and motivation.

Hence, the study adds to the factors for participants, though primarily African American females, factors of motivation and engagement towards completion. Further research could explore this population, such as a follow-up within reflexivity of future qualitative research to determine participants' academic completion and barriers. Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2018) found that two factors constrain online learning experiences and academic self-concept: lack of social presence and cultural inclusion. The study adds to literature with theoretical concepts in mind that inform this topic. In the literature review, qualitative research was suitable with the progression of MOOCS development to expand on the knowledge and behavioral precursors of dropouts for this population being studied.

The research questions were associated with some concepts related to critical student engagement and motivation. Hence, the question varied across the research into the population of this study. Based on the topic of interest and condensing an area of focus, the questions derived seem suitable. As mentioned, the significance of the study is that it would fill a gap and outline some clear considerations around student engagement and motivation that may impede learning outcomes for African-American college students.

The study results could provide a course for improving student learning research in different areas, such as understanding the perceived psychological experiences that increase or decrease African-American students' engagement and motivation. Eugene and Clark (2012) emphasized that students of African descent face challenges in STEM fields, including online learning platforms. Byars-Winston et al. (2008, as cited in Eugene & Clark, 2012) noted that social dynamics and cultural and individual influences could inform retention decisions. Investigating these areas in e-learning to promote student success and close achievement gaps is worthwhile. The study added to the literature to learn about participation challenges and social and individual influences on academic achievement across different disciplines.

Further recommendations for research included connecting online learning with securing opportunities such as jobs and partnerships (2008, as cited in Vohra). I suggested that further research explore the aspects of engagement and motivation in online learning for this population. This could be done at traditional HBCUs, and other online programs could expand the data on this population. In their study, Milman et al. (2015, pp. 1–2) utilized a mixed-methods approach with 1st and 2nd-year master-level student population. Their focus areas were "perceptions of the importance of, and satisfaction with, administrative, academic, technical, and online community supports—personal factors and grade level.

"In addition, differences, if any, existed among students in that area. Findings had shown differences in satisfaction with services such as technical support and differences between white and non-white students' access to career services. Many students' found course-level support rated high in engaging in social help. Several questions were raised: "Which supports and resources should be offered by higher education institutions to promote success in online learning for online master's graduate students?" stated Milman et al. (2015, p. 1). Based on the study, some of the factors noted above were present, such as participants' feedback around academic and online community support. Though the research primarily focused on African-American students, there have been differences in educational satisfaction between white and non-white students. Further study can be expanded based on the population of interest, as well as for white and non-white students.

Implications

The social change implications include assisting educational providers with the different delivery methods offered in programs for learning. This includes improving gaps around diverse learning needs. In the research, language and culture-bound concerns may arise within social change. This research could give insight into the pathway to assist student outcomes such as dropouts and improve retention strategies.

This could include semester-based questionnaires sent by colleges inquiring about improving student experiences but monitoring students' academic pathways in response to the data received. Curriculum and program markers can be developed to mediate and address non-traditional students' difficulties (Van Doorn & Van Doorn, 2014). Further research can be expanded based on this population of interest, including white and non-white students. I suggest that further study explore the aspects of engagement and motivation in online learning for this population. This could be done at traditional HBCUs, and other online programs could expand the data on this population. The diverse learning needs of African American college students are that students' academic progression is met with personal and professional life circumstances. This could impede growth and advancement. As the recommendations indicate, further research into other areas per this study is needed.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the motivation and engagement of African-American students in online learning. The participants, being African-American, offered unique perspectives on their experiences in online learning environments. These findings are not only significant but also have the potential to inform and shape the policies and practices of educational institutions. By enhancing the educational experiences of African-American students, we can contribute to positive social change and a more inclusive educational system.

The study results show four themes relating to motivation and engagement in online learning: Online learning, experience, student, and time and responding to the scant data on achievement gaps for African-American college students in online learning environments. The study assisted with the need for more research on the perceived experiences of African-American college students. There may be further impediments to learning based on students' perceived experiences that contribute to learning outcomes such as grades and completion of one's academics (Rovai & Gallien, 2005). The participants in this study were open to their experiences in areas of their lives, motivation, and engagement toward academic attainments. However, the participants had various experiences across their academics with a similar goal for degree completion. Further, this study demonstrates the importance of improving student engagement and support across online educational platforms to help African-American students reach their academic achievements and completion.

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https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00324

Appendix: Interview Script

(Template adapted from Patnode, Burda & Whitlock, 2012)

Interviewer:

-I am a graduate student in the Counseling Psychology program at Walden University. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The interview should last approximately one hour and half.

-I would like to find out about your experiences in online learning. As I hope you noticed in the recruitment materials, all your responses will be strictly confidential and no identifying information will be in any part of this study, as per the IRB. So, I am hopeful that you will express your views and opinions openly and freely.

-To make sure I accurately report your statements, with your permission I would like to audio record our conversation. Is this ok?

-This recording will be transcribed word for word, and your name replaced by a number to make sure the information obtain remains confidential.

-Let me tell you a little bit about this study.

-We know there are a lot of research needs and questions related to the online learning experiences of a variety of students. However, we wish to focus on the lived experiences of specific graduate students. If our conversation starts to drift into a broader discussion of online learning, I might try to steer us back to this.

-I make take some notes during our interview. Before we jump into specific research questions, can you tell me a little about yourself or the level of familiarity you have with this topic?. This topic refers to the college students experiences in online learning environments.

Interview questions:

-What drives you to complete your academics?

-Could you describe in as much detail some of your academic experiences online?

-Could you describe some of your feelings towards learning online?

-Could you describe your commitment in completing your academic program?

-Think of a time when you experienced challenges in your online learning and describe that in as much detail as possible.

-What factors do you feel play a role in your engagement in online learning?

-How do those factors affect your engagement in online learning?

-What factors do you feel play a role in your motivation in online learning?

-How do those factors affect your motivation in online learning?

-What inspires you as you look ahead towards your academic pathway?

Conclusions and Wrap-up

Before we wrap things up and discuss next steps, are their any last comments you would like to make?

Thank you for your participation. Please do not hesitate to e-mail should you have any additional questions. The verbatim transcript will be made available to you in the next 14-18 days. You have been provided the contact information of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). You can contact the IRB with any questions or concerns that you have about your rights as a study participant.