The Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Discourses of Whiteness, Social Absence, and Inequity

by

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Abstract

Local and federal governments, public school boards, and higher education institutions have been promoting online courses in their commitment to accommodating public needs, widening access to materials, sharing intellectual resources, and reducing costs. However, researchers of education need to consider the often ignored yet important issue of equity since disregarding the issue of inequity in online education may create suboptimal consequences for students. This dissertation work, therefore, investigates the issues of social justice and equity in online education.

I argue that equity is situated between the tensions of various social structures in a broader cultural context and can be thought of as a fair distribution of opportunities to participate. This understanding is built upon the idea that individuals have different values, goals, and interests; nevertheless, the online learning context may not provide fair opportunities for individuals to follow their own learning trajectories. Particularly, online
learning environments can reproduce inequitable learning conditions when the context requires certain individuals to assimilate mainstream beliefs and values at the expense of their own identities. Since identifications have certain social and political consequences by enabling or constraining individuals’ access to educational resources, individuals may try to be identified in line with culturally-hegemonic perspectives in order to gain or secure their access to educational resources or to legitimize their learning experiences.

In this interview study, I conceptualize online courses within their broader socio-historical context and analyze how macro-level social structures, namely the concept of whiteness, can reproduce inequity in micro-level online learning practices. By questioning who has control over the conditions for the production of knowledge, values, and identification, I investigate how socially accepted bodies of thoughts, beliefs, values, and feelings that give meaning to individuals’ daily-practices may create inequitable learning conditions in day-to-day online learning practices. In specific, I analyze how those who are identified as non-White experience “double-bind” with respect to stereotypification on one hand, anonymity on the other. Building on this analysis, I illustrate how those who are identified as non-White have to constantly negotiate their legitimacy and right to be in the online environment. The findings of my research can have an important impact on the literature of online education by sparking thought, controversy, debate, and further research on this topic.
Dedication

This dissertation work is dedicated to my wife, Abra Pierce, without whom I could not be able to finish - or even start. With her love, patience, and support, I was able to complete this work. My love, thank you for everything you have done.
Acknowledgments

I always thought that acknowledging your supervisor, advisory committee members, colleagues, and friends is just a cliché that one just does at the end of a dissertation work. Yet, here I am, writing up my own acknowledgements and thinking whether I can thank enough to those who helped me through out in this process. Many have influenced me and helped me, and I want to acknowledge those who contributed to this work with their thoughts, insights, and feelings.

I want to start with my supervisor, Clare Brett. Clare is a great mentor, and without her questions, feedback, support, and encouragement, I would not be able to explore the critical educational theory in the field of online education. My conversations with Clare have greatly helped me to connect the missing dots between critical theories and learning in online environments. She believed in me and my ideas even before I thought about this dissertation work. I hope to be a kind of supervisor and mentor Clare has been to me.

The members of my committee, Indigo Esmonde and Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez, have been invaluable to me. Indigo and Ruben were demanding critics, without whose exhaustive comments and suggestions I could not be able to turn my loose ideas into a dissertation. Ruben and Indigo were my compass when I thought I was lost in the terrain of critical educational theory.

I would also like to thank to my participants, who not only welcomed me in the online courses but also committed their time to me and shared their insights and feelings with me. Without their assistance and support, this dissertation work would not be possible.
Throughout my time at OISE, I was part of Clare Brett and Jim Hewitt's “Pepper” research team. Jim Hewitt was an intellectual resource to me; his careful comments have helped me to situate my work into the field of online education. My conversations with other students, with my future colleagues, have helped and encouraged me, and I learned a great deal from them. Kyungmee Lee has been very helpful to me; we spent many hours discussing many topics, from critical theories of education to critical theories of technology, and many scholars, from Foucault to Gramsci.

I saved the best for the last: Mr. Z. Daniel Zingaro has been anything that I can ask from a good friend. He provided much needed fun at the lab – and the Blue Jays' ball park. We not only spent countless hours discussing academic topics or writing articles but also playing computer games and discussing strategies to defeat our virtual nemeses. We did not only conducted many research projects but also completed many DOS Games; even so that I cannot remember the number of works we published or presented or the games we played. I cannot list all the things that I have learned from him but, for sure, I have learned great deal about writing an academic article. In a sense, Dan to me is a friend with academic benefits.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

Learning is simultaneously an individual and cultural process (Dewey, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). It is the material, symbolic, and intellectual reconstruction of self; a process of discovering and articulating oneself in relation to others. In other words, it is a process of knowing the self through mediation between self and others (Pinar, 2004). What mediates between the self and the others – between the personal and cultural – is referred to as subjectivity. Thus, the process of education is the process of constructing and shaping individuals' subjectivity, consciously or unconsciously (Greene, 1971).

In the field of online education, subjectivity is understood and studied through the concept of social presence (Kehrwald, 2010); that is, the degree to which individuals represent themselves and perceive others in digitally-mediated environments. Much research has argued that a sense of social presence plays a significant role in an online learning community (Oztok & Brett, 2011). While the documented benefits of social presence may hold some truth, such perspectives solely focus on the positive aspects of community but ignore the implicit ways in which group work may perpetuate inequity. A positive sense of community and productive group work cannot be expected for every individual under every circumstance. Indeed, scholars have noted that when not implemented carefully, group work in learning communities may aggravate equity issues (Esmonde, 2009b; Nasir & Cobb, 2007a). That is, individuals can feel that they are consistently or systematically marginalized, isolated, devalued, or even oppressed in a group work setting. Consequently, in order to work
towards more equitable learning conditions in online education, it is important to understand how individuals perceive their online subjectivities and experience the curriculum of online education.

This dissertation work is concerned with understanding how inequitable learning experiences may occur in online education. To this end, I analyze how material realities of daily life impose the dominant perspectives on individuals' identification and operate to produce unfair learning contexts. In what follows, I briefly introduce the concepts, theories, and frameworks that I use in my analysis. Following a general discussion of what constitutes equity and equitable learning conditions, I discuss how equity can be addressed and analyzed in online education. Then, I compare such perspectives with the current misunderstandings in the literature of online education.

1.1. Defining Equity

Understanding whether a given learning practice, context, or work is equitable is not straightforward. Because equity is a value-laden term and requires human judgment of whether the given circumstances are just or fair (R. Gutiérrez, 2007), what equity might empirically mean is contingent on the context and open to debate. That is, equity might mean different things for different individuals under different circumstances. Indeed, there is no widely agreed-upon definition of the concept nor is there a widely agreed-upon understanding of how we might identify or address it (Nasir & Cobb, 2007a). Nevertheless, the ways in which equity is defined have implications for how equity concerns are addressed.
Current research on equity argues for a distinction between equity and equality (Esmonde, 2009b). While equity refers to justice or fairness in a given situation, equality means "sameness" (R. Gutiérrez, 2007). In terms of education specifically, equity focuses on the qualitative judgment of the learning situation or the learning process while equality is concerned with the quantitative measurement of educational inputs, treatment, or outputs. Based on this distinction, equity judgments should go beyond the issues of equal access or equal treatment and consider how social, political, and historical dynamics can create unfair or unjust learning situations.

In order to frame what constitutes equity, scholars contend that the discussion of equity should move beyond investigating patterns of courses taken by various race groups or genders (i.e. White students do this, Black students do that), and instead consider the cultural processes by which inequity is continuously created and maintained (Nasir & Cobb, 2007a). According to this perspective, equity is not a static outcome of certain treatments of certain groups or individuals; rather, it is a process that is situated between the tensions of various social structures that exist in cultural settings.

Viewing equity as situated in cultural contexts and as involving relations between various social structures requires an examination of how Discourses are implicated in the regeneration of inequities. A Discourse is a characteristic way of saying and doing (Gee, 2011). Gee (2011) uses “big D” Discourses to distinguish it from “little d” discourses; while the first one refers to combination and integration of “language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (p. 30), the latter one refers to “language-in-use or stretches of language (like conversations or stories)” (p. 34).
As a characteristic way of being in the world, it embodies one's thoughts, goals, expectations, values, and actions and thus can be thought of as individuals’ comprehensive ways of looking at things in their daily lives. A Discourse, therefore, is a socially accepted body of thoughts, beliefs, values, and feelings that gives meaning to individuals’ enactments (Foucault, 1972). Thus, employing the concept of Discourse for exploring the reproduction of culture in a classroom setting serves to link between macro-level social structures and inequity in micro-level learning settings.

This argument – that equity concerns embody much more than access and require qualitative value judgments – yields more questions than answers. These questions include (but are not limited to) the following: what constitutes equity in digitally-mediated learning environments? What is the relationship between equitable learning conditions and Discourses in digitally-mediated environments? More precisely, how is identification related to equity in online education? One way to answer these questions is to pay attention to students' learning experiences (Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee, 2005).

A growing body of research on equity has suggested that equity can be thought of as a fair distribution of opportunities to learn or more fair pedagogical conditions (Esmonde, 2009a; R. Gutiérrez, 2007). However, “defining equity as a fair distribution of opportunities to learn invites debate around what constitutes an opportunity to learn” (Esmonde, 2009a, p. 1010). One possible way to think about this issue is to consider what we mean by learning. If, as I have articulated above, learning is about shaping subjectivities, then equal opportunities to learn might mean that the learning context should provide equal, just, or fair circumstances
for individuals to develop their own subjectivities. Nevertheless, the learning context is far from neutral and is continuously affected by Discourses (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2011). Considered in terms of equity, it can be argued that inequitable learning conditions may occur if the learning context requires certain individuals to assimilate themselves at the expense of their own subjectivities.

This privileging of mainstream perspectives is referred to as cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 2000) and it helps us understand how the digitally-mediated learning context may reproduce inequity “by drawing attention to questions regarding who has control over the conditions for the production of knowledge, values, and classroom practices” (Giroux, 2011, p. 5). Cultural hegemony “play[s] a significant part both in whose learning is valued as legitimate … and in how students come to see themselves as … thinkers and as members of … [their] community” (Nasir & Cobb, 2007a, p. 7). The relationship of hegemony to equity is based upon the idea that individuals have different subjectivities, but that the learning context may impose perspectives of dominant cultures rather than support each individual to follow their own learning trajectories.

Fundamental to my perspective is the idea that equity is not about providing a point of sameness among individuals, but about enabling them to become agents of their own learning by appropriating the learning repertoires they need in order to fulfill their potential. Conceptualizing equity within the tensions between cultural hegemony and subjectivity, of course, invites a discussion about the process by which subjectivities are defined and developed.
1.2. Identities and Identification

Fields as diverse as psychology, sociology, physical sciences, humanities, and philosophy offer discipline-specific conceptualizations and definitions of identity. Yet, the concept of identity is challenging: it implies both similarity and difference. Much of the debate regarding identity stems from attempts to balance these similarities and differences (Buckingham, 2008a).

Psychological perspectives typically contend that individuals have an authentic or essential self, assuming that individuals have relatively consistent and stable identities. According to this perspective, identity is a predefined state of self. Thus, psychological perspectives conceptualize identity outside of experience by ignoring the fluid and contingent nature of identity construction (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Sociological perspectives have moved away from this normative perspective to suggest that identity is something people enact or perform, as opposed to something people have. According to this perspective, identities are situated in and bounded by Discourses that exist in any given community. In order to understand the relationship between Discourses and identity enactments, scholars have employed the concept of identification (or identities-in-practice). Based on available material and symbolic resources, identification is the process of classifying, labeling, or linking individuals that have a relation to one another (Jenkins, 2008).

The process of identification is closely related to Discourses (Gee, 2000): individuals constitute themselves in an active fashion; however, their practices are not freely and openly
invented but rather are delimited by Discourses. That is, Discourses provide means for individuals to make sense of themselves by interpreting their moment-by-moment negotiations with others (Foucault, 1978). Consequently, the relationship between Discourses and the process of identification is important for our understanding of equity since identification impacts on how individuals make meaning of their experiences.

1.3. Social Presence and Social Absence

Social presence is defined as the degree to which individuals represent themselves (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999) and perceive others in digitally-mediated environments (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003). The concept of social presence has long been employed to study human experience in online learning environments (Oztok & Brett, 2011). Social presence is constructed dialogically, conveys meanings about individuals, and creates norms and values that determine what is acceptable in a given context. Thus, social presence not only facilitates individuals’ practices in digitally-mediated contexts but also conveys socio-historical norms, values, beliefs, and perspectives that individuals bring into online learning environments. Consequently, the construction of social presence is not an improvisation without a script but is derived from cultural norms (Walther, 1992) and thus is constrained by Discourses (Hughes, 2007).

A comprehensive understanding of equity in digitally-mediated environments, however, goes beyond how individuals represent themselves and further includes the qualities and cultural background that individuals consciously filter-out when they create
their online existence. That is, the process of identification in digitally-mediated experiences is not only articulated by what is represented but also defined by what is filtered-out in that particular representation. I shall term these consciously filtered-out identifications social absence. Therefore, I regard social absence as the extent to which particular identifications are not represented in one’s social presence. The idea of social absence suggests that individuals may hide behind their relative anonymity (Hughes, 2009) to overcome exclusion based on their socio-cultural identifications (P. Rogers & Lea, 2005).

The dynamic interplay between social presence and absence can provide means to explore the effects of identification in digitally-mediated learning environments. In particular, the degree of filtering can explain how individuals have differentiated learning experiences based on their identification, revealing the otherwise hidden effects of cultural hegemony on the construction of self in online learning environments (S. Yates & Hiles, 2010).

1.4. Misunderstanding Equity in Online Learning Environments

The online learning literature has many untested and often self-referential claims around the equitable nature of online learning environments. Core to these claims is the suggestion that individuals from various backgrounds can share their ideas and learn from each others’ diversity as they collaborate (Daniel, 1996; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995). These claims, coupled with claims that online education has been democratizing higher education (Harasim, 2000; Hollenbeck, 1998), lead to the premature conclusion that online education can provide and sustain equitable learning conditions in online learning
environments. Nguyen, Torlina, Peszynski, and Corbitt (2004) summarize how these premature conclusions fail to acknowledge the complexity involved in determining the extent to which digitally-mediated environments can provide equitable learning opportunities:

There is a widely accepted point of view that because virtual space is not hierarchical, it is inherently democratic and politically unbiased, and therefore members of virtual organisations can exercise freedom unavailable in the real world, stratified and burdened with traditional power and authority structures. According to this view, the Internet application becomes political only when politicians and large businesses use it for political games and imposition of power. (pp. 5-6)

Such claims stem from two perspectives: (1) open-flexible access, which leads scholars to suggest that individuals can access online materials or environments anytime and anywhere, and that online learning environments therefore provide and sustain equity; and (2) neutral environment, which leads scholars to suggest that digitally-mediated environments are inherently culturally value-free, and that individuals in these environments are, by extension, assumed to be equal.

1.4.1. Open-Flexible Access

The proponents of the open-flexible access mindset emphasize the flexibility that online learning environments provide for individuals. They argue that anytime-anywhere access provides equity in educational contexts since online environments provide equal access to educational opportunities for people who previously had only limited access due to time or location boundaries. Furthermore, the proponents of this mindset thought that accessing to the Internet means the same for everyone, disregarding the fact that accessing to
the Internet may require different resources or pose different challenges for different individuals in different socio-political contexts or geographical locations. Nevertheless, the online education literature has argued that though students are geographically distributed, the volume of student participation is nevertheless equally distributed:

Online seminars enable all students to participate, … encouraging active engagement in formulating positions, exploring arguments, and converging on common understanding. … The overall volume of student messaging is very high, but it is also fairly evenly distributed. Most students participate most of the time, each sending several messages each week. … However, rarely does a student not participate at all during an online course. (Harasim, 2000, p. 47)

As Carr-Chellman (2005) elaborates, the premise of this position is the idea that providing access for those who might otherwise be excluded holds the promise of equity, as if the notion of providing access is synonymous with providing or sustaining equity. Applying this mindset, many researchers (Boyd, 1996; Hollenbeck, 1998; Swan, 2005) come to similar conclusions. They echo this same supposed implication: that equal and free participation leads to spaces that are themselves equitable.

The concept of open-flexible access fails to differentiate equity from equality. As I have argued above, equality refers to sameness and can therefore be measured through quantity; however, equity requires value-laden judgments based on the situatedness and contextuality of learning conditions (Boaler, 2006; Esmonde, 2009b). Equity in digitally-mediated environments requires one to critically examine whose knowledge gets created and is valued, and how knowledge is represented and consumed. For example, in the process of learning, students can equally participate and develop skills by exploring their worlds or expand their knowledge by collaborating with others. However, they may never
consider or question whose knowledge is consumed or whose interests are served by this learning process. Thus, online learning environments can become sites where social inequity is reproduced (Apple, 2004) and where knowledge is contextualized at the intersections of various Discourses (Ess, 2002). Consequently, though I acknowledge that having equal access to an online learning environment is an important educational goal, equal access is not a sufficient condition for claiming that the online learning context is equitable.

1.4.2. Neutral Environment

Along with open-flexible access, online education scholars have used the notion of neutral environment to understand issues related to the public sphere, social enactments, and individuals. This mindset suggests that the social and cultural fabric in which practices are embedded is determined by the technology itself (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1992). Considering that the “medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964), scholars employing this perspective have argued that technology has its own capacity to determine the parameters of the context, and that individuals’ characteristics do not influence the environment:

Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in process of production, experience, power, and culture. While the networking form of social organization has existed in other times and spaces, the new information technology paradigm provides the material basis for its expansion through the entire social structure. (Castells, 1996, p. 468)

Scholars, therefore, have argued that digitally-mediated environments are culture-free places influenced only by the characteristics of the particular medium. Research builds on this idea to suggest that loss of social cues\(^2\) is, in fact, more beneficial for social practices since

\(^2\) The discussion regarding what constitutes social cues in digitally-mediated environments is limited. In early research, linguistic aspects, such as emoticons or use of pronouns are accepted as social cues.
individuals are socially equal when technology precludes the conveying of cultural biases (Meyrowitz, 1986). For example, research has argued that:

the facelessness of online interaction frees people to interact without at least some of the inhibitions they have in face-to-face classrooms. … Gone are the powerful catalysts of visual and aural clues that make people want to listen, ignore, hide, or respond in a face-to-face classroom. … I have found that American teachers interact differently online with people of other cultures than they do face to face. Teachers have explained this phenomenon to me as “triggers of difference.” When they hear a Chinese accent, see a Jordanian woman’s head cover, observe a Brazilian’s body language, smell curry on an Indian’s breath, some Americans automatically register a consciousness of difference that may trigger discomfort, stereotypes, xenophobia, or recognition of their own ignorance of other cultures. The triggers of visual and aural differences often subconsciously make people uncomfortable or otherwise constrain people’s abilities to listen, interact, and learn from others. (Merryfield, 2003, pp. 160–161 quotation marks are original)

Employing this perspective, much online learning research assumes that such environments exist without social, cultural, or political origins, and that individuals in these environments are indifferent agents (Hodgson, 2002; S. J. Yates, 1997).

A neutral environment perspective ignores Discourses and human agency by simply assuming that culture exists prior to or separate from individuals and their practices. However, as I have noted above, many scholars have instead argued that the context is both the product and the producer of Discourses (Foucault, 1972). Indeed, scholars in other disciplines have already addressed the dynamic interplay between Discourses and human agency in other online contexts (e.g. online forums or social networking sites) in order to understand the online context (e.g., boyd, 2008b; Ess, 2002; Rybas & Gajjala, 2007; Sterne, 1999). According to these perspectives, the online learning context should be thought of as a

Later, researchers considered self-declared personal or individualized information as social cues. See Walther (1992, 1996).
cultural site, where Discourses manifest themselves and operate to produce differentiated relations through which meanings are negotiated (Sterne, 1999). It is through understanding the relationships among individuals, context, and Discourses that we can make contextual judgments about equity. Productive inquiries of equity, therefore, should address how individuals navigate through and within an online learning context as discursive subjects.

Building upon such limited accounts, the current literature of online education suggests that equitable learning conditions can be sustained by providing equal access to a digitally-mediated environment, where social, cultural, historical, and political dynamics of learning are neutralized. As I have argued above, equitable learning conditions are about allowing each individual to develop their own identifications and letting them follow their own learning trajectories. Learning, therefore, is a personal experience. We need more studies examining how day-to-day learning practices are historically based on unequal power relations and how such practices operate to reproduce differentiated learning conditions. Importantly, as will be argued throughout this dissertation, such practices do not in any sense "go away" once technology is added to a learning setting.

1.5. The Researcher and The Research Questions

Since one's social position affects one's perspectives and “the ardor of one’s subscription to the values and interpretations that are promoted in rituals and other socially produced cultural forms” (Holland, Lachicotte Jr, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 25), I shall articulate how my perspectives have guided me in problematizing the effects of Discourses in
online education. Below, I explain how this study has grown around my experience with online learning.

As an international student in a Canadian research university, I was and still am being bombarded with the Discourses of multiculturalism: that cultural diversity is protected and promoted to enrich and strengthen Canadian society. Indeed, Canada was the first country to adopt a multicultural policy. Informed by liberal perspectives, the act of multiculturalism — presumably — preserves cultural identity and difference; thus the debates over multiculturalism are also political debates over identification (Joshee, 2009).

Discourses of multiculturalism are often criticized as masquerading racist practices (Dimitriadis & McCarthy, 2001; Ng, 2003). That is, while in theory multiculturalism protects individuals' diversity, in practice the concept becomes the focal point through which cultural hegemony is created with respect to cultural difference (Ng, 2003). In Canada, Discourses of multiculturalism support the White-supremacists colonial Discourses (Bannerji, 2000). For example, Bannerji argues that multicultural Discourses normalize Whites as the default Canadian category while other cultural groups are identified as the Others or, in her words, “hyphenated-Canadians”. For Bannerji, the concept of multiculturalism creates “a fundamental unease with how our difference is constructed … and how our otherness in relation to Canada is projected and objectified” (ibid., p.90).

Canada, as any other nation, is an imagined community (B. R. O. Anderson, 1991) and its development to a nation-state is grounded in colonial perspectives (Bannerji, 2000; Joshee, 2009). Therefore, one’s identification in this imagined conceptual topography affects
the ways in which one makes sense of daily life. In my experience specifically, how we identify ourselves within collective practices positions us in relation to whiteness’ and defines our position in learning contexts. Such discursive positioning has direct impact on how individuals are socialized into normative structures. For certain cultural groups, this discursive positioning is a process of alienation; a process through which individuals internalize a false self-system where they accept the oppressor’s image of the self (Pinar, 2004). The internalization of the false self-system works from within, often convincing us that to be normal, to be acceptable, requires degrees of self-negotiation and thus self-alienation.

Therefore, I aim to provide a more informed and nuanced description about how white-supremacy manifests itself and reproduces inequity when students are required to position themselves in relation to those around them. Consequently, my research questions are:

- how does macro-level societal Discourses manifest themselves in online learning and operate to produce inequitable learning conditions?

To this end, I ask:

- how do Discourses manifest themselves through their effects on identifications?
- how do social presence and social absence affect the ways in which individuals develop their online subjectivities?

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3 The concept of whiteness denotes sets of norms against which all those who are identified as non-White are judged, measured, and positioned. The concept of whiteness will be discussed later.
how do inequitable learning conditions yield differentiated learning experiences on the basis of participation?

Finally, I feel it is necessary to define my understanding of equity. I do not understand equity in binary terms – whether something is inequitable or not – nor do I see it as an absolute end. Rather, it is a continuous process and can be understood as the degree to which given conditions are fair for individuals. However, since given conditions can never be equal for individuals in a community, I do not believe any community or group work can ever be inherently equitable. Ultimately, I believe there will always be unjust practices or conditions, whatever the ideological or political system might be. There are, and will be, inevitable inequities in every aspect of civic life. Some of these inequities have been studied, while others have not. This knowledge is as much depressing as it is true and I can't help but agree with the statement that: “any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry” (Foucault, 1980, p. 66).

My aim with this research is not to suggest a blueprint for somehow creating equity. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate why and how inequity might exist in online learning environments and to create awareness of this perspective for teachers, students, and scholars interested in online learning. If we know how and why any such unequal learning conditions occur, we might begin to address them to provide better opportunities for those who might be disadvantaged. My purpose is exploratory in nature: understanding online learning environments as the context of learning while social and cultural discourses manifest
themselves in self-representations and interactions in these settings. Therefore, my research does not in any way constitute the final word on equity in digitally-mediated environments. I hope that our understandings of equity in online education will continue to evolve and that this research will serve to spark thought, controversy, debate, and further research.
Chapter 2. Situating the Theoretical Frameworks

Equity is a value-laden term and requires human judgment of whether the given circumstances are just or fair (Esmonde, 2009b). What is just or fair in a given situation, however, is open to philosophical\(^4\), political\(^5\), scholarly\(^6\), or even economical\(^7\) debate. Thus, the definition of equity is contingent upon the contextual judgments of the given situation and may mean different things for different individuals under different circumstances. Indeed, there is no widely agreed-upon understanding of how we might identify it when we see it nor is there a widely agreed-upon way to address it (Nasir & Cobb, 2007a). Nevertheless, the ways in which equity is defined have implications for how equity concerns are addressed.

In this chapter, therefore, I articulate what constitutes equity in digitally-mediated environments, how I conceptualize equity as situated in pedagogical activities at the micro-level and as being informed by Discourses at the macro-level, and how I examine it in day-to-day online learning practices.

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4 Philosophy of ethics (or values) is concerned with systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior. Philosophical debate focuses on how we understand, know about, and what we mean when we talk about what is right and what is wrong.

5 Ethical politics is the political terrain in which the right way to live is subject to contest, but there is not necessarily any contest for state power or any attempt to seek office or build organizations.

6 Scholars have tried to explain how, why and to what degree people value things; whether the thing is a person, idea, object, or anything else. Scholarly debates revolve around the idea that different groups of people may hold or prioritize different kinds of values influencing social behavior.

7 Economic debate emphasizes the consumer's choices as evidence that a particular thing is of value.
2.1. Equity and Discourses

The first step towards understanding equity in an educational setting is to distinguish it from equality. While equity refers to qualitative judgments of what is right, equality refers to the quantitative measurement of resources, treatment, or outcomes in a given situation (R. Gutiérrez, 2007). Based on liberal principles, the concept of equality in education calls for meritocracy by offering a theoretical explanation for two issues: maximization of educational resources and distribution of educational resources (Gutmann, 2007). According to this perspective, while the maximization of resources supports “the fundamental liberal values of free choice and neutrality among different ways of life” (ibid. p.236), equalization of resources supports the “use [of] education to raise the life chances of the least advantaged (as far as possible) up to those of the most advantaged” (ibid. p. 238). In an educational context, meritocracy argues for distribution of educational resources in proportion to natural ability and willingness to learn.

Research regarding equality in educational settings is concerned with providing sameness in educational treatment, comparing differences found among individuals based on social-demographic characteristics. Thus, many studies have addressed quantitative differences or sameness of educational inputs or outputs; and while the former attends to the

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8 Meritocracy argues that resources, rights, and responsibilities should be objectively assigned to individuals based upon their merits (i.e. intelligence, credentials, and education) determined through evaluations or examinations. In education, merits are conceptualized in terms of competency and ability, measured by standardized achievement tests. In its most neo-liberal interpretation, meritocracy is associated with the concept of Social-Darwinism, suggesting that the resources must be given to those who deserve them.
equal distribution of resources, such as money spent on school boards or access to digital technologies, the latter focuses on determining the strategies that will result in equal outcomes, such as student dropout rates or test scores.

While equality in educational setting is the first step towards understanding equity in the context of education, it is not a sufficient condition in and of itself. That is, assuming that learning sources, inputs, treatments, or outputs are distributed equally (a dubious supposition, to be sure), we cannot assume learning conditions to be equitable naturally. The context of education is defined by social, political, and historical dynamics, all relating to “the value-based determination of the field of material, social, and symbolic resources that both set limits and enable particular possibilities across full range of daily activities” (Simon, 1992, p. 40). Thus, even if:

all students are given the same access to mathematics, the same quality of teachers, the same curricular materials, the same forms of teaching, and the same support for learning … [in order] that student outcomes are the same, … [it] does not represent “justice” for students’ own desires and identities (R. Gutiérrez, 2007, pp. 40–41 emphasis is original).

According to this perspective, conceptualizing equity as an outcome of the treatment of certain individuals cannot help us to decipher how and why inequitable learning conditions might occur. Indeed, “understanding equity requires a focus both on inequitable social structures and ideologies they give rise to, and on how such realities play out in day-to-day activity in classrooms...” (Nasir & Cobb, 2007b, p. 7). Thus, the discussion of equity should move beyond investigating whether course-based patterns of various demographic groups are the same; instead, we must consider the pedagogical approaches or practices in which social,
political, and historical structures affect day-to-day classroom interactions. Consequently, we should conceptualize equity as a process that is situated between the tensions of various social structures that exist in cultural settings.

Viewing equity as situated in cultural contexts and as involving relations between various social structures requires an examination of how Discourses⁹ are implicated in the regeneration of inequities (Giroux, 2011). Simply, a Discourse “is a characteristic way of saying, doing, and being” (Gee, 2011, p. 30):

when you speak or write anything, you use the resources of [the language] to project yourself as a certain kind of person, a different kind in different circumstances. You project yourself as engaged in a certain practice or activity. … [This] projection has a meaning and … communicates a who and a what. … A “who” is a socially situated identity [while] a “what” is a socially situated practice. … [However], whos and whats are not really discrete and separable. You are who you are partly through what you are doing, and what you are doing is partly recognized for what it is by who is doing it. (emphases are original)

Discourses are diffused in the society as individuals reproduce and redistribute them in their daily lives (Foucault, 1972). Thus, in order to examine whether digitally-mediated environments provide fair opportunities for students to participate, I address how the Discourses for understanding how socially accepted bodies of thoughts, beliefs, values, and feelings that give meaning to individuals’ practices may influence students’ day-to-day practices. In particular, I focus on the learning context and investigate how and why inequitable learning conditions may well occur if the learning context imposes dominant

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⁹ While there is no clear distinction between the concepts of Discourse, Ideology, or Narratives, the term Discourse covers what others have called dispositif (Foucault, 1980), sign-systems (Barthes, 1972), cultures (Geertz, 1973), practices (Bourdieu, 1998; Heidegger, 1962), activity systems (Engestrom, 1990), life-worlds (Habermas, 1987; Wittgenstein, 1958).
perspectives and forces certain individuals to assimilate mainstream beliefs and values 
(Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991) at the expense of their own identities or learning trajectories 
(Nasir & Cobb, 2007b). The domination of certain Discourses over individuals is referred to as cultural 
hegemony (Baszile, 2010). Gramsci (2000) uses Marxist lenses to conceptualize cultural 
hegemony and thus formulates it in terms of social-class struggle. He uses the concept to explain how ruling elites impose their norms to manipulate and dominate social, cultural, 
economic, and political beliefs, perceptions, and values in order to reproduce their power and 
control over the rest of the society. In this dissertation, however, I conceptualize cultural 
hegemony beyond one social-class’ domination and accept is as combination of various 
social structures in a society.

The concept of cultural hegemony helps us to understand how inequity may be reproduced in educational contexts “by drawing attention to questions regarding who has control over the conditions for the production of knowledge, values, and classroom practices” (Giroux, 2011, p. 5). Since Discourses “play a significant part both in whose learning is valued as legitimate … and in how students come to see themselves as … thinkers and as members of … [their learning] community” (Nasir & Cobb, 2007b, p. 7), the learning context may not provide fair pedagogical opportunities for individuals to follow their own learning trajectories. Specifically, inequitable learning conditions can be constructed when individuals identify themselves with the non-dominant perspectives and, as a result, have their values marginalized or their knowledge devalued. In other words, a learning situation can be said to
be inequitable if a clear pattern of hegemony is observable over a period of time, forcing students to assimilate the dominant Discourses.

Discourses, therefore, can link between macro-level social structures in society and the reproduction of inequity at micro-level classroom settings. In order to address equity as situated in a pedagogical activity and as being informed by social structures that bound educational institutions, I employ the concept of Discourses for simultaneously bringing both issues of classroom interaction and broader social, cultural, historical, and political structures to the fore. Since “culturally based interpretations that students bring to the … classroom can profoundly influence both how they learn and indeed what they define as learning” (Nasir & Cobb, 2007b, p. 3), such a formulation can explain what constitutes equity in digitally-mediated environments and how and why inequitable learning conditions might occur in day-to-day classroom activities.

Fundamental to my perspective is the idea that equity is not about providing a point of sameness among individuals, but about enabling them to become agents of their own learning by appropriating the learning repertoires they need in order to fulfill their potential. Thus, under an equitable learning condition, individuals should be able to build on their prior experiences and construct positive identities as learners without being constrained by the dominant Discourses, and should be accepted as equal partners and treated as such by their peers. Conceptualizing equitable pedagogical conditions within the tensions between cultural hegemony and identification, of course, invites a discussion about identification and identities.
2.2. Identity and Identification

The concept of identity has been at the center of many political, philosophical, economic, and academic debates. For example, politically, identity refers to how various social groups struggle for recognition within a society and how these groups were affected by various institutional practices. Philosophically, identity is associated with the question whether humans are unique to themselves or they share a degree of sameness with one other in a particular time and space. Academically, it has been deemed vital by many disciplines; yet, identity means different things to different scholars from different disciplines. Indeed, notions of identity are as diverse as the bodies of literature that have taken up the concept. Fields as diverse as psychology, sociology, physical sciences, humanities, and philosophy offer discipline-specific conceptualizations and definitions of identity. Thus, the concept of identity has been overused in academia and its meaning is ambiguous: it may mean too much, too little, or nothing at all (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

The concept of identity is challenging: the conundrum becomes evident through a look at the word's etymology. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term was appropriated from a Latin word “idem”, meaning the sameness or being identical. Yet, the concept of identity implies both similarity and difference and much of the debate regarding identity stems from the tensions between these two aspects (Buckingham, 2008a):

On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time. … Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. … On one level, I am the product of my unique personal
biography. Yet who I am (or who I think I am) varies according to who I am with, the social situations in which I find myself, and the motivations I may have at the time, although I am by no means entirely free to choose how I am defined. (p.1)

This dilemma marks a the fundamental difference between psychological and sociological perspectives on identity and remains inherent in educational research.

Psychological perspectives typically contend that individuals have an authentic or essential self\textsuperscript{10}, assuming that individuals have relatively consistent and stable identities. Conceptualizing identity as resolving role confusion, these perspectives argue that identity is internally coherent and inexorable, and that identity is a single state that one achieves over time and development (Erikson, 1968). However, such a conceptualization does not provide sufficient means to understand the complex human experience (Hall, 1996) since it does not capture the dynamic interplay of social factors on identity construction (Jenkins, 2008).

Psychological perspectives, in this sense, accept identity as a predefined state of self and thus conceptualize it outside of experience by ignoring the fluid and contingent nature of identity construction (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

Sociological perspectives have moved away from this normative perspective to suggest that identity is something people enact or perform, as opposed to something people have. According to this perspective, identities are situated in and bounded by Discourses that exist in any given community (Holland et al., 1998). That is, identity is the temporary product of various Discourses and it is invoked to highlight the rather unstable, multiple,

\textsuperscript{10} Post-structuralist argument criticizes essentialism by focusing on the oppressive and reductive function of representation and argues that the idea of “essential self” risks naturalizing one groups’ experience as normative; thereby, it marginalizes other groups and creates exclusion.
fluctuating, and fragmented nature of the self (Jenkins, 2008). Precisely because identities are constructed within Discourses, socio-cultural perspectives argue the need for understanding identities as produced through particular practices or enactments in a particular historical, social, and institutional site (Hall, 1996). Sociological perspectives, therefore, move identities from an essential authentic self “to a matter of engagement, participation, and membership in a community of practice” (Nasir & Cooks, 2009, p. 42).

In order to understand the relationship between Discourses and identity enactments, scholars have employed the concept of identification11 (or identities-in-practice). Based on available material and symbolic resources, identification is the process of classifying, labeling, or linking individuals that have a relation to one another (Jenkins, 2008). It is not deterministic in the sense that it is a given, fixed condition, but rather it is situated in contingency and it “is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group …” (Hall, 1996, p. 2). Individuals identify themselves or are identified with various cultural categories depending on their enactments of particular identity or identities within particular historical and social situations (Holland et al., 1998). In this sense, identification is intrinsic to context and has both individual and social aspects by which individuals perceive, categorize, and situate themselves and define symbolic boundaries or create links between one another:

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11 While sociologists reacted to essentialist psychological perspectives and employed the concept of identification to capture the dynamic interplay between Discourses and identity enactments, ironically enough, the concept itself is historically associated with Freud and his method of psychoanalysis. Jacques Lacan, another psychoanalyst, has also made prominent contributions to the psychological aspects of the term by developing Freud’s concepts.
people categorize or label themselves and others, how they identify as members of particular groups; how a sense of group belonging or community is developed and maintained, and how groups discriminate against outsiders; how the boundaries between groups operate, and how groups relate to each other; and how institutions define and organize identities. These processes operate at both social and individual levels: individuals may make claims about their identity (for example, by asserting affiliation with other members of a group), but those claims need to be recognized by others. In seeking to define their identity, people attempt to assert their individuality, but also to join with others, and they work to sustain their sense of status or self-esteem in doing so. (Buckingham, 2008a, pp. 5–6)

Consequently, identification is a never-ending interplay between Discourses and identity enactments. It is not a singular, fixed, or static entity; rather, it is a dynamic set of practices in particular contexts under particular circumstances (Gee, 2000).

Race, gender, and class are the three canonical identity categories by which scholars have investigated identification. As socially constructed identity categories, race, gender, and class are not immaterial or inconsequential; rather, they are informed by and situated in Discourses (Gee, 2000) and they are closely related to the dynamics of identification. Playing a significant role in how different individuals make different meanings of their experiences, race, gender, and class affect how different individuals construct different identifications under particular circumstances. Furthermore, race, gender, and class are closely intertwined and intersect in complex ways, making it difficult to talk about them all at once (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009):

[However,] one way to deal with this challenge is to foreground the dynamics of one category while keeping the others, at least analytically, in the background. … This process of shifting categories of race, class, and gender analytically between foreground and background allows us to see how the dynamics of each operate distinctly yet always in relation to others. (p. 161)

Analytical switching, therefore, offers means for understanding how different identifications
allow or constrain individuals to navigate through and within their educational context as raced, gendered, and classed subjects.

The process of identification, however, needs an interpretative system by which particular meanings or practices can be recognized, legitimized, and prioritized. This interpretative system, or Discourse, provides means for individuals to make sense of themselves by interpreting their moment-by-moment negotiations with others (Gee, 2000). And, because the process of identification gets its meanings from prevailing Discourses (Holland et al., 1998), cultural hegemony can manifest itself by affecting the cultural symbols or signifiers (Giroux, 2011). That is, while individuals constitute themselves in an active fashion, these practices are not something freely and openly invented by individuals themselves (Foucault, 1978). In other words, “just because [identities] are constructed in the moment … [it] does not mean that individuals have perfect freedom to construct their identities or subject positions in any way they choose” (Esmonde, 2009a, p. 1012). Individuals appropriate these cultural artifacts to authorize or legitimate their own and others’ practices; therefore, “[identification] is constructed as individuals both act with agency in authoring themselves and are acted upon by social others as they are positioned …” (Nasir & Cooks, 2009, p. 41).

In this sense, identification classifies individuals into readily available subject positions that are derived from the cultural resources at hand and these subject positions have particular meanings of and for individuals. Since individuals use different identifications for their own reasons and purposes (Jenkins, 2008), they may resist (especially if they are
identified with subaltern categories\textsuperscript{12}, redefine, or simply reproduce the identifications available to them. Consequently, the dynamics of identification not only affect how individuals make meaning of their experiences but also alter each student’s experience.

The relationship between Discourses and the process of identification is important for our understanding of equity since identifications have certain social and political consequences. Identifications enable or constrain individuals’ access to educational resources or materials. Consciously or unconsciously, individuals may try to identify themselves in line with dominant Discourses in order to gain or secure their access to educational resources or legitimize their learning experiences. Consequently, the process of identification may create inequitable learning conditions. Understanding the macro-level material or symbolic conditions under which identifications are produced at the micro-level educational contexts explains how Discourses can perpetuate inequity since “access to the range of meanings available in any given space is determined … by how [individuals] understand themselves and how they are perceived by others” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009, p. 161). Furthermore, such an understanding conceptualizes both identification and equity as dynamic and practice-based processes in a cultural context, and underscores the rather implicit yet strong connections between Discourses and inequity in educational contexts.

Online learning research needs such perspectives if it is to adequately address equity and social justice in learning contexts. Critical questions should revolve around how claims

\textsuperscript{12} While the term is derived from Gramsci’s work, it is associated with Post-Colonial theorists, particularly with Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. It describes the social groups who are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structures; thus, who are excluded from a society’s established structures for political representation.
of identification are produced in a particular situation and how those claims affect individuals’ experiences. Productive inquiry, therefore, should explore how identifications play a role in access to or distribution of learning resources, rather than simply investigating how a particular person or group experiences online learning. It is through examining how Discourses manifest themselves in the process of identification that we can work within analytical frameworks and actively make contextual judgments of equity.

2.3. Online Selves and Impression Management

In other disciplines, such as Information and Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, or Computer Sciences, research regarding the intersections of technology, mediated interactions, and identification has a long history. Early research employed social-psychological perspectives for examining how interactions within and through digitally-mediated environments allow individuals to manage identifications (e.g., Giese, 1998; Hardey, 2002; Walker, 2000). Focusing on the “subjective side of technology”, scholars have questioned, “what does technology do to us” (Turkle, 2005, p. 3) and discussed how a digitally-mediated experience results in new manifestations of identity (Haraway, 1991). The current body of literature builds on these early accounts and indicates that face-to-face embodied experiences are reproduced in digitally-mediated environments (e.g., Buckingham, 2008b; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Van Doorn, 2009). According to these scholars, one way to conceptualize identification in digitally-mediated environments is to focus on how individuals manage their online selves.
Online selves are created through profile pages and they are situated within the intersection of self-representation and identification. Yet, what is taken for granted in face-to-face contexts cannot be taken for granted in digitally-mediated environments. While physical presence conveys cues about one's gender, race, social-status, age group, attitudes, or affiliations by its very being (Buckingham, 2008a), online-self has to be created (Van Doorn, 2009). In order to convey social cues, individuals use everyday realities when they write digital bodies (Sundén, 2003). In other words, online selves are:

… tightly tethered to the individual behind the profile, if for no other reason than because they serve as a direct digital representation of that person for [digitally]-mediated interactions. … [For this reason,] the performances that take place online are not isolated acts, disconnected from embodied settings, but rather conscious acts that rely on a context that spans mediated and unmediated environments and involves people who are known in both settings. (boyd, 2008a, p. 128)

According to this perspective, a digital body not only identifies a person in relation to those around them but also situates a person in a social context. Thus, the pressure surrounding creating profile pages are not much different than representing the self in daily life. Online self is contextual and ephemeral:

… identity statements on home pages closely resemble those found in face-to-face interaction. [Profile] pages give and give off impressions … They can be embedded in and linked to networks of relationships and activities. They can be used to bolster real life communication, can be compared to old-fashioned physical objects, and can invite response and create dialogue. (Walker, 2000, p. 111)

In all these ways, profile pages resemble the process of identification in face-to-face contexts. It is important to note that writing up a digital-self is not, by any means, limited to creating profile pages. People are able to represent themselves – at least to a certain extent –
even if profile pages are not present (Mann, 2003). In the absence of profile pages, one uses linguistic signs and markers as semiotic resources since such linguistic-semiotic signs bear socio-cultural knowledge and provide contextualizing cues (Fairclough, 2001).

In profile pages, individuals type in how they wish to represent themselves and include information about their sense of self in relation to those around them. Text and images are the main media to create profile pages, though this is occasionally accompanied by audio or video recordings. Through the combination of media – in some cases with links to personal blogs or Facebook pages – people “explicitly articulate their identity, imagine the context in which they are operating, and negotiate the impressions they are conveying” (boyd, 2008a, p. 167).

Creating an online-self is the beginning of the process of identification in digitally-mediated environments. Indeed, the presentation of self in everyday life is more than simply introducing oneself but a “theatrical performance” balanced between the dynamics of what one expressed and how one impressed (Goffman, 1959). In order to make a good impression, people look around, observe how others are behaving, and enact their performances accordingly. This is what Goffman (1959) calls “impression management” to explain how people alter their behavior in order to be perceived as intended.

While Goffman developed his notion in face-to-face contexts, impression management in digitally-mediated environments is no exception (boyd, 2008b). Tightly connected to the context in which impression management takes place, people create better selves in digitally-mediated environments and manage their impressions (Giese, 1998;
Indeed, the notion of better selves is based on the physical appearance. For Turkle (2011), people tend to represent themselves as more desirable and better looking: online selves are usually thinner, slimmer, or more athletic. While Turkle suggests normative understanding of beauty, “the better self” is tightly connected to the context and there can be many “the better self”, constructed by the values within the context.

In digitally-mediated contexts, online selves, impression management, and identification are closely related. Therefore, despite the absence of physical bodies, people create a “digital body” for their digitally-mediated interactions (Sundén, 2003). Through profile pages, digitally-mediated experiences become embodied (Van Doorn, 2009) and the context is constituted through a shared digital-social reality (Hardey, 2002):

in constructing linkages between real and virtual identities there is a tension between the conceptualization of an empty free-for-all virtual social space and an approach that pays attention to the way embodied sociability anchors and shapes interactions within the virtual land-scape. (p. 571)

The digitally-mediated context, in this sense, is not *tabula rasa*. It does not lack social context, nor does it afford arbitrary social contexts. Rather, digitally-mediated context is shaped by and grounded in the social, political, and historical realities of its inhabitants. By creating their online-selves, people embody material and symbolic conditions of daily life in digitally-mediated contexts.

2.4. Social Presence and Social Absence

While early research studied online and offline practices as isolated entities, some scholars have challenged such perspectives and argued that online and offline beings should
not be studied as a dichotomy (Turkle, 1997). Currently, scholars further challenge the current beliefs regarding the differences between real and virtual and between hyper-real and imaginary (Žižek, 2008). For example, Gajjala (2009) argues that online and offline practices are neither separate or unrelated entities nor are they unchanged or identical existences; rather, they are continuous states of the same being:

… when we ‘are online’ we are simultaneously somewhere else physically as well – but we are definitely not disembodied (i.e. without body) when we ‘are online.’ Neither are we not online or not connected when we ‘are’ offline, since we are simultaneously connected physically, hands typing, eyes reading, mouth speaking and engaged with activities around us in the wider physical space surrounding us as well. But in being online we cannot really separate our being online from being offline, because online and offline are not discrete entities. (p. 61 quotations are original)

Therefore, an online and offline existence is a continuum of the self in both contexts (Sterne, 1999). However, practices in online environments are digitally-mediated experiences and the concept of presence\(^\text{13}\) has been employed to study these mediated experiences.

Defined as the degree to which individuals represent themselves (Rourke et al., 1999) and perceive others in digitally-mediated environments (Biocca et al., 2003), social presence has long been employed to study human experience in online learning environments (Oztok & Brett, 2011). With particular interest to “the degree of feeling, perception, and reaction to another intellectual entity” (Tu & McIsaac, 2002, p. 146), online education research has examined how individuals engage with each other by interacting with and reacting to others

\(^{13}\) While online education scholars have adopted the term in 1980s to study the various computer-mediated experiences in online learning environments, presence research is originated in the discipline of Communication Studies and, indeed, the term is coined by scientists in this discipline (See, Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Communication studies research has long examined the effects of technology on the representation of mind and body. See, Floridi (2005) for a detailed discussion.
(Hill, Song, & West, 2009) and argued that the degree of social presence is the total quality of interpersonal relationships (Kehrwald, 2008).

Since the construction of social presence is grounded in how individuals perform their state of being as they socialize within a particular context, it reflects one’s awareness of the self in a particular context. Therefore, it can explain how subjectivities are constructed in digitally-mediated environments:

The subjectivity of perspective is part of the establishment and cultivation of social presence and the particular subjective readings of others’ social presence. In the cultivation of social presence, each individual asserts a particular perspective which is related to not only his/her immediate point of view, but also his/her accumulated experiences. While there are explicit, situated demonstrations of particular perspectives in certain messages …, it is more common for individuals to build up a sense of others’ current perspectives based on an increasing number of interactions. …[Accordingly,] individuals with a particular point of view see and interpret messages in particular ways according to their frame of reference. (Kehrwald, 2010, p. 46)

Social presence, in this sense, is constructed dialogically (Bakhtin, 1986) and it is a combination of the self and others: it operates “on the boundary between two consciousness, two subjects” (ibid p.106). As a dialogic construction, it conveys meanings about individuals and creates norms and values that determine what is acceptable in a given context (Ferreday, Hodgson, & Jones, 2006). Thus, social presence not only facilitates individuals’ practices but also mediates socio-historical norms, values, beliefs, and perspectives that individuals bring into online learning environments. Consequently, the construction of social presence is not an improvisation without a script but is derived from cultural norms (Walther, 1992) and thus is constrained by Discourses (Hughes, 2007). By accepting, rejecting, redefining, or simply reproducing their subjectivities in their social presence, individuals choose from their
repertoire of practices (K. D. Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) and enact their identifications in online learning environments.

A comprehensive understanding of equity in digitally-mediated environments, however, goes beyond how individuals represent themselves depending on their perceptions of self in relation to others and further includes the qualities and cultural background that individuals consciously filter-out when they create their online existence. That is, the process of identification in digitally-mediated experiences is not only articulated by what is represented but also defined by what is filtered-out in that particular representation. I shall term these consciously filtered-out identifications social absence. Therefore, I regard social absence as the extent to which particular identifications are not represented in one’s social presence. Social absence is not the opposite of social presence; rather, one’s social presence and absence are always related to each other and both are situated in and defined by Discourses.

In digitally-mediated environments, one’s social presence or social absence operates as a site for the process of identification since individuals use their presence in conveying who they are to other people. That is, individuals assess the context in which they enact their social presence and consider the conditions by which others will make sense of their presence (Riva, 2002). Then, individuals alter their social presence and social absence in particular ways in order to be accepted or legitimized (Kehrwald, 2010). This process of enactment, interpretation, and adjustment of self-representation is called impression management (Goffman, 1959) and through the process of impression management, individuals write
themselves into online beings (boyd, 2008b):

Impression management is a part of a larger process where people seek to define a situation through their behavior. People seek to define social situations by using contextual cues from the environment around them. Social norms emerge out of situational definitions, as people learn to read cues from the environment and the people present to understand what is appropriate behavior. … The process of learning to read social cues and react accordingly is core to being socialized into a society. (p, 128-129)

The process of impression management can be thought of as the decisions that individuals make in creating their social presence (Walther, 1992) – and consequently their social absence – and it can be linked with the idea of self-monitoring (Foucault, 1978):

people have relative control in choosing what information to put online in order to eliminate the unwanted consequences of being identified with subaltern categories.

Self-monitoring in digitally-mediated environments can be thought of as the process by which certain individuals from certain cultural groups hide their differences since the difference is the primary point of othering\(^{14}\), constituting a fixated form of representation for both the dominant and the subaltern (Spivak, 1999). Social absence, therefore, is the degree to which individuals hide their differences in digitally-mediated environments through the process of self-monitoring. Consequently, one’s social presence or absence is contingent on the dynamics of what constitutes the subaltern or how the Others are defined.

The idea of social absence suggests that individuals may hide behind their relative anonymity (Hughes, 2009) to overcome exclusion based on their socio-cultural

\(^{14}\) The Other is a stereotypical form of identification and fixed mode of representation. Othering is a process by which societies form and sustain symbolic boundaries through cultural hegemony in order to exclude or segregate whom they want to subordinate. By marginalizing subordinate culture’s perspectives or extenuating their experiences, the dominant culture articulates its difference and reproduces cultural hegemony.
identifications (P. Rogers & Lea, 2005). Indeed, one study reports that when individuals have lower levels of social presence (and thus higher levels of social absence), they perceive that they have more equal opportunities to participate (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997).

Unfortunately, the study does not further explain the negative correlation between social presence and equal opportunities to learn nor does it conceptualize the results as a matter of inequity. Furthermore, hiding behind relative anonymity does not necessarily mean that individuals are exempt from identifications (Ferreday et al., 2006); rather, it may mean that individuals pretend to be someone else in order to be identified with dominant Discourses.

Defined as a pseudo identity (Gunawardena, 1995), one’s anonymity is presumed to provide social equality in digitally-mediated environments (Baym, 1995). For example, one study indicates that, though the participants did not generally perceive gender as an issue in their everyday interactions, a female student articulated that gender differences did not completely disappear (Ferreday et al., 2006). The female student in that study characterized her experience as “ideal blend of personalities” as she was performing “male behaviors” and being more “macho” since she was situated in a male-dominated environment and enacting a stereotypical masculinity. Thus, her social absence (the extent that she filtered-out her femininity but performed masculinity) can typify how individuals try to be identified with dominant identifications in order to avoid exclusion. Consequently, the dynamic interplay between social presence and absence can provide means to explore the effects of claims of identification in digitally-mediated learning environments. In particular, the degree of

15 It is important to note that I do not define what male behaviors might be nor do I suggest what it means to be a male or female; neither do I argue that masculinity can only be associated with males.
filtered-out qualities can explain the otherwise hidden effects of cultural hegemony on the construction of self in online learning environments (S. Yates & Hiles, 2010).

In order to understand how those claims affect individuals’ experiences, therefore, I turn to the context in and cultural practices by which social presence and absence are created: the community. Online education literature has long studied the online context and culture through the concept of community. Defined as a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful dialog to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understandings (Luppicini, 2007), the concept of community has been employed to explain what the online learning context is (Hiltz, 1994), how it plays a role in learning (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999), how it relates to online culture (Rheingold, 1991) and how it mediates pedagogy (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). The central idea of the concept of community is that culture mediates practices and pedagogies and that a community is built around the mutuality of meanings, purposes, and practices.

Mutuality of meanings and goals, surely, are very important for learning practices (Cole, 1996). However, mutual meanings may not always support a sense of community, and may have consequences for particular individuals or groups as being a member of a community requires individuals to accept (or seem to accept) its core values and norms (Carusi, 2006) in order to preserve the integrity of the community (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2006).

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16 Some scholars termed special communities based on the context or the purposes, such as Community of Inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999), Learning Communities (Scardamalia, 2002), Virtual Communities (Hiltz, 1994), Knowledge Communities (Slotta & Najafi, 2010), Cyber Communities (Jones, 1995), or Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998). I do not specifically refer to any of these definitions but use the community in its most general definition.
2005). By accepting or rejecting their communities’ mutual meanings, individuals can be included into or excluded from their communities (Hughes, 2009). Thus, in order to be included as a member of a community and be legitimized in their participation, individuals may feel pressured to accept such mutual meanings.

Mutuality of meanings, therefore, is closely related to how individuals make sense of themselves and others. Indeed, when a community is conceptualized as a zero-institution17, it is the membership to such an institution that enables all members to experience themselves as such (Žižek, 2006, p. 1558):

Is then, this zero-institution not ideology as its purest, i.e., the direct embodiment of the ideological function of providing a neutral all encompassing space in which social antagonism is obliterated, in which all members of society can recognize themselves? And is the struggle for hegemony not precisely the struggle for how will this zero-institution be overdetermined, colored by some particular signification?

It is through this battle for hegemony that the online learning context can create conditions for inequitable learning situations: “consensus or group cohesion plays a large role in community life, [and] it is fairly common for members to silence, modify, or limit the fullness of dissenting voices in favor of the dominant opinion …” (Byrne, 2008, p. 30). How mutual meanings are negotiated and defined, therefore, plays a role in how individuals perceive themselves and thus impacts how they construct their social presence and absence. In other words, meanings, subjectivities, and the process of identification are interconnected and one’s degree of social presence and social absence can reveal how cultural hegemony can reproduce inequitable learning conditions in digitally-mediated environments.

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17 Lévi-Strauss (1967) uses the term to define a specific institution with no determinate function since relationships within this social group is natural and has no pre-determined meanings.
Every educational system, including education in and through digitally-mediated environments, imitates social disputes and struggles; thus, “it is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of [D]iscourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it” (Foucault, 1972, p. 227). Consequently, when the question concerning whose values, perspectives, and beliefs are legitimized as mutual meanings is ignored, online learning contexts may reproduce inequitable learning situations since such mutual meanings can reproduce cultural hegemony and affect one’s social presence, compelling individuals to filter-out their particular subjectivities in order to be identified with dominant Discourses.
Chapter 3. Positioning the Research in Online Education

Literature

Every academic discipline recognizes many true or false propositions that constitute a sort of system in which specific questions, concepts, and methods are legitimized (Lyotard, 1984). Thus “disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate" (Foucault, 1978, p. 223). Each academic research discipline, therefore, has its own historical motivations to ask certain questions and investigate them in certain ways:

[c]oncerned with [understanding] scientific development, the historian then appears to have two main tasks. On the one hand, he [sic] must determine by what man [sic] and at what point in time each contemporary scientific fact, law, and theory was discovered or invented. On the other, he [sic] must describe and explain the congeries of error, myth and superstition that have inhibited the more rapid accumulation of the constituents of the modern science text. (Kuhn, 1970, p. 2)

It is important, therefore, to understand how the historical development of educational technology has influenced the ways in which online education scholars perceive, conceptualize, examine, and draw conclusions about current pedagogical practices.

When collective pedagogies are considered, online education literature has overwhelmingly reiterated that online learning environments naturally provide active and democratic participation by which all students learn much better:

[c]omputer networking encourages the high-quality interactions and sharing by which all students can participate actively and learn from one another. Among all students, regardless of their appearance, location, or assertiveness, there is a rich interchange of information. Because a group shares a common
world of knowledge, they have a strong motivation to do work. These characteristics of online learning, along with expanded, democratic access, generally result in much better contribution of students. (Harasim et al., 1995). However, such studies have not conceptualized the online learning context in relation to broader societal Discourses nor have they considered the social, cultural, historical, and political dynamics in which students are situated. As I have articulated in the previous chapter, equity in technologically-mediated environments should be conceptualized as situated in the micro-level day-to-day learning activities that are shaped by macro-level Discourses.

In this chapter, therefore, I demonstrate how and why online learning research has failed to conceptualize equity in relation to Discourses on the one hand and learning conditions on the other. I turn to the historical trajectory of educational technology in order to understand the theories and concepts in which the current perspectives and traditions in online education are grounded. I analyze the historical development of education in and through the use of digitally-mediated environments in relation to the socio-historical conditions under which general education and public schooling are transformed.

Tracing the broader Discourses that subjugated the educational policies, theories, and practices, I change the emphasis from how technology is used to why technology is used. By doing so, I address equity as fundamentally tied to societal Discourses inherent in education and schooling, and contextualize online education within the broader societal struggle among different groups over questions regarding the purpose of schooling, how children learn, whose knowledge is to be legitimated, and what social relations would prevail (Kliebard,
3.1. Genealogy of the Concepts and the Myths of Equity in Online Learning

When education in general and schooling in particular is considered, the relationship between technology and learning can be thought of as a post-Fordist project, driven by liberalism. While economical and political concerns have always been central to the debates regarding education and schooling, efficiency and accountability models for curriculum have influenced the theory and practice of education since the post-Sputnik era (Apple, 2004). The industrial revolution produced its own cultural beliefs in science and technology (Trend, 2001) and it was a time of an emerging positivism when scientific techniques were finding their way into educational theory and practice through the marriage of science and technology (Pinar, 1978). The industrialization of schools turned them into technical training institutions, where students were educated to meet the national standards in literacy, math, and science with:

- the rise of scientism and technocratic rationality as a major ideological force in the 1920s;
- the increasing impingement of state policy on the shaping of school curricula;
- the anti-communism of the 1950s;
- the increasing influence of industrial psychology in defining the purpose of schooling;
- the rise of individualism and consumerism through the growth of the culture industry, in which the logic of standardization, repetition, and rationalization defines and shapes the culture of consumption;
- the gendered nature of teaching as manifested in the educational labor force and in the construction of school administration and curriculum;
- the racism, sexism, and class discrimination that have been reinforced through increasing use of tracking and testing; and
- the failure of teachers to gain sufficient control over the conditions of their labor (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 48)
In order to correspond with such demands in schooling and education, school boards, educational institutions, and governmental agencies turned to technology since technology was believed to be effective\textsuperscript{18} for training mass amounts of American soldiers in a short period of time during the Second World War (Seattler, 1990).

Socio-political Discourses, therefore, promoted automation of teaching (Feenberg, 2002), arguing that replacing faculty with technological instructional products (e.g., CDs, videos, computer software) would address the fiscal concerns regarding public schools (Trend, 2001). The concepts of efficiency and productivity\textsuperscript{19} formed the theory and practice of educational technology, defining the field as a modernist project (De Vaney, 1998). In this sense, educational use of technology as a research field, and later education in digitally-mediated environments, developed out of the concerns for cost-effectiveness in transmitting academic-content knowledge:

The educationalist, in considering the effect of technology on the instructional process must remember that, in addition to machinery, technology includes processes, systems, management and control mechanisms both human and non-human, and above all . . a way of looking at problems as to their interest and difficulty, the feasibility of technical solutions, and the economic values - broadly considered - of those solutions. This is the context in which the educator must study technology (Finn (1960) as cited in Ely, 1970, p. 85)

Consequently, online education scholars have conceptualized pedagogy in terms of transmission, productivity, and efficiency, but have ignored pedagogy as a deliberate and

\textsuperscript{18} Such studies focus on the use of audio-visual media and are concerned with transmitting basic knowledge. However, no evidence of actual learning as such are reported since learning was considered as remembering.

\textsuperscript{19} While efficiency is simply the ratio of input to output, in case of education, it is defined as the amount of work spent to transmit knowledge. Similarly, in case of education, productivity is defined as teaching to mass amount of students with little input.
critical attempt to influence the ways in which knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Investigating how technology can enhance learning:

…much of the academic study of educational technology that has taken place over the past 25 years is perhaps described most accurately as the study of ‘learning technology’ – i.e. work that focuses on the role of technology in facilitating, supporting and (it is assumed) enhancing the act of learning. In this sense, academic investigations of digital technology use in education have tended to focus either on the process of technological development and design, or else on the process of learners using technology – therefore drawing predominantly on a range of theories of instruction and learning that seek to explain how and why technology-enhanced learning can take place. (Selwyn, 2010, p. 67)

The curriculum of educational technology and its concomitant pedagogical practices, then, is accepted as something an instructor does to implement a pre-constituted body of knowledge and is therefore improvable by increasingly complex applications of technology.

Academically, the relationship of technology to education is defined by positivism and constructivism (Oliver, 2011; Selwyn, 2010). While there is no single evolutionary point from which online education originated academically (Kidd, 2010), many scholars suggest that it emerged around the 1980s when practices of educational technology were integrated with distance learning (although there is no clear distinction between distance education and online education, distance education practices can be traced back to the educational radio, or even the earlier practices of educational mail) (Hiltz & Turoff, 1993). Since educational technology research was previously focused in psychology departments (Ely, 1999) and researchers relied on behaviorism and cognitive sciences in their inquiries (Harasim, 2000), the theory and practice of online education has been mostly shaped by these perspectives:
... professors practiced educational psychology but added something to the study of brain function; they investigated the interaction between a student's mind and a machine. Educational psychology and technology were, in the '20s and early '30s, under the sway of Thorndike's connectionism and a happier marriage of machine and theory could not be found. Connectionism and other forms of behaviorism strip a student's mind of culture and consciousness to provide researchers with the control necessary to analyze stimulus effects. In academic research a mechanistic learning theory was paired with a machine, a film projector, and the combination was so powerful that it controlled later ... educational technology research for decades to come (De Vaney, 1998, p. 74).

Accordingly, studies focused on mental models in order to explain the role of technology in the process of learning, isolating classroom practices from macro-level societal dynamics and structures.

On the theoretical level, Ally (2008) defines how the most influential schools of learning have contributed in different ways to current understandings: “behaviorist strategies can be used to teach the facts (what); cognitivist strategies, the principles and processes (how); and constructivist strategies to teach the real life and personal applications and contextual learning” (p. 39). Similarly, on the practical level, Kanuka’s (2008) definition of the present state of regular online learning practices demonstrates how these learning theories are employed in practice:

At present, education at all levels is to a great extent minimally regulated in terms of what will be taught, how it is taught and, in particular, what role e-learning technologies play. Individual teachers, schools, colleges, and/or faculties often determine the content and scope of what they will teach, then choose methods or strategies, instructional materials, and the e-learning technologies they believe will best help the learners to gain new knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes. (p. 92-93)

Taken together, the literature exemplifies that, in accord with Tyler’s (1949) rationale of curriculum, many online education scholars have been concerned with deciding and
conveying the academic content and the skills that students are expected to gain but have disregarded the social structures of the broader context. Drawing from positivist and post-Fordist pedagogical guidelines, online education research has addressed students as a unified subject and argued that learning in digitally-mediated environments transcends culture.

Conceptualizing the educational process as tabula rasa rather than historically and politically constituted, online education research has not paid attention to the struggle over meanings and practices. Accordingly, the online learning literature has primarily defined learning as the pedagogy of transmission of knowledge and studied “who, says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect” (Ely, 1970, p. 85), disregarding the wider social dynamics and political interests that schools are predicated on. Ignoring how schools function as agencies of social and cultural reproduction, online education research has ignored the ways in which various social, economic, and political interests bear down on and shape the day-to-day practices of classroom life.

The current state of online education does not position students and learning conditions in relation to differentiated societal dynamics, which is the core of questions concerning equity (R. Gutiérrez, 2007). Historically, therefore, the frameworks and concepts that online education research has employed for studying participation, collaboration, and equity inherently ignore the societal dynamics, power struggles, and ideologies in which online education itself is situated.

Technological determinism is the ultimate concept at the intersection of these liberal,
positivist, and post-Fordist Discourses since, within the deterministic framework, the concepts of affordance and cost-effectiveness can serve as a selection criteria for determining successful and failed applications of technology (Feenberg, 2002). In its simplest definition, technological determinism refers to the philosophical stance that technology is the driving force in the modern world.

The idea that technology is the sole changing force can be traced back to the concept's etymology: in Greek, techné can be understood as the craft-based approach to producing or achieving something and it is often discussed in terms of the systematic application of science (or scientific knowledge) to control or alter the nature for human's needs or desires (Heidegger, 2008). It suggests that technology is an external and autonomous force that is independent of the context in which it is used and is exempt from the complex interplay of historical, social, economic, and political forces. According to this perspective, “technology sets the conditions for social formation [as] it influences our cognition and sensorium, changes our social behavior and shapes our culture” (Lee, 1996, p. 201). Thus, proponents of this perspective argue that technology’s effects are not bounded by the processes in which it is used.

Opponents of this perspective argue that technology is entirely shaped by existing social relations and it is “simply a matter of what people choose to make of it: it has no inherent qualities and is regarded as essentially value free” (Buckingham, 2008a, p. 12). However, this approach disregards the potentials and affordances that technology offers. Rather than thinking of technology as an external force shaping society, I suggest a search for
a point of balance between these two perspectives in order to “move beyond the notion of technology as a simple cause of social change (on the one hand) and the idea of technology as an easy fix for complex social problems (on the other)” (Buckingham, 2008a, p. 12 emphasis added). In this dialectical approach, technology is another dimension among various societal factors; it is “social in much the same way as are institutions” (Feenberg, 2002, p. 11). That is, while technology has its own inherent constraints and possibilities to affect social life, its production, use, and distribution is shaped and appropriated by social actors and institutions:

as an artifact of culture, [technology] comes with its own locatedness within that materiality, suggesting particular functions, uses and possibilities, while simultaneously being subject to the ideology of the cultural contexts (or academic disciplines) within which it is employed (LeCourt, 2001, p. 87)

Such a conceptualization provides better means to understand the larger economical, political, and cultural dynamics behind the use of technology.

Frankfurt School theorists have arguably provided the most influential accounts regarding technology and its socio-cultural implications in daily life. Specifically, analyzing the effects of technology in both the production and consumption of mass cultural goods (Benjamin, 2008), Frankfurt School theorists documented how mass media uses subtle means of control and creates tyranny by changing the experience and perceptions of individuals (Adorno, 2001). They argued that mass-media manipulates people into a state of pessimism, and thus instrumentality can lead to oppression as it induces the foundation of social

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20 Frankfurt School refers to the institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt am Main, where inter-disciplinary neo-Marxist social theory is developed.
domination over individuality and free will. Although the Frankfurt School theorists mainly criticized the culture industry by exploring the implications of mass production of cultural goods, their perspective on the effects of technology inspired scholars in North America. Employing the deterministic view of technology, many influential media theorists and scholars studied the effects of technology on culture and society. For instance, media scholars employing this perspective have argued that social power structures are conveyed through the dominant forms of media tools (Innis, 1950) and that changes in the dominant medium alter individuals’ world-views and create biases through which a society’s orientation and values are shaped (McLuhan, 1964).

In the case of education, the deterministic view of technology influenced the curriculum of educational technology, shaping the classroom activities and the pedagogical practices by which technology is used. Stemming from the “techno-romantic” perspectives, the de facto role of the educational technologist was to “harness the power of technology” by finding ways to fix or enhance teaching and learning situations with technology-based improvements (Selwyn, 2011). This is what the Frankfurt School theorists call instrumental rationality and it represents the de-socialized view of technology by ignoring various Discourses behind the relation of technology to education, curriculum, and pedagogy. Thus, it reduces the importance of human agency by suggesting that technology itself defines the ways in which individuals engage with each other in digitally-mediated environments.

Adorno proposed that popular culture can be thought of as a factory producing standardized cultural goods (i.e. films, radio, magazines) that are used to manipulate mass society into passivity. The mechanization of cultural products are made available by the mass communications media.
In order to understand how these perspectives play a role particularly in online education, I analyze the current conceptualizations of online education in two categories: (1) open-flexible access, which leads scholars to suggest that individuals can access online materials or environments anytime and anywhere, and thus that online learning environments provide and sustain equity; and (2) a neutral environment, which leads scholars to suggest that mediated environments are inherently culturally value-free, and thus individuals in these environments are, by extension, assumed to be equal.

3.1.1. Open-Flexible Access

Open-flexible access refers to the capacities of online education technology that provide flexible and increased access to educational resources. This perspective supports an any-where, any-time view of digitally-mediated environments as it is concerned with the issues of access to educational resources. Arguably, open-flexible access is heavily influenced by liberalism (Haughey, Kidd, & Murphy, 2008); therefore, scholars employing this conceptual mindset have typically emphasized that technology can provide equal educational opportunities for participation, negotiation, and engagement. Proponents of open-flexible access have advocated that the digitally-mediated environment is a more democratic and inclusive space compared to typical face-to-face classrooms (Hollenbeck, 1998) since technology enables many-to-many communication among peers (Boyd, 1996), facilitates collaborative work (Daniel, 1996), and allows knowledge production regardless of time and space (Gubernick & Ebeling, 1997).

Such claims, however, are built on the assumption that digital technology can provide
better and enhanced opportunities for more individuals to participate, as if equity and social justice were direct consequences of open-flexible access to the digitally-mediated environment (Carr-Chellman, 2005):

For most of us, the idea of open access – the elimination of elitism as a function of place and prestige – holds the promise of equity. The basic premise of the rhetoric of democracy in online education is that if we can make access available to those who currently must work to earn a living and cannot attend residential programs because of geography or family obligations, then we are making these opportunities available more equitably. (p. 2)

While I acknowledge that open and flexible access is a very worthwhile educational goal, it is important to recognize that having equal access to educational resources affords equality rather than equity. As I have argued in the previous chapter, while equity refers to a contextual judgment of whether or not the given situation is in line with community ideals of justice, equality refers to quantitative measurements of equal treatment or outcomes.

The open-flexible access perspective has led to two separate yet related research strands: research focused on improving access to digitally-mediated environments and research focused on improving participation in digitally-mediated environments.

When issues of access are considered, research has typically focused on the possibilities that technology can afford and has argued that asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides ideal conditions for non-dominative, liberal discourses (Hiltz, 1994) “because everyone can be given [an] equal opportunity to enter arguments in the conference” (Boyd, 1996, p. 181). Building on these early claims, researchers have suggested that CMC provides open (Boshier, 1990), non-hierarchical (Harasim, 2000), and
emancipatory communication (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991) among the participants, allowing participants to contribute to discussion from anywhere in the world at any time of the day (Eastmond, 1995; Mason & Kaye, 1989), with many-to-many interactivity (Collins & Berge, 1995; McComb, 1994). Typifying the research concerned with access to the digitally-mediated environments, these early accounts focus on CMC’s effects on time and space barriers as a condition for equitable learning conditions:

Empirically, the findings show that students were able to attain mastery of the medium and act as … equal partners in the educational process. The study expanded earlier speculations … [and] showed how students are able to have better access, control, and equity in the learning environment. Physical characteristics such as the removal of time and place allowed students to tailor class participation to fit within their lives and locations. All voices were given equal opportunity to contribute to class discussion. (Hollenbeck, 1998, p. 41) Open-flexible access perspectives, therefore, proclaim that technology, by its very nature, opens up possibilities for widening access to higher education; thus, it promotes social equity (Gladieux & Swail, 1999).

Building upon these early accounts, the current research in online education echoes the early claims as scholars posit that digitally-mediated environments are free from the limitations of space and time (Kidd, 2010), and are able to provide equitable learning conditions since Internet-based learning is available to anyone at anytime and anywhere (Bates, 2005), helping adult learners in a global context both synchronously and asynchronously (Rajasingham, 2011). The literature, therefore, identifies digitally-mediated learning environments as “having the potential to overcome the ‘tyranny of distance’, allowing people … who are remote from the university, or who have primary care
commitments, to participate where otherwise they might not” (Barraket, 2000, p. 34).

When issues of participation are considered, researchers have argued that the appearance of equal conversational relations implies the presence of equitable learning conditions. Measuring the quantity of messages posted or received, research has concluded that the nature of communication in digitally-mediated environments provides equitable learning conditions compared to face-to-face discussions since those who are traditionally shut out of discussions – people from various cultural groups, women, minorities, or even people shy in nature – can benefit from the increased possibilities for participation:

All participants … had their messages posted in exactly the same manner. While perhaps this seems a minor factor, the effect in courses has been to further enhance the equitable nature of the educational environment. A posting … is just as apt to be ignored as any other in on-line discussion. [Therefore,] there may be a greatly reduced inequity between the number of student and instructor interjections on computer conferencing. (Hollenbeck, 1998, p. 41)

Focusing on the equality of participation, the literature posits that students from different cultural groups participate equally (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991), that women are as active as men when proposing a solution to a problem and that those of lower and higher socio-economic status contribute equally to discussion (McGuire, Kiesler, & Siegel, 1987).

Viewing equity as equality in terms of access to the digitally-mediated environment, open-flexible access research has addressed educational implications using quantitative outcomes, dropout rates, attendance, or achievement gaps. Simply, the literature has assumed that social equity can be reached to the extent that the digital gap is closed; therefore, it has considered the digital divide as a means to study equity (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010):

The large and growing role of new media in the economy and society serves
to highlight their important role in education, and especially in promoting
educational equity. On the one hand, differential access to new media, broadly
defined, can help further amplify the already too-large educational inequities
in American society. On the other hand, it is widely believed that effective
deployment and use of technology in schools can help compensate for unequal
access to technologies in the home environment and thus help bridge
educational and social gaps. (p. 180)
However, equal access is a necessary but insufficient premise for equitable learning
conditions (R. Gutiérrez, 2007). That is, just because students can login to the
digitally-mediated environment and interact with others does not ensure that there will be
equity in their learning experiences. Disregarding the effects of the macro-level Discourses
on micro-level classroom practices, open-flexible access does not address power
relationships, otherness, privilege, or marginalization in relation to the material and symbolic
conditions within which the daily learning practices are embedded. As I have argued in the
previous chapter, understanding equity in digitally-mediated environments should go beyond
the limited notion of access and include the rules of engagement and the process of
identification in learning contexts.

3.1.2. Neutral Environment

Neutral environment refers to the belief that digitally-mediated environments erase
socio-cultural differences. This perspective has led online learning scholars to assume that
individuals in digitally-mediated environments are socially equal by nature (Abrami & Bures,
1996) since technology itself is the means to remove conditions of oppression for students
(Winkelmann, 1995). Emphasizing the relative anonymity that CMC provides, research has
suggested that digitally-mediated environments provide opportunities for increasing
communication among participants (Walther, 1996) and are therefore preferred to typical face-to-face classrooms (Hawkes, 2001).

In line with the neutrality claims, the online education literature has been largely influenced by Habermas\(^{22}\) (1984) theory of communicative action. According to this theory, media and technology are means of modernity and media provides opportunities for individuals to coordinate their actions in the sphere of everyday life. Though Habermas suggested that communicative actions through media can be liberative or dominative (or both) for different people under different circumstances, online education research has preferentially adapted the liberative perspectives to address the nature of communication among participants.

Grounded in such perspectives and built on the assumption that lack of social contact reduces the role of social status (Harasim, 1989), the literature has analyzed the “democratic theory of CMC” (S. J. Yates, 1997, p. 283) and suggested that the digitally-mediated environment is simply a medium to deliver instruction and it does not affect students “any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition” (Clark, 1983, p. 445). Indeed, early online education research has conceptualized communicative actions as mere transmissions between senders and receivers, “where the sender of the information / message and the destination / recipient are separated by physical distance or time, and information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide the link” (Rajasingham, 2011, p. 445).

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\(^{22}\) Habermas was a student in Frankfurt School, and later became the director; however, he is less associated with the Marxist theories. He departed from Marxism and diverged the institute's research agenda.
Consequently, the CMC is assumed to promote equitable conversation by its nature (Herring, 1993):

CMC neutralizes social status cues (accent, handwriting/voice quality, sex, appearance, etc.) that might otherwise be transmitted by the form of the message. While on the one hand these characteristics render the medium less personal, they also provide for the possibility that traditionally lower-status individuals can participate on the same terms as others – that is, more or less anonymously, with the emphasis being on the content, rather than on the form of the message or the identity of the sender. [Thus] one of the greatest strengths of … [CMC] is its ability to break down socio-economic, racial, and other traditional barriers to the sharing and production of knowledge. You, for example, have no way of knowing if I am a janitor or a university president or an illegal alien – we can simply communicate on the basis of our ideas, not on any preconceived notions of what should be expected (or not expected) from one another. (para. 4)

The promise that social markers are absent in CMC environments has led researchers to argue that learning must necessarily be equitable (Boshier, 1990; Hiltz & Turoff, 1993) because the relatively anonymous nature of communication allows students to participate without being dominated by other students (Boyd, 1996; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991).

While current online education research no longer emphasizes the loss of socio-cultural markers – since the capacity of current technology conveys such information easily – the claims of neutrality continue to influence the literature. The current research suggests that neutrality of the online learning context provides greater learning outcomes compared to face-to-face settings (Freeman & Bamford, 2004):

In a face-to-face-learning scenario, a person’s identity is largely singular and fixed. To describe this simply, the individual is sitting in the class and in a glance you can determine their identity. Along with the recognition of this identity come a number of assumptions such as experience, motivation, and so on. … [In] online learning environments, where the students exist not as physical beings in a classroom context, but rather as identities in cyber space,
… discussions are disembodied and do not rely on the range of physical, tonal and enacted clues often associated with verbal communication. In this way, the “written talker” is able to adopt a range of personal presentations or personas, without the usual aesthetic and tonal limitations imposed by face-to-face verbal communication.

(p.46 quotation marks are original)

And, since the neutrality of digitally-mediated environments is assumed to provide a range of learning identities and equal opportunities for participation, “many researchers note that students perceive online discussion as more equitable and more democratic than traditional classroom discussions” (Swan & Shih, 2005, p. 116). The current perspectives, therefore, echo the earlier accounts as they suggest that the digitally-mediated environment by itself can provide better equitable learning opportunities for facilitation (Asterhan & Eisenmann, 2009), argumentation (I.-H. Kim, Anderson, Nguyen-Jahiel, & Archodidou, 2007), and group work (Wong, 2004).

Research arguing that digitally-mediated environments are neutral spaces disregards the role of Discourses and its effects on the rules of engagement and the process of identification. It minimizes human agency through its implicit assumption that actions are performed in ways independent from context. Focusing on the affordances of technology in this way leads to the assumption that the digitally-mediated context is a tabula rasa and exists without social, cultural, or political origins or assumptions. However, “social context is far from neutral and [has] to be related to broader social class, gender, and racial dynamics in society” (Nasir & Cobb, 2007b, p. 7). Characteristics such as race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, and gender are the very markers used in society to determine the
material and symbolic boundaries and relations (Goffman, 1959). “To ignore these characteristics would be to assume that [differentiated] power relations do not exist in society” (R. Gutiérrez, 2007, p. 42). The online learning context, therefore, is a socially constructed space. The digitally-mediated environment is not neutral, but is socially constituted by its inhabitants and their characteristics.

The neutrality perspective has contributed to the lack of attention paid by online learning research to the social, political, and cultural aspects of digitally-mediated environments (Oliver, 2011); instead, the focus has been transmitting the “scientific curriculum” (Den Heyer, 2009). To be fair, this focus is understandable when considering the role of online learning as a replacement for traditional forms of distance education (T. Anderson, 2008b) and the correspondence model of teaching-as-lecturing (Evans, 1995).

When the claims of open-flexible access and neutral environment are taken together, the literature concludes that CMC can enable conditions for “ideal discourse” (Habermas, 1984), where all participants can contribute equally to the discussion whenever they want since there are no cues to reflect social status or power relations. CMC characteristics that are believed to provide the ideal discourse can be summarized as (Hodgson, 2002, p. 231):

- it is possible to contribute to computer mediated interaction or discussion whenever individuals feel they want to without having to wait their 'turn' or without having to interrupt someone else
- contributions can be made at any time of day or night and on any day of the week
- contributions can be made wherever the different participants are geographically, from almost any location in the world, and are not dependent on the 'physical' presence in one locality of the discussants
- discussions are on going and continuous in nature for as long or short a period of time
as required or desired

- responses to others do not have to be made instantaneously or immediately but when the respondent is 'ready'
- communication is generally slower and of a more specific nature (and thus more potentially reflective) as compared to face to face communication
- there is a permanent record of a group's work and of every individual contribution which can be referred to at any time and which can be manipulated as any other information held electronically in a database

Because of these characteristics, it is claimed that digitally-mediated environments can provide and sustain equitable learning conditions for all participants.

Considering the genealogy of online education, the literature suggests that the broader social, political, historical, and economical dynamics that affect schooling and education in general point to online education is a modernist, positivist, and liberal project. Built on optimistic, if not idealistic assumptions, the theory and practice of online education have produced “instructional industrialism” (Evans, 1995) and have been employing technology merely for instructions or lectures (Carlson, 2010):

... formal causation in curriculum development takes the form of a narrow instrumentalism that mobilizes curriculum “machines” to produce achievement-level outputs (test scores), at the expense of genuine efforts to raise achievement and expectations in schools serving youth marginalized by class and race. This is what the critical theorists of the Frankfurt school called “instrumental rationality,” or “purposive rationality,” a technology that is interested only in immediate ends, even if these immediate ends (higher test scores) are attained through the use of a reductionistic skill-based curriculum that is ultimately inconsistent with the development of “higher order” or “critical” thinking skills, to say nothing of the development of critical citizens in a democratic society (p.203 quotation marks are original)

Focusing on the efficiency of instruction, much research has consequently failed to consider the effects of macro-level Discourses on micro-level learning practices. While neutrality de-contextualizes the context (disregarding macro-level Discourses), open-flexible access
de-contextualizes learning practices (disregarding micro-level learning practices). The literature has failed to situate the process of identification and the rules of engagement between the macro-level Discourses on the one hand and day-to-day classroom practices on the other.

3.2. Current State of Research in Online Education and Challenges

Building upon such limited accounts, the current state of online education provides idealistic, depoliticized, and normalized perspectives regarding equity in digitally-mediated learning environments. In particular, the online education literature suggests that equitable learning conditions can be sustained by providing equal access to a digitally-mediated environment, where social, cultural, historical, and political dynamics of learning are neutralized. Ignoring how the process of identification and the rules of engagement are produced, contested, and legitimated within the dynamics of everyday-life (Giroux, 2011), online learning literature tends to oversimplify human experience and considers it as reflecting inherent characteristics of different cultural groups. This essentialist and normative perspective assumes that identities are given, fixed, or predefined, and tends to generalize the members of a particular group and assimilate them into a singular identity. Consequently, it disregards the socio-cultural implications of Discourses on the process of identification (Buckingham, 2008b).

The online education literature has been influenced by Hofstede's (1980, 1997) conceptualization of identification23, which defines, identifies, and categorizes individuals

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23 The theory of cultural dimensions still continues to be a major resource in cross-cultural fields as the
through binary terms (i.e. collectivist – individualist, high uncertainty – low uncertainty, or high power – low power). Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions has been widely used in cross-cultural studies. It is developed as a result of using factor analysis to examine the results of a world-wide survey of employee values by IBM in the 1960s and 1970s. The theory was one of the first that could be quantified, and could be used to explain observed differences between cultures. Therefore, it is widely employed in educational technology research since it was in line with its positivist and modernist perspectives.

This taxonomy classifies countries or regions through the aforementioned binary terms and indicates what reactions are likely given one’s cultural background. For instance, if a person is identified with individualism based on his or her cultural background, that person is assumed to participate less in group work since “individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 51). On the contrary, a person is believed to be a good collaborator when he or she is identified with collectivism, since “collectivism … pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (ibid. p. 51). According to this perspective, students from collectivist societies are expected to speak up only in small groups while students from individualist societies are expected to speak up in large groups.

This framework can be found in much online learning research. For instance, when
research argues that “online courses benefit a wide variety of students, but perhaps none more dramatically than nontraditional female students” (Sullivan, 2001, p. 817), it not only suggests that there are enough commonalities among “non traditional female students” to allow this analysis to be made but also implies that there is a predefined way to be a female in digitally-mediated environments. The underlying theoretical assumption is that gender categories are given and that they are meaningful on their own to explain certain online learning practices. Similarly, when researchers suggest that African American students have a significantly weaker sense of community compared to their White American peers in an online course (Rovai & Ponton, 2005), it implies that the category of race itself is sufficiently meaningful to inform the understanding of different societal factors that might contribute to a sense of belonging. As it would be a mistake to suggest that White Americans are more friendly or open for communication than African Americans, it seems clear that race alone cannot explain this apparent finding. Similar online learning studies making such claims include but are not limited to: a cross-cultural study of social interaction behaviors among Korean, American, and Finnish students (K.-J. Kim & Bonk, 2006); a quantitative comparison of online learning experience between US and non-US students (Bently & Tinney, 2003); an examination of online success contingent on individuals’ cultural background (J. Mills, Eyre, & Harvey, 2005); and an investigation of pedagogical differences between Chinese and Western students (Ku, Pan, Tsai, Tao, & Cornell, 2004).

Studying identification, engagement, and group work in digitally-mediated environments through this normative perspective, the online education literature argues that
pedagogical practices should target the ways that different cultural groups interact with each other (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000), how they react to each other (P. C. Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007), and how they learn (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010).

These studies conceptualize the process of identification as a predefined cultural practice depending on one's cultural background. However, understanding the relationship between culture at large and education in general starts with understanding culture as the production and legitimation of particular ways of life specific to class, gender, and race (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Culture is neither an end in itself nor the product of autonomous agents; instead, it comprises the ongoing contingent Discourses that form how we act, think, and live (Foucault, 1972). Scholars have long investigated the implications of culture and argued that the culture transmitted by the school is related to the various cultures that make up the wider society (Apple, 2004), and that it confirms and sustains the culture of dominant groups (Freire, 2000) while marginalizing and silencing the cultures of subordinate groups of students (Giroux, 2011). By disregarding the dynamic interplay between Discourses and everyday practices of individuals, online education research is unable to acknowledge the complex societal dynamics that structure day-to-day school life. It provides inconclusive arguments – if not wishful imaginations – regarding equitable learning conditions in digitally-mediated environments.
3.3. Summary

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how social, political, economical, and historical dynamics regarding public schooling and education in general affected the ways in which the theory and practice of online education was developed. I argued that online education literature emerged through and has been hampered by idealistic accounts derived from positivist, modernist, post-Fordist, and liberalist perspectives, perspectives that also shaped the curriculum of public schooling and education. There was and still is an underlying belief that technologies are inherently capable of improving education (Selwyn, 2011). The zeitgeist around the time that technology was finding its way into schools and classrooms was that education can be improved by efficiently transmitting academic knowledge to mass amounts of students. Technology was a perfect candidate for this role.

Unfortunately, despite some notable studies (e.g., Cuban, 2001; Schofield, 1995; Seattler, 1990), it is not until recently that some scholars (e.g., Friesen, 2009; Oliver, 2011; Selwyn, 2010) have questioned the origins and the theoretical assumptions of educational technology and online education:

… there is a clear need for those of us currently working in the area of education and technology to … [understand] how digital technologies are actually being used – for better and worse – in ‘real world’ educational settings. In this sense, it is contended that the academic study of educational technology needs to be pursued more vigorously along social scientific lines, with researchers and writers showing a keener interest in the social, political, economic, cultural and historical contexts within which educational technology use (and non-use) is located. (Selwyn, 2010, pp. 65–66 quotation marks are original)

Rather than producing yet another recycled account regarding online education's limitless
potential, the literature needs more studies questioning the theoretical grounds of online education, not only for recognizing its limits (Kanuka, 2008) but also for working within such limitations (Selwyn, 2011). We need, therefore, better perspectives, conceptualizations, and frameworks to understand equity in digitally-mediated environments. It is only by examining how day-to-day learning practices are historically based on unequal power relations and how such practices operate to reproduce differentiated conditions that we can address equity in digitally-mediated environments.
Chapter 4. Searching for Individuals in Online Learning:

Methodology

I am interested in understanding how inequity is reproduced in online learning environments when macro-level social Discourses come into play and affect individuals’ micro-level learning experiences. Even though the literature on equity is slowly growing, there remains a lack of clear understanding for addressing and investigating inequitable learning experiences in relation to Discourses (Warschauer, 1999). However, scholars suggest that equity-oriented research should probe how students experience their learning activities (Esmonde, 2009a; R. Gutiérrez, 2007). Thus, I am concerned with exploring how students' experiences are situated within and related to Discourses of identification. Specifically, I analyze how whiteness as a Discourse of identification enables or constrains students' social engagements with one another and negotiations of meanings. In conjunction with Discourses of identification, I further probe how students negotiate the norms of participation in their daily online learning practices.

Yet, understanding the online experience is an epistemologically and methodologically challenging task for researchers (Baym, 2009; Sterne, 1999) since the internet as a research context aggravates the challenges of doing a good enough qualitative research (Hine, 2000). While throughout this dissertation work I argue that digitally-mediated environments do not decontextualize individuals nor do they erase social cues, the online data by themselves are not rich enough to understand how one experiences
the online learning environment. Precisely because the Internet is not an isolated phenomenon but is situated within daily life, making sense of individuals within a digitally-mediated environment requires the researcher to continuously shift between online and offline contexts (boyd, 2008a).

The cartoon published by the New Yorker magazine in 1993 can be one example to explain the epistemological problems associated with doing online research. The cartoon features two dogs, one sitting on a chair in front of a computer, speaking to a second dog sitting on the floor: “On the Internet, nobody knows you are a dog”. There are many ways to interpret the message of this cartoon. For example, while it may refer to the relative anonymity of individuals on the Internet, it may mean that one can bend his or her identity, pretending to be someone else. In general, the cartoon symbolizes the understanding that identification and online experience – or even dogness – needs to be contextualized with respect to offline context. I further continue the analogy in the cartoon and suggest that to understand what it means to be a dog on the Internet, I move between online and offline contexts, triangulating, comparing, and contrasting both types of data. Thus, I aim to understand the online experience.

Researchers continuously make decisions about what is to be gained or lost with each option that lies before them. These decisions have never been about distinguishing right from wrong in an absolute manner (Markham, 2009) but about finding the most appropriate ways of collecting, interpreting, and presenting data within the given circumstances (Baym, 2009). Thus, my decisions were always open-ended and subject to constant reinterpretation,
determined by my goal of capturing and reflecting the online experiences.

This chapter outlines the conceptual, epistemological, and methodological decisions that I made. While some of the decisions I made in this dissertation work are specific for the digitally-mediated context, many of the struggles I encountered are germane to all types of qualitative research. Furthermore, this chapter highlights how I problematize the Internet as research context and the lessons I learned as an Internet researcher. I do no suggest my methodological decisions to be accepted as one absolute explanation; rather, I do hope that I provide an alternative way to think about an ongoing discussion about doing the Internet research.

4.1. The Internet as a Research Site: Understanding and Defining the Research Site

Studying equity and social justice in online education is thrilling. Yet, studying digitally-mediated environment as a research context is ontologically, epistemologically, theoretically, and methodologically challenging. In particular, I was challenged with making sense of the online context, as well as individuals within this context. What constitutes the context for online education? What does it mean for an individual experience the online context? How can I know about, study, explore, and articulate one's online experiences?

Another relevant concern regarding the research site is whether the site is discovered or constructed; and if it is constructed, whether it is constructed by the participants or by the researcher (Hammersley, 2006). Current perspectives, particularly informed by Marxist,
feminist, or post-colonial traditions, suggest that the research site is constructed both by participants and by the researcher. This perspective makes evident the importance of researcher-participant interaction in understanding the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, the co-construction of the research site not only defines the ways in which the researcher conceptualizes and comes to understand the phenomenon, but also determine how he or she defines and supports the validity of the constructed reality. I accept validity in its traditional sense and I refer to the accuracy and truthfulness of research in the attempt to define and describe the reality (Saukko, 2005). Indeed, the accuracy and truthfulness of the reality depends on one’s epistemological and methodological perspectives. While socio-culturally informed research has been distinctively employing contextual, dialogic, or self-reflexive validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), I employ an integrative approach to “… facilitate empirical inquiry into social reality in a way that takes into account that the reality is shot through with a mosaic of different realities and that our research is part of the processes forming this social mosaic …” (Saukko, 2005, p. 354).

4.1.1. Epistemological Puzzles

Conceptualizing digitally-mediated environments has always been at the center of scholarly debates. Early scholarship concerning experiences in digitally-mediated environments offered science-fictionalized perspectives, arguing that the Internet is a culture by itself, where social, political, and historical realities of daily life are left behind (Barlow, 1996; Stone, 1995). As researchers began focusing on how individuals appropriate the Internet and incorporate it into their lives, they moved from this deterministic rhetoric,
showing that material and symbolic realities of daily life play crucial roles in individuals' online experiences. For instance, the Internet researchers articulated that social constructions are reproduced online (Kendall, 2002) and that one's socio-historical context is an integral part of how one makes sense of their online selves (Sundén, 2003). Current perspectives moved from the cyber-utopian understanding and conceptualize digitally-mediated environments as “a third place”, inflected everyday life (boyd, 2008a; Hine, 2000; Ito, 2010). According to the current perspectives, the Internet exists within the broader cultural context in which people live; yet, it possesses a set of norms and practices that are unique to the environment. That is, online experiences “extend the physical while also being configured by the digital” (Sundén, 2003, p. 109).

In order to understand the online experience, therefore, I focus on the ways in which individuals co-construct the material and symbolic realities of the face-to-face life in digitally-mediated environments. I look for the interconnections and interplays between the online learning environment and the context within which it is situated. In specific, I trace the flows of individuals, Discourses, and meanings in between digitally-mediated and face-to-face environments.

4.1.2. Methodological Puzzles

On the theoretical and methodological level, I struggled to decide on a research site that is balanced between the tension of the breadth and depth of the research site. What constitutes the research site for online education? How can I define the boundaries of the research field in a theoretically boundless web space? I made a decision through a painful
process of self-debates about how I can capture and represent issues of social justice and equity. I decided focusing on online courses offered at universities since the literature of online education – as I have outlined in the Chapter 3 – greatly focuses on online education in higher education institutions. Yet, online courses offered at universities cannot be accepted as one unified research site; online courses can be classified in countless ways. For example, the method of delivery (i.e. fully-online or blended), subject matter (i.e. group discussions or individual virtual lab sessions), academic level (i.e. graduate courses or undergraduate courses), or access method (i.e. synchronous or asynchronous) can significantly alter how one experiences online learning.

For this research, I did not predefine a criteria for deciding the research site but let the phenomenon itself determine the selection of online courses. Theoretically and methodologically, three conditions emerged for deciding on a good enough research site investigating social justice and equity in online education. First, the online course should have the optimum class size to provide the optimum engagement within students. The research indicates that there is a critical mass to support online discussions (Hewitt & Brett, 2007). Second, the online course should offer weekly discussions, where individuals are required to interact and engage with each other. Third, the online course should encourage and support social ties and bonds in order for individuals to feel the sense of community.

4.1.3. The Research Site and Participants

Based on these criteria, I turned to graduate level online courses, where I could work with self-motivated (that students are willing to engage with each other) and already
successful students (where lower drop-out rates are expected) in addition to the
aforementioned criteria. I selected two graduate level online courses offered at a public
research university at Canada. Typically, these courses have students from diverse historical
and cultural backgrounds, from different geographical locations, and of various ages and
professions. The first course took place in Fall 2012 and the second in Winter 2013. Both
courses were taught by the same instructor, and used the same institutional online learning
environment. Both courses comprised eleven modules, each corresponding to one week, in
which students discussed instructor-assigned readings. This discussion occurred
asynchronously; the environment does allow synchronous communication through chat, but
such activity was not mandatory in these courses. At the beginning of each course, students
were required to select one week in which they would like to moderate the course. Each
week, one or two students acted as moderators: they collaborated in advance to develop
guiding questions for the week, facilitated discussion throughout the week, and finally
offered a summary of the week’s issues. Each student acted as moderator once during the
course.

A total of 37 students (17 in the first course and 20 in the second) were enrolled but
with some overlap, the total number of distinct students was 28. While there are inherent
advantages and disadvantages in choosing participants according to predetermined categories
as opposed to what emerges from the context (Maxwell, 2004), I did not predefine a criterion
for selecting key informants and participants. I did not want to limit the study to how certain
cultural groups experience online learning but rather wanted to understand how whiteness as
a Discourse of identification is manifested in each individual’s learning. Thus, I did not use purposeful sampling; instead, I invited every student in the two courses to participate in the study. Out of these 28 students, a total of 12 students (5 in the first course and 7 in the second) agreed to participate in my dissertation work (See Appendix E).

4.2. Entering the Research Site: The Online Self as the Online Researcher

While deciding on what constitutes the research site and defining its boundaries address many epistemological quandaries, such decisions do not provide any practical solution for entering the research field or negotiating my insider/outsider status. Entering the research site is a complex process of negotiations due to the dynamic relationship between the researcher and the participants. In all of my engagements with my participants, whether online or face-to-face, I was conscious of my own identification in relation to who, what, and where I was studying. I gained access to the online learning environment a week before the official start day and created my profile page (profile pages will be discussed in detail in the Chapter 5), making my presence known and explicit to others. Furthermore, in order to make my presence as explicit as it can be, I shared a YouTube video, in which I introduced myself and my research, and invited students to participate in my research.

While my profile page and the YouTube video introduced me and my research, my interactions with participants were subject to constant tensions. This is particularly true for the dynamics related to insider/outsider status:

[Researchers] typically insist on the importance of coming to understand the perspectives of the people being studied, … participating in their activities to
one degree or another as well as interviewing them, collecting genealogies, drawing maps of the locale, collecting artifacts, and so on. … [Thus] the essence of [qualitative research] is the tension between trying to understand people’s perspectives from the inside while also viewing them and their behavior more distantly, in ways that may be alien (and perhaps even objectionable) to them. (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4)

Indeed, researchers have long debated whether the researcher has an insider or outsider status when they enter into the research site and have long questioned whether either status is entirely possible (Fine, 1993). Currently, many scholars argue that being an insider/outsider is a complicated issue and is not a static dichotomy but rather a dynamic process. The context in which and the norms by which the researcher and the participants engage with each other is negotiated and subject to change (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2006).

There were many aspects through which I switched between my insider and outsider status. Studying equity and social justice in online education with respect to race and ethnicity inevitably created an insider/outsider dynamic around my identification. As I have already discussed in the Chapter 1, my identification as “not White enough” enabled me to be an insider for those who are identified as non-White while at the same time an outsider for those who are identified as White. In one of my interviews with one White participant, I put my arm next to her arm and we compared our skin color. She was surprised to see that my skin tone was as white as hers and admitted that I can pretend to be White if I don’t speak (because of my particular Turkish accent). Collecting data from graduate level online courses provided another aspect by which I was able to switch between my insider/outsider status. As a graduate student, I was literally on the same hierarchical level with my participants. I tried to convey the image that I was just another student, who my participants can easily talk to.
Indeed, in many cases, we kept talking for many hours after I officially ended the interview protocol and stopped the voice recorder. As a senior student in the program, I provided my insights and experiences. Furthermore, my experience with online courses gave me one more aspect by which I identified myself as insider. I took many online courses (in fact, I took the very same courses in which I collected my data three years earlier) and I was very familiar with the troubles that participants were going through.

How I presented myself as a researcher and negotiated the norms of interactions with my participants profoundly affected how I come to understand the phenomenon in which I am interested. Therefore, not only was I constantly wondering to what extent and in what ways I am both an insider and outsider at the same time, but I was also concerned with how I would use my insider/outsider status, reach students, explain my research, and negotiate the norms, boundaries, and rules of engagement.

4.3. The Online Data: Techniques, Methods, Sources, Avenues

In order to understand how whiteness as a Discourse of identification enables or constrains students in their online learning experiences, I analyze how students chose to identify themselves and how they reacted to each other’s identification. In conjunction with Discourses of identification, I further probe how students negotiated the norms of participation and how those norms affected their learning experience within the group.

Despite moving between online and face-to-face to gather data for this inquiry, I spent extensive time online in order to make sense of individuals' online experiences in their own
terms. When I was involved in data collection, I spent two to three hours everyday in the online learning environment. I estimate that I spent more than 300 hours online, scanning profile pages (explained below), analyzing learning journal entries (explained below), reading the weekly discussions, and analyzing online log files (explained below) in order to understand the range of patterns for engagements.

I used a combination of techniques, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, a student questionnaire, and discourse analysis. The bulk of data used in my analysis stems from in-depth interviews; yet, each data set in combination reveals particular and overlapping areas of the phenomenon under study. This triangulation method informs and influences the interpretation of the other data forms. What follows is a description of the different types of data that obtained and used as part of my field research.

4.3.1. In-depth Interviews

I conducted three in-depth interviews at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the study with 12 participants. In order to shift between online and offline, and to collect both types of data, I conducted face-to-face interviews; however, I offered solely online interview options for those who cannot – or simply do not want to – meet me in person. Three of my participants (two of whom live abroad) chose online interviews and I did not have any chance to gather offline data about those participants. I allowed my participants to choose where they wanted to meet me for the interviews; I interviewed them in their student offices, research labs, student lounges within the university, or at my own research lab, where I offered freshly prepared coffee or cooked tea.
All interview protocols include open-ended and semi-structured questions, focusing on different aspects of participants’ online learning experience (Appendix B). While the first interview protocol focuses on participants’ background and their perspectives on online learning, the second interview protocol generates data about participants’ current online learning experience, including how they navigate through and within day-to-day learning context, how they engage with their peers, and how they negotiate learning processes. The third interview protocol specifically focuses on how and in what ways whiteness as a Discourse of identification affects students’ overall online experiences. The first interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes while the second and the third interviews averaged between 60 to 90 minutes.

At the end of the second and the third interviews, I shared my initial thoughts with interviewees and asked them to clarify or challenge my thoughts in order to seek contradictory evidence for my own understanding. By doing this, I specifically aimed to avoid defining the reality from the outside but invite participants to do analysis with me for explaining the reality from the inside24. Because my participants were graduate students, many of them had good enough understanding about the issues related to Discourses and identification with respect to social justice and equity. For instance, some participants explicitly used concepts like dominant ideology or hegemony in their explanations before I mentioned such terms. Furthermore, throughout our conversations, I defined key concepts

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24 Critical researchers conceptualize this as a problem of authority and power in questioning the roles of the researcher as an outsider. They suggest that researchers should work in collaboration with participants (Saukko, 2005).
and terms if needed, particularly the concepts of social presence and social absence. Taken together, in-depth interviews provide a collection of data about how individuals make sense of themselves, of their peers, and of their experiences in online learning contexts.

At the end of each session, I asked interviewees if there was anything they wanted to add, allowing them to bring up issues that I might have missed. Two of my participants raised their concerns about being portrayed as racist simply because they were White. I addressed their concerns in three steps. First, I reminded them that the consent form allowed them to withdraw from the research at any moment and restricts me use their data. Second, I reminded that the aim of my research is not to label or accuse individuals of being, or not being racist but to reflect how Discourses inevitably reproduce societal inequities. Third, I reminded that I anonymize any personally identifiable information, making sure that none of my participants will be publicly known. In addition, I offered to share drafts of my findings chapters, to ensure that they feel comfortable with the way I profiled and represented them. I satisfied their concerns after I shared Chapters 5 and 6.

4.3.2. Participant Observation

Participant observation is a canonical tool for studying experiences (Hammersley, 2006; Warschauer, 1998). Many researchers conduct their participant observation as they deeply hang out in the context, a term coined by Geertz (1973) to describe the process of immersing in a cultural experience. While I was moving between online and offline to gather both types of data, my participant observation had to be online since my research site was an online learning environment. However, participant observation in digitally-mediated
environments are methodologically problematic (Kendall, 2002). In particular, what constitutes observation in such environments has been at the center of debates since early qualitative research on the Internet (Hine, 2000). The Internet researchers rely on their own interactions and engagements as their participant observation. For instance, in her ethnographic study, Kendall (2002) refers to her own experience as *deep hanging out* in an online pub. Similarly, the collection of works documented at Ito (2010) suggest that observation in digitally-mediated environments are based on upon researchers own accounts of their interactions with participants. In addition, Hine (2000) suggests that analyzing the tracking data can also be used as supplementary data to map out individuals in online context.

My participant observation constitutes my direct engagements with participants, along with the quantitative tracking data that is automatically-generated by the computer to analyze what students do in the online learning environment. Despite spending about 300 hours online, I do not refer to my participant observation as “deep hanging out”. Rather, I refer to my participant observation as getting to know my participants. I used my observation data to make a general sense of what students do when they login to the online learning environment. Since participant observation is aimed to generate relevant and reliable data to address certain aspects of the phenomenon that is being studied (Walford, 2009), my aim with the participant observation was to identify patterns and norms of engagements among individuals, which I discussed with my participants later in interviews.
4.3.3. Student Questionnaire

At the beginning of the study, I administered an online questionnaire with open-ended and free response questions, allowing participants to describe themselves in their own words (Appendix A). The questionnaire generated data about the demographics of participants and their daily professional and personal life outside the online learning context. All 12 participants filled in the questionnaire, providing me preliminary data about participants before I conducted interviews.

4.3.4. Online Discourse

Since online courses are mediated through written language, they provide great opportunities for gathering written data with minimal effort. Analyzing online discourse as language-in-use – can provide information regarding the otherwise-hidden effects of participants’ larger societal realities. Discourse analysis is a technique employed to explore how language mediates between meanings, practices, and social structures (Gee, 2011). It reveals how language regulate particular forms of meanings, identities, and social experiences by deconstructing the relationships among saying, doing, and being in the language-in-use:

If I say anything to you, you cannot really understand it fully if you do not know what I am trying to do and who I am trying to be by saying it. To understand anything fully, you need to know who is saying it and what the person saying it is trying to do. (Gee, 2011, p. 2 emphasis removed)

According to this perspective, language-in-use not only gets its meaning from the context in which it is used but also creates, sustains, or transforms meanings in the context.

25 I use “small d” discourses (Gee, 2011) to refer to the linguistic aspect of written materials.
I analyzed the discourse and explored how whiteness as a Discourse of identification manifests itself in individuals’ language-in-use when they engage with each other. The two online courses I explored in this dissertation work provided three avenues for data: Asynchronous weekly discussions, learning journals, and profile pages.

Asynchronous discussions (or threaded discussions) are typical learning practices in online learning (Hewitt, 2005). Currently, the vast majority of online courses employ asynchronous threaded discussions, providing individuals an opportunity to reflect on their insights while reacting to and engaging with each other as they exchange ideas, values, and perspectives about subject matter (T. Anderson, 2008b). Since discussions are not simply a means for arriving at decisions but convey implicit or explicit meanings, they are social, historical, and political artifacts (Carusi, 2006). Thus, discourse analysis of asynchronous discussions provides rich data for exploring how Discourses of identification manifest themselves and affect negotiations of meanings.

Profile pages (biography pages) allow students to represent themselves and create their existence online by introducing themselves along with their picture or avatar. Self-representation is always constructed through a set of discourses (Hall, 1996) and it is an essential process for creating an online identity. It is a cultural product with both implicit and explicit meanings that evolve and are negotiated through practices (Buckingham, 2008a). Thus, deconstructing self-representation offers rich data to analyze whiteness as a Discourse

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26 Many online courses include profile pages and use them as an “ice-breaker” activity; however, it is not a standardized feature or activity. While in some cases social-networking sites are used, the environment I researched offered a built-in feature for this activity.
of identification and investigate the otherwise hidden effects of Discourses on individuals’ learning experiences. I used data from profile pages during my interviews with my participants, aiming to make sense of how they thought about their identification.

Another site for discourse analysis is online learning journals, where individuals articulate their learning experiences as they reflect on what they have learned about subject matter and how they have learned it in that particular week. The discourse analysis, therefore, reveals how Discourses of identification manifest in how individuals make sense of themselves as students, of their peers, and of the subject matter. These entries provided additional information about individuals' perspectives. I use this data to counter or complement the broader data that I gathered.

27 This is a rather unusual pedagogical practice for many online education scholars and instructors. Technically, it is a forum within the online learning environment, where students can post blog-like entries and reflect their insights. Learning journals are described by the instructor in the following way: “…your entries will involve a process of emergent understanding and ideas which may shift a lot between early and later in the course, and that is fine. These entries are a way to connect with others interested in similar ideas, and to think about ideas you come across online and in other contexts, in relation to your own academic development and identity. …”
Chapter 5. Writing Oneself into Online Being: The Art of Self-Representation and Impression Management

Profile pages resemble the process of identification in face-to-face contexts: they convey social cues about an individual through which one can be positioned within a social context. Unlike Hofstede's predefined cultural markers, which I examined in Chapter 3, identification is a dynamic process that is defined and shaped by socio-historical variables at hand. In this chapter, therefore, I illustrate how profile pages created a dynamic process of identification and operationalize impression management.

Creating a profile page in digitally-mediated environments has both technological and socio-cultural aspects. Technologically, it is an easy task even for novice users; it requires one to follow screen prompts throughout predefined procedures. Consider, for example, this passage from my notes about the technical aspects of creating my online self for this research:

I type the online course's address in my web browser's address bar and hit the return key. A page is loaded with an image in the background showing one of the many historical landmark buildings of the university, asking for my user name and password. I successfully enter my name and password and sign-in to the mediated environment. The browser takes me directly to the “community” area (are we a community already?), though I am the only one in the environment at the moment (the course allows you to see who else is online and there is no option to hide out). I feel like a student who arrives to the lecture hall earlier than anyone else and sits there alone waiting for other students to come in though I am very much aware that people might log in and out of the environment anytime due to the asynchronous nature of the environment. I play around with the buttons that I can click and check the menus to figure out what my options are. I realize that the banner on top of the
web page is the picture of the school's building and it is indicating the code and name of the course, creating a sense of reality and belongingness as though it is a real classroom. It all makes sense to me. With nobody around to talk to, I click on my avatar – a little picture representing me – and take a close look at my online self, my online representation:

I am a beautiful purplish and whitish daisy (a random picture that is assigned to my online account by the system). I go into the preferences menu, where I can edit my account settings and change my picture. I enter some information regarding my time zone and location, and change my profile picture to a picture of myself that I uploaded to the system though I am wondering whether I should keep the daisy since it is better to look at a flower than to look at myself. I decide to go with my own picture anyway since I know representing myself as who I am is an important dynamic in the delicate balance of intimacy between me and my participants. I want them to know me as much as I can represent myself to them.

While changing basic information and uploading a picture is a technologically simple process, how to create an online self is comparably less straightforward. What it means to represent self is socially, politically, and historically situated. That is, while people have choices in deciding how to represent themselves in digitally-mediated environments, deciding what is appropriate and acceptable to present depends on the context of representation. Writing oneself into an online being can be quite challenging. Again, consider my notes about my decisions regarding how to represent myself as a researcher:

Now with a new picture representing me, I navigate my way to the class biographies – a forum page, where people can create their profile pages to introduce themselves to others – and start writing myself into being. Although I took a few online courses through this medium during my course work and wrote my online-self a few times before, I am struggling with how to represent myself, particularly as a researcher. While I acknowledge that such concerns are not exclusive to doing research on the Internet, I find myself unsure of my self-representation about my identification. How should I
introduce myself? What aspects of myself and my personality should I put forward? How can I make sure that they understand who I am? What is the best way to create these relationships
Frustrated, I log out.

I log back in at night and finish what I started earlier on in the day. I continue editing my note and introduce myself as I write who I think I am, or as who I think I wanted to be known as. I try to represent myself as close as I can be to my offline self; I want others to know me and understand my research. I am not here because I am interested in playing phantasies or exploring other identities. I am here because I am conducting research. My online-self is finally alive.

While these are my own struggles of creating an online-self, I shall demonstrate in this chapter that such a process is by no means exclusive to me.

Technical and mechanical aspects of creating an online-self are relatively simple; socio-cultural dynamics of negotiating identification and self-representation are not. The rest of this chapter examines how the participants in this dissertation work create their online-self and manage impressions with respect to macro-level Discourses in digitally-mediated environments. Specifically, I shall analyze the interplay between self-representation, identification, and impression management with respect to macro-level societal Discourses. I illustrate how impression management is shaped by the dynamics of race and ethnicity, with

28 Unlike online education environments, in digitally-mediated environments like MUDs (i.e. World of Warcraft), participants do not need to accurately reflect who they are. People usually go to such environments just to “play with their identities”, “escape from their bodies”, and explore their “second selves” (Turkle, 1984/2005). Indeed, such environments are built to allow imagined identities (Hardey, 2002) and simulate various phantasies (Sunden, 2003). More often than not, people bend their identities just to explore what it means to be like someone else. For example, the “Alex Affair” is a famously known story about gender bending. In this story, a male psychiatrist pretends to be a woman in a women-only chat room and he soon realizes how intimate his patients can get with “Joan” - his fake woman character. See Turkle (1997) for more details. Therefore, the selves created in MUD's are not necessarily “real” in a sense that I argue in this dissertation. In online learning, identity bending does not happen as often – indeed, I was not able to identify a single study about it – since existing identities are central in learning environments.
a focus on whiteness.

5.1. The Art of Creating an Online Self

In the case of online education, a digital body is created when one registers for the online course. The process continues as people type in some information about themselves in profile pages. The profile pages in the two online courses were semi-structured. The instructor provided three questions (asking students to offer personal traits, strengths, and previous experiences); however, people were free to answer (or not to answer) those questions in anyway they wanted – with no limitations of word count.

Despite the fact that creating a profile page is an open-ended task in terms of creativity, the process of creating an online self is not arbitrary. As I will illustrate, individuals simply want to be identified as “good students”. However, what it means to be a good student, and the qualities that convey the image of a good student, have different meanings for different individuals. Yet, participants in these online courses tend to highlight three aspects of themselves as they convey the image of a good student: social life, professional work, and academic success. In most cases, these three personal aspects are used in concert for impression management. In this section, I focus on how online selves create a

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29 There is no standardized name or application in the practice of online education. In different online education environments, a profile page might be called by a different name. A profile page in an online education environment is similar to those profiles in social network sites (SNS) (i.e. Facebook) but less detailed and less complicated when compared to them. One of the biggest difference between a profile in SNS and online education is the option of “friending” with others. In online education, people are friends by default and are already a member of a learning community. Yet another big difference is the maintenance of the profile pages: while profiles in SNS are more dynamic and more regularly updated, profiles in online education are somewhat static; in most cases are created once at the beginning of the course without being changed.
social context. In the next section, I focus on the social-political aspects of impression management and analyze what is at stake in impression management.

The desire to be seen as interesting in social life, caring or helpful in personal life, successful in professional work, and competitive in academic studies is a challenging task that has to be carefully managed in creating an online-self. Take Johanne for instance. She strongly focuses on her social life. Her profile picture with a big smile on her face accompanies the following text:

I am a first year PhD student and I recently graduated in June from City University’s Master of Education program. ... I have a bubbly personality. I know that I am always smiling and laughing with my family and friends. At first, I am quiet because I like to observe, but once I get comfortable I’ll come out of my shell and then it becomes difficult to keep me quiet. I noticed that I enjoy creating remix videos, whether it is about a family vacation or on course readings, I find that these videos help to further articulate ideas in a cheery and refreshing way. ... [I like] being able to help people in my own way, (whether it’s editing a peer’s paper or cutting for hours to help teacher - friends prepare class activities), so they can complete their tasks - I’m there. Outside of school I enjoy hanging out with my family and friends, doing yoga, listening to music, scrapbooking, traveling, cooking, and watching my favourite TV shows.

While we get very little about Johanne's academic or professional life, her online self suggests that she is highly active and outgoing in her social life. Furthermore, Johanne's online self reveals clues about her personality traits. Indeed, when I met Johanne in person for interviews, I observed her “bubbly personality”. She was energetic, positive, cheerful, and smiling at all times. By creating her online self as personally and socially desirable, Johanne conveys the message that she is “there” when her peers need her.

There seems to be no predefined formula for how much and where to focus in terms
of personality attributes. While some people may prefer to reflect more of their academic success or personal traits, others stress their social interests and hobbies. It is a delicate balance that each person has to figure out to convey the image of a good student. Courtney's online-self is more of an academician. With a friendly smile in her picture, she writes herself into online being:

I am a first year PhD student. I have just finished my Master's here in this department, and I am looking forward to continuing my journey. One of my favourite parts of grad school is taking courses! So I am really excited to be here and to learn from you all. I have a lifelong interest in education - I have taught Elementary school (Grade 6) and have also been a High School Visual Arts teacher. One of my passions is technology use for education - particularly in school settings. The research projects that I take part in with my lab all involve developing innovative technologies for Elementary Science classrooms, to connect kids with kids, and to allow them to share their ideas and findings with each other. I am not sure exactly where my PhD interests lie, but I may be interested in pursuing location or gesture based technologies within these contexts. … I guess I would also describe myself as "tenacious" (some might say stubborn!!). But basically, I work really hard, and keep working until I reach my goals. This trait is manifest in my academic work as well as in my personal life.

Compared to Johanne, Courtney provides almost no information about her social life but foregrounds her academic success. Despite selecting a different aspect of herself to highlight, Courtney does what Johanne does: convey the message that she is a good student. As a “tenacious” student, Courtney's online self suggests that her peers can rely on her when it comes to group work.

Along with social interests and academic work, professions and careers are used for representing oneself in mediated environments. Amy underscores her professional work when she creates her online-self:
I’ve been doing my MEd online on a part time basis over the past few years. I’ve been teaching English as a second language for the past six years - and have had the opportunity to work in Tibet, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and Pakistan. I’m in Korea this year living at a temple and teaching English to Buddhist nuns. It’s a bit hectic as I’m also developing the curriculum - but definitely an amazing experience. I also have a lot of empathy which I find really helpful in my teaching practice, particularly with Second Language Learners where language anxiety can be a huge barrier to learning. I’ve also learned from previous courses that online communication can be really helpful in overcoming this anxiety - one of the reasons I need to get more comfortable with implementing these kinds of approaches in my classroom. I made a wiki for a facilitation assignment which went really well but am now in the process of redoing the blogs I set up for my students due some mysterious technical problems. It’s been frustrating, but I am determined to learn how to integrate technology in a meaningful way into my practice.

Amy gives very limited information about her academic interests or social life but explains her professional success in detail. Of course, one might infer an interesting social life as a result of her broad travels. Indeed, after our second interview, Amy and I had a long off-the-record conversation about her international experience as a teacher and she stated that she – after our conversation – wished that she included more of her social experience in her profile page. Regardless, by putting herself forward as a dedicated and considerate teacher, Amy’s online self implies that she is highly professional (particulary given that this is a course in the field of education) and knowledgeable.

While the three excerpts above illustrate how individuals create online selves by using their social, professional, and academic life realities, it does not mean that they use these categories in an isolated fashion. Participants use the combination of these categories to a certain extent and emphasize two or more aspects of their offline realities. Take Jeff, for example. His online self includes aspects of both a teacher and a student:
I am a full-time PhD student on another department. …This is my first online course at OISE. I taught EFL in Asia and Europe for 16 years and am still adjusting to being a full-time student. … I have integrated social media into blended EFL and EAP courses. I use twitter, facebook, LinkedIn and academia.edu as my personal learning network (PLN) and encourage my students to cultivate their own PLNs. … I am looking forward to enhancing my understanding of online learning. (surprise emoticon)

Jeff’s online self in many ways is in between Amy and Courtney. Similar to Amy, Jeff highlights his international teaching career while at the same time, similar to Courtney, he articulates that he treats his learning as a journey. In addition to these two aspects, Jeff wants his online self to be known as funny – or as a joker, as he stated in one of our interviews. In his profile page, he writes that procrastination is one of his positive traits: “I can procrastinate for hours trying to word introductory activities such as this”. When I ask Jeff about this joke, he explains that he did not have any idea of what to write as a positive personal trait, and thus decided to joke on how many hours he spent writing up his profile page. According to Jeff, his profile picture also reflects his fun approach to his online self:

I was six years old in that picture. I was in school and I have lots of books behind me. It was done for the purpose of picture. I didn't want to have my current image up there. Also, it signified to myself that this is a new subject area to me and I wanted to feel that I am back to school. It is like … a reminder that I am back to school.

While I do not get Jeff’s joke about his profile picture, he certainly put much effort in creating his online self as a fun person. For Jeff, being a good student means to be an experienced teacher and a dedicated student, who is also a funny person in his personal life.

Personal traits are also common in creating online-selves. Sydney's online self represents more of her personal traits than anything else:

I am a full time student working on my Master of Education degree. I
graduated last year from Lakeview University. I love learning, being in an educational environment and being a ‘professional student’ as many would say. I have been told that I am a very warm and friendly individual. It is rare to see me without a smile on my face. I am also very sensitive to the needs of others. I am a very organized individual especially when it comes to work or school. I am also very focused and determined. Once I set my mind to something, I will work very hard until I achieve it. I love spending my spare time with my family. I also love reading and in particular I enjoy psychological thrillers. In addition, I enjoy singing, yoga and going out on the four-wheeler. Animals are another passion of mine. I volunteer at a local animal shelter and spend as much time there as possible.

She highlighted her online self as warm, sensitive, and caring: qualities that everyone looks for in others. Her online self is not only friendly but also very organized and determined. She is socially active and volunteering. Clearly, Sydney's online self conveys the notion that she is someone that would enjoy learning from and with others.

When asked, participants suggested that they spend time and put an effort to carefully create online-selves. They did try to convey certain messages about themselves. Determining what to write, which information to put forward, and choosing the right picture – definitely with a smile – is an important task in creating the online self. Some people, however, do not upload their pictures but use an image that is by default assigned by the system. Yet, they still carefully write themselves into online beings. Gulsum for example used the daisy picture.

When I asked her why she did not upload her own picture, she explained:

I didn't have a picture ready to upload. I am not interested in anyway... But I don't think I have a picture of myself. I mean I have family pictures, with my kids and with my husband. I could have got a picture scanned and uploaded … but, um, … I mean it is just time. I work full-time, I study full-time, I have three kids... so, um,... it was just one more thing to do and it was too much... But I changed my picture from a shoe\textsuperscript{30} to a daisy. I cannot be a shoe, right?

\textsuperscript{30} Just another system picture that may be randomly assigned to a person. For Gulsum, shoe is culturally inappropriate to represent oneself.
Gulsum claims that she did not have the time or motivation to upload her picture. Yet, she cared sufficiently to change her profile picture from shoe to daisy. When prompted, Gulsum replied that shoes are culturally inappropriate because they are accepted as unclean, and thus she changed her profile picture. Furthermore, she took her time to consider what to write in her profile and how to represent herself. I was puzzled by Gulsum's attitude towards her profile picture. In my interviews with her, I reminded Gulsum of my observation about her picture and discussed the motivation behind her decisions. Since I am interested in understanding the effects of macro-level Discourses on individuals' online education experiences, I was curious whether her decisions are shaped by social dynamics. Gulsum strongly denied the possibility of any extrinsic social pressure\(^{31}\) (though she believed the shoe is culturally inappropriate) but insisted that it was a matter of time commitment.

Although Gulsum does not have a picture of herself, her online-self conveyed much information about her: She is a teacher, a busy mother, and a successful student:

> I am pursuing an M.Ed degree and this is hopefully my last semester :) I worked as a business consultant for three years in Egypt before moving to Canada with my husband in 2001. I run a Montessori School in [a suburban neighborhood] from toddlers to Grade 3. I worked as a Montessori teacher for four years and still teach to Lower Elementary for the past three years. Since January 2008, I have been working as an instructor at [a private college], offering accredited Montessori teachers' training programs. I have three children and I changed my career to become a teacher because I love children. … I am a hard worker and love to be around people in general and children in particular. … In my "spare" time I like traveling, cooking and learning new languages (I speak four: Arabic, English, French and German) and I hope to learn Spanish.

\(^{31}\) However, as I will illustrate in Chapter 6 and 7, Gulsum is aware of Discourses and explains in her own words how she positioned herself with respect to Discourses of whiteness.
Gulsum decided to represent herself as a hard-worker, both in her personal and professional life. However, I was not able to think of her with the same sense of reality as I felt for the others, simply because she did not have her picture in her profile page. When there is a personal picture in a profile, I believe I was able to get a very good sense of who the person is behind that profile (I was not surprised by who I met for interviews). Nevertheless, I was not able to truly imagine Gulsum in flesh and blood. How she really looked was a mystery to me until the day I met her for the very first time on a very cold night for an interview.

“A picture is worth a thousand words” is a famous expression, referring to the power of visual representation in communication. In line with this adage, research indicates that profile pictures are significantly correlated with affection and social attraction in digitally-mediated environments (Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001). My interviews yielded similar results. When I ask my participants how they made sense of people without personal pictures, they all posit that they had negative attitudes against such individuals. “I cannot make sense of them, so I move on” says Sydney. Jeff articulates that he feels “sorry for them” because he believes “there must be something wrong with them”. Johanne's attitude is also negative. She suggests that people without pictures “creep[s] her out”. She adds: “we are not going to be friends if you don't have your picture. I cannot have relationship with you”. By contrast, Gulsum suggests that she did not sense any negative attitude against her. Rather, she believes that her peers were “very warm” to her.

Profile pages in online education are aimed at introducing people to one another, assuming that people do not already know each other from other courses or from daily life
beyond school. While the person behind a profile may or may not be known to others, online-selves are crafted to explain the self to strangers, motivating individuals to carefully consider which aspects or features to highlight in their self-representation. This does not mean that people write their profiles for complete strangers or write them with no sense of potential readership. People are aware that others in the environment are also students with whom they will spend the next 12 weeks. People acknowledge others' presence and address them in their profiles. Courtney salutes her new friends and sends her “best wishes to all … for a successful term!”; Amy expresses her excitement for sharing the environment with others and states that “it's really great to be here and [she is] looking forward to getting to know [her] peers better during this course!”; and Gulsum indicates her willingness to work together as she is “looking forward to learning with and from all [of her] friends and [she] thanks [everyone] for the support in advance :)”. Acknowledging the presence of others, however, goes beyond mere salutations or expressions of good will but shapes the dynamics around how one represents the self.

5.2. Impression Management in the Online Context

Typing the self into online existence is not a random performance nor does the process of creating online self occur in a void. Mediated or face-to-face, the ways in which people represent themselves and engage with each other is a socially situated process (Goffman, 1983). That is, “our daily life is spent in the immediate presence of others” (p. 2) and the process of impression management is enacted “once individuals – for whatever
reason – come into one another's immediate presence” (p. 3). The same is true for online education, where people always act in the presence of others. As I shall illustrate below, my participants suggest that in digitally-mediated environments, deciding how to write about oneself, what information to reveal, and which picture to upload (or whether to upload at all) are all dependent upon the presence of others in the context.

Johanne explains what it means to represent herself in mediated environments and how she typed herself into an online being:

Obviously, you want to look good. You don't want to look like all academic and nerd. You obviously want to look good too... um ... You want to present yourself in a particular manner. You have to choose traits that get looked at or complimented [in order] to attract people. So that's what I was doing. I didn't want to be boring. So, what I did was that I added some of my …, um, things like … I actually added pictures of where I traveled. … um … So, when I was just doing this, my goal was just to make my classmates engage with me because it is just hard to engage with people [in CMC]. I want to be approachable and look like enthusiastic. You know what I mean? Also you want to advertise that you are a good student. So you kind of want to choose things that compliment your online learning aspect because I think you have to have traits for online learning that are different from [those] face-to-face one's. So, I wanted to be seen as approachable, friendly, and, um, helpful. I didn't want to come off as … um, I don't know, I didn't want to come off as a boring person or, um, as crazy picky. I was thinking what people would think of me and how they react to me. You don't want to come off as hoity-toity or pompous. You know … (laughs) that's actually a Caribbean saying. You don't want to come off like that but [want to be seen as] friendly. I was just thinking advertising myself. Advertising all of my academic accomplishments. That's also part of who you are. People want to know what your background is. You know what I mean? You want to make yourself look good. When creating my profile, I was keeping my peers in mind, as well as the instructor. So I was reading it from my peers' point of view and my instructor's point of view. I was asking [myself] how it would look like or appear to them; how would the virtual Johanne appear to them. That's what it was in my mind.

The process Johanne went through captures and reflects the essence of what Goffman defined
as impression management: in order to look good, one has to consider the context and represent himself or herself in a manner that attracts people. Yet, what it means to look good in the context of online education is an open-ended question.

Impression management is part of everyday life in mediated environments and it is performed through and negotiated by profile pages. For example, Johanne explains that she wants to “look good” and tries to “make a good impression”; therefore, she “advertise[s]” herself in her profile page. The process that Johanne defines as advertisement is at the heart of impression management. According to boyd (2008a), making the right advertisement to the right audience is important: “what content to display [in online-selves] are situated in a context that is driven by the space, social situation, and people” (p.143). In the case of online education, people similarly keep their intended audience in mind when they represent themselves. For Johanne, advertising herself means “to make [her] classmates engage with [her]” by choosing “traits that get looked at or complimented”. She posits that when creating her online profile, she keeps her peers in mind in order to decide how to represent herself as a good student: “I was thinking what people would think of me and how they react to me”. Thus, Johanne considers how to represent herself based on the context in which she enacts.

In the online courses I studied, people are aware that the audience is limited to the other students (along with the instructor) in the environment. Therefore, people craft their online-selves particularly for the other students in the same online environment. For example, Courtney says: “Did I spent a lot of time in creating my profile, yes. Did I concern how others will see me, yes. But, I wanted to be seen as a good student; a student who is on a
learning journey”. For Courtney, being on a learning journey means being “tenacious”: “I work really hard and keep working until I reach my goals. This trait is manifest in my academic work”. Courtney knows that her online peers are her audience and she sends a message to them: “I am really excited to be here and to learn from you all”.

Indeed, the notion of “being on a learning journey” is manifest in many online profiles I examined. It is a common way by which people try to make connections with other students in the course. Devran, for example, postulates that she is “excited about this course and looks forward to learning with everyone”. She continues and represents herself as a good “team worker”: “I believe that I am more creative and productive in a team”. In this sense, representing oneself as “being on a learning journey” is a strategy to recognize other students in the course and situate oneself in relation to those around them.

Because the audience is other students in the course, representing oneself as a good student is a common concern regarding impression management in online education. Take, for example, Sofia's explanation of what it means to represent the self to other students in online education environments:

I knew that [my profile] was the first impression that other students are going to have of me. So I wanted to make sure that everything flowed properly. I wanted to come across as academic, I suppose. And [I] added all about my personality as well. I wanted to make sure that I was coming off as as a good student but also friendly; so, I was putting up my personal aspects. I like to include emoticons here and there … (laughs). I think [emoticons] helps them to see me who I am as a student, as a person. And when asked what it means to “come off as a good student”, she further elaborates:

I wanted to be taken seriously as a student and I was like … this is my first impression … so, I wanted to make a good impression. Who wants to make a
bad impression, anyway? It is awful. So, I wanted to make sure that … you know … when people read it, they kind of get a sense of who I am as a student and person. I wanted them to be comfortable talking to me and responding to my profile. I was concerned how people will see me and it is a pretty normal thing, right?

As Sofia's explanation illustrates, representing oneself to other students means that one has to be a “good student”, “serious academic”, and yet be friendly and smiley at the same time. Similarly, for Kate, being a good student means being organized and helpful: “For me, I organize things and be precise. I am really good at organizing my studying materials or … um … and I like to help out people and I give [them] examples and help them understand [the readings] better”. What it means to be a good student, therefore, is something that students negotiate in online education; people try to impress each other as they seek to present the perfect combination of their traits as a student and as a person.

In profile pages I examined, my participants think of their profile pages as a space where they can utilize and make evident their various qualities. One's skills, abilities, interests, accomplishments, and other traits or qualities, then, become means by which people negotiate their first impressions. “Your online-self is a combination of different traits”, says Sydney, who continues: “coming off as a serious academic was my priority but I also wanted to include aspects from my personality. Also, I didn't want to be like … 'oh, look at everything I have done so far. Look how successful I am'. It is like … all flashy flashy … you know what I mean? I didn't want to do that”. Others have different approaches in representing themselves. For example, while Johanne's online-self is all about her personality and her social interests beyond school, Courtney's online self is strict to her academic
achievements with just a touch of reference to her social interests.

Personal traits, interests, and qualities are common means by which the participants in this research can personalize their profile pages. Even though the online environment in which I conducted this research does not provide many technological options for customizing the way profile pages look (e.g. changing the background, layout, or colors), the participants I interviewed believe that their profiles are customized and unique to them. Indeed, personalizing profile pages is fundamental for representing oneself in mediated environments (boyd, 2008b). For example, Johanne thinks “personalizing is the most important thing in creating the profile pages”. She further explains how she personalized her online-self: “I wanted to put what I like to do out of the school. So I put my family and friends, and places I traveled. I put the TV shows I like to watch. I personalize [my profile] so [others] actually can see how I am and what I do beyond the class”.

Reflecting personal traits, qualities, and interests not only allows people to customize their online-selves but also serve as means by which people engage with each other. As familiarity and similarity prevails through profile pages, solidarity is likely to be developed among people (Goffman, 1983). Similarities and commonalities are the first thing people try to find when they look at others' profiles. Sydney, for example, says:

I was trying to find similarities between me and others … um, because I wasn't sure who were going to be in my class. You don't know anything about them. I had no clue. So I was just looking for similarities … you know … to start up a conversation with people and make connections. Similarities and things in common. That is the first thing I was looking at. When I asked her if she was able to make any real connection, she nodded and further
explained: “I found Johanne to be very similar to me and I responded to her and I said 'oh, look, we have similarities' and we eventually ended up as [being] close friends”. Indeed, Johanne also mentioned how she ended up being a close friend with Sydney as they realized their similarities. Johanne further explained to me how she was trying to find similarities with her peers so that she can make connections with them: “If I find anything to connect with people, either for social, academic, or professional aspects, then I will respond [to that person] and say 'hey'. And, if I cannot find that connection, I just don't respond to them”. The fact that people use their similarities to make social connections was evident in their responses to others' profiles. In my interviews, the participants articulated that they look for similar interests or experiences they have with others and ask more questions or offer further explanation to deepen the social encounters.

By and large, online-selves create the first impression and set the tone for the communication process. For instance, Johanne thinks of her profile page as “like the first impression you give to your peers as well as your instructor”. When I asked her why she thinks of profile pages as the first impression, she explains: “because [the profile] is, um … kind of … um, going to set the tone [for] who you are, you are going to be, and you want to be in [online] classroom. And if you set the wrong tone, um, you can turn people off”. Sydney thinks similarly: for her, profile pages are places, where people introduce themselves to others for the first time. I asked her what it means to introduce oneself in mediated environments. She replied: “Um, I basically thought about meeting with someone else for the first time in face-to-face. It is like … introducing yourself. It is the first impression that
people have about you. So I wanted to make it … um, I wanted to sound good and you know … I tried to incorporate as much as I can about myself.” Profile pages, in this sense, provide means from which social life originates in online education environments.

While online-selves create the tone and make the first impression, maintaining that tone and impression is an ongoing process. People have to perform in ways concordant with the representations offered in the profiles. This doesn't mean that individuals have to constantly update their profile pages to manage their impressions; rather, they have to perform the qualities and abilities they claimed when they engage with each other in weekly discussions. As Nalini explains “everyone says that they are a good [student] but … you can only keep on that impression if it is true. You have to be who you are in your profile; otherwise people just don't care what you [said you] are in the profile”. According to Nalini, impression management is not a one-time performance but an ongoing process; a process people have to repeat everyday to sustain their impressions (Goffman, 1983).

It is important to note that when there are no profile pages, people can still create their online-selves and represent themselves. However, managing self-representation and impressions becomes even more challenging when profile pages are absent. For instance, in an auto-ethnographic study, (Mann, 2003) suggests that she was able to represent herself when she engaged with others through threaded discussions. However, for Mann, the lack of profile pages caused extra struggles with finding the balance between how much she self-discloses and how anonymous she remains:

I am conscious of the idea of visibility and invisibility. All I have here are
words on a screen and a sense of a void out there with unknown respondents. I have a strong feeling that I don’t know who is out there. There is no instant ‘feedback’ and no capacity for instant re-adjustment of one’s self in relation to others. … The factors that seem to be at play here for me are to do with the invisibility of one’s peers and teacher; the lack of or limited amount of feedback and clues as to who they are and what they are making of me … It is as if learning to express myself and engage with others in a new medium highlights and exaggerates processes I normally take for granted (ibid. pp. 115-116)

Profile pages, therefore, provide feedback for individuals to “assess the success of their presentations in conveying their sense of the self to the audience” (boyd, 2008a, p. 169). By learning of and from others, people situate themselves in relation to those around them.

The role of profile pages in online education can be understood both at personal and social levels. At the personal level, profile pages provide opportunities for individuals to reify their qualities, traits, and interests in digitally-mediated environments. In other words, profile pages allow individuals to create their online selves. For example, Courtney says:

You want to give people a little bit of information about yourself; so that they can get to know you a little. And because they will know you, they will be a little bit comfortable talking to you. It makes the learning personal, you know. It is not like, … like, all faceless technology that seems cold [but] you are creating a sense of human touch. I really revealed myself. So, for me, it was about having my online … it was like being alive online.

At the social level, profile pages allow individuals to make sense of the context in which they operate and of their peers with whom they engage. For example, Sydney says:

I think that it establishes a sense of community rather than just being tossed into the environment without knowing who your peers are. It just helps make connections and helps make sense of who you are talking to, which I think foster discussion and even collaboration.

Consequently, because profile pages have both personal and social aspects, they allow individuals to situate themselves in their context. Thus, profile pages become central means
for individuals to manage their impressions.

Taken together, my interviews and my analysis of profile pages suggest that what it means to represent the self in digitally-mediated environments seems not so different from what it means to represent the self in daily life. The mediated environment provides the participants with opportunities for reflecting the best aspects of themselves. Therefore, in order to highlight their best-selves, people negotiate their representations and try to impress the others in the mediated environment. Individuals I interviewed suggest that they explore those who are around them, observe others, and create their online-selves while they explicitly express themselves, and in return are impressed by others. Consequently, behind social engagements and interactions in mediated environments, there is a dialectic understanding stemming from the impressions given to, or taken by, others. The following section discusses how this dialectic understanding works with respect to Discourses and what is at stake in the process of impression management.

5.3. Representation of Self In Online Education

When people create their online-selves, they do not create a whole personality that is totally different from who they are in their daily lives (Hardey, 2002); rather, they reproduce themselves in a digital environment (Walker, 2000). For example, Kate says, “I am who I am and my online self is the same”. Similarly, Nalini posits, “I tried to stay true to what I put in my profile and I was myself, so, um, … um, my profile was me”. Courtney is concerned with being misunderstood as to who she is: “I don't want to be misunderstood, misinterpreted. So,
I take a long time to make sure that who I am is clear. That's the main thing”. Devran says that she wanted to “make sure that she is going to be taken as who she is in her daily life”. Sydney articulates that she wanted to be known as who she actually is: “I wanted them to get a general sense of who I am … like … like they would know me in a face-to-face environment”. She continues: “I think the profile is just reflecting who you are in the real world”. While Kate, Nalini, Courtney, Devran, and Sydney offer essentialist and deterministic perspectives in comparing their online selves with “who they are” in the “real world”, they point out that the impressions they convey online are similar to the impressions they convey face-to-face. In other words, they all suggest that what is at stake in their face-to-face impression management is also at stake in their online impression management.

Profile pages, therefore, not only help individuals to reproduce themselves in online environments with respect to daily life realities but also allow them to bring macro-level societal Discourses in online education, whether intentionally or not. Accordingly, Discourses and online selves are dialectically related: Discourses shape online selves and online selves in turn reproduce the very same Discourses. There is no place outside of Discourses, including digitally-mediated environments and online selves. While other Discourses are also at play, in this dissertation work, I focus on Discourses of whiteness to

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32 As I argued in Chapter 2, essentialist perspectives suggest that self is a static and stable entity, regardless of the context in which self enacts.

33 As I argued in Chapter 3, deterministic perspectives suggest that online and offline are two distinct modes of being. However, I argued that online and offline cannot be distinguished clearly and that online does not mean not real.

34 See, for example, Sundén (2003) and Haraway (1991) for gendered construction of self; Byrne (2008) for racial construction of self; Burston, Dyer-Witheford, & Hearn (2010).
analyze impression management.

Discourses of whiteness refer to the set of societal privileges that are granted to those who are identified as White. Whites benefit from these privileges beyond those commonly experienced by non-Whites in the same social, political, cultural, educational, or economic spaces (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Giroux, 1997). The concept of whiteness denotes otherwise non-obvious privileges that Whites have. These discourses, therefore, are distinguished from obvious racial or ethnic bias or prejudice. Such privileges include greater social status, access to everyday goods (e.g. food, health protection, safer neighborhoods, police and fire protection), access to quality education, and basic civil liberties (i.e. freedom to move, buy, work, play, and speak freely) (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; McIntosh, 2003). According to this understanding, whiteness is a property (intellectual, cultural, or legal) that has intrinsic value that must be protected (Harris, 1993, 1995). Thus the concept of whiteness is not a biological or phenotypical (i.e. skin color) category. Rather, it is a discursive construction and, as any discursive construction, it can be reinvented, modified, or discarded. As social construction, Discourses of whiteness provide sets of norms against which all non-Whites are judged, measured, and positioned.

In two online courses I studied, Discourses of whiteness manifest themselves through the process of impression management; particularly, through the negotiations of what constitutes a good student. By highlighting their achievements, traits, desires, hobbies, and qualities, the participants reproduce their online selves in line with the White norms of desire and intelligence. This does not mean that non-Whites are unintelligent or undesirable nor
does it mean that non-Whites want to be seen as White. Rather, it means that by highlighting their achievements and success in line with the Discourses of whiteness, non-Whites try to claim their legitimacy, their right to be in the online course. Through impression management, non-Whites in this study negotiate their status of belonging to their community. For example, in Gulsum's impression management, being accepted as an equal participant is at stake. Gulsum believes that she is not accepted as intelligent; therefore, she is worried that her peers do not want to work with her:

You want to, um … um, you want people to know who you are. You are trying to put the positive side [of yourself] and even though you might put negative things, you just rephrase them, um, you … you sugarcoat them, in a sense. And, um, you want to put the achievements so that, um, … you want to put your achievements but not limited to academic life but also professional life, your working life. By reading my achievements, um, … so, like people say, um, 'ok, I can work with you for group projects'. So, my aim was to … to make people know the good side [of me]; so that my achievements can overshadow any judgment that they might make [of me]. Like, anything to help them … like … um, for instance, you know because of my name, I am not from here. So, when you see [my profile], my achievements can overshadow that fact that some of my peers might be biased [against me]. So you want to represent yourself in a way that [it] intrigues people to know more about you.

Gulsum thinks it is necessary for her to represent herself as competent and rigorous because she believes her peers have biases against her just because she is not identified as White\(^{35}\). In specific, Gulsum worries about her name and believes that she will be identified as non-White, and thus accepted as not intelligent. According to Gulsum, intelligence and success are associated with being identified as White. In other words, intelligence and success are property of whiteness. What is at stake for Gulsum is her inclusion or exclusion

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\(^{35}\) Even though she is officially White according to Canadian census.
from her community, and impression management is a process of survival that I will explore in detail in chapters 6 and 7.

Caught in the White interpretive filter, those who are identified as non-White believe that they have to demonstrate that they can be as intelligent and desirable as Whites are assumed to be. For example, Nalini uses impression management to convey that she is as good as her peers. She says “my name was there, right? So, [my peers] guess … um, they assume that I am Brown and I have a different name, so I am not Canadian or White”. Later, Nalini continues:

I was trying to put in some stuff that will make people think that I am a good student because I wanted people to consider me for homeworks and for the final project. I wanted to attract people so they would … so that they would consider working with me. I wanted my online profile to be intelligent because this is the only chance that I can explain … that I can make sure that I am taken as intelligent. Because I am as intelligent as [my peers] are.

Nalini articulates that it is necessary for her to represent herself as intelligent and successful because she believes that her name reveals that she is not White. She deems it necessary to explicitly convey her intelligence to counteract biases that would otherwise cast her as less intelligent than others.

For Devran, impression management is a chance to prove her academic success. Devran is a PhD student from Turkey and she received her previous degrees from a Turkish university. She posits that “because [she] didn't get [her] degrees from a Canadian or an American institution, [her] success might not be fully understood”, even though her “university is one of the top universities in Turkey”. In order to convey an impression that she is a successful student, Devran says that she explained how her accomplishments would look
in the Canadian context. Indeed, in her profile page, she writes: “Before I came to Canada, I worked as a research and teaching assistant in my university. I had responsibilities of teaching courses and grading students. It is like being a lecturer here in [departments name]”.

Identified as non-White, Gulsum, Nalini, and Devran believe that their intelligence and success are devalued, under constant threat, or subject to negotiation at all times. Devaluation of non-Whites' perspectives, values, and qualities are how Discourses of whiteness operate (Kincheloe, 2010). Since the normative standards of intelligence rely on cultural difference between Whites and non-Whites, Discourses of Whiteness create a hierarchy that non-Whites cannot overcome.

**5.4. Conclusion: Reproducing the Self, Reproducing the Discourses**

How people represent themselves and manage impressions in mediated learning environments can be thought of as what Butler (1990) calls performative acts. With respect to gender and sexuality, the theory of performative acts suggests that gender norms are culturally constructed through the repetition of performances. While Butler particularly refers to gendered norms, the theory can be applied to other identity manifestations in mediated environments (Van Doorn, 2009). People “perform” their online-selves by embodying online-existence and managing impressions, meaning that they reproduce their identities through what Butler calls performative repetitions.

Performing the online-self not only embodies people but also situates and contextualizes them in relation to those around them. The online-selves place individuals in
particular “temporal and spatial configurations of relationships and cultural practices (institutions and discourses)” (Sommers & Gibson (1994), as cited in Walker, 2000, p. 103 parentheses are original). In other words, by creating and performing online-selves, people bring material and symbolic dynamics of their daily life into mediated environments. Such material and symbolic conditions, then, become means by which people try to impress each other in order to fulfill their desires. Therefore, the performance of self in mediated environments reproduces macro-level societal Discourses under which people operate in their daily lives. Consequently, self-representation and impression management in mediated environments create what Foucault calls a “discursive regime” (1978), in which people create sets of social norms and rules and self-monitor to follow such norms and rules. Since the two online courses I studied and the education institution that offer these courses are situated in a colonial and white-supremacist society, the discursive regime in these online courses reflect the Discourses of whiteness.

Butler acknowledges Foucault's concept of discursive regime when she argues that the self as a subject is formed by Discourses36. For Butler (1990), the discursive regime affects the meanings of what is acceptable and appropriate; therefore, people are not free in their performance of the self and in most cases the self is performed without one being conscious of it. The discursive regime is also manifest in digitally-mediated experiences (Haraway, 1991). When people perform their selves in mediated environments, they do not enact “freely or randomly, but are culturally constrained within [D]iscourses, which allows

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36 The discursive regime is also acknowledged by Goffman; however, he refers them as “establishment” (1959) and, later, as “frames” (1983).
for certain performances … while prohibiting others” (Van Doorn, 2009, p. 586).

For online education, the discursive regime is manifest in decisions regarding who can be included in or excluded from the learning community. Particularly, the discursive regime affects the norms and values of what aspects of the self are acceptable, allowed, and appropriate to represent in order to become included in the learning community. While the political implications of this discursive regime can be understood

… in terms of the actions which each participant (or class of participants) can demand of other participants, the kinds of deprivations and indulgences which can be meted out in order to enforce these demands, and the kinds of social controls which guide this exercise of command and use of sanctions … (Goffman, 1959, p. 240)

the social implications can be understood

… in terms of the moral values which influence activity in the establishment —values pertaining to fashions, customs, and matters of taste, to politeness and decorum, to ultimate ends and normative restrictions on means, etc. (ibid., p.240)

In socio-political terms, profile pages can be seen as means to negotiate who has rights, responsibilities, power, and control over others. While there is no direct or material domination between Whites and non-Whites, data presented in this chapter suggest that non-White people are dominated by White people's perspectives through the Discourses of whiteness. Political aspects can be seen as the process of legitimizing who can speak with what authority. As data in this chapter show, non-White participants try to claim their legitimacy by conveying impressions that they are as good, as successful, and as desirable as Whites. With the pictures they upload, with the words they type, people claim their rights to be in the environment and their rights to be included in the community.
In this chapter, I have shown that digitally-mediated environments do not disembodify people or decontextualize social engagements. By analyzing what it means to represent the self and what it means to negotiate impressions in mediated environments, I have demonstrated that people use material resources available to them in their daily-life realities when they dialogically create a shared social reality. Finally, I have argued that as people perform their selves, they create a discursive regime in mediated environments. In the next chapter, I explore how people navigate in and through this discursive regime.
Chapter 6. Hierarchy of Privilege: Self as Curriculum of Diversity and Otherness

The previous chapter showed how profile pages allow people to write themselves into online beings and negotiate identification. Since discursive practices link between material realities and forms of social practice (Foucault, 1978), I argued that online-selves embody material realities of the broader society and manifest discursive practices in digitally-mediated contexts. In this chapter, I shall demonstrate how discursive practices are constituted around Discourses of whiteness, and how Discourses of whiteness create a hierarchy among participants.

Discourses of whiteness, as I have defined in the previous chapter, refer to the notion that whiteness itself has value for its possessor and grants sets of privileges (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 1995). In order to link Discourses of whiteness with discursive practices, I analyze how discursive practices define the ways in which people navigate and learn in and through online learning contexts. I discuss identification as a discursive practice to illustrate how individuals identify themselves and others in relation to Discourses of whiteness.

The nexus between discursive practices and identification constitutes “what is desirable to be done, how people … are to be understood, related to, and acted upon” (S. Yates & Hiles, 2010, p. 56). If discursive practices dictate the identities that are accepted, legitimized, or included, and those that are othered or excluded, then discursive practices can never be equal or neutral. In other words, different individuals from different social

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37 In some cases, Foucault uses the term episteme, discursive formation, or regime of truth to refer to discursive practices.
categories experience discursive practices differently at any given time. This is what Crenshaw (1989) calls “intersectionality”. According to this perspective, dynamics of oppression operate differently for different individuals; thus, different identification categories (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or nationality) should be examined in relation to each other since no person has a single identification (i.e. a person may be both gay and Native-American or both female and Black). For example, Delgado and Stefancic (2012) provide a vignette about how a hypothetical Black woman experiences work-place discrimination based on the combination of her race and gender. In this vignette, the woman's supervisor does not discriminate against Black males or White females; thus, the discrimination she experiences cannot be explained just by race or gender but combination of both. Considering these identification categories in combination with each other, then, can explain how different individuals experience the world in different ways on different occasions.

Rather than asking how Whites and non-Whites experience online learning\(^{38}\), I seek to explain how identification and engagements are racialized with respect to privilege and diversity. By so doing, I seek to explain how discursive practices limit, shape, authorize, and legitimize the identifications that can be utilized and the meanings that they convey. With this approach, I hope to move beyond a mere description of who is who but illustrate how identification preserves power, privilege, and hierarchy with respect to race, ethnicity, and nationality. I underscore the point that macro-level societal

\(^{38}\) As discussed in the literature, this is a rather normative and essentialist approach that does not explain how discursive practices of identification are defined and shaped with respect to race and ethnicity. My conceptual and analytic approach, therefore, drastically departs from the current understanding in the literature of online education. In particular, compare this approach with Hofstede's (1997) limited and predefined approach to identification.
Discourses have a direct impact on how people identify themselves and others, and thus that such discourses must also affect subjectivities.

6.1. Discursive Practices of Identification

Discourses produce knowledge that provides a language for talking about a particular concept at a particular moment (Foucault, 1980; Gee, 2011). Multivalent and intertwined, discourses regulate the knowledge that is meaningful and the practices that are reasonable. In this sense, Discourses and societal power relations are inextricably related: Discourses produce differentiated power relations and these social relations in turn reproduce the very same Discourses. This circulation of production/reproduction of Discourses is what Foucault (1978) calls discursive practices. Discursive practices operate at every level of social life; therefore, they permeate all levels of social existence (Hall, 2001). There is no place outside of discursive systems (ibid, p.77):

… power and knowledge [and thus discursive practices] do not function in the form of a chain. It is not radiating in a single direction but it circulates; it is never monopolized by one center. It is deployed and exercised by a net-like formation. This suggests that we all are, to a certain extent, caught up in this circulation of Discourses … This suggests that discursive practices have no center. At any given time, different people may be positioned differently depending on which Discourses they are currently experiencing.

According to Foucault (1978), discursive regimes have three characteristics: (1) they limit and define who can speak with what authority, (2) they limit and set the range of meanings available for individuals, and (3) they limit and impose specific roles on individuals. In other words, they determine what is thinkable, sayable, and doable in a given context. According to this definition, discursive practices limit, allow, and
determine the range of possible meanings upon which individuals build their subjectivity. Discursive practices of identification, then, “[are] as much about what we feel/understand about ourselves as [they are] about what we do and the roles we play” (Miller & Arnold, 2009, p. 54). In what follows, I demonstrate how discursive practices of identification create racialized subjectivities that shape social engagements in digitally-mediated environments. In other words, rather than articulating what individuals from different races do (for example, Whites do this, non-Whites do that), I illustrate how Discourses of whiteness determine one's identification. Furthermore, I analyze how Discourses of whiteness create a hierarchy of privilege by which individuals are positioned in relation to each other.

6.1.1. Privilege and Power

Jeff is from Britain and identifies himself as a “White-Caucasian male, British in origin […] and from middle or lower-middle class”. He calls himself an “economic migrant” as he lived in different parts of the world as an English teacher: “I traveled where I can make income”. This is his first online course and I ask him whether he enjoys it:

Um, … I think … I enjoy … not going to a classroom. And, it does allow anytime, anywhere access but it has constraints … Um, I thought it would be freer than it is. When you read articles about online learning, they sound like it is freer that it is. But it is still constrained. The only freedom is that I don't have to go to a class.

Curious about his definition of freedom, I ask him what he means by freer. Jeff is quick to talk about the democratizing effects of online education: “it has some sort of democratizing effect for education because … um, if you have the Internet connection, then you get access to knowledge”. He continues, “people take this online knowledge,
[take] this global knowledge and use it for their own local context. I believe it is a good example”. I remind Jeff of the notion of the digital divide and ask him whether he believes online learning is “freer” with the divide in mind. He replies: “Um, it is not if you think in that way. But it is not a productive way to think about. Yes, people in remote places may not have access, yet but it is a matter of time”. Following up his explanation, I ask him what he means by “people in remote places”. Jeff explains that he means “people in Africa … I don't know, maybe, some native tribes in somewhere”. Jeff deftly racializes the notion of the digital divide by using racialized geographical locations.

Indeed, the digital divide is not only a geographical matter but also has a racial aspect (Warschauer, 2003). According to Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010), for example, while North America has higher Internet connection rates overall than other continents, Whites have overwhelmingly higher and faster connection rates compared to Blacks or Browns. Jeff does not recognize this (saying "people in Africa" instead of "Blacks") nor does he consider racial or ethnic dynamics in his explanation. Thus, he does not speak directly about racialized experiences in online education. Such avoidance was not exclusive to Jeff but was typical for White or Caucasian students overall when discussing issues such as access, freedom, or equity. By avoiding certain discursive practices, people separate knowledge, experience, and the self, and assume that they are therefore exempt from certain discursive practices. However, post-structuralist and post-colonial scholarship suggest that self, knowledge, and experiences are intertwined and cannot be thought is isolation from each other (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980; Spivak, 1999).
According to Jeff's explanation, online education is supposed to be “free” or “more democratic” because people can “take global knowledge and use it for their local context”. I ask Jeff whether he thinks that, according to his definition, online education is not a democratizing tool but rather a means of colonization since such knowledge represents White-male perspectives of the Western world. Hesitant to give me a quick answer, he explains:

Well, I meant it democratize to a certain extent. You know there is a great firewall of China\textsuperscript{39}. There is a great amount of propaganda going on there because the type of knowledge they are getting is restricted. But it also um, it still can change the society. The social media, in my experience in Singapore, has opened up people. It is difficult to police social media so people are bringing up all these social and political issues. So, it does have these effects in society but it does not … um I am not super positive or skeptical about the effects of knowledge in such places. I think this is a lot better than the previous model. […] I mean … I think the whole idea that knowledge is constructed, presented, and taken up is moving from the colonial model, rightly or wrongly. Colonial model is … it starts with the industrial revolution and Enlightenment; it is a business model, Fordist model. I am not saying we are in a post-colonial era. English, or Anglo-Franco model of living still dominates the entire Internet, still; and the academia. … Um, I think the Internet did and still does support or um, reinforce the colonial agenda but there is a much greater awareness of that right now and we are moving from that era. But I agree with you to a certain extent. It might also reinforce status-quo.

Analyzing knowledge, the Internet, and digitally-mediated interactions with respect to colonial agendas, Jeff was able to consider that online education – or the Internet in general – may not be as democratic as he first suggested. By acknowledging that “Anglo-Franco model of living” “might reinforce status-quo” in digitally-mediated interactions, Jeff recognizes that Discourses of whiteness may affect how one experiences online learning.

\textsuperscript{39} His allegory is funny and quite clever as firewall is a software developed for the security of network system. It controls the incoming and outgoing network traffic by analyzing and determining whether data packages are secure or not.
The conversation returns to Jeff's online learning experience. I ask him what he thinks of the relationship between his race, gender, and class and his status quo. He replies right away: “it is my privilege. It is the positive discrimination I experience”. We have the following exchange:

- Murat: Positive discrimination?
- Jeff: It is difficult to … um, … Well, most of the discrimination I experience is positive. You know… they look at my name, they look at my picture, they probably look at my nationality. There are a lot of positive things about it in online context. What I mean is that there are a lot of positive connotations that go along with my name and gender and … my nationality and my … race. But, uh, I don't want to say that I am all being spoiled or something like that (laughs). But also there are certain expectations
- Murat: Like?
- Jeff: To be intelligent, I suppose. To be able to write clearly and concisely. Maybe I give myself these expectations, I don't know but you know what I mean? There is always this … belief um, … this understanding that … that I have to be as such, right?

Jeff suggests that the positive discrimination he experiences is based on his name and his picture in his profile page; that is, his identification carries positive discrimination.

According to him, being White connotes the impression that he is – and perhaps other Whites are – intelligent and deserving. I am intrigued by his suggestion that he has to be as such, and ask:

- Murat: What do you mean?
- Jeff: I mean … my positive discrimination is …, um … cultural, if you like. It is something I am privileged to have; just because of the world we live in. It is given to me just because the culture I am coming from. Not that I like it or want it or … I, um, … I didn't ask for it. But the positive discrimination is that you have to have privileged … um, be privileged on minorities.
- Murat: How about negative discrimination?

- Jeff: Oh, there is. … Um, actually, … you know, I don't know. … I don't know enough about it; I never experienced it but I imagine there must be. You know dominant social structures exist everywhere and I am sure that dominant power structures exist online. So, people, um, want to hold on to those power structures in online courses, too. But it is not necessarily a gender or ethnic thing, it is simply, purely about power. I experienced those dominant power relations from my privileged background. So, those power relations exist anywhere in any context. It is not simply White male domination. (laughs). What about a White female, right? So, I don't know anything about negative discrimination. I don't know.

Jeff defines one way in which Discourses of whiteness operate in online courses. He is privileged to experience positive discrimination simply because he is identified as White. In other words, he does not have to do anything to deserve his privilege: “It is given to me just because the culture I am coming from”. This is what Harris (1995) calls whiteness as a form of property: whiteness has a value in itself. In particular, Discourses of whiteness provide a symbolic privilege that conceptions of beauty or intelligence not only are tied to whiteness but also necessarily exclude those who are identified as non-White. This is evident in Jeff's explanation as he suggests that he is privileged over minorities.

Jeff considers power separate from race, ethnicity, or gender; therefore, he claims that his discrimination is not “a gender or ethnic thing [but] it is simply, purely about power”. This can be explained through the concept of whiteness as normalization or neutralization; that is, social, political, and cultural advantages accorded to Whites seem invisible to White people. However, Discourses of whiteness “must be addressed within power relations that exploit its subversive potential” (Giroux, 1997, p. 299) in order to understand how such Discourses justify discrimination against those who are identified as
non-White. By separating ethnicity from power, Jeff cannot comprehend whiteness as a social structure that systematically oppresses those who are identified as non-White.

The passage above reflects ideas core to the purpose of the present chapter. When Jeff articulates his online learning experience with regards to race, ethnicity, gender, and class, he is able to talk about his online learning experience in terms of privilege, discrimination, and power. For Jeff, and for many students I interviewed, intelligence, privilege, and positive discrimination are given to those that are identified as White. For the participants in this research, being entitled to positive discrimination and privilege is equated with being White or Caucasian; thus, power and status quo is racialized in the two online courses I studied. Such discursive identification has direct consequences for how both Whites and non-Whites are positioned in relation to each other.

Kate identifies herself as “White/Caucasian” whose family origin goes back to “England, Scotland, and Ireland”. She is a teacher at one of the neighboring city's school boards and she constantly makes connections to her profession as we talk. She describes herself as “not only an experienced teacher but also an experienced online student since this is [her] tenth online course”. She resides three hours' drive away from the campus and she travels to the main campus “only once at the beginning of each semester, just to smell the air and get the feeling of being a student”. Since she is physically away from the campus, I ask her opinion about the statement that online education allows anytime-anywhere access. She answers that “it provides great benefits” but she continues “there are some equity issues regarding the access … um, to tools, to equipment, or to the Internet”. Kate brings up the issue of equity even before I mention or ask about it.
However, Kate addresses equity in terms of access to the Internet and thus she echoes the popular notion of a digital gap or digital divide\textsuperscript{40}. Likewise, she neglects race and ethnicity as important aspects of equity. Kate's focus on the digital divide – despite its direct relation to social class – makes it easier for her to talk about equity without questioning her privilege or status quo.

I ask her whether she thinks that there would no longer be any issues of equity or social justice if everybody had had access to the Internet:

- Kate: I think, um … I think if everybody would have had access to the internet, I think … I think there would be fewer issues of equity. Like … um, … If we all had equal opportunity to participate, there would be fewer issues of equity

- Murat: What issues would there be?

- Kate: Um, maybe … some people would be anxious to participate because they never participated online before. You know … This is something new for many people, so there, um … so, it might be stressful for some people.

I am curious why Kate thinks this is an issue of equity, I ask:

- Murat: So, what does it mean for participation?

- Kate: Well, people would participate less, right? So, it is all about participation.

Kate uses the concepts of equity and equality interchangeably. As I have argued in Chapter 2, equity refers to qualitative judgments of whether a given situation is just or fair. Yet, the way Kate uses the term suggests that she means sameness in quantity of participation; that is, equality. I suggest that she consider opportunities to participate in relation to her ethnicity. Puzzled, she says:

\textsuperscript{40} As I have articulated in the literature section, I acknowledge digital divide as an important issue regarding digital equity and social justice. However, I am interested in looking beyond the digital divide and investigating what happens after people have access to such digital gadgets or digitally-mediated environments. For comprehensive analysis of digital divide with respect to social justice and equity, see Warschauer (2003), Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010).
I am a teacher, so, when … um, so, I always see how that privilege works in schools. When we talk about privilege in schools, we always consider students' background; background in terms of race and ethnicity, and, um, in terms of socio-economic background. I come from a privileged background. I am third generation Canadian and my family background is going back to England, Scotland, and Ireland. So, … I come from a background, where […] I am privileged. I have access to technology … um, to the Internet and I am pursuing my Masters degree, which is privilege by itself because … because it is higher education and even beyond higher education. So, yeah, I do experience that privilege.

Kate now acknowledges that she believes she is privileged because of her ethnicity and recognizes that her privilege allowed her to pursue her academic degree online. Thus, Kate links her academic achievements with her privilege. Curious about how she understands the role of her privilege in the online learning environment, I ask Kate how she utilizes her privilege.

- Kate: I think it is important for me to bring up my privilege because the whole notion of digital gap is related to privilege; so I believe it is important for me to stress that … that aspect of my background.

- Murat: How did you experience that privilege?

- Kate: I would like to think that my privilege does not matter, I would like to think it doesn't have anything to do with it but it does; unfortunately it does. You know … just my name itself can tell a lot about myself, and my background, perhaps. And also my picture and name can say a lot about myself; it says a lot about my privileged background. I mean, I wish there … I wish my privilege was not in play but it is in play. It is inevitable.

- Murat: What does it mean to be privileged in online learning?

- Kate: Well, it means that you know more … Um, for example, the person I am currently working with for this final project is not Canadian. And she is not Caucasian either. Um, … um, and we work on things that … um, well, when we work on the final paper together, I can say that I have certain advantages over her but I try not to over-power her. Only because she is not Canadian, I can tell that I am more knowledgeable about the subject matter because we deal with Canadian stuff. I mean … I mean, the context is in Canada and we deal with Canadian schools and Canadian school system, so I know more than her, more than non-Caucasians. Um, I
guess, it is mostly because of the context. So I am privileged not because of my ethnicity but also because of the context. So, um, I am privileged … um, through my ethnicity in relation to the context. For Kate, her privilege – that she is identified as Caucasian – means that she knows more about the subject matter. Thus, Kate affirms the notion that intelligence is a property of whiteness and that being identified as White has an intrinsic value. Another important point is that Kate not only suggests that being identified as Canadian is a form of privilege but also equates being Canadian with being Caucasian. By so doing, Kate reflects Bannerji's (2000) notion of “hyphened-Canadians” (as discussed in Chapter 1); that is, Whites are default Canadians and non-Whites are identified with their hyphened ethnicity or nationality. Consequently, Kate's explanation of her privilege reflects the colonial and white-supremacist Discourses in which the educational institution of this research is grounded.

What both Kate and Jeff suggest is that being identified as Caucasian carries privilege and that those who are identified as non-White or non-Canadian students are perhaps less knowledgeable unless otherwise demonstrated by personal characteristics, professional experience, or academic success. This is particularly true for Gulsum, who identifies herself as non-White. She was born in Egypt and immigrated to Canada with her husband and three children almost ten years ago. I asked Gulsum whether she considered herself as White before she immigrated to Canada. She answers:

Um, not really. I am not sure actually. (laughs). I never thought about it before I came here. I mean we had tourists and foreigners and they were White but in Egypt, we don't talk about it. We all are the same there, so we

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41 The motivation behind my question is originated in Fanon's (1967) explanation of sociocultural construction of racial identity and the attendant subjugation determined by the White world. Fannon argues that there is no racial otherness as long as a Black person is among Blacks. Thus, for Fanon Blacks must be black only in relation to Whites. See the Chapter called The Fact of Blackness in his book Black Skin, White Masks.
don't need such … um, racial understanding to … separate people. I mean … I mean, maybe we all are accepted as White or not; I don't know but it didn't matter because we never think of us in that way.

Gulsum's explanation that she didn't think of her race or ethnicity before she came to Canada hints that she is now more aware of such issues. I ask her whether she makes sense of her ethnicity now and she responds by nodding. I ask Gulsum how she makes sense of her racial identification in the online course. She says that she believes she has to “prove [herself] as a successful student, who knows as much as [her] peers”. Gulsum echoes what Jeff and Kate suggest in the above excerpts and racializes intelligence and success. As identified non-White, Gulsum believes that she is not accepted as intelligent or as successful; thus, she has to create the impression that she is as intelligent and as successful as those identified as White. She continues:

I always underscore my achievements um, … because when people look at me or um, talk to me, I want them to know that I know things … um, know things as much as they do. So, like, … I want to put forward my achievements but not limited with my academic life but also I put forward my achievements in my professional life. I am a non-White, Muslim Canadian so I want my achievements … to overshadow any prejudice um, … any judgment that Whites make.

I am interested in understanding why she does not identify herself as White. I remind Gulsum that according to the Canadian census, Middle-Easterns and North-Africans are accepted as White. She replies to me right away: “Well, I am not White enough … you know what I mean?” By saying that she is not White enough, Gulsum reiterates the notion that whiteness is not about phenotype or geographical location but is a social, political, and historical construction. I am curious about how she experiences online learning with respect to her racial and ethnic identification:

- Murat: What does that mean for your online learning experience?
- Gulsum: People know that I am not from here; I am not Canadian enough for them.

Gulsum is aware of the colonial and white-supremacist Discourses, and echoes Kate (and indeed Bannerji’s (2000) notion of hyphenated-Canadian) when she suggests that she is not Canadian enough simply because she is not White enough. Gulsum adds:

So, they think that I am … um, they think I don't know things. So I am trying to show my intelligence so that I can break their bias against me. I am trying to show that I can be intelligent even though I am not White. Or, partially White. (laughs)

She continues and brings a new aspect to the fore:

- Gulsum: You know that bias, right? You are from Turkey so you must have experienced that, too.

- Murat: What bias?

- Gulsum: That Muslims are fools, in a sense. Whites think that we are not intelligent because I am covered. That is … bias against Muslims.42

Gulsum points out how Discourses of whiteness are manifest in Discourses about religion and how Islamophobia can be a form of racialized identification. She believes that if she was “British or Scottish”, people would not consider her “as a deficit person”. I wonder how she experiences Islamophobia in online learning:

- Murat: Do you think this is somehow related to your race or ethnicity?

- Gulsum: Um, it must be. I mean … if … I were White enough or [if I were] British or Scottish, people wouldn't ask me … um, they wouldn't consider me as a deficit person.

- Murat: Deficit?

- Gulsum: You know … as … um … as less intelligent.

After this conversation Gulsum and I exchange our experiences regarding Islamophobia.

Even though I explain Gulsum that I do not associate myself with any religion or belief

42 Gulsum points out Islamophobia, a form of prejudice against Muslims. I acknowledge that it is a form of racism and an important issue to be address; however, such analysis is beyond the scope of this research.
system, we exchanged many stories regarding religious biases and discrimination.

Indeed, religion can be another means to analyze discursive practices in online education; however, it is currently beyond the scope of this research.

I ask Gulsum what all of this means for her learning in a digitally-mediated environment. She says:

I try to participate. I show how intelligent I am. If they don't see it, I can't do anything about it, right? So, if um, if they don't see it, then it is their … loss. You know what, I tried but I don't care anymore. I am in Canada for more than ten years and after all that racial discrimination I faced, this … online, um, what happens [in] online courses don't hurt me anymore. I am immune now; […] immune from all racism and discrimination.

Gulsum's words are striking. She believes she was and still is being discriminated based on her ethnicity and religion; that is, she is identified as non-White and believed to be inferior to those identified as White. According to Tate (1997), this inferiority paradigm is built on the belief that non-Whites are biologically or genetically less intelligent than Whites, a notion that is based on IQ studies. Gulsum suggests that the inferiority paradigm is manifest in her online learning experience. Such experience, however, shows striking contrasts to Devran's.

Devran is an international student from Turkey. Devran identifies herself as White, Turkish, female, and from the lower-middle class. She suggests that she was able to “openly and freely participate because [she] was able to login and join the discussion anytime [she] wanted”. I invite her to consider her participation in relation to her race or ethnicity and I ask her whether she sensed or experienced any sort of privilege. Devran

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43 Depending on the audience, subject, and international political climate, Turkey can be associated with both Middle-East and Eastern-Europe. Indeed, in our informal and very long conversations, Devran and I talked a lot about Turkey and its dual characteristic as a Middle-Eastern and Eastern-European country. In this sense, as someone from the Middle-East, I was expecting Devran to have similar experiences or understanding to Gulsum.
rejects such privilege right away; however, she adds:

um … I, um, … in fact, I sort of think that some people were more privileged and some people were under-privileged. But not me; at least I don't think so. I mean, I … would … realize that I was privileged if I really were; but again, I felt I was … um, sort of in a balance. I was not privileged … but also not under-privileged.

Devran's hesitation is typical among those who consider open and free participation simply in terms of access to the digitally-mediated environment. When I challenge the issue of access and suggest she consider participation and identification in terms of race and ethnicity, Devran – and almost all of the participants – acknowledges participation as a discursive practice:

- Murat: Who, then, is privileged and under-privileged?
- Devran: Um … those who are … who come from or have British origin. They are privileged. And those under-privileged ones are … those who are … Um, under-privileged ones are all the others.
- Murat: How about you? You suggest that you are neither privileged or under-privileged. How is that possible?
- Devran: Well, I am not under-privileged because I am White but at the same time I am not privileged because I am not British in origin. Although it is evident in Devran's explanation that she believes privilege – or under-privilege – is a matter of ethnicity, she insists on not defining privilege in terms of ethnicity until I directly ask her:
- Murat: What's the difference between being British in origin and being Turkish in origin?
- Devran: Um, I guess the difference is something to do with Canada's history, right? Anyone from British origin, or French origin is … Like, I mean, if you are from Turkey, you are not from the first colonizers, so you are not privileged but you are not Black or Asian, so you are still White.
- Murat: So, do you mean privilege is a matter of ethnicity with respect to colonization?
By racializing their identification, both Devran and Gulsum understand their online learning experience as a discursive process. They both suggest that they are “not that White”. However, while Gulsum believes she is racially discriminated against, Devran puts herself into a more balanced position as she believes she is neither privileged nor under-privileged. In this sense, Devran suggests an ethnic or racial hierarchy that classifies individuals from most privileged to under-privileged: those who are identified as White or Caucasian are on the top, those who are identified as non-Canadian Whites are in the middle, and all the rest are at the bottom of the hierarchy of privilege.

Johanne offers another possible hierarchy of privilege. She identifies herself as Caribbean-Canadian: “I was born in a Caribbean country but we moved here when I was two years old. So, I grew up in Canada; therefore, I am Caribbean-Canadian”. I ask her what it means to be a Caribbean-Canadian in an online course; she replies without any hesitation: “it means you are more of a Caribbean than a Canadian”. For Johanne, the online course is “a White place, anyway” and she does “not want to have any conflict” about her identification since she is not sure whether she is entitled to be “accepted as Canadian”. Similar to everyone I interviewed, Johanne suggests the implicit understanding that Caucasians are real Canadians and others are somehow peripheral Canadians. In other words, along with all my participants, Johanne illustrates the colonial and white-supremacist understanding of Canada as an imagined nation of Whites:

I usually speak about my Caribbean background more so than my Canadian background because I don't think I would be defined, um, … or accepted as a Canadian. If you look at me in online [courses], people think of me as Caribbean, as immigrant or minority. But you know what, if I
was White, I would be defined as Canadian automatically. So, I am speaking from my Caribbean background because I don't want to have any conflict, right. Besides, it is a White place anyway; you don't need to speak from White perspective because everything or everyone is already White. Arguing that “it is a White place” and “everyone is already White”, Johanne points out to the fact that Discourses of whiteness are accepted as normative and neutral standards, against which all non-Whites are measured or judged. Therefore, she suggests that Discourses of whiteness are manifest in the online learning environment and that they determine how individuals can be identified.

I ask Johanne what she means when she says that she speaks from her Caribbean background because she doesn't want to have any conflict. I am interested in how this conflict affects her participation and she is quick to talk about power and privilege:

I believe, um, it is about … sort of privilege or power let's say. You know what I mean? When you are not coming from White, um, or let's say from non-English background, you are put in a … less-valued or less-privileged category. And this is not only for me, but it is also so for people from Eastern-European, like Polish or Bulgarian people. You are not Canadian no matter what. Right? And, you are put into this … um, minority category. But it is true though; there are some privileged groups and you either belong to it or um, or … out of it. Johanne's explanation of identification shifts from a sole racial understanding (that all White-Canadians are real Canadians) to a colonial understanding (that only Whites/Caucasians and Anglo-in-origin are real Canadians). According to her, privilege is a matter of ethnicity along with national background (one still has to be White and English at the same time) and one is either entitled to privilege or not, based on such criteria.

For individuals I interviewed, race, ethnicity, and national origin define the hierarchy of privilege. Though those who are identified as White or Caucasian
acknowledge their privilege and indeed place themselves on top of the hierarchy, they cannot categorize how others are positioned in such a hierarchy. That is, for many Whites or Caucasians, they are on top of the hierarchy and “non-Whites and all the others and immigrants” – as Denise puts it – are somehow positioned below.

Such hierarchy of privilege and the positions individuals occupy in this hierarchy, then, define the discursive practices around identification. Such discursive practices around identification determine who can be identified as White, Caucasian, or Canadian in order to be entitled to symbolic privilege, stemming from the Discourses of whiteness. Discursive practices, therefore, enforce an implicit understanding that individuals must somehow position themselves in this hierarchy of privilege. This implicit understanding determines the rules by which people engage with each other in online discussions. For example, those who are identified as non-White have to convey the impression that they are as successful, as intelligent, and as good as those who are identified as White. In other words, those who are identified as non-White have to be “White enough” to be accepted as and intelligent.

6.1.2. Diversity vs. Hierarchy

As discussed in the literature review section, online education research takes sense of community as a given, focusing only on the positive aspects while disregarding the discursive practices that might create unintended issues. The notion of diversity is often used to explain the benefits of group work: that it gives students opportunities to talk to, share with, and learn from each other. However, “when not implemented carefully, group work may exacerbate equity issues in the classroom...” (Esmonde,
Diversity, then, is central in my analysis for exploring how hierarchy of privilege is understood and utilized. Since the notion of diversity does not challenge discursive practices of identification, diversity is accepted as part of the online learning curriculum and the status quo is preserved and fostered.

Sydney is a “White/Caucasian” female and her “family origin goes back to England”. She is a “second generation Canadian” and she works as a part-time teacher at the city's school board. She “really enjoys [her] online course because [she] loves interacting with different people”:

It is very diverse, the [online] course, I mean. We all are different. We have different racial and ethnic backgrounds; we have different identities. I am White and Canadian, someone else is White but not Canadian, someone else is not White but Canadian. It is all different. And it is not limited with … just with race or ethnicity. Um, like, for example, I am a part-time teacher and someone else might be a full-time teacher, teaching same or different topics or grade levels. I live in Canada but someone else might be living in who knows where, right? Or … or, like I travel. I traveled to Africa and been there and someone else might be traveled to … let's say South America.

With reference to race and ethnicity, Sydney's definition of diversity is initially racialized. However, she quickly moves from the definition of diversity as a trait of certain cultural groups to diversity as stories of certain individuals. I am interested in understanding what constitutes diversity for Sydney. She says “there is always something that makes us someone different” and continues: “we all are diverse in a sense. We all are from different parts of the World. Right? This person is from Asia, this one from Caribbeans, another one is from Turkey; all over the World”. For Sydney, individuals from different parts of the World make the online course diverse. Thus, she considers diversity as traits of individuals. I wonder what Sydney thinks with respect to the way that diversity plays a
role in online learning. She answers: “[Diversity] adds up to the conversation. It makes
the discussion richer and, um, it makes it more sound. It is … I like that diversity because
… we … then, have different opinions and … Um, we will be able to add something to
discussion”.

Since Discourses of whiteness are accepted as normative and neutralized ways of
sense-making, Sydney – and other students identified as White – tend to address diversity
as a commodity of those individuals identified as non-White. For example, Denise, who
identifies herself as Anglo-White, suggests that “the group is diverse because [they] all
come from different places and [they] all have different interests”. Amy, who is
“Caucasian” and of “Irish descent”, similarly believes that “the online course is such a
diverse place because people [in online courses] are from all around the world”.

When diversity is accepted as an individual rather than a group characteristic,
students identified as White can avoid the social, political, and historical aspects of
diversity (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). In particular, talking about diversity as personal
difference allows students – particularly those who identify themselves as White or
Caucasian – to disregard discursive practices that preserve their status quo within such
diverse groups. That is, by addressing diversity as “different perspectives that different
people bring to discussion”, as Courtney puts it, White-Caucasian-Anglo students see
themselves as the norm and see others as those who can “enrich” the discussion and
“diversify” their learning context. Non-White students, then, are identified as those who
are different and who are supposed to provide diverse perspectives. Such discursive
positioning has important consequences on identification, both for Whites and “all the
Johanne, “Caribbean-Canadian”, also believes that the digitally-mediated learning environment is a diverse place. She defines diversity as involving characteristics of racial and ethnic groups, but she seems puzzled, and her typically smiling face is etched with confusion:

The course is very diverse. And when I say diverse, I mean different racial and ethnic backgrounds. [...] And sometimes such different ethnicities come into play in discussions. And, um, … there is … a common courtesy that … you have to acknowledge your peer's idea but suggest yours (perspective) too. Like, um, … for example, ‘I understand your idea, but how about considering this idea because I am coming from this background and perspective. […] Otherwise, this is harsh, right? You have to remember that you are talking to a human; there is a human on the other side. You have to remember that everyone is coming from a different background; everyone has different identity, different culture. So, what I am saying is not totally wrong; it is just … that … there are other perspectives, too; and I want them to consider my perspective, too. But it all goes back to dominant ideology, right? How would you know there are other perspectives if you are coming from dominant ideology? Right? But there are. We all are different.

Because Johanne addresses “diversity” with respect to racial and ethnic identification, she is able to talk about the effects of Discourses on “diverse” groups. According to her, there is a tension between diversity and Discourses of whiteness; that is, her perspectives are not considered nor acknowledged. Johanne's final comments about dominant ideology points out what is known as White-ignorance, a notion that Discourses of whiteness are invisible for those identified as White since such Discourses are accepted as normative and neutral (C. W. Mills, 1998). I ask her to explain what she means by ideology, particularly dominant ideology:

44 The notion of dominant ideology – and ignorance – indeed is very important and a great deal can be said about its effects on equity and social justice. Here, I analyze dominant ideology in terms of diversity; however, I will focus on ideology and explore it in depth with respect to equity and social practices in the following chapter.
- Johanne: It is … um, it is this general belief about things. It is like … knowing something without knowing how you know it. I guess what I am trying to say is that it is a narrative that, um, … defines the things or people or meanings … in a way they are. And there is not only one narrative but um, there are many narratives that … are infused in society. And, it is infused in online learning environments, too.

- Murat: How does it manifest itself in online learning?

- Johanne: It is because many students are coming from dominant ideology. Um, you know what, I am not sure. I mean, um, … I mean it is kind of like … because that society has many dominant ideology … and … that ideology is infused in everything. So, ideology is manifest in … in … um, in all of us. So, it is likely that dominant ideology will be picked up in online learning too. I guess my answer is that people just assert their position and um, … exercise that position; and they bring that dominant ideology.

- Murat: And, what is this dominant ideology in online learning?

- Johanne: Oh, it is Whiteness. It categorizes us; it under-privileges us. […] It is simply the hidden curriculum. It happens when one view is seen as the norm. And, when there is other people over there in the [mediated] environment, they might want to bring in their identity. Like, I mean …, you know …, there are different identities; different races, different gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on and so forth. People want to bring in these in their online experiences. Um, … so, in some cases, these identities may clash with dominant ideology. So, I am not sure if it is fair for people like us.

Despite being not sure, Johanne defines ideology in terms of identification. She posits that ideology is something that defines meanings, roles, and enactments; thus, she suggests that it is implicit in the online curriculum. Interested in diversity, I ask:

- Murat: What do you think all these mean for diversity? How does ideology work out in the community?

- Johanne: Well, I believe that diversity is just a term to cover this racism. Um, maybe I should not call it racism. But anyway, it is a way to cover what is really happening online. Um, for example, diversity is taken like 'oh, let's learn about your food' or 'let's learn about your music'. It is always superficial; it is always taken as something good. But on the other hand, you need that community; and without it, you have no learning. So,
it is interesting, isn't it?

- Murat: So, what does that mean for you?

- Johanne: Well, um … It means that, um, it means that I am different and it means that it is not easy to be different or diverse. So, again, I am not sure if it is fair.
Johanne thinks of diversity as cultural traits; therefore, she was able to address diversity in relation to discursive practices – something that White or Caucasian students cannot acknowledge or recognize. By bringing discursive practices into her analysis, she questions diversity and the hierarchy of privilege with respect to equity or, in her words, fairness45.

Nalini is a “second generation Canadian”, who identifies herself as “Indian-Canadian even though [she] was born and grew up in Canada”. She believes that her online interactions are “rich” because “the [online] course has diverse people from all over the world”. “It is a multicultural learning platform”, she says. Indeed, Nalini echoes the multicultural discourse – and her White or Caucasian peers – that people bring diversity and that somehow everyone learns from each other. I ask her to elaborate more on what she means by rich interactions:

- Nalini: Rich, like different things … like, um, for example, diversity in experiences or perspectives. … Um, maybe like different ethnicities. Things like that.

- Murat: So, how do you bring these different experiences or perspectives?

- Nalini: Um, like … I bring in my perspective when I discuss with someone. So, in a sense, I bring that richness. (laughs). I enrich the discussion with my difference, with perspectives.

- Murat: But you said you were born and grew up in Canada. What kind of

45 The relationship between discursive practices of identification and equity is the fundamental motivation behind this research and I will further analyze this relationship in detail later.
difference do you think you bring in?

- Nalini: Um, right … Um, I believe that … that I am more Indian than Canadian in online; perhaps … because I am sort of um, … taken as Indian. I never realized that I was that Indian but I am. So, I bring in that culture with me; bring that Indian culture with me and add my experiences and perspectives.

Despite how Nalini self-identifies as Indian-Canadian, she says that her peers identify her as Indian; thus, she believes that she brings diversity and enriches discussions by enacting Indian:

I enrich discussions because I bring in that different culture people need. You know, you need different perspectives to learn from others. So, I do that. I feel like I am more Indian and um, … That diversity has a lot to do with learning. And, um I am Indian … and … someone else represents some other culture and this is how we diversify learning experience.

Nalini identifies herself as *the curriculum of diversity* (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009) from which others can learn. Analyzing how Discourses of distinction shape an elite boarding school students' identification, Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) uses “the curriculum of diversity” to illustrate how those who are identified as non-White have to negotiate their academic status while those who are identified as White are associated with being smart. In Gaztambide-Fernandez's work, a student who was born in India but grew up in the United States articulates that she felt like she should be that Indian because that's why she is accepted to the elite boarding school. Thus, the student in Gaztambide-Fernandez's work believes that she is admitted to enrich the school curriculum. My interview with Nalini suggests the same is true in online learning environments. Nalini believes it is her role to enrich and diversify online learning.

I am curious whether Nalini had a chance to benefit from the “diversity” in the online course. I ask her if she has learned anything from someone who is different from
her:

- Nalini: There are always Blacks, and Asians, and … Latinos. I don't know … There are Middle-Easterns. What I am saying is that there are always different people that you can learn from.

- Murat: How come you didn't mention Whites or Indigenous people, like anyone from First Nations? Didn't you learn anything from them?

- Nalini: (laughs). Nah. What can you learn from them (Whites)? You already know it. And as for Indigenous people, they are not there. So how can I learn from them, right? I am sure I would learn from them if they were online.

Both Nalini and Johanne identify themselves as Canadians. However, identified as non-White, their hierarchy of privilege positions them as being different and supports an expectation that they enrich discussion. Hierarchy of privilege, then, positions those who are identified as White as the norm\textsuperscript{46} and identifies others as different. Therefore, for both Nalini and Johanne, diversity means that they are different and that they are supposed to bring their differences to enrich discussions.

Despite the fact that Devran identifies herself as White – but not necessarily Caucasian – she believes she is “somehow different” and she should “bring [her] difference into discussions”. She says she is “White but still different, may be because [she] do[es] not represent the mainstream Whiteness”. I ask her to explain what she means:

You know … if you are Turkish, you are still White but … you are not White as someone like Canadian or American or English. It is like, um, different um, … different Whiteness. I am not sure how to explain this but … I guess one thing I can say is that I am different in a way that I am from Turkey.

Devran's commentary suggests that she is not privileged enough to claim herself as

\textsuperscript{46} Delgado and Stefancic (2012) defines this phenomenon as ordinary Whiteness, where White perspectives set the standards in and for many social situations.
White; thus, she is positioned as “somehow” different. Indeed, Devran's explanation points out the fact that whiteness is not a biological category but a social construction. Consequently, who can be identified as White is a social construction and thus who can be identified as White can change based on what is at stake (for example, in the early 20th century, Italians, Irish, or Jews were not identified as White in the United States). Though Devran counts as White according to Canadian census, she is not identified as White in a context shaped by social, political, and historical dynamics.

For Gulsum, “diversity has a lot to do with assimilation”. She believes she has “to conform to the dominant culture and assimilate herself; otherwise [she has to] face the consequences, like alienation or discrimination”. According to her, “diversity has nothing to do with Whites”. I am puzzled by her answer:

- Murat: What do you mean by that?
- Gulsum: I mean, they have nothing to lose. Diversity is not about them, it is about us; it is about us … giving up from ourselves but accepting what they want us to be. It has nothing to do with Whites because they are the mainstream belief, in a sense.
- Murat: So, when you say 'diversity has nothing to do with Whites', you mean they are the norm and they have nothing to lose from their privilege?
- Gulsum: Exactly!

Gulsum echoes Devran, Nalini and Johanne that students who are identified as White constitute the norm and that others are somehow different, and it is the “others” who have to position themselves somewhere in the hierarchy of privilege.

These accounts and insights suggest that discursive practices define who can claim certain roles and privileges. Hierarchy of privilege, then, positions White or Caucasian-Canadians as the norm and all the others as somehow different. Those who are
identified as different have to understand what makes them different and enact their differences by enriching curriculum and diversifying learning experiences. Consequently, rather than echoing the optimistic and idealistic understanding in the literature of online education supporting a diversity from which all students benefit, it appears that those who are identified as non-White students are themselves the diversity from which those who are identified as White can learn.

### 6.2. Negotiation of Difference and Diversity

So far, I have demonstrated that discursive practices of identification position individuals within a hierarchy of privilege. Nevertheless, it is possible for individuals to resist or struggle against such discursive positioning – and against power structures that reproduce such Discourses. Individuals can negotiate their identification and redefine the positions available to them since temporary inversions of power relations are always possible⁴⁷ (Foucault, 1978). Indeed, individuals who are identified as different or other do not seem to occupy their position in an unproblematic fashion.

Devran believes that she was able to challenge her position within the hierarchy of privilege:

I was actually able to challenge that understanding. I was able to challenge people, especially those who think that I am um, … sort of a person … um, who thinks that I am less-privileged, let's say. So, I was able to speak up for myself. I did it.

Devran was able to speak up for herself; however, she is not sure whether she was

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⁴⁷ This is where Foucault departs from classical Marxism. For Marxism, the dialectical relationship between superstructure and base is not subject to change (without revolution) and thus those who are from ruling class always dominate subordinate class. For Foucault, power can also be positive and since power is not monopolized by one center but distributed among individuals, it is possible to resist against such power structures. However, post-colonial scholarship criticize Foucault's rather optimistic approach to individuals' power to change. That is, subordinates and Others have no power to struggle.
accepted as a legitimate participant. She continues:

But it doesn't matter if they still don't see me as a real participant. It is ok. And it is ok only because I needed to … and was able to challenge that. And it is enough for me.

I ask Devran why she felt that she needs to challenge her peers.

- Devran: I think if you … So, for example, if you are living in Canada or someone lives in India and other person lives in Turkey, they all are coming from totally different cultures. So, let's say that the course is being offered in Canada. Um, it may just have … um, let's just say [the online course] has dominant culture that complements Canadian understanding. And if you are coming from India, Turkey or let's say Mexico, you are kind of in this space, um, where Canadian ideology is in everywhere. So you have to acknowledge or accept this Canadian perspective. And, I think most of the time it is not intentional. I think sometimes it is unintentional. Only because this is the culture we are embedded in. But you don't only accept the ideology but also challenge it. You need to challenge this Canadian ideology but also you need to challenge your own identity, too.

- Murat: What do you mean by that? How do you challenge Canadian ideology or your own identity?

- Devran: Um, it is just saying out loud that … saying that you are not who they think you are.

- Murat: And how is it related to Canadian ideology?

- Devran: Oh, it is just um, that … they are Canadian and I am Turkish so there is this understanding that I have to be, I guess, a certain person. You know … Like, I am being stereotypified. But I can face that. It is ok. I am very vocal and I can say right away if people are wrong about me.

Although Devran posits that she was able to speak up for herself and challenge her discursive position within the hierarchy of privilege, Nalini was not able to stand up for herself. Nalini articulates that she did not take any action regarding her identification as other because she was afraid of being excluded from discussions. She says:

I told you I was [accepted as] more Indian than Canadian, right? So, I was playing um, … um, not playing; it is somewhat harsh to say. But let's say I was bringing up more of my Indian perspectives because … simply you accept the dominant ideology and represent yourself to go along with it.
Because, um … You need to get accepted, you need to fit in if you want to participate. You don't want to be left out. You want to fit in.

Nalini's fear of isolation suggests that she does not have the power to challenge her discursive position.

For Sofia, who identifies herself as “Latina”, challenging the discursive positioning is the balance between anonymity and identification. She believes that there is always a decision that she has to make about her position within the hierarchy:

it is always a decision about how much you can bring in your experience. Um, … um, it is a matter of how much you use your identity or um …, perspectives. It is about how much you reveal yourself. But, you have to use your identities because this is where you come from; this is why you think in a way that you think. So, it is always a tension that whether you can bring your perspectives or not; always a question whether you reveal yourself or stay anonymous and pretend that you agree with others. It is always about cultural identity.

Sofia is a permanent resident, who came to Canada “almost six years ago as a student”.

She believes that she is not that different; “in fact, [she is] just a normal person, like anyone else”. However, she says that she plays her otherness and difference because she doesn't want to “have any conflict over cultural beliefs, which might lead to disconnection or isolation”. I ask her why she plays her otherness rather than trying to be who she wants to be. She says:

it is not that simple, you know. You are already defined, um, your role is already defined for you and you … you either play it and get along with people or just don't play it and face the consequences. You have to accommodate your role and yourself; you have to find a balance there; otherwise you have no learning. I guess, … I guess, I play that [Latina] identity in my regular life, so, why not online? So, I just don't care much anymore.

Sofia's explanation parallels Nalini's fear of isolation. They both suggest that they have to play their “difference”, otherwise they believe that they may be excluded from discussions. By playing their difference, Sofia and Nalini find ways in which they can
participate. Thus, Discourses of whiteness not only delimit identifications available for individuals but also determine the ways in which one can participate in discussions.

Gulsum echoes both Sofia and Nalini, and posits that her identification is already determined for her:

- Gulsum: I think it is because … sometimes they assume that because, um, because you are coming from a certain culture or coming from a different culture so to say … So, they think you must be different or you must be that certain people that they think for you.

- Murat: So, how come you don't tell them who you really are?

- Gulsum: It is about fitting into dominant discourse. Absolutely! Nobody wants to be judged or nobody wants to be left out. So, you want to be included; you want to be part of the culture, part of the community. It is also an issue of control; control in terms of your image and your [online] self.

Sofia, Nalini, and Gulsum accept that Discourses of whiteness delimit and determine their positions in their learning community. However, as I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, they play with their social presence and social absence as they make strategic choices and navigate the racial terrain of online learning environment.

Johanne is “ready for struggle even though it is not easy”, she says. I am curious about what it means for her to challenge her identification or position within her online community. She explains that it is a constant struggle:

Um, I … um, … how I deal with that is … um, honestly, it is not easy. I mean you can do it but you constantly challenge people and struggle with them …, um, struggle about your perspectives. I do necessarily stress that I am Canadian too so that I can make sense but … it is hard, you know. Just because you are White, it doesn't make you more Canadian. But it makes them right to begin with. You know what I mean. Just because they are White and Whiteness is the dominant ideology, they are right. And then, you fit in; and then, you can try to prove them otherwise. […] but you have to do that. And sometimes it is frustrating but you have to bring that up.
I ask her what is the reaction she gets when she speaks up for herself:

- Johanne: When you do that, people get caught off guard. They get really caught off guard because they don't expect you to say something about it. It is not easy but at the same time, you have to do that. They don't like it. They really don't like it. And you feel that they will come back at you at some point in the future because you challenge their dominant ideology but this is what it is. I am not being rude. I am standing up for myself. You cannot do it all the time; you still have to know when to do it. But you have to. Otherwise I cannot learn. People, um, … let me say that, um, White people do not realize they can be mean and they can hurt you with jokes because they do not realize it. But it is all about race and ethnicity.

- Murat: How come?

- Johanne: Whiteness is manifest subtly. Nobody is doing it bluntly or overtly. It is subtle and embedded, you know. I think, … um, I can … Um, it is ironic because when I identify myself as Canadian, people are like 'well, you are not really Canadian anyway, aren't you?' (laughs). In certain discussions, people want to ask you that; you can feel it. They want to ask you whether you are, um, or can be Canadian. So, I have to position myself before I put a note there. I have to clarify. And those people … um, they are cautious, right? They don't want to be labeled as racist. Otherwise it is a social suicide, right? So, being online is always about adjusting yourself accordingly … um, according to the dominant ideology. It is still there, right? So, you can't go against it but sometimes you cannot accept it either. So, you have to be careful and position yourself carefully. It is a balance in a way. And to be honest, it is very hard sometimes. But you know what, it is doable.

Johanne believes that people do not explicitly exercise racism; however, she suggests that there is still racial identification and that it works subtly. Furthermore, she echoes Sofia and suggests that there is a delicate balance between her identification and her otherness.

Taken together, those who are identified as different or other believe that they are identified as such because the culture they live in already determines who they are. It is a common understanding that they are playing their difference because they don't want to be isolated due to a cultural struggle. One can challenge his or her discursive position within the hierarchy of privilege as long as he or she is ready for struggle. My interviews
suggest that otherness and difference can be negotiated to a certain extent; yet, not every individual is ready or willing to negotiate their discursive position.

### 6.3. Discursive Practices of Identification and Otherness

Any given social institution (e.g., educational systems, schools, and providers of formal education – including online education) represents the institutionalization of Discourses and discursive practices: it establishes orders of truth and defines what can be accepted as reality in a given society (Apple, 2004). Indeed, the notion of Discourse has provided a conceptual groundwork for educational theorists working toward equity and social justice. For example, feminist pedagogies have focused on gender roles (Grumet, 1988), post-colonial pedagogies on racial and ethnic discrimination (Spivak, 1999), queer pedagogies on stereotypification of gender performance (Honeychurch, 1996), critical pedagogies on cultural hegemony (Simon, 1992), and others on social class and economic distinction (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991) in addressing Discourses with respect to equity and social justice.

It would be erroneous to consider online education exempt from Discourses. In this sense, online education was and continues to be subject to macro-level societal Discourses. Online education, as a type of social institution, reproduces such societal Discourses. In particular, the discursive practices of identification create hierarchies of privilege and position individuals within this hierarchical system. In particular, I have focused on three aspects of discursive regimes: (1) they limit and define who can speak with what authority, (2) they limit and set a range of meanings available for individuals, and (3) they limit and impose specific roles on individuals. In other words, they
determine what is thinkable, sayable, and doable in a given context.

The first aspect of a discursive regime is that it limits and defines who can speak with what authority. This was particularly evident when individuals I interviewed defined their own hierarchies of privilege. For White or Caucasians, the hierarchy has two levels: White/Caucasians are on top and all the rest are at the bottom. For many students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, the hierarchy of privilege has three levels: White/Caucasians are on the top, non-White Canadians are in the middle, and all the rest are at the bottom. Discursive practices of identification, consequently, create a racial and ethnic taxonomy, by which individuals gain certain levels of privilege and authority.

The second aspect of the discursive regime is that it limits and sets a range of meanings that are available for individuals. This aspect was manifest when individuals were being identified and positioned within the hierarchy of privilege depending on their race, ethnicity, and nationality. In particular, what it means to be in a digitally-mediated environment had different meanings and implications for different individuals. For example, being identified as White or Caucasian means being privileged while other identifications mean being different or diverse. Similarly, for individuals who are identified as White or Caucasian, diversity means opportunities to learn from those who are different, where as diversity means assimilation and acceptance for individuals who are identified with other racial and ethnic categories.

The third aspect of the discursive regime is that it limits and imposes specific roles on individuals. This aspect can be seen in how individuals defined the ways in which they engage with each other. In particular, different racial, ethnic, and national
backgrounds allowed individuals to have different roles and responsibilities. For example, those who are identified as White/Caucasian-Canadians can identify themselves as Canadian while those who are identified as non-White are identified with their differences (i.e. Indian-Canadians were more Indian than Canadian or Caribbean-Canadians were more Caribbean than Canadian). Thus, we see how discursive practices determine three roles for those who are identified as non-White: (1) they should fill less-privileged positions, (2) they should enact their differences, and (3) they should enrich and diversify learning in digitally-mediated environments.

These three aspects are fundamentally dependent upon and related to each other. They determine:

the manner in which people actively relate to themselves as beings with certain identities, and to their environment; the ways they are incited to constitute themselves as beings with certain rights, responsibilities, obligation, needs, and so on; how they act upon themselves and shape their own lives and their own conduct; and the rationalities according to which they do so. This involves highlighting the forms of knowledge, the discourses, which people draw upon in recognizing themselves as certain types of being, in referring to themselves as individuals, and through which they recognize ideals by which they direct their own conduct and assign a moral force to their lives and their actions. (S. Yates & Hiles, 2010, p. 66)

Such discursive practices of identification have social and political consequences as they reproduce differentiated power relationships and secure the cultural hegemony of the dominant cultural group. Furthermore, discursive practices have pedagogical consequences. For online education, the discursive practices of identification mean that while individuals from certain cultural groups are accepted as legitimate participants of the learning community, some individuals are identified as different or diverse. That is, they are identified in opposition to Whiteness; simply put, they are othered.
6.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that macro-level societal Discourses manifest themselves and affect the ways in which individuals identify themselves in digitally-mediated environments. I analyzed how Discourses of whiteness position individuals within a hierarchy of privilege and determine who has rights, responsibilities, power, and control over others. In particular, I illustrated how students make sense of their online learning experiences with respect to the discursive practices of identification. In particular, I sketched how some individuals were able to benefit from the learning community while some individuals were simply othered. This starkly contrasts with the belief that digitally-mediated environments liberate people from power relations and equalize social status resulting in greater equality of participation.

Being other or different is not inconsequential but rather closely related to how individuals make sense of their experiences. How otherness is enacted and negotiated is explored in depth in the next chapter.
Chapter 7. Socio-Cultural Production of Self: Social Presence and Social Absence

The previous chapter explored how macro-level societal Discourses come into play and affect identification in online education. I drew from Foucault's (1978) definition of discursive practices and explored how Discourses of whiteness delimit the ways in which individuals are identified. I demonstrated that Discourses of whiteness create a hierarchy of privilege and that individuals are identified and positioned within this hierarchy with respect to race, ethnicity, and nationality. In particular, I illustrated that those who are identified as White or Caucasian-Canadians were positioned on top of the hierarchy, whereas those who are identified as non-White were identified as others or different. In this chapter, I built on the notion of “delimitation” and use social presence and social absence to illustrate how difference or otherness is experienced with respect to racial, ethnic, and national identification. Thus, this chapter is concerned with how discursive practices of identification are enacted in digitally-mediated environments with respect to difference and otherness.

The concept of difference or otherness has provided the conceptual groundwork for educational theorists working towards equity and social justice within a society, regardless of individuals' or cultural groups' race, class, gender, or other cultural identifications (Giroux, 2011; Pinar, 2011). Yet, the concept of difference is also the practical juncture at which different theoretical approaches for providing equitable educational environments begin to part company (Trifonas, 2003):

Difference therefore becomes an intrinsic point of theoretical validation
for ... the creation of equitable educational environments that seek to engage questions of social justice and alter the ideological preconditions of prejudice and discrimination. (p. 1)

Whiteness studies and post-colonial pedagogies have generally addressed the concept of difference as a marker of identification through which discrimination, oppression, or cultural hegemony is operationalized against those who are identified as non-White (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Spivak, 1999). Consequently, in order to understand how the concept of difference relates to equity and social justice in online education, I focus on how individuals make sense of their identification as different or other in digitally-mediated environments. In particular, I analyze what it means to be identified as different or other and illustrate how difference or otherness is experienced with respect to Discourses of whiteness.

I employ three concepts. The first concept is identification. Since identification refers to how individuals enact within a given context, the concept of identification provides a means to understand how people recreate, adjust, or simply reproduce Discourses. I derive the second concept, social presence, from online education literature. Social presence provides a means to understand how individuals make sense of themselves in relation to those around them (Gunawardena, 1995; Kehrwald, 2010). The third concept – as I have discussed in Chapter 2 – is built on social presence and I coined it social absence. Social absence provides a means to understand and address certain identifications that individuals have but do not necessarily enact in digitally-mediated environments. Thus, I use both social presence and social absence to understand how individuals experience otherness in a digitally-mediated learning context. By so doing, I aim to address Discourses of whiteness, identification (including social presence and
social absence), and otherness as inextricably interwoven.

Power, privilege, and identification are relational constructs that perpetuate educational inequity. Therefore, in this chapter, I illustrate how the hierarchy of privilege and otherness reproduces educational inequity with respect to racial, ethnic, and national identification. That is, the learning context yields unequal learning experiences that ultimately secures power and privilege for certain cultural groups in the context of online learning.

7.1. Social Presence and Social Absence: I am who I am, or Disengagement

Presence and absence are self-referential: they refer to states of being. However, the concepts are considered in relation to reality, truth, and existence in Western thought. For example, in his famous Allegory of the Cave, Plato pointed out that true being is the ultimate form of presence. Aristotle, on the other hand, set forth the belief that there can be no unmediated forms, but rather being cannot be extracted from representations. With the Enlightenment – particularly with German idealism, presence and absence are employed to question the conditions of being. In Being and Time, Heidegger (1962) suggested that presence is precondition for the self. On the contrary, in Being and Nothingness, Sartre (1993) argued that existence is prior to one's presence. That is, individual is born into the material reality of one's body; therefore, one finds oneself inserted into being. With post-structuralism, presence and absence have lost their binary distinction. In Of Grammatology, Derrida (1998) criticized the conventional notion that associates existence with presence and suggested a play between presence and absence.
Similarly, Deleuze (1990) tried to separate presence from the absolute truth and absence from absolute falsity. According to the current post-structuralist thought, presence is a form of absence and absence can be thought of as a kind of presence.

As I have argued in Chapter 2, online education has accepted presence as the only form of human experience in digitally-mediated environments. Absence, in this sense, has never been part of the discussion of being online in mediated-learning environments. Here, I depart from the conventional online educational research and do not solely depend on social presence but also draw on the concept of social absence for sketching online subjectivities.

Johanne identifies herself as a “Caribbean-Canadian” – as introduced earlier – who was born in a Caribbean country and grew up in Canada. Recall from the previous chapter that she emphasizes her “Caribbean identification more so than [her] Canadian identification” because she believes that she is “accepted as Caribbean but not Canadian”. Johanne suggests that she is a very active participant who is not shy in bringing her perspectives in discussions. She claims that, compared to face-to-face courses, she engaged more with her peers: “I talked with my peers, I posted more, I read more, I replied more”. Although I cannot validate her participation in face-to-face courses, the log report (automatically-collected student data) indicates that Johanne is indeed very active in the online course. She spent 120 hours in aggregate while the average time spent online per student is 77 hours. Similarly, the number of notes she read and wrote, and the number of replies she received nearly doubles the class average. In a classical sense – that social presence is the degree to which individuals represent themselves – she is
socially present in discussions and she says her “social presence represents her Caribbean-self”. However, when I ask her if she believes that she truly represents herself, she answers with no hesitation:

No! Although I have always been genuine in my self-representation, I don't truly represent myself. No! And here is why. Ok, for example, they would know which university I got my degrees, they would know what TV shows or music I like. Like, things I shared, you know. They, wouldn't know how really I am because there are other aspects of me that I don't talk about. It is only half of me. For example, they wouldn't know what it means to be different because I never talked about it. […] So, … so, I think what you present about yourself is only the half of it, right? So, there is always others' assumptions. There is always stereotypification. So, even though I was genuine about myself and my self representation, I cannot know what others think of me … because of um, … this … stereotypification. And it goes to dominant perspectives, right? So, I cannot know what others get out of me.

Johanne's answer suggests that even though her social presence is a genuine and true representation of herself, there is more to her identification than what she represents. According to Johanne, her online self is “only half of” who she really is. I ask her to explain what was missing in her online self:

- Murat: What was absent in your online representation?

- Johanne: Well, funny but my ethnicity was definitely absent. I am Canadian, right? But I was Caribbean in the [online] course. So, it is funny because I was not Caribbean-Canadian but I was simply Caribbean. So, my ethnicity was not there. You know what I mean?

Johanne's explanation points out how Discourses of whiteness delimit identifications available to individuals. In the two online courses I study, what it means to be Canadian is available to certain individuals; that is, being Canadian means to be White. Thus, Johanne believes that she was identified as Caribbean even though she is Canadian. Johanne continues:

- Johanne: My ethnicity was absent because I didn't even have a chance to
bring it in. I wasn't Canadian whose ethnic background is Caribbean; I was just Caribbean. So, if I had a chance to be who I was, I would … probably use my ethnic background. But, um, now I am … not this person, so I don't use my ethnicity … How can I use my ethnicity if I am not using my ethnic background?

- Murat: So, how is your ethnicity absent?

- Johanne: I am Canadian-Caribbean. Not just Caribbean. So, if you make me Caribbean, you erase my Caribbean-Canadian background. For example, um … Whiteness defines … um, it defines who we are … and also it defines who they are; who Whites are. So what I mean by that is that I am Canadian but I am accepted as Caribbean and this is defined by Whiteness. Um, so, um, even though I grew up in Canada and I am Canadian I cannot be Canadian; so I was being Caribbean. So, if I wanted to be Canadian or accepted as Canadian I would have to hide my Caribbean background.

Johanne's articulation is quite powerful. She analyzes how Discourses of whiteness define who counts as Whites or non-White. Furthermore, she explains how Discourses of whiteness do not allow her to be identified as Canadian. Precisely because her Caribbean-Canadian background is “erased”, Johanne believes her online self does not represent her. Thus, Johanne's social absence is her ethnic background.

Race, ethnicity, and nationality are common points of juncture between presence and absence for those who were not positioned on top of the hierarchy of privilege.

Nalini, who self-identifies as “Indian-Canadian”, suggests that her ethnicity was absent. I ask her why and she answers:

I don't know. I think it just didn't come up. I mean, I thought it is ok not to mention it. I mean, parts of me were missing. You know, like my culture and cultural background. I could have put more of myself and wrote about myself. But in terms of what I shared with people, I was accurate. But, yes, there were some parts missing. So, I did not reflect myself fully. You know … Honestly, I thought people do not care about it or take that into account; I thought they don't want to know about it. So, um, I thought … I thought I should not mention it because I am not a typical Canadian.

Nalini echoes Johanne in many ways. Most importantly, she believes that her ethnicity is
absent through being accepted as Indian rather than Indian-Canadian. In a preview interview, however, Nalini suggested that she had to be Indian because it is the role that was expected of her (see previous chapter). Her contradictory explanations suggest that she is caught in a dilemma that she feels her identification as Indian is absent, yet she feels like she is expected to be Indian. Spivak (2012) calls this dilemma “double-bind”; an irreconcilable binary in which two subject positions can simultaneously oppose yet construct one another. For Nalini, double-bind is the dynamic interplay between Discourses of whiteness and her social absence. In specific, since being intelligent or successful is granted to those who are identified as White (see Chapter 5), Nalini is caught in a double-bind: her ethnic identification on one hand, the risk of being identified as unintelligent on the other. Discourses of whiteness enforce Nalini to be Indian yet Nalini feels her ethnicity is absent. Thus, for Nalini, similar to Johanne, social presence and social absence are subject to discursive practices of identification.

I wonder what Nalini meant when she said “because I am not a typical Canadian”.

Nalini explains:

Well, you have limited social cues in online learning, right? So people fill in those … cues … they make guesses … um, they stereotypify you depending on their dominant ideology. And, they are White. So, let's be honest. They stereotypify me depending on what they think of me. … They do; they start guessing. […] So, my picture was up there, um, … and my name was there, right? So, they guess that … um, they assume that I am brown and I have a different name, so I am not Canadian or White. (laughs). You know … And if you don't represent yourself according to the image they have in [their] mind, they think you are fake.

Nalini's answer explains how Discourses of whiteness manifest themselves in digitally-mediated learning environments. According to Nalini, people try to make sense of their peers and stereotypify each other by using meanings that are defined and
delimited by the very same Discourses of whiteness. This explains why Nalini is caught in a double-bind: she is Brown and has a different name; therefore, she cannot be Canadian, otherwise her peers may think she is “fake”. Nalini cannot be Indian; she must be the Indian her peers assume her to be. Discourses of whiteness not only delimits Nalini's identification (that she is not Canadian but Indian) but also determines what it means to be Indian (that she has to represent herself according to the image her peers have in their minds). Consequently, for Nalini, her social absence is a matter of race, ethnicity, and nationality.

Yet, similarities between Nalini and Johanne are quite interesting. They both believe that their ethnicities are absent from their online selves because they are identified as who they are not: not Canadian but Caribbean and Indian. Furthermore, they both believe that their absence is the direct result of stereotypification that is originated from macro-level societal Discourses.

Being stereotyped in relation to social absence is repeated by Sofia, who self-identifies as “Latina”. “… we all make guesses, right? You start putting stereotypes. You put in dominant ideology”, she says. For Sofia, social presence and social absence are matters of identification:

I think it all comes down to identity and of course because this is [an] online [course], it comes down to social presence, too. Not only your social presence but also your peers', too. Sofia suggests that social presence – and social absence – is constructed dialogically. Thus, Sofia understands that one's sense of social presence is not free-floating but is shaped by others' perspectives as well. She continues:

If you don't have enough [sense of] social presence, you have a
disconnection; you, um, you do not learn. And once my experiences, my perspectives, or my identity is devalued, then, my social presence … um, … um, if this is the case, then it is going to break down the communication, break down social presence, and break down the community at large. […] I don't have [sense of] social presence if you don't accept me as I am. I can't be here if you don't accept me as I am. Sofia's explanation of social presence now shifts from identification to existence.

Curious about the interplay between social presence and social absence, I ask her whether she felt absent from discussions:

- Sofia: Um, I guess I felt so sometimes. I was … Um, I was present, right? I was there, I was participating. And, I was presenting myself; I was presenting my perspectives. But um, … I don't know how to explain this … I was sort of experiencing this absence. It wasn't me, fully.

Sofia's answer indicates why identification in digitally-mediated learning environments should be considered as the dynamic interplay between social presence and social absence. She suggests that she was present and participating to discussions, yet she argues that she felt absent. Since Sofia captures the interplay between the concepts of presence and absence, I introduce her the concept of social absence (she already knows the concept of social presence through the readings of the course). I am interested in how Sofia thinks of her social absence:

- Murat: So, were there any aspects of you that were absent?

- Sofia: Not that anything was absent per se but I was … like I told you, I was considering how much to reveal of myself as opposed to how much to stay anonymous. So, there was always … a feeling that I was cautious of who I am and how much I contribute. So, what I am trying to say is that, in a general sense, I was absent although I was present. I guess I am confused (laughs). I guess this is what you mean by social absence, right? Sofia suggests that she was absent from discussions and in this way she differs from Johanne and Nalini – and from everyone else I interviewed. This finding is to be understood with regard to her overall interaction patterns. Sofia is quite vocal and
participates in discussions regularly, providing her insights as a teacher. She always starts her notes with friendly salutes and occasionally uses smiley faces – something that indicates high levels of social presence according to current understandings. However, she suggests that she felt she was absent from discussions. She continues:

- Sofia: So, I was absent and I believe people were filling in my absence as they stereotypify me. So this is what I meant [that] your identity is defined for you. And in this case, your social presence is defined for you.

- Murat: What do you mean? Who defines it? How?

- Sofia: Again, it all goes back to … ideology, narrative, discourse what ever you want to call it. Every culture has some hegemonic aspects in it. […] And here online, there is this Canadian ideology. Um, in my experience it defines who you can be, online and offline. It does not tolerate or consider other perspectives. That is how cultural hegemony feeds itself into online learning. It is forcing you to be a certain person. Devran and Gulsum also explain the effects of Discourses on social presence and social absence by means of race, ethnicity, and nationality.

Gulsum, a Canadian born in Egypt who identifies herself as non-White, is not very active in terms of the quantity of notes she posts. She joins in discussions late in the week and she usually logs in to the digitally-mediated environment late in the day (she says she is a busy mom of three). She seldom receives responses to her notes and is not often questioned by peers. The log data indicates that she received only 43 replies while the average number of replies received per student is 60. Her reply ratio (correlation between number of replies she received per number of notes she posted) is .47 while the mean reply ratio per a note is .79 for the whole class. I ask her whether she thinks she has

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48 Sofia refers to one of our earlier conversations, which is articulated in the previous chapter.

49 In the next chapter, I will use the concept of cultural hegemony to interpret my findings as evidence of inequity.
a low level of social presence. Gulsum answers that “self-representation cannot be quantified” and adds that “numbers do not matter”. She suggests that she “must have high social presence” because she “represents [herself] truly”. I am curious about what she means by representing herself truly.

- Gulsum: It means that you are not pretending to be someone else. Or it means that you are not trying to fool people or fool yourself by trying to be someone else. You know how people change their identities and act like someone else online?

- Murat: Do you mean something like gender bending or identity bending?

- Gulsum: Yes. So, yes, in that sense, I truly represented myself. Gulsum suggests that her sense of social presence is high because she believes she represents herself online. I ask Gulsum whether she experienced similar challenges in her online or offline representations. She answers by nodding. I suggest to Gulsum that, according to what she says, her online self also must be immune from racial discrimination. She is confused and surprised with my words:

- Gulsum: Um, I never thought about it in that way. [long pause] I guess … Um, I think my online self is actually the um, … [my online self] is already the immune version of me. In online, … I told you this already, right? … I am not bringing in my race or my country of origin. I don't share them. I just hide those things.

- Murat: Hide?

- Gulsum: Yeah, hide. You just don't talk about it. And if I don't bring them in, they are not there, right? (laughs)

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50 In a casual exchanges before one of our interviews, I explained the concept of social presence when I was briefly explaining my research. Before I asked this question, I made sure Gulsum remembers the concept correctly.

51 As discussed in the Chapter 2, identity bending refers to altering identity in CMC for deception. This is another concept that I explained Gulsum.

52 When Gulsum and I were talking about her identification, she stated that she is immune from all sorts of racism and discrimination. See the previous chapter.
As the focus of conversation moves from social presence to social absence, Gulsum starts to consider the implicit effects of Discourses of whiteness on her online self. I am curious to know more about how she makes sense of her social absence. She suggests that it means she has less to share:

So, I hide myself and I guess [I] engage less. But I don't mean numbers again. I mean I engage less in a way that um, … I am less of me. But again, I am true in a sense that I am who I am but I am … Like I said before, my online self is less of me.

Similar to Nalini, Gulsum believes that she is present because she represents herself, and yet she believes she is absent because she hides herself. Thus, Gulsum experiences her social presence and social absence as two contradictory subject positions that simultaneously interact to construct her online self. For Gulsum, presence and absence has impact on how she engages with her peers. She says sharing is not an easy process but includes some critical decisions because she has to decide how much of herself to reveal. We had the following exchange:

- Gulsum: For me to share, um … like, I have to be very comfortable and feel safe to share. But you have to work really hard to have that [sense of] comfort within your community. And it is not easy to create that. You have to know that you are not going to be judged or devalued based on your race or any other cultural background. You have to know that … you are not accepted as less intelligent because you are Arab or Muslim. You have to know that you are not going to be isolated or left out because who you are. Nobody wants that, right? Um, and it just doesn't happen just like that. Even you try hard; even your instructor or professor try hard, you need time … believe me, a lot of time. And you just don't feel comfortable.

- Murat: What if you never feel comfortable?

- Gulsum: I don't but this is why I call myself immune from racism. I deal with it. Despite Gulsum calls herself “immune from racism”, she does not mean that she is exempt from racism; rather, she means that she “deal[s] with it”. Indeed, Gulsum and all
the others identified as non-White argue that they somehow deal with racism. Crenshaw (1989) argues that the notion that race is a problem of non-Whites is imposed by the Discourses of whiteness. According to Crenshaw, whiteness is accepted as normative; thus, whiteness is not considered as a racial category whereas all those who are identified as non-White are accepted as racial subjects.

My interviews with my participants suggest that social absence is one way to deal with racism in online learning environments. In specific, individuals' racial or ethnic backgrounds become their social absence while they are able to present themselves.

I am interested in understanding how Gulsum experiences her social absence:

- Gulsum: You just disengage. It is that simple. You become disengaged, and then people think you are just disinterested or you don't want to participate but you are just disengaged because there is no other way to engage, right? So, what you do is that, you hide yourself and … and, um, when you feel comfortable enough, you reveal yourself, you show yourself. And, um, if the reaction [of your peers] is ok; if you feel that it is ok to be yourself, then you are lucky and you can go ahead. But if not, it is not good, right? You either wait for another moment or just let it go. So, you hide yourself.

- Murat: How do you hide yourself?

- Gulsum: When it happens to me, I just superficially engage. I just quote a couple of things from the article and just don't care what others say because it might hurt me. So, you hide yourself because you … you want to fit in. It is sort of social sacrifice, in a sense. I wonder whether Gulsum's meager amount of participation is related to her social absence. She rejects this idea even before I finish asking the question. Nevertheless, Gulsum suggests that she deals with discourses of identification by disengaging from discussions.

For Devran, an international student from Turkey who identifies herself as White,
social absence is “temporal [because] as the course progress, [one] can bring [his or her] perspectives and experiences”. Devran is an active participant and she confirms that her sense of social presence is “high”. She believes her social presence is her “accurate and true representation” and she experienced social absence “only for a few weeks at the beginning of the course”. She explains:

I wasn't talking much about Turkey at the beginning because I wasn't sure how people would react to that. I guess I was worried that um, … I wasn't sure if people would want to listen what I say because I am coming from Turkey and I represent that perspective.

Devran defines her social absence – even though she experienced it only for a short period of time – in terms of nationality. I ask whether she experienced any racial or ethnic tension with regards to her social presence or social absence, and remind her of the hierarchy of privilege she suggested and ask her whether she sensed any relationship between such a hierarchy and social absence. She takes her time to think before she explains:

Um, I think there must be a relationship; now that I am thinking about it. … I mean, again, I was in the middle somewhere [within the hierarchy], so the perspectives that I didn't bring in, um … it might be relatively less significant to those who are [positioned] towards the bottom. … I guess … So, in theory there must be [a link], but for me it was not that big of a deal. For me, it was my Turkish identity that I didn't … use much. But it is ok. But I think for those who are less privileged, it must be harder.

By making a theoretical relationship between hierarchy of privilege and social absence, Devran is able to consider race and ethnicity along with nationality. Despite the fact that she didn't experience racial or ethnic social absence, she believes there may be a link as such.

I am curious about what social absence meant for Devran and how she

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53 See the previous chapter
experienced it. She suggests that she “simply not talked about her Turkish identification as though [she is] not from Turkey”. She continues:

but as the course progresses you understand your peers and your peers understand you. They get to know your experiences and your perspectives. And, as the course progress, your peers know that you are coming from a different culture, coming from a different society. So, when you have that, it is ok that you can be yourself. It is only through this understanding. So, you start off as you want to fit in and as the course progresses, you connect with your peers. Then, things change. They change in terms of … that … um, that you can bring in your actual identity, your actual self. It means that you are more comfortable for bringing in your own identity to the group. … It doesn't matter what race or gender or nationality or anything else. And, honestly, if there was not such, um … understanding or comfort in group, the whole class would fall apart. […] But there is a comfort level so I was ok.

Devran suggests that she felt comfortable as the course progressed, and consequently she experienced social absence only for a short period of time.

Devran's overall experience suggests that she experienced social absence less overtly compared to those who are identified as non-White. That is, her social absence constituted only one aspect of identification (nationality) as opposed to the combination of three (race, ethnicity, and nationality). For those who are identified as non-White, the implications of social absence are legion:

- Nalini: You know, I felt many times … um, … I was like 'don't you think before you talk? You can hurt others' feelings'. So when they hurt me; when it happens to me, I filter um, I filter what is coming out from me. I mean, you filter yourself. It happens in face-to-face [courses] and it happens in online courses. It always happens. And it is mean. It hurts. When it happens, even [in] online courses, I do not want to participate anymore. So I chose not to participate; I chose not to contribute. It broke down my participation and my learning.

- Sofia: I just don't want to participate but I do anyway. I want to wait until I feel comfortable again but the course is going on and you can't stop posting notes. If I stop participating, I would only punish myself because I can't learn without participating. So I participate without being myself.

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- Johanne: In my understanding, it is about being … Um, it happens because you just cannot take cultural hegemony out; you just can't. So, there you go, you accept this hegemony or get marginalized. You just can't take hegemony out; it is going to happen. What you do is that you always consider what your position is; you always consider who you are. So, you hide yourself and deal with it. If you need to leave some … of your cultural identity out, then you leave it out. You can negotiate it to a certain extent but sometimes you cannot; and you just let it be. Those who are identified as non-White experience disconnection.

For those who self-identify as White or Caucasian, however, social absence has a different meaning. Discursive practices of identification and hierarchy of privilege seem to have no significant effect – if any effect at all – on social absence. Rather, social absence is defined in terms of personal traits.

Jeff believes his “online self is just who [he is]” and there is “nothing missing” from his online self. “If anything”, he adds, “my online self is a politer version of me”. Jeff’s explanation indicates that Discourses of whiteness are manifest in his online self since being polite is regarded as white property (Harris, 1995). He complains that online learning discourse as a writing genre is unnecessarily polite, which according to him “doesn't allow intellectual discussions or fruitful debates but causes rather superficial engagements”. Jeff names this genre “politics of politeness”:

After 3 weeks, I got fed up with that whole online thing. People like 'oh, great post! I totally agree with you' or 'oh such a fantastic note!' or like 'oh thank you so much for your note'. All that being nice thing. You know what I mean? I just got really fed up with that. It is like … online culture shock. Jeff believes that “politics of politeness” affect the ways in which people engage with each other. Dissatisfied and displeased, he perceives the implications of such politics as

54 Note that he refers to the small d discourses: the linguistic aspects of writing. The difference between small d and big D discourses are discussed in the Chapter 2.
I ask Jeff if he experienced or sensed any cultural shock in terms of his race, ethnicity, or nationality. He is negative about my suggestion; however, he acknowledges that “certain individuals from certain cultural groups might feel that way”. He adds “but I don't know enough about how those people might sense that”. Despite Jeff’s earlier contention that nothing is missing from his online self, he later suggests that he did give up certain aspects of himself:

I was asking [myself] 'can I fit in while staying true to myself?'. I did give up a certain amount of um, … I had to give up certain aspects of myself trying to fit in. You just choose not to say those things. But later on I was like … 'nah, just I don't care anymore'. So it is the effects of community, if you like to say it in that way. It was … um, the community was exercising social control over me … um, … both in good and bad ways. (laughs). Do you know what I mean? It made me, um, … more likely to conform to it, in a politer way to say it. I was just being indifferent when I had to conform and when I had to … not to say the things I wanted to say.

Jeff experiences social absence with regards to linguistic genre; yet he believes he conformed and gave up certain aspects of himself in order to fit in. For those who are identified as non-White that I interviewed, social absence is a result of otherness and difference, and it causes disengagement. I am curious whether Jeff sensed or experienced it as such. He answers:

No, I believe it is a personal thing. I just can't stand that language. Um, I am sure others are just fine with it; so, I can't associate it with culture. In terms of disengagement, … I wasn't disengaged but I was indifferent. I was like 'yeah, whatever'

For Jeff, and others identified as White, social absence is not related to cultural background but is largely a personal matter.

Kate, identifies herself as “White/Caucasian”, participates in discussions regularly; she posts her notes early in the week and she is quick to reply to those who
interact with her. “I am on top of everything going on in the course […] I am active, I engage, I interact” she says. I ask her whether she is familiar with the concept of social presence. She confirms that she is, and explains that her sense of “social presence is really high”. She adds as she laughs: “I must be overly present if you like to say it in that way”. For Kate, her online self is her representation. I ask Kate if there are any aspects of herself that are missing from her online self:

Um, I am … I don't think so. I mean, I believe it is the truest representation of myself. If you ask my peers online who I am, the person they describe is going to be me. But … the only thing I can say is that I am a much funnier person in my life. I like to make jokes, especially practical jokes. That's the only thing missing in my online self. I guess I will make more jokes now. (laughs) But, anyway, so my answer is no, there is nothing missing from my online self. Kate's answer suggests that one of her personal traits – making practical jokes – is absent from her online self and, perhaps, her online self is slightly more serious than who she is.

Wondering whether Kate is going to pull any practical jokes on me, I suggest that her online self, according to her explanation, must be “White/Caucasian” since this is how she identifies herself. She replies after she stops laughing: “yes, I guess so. If I am Caucasian, I must be representing Caucasian perspectives; so my online self must be Caucasian”. I am curious whether Kate would address her social presence – or absence – as racial or ethnic identification. I ask her what it means to have Caucasian social presence and her answer is straightforward: “it means to be me”. Kate's answer points out the fact that Discourses of whiteness affect how different individuals experience online learning differently. Identified as White, Kate does not experience any racial or ethnic absence. In other words, identified as White, Discourses of whiteness are invisible for Kate. Thus, she suggests that her “online self must be
Caucasian”. However, as illustrated above, those who are identified as non-White experience the effects of Discourses of whiteness and “deal with it” through their social absence. Furthermore, Kate's answer suggests that Discourses of whiteness normalize Whites and their perspectives as neutral way of being, doing, or saying. Kate does not have to negotiate her social presence or social absence with respect to racial or ethnic dynamics; thus, she suggests that “[her] social presence means to be [herself]”. However, as demonstrated above, those who are identified as non-White negotiate their online self (who can be identified as White or Canadian is delimited) and experience social absence with respect to Discourses of whiteness.

Denise regularly participates in discussions. However, she argues that she “could have participated more but [she] didn't feel connected to her peers much because [she] live[s] at the other end of the world”. She says, “you really feel the physical distance even though the Internet allows you to participate from distance”. Still, she believes that her “online representation is accurate” and that her peers have “a pretty good sense of [her]”. In this sense, Denise suggests that she has a high sense of social presence. I wonder what makes her think that her peers know her well. She answers that she “shares [her] perspectives, so [she] brings in [her] personality”; thus, she suggests “there is nothing [she] hides about [her] personality”. I insist that there may be something that her online peers do not know about her. Denise insists that she is “pretty honest and open about [herself] and if anything comes up”, she continues, she “will bring it up without hesitation”. However, she admits, probably to appease me and change the topic, that she does not talk about her hobbies. She asks:
- Denise: Have you heard this famous Latin phrase: Ego sum, qui sum\textsuperscript{55}

- Murat: (I nod)

- Denise: That's exactly what I think of my online self.
It was evident from my conversation with Denise that she denies – or genuinely does not have – any sense or experience of social absence.

Unlike Denise, Amy, Courtney, and Sydney talk about their sense of social absence; however, they address it in terms of personal traits or daily life routines. Courtney, for example, does not talk about a certain school she worked at. She explains that “it is extremely insignificant, anyway”. Amy teaches English at [a country in Asia]. Her social absence includes her “daily life routines that [she] goes through in [the country she lives]”. She adds that she doesn't “want to bother people with her daily life because nobody wants to hear [that]”. For Sydney, social absence constitutes, “obviously, [her] daily life problems, like problems with family or friends”. Sydney, however, acknowledges “minorities or under-represented groups might have a different answer for that”. I am surprised that Sydney brings power and Discourses to her explanation. I ask her to articulate more:

- Sydney: I don't know but it seems to me … like those people might have hard, um … It might be hard for them to truly represent themselves because they may not feel comfortable enough.

- Murat: Why they may not be comfortable?

- Sydney: Well, it is because … it is very common that … Ok, so, the course is offered in Canada, right? So, if you are not from this … Canadian perspective, then you may not be comfortable enough if you are not coming from that perspective.

- Murat: Why not? What would make them uncomfortable?

\textsuperscript{55} Verbatim: I am who I am
- Sydney: They may feel compelled to … present themselves in ways that they … in ways that are different from who they are.

- Murat: What do you mean compelled to? Can you explain that?

- Sydney: Maybe they feel isolated. I am not sure. I mean … I don't mean that they don't represent themselves truly. They do. I believe, they do. I am just saying that it may not be as easy for them as it is for me. But this [course] is online, right? So, everybody has more chances. And I believe it is the community that allows that. The instructor established this understanding … that um, it is OK to represent yourself. She established that it is OK for everyone to bring their perspectives; it is OK to bring your personality. So, she provided [the understanding] that it is OK to be yourself. Um, it is hard to do it but, um, … it is nice that they have that opportunity now.

While Sydney understands her social absence in terms of “daily life problems”, she positions social presence and social absence in relation to discursive practices for those who are identified as different or other. According to her, such discursive practices are manifest in social presence and social absence for “minorities and under-represented groups”. Sydney provides a discursive approach to social presence and social absence: that, perhaps, those who are identified as White or Caucasian – those who are on top of the hierarchy of privilege – are exempt from the effects of Discourses. Sydney's explanation, however, should be interpreted as evidence for how Discourses of whiteness are invisible to Whites since, according to Foucault (1978), there is no place outside of Discourses and everyone is caught in the web of social, historical, and political structures. Furthermore, Sydney echoes the online education literature that digitally-mediated context liberates people from social power relations. My interviews with those who are identified as non-White suggest otherwise.

Taken together, the discursive practices of identification come into play and affect
individuals' online selves. Regardless of their race, ethnicity, or nationality, individuals I interviewed articulated that their social presence represented themselves. For those who are identified as non-White, however, their online self captures only a partial representation of themselves. I argued that social absence can explain how individuals' utilize their incomplete selves. Everyone I interviewed, except Denise, provided explanations and examples of their social absence. For those who are identified as White, social absence is a matter of personal story, daily life routine, or personal trait that, in their own words, is not significantly related to their learning. For those identified as non-White, social absence is part of their cultural background: race, ethnicity, or nationality. Such effects can have dramatic outcomes for them, such as isolation, disengagement, or veiled acceptance for the purposes of a parsimonious online experience with peers.

7.2. Discursive Subjectivities: Know Thyself, or Stay Anonymous

In this section, I turn to the notion of identification to illustrate how individuals make sense of their online selves. I analyze social presence and social absence as means by which individuals make sense of their digitally-mediated experiences. However, as discussed in the Chapter 3, the current literature disregards social absence by equating identification with social presence. According to this perspective, subject is an autonomous and stable entity, fully endowed with consciousness who is the authentic source of action and meaning. Thus, identification is accepted identical with what has been uttered in CMC. Hall (2001) suggests that this perspective, however, privileges subject over experience for two reasons: it assumes that (1) an individual is always
conscious of himself/herself and (2) that an individual comprehensively understands himself/herself because he/she is the source of the meaning in the first place. Foucault's (1978) notion of discursive practices relocates subject from a privileged position in relation to knowledge and meaning. Foucault argues that subjects may produce particular texts but they operate within the limits of discursive practices; therefore, subjects cannot be fully independent from Power-Knowledge nexus.

With this approach, I not only aim to address identification as situated within Discourses of whiteness but also conceptualize it as a dialogic construction (Butler, 1990). I focus on the link between social absence and digitally-mediated subjectivities to explore how power, privilege, and hierarchy yield unequal learning experiences. In particular, I argue that digitally-mediated subjectivities can provide means to understand the hidden curriculum of online education since subjectivity reflects how the curriculum is lived and experienced: it “emphasizes the everyday experience of the individual and his or her capacity to learn from that experience; to reconstruct experience through thought and dialogue to enable understanding” (Pinar, 2011, p. 2). Consequently, by deconstructing lived experiences and digitally-mediated subjectivities, I reconstruct the link between Discourses and equity in online education.

As discussed earlier, Johanne posits that she does not truly represent herself despite her genuine self-representation. She explains that her representation is half of who she is since her ethnicity was absent from her online self. In order to explain this dilemma (that she is present yet absent at the same time), I used the concept of “double-bind” (Spivak, 2012) to explain how those who are identified as non-White
simultaneously experience two contradictory subject positions.

I am curious what social absence (that her ethnicity is absent in her online self) means for Johanne. She replies:

- Johanne: It is about … Um, you feel uncomfortable; you feel unease about yourself. It um, frustrates you … because you cannot participate or engage because you are not really you.

- Murat: You are not really you? What do you mean by that?

- Johanne: You are different, right? But I am not different to myself. So, I am this Caribbean person to my peers but I am Canadian-Caribbean to myself. So, you play it. Um, play is not the right word, I guess. Let's say … um, … let's say I don't know …

- Murat: OK. So, how can you be not you?

- Johanne: Easy. (laughs) You stay sort of anonymous because it gives you a level of comfort. It makes you feel somewhat comfortable. Let me … let me clarify what I mean by that. You are still not yourself but you feel comfortable enough to participate.

According to Johanne, social absence has direct results on her learning. She claims that she cannot engage with her friends because she cannot be herself. Staying anonymous is the way to handle such uncomfortable social situations. What does Johanne mean by staying anonymous?

- Johanne: I use anonymity as a metaphor. Um, I mean it is like being there physically but … I mean you can't be there physically in online learning but you know what I mean, right? So, it is like being there, like being in online discussions but being insignificant at the same time. I think that's what it is.

- Murat: What do you mean?

- Johanne: It is like being this third person who you are not. […] It is like seeing yourself as two different people […] [It is] like being hybrid. Johanne understands herself as a hybrid person, yet I am not sure whether she refers to the concept of hybrid third person in post-colonial studies. I ask Johanne whether she is
familiar with the concept. She says “no” but she adds that she may have “a pretty good understanding of the concept without knowing it because this is what [she has] been experiencing”. I explain Johanne that in post-colonial research hybridity refers to an “in between identity”, in which “the colonizer” and “the colonized” are mutually dependent on each other to construct a shared culture (Bhabha, 1994). It is inbetweenness without a point of origin or arrival (Ahmed, 2000).

What Johanne explains as “being hybrid” can be best explained through the concept of double-consciousness (Du Bois, 1994), a concept that refers to the notion that Black people are able to see racial events from two perspectives – that of the majority group and their own at the same time. “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (ibid., p.2). The concept of double-consciousness suggests that those who are identified as non-White can see themselves through the perspectives of those who are identified as White. In other words, double-consciousness refers to the ability of non-Whites recognizing the effects of Discourses of whiteness.

I wonder what this “hybrid identification” – or double-consciousness – means to Johanne for her learning. She answers without hesitation:

Oh, I learn. I do. No problem over there. But it is like you are disappointed because it … because you can't stop thinking about that … it could have been much better learning experience. You can't stop thinking that you could have said more or done more. […] For me, it is living with “could haves” or “would haves”. (quotations marks with her hands) Johanne suggests that her hybrid identity has very little – if any – effect on learning the subject matter. However, when I ask Johanne to consider the ways in which she engaged
with her peers, she explains:

- Johanne: It definitely contradicts this idea that online learning provides open access.

- Murat: You mean the anytime-anywhere access?

- Johanne: Yes. Before this online course, I would say yes, online learning supports that flexible access. However, I now say no. The reason is that you may be taking the course online and you can, um, actually access it at anywhere at anytime. But at the same time, there are, … there are specific discussion habits that is originated from the dominant ideology. Johanne's explanation is at the heart of this dissertation work: having access to online learning does not guarantee equitable learning environment since the learning context is shaped by Discourses that its inhabitants are situated in their daily lives. Johanne points out that dominant ideology, or Discourses of whiteness as I argue in this dissertation work, shapes how she experiences online learning. She continues:

You may want to post your thoughts, you may need to respond to a certain individual but they all are structured and not that flexible when it comes to participation. So, you may access it anytime and anywhere at your own convenience but at the same time you are structured by the dominant ideology, by your peers, and by their frame of mind. So it means that you have to be very very very careful at crafting your answer. You are being this third person, this hybrid person like you said. And if you are not playing by the rules, then you are … in trouble (laughs). So, you play by the rule and you are either this hybrid person or you stay anonymous and you participate without any meaning to it. So, either way, your participation is limited.

According to Johanne, Discourses of whiteness determines the ways in which one can be identified in posting or replying to a note. In particular, she says that one has to “play by the rule” and be “very very very careful at crafting [his or her] answer”. Thus, Johanne suggests that Discourses of whiteness not only delimits identifications available to individuals but also delimits the ways in which individuals engage with each other. For her, being identified as different means that she is “hybrid” between who she thinks she is
and who she is identified as by her peers. Accordingly, Johanne's hybridity limits the ways in which she engages with her peers: either (1) she has to accept a hybrid identification and be a person who she is not or (2) she denies hybrid identification but stays anonymous and engages superficially.

Johanne's explanation of how she experienced her *difference* reveals the ways in which Discourses of whiteness create differentiated pedagogical implications for those who are identified as non-White. Johanne's experience of the lived curriculum and her understanding of her difference have many similarities with those who are not positioned on top of the hierarchy of privilege. In particular, anonymity was commonly associated in my interviews with social absence.

Social absence means disconnection for Sofia. She believes that she is being stereotyped and that her perspectives are devalued; therefore, she articulates that the communication process breaks down. I ask Sofia whether social presence has any effects on her learning. Similar to Johanne, Sofia quickly rejects any negative effects. She adds: “You can learn. It is not a problem. Everything is online: readings are online, discussion is online. Just login and read and learn”. Sofia reiterates the online education literature. First, she addresses the curriculum as a matter of subject matter that needs to be transmitted. Second, she suggests that learning is a matter of access to the digitally-mediated environment. I remind Sofia of one of our earlier conversations, where she argued that there is a tension between “how much to reveal of [herself] as opposed to how much to stay anonymous”. I suggest for her to consider her previous statement in relation to her participation. Sofia is now able to address the curriculum as lived
experience and she articulates how she experienced social absence:

What it means for participation is a whole other story. It means that you have no choice but follow the path that is already … put there for you. Sofia, similar to Johanne, argues that Discourses of whiteness determines the ways in which people engage with each other. She continues and explain how Discourses of whiteness affect her identification:

People had an idea of what it means to be Latina. I mean they think they do but they don't. But they think they do and they expect you to fit in that image that they have for you. So, this is what I meant by staying anonymous. If you don't fit in that image, you are anonymous. I am surprised how Sofia and Johanne explain social absence and anonymity very similarly. They both understand their social absence in relation to who they are not, and use anonymity to explain how they utilized their social absence. They both have double-consciousness of their identification at the intersection of who they are and who they are accepted as. She continues:

- Sofia: So, anonymity gives you more chances to participate.
- Murat: Interesting. Can you explain to me why or how?
- Sofia: Because if you don't use that anonymity, you can't participate because you can't be someone else. I am not the person [that] they stereotype; I can't be that person. […] So, I stay anonymous when I am stereotyped but still want to participate.
- Murat: So, anonymity is something positive for you?
- Sofia: Um, yes and no. I mean it is not all that positive. I mean, … think about it; It is not positive because um, the whole idea of anonymity is bad. So, it is the best you can do.

Sofia's explanation of anonymity is intriguing. For Sofia, anonymity is both positive and negative. In a sense, Sofia has two perspectives on her anonymity: anonymity as an

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56 Similarly, online education literature has long considered anonymity both as positive and negative. As discussed in the Chapter 3, studies that focus on negative consequences highlight de-individualization and de-contextualization of learning while studies that focus on positive
opportunity to participate (positive) and anonymity as being stereotypified as who she is not (negative).

I ask Sofia whether this is what she meant in one of our earlier conversations that “she was absent although [she] was present”. She says:

I guess so. I guess you can say that. It means that you can participate without being yourself. It means that you know you are different. And, it doesn't matter how many years you spend here, you will still be that different person because that different person has already been defined; and it never changes. [pause] It means that you are not from here, you are not White or not Canadian. And, it also means that you can be Canadian but you can't be White. So, I fit in that definition, so I am accepted as different. This is why I need anonymity.

Sofia's experience of lived curriculum suggests that she understands her subjectivity in relation to her social absence and to race and nationality. Accordingly, she understands and accepts that she is different from those who are identified as White or Caucasian. For Sofia, anonymity is the way in which she can participate in and define discussion as a discursive subject.

Nalini's social absence is related to her ethnicity and cultural background. “Parts of me were missing” she says. She reiterates ideology, stereotypification, anonymity, and level of comfort. For Nalini, anonymity can be a good strategy to deal with social absence:

You have a picture and you have a name next to it but at the same time, they are not really seeing you. So, you kind of get to control how you represent yourself online. But online, um, you still have to be careful about what you are saying.

Nalini's explanation reveals an important link between anonymity and Discourses of whiteness. For Nalini, anonymity is a way to “deal with” Discourses of whiteness; that consequences underscores the liberating effects of CMC. Sofia’s explanation, however, is drastically different. See, Spears and Lea (1994) for more examples.
is, a strategy “to control” how to represent herself. Yet, anonymity does not provide a full protection from Discourses whiteness. She continues:

You have to be careful about yourself and how to present yourself because you will be stereotypified no matter what. So, anonymity can be a good thing because, um, even you have a picture or name, you are still … um, you are still not seen. So you can be more comfortable because it might help you, um, (pause). If you don't want to clash with the ideology, anonymity gives you a certain level of comfort.

For Nalini, similar to Johanne and Sofia, anonymity is double-consciousness: anonymity as an opportunity to have a relative control on her online representation and anonymity as being stereotypified as who she is not.

I am curious about the link that Nalini suggests between ideology, anonymity, and level of comfort. Nalini's answer reveals how Discourses whiteness effect the ways in which she experience online learning with respect to her difference:

They are linked tightly, I suppose. Here is how I can best describe it. So, ideology sets the tone, right? We are in Canada and we have Canadian ideology. It is about who is Canadian and who can be Canadian and who cannot. And it is also about race, and gender, right? And once you have that background understanding, … you have certain expectations from people. Like, if you fit in, then you are OK. So the question is how you can fit in to those expectations. For me, it is through anonymity. I feel um, … I fit in when I am anonymous. And it all comes down to the level of comfort. Right? Once you feel you fit in, you are comfortable.

Nalini's discursive approach to her online experience echoes the core themes of this chapter. She situates her online self between ideology – what I call Discourses – on one hand and identification on the other. For Nalini, anonymity is a strategy to control her online representation.

I am interested in understanding how anonymity is related to her participation. She says:

It means that you accept that some part of yourself is missing; yet you still
participate. You can't stop participating because it is the only way you exist in online learning environments, right? If I don't write anything, there is no Nalini over there, right? So, I have to … so, I keep writing notes and I participate. But sometimes I am there as Nalini, talking about myself and talking about my life and my perspectives and my beliefs and um, I … I talk about anything I want to. But sometimes I am not as much Nalini as I want to be. (laughs). I sort of filter out what I write about myself.

Nalini follows Johanne and Sofia in her concern that parts of who she wants to be online are missing. She posits that the quantity of her participation is not affected at all. However, the quality of her participation may be different in that she filters herself for purposes of anonymity. For Nalini, there is a direct link between her learning process and her social absence. Her final remarks clarify how she makes sense of her online self in relation to her social absence:

- Nalini: So, if you look at the course, you will see me there, participating. But if you carefully read it, there are some instances where … where I have a few frivolous notes. This is where I was anonymous. I would not participate otherwise. So what happens is that you end up fitting in at the expense of filtering yourself to an extent. You know what I mean? For me, it was my ethnicity. Like I told you before, I was Indian, not Canadian. And that's it. I had no choice; I had no other identity. So I was being Indian in order to fit in. I can't do anything else, right? So, I guess, um, […] what I can tell is that there were two different Nalini: one was me and the other one was the Indian one. So, my online self was in between those two. Does it make sense?

- Murat: (I just nod)

Nalini defines the dialogic construction of identification. The self is comprised of a multiple consciousness that is shared with others. It is constructed through our personal and social experience (Butler, 1990). Our experience, however, is complicated: “It seems we share experience but that experience is always inflected by these separate locations, in historical time and geographical place, and by our distinctive experience of these” (Pinar, 2011, p. 5). Nalini’s online self, therefore, is constructed by the interplay between how
she identifies herself and Discourses of whiteness.

Taken together, identification is composed of social presence and social absence in digitally-mediated environments. That is, identification includes not only how individuals represent themselves but also how they do not represent themselves. Social absence has three significant impacts on those who are identified as non-White. First, it affects how those who are identified as non-White make sense of their online selves. In particular, individuals I interviewed articulated that they experience double-bind (Spivak, 2012) or double-consciousness (Du Bois, 1994) – or “hybridity” in Johanne's own words: their online self is the combination of how they identify themselves and as whom they are identified. Second, being identified as different leads to anonymity. Those who are identified as Non-White posit that they stay anonymous when they utilize their difference in discussions. They argue that anonymity gives them opportunities to control their online representation and deal with stereotypification that would otherwise contribute to others understanding them as they are not. Third, anonymity leads to rather superficial engagements. Those who are identified as non-White assert that, when they stay anonymous, they do not bring in their perspectives and experiences but simply make trivial contributions. Though the impact on participation quantity may not be noticeable, the quality of such engagements may suffer – even though those who are identified as non-White posit that they learn the subject-matter. In sum, social absence – difference and otherness – creates differentiated learning experiences, particularly for those who are not positioned on top of the hierarchy of privilege.
7.3. Conclusion

Identification is an ongoing reconstruction of self; it requires articulation, embodiment, personification, acknowledgement, and engagement. For education, identification includes the ways in which individuals make sense of their pedagogical experiences (Nasir & Hand, 2008). In order to understand how individuals make sense of their online selves, I illustrated how identifications are constructed in digitally-mediated contexts with respect to Discourses of whiteness. In particular, I conceptualized identification as a relational concept that is composed of social presence and social absence; as such, identification is a dialogic construction that is situated within Discourses. Accordingly, I analyzed how individuals articulated their own identification in relation to hierarchy of privilege, and otherness.

The findings suggest that while those who are identified as White understand their online self as their social presence, those who are identified as non-White are caught in the double-bind of their social presence and social absence. This means that discursive practices of identification have implications on how individuals experience online learning: those who are identified as non-White understand themselves as cultural others. In other words, non-Whites experience the lived curriculum of online education as cultural others. Cultural otherness is not inconsequential but has implications for the rules of engagement.

For those who are identified as non-White, cultural otherness means that they have to use anonymity\(^57\) to handle uncomfortable consequences or stereotypification. The

\(^{57}\) Early CMC researchers used “selective self-representation” (p.19) or “self-censorship” (p.20) to analyze identity and its relationship to anonymity (Walther, 1996). They argued that “the point is not to dispute the fact that social information is cut out or reduced by CMC. More crucial is what
result of anonymity is not reflected in terms of quantity of participation (notes read and written) but in terms of superficial engagement. The findings suggest that discursive practices of identification perpetuate differentiated educational experiences for those who are identified as non-White.

These differentiated learning processes and outcomes for different cultural groups are closely related to and intertwined with macro-level societal Discourses. The next chapter explains such links.

sort of information is cut out and what is left in” (Spears & Lea, 1994, p.450). The anonymity I suggest here parallels such early accounts; yet it radically differs from them because I conceptualize anonymity as the direct result of cultural practices as opposed to affordance of technology.
Chapter 8. Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Discourses of Whiteness, Social Absence, and Inequity

Lauded by Liberal, Positivist, Determinist, and Fordist perspectives, online education has been promoted as an affordable solution to problems surrounding schooling and public education. Indeed, the literature thoroughly documents that local and federal governments, public school boards, and higher education institutions have been promoting online courses in their commitment to accommodating public needs, widening access to materials, sharing intellectual resources, and reducing costs (T. Anderson, 2008a). Such perspectives contributed to researchers assuming that effective group work and community-building "just happen" in online courses; that individuals come together as an inclusive group where diversity enriches the learning context. Unfortunately, the same research has largely ignored how such group work may perpetuate inequitable learning situations. In broad outline, I have portrayed the concrete ways in which such diversity can also be the very reason that Discourses reproduce unequal learning conditions in digitally-mediated environments. However, though my work starkly contrasts current understandings in online education literature, this reproduction theory\(^58\) is hardly new (for example, see: Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Bernstein, 1977; Young, 1971).

The reproduction theory can be traced back to Durkheim (1956), who argued that social reproduction is an important dynamic to secure the stability (more specifically, the division of labour) of a modern society, in which individuals assume their positions within the social structure. Durkheim suggested that schools provide that stability by socializing individuals into

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\(^58\) Social – or cultural – reproduction theory argues that schools are not institutions of equal opportunity but mechanisms for perpetuating social inequalities to preserve dominant cultural groups' advantage (Apple, 2004).
the status quo. Pierre Bourdieu is another important scholar who focused on the concept of cultural reproduction. Bourdieu (1990) discussed the role of education in a modern society and argued that the education system was used to reproduce the culture of the dominant class in order for the dominant class to preserve their power. Bourdieu’s work was mainly focused on the reproduction of disadvantages and inequalities that are caused by cultural reproduction in schools. According to Bourdieu, inequalities are produced through the education system and other social institutions.

Cultural reproduction theory argues that inequity is reproduced through the existing mechanisms by which continuity of cultural experience is sustained across time: cultural values, practices, beliefs, and norms. In short, inequity is reproduced through Discourses. In this sense, public education and schooling are among the main mechanisms of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Public education acts as an agent of cultural reproduction not through the scientific curriculum, but through the hidden curriculum (Apple, 2004). It is argued that identification is one of the primary means by which cultural reproduction occurs in educational contexts (Giroux, 2011; Holland et al., 1998). This dissertation work follows such an understanding and expands that perspective to describe learning conditions in digitally-mediated environments.

Cultural reproduction theory provides a simple yet powerful explanation for the unequal distribution of learning opportunities. This dissertation illustrates that, based on their identification, individuals experience differentiated learning conditions and opportunities within an online community. How exactly, then, does identification reproduce inequitable learning conditions? In particular, if – as the literature of online education suggests – the
digitally-mediated context is a neutral space, and if anytime-anywhere affordance allows individuals to access the environment, what are the ways in which identification reproduces differentiated learning conditions? At the center of these questions is the cultural explanation of community. I do not regard community as mere communication among participants, where individuals simply learn with and from others' differences. Rather, I accept it as a cultural practice that determines who can speak with what authority, shaping subjectivities by delimiting the positions that individuals can assume. Through the process of identification, therefore, individuals understand their difference and behave accordingly within their community. And, through this cultural reproduction, inequity seems natural and inevitable.

In what follows, I shall draw on the analysis in the previous chapters and explain in detail how discourses of identification operate to produce inequitable learning experiences.

8.1. Neutral Environment, or Material Realities: Online Self

Understanding how the digitally-mediated context is formed and how identities are created are the preliminary steps towards understanding the discourses of identification. This understanding necessarily depends on conceptualizing the online context as a terrain of cultural and political struggle (Trend, 2001). That is, it depends on addressing the context as a dynamic place, where daily life materiality is manifested in online selves. In digitally-mediated contexts, daily life manifests itself through performing online selves.

Writing oneself into an online being can be quite challenging. It involves more than writing a few words and pairing that text with a picture. It is a negotiation of the self. Thus, much consideration and thought can be involved in how to present oneself. “It is just like you are introducing yourself for the first time … [and] it is your personality that you have to keep up to
the end of the course”, Johanne says. Presenting one's online self is tantamount to being alive in online learning environments; it allows people to embody their online existence and create their online selves, filling the absence left by physical bodies.

When people create their online-selves, they do not create a personality that is wholly different from who they are or what they do in their daily lives (Hardey, 2002); rather, they reproduce themselves in a digital environment (Walker, 2000). They derive from the very same material and symbolic resources in which their daily life is situated. Courtney says, “I am who I am and my online self is the same”. Similarly, Sydney articulates that she wanted to be known as who she actually is: “I wanted them to get a general sense of who I am … like … like they would know me in a face-to-face environment”. Through profile pages, therefore, the digitally-mediated context becomes embodied, where the social, political, and historical realities of its inhabitants are reproduced. Indeed, as Johanne suggests, online selves set the tone for the context, as well as for individuals: they define who one is, is going to be, and wants to be in a digitally-mediated environment.

Once the context is socially constructed, individuals negotiate their identifications and try to impress each other in order to portray themselves as good students. What it means to be a good student is not an open-ended question but is defined by Discourses of whiteness: being a good student is a White property. Those who are identified as White are accepted as intelligent and successful while those who are identified as non-White have to convey the impression that they are as good, as intelligent, as successful, and as desirable as Whites are believed to be. Therefore, by highlighting their achievements, traits, desires, hobbies, and qualities in their profile pages, the participants reproduce their online selves in line with the White norms of
beauty and intelligence. This does not mean that non-White people are unintelligent or undesirable nor does it mean that they want to be seen as White. Rather, it means that by highlighting their achievements and success in line with the Discourses of whiteness, those who are identified as non-White try to claim their legitimacy, their right to be in the online course. Through impression management, those who are identified as non-White negotiate their status of belonging to their community.

Online selves are created through what Butler (1990) calls performative repetitions: cultural construction of self through the repetition of performances. The performing online-self not only embodies people in a digitally-mediated context but also situates and contextualizes them in relation to those around them. Therefore, the performance of self in digitally-mediated environments reproduces macro-level societal Discourses – Discourses of whiteness to be precise – under which people perform what it means to be “a good student”.

8.2. Open-Flexible Access, or Discourses of Identification: Difference and Otherness

The nexus between macro-level societal Discourses and identification constitutes the meanings that are available and the roles that can be assumed. It determines what is thinkable, sayable, and doable in a given context (Foucault, 1978). Thus, the outcomes of discursive practices can never be equal or neutral. In other words, different individuals experience discursive practices differently at any given time, and the implications of those discursive practices necessarily vary as well. In the two courses I studied, discursive practices of identification create a hierarchy of privilege that is shaped by Discourses of whiteness.

Discursive identification, then, determines how individuals are positioned in relation to
each other. Regarded as White property, intelligence, privilege, and positive discrimination are
given to those that are identified as White. For example, Denise, who identifies herself as
“Anglo/White/Caucasian”, argues that “certain people are entitled for certain privileges” and she
adds that her “privilege is based on [her] cultural background, particularly [her] ethnicity”. Jeff,
who identifies as “White”, articulates that his race and ethnicity afford him positive
discrimination. Privilege, then, is granted to those who are identified as White; thus, power and
status quo are racialized. In other words, privilege is equated with being Caucasian. Such
discursive identification has direct consequences for how both Whites and non-Whites are
positioned in relation to each other: those who are identified as White are on top of the hierarchy
and those who are identified as “non-White and all the others and immigrants” – as Denise puts
it – are somehow positioned below. Discursive practices of identification, therefore, enforce an
implicit understanding that those who are not on top of the hierarchy of privilege are somehow
different. In other words, while those who are identified as White are accepted as neutral
Canadians, those who are identified as non-White are accepted as different or other.

Diversity is a central concept for understanding how difference or otherness is understood
and utilized. Talking about diversity as personal difference allows White people to disregard
discursive practices that preserve their status quo within such diverse groups. For those who are
identified as White, diversity means different perspectives that non-White people bring to
discussion, as Kate puts it. For those who are identified as non-White, however, diversity means
“the perspectives and experiences that [they] bring in”. As Nalini, a second generation Canadian
who identifies herself as Indian-Canadian, puts it, it is her role to enrich and diversify the process
of learning. Discursive practices of identification, then, determine the role that those who are
identified as non-White are supposed to assume within the hierarchy of privilege: they are the *curriculum* from which others can learn (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). In other words, regarded as a White property, being a neutral Canadian is associated with those who are identified as White. Thus, non-Whites' roles are determined by Discourses of whiteness: those who are identified as non-White are supposed to “enrich” the discussion and “diversify” White people's learning experiences.

Taken together, those who are identified as different or other believe that they are identified as such because the culture they live in predetermines how they can be identified. It is a common understanding that those who are identified as non-White are *displaying* their difference because they don't want to be isolated due to a cultural struggle.

**8.3. Equality or Equity: Rules of Engagement**

Being identified as other or different is closely related to how individuals make sense of their online experiences. Considered in terms of educational equity, how otherness is enacted, negotiated, and valued is important for understanding the difference between equality and equity. As I have argued in Chapter 2, equality refers to comparisons of quantity while equity is concerned with subjective quality (Esmonde, 2009a). Thus, how individuals make sense of their *otherness or difference* can explain how identification can create inequitable learning context even when the quantity of participation is relatively equal among individuals.

In order to address identification as a dialogic construction that is defined and delimited by Discourses of Whiteness, I conceptualize identification as inextricably interwoven between social presence and social absence. That is, one's online self relates not only to how individuals represent themselves but also to how they do not represent themselves.
For those who are identified as White, identification and hierarchy of privilege seem to have no significant effect – if any – on their social absence. For them, social absence is defined in terms of personal traits. For those who are identified as non-White, however, social absence has a different meaning; their social absence is part of their cultural background: race, ethnicity, or nationality. For example, Johanne posits that she does not believe she represented herself truly since her ethnicity was absent. She argued that her online self is only half of herself. Thus, for those who are identified as non-White, social absence is the means by which they are identified as different from Whites. Being caught in White interpretative lenses, those who are identified as non-White experience their online selves from two oppositional subject positions. That is, they experience their social presence and social absence as two contradictory subject positions that simultaneously interact to construct their online selves. In other words, their online self is a double-bind (Spivak, 2012).

In order to “deal with” this double-bind, those who are identified as non-White have to negotiate their online selves with respect to Discourses of whiteness. For those who are identified as non-White, identification is a tension between stereotypification on one hand and anonymity on the other. In either case, those who are identified as non-White have to identify themselves as who they are not when they engage with their peers. For example, Gulsum postulates that she cannot share much with her peers because she hides her race and country of origin. As Johanne says, those who are identified as non-White have to “play by the rule” and be “very very very careful” at negotiating their social presence and social absence. Such negotiation has dramatic outcomes, including isolation, disengagement, or veiled acceptance for the purposes of a parsimonious online experience with peers. Consequently, the tension between
stereotypification and anonymity is a delicate balance that those who are identified as non-White have to figure out in order to claim their right to be included in the online learning community. Deconstructing lived experiences and identification reconstructs the link between Discourses of whiteness and equity in online education. One way to understand this link is through an appreciation of how social presence and social absence are racialized with respect to Discourses of whiteness. In particular, being a good student and being a neutral Canadian as a property of whiteness is reproduced in online learning environments through the racialized understanding of social presence and social absence. By racializing who can be identified as good, successful, intelligent, desirable, and deserving, social presence and social absence not only secure the property of Whites but also reproduce the colonial and white-supremacist understanding of Canada as an imagined nation of Whites.

8.4. Cultural Hegemony: Unequal Learning Context

Hegemony refers to dominance, especially by one state or social group over others. Hegemony, particularly cultural hegemony, is associated with the work of Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. “Refusing to separate culture from systemic relations of power, or politics from the production of knowledge and identities, Gramsci redefined how politics bore down on everyday life through the force of its pedagogical practices, relations, and discourses” (Giroux, 2011, p. 48). Departing from the classical Marxist thought that ruling class maintains control over the working classes through direct force, Gramsci (2000) refuted the idea that domination is maintained by physical force. Instead, he suggested that hegemony is retained primarily through culture as the subordinate groups adopt the dominant group's values, beliefs, and perspectives. Gramsci (2000) argued that Discourses are assumed to be natural and thus have a powerful
impact on shaping everyday interactions. For Gramsci, cultural hegemony is achieved when subordinates take daily inequities for granted and as such think and act in ways that are consistent with the status quo. It is through normalization and acceptance that hegemony is reproduced. Gramsci’s work provides a theoretical framework for understanding how hegemony is lived through schooling and public education.

In the field of education, cultural hegemony refers to the idea that curriculum is not neutral but serves the interests of one social group over the others; in particular, it conveys White, male, middle-class, and heterosexual worldviews (Baszile, 2010). With the reconceptualism movement, the concept of the hidden curriculum is widely used to explain the reproduction of cultural hegemony and social inequity (Pinar, 2004). The hidden curriculum subtly (through students' day-to-day experience of social life) yet deliberately (through policy makers at school boards or at local and federal governments) maintains the dominant groups' privilege and creates inequity that is based upon cultural differences (Apple, 2004).

The relationship between hidden curriculum and the concept of difference is at the center of many theoretical and pedagogical approaches that work towards equity and social justice (Trifonas, 2003). Yet, online education research has idealized the concept of cultural difference and narrowly addressed it for the sake of promoting its liberal, positivist, Fordist, and determinist perspectives. In order to understand online education for equity and social justice via the recognition of cultural difference, Discourses of whiteness “must be addressed within power relations that exploit its subversive potential, while not erasing the historical and political role it plays in shaping other racialized identities and social differences” (Giroux, 1997, p. 299). Thus,

59 The reconceptualist movement understands the school curriculum as a form of political praxis. Its aim is to understand, not just implement or evaluate, the curriculum.
there is a need to develop a community of difference: “the solidarity of a community of difference rather than a simple celebration of a community of differences perceived to exist, more or less, independently of each other as the multiple sites of isolated or marginalized subjectivities” (Trifonas, 2003, p. 3).

In this dissertation, I illustrated how the hidden curriculum of online education maintains cultural hegemony and creates an inequitable learning context through cultural differences. When equity is considered as a more fair learning context, identification becomes means by which the hidden curriculum operates to produce inequitable learning experiences. In particular, individuals experience differentiated and unequal online learning conditions based on their identification. Macro-level societal Discourses – precisely, Discourses of whiteness – manifest themselves within digitally-mediated environments through online selves (Chapter 5). Online selves create a discursive space, in which individuals are positioned within a hierarchical system based on their identification (Chapter 6). Identified as different or other, those who are identified as non-White experience the “double-bind”, resulting in superficial or peripheral engagements (Chapter 7).

Many students continue to experience inequity through the digital divide. Yet, educational inequity still exists even when one has crossed the digital divide and has access to digital resources. Access does not solve nor provide equitable learning conditions. Equity is a continuous process that requires awareness of the material realities of students with different cultural backgrounds, as well as a commitment to solidarity through diversity and difference.
8.5. Last Words: Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Studies

In this dissertation work, I illustrated how students live the curriculum of online education with respect to issues of equity and social justice. I defined equity as the fair distribution of opportunities to learn within a more fair learning context, and analyzed how the hidden curriculum of online education maintains cultural hegemony and creates inequitable or unfair learning experiences through cultural differences. I argued that such inequitable learning experiences are not random acts but rather represent the existing inequities in society at large through cultural reproduction. However, the findings should be considered in relation to the limitations of the study.

The findings represent those from a small population from two graduate level online courses offered by a prestigious Canadian university. The small sample size limits my ability to provide more in-depth analysis of how each cultural group may experience such inequities. I was able to collect data from only one international student, two permanent residents of Canada, one Caribbean-Canadian, one Indian-Canadian, and one Middle Eastern-Canadian. Thus, while I was able to analyze how these individuals experience online education with respect to colonial Discourses, I was very limited in my analysis of how and in what ways these individuals may have differentiated learning experiences compared to each other. Furthermore, a major drawback in the findings is that I was not able to recruit any student who self-identified as Black or Asian. Future work should provide more empirical data from larger and more diverse populations.

Collecting data from graduate level courses is both a benefit and a drawback. As graduate students, the individuals I studied have a good grasp of relevant theories and concepts, which allowed me to discuss in detail the issues of equity and social justice. Indeed, as the
transcriptions of interviews represent, individuals were quick to talk about concepts such as the
digital gap, cultural hegemony, and dominant Discourses. Yet, such a population represents a
challenge to study inequity with respect to privilege since these individuals, including me as a
researcher, are all privileged to a certain extent. Thus, studying privilege within a population that
is itself privileged represents limited – and necessarily privileged – perspectives. In particular, I
was not able to analyze inequity with respect to social class. However, as I have argued earlier,
online courses are becoming widely used by public school boards and higher education
institutions. Therefore, future studies should aim to understand equity in different online courses
at different schools and grades since such population would offer significant differences from the
population represented in this work.

A major goal of this dissertation work was to challenge the current understandings of
equity in the field of online education and illustrate how and in what ways inequitable learning
experiences can occur in online education. I argued that when equity is considered as a fairer
learning context, identification becomes means by which the hidden curriculum operates to
produce inequitable learning experiences. I suggested that a community of difference may be a
means to foster more equitable learning conditions. Future work should aim to develop the
concept of the community of difference and try to understand how cultural differences can
become a means to create a sense of solidarity for equity and social justice instead of serving as a
point of discrimination.

I hope that the findings of my research impact the literature of online education by
sparking thought, controversy, debate, and further research on this topic.
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Appendices
Appendix A: The Questionnaire

1. Personal Description

1.1. What is your name and last name?

1.2. Are you a PhD or Masters student? What is your year of study (i.e. 1st year, 2nd year)?

1.3. How many courses (either online or face-to-face) have you taken so far in your program?

1.4. Can you please list a few of your research interests?

1.5. Can you please list your previous degrees with the name of institutions and countries you get them?

1.6. Are you a teacher?

1.6.1. If yes, where, what subjects and which grades do you teach?

1.6.2. If no, what do you do for living?

1.7. Can you please tell me something interesting about you?

2. Background Information

2.1. Please provide a few sentences to describe yourself.

2.2. Please provide a few sentences to describe your family background (i.e. where were you born? Are your parents native to the country you were born?)

2.3. How would you describe your racial or ethnic background?

2.4. Where were you born?

2.5. Are you an immigrant in Canada or child of an immigrant parent(s)?

2.6. Where were your parents born? How would you describe your parents' ethnicity?

2.7. Which city/town/place do you call home?
2.8. What is your gender?

2.9. What is your first language? Do you speak other languages (other than English or your first language)?

2.10. How would you describe your class status? (i.e., middle class, higher-middle class, or working class)

2.11. Is there any additional information about you that you want to share with me?
Appendix B: Interview Protocols

Appendix B-1: Interview 1 - OISE and Online learning experience

• Why did you choose OISE for your studies?
• How many online courses have you taken so far?
• There is a prevailing assumption that online courses allow people to take courses at any time and any where. Do you agree with this statement? Can you provide a few sentences to explain your answer?
• In terms of participation and learning, are there any fundamental differences between online courses and face-to-face courses?
• What has been the most important learning moment of this course for you?
• Do you think you are learning what is most meaningful to you?
• Can you share with me a moment in an online course that has impacted you?
• Can you share with me a moment in an online course when you disagreed with your peers?
• How did you articulate your disagreement?
• How did you draw from your own experience or perspectives when you engage with someone in disagreement?
• What types of reactions did you get?
• How did your social and cultural background mattered when you disagreed with your peers?

• Can you name a few of your peers that you liked or preferred working with?

• Can you briefly describe why did you choose these people?

• What sort of impact do they have on your learning?

• Do you think you were able to freely and faithfully represent yourself or your perspectives?

• Do you think your peers really know who you are?

• Do you think your peers really know about your social and cultural background?

• Which important aspects of your social and cultural background were absent from the course? Why?

• Do you think your online presence was an accurate reflection of yourself?
Appendix B-2: Interview 2 – Online Self

- Can you please explain how you were feeling or what you were thinking when you were writing up your bio or profile page?

- How did you want to be known as or seen by others when you were writing up your profile?

- What was the most important thing for you in this process of representing yourself? What were you trying to convey through your profile?

- Why did you choose your particular picture – the picture you uploaded to the system as your own picture – over anything else?

- When you were answering the questions in your bio or profile, were you thinking of how other would react to you?

- Have you read others' profile or bio before or after you posted your note?

- Have you ever edited your profile after you posted it? If so, what information you added or changed; and why?

- What sort of information were you looking for when you were reading others' profile?

- Can you please elaborate what it means to represent yourself in an online learning environment?
Appendix B-3: Interview 3 - Background and Learning

- How and in what ways has your background shaped your learning experience?

- How and in what ways has being a [cultural background here] shaped your experience with your peers?

- Would you take other online courses or recommend taking online courses to individuals similar to you?

- Does the cultural background of your peers matter to you? Similarly, do you think your peers engaged with you in ways dependent on your cultural background?

- If the participation was anonymous (instead of showing names and avatars), how would your participation be different?
Appendix C - Informed Consent

Dear Student:

This year, I am conducting a study, investigating how Discourses affect social, cultural, and pedagogical activities in online learning environments. In order to understand how equitable learning practices can be created and sustained, I aim to identify how inequity is reproduced in online learning practices.

This is a consent form inviting you to participate in my study. Participation to this research is voluntarily and the total time required will be about two hours. If you wish to participate, I will collect data from you in three different ways:

1. I will collect computer-generated tracking data about your activities in the online learning environment. You do not have to do anything for this option since this type of data are collected and generated by the online learning environment. If you wish to participate, you give me permission to collect your data.

2. I will ask you to fill out a questionnaire about yourself and your background. The questionnaire consists open-ended or short answer questions. The total time required for this task is about half an hour.

3. I will interview you at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the study. In these interviews, I will be collecting data about how you perceived yourself and your peers in the course, how you experienced the course, and how you made sense of the course in relation to Discourses. Each interview will take about half an hour and will be conducted face-to-face or online, depending on your preference.
Please note that I will be collecting personal data about you. This type of data is very important for my research because it is only through analyzing how individuals and their experiences are bounded by and subject to Discourses of race, gender, and class that we can understand how inequity may be reproduced in online learning environments. However, as you expect, no personally identifiable information will be published and your anonymity and confidentiality will be protected. Your personal data will be represented through pseudonyms and I will be careful to ensure that you cannot be identified based on personal attributes. Furthermore, none of your data will be made available to anyone. It will be held strictly confidential and destroyed within five years.

You have the right not to participate in this research. Even though you give me your consent now, you still have the right to withdraw your consent at any time you want. Simply, just send me an email clearly stating that you do not want to participate to study anymore. In this case, your data will be immediately discarded and none of your data will be used in my study. Whether you participate or not, rest assured that your decision in no way affects your performance, participation, or grades in the course.

As a participant in the study, you have the right to receive a copy of the research findings. Once the research is complete, I will provide to you a small pamphlet by email outlining the study’s findings. In addition, you will be able to download the full report for further reading.

Should you have any further questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact:
1. The researcher: murat.oztok@utoronto.ca

2. The Office of Research Ethics: ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Please select one of the two options below.

[ ] I wish to participate in the research as outlined and I give my consent.

[ ] I do not wish to participate in the research and do not give my consent.
The first email

Dear Student:

This year, I am conducting a study, investigating how Discourses affect social, cultural, and pedagogical activities in online learning environments. In order to understand how equitable learning practices can be created and sustained, I aim to identify how inequity is reproduced in online learning practices.

I think it is useful for you to participate in this research. Specifically, since you will reflect on your insights about group work, participation, and collaboration in relation to race, gender, and class Discourses, you may become more conscious about how such Discourses implicitly affect every aspect of your educational experience. Such consciousness, then, may inform your decisions when you navigate through the education system and beyond.

Participation to this research is voluntarily and the total time required will be about two hours. If you wish to participate, please simply respond to this email stating your decision of participation. Then, I will provide you a link to OISE’s web survey tool to gather your consent of participation.

Please note that you are not consenting me yet. You will be provided more information about the research and conditions of participation.

Thank you,

Murat Oztok
Dear NAME HERE,

Thank you for deciding to participate in my research. The link below will take you to the OISE’s web survey tool, where I will be providing you more information about my research, the conditions of participation, and your rights as a participant.

[LINK HERE]

Thank you,

Murat Oztok
Appendix E: Demographics of the Two Online Courses and Profile of Participants

Appendix E-1: Demographics of the two online courses (Self-Declared Data)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>International</td>
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<tr>
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Appendix E-2: Profile of participants (Self-Declared Data)

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