THE H.E.R.O.S OF ONLINE EDUCATION: WHAT MAKES STUDENTS SUCCEED DESPITE THE ODDS?

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ABSTRACT

The study of psychological capital (PsyCap) is prevalent in organizations globally and is part of the movement towards attaining positive organizational behavior. This concept is slowly being transferred to the education realm with teachers becoming more mindful of students’ inner H. E. R. O. (Hope, Efficacy, Resilience, and Optimism). Little research, however, has been conducted upon the PsyCap of university students in fully online programs. The purpose of this study was to determine what aspects of students’ psychological capital lead to success despite adversity. An exploratory qualitative methodology was used to interview five participants from the United States, Canada, Africa, France, and Serbia in order to determine whether or not PsyCap influenced their drive to complete their online graduate programs of study at the University of Liverpool. This convenience sample yielded compelling results for future research and indicated similarities in hope and efficacy as well as differences in gender regarding participant resilience and approach to challenges. Further research is needed to determine whether gender does play a critical role in online students’ PsyCap, especially resilience. Another revealing result was that the participants credited their online instructors for motivating and discouraging them based on their feedback, grading, and overall communication. This points to a possible relationship between the students’ PsyCap and the three online teaching presences in communities of inquiry (cognitive, teaching, and social).

Keywords: psychological capital, PsyCap, hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism, online students, Community of Inquiry (CoI).

INTRODUCTION

The demand for online courses continues to increase rapidly as more students choose to complete a degree online (Stone & Springer, 2019). With this demand has emerged the need to understand online students’ motivations. In understanding online students’ needs, researchers are conflicted as to whether the relationship between teacher and student is more critical than the student-to-student relationship in allowing online students to succeed (Arbaugh, 2013; Bissessar, 2014c, 2014b; Daspit et al., 2015). Additionally, in their study on teacher presence within the online environment, Stone and Springer (2019) found that the online instructor who creates a supportive and engaging learning environment can lessen the impact of the challenges students face within the online environment. Indeed, more research has been conducted on online teachers’ presences in the form of the Community of Inquiry (CoI). According to Daspit et al. (2015), CoI takes into consideration only the typical presences within the online learning environment but does not encompass the “conceptualization of intrinsic, student-level self-
regulated factors that influence students’ learning” (p. 628). They further stated that individual motivation plays a key role in students’ desire to continue within the online environment, yet, this is one of the understudied aspects of online learning. In like fashion, Muilenburg and Berge (2005, as cited in Hartnett et al., 2011), Chen and Jang (2010) and Bissessar, Black and Boolaky (2019) and Black, Bissessar and Boolaky (2019), found a dearth of literature on students’ motivation within the online environment. Daspit et al. (2015) further contended that more research is needed on students’ motivation so that practitioners and researchers can understand what drives online students to stay motivated to complete their courses of study.

**WHY IS UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS’ PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL IMPORTANT?**

There is a decline in the on-the-ground student population in the United States with more students opting for the convenience of studying in the online environment (Black, Bissessar, & Boolaky, 2019). Additionally, the attrition rate among online students in the United States is 3% to 5% higher than on-the-ground institutions (Lorenzetti, 2018). The current statistics for the attrition rate of online students by country ranks the United Kingdom lowest at 9.6% and the United States the highest at 17.7% (Higher Education Statistics Agency UK; National Student Centre Clearing House USA, as cited in Pitman & Moodie, 2017).

Accordingly, it is important that online tertiary (i.e., higher education) institutions understand what makes students persist despite the odds. How can institutions better serve their clientele if they do not know what students want vis-a-vis their psychological capital? Therefore, the thrust among online tertiary level institutions is to find ways to retain their online student population and lessen student attrition. This study is a response to this need to understand what causes students to persist, and the researchers hope that the data contained herein will benefit the online teaching and learning community.

This study will also add to the extant empirical literature on psychological capital and will further the research on psychological capital within the educational realm, specifically, within the online education environment (Bissessar, Black, & Boolaky, 2019). It is also one of the few qualitative studies on psychological capital since most of the studies on psychological capital are quantitative (Luthans & Youssef-Morgans, 2017). It is hoped that this research provides insight into the key issues that need to be addressed within the online environment so that stakeholders can better cater to the needs of the online student population. With this in mind, this study answered the question: What aspects of students’ psychological capital make them succeed despite the odds? The epistemological approach was used to frame the research question since it entails understanding a phenomenon (Saldaña, 2013).

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

**Psychological Capital Theory (H.E.R.O.)**

Positive Psychology

Seligman (1998) believed that there was a need for scientific methods to be used to measure individuals’ strengths and weaknesses to determine how they succeed (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Therefore, positive psychology investigates how individuals grow, develop, discover their inner reservoirs of motivation, embrace their potential, and lead meaningful lives despite adversity (Bissessar, 2014b). This movement emerged because of Luthans and Youssef’s (2007) call to pay attention to the positive aspects of psychology in the workplace rather than the negative aspects.

**Psychological Capital**

An offshoot of positive psychology and positive organizational behavior is psychological capital (PsyCap). Psychological capital evaluates individuals’ psychological strength in order to determine how they improve themselves (Sheldon & King, 2001). In defining psychological capital, researchers agreed that it is an intangible quality that results in a positive state of well-being (Caza et al. 2010; Luthans & Youssef, 2007). However, Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2007) and Pryce-Jones (2010) transcended this view and saw it as a positive state of the mind that is capitalized upon in times of crisis.

Earlier, Luthans, Luthans, and Luthans (2004) indicated that PsyCap consists of hope, efficacy (self), resilience, and optimism (H.E.R.O.; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). It, thus, focuses mainly on individuals’ strengths rather than their weaknesses. It has also been used as a paradigm in the human resource aspect of organizations in order to understand and evaluate performance (Caza et
al., 2010; Daspit et al., 2015; Kalman & Summak, 2017). These strengths are seen as states rather than traits, which indicate that they can be nurtured and are not fixed (Daspit et al., 2015). In fact, Stallman (2011) conducted a study in which she implemented resilience training for college students and obtained positive results, indicating that components of psychological capital can be indoctrinated.

Interestingly, Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2017) proposed the Psychological Capital Intervention Model (PCI) as a means of training key practitioners in the appropriate application of the variables of PsyCap. In this model, they suggested examples of developmental tools to hone individuals’ inner H.E.R.O.s. Such interventions include SMART goals, exercising, meditation, yoga, and other ways in which individuals can improve their overall well-being. Luthans and Youssef-Morgan also offered sustainable strategies to be implemented during training in order to ensure that all the variables are given equal prominence in training sessions.

Moreover, Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2017) proposed a list of distal evidence of higher performance and lower stress levels. However, despite all of this, they do contend that PsyCap is difficult to quantify and a mixed methodology would better capture the subtle nuances of these softer skills/intelligences. Furthermore, Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2017) recommended that more experimental and longevity studies should be conducted in order to determine the effect of PsyCap over time. They stated that there is a need to conduct studies to see whether participants (over time) have experienced a paradigm shift or transformed their beliefs based on their exposure to the variables of PsyCap.

Additionally, Daspit et al. (2015) indicated that the theory of PsyCap allows for a deeper understanding of what motivates the individual to succeed despite all odds. This aligns with the view of Luthans, Vogelgesang, and Lester (2006) that optimism, hope, and efficacy are the pathways to resilience, thereby suggesting that the more hopeful, confident (efficacy), and optimistic individuals are the more they are able to bounce back from adversity and display states of resilience. Moreover, Silva and Roche (2010) found that persons who exhibited strong psychological capital in the four H.E.R.O. dimensions were more likely to cope in times of crisis. This is echoed in studies by Abbas and Raja (2015) and Yu and Liu (2016), which concluded that individuals who possess high psychological capital tend to display high levels of creativity, take initiative, plan, develop, and implement new ideas. Interestingly, Ngoma and Ntale (2016) in their study of the employability of Ugandan graduates found that individuals strong in psychological capital are better able to cope with the employability issues that they face in Uganda.

Hope

Hope is a nonlinear process that is based on Snyder’s (2000) research. Snyder (2002) defined hope as the “perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways” (p. 254). This shows hope as consisting of both willpower (agency) and pathways (Snyder 2000; Snyder et al., 2000; Snyder & Lopez 2002). Willpower, according to Luthans, Avery, Clapp-Smith, and Li (2008), is an individual’s drive and motivation towards attaining a desired goal. The pathways are the strategies that individuals use to attain their desired goals. Therefore, there is a strong correlation between pathways and willpower where individuals’ willpower fuels their desire to find new pathways (“waypower,” Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017, p. 341) in order to attain specific goals and persist despite all odds and vice versa. Put simply, there is a link between hopeful individuals and their level of confidence in completing a task (Luthans, Avery, & Patera, 2008 and Kalman & Summak, 2017).

Within organizations, hope is seen as an important positive mental state that fuels individuals to attain specific goals (Bissessar, 2014a). Hope is the catalyst to improved PsyCap.

Efficacy (Self)

Efficacy originated from Bandura’s (1997) social cognitive theory and its links to performance and academic achievement. Both Bandura (1997) and Stajkovic and Luthans (1998) defined efficacy as the individual’s confidence that they can use their capabilities to successfully complete a task. Stajkovic and Luthans (1998) defined efficacy beliefs as “one’s conviction (or confidence) about ones’ abilities to mobilize motivation, cognitive resources or courses of action needed to successfully execute a specific task within a specific context” (p. 66).

According to Bandura (1997), each individual
possesses. This takes into consideration the individuals’ successful experiences that are stored in long-term memory and ready for recall. Such successful experiences determine individuals’ thoughts and behaviors and how they will react to similar experiences in the present and future. Therefore, these experiences shape the level of confidence or lack thereof that individuals may have in their own abilities in completing similar tasks.

This is substantiated by several studies in the literature such as Irizarry (2002), Adegbola (2011), Ouweneel et al. (2012), and Alquarashi (2016), who suggested that individuals’ level of efficacy beliefs governs their efforts and persistence when confronted with obstacles and unanticipated impediments. Moreover, this indicates that there is a link between individuals’ confidence as to whether or not they can accomplish a task and whether or not they actually accomplish it. This relates to Bandura’s (1997) mastery or success experiences, which is referred to as perceived efficacy (Kalman & Summak, 2017).

Resilience

Resilience developed from the concepts of adaptability and coping (Block, 1961). Luthans (2002) defined resilience as “the capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure or even positive events, progress and increased responsibility” (p. 702). Modern thought on resilience stemmed from research on schizophrenic mothers and their children (Gramezy, 1971, 1974; Masten et al., 1990). The children in Gramezy’s research belonged to two groups: (a) those who continued to feel disadvantaged throughout their lives, and (b) those who were able to bounce back from their disadvantaged childhoods and lead productive adult lives.

Initially, resilience has been studied in developmental psychology and thereafter it has become popular in organizational psychology. Resilient individuals are better able to cope with adversity and adapt whenever possible (Block & Kremen, 1996; Coutu, 2002; Masten, 2001; Masten & Reed, 2002). In fact, the extant literature on resilience points to different types and/or models of resilience that started with Richardson et al. (1990, as cited in Johnson et al. 2015; Allan et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2006).

Allan et al. (2016) concluded that resilience plays an important role in whether students achieve academic success in higher education. From their sample of 1,534 inductees in one University in the UK, they found that females increase their resilience as they are challenged. However, in males, when challenged, resilience becomes less functional. Harvey and Delfabbro (2004, as cited in Allan et al., 2016) earlier indicated this. In fact, Allan et al. (2016) and Richardson et al. (1990, as cited in Johnson et al., 2015) stated that females tend to record the highest number of admissions and, by extension, completion. They are able to use their social connections with others to help them navigate and negotiate stressful environments. Allan et al. also suggested that highly resilient individuals might tend to disconnect from situations that might threaten their well-being.

Optimism

Optimism is the individual’s general outlook and state of mind that generates positive expectations that they will succeed (Bissessar, 2014a; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Additionally, Tiger (1979) defined optimism as “a mood or attitude associated with an interpretation about the social or material—one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable to his/her advantage, or for his/her pleasure” (p. 18). Carver et al. (2009) opined that optimistic individuals outperformed pessimistic individuals and suggested that optimism fosters positive outlooks and expectancies, and Seligman (1998) stated that individuals internalize positive occurrences. This is referred to as dispositional and/or explanatory optimism, which is reflected in the way that individuals explain and provide reasons for why events occur. These explanations and reasons exemplify individuals’ positive and negative disposition and, by extension, their optimism. Moreover, Kalman and Summak (2017) added that there is an expectancy viewpoint that is futuristic and indicates how the individual anticipates the future.

In her research on 51 female Trinidadian primary school teachers’ psychological capital, Bissessar (2014a) found that the female teachers scored highest with questions pertaining to “seeing negative events as stepping stones, perceiving positive outcomes, and looking on the bright side of situations” (p. 46). This would suggest that the teacher/participants displayed expectancy
viewpoints. However, this could have been due to how the questions were stated.

**Psychological Capital and Online Learning**

Studies on PsyCap and its components within the online learning environment are quantitative in nature and most do not study the online student at the university level. For example, within the workplace Luthans, Avery, and Patera (2008) conducted a traditional action research study with control and experimental groups of trainees within an organization to determine whether PsyCap could be developed in trainees online through two short training sessions. The treatment group showed increased levels of PsyCap after training was implemented online. In a similar vein, Baskaran and Rajarathinam (2017) conducted a study of teachers to determine whether PsyCap had any influence on online teachers’ creativity and innovativeness. They discovered that a significant correlation exists between online teachers’ creativity, innovation and their psychological capital. This study pertained to the participants’ role as employees, however, and not as students.

Another example is the study conducted by Daspit et al. (2015) that integrated PsyCap with the Communities of Inquiry (CoI) model to determine whether PsyCap can be seen as the next presence in the online environment affecting students’ completion of their programs. Daspit et al. indicated that there is a definite lack in the CoI model to capture the individual student’s motivation. They proposed that PsyCap could be used to better understand what fuels students’ learning within the online environment. It could also be used to indicate how the key stakeholders involved in online education could better meet the needs of a growing clientele.

Daspit et al. (2015) discussed the concept of PsyCap and teaching, cognitive, and social presences in general rather than specific terms. Their findings concluded that there is significant statistical correlation between PsyCap and the three presences. It would have helped to have furthered this research by indicating the specific relationship between the three teaching presences and the four components of PsyCap instead of generalizing the correlation.

Bissessar (2014b) highlighted the importance of student/instructor relationship within the online environment in her study of online Bachelor of Education students’ perceptions of the program and their perceptions of effective teacher characteristics in online learning. She found that the four participants from the Caribbean cited learner/learner and learner/instructor relationships as being critical in motivating them to stay and complete their online programs. In a study conducted by Budash and Shaw (2017) of online Master’s students’ desire to persist, both students and faculty indicated that the student-instructor relationship affects students’ desire to stay the course. The faculty’s ability to intuit the individual needs of students played an important role in whether students stayed in the program. One faculty member mentioned the need for individualized attention for some students versus others who were happy to have more general guidance. This could relate to the individuals’ level of PsyCap, where some individuals are more hopeful, confident, optimistic, and resilient than others.

Furthermore, in their narrative synthesis of 12 years of studies on students’ efficacy in the online environment, Peechapol et al. (2018) concluded that online learning experience and knowledge, feedback and reward, online communication and interactions, social influence, and learner motivation and attitude affected online students’ efficacy. Stone and Springer (2019) substantiated this finding and concluded that the difficulties encountered by students in their daily lives could be lessened based on the support and engagement they obtain from their online instructors. This last finding should also be tied directly to PsyCap so that it is relevant to this study’s purpose.

Conversely, Maddrell, Morrison, and Watson (2017) found that there was no relationship between students’ participation in five distance education courses and teachers’ three presences in the United States. This is similar to the findings of Bissessar, Black and Boolaky (2019) who conducted a study of 54 students’ self-determination to stay in graduate online programs at University of Liverpool and found that there was a significant relationship among the variables of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, there was a stronger correlation between participants’ autonomy and their competency as opposed to relatedness that would suggest that the participants who persisted were more self-reliant and self-directed. This indicates that the stronger the autonomy the stronger the competency and the lesser the relatedness. This can also relate to the
level of PsyCap that each individual possesses. The higher the levels of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, the more autonomous and competent the individual will be.

METHOD

We used a qualitative exploratory case study, couched in the interpretivist paradigm, to determine whether five online graduate students displayed PsyCap in their responses to online interviews. The interpretive phenomenological approach was used where the participants’ lived experiences were captured with the understanding that we would attempt to understand their experiences in context (Saldaña, 2013).

We conducted five online interviews with participants from the United States, Canada, Nigeria, France, and Serbia using Skype and recorded with Audacity (see Appendix A for the sample interview questions). The American participant (Jane—all participants names are pseudonyms) was completing her DBA and fell within the age range of 31–50. The Canadian participant’s (Amanda) native language was Cantonese. An alumna of the University of Liverpool, she fell within the age range of 51–60. The Nigerian participant (Harold) fell within the age range of 31–50 and listed English as his native language. He was pursuing a graduate degree with the University of Liverpool at the time of the interview. The French participant (Francoise) was an alumna of the University of Liverpool and was 31–50 years old. Her native language was French, and she had an MSc. The Serbian participant (Mary) was between 31–50 years of age and had an MBA. She listed her native language as Serbian.

We used convenience sampling for the sampling method, and the participants were given the interview questions before the actual interview. The interviews were 25–40 minutes in length. Open-ended questions were asked based on the challenges and barriers to persistence the participants may have encountered and their motivation and persistence. It must be noted, however, that the small sample size of only five participants limits the data that are presented in this study and indicates that the data cannot be generalized to the entire University of Liverpool population.

Data Analysis

The theoretical thematic approach to data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework: (1) become familiar with the data, (2) generate initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review the themes, (5) define the themes, and (6) wrap up. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and read and reread to identify themes and patterns in the data. These themes were identified based on recurring words and phrases implementing, initially, the semantic level of theme identification and later the latent level of theme identification. We used the deductive approach to coding based on the responses to the research question inherent in the transcribed data. Based on Saldaña’s (2013) list of coding processes specific to exploratory epistemological research questions, we implemented the “theming data approach” where phrases or sentences were used to describe or capture the meaning of an aspect of the data (p. 64).

In order to ensure credibility, we examined and reexamined the data so that the codes and themes were consistent. Additionally, interrater reliability was used with the three of us acting as the other raters, and a value of .949 was found when an interclass correlation was conducted, which indicates that this is an acceptable interrater reliability. The dependability of the themes was observed through the code/recode process whereby we coded and reduced the data to themes, left it for two weeks, and then recoded the data to ensure consistency. There were no evident threats to external and internal consistency of the data. However, it must be noted that one researcher conducted the interviews and engaged in reflexivity and bracketing through dialoguing with the other researchers. She also wrote memos after the interviews to ensure that her previous experience as an online learner did not interfere with the interview process or the coding and reduction of data into themes.

The researcher who conducted the interviews was able to discuss any issues she may have with her fellow researchers to ensure that she was as objective as possible in conducting the interviews. As a former student and current online lecturer, the interviewer was aware of how her past and current roles could color the interview process and the analysis of the data. This self-awareness shows that the interviewer was actively involved in the research process and cognizant of her own biases and preconceptions (Palaganas et al., 2017). Throughout the process, we ensured that we engaged in bracketing and tried as much as possible to be objective in our analysis of
the data. We tried our best not to allow our personal biases, experiences, and preconceived ideas about the research topic influence our analysis of the data and understanding of the topic. We also had to set aside previous knowledge of research findings and our expectations of the outcome of the data. We dialogued before the start of the research and discussed our personal biases, previous experiences, and knowledge of the topic. We wrote all this information down and bracketed it.

FINDINGS

Identified themes

The following section presents the findings from the face-to-face interviews conducted by skype and recorded using Audacity for the five participants, Mary, Jane, Harold, Francoise, and Amanda. Table 1 shows the frequency count for recurring themes via semantic and latent levels of theme analyses. Efficacy was mentioned directly and/or indirectly 15 times, with hope expressed latently 10 times in the participants’ responses, resilience was mentioned eight times, and optimism nine times. For Jane, the recurring words throughout her interview were “responsibility, control,” indicating that she was stronger on efficacy than the other psychological capital components. She also displayed hope, resilience, and optimism. Likewise, for Amanda, the recurring words were “self-discipline, self-determination, time-management, and character.” These all relate to efficacy, which was also high with Amanda. Harold also referred to “self-confidence, self-determination, and drive” as part of his motivation, which shows levels of efficacy. Francoise’s recurring words were “motivation,” “persistence,” and “take control.” Mary’s recurring words were “culture,” “teamwork,” “self-control,” and “commitment.” From the list of recurring words, these individuals are autonomous and self-directed, though it must be noted that some themes overlap, such as hope and optimism, and the components of PsyCap, as softer skills, cannot be viewed in isolation and are not linear or hierarchical in nature.

Hope

When asked about how she overcomes challenges, Jane illustrated the symbiotic relationship that willpower and pathways share (Luthans, Avery, Clapp-Smith, & Li, 2008). She was able to attain her specific goal despite setbacks and use her willpower to find new pathways (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017, p. 341). She stated, when asked about how she problem solves, “You know just kind of focus on the trouble, break it into small parts, and attack it.” This shows a perceived capability to derive pathways to achieving one’s goals (Luthans, Avery, & Patera, 2008). In so doing, she was able to find an online university she liked and the funds to finance her education. Likewise, Amanda displayed hope and indicated that when she has a problem, she tends to try to rely on herself in “solving it and she tries to keep calm.” Amanda credits her high self-determination, which “allowed me to succeed.” This is similar to Francoise’s view that, “I live on my own, I have to take control and responsibility for everything. So, for me, it is not even an issue as in any case I’ll take control and responsibility of all arising problems.” Harold indicated that he tries to solve the problem but if he thinks that it is a problem that he cannot resolve he leaves it alone. Mary stated that she is a problem solver and did not give any details.

Efficacy

Jane’s interview showed a proclivity towards efficacy. She mentioned responsibility, control, and being a role-model to her employees as being important to her. Likewise, Amanda, Francoise, and Mary mentioned self-determination, self-discipline, and time management as being responsible for their
successes. Mary added commitment as also being responsible for her success. Harold also mentioned self-confidence, self-determination, and drive as being responsible for his success. All participants displayed qualities of perceived efficacy (Bandura 1997; Kalman & Summak, 2017). Jane and Harold displayed social cognition when they mentioned serving as role-models/leaders to others (Bandura, 1997). In this case, Jane served as the role-model through which her employees experience vicarious learning. This was especially indicated when she discussed how much she supports her employees if they wish to study further. In the same way, Harold served as group leader for several of the assignments and had to motivate his peers.

When asked about whether or not her ability to succeed is reliant upon others, Jane stated, “Yeah, I rely on others I guess the fact that they hold me accountable for persevering.” This indicated that the relationship is two-fold and that she serves as a role-model but also ensures that others learn vicariously through her. This also indicates that she responds to life based on her success in previous similar experiences. Congruently, Harold gave an example of how he has served as group leader several times within the online environment and had to “push others to perform because I do not allow others to determine my drive.” This is different from Amanda, Francoise, and Mary, who indicated that they are self-reliant and are responsible for their own successes. However, Mary highlighted the importance of teamwork.

When asked about the extent to which she would exert herself to take control of situations, Jane stated, “I felt responsible for doing all that I can do to control the situation. But you know I also have a plan.” This corresponds to Francoise’s and Mary’s views. Francoise stated, “I feel that, to a very high extent, I should exert myself to take control of situations which is a behaviour that is not always to the benefit of all around.” Mary explained, “I have learnt to take control of situations. It comes from communication, knowledge, expertise, attitudes, experience, etc.” This further reiterates the fact that they both have a self-system and use their understanding/mastery of past experiences to dictate how they respond to present obstacles (Bandura, 1997; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). This self-system was also evident in Amanda’s responses when she mentioned that “my high self-determination and self-discipline allowed me to be successful.” In like fashion, Harold stated that his drive has been there “when I was a kid and I think it is innate.”

In their comparison of face-to-face versus online university in favor of the online university, Jane and Amanda augmented Peechapol et al.’s (2018) view that online learning, communication, and interactions increase learners’ motivation and, by extension, online learners’ efficacy. Jane stated, “It’s a doctoral program and I might need that extra help of face-to-face interaction with professors and so I chose to do the more traditional on-campus route. And after the first semester, I realized that I never saw the teachers anyway.” Consequently, Jane dropped out of face-to-face classes and decided to enroll in online classes. She felt that she could not study online because she might need some attention from the professors. However, she found that “the professors were more responsive within the online environment than the face-to-face environment and more positive.” This is an example of the importance of the student-instructor relationship and how it affects students’ desire to stay the course. This was echoed by one of the instructors in a study conducted by Budash and Shaw (2017). A faculty member indicated that some students only need general guidance while others need individualized attention. The students who persist are those who believe that their instructors value them and the institution has a vested interest in them. In this instance, Jane did not feel valued by the institution and the instructors who did not encourage her but dissuaded her. Therefore, she left and went where she felt more valued.

Amanda was more specific about the instructor-student relationship and indicated that some instructors can be “passionate, experienced, and motivated” while others can be “inexperienced and demotivating in their feedback.” Amanda and Harold were specific about courses that were taught by instructors who were motivating versus courses taught by instructors who were demotivating or “stingy with grades.” However, despite this being the case, Amanda and Harold credit their self-discipline and self-determination for their successes. This also aligns with Peechapol et al.’s (2018) view that online learning, communication, and interactions with learners can motivate online learners. Francoise also found that “the help of my
instructors and dissertation advisor was very helpful and obviously takes a big part in the achievement of the goal.” Similarly, Mary stated “for those instructors who gave more efforts, the effect on me was more positive, bringing up to me more energy and willingness to really understand a module. It also opened communication channel, so I was free to ask them any question.”

Resilience

In dropping out of face-to-face classes and opting for online classes, Jane illustrated that she could make her decisions and discover a new pathway despite adversity (lack of funds). She was able to overcome such issues and enjoy the online experience. She also showed that she was able to bounce back from the negativity that she experienced in the face-to-face university and move beyond that experience when she said that she was only depressed for half a day. She did not let that experience deter her from continuing with her dream of becoming a doctor. Congruently, Amanda was also able to take the negative feedback from particular instructors, let the moment of demotivation pass, and ensure that she completed her program. Harold also indicated that he was somewhat demotivated by his second instructor when he was trying so hard and only “getting B.” He stated that he had some “stingy instructors” who did not want to give marks and his self-confidence and motivation lowered. However, later, when he “got a very nice instructor” his motivation increased. He also indicated that when he is faced with challenges, “I try to find a way around them except when I don’t want to do it. I just discard it.” Francoise and Mary did not indicate any negative experiences with their instructors or peers and only had praise for them.

When asked about her resilience and how she can redirect paths, Jane stated, “It does become demotivating. You know I get highly demotivated if I do not get enough sleep.” However, Jane mentioned how she can bounce back from issues and find new pathways to achieve her goal. She stated, “I find it motivating to try and accomplish a goal.” Furthermore, she discussed the difference between online and face-to-face learning and indicated that she was less overwhelmed and more able to cope with the online environment. She added that the instructors online were “just as responsive as or probably more so at University of Liverpool than they ever were at University of X [name withheld].”

Francoise shared parallel sentiments and stated, “I would say that it is part of my personality to address challenges and find a way out of them. And although I might feel demotivated at first, I then am interested in figuring out the solutions that help me address the challenges.”

Whereas Jane was very vocal about her experiences and how she dealt with feeling demotivated, Amanda, Francoise, and Mary did not give an explicit insight into how they dealt with it, and Harold indicated that he had the “drive to overcome challenges, if it is something that I think that I cannot resolve then I will forget about it.” This is interesting since he did not indicate that he would try to find another way to overcome this. He was the lone male and this could point to distinct differences between male and female resilience; however, a larger sample size geared towards gender differences could have answered this question. Allan et al. (2016) indicated the distinct differences between males and females.

Optimism

Amanda, Harold, Francoise, and Mary did not give extensive information about themselves and how they dealt with issues when they arise. Amanda simply stated that she “keeps calm and problem-solves,” while Harold stated that he simply tries to solve the issue and if he cannot he leaves it alone. Nevertheless, keeping calm is one of the strategies posited by Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2017) for training individuals to implement PsyCap.

When asked about her confidence to deal with issues that may arise, Jane showed an expectancy viewpoint when she indicated that she expected the outcome to be positive rather than negative (Kalman & Summak, 2017). Jane stated, “I tend to be philosophical about failure. If it happens there is a reason for that.” She showed dispositional optimism when she indicated that despite her experiences in the face-to-face classroom, she was willing to try the online classroom. Despite the negativity she experienced from the teachers and the workload, she decided to find ways to accomplish her goals. She indicated that the first time she completed an assignment at University of Liverpool the feedback was terrible because of the difference in focus between the British and American systems. However, she stated that she used humor to get over that initial shock. She also realized that she had to change her style and adapt to the British system.
when her first professor said that her literature review was annoying because of all the headings, which is not done at the University of Liverpool. Jane continued that she grew to appreciate this professor. She stated, “Now, I’ve watched him as a professor and I loved him then too.” She continued, “If anything, you know I take things like that with a bit of humour.”

**DISCUSSION**

Based on the foregoing, it could be said that all aspects of online graduate students’ PsyCap assisted them in succeeding despite the odds. All participants displayed hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism in their responses and showed that they use/used these qualities to ensure their success within the online environment. For example, the findings in this study resulted in similarities in efficacy and hope among the five participants with the most marked difference in how the lone male deals with challenges and his ability to bounce back from adversity as opposed to the females’ ability to bounce back. This is comparable to the findings by Allan et al. (2016), which indicated that females possess incremental resilience so that when faced with adversity their resilience increases whereas males tend to become less functional. However, Allan et al. also suggested that highly resilient individuals might tend to disconnect from situations that might seem to threaten their well-being. This lack of clarity as to the extent to which resilience is employed by males and females would suggest that there is a need for more qualitative research on resilience and the male/female dichotomy specific to PsyCap. This is echoed by Harvey and Delfabbro (2004, as cited in Allan et al., 2016), who indicated that gender disparities do exist as well as differences in culture. In fact, Allan et al. also stated that females are able to use their social connections with others to help them navigate and negotiate stressful environments. According to Richardson et al. (1990, as cited in Johnson et al., 2015), resilient individuals tend to have support persons to help them through stressful events.

Another common theme among the participants was that of the influence of instructors’ experience, passion, and positive presence in motivating them. Participants complained about “stingy” instructors who did not want to give them high grades and instructors who gave negative feedback that they felt was not constructive. The instructors who gave positive feedback were the ones who helped motivate the participants in this study to continue with the program. Therefore, to some extent, it could be said that the participants’ persistence in this study was contingent upon their relationship with their instructors and the positive feedback given. This agrees with Daspit et al.’s (2015) view that online students’ PsyCap is significantly influenced by their instructors’ teaching, social, and cognitive presences. Budash and Shaw (2017) found that online participants in an online Master’s program linked their persistence to the student-instructor interaction where the student felt valued and appreciated with the personal interest shown by the instructors. Bissessar (2014c & 2014b) found similar links in her study of students enrolled in the online Bachelor of Education program. It seems that online faculty members who are able to give immediacy of feedback, be passionate about what they do, and are positive and helpful would make a difference in students’ persistence. Therefore, faculty need to ensure that feedback is tactfully given and students understand the constructive aspect of feedback within the online environment. These all point to the three presences and the relationship they may have with the components of PsyCap. However, although Daspit et al. (2015) found a significant correlation between the three presences and PsyCap, further correlational research is needed to understand the relationship among the three presences and the components of PsyCap.

**Scope for future research**

Contrary to the above, Maddrell et al. (2017) found that there was no relationship between students’ participation in five distance education courses and teachers’ three presences. This ambiguity points to the fact that more research is needed to make a more substantial conclusion. However, the online environment captures instructional components of the faculty’s social, teaching, and cognitive presences but does not take into account the students’ PsyCap. Therefore, this study extends the body of information on online students’ softer skills and how they use and/or do not use such skills to navigate the online environment and persist. Additionally, Jane, the American participant, was more open in her entire interview and more optimistic than the other participants, which could suggest differences in culture that
could be another area of future research (Delfabbro, 2004, as cited in Allan et al., 2016).

In fact, this study just touches the surface of the significant role PsyCap plays in the online environment. It is recommended that this study be replicated with more courses within the same organization to determine the effect of students’ PsyCap to their persistence. This would also include a larger sample size, which is one of the limitations of this study.

**Implications of the study**

There is a large body of research conducted on psychological capital in business organizations and in education relating to teachers and their approaches to students. However, limited information exists on the implementation of the PsyCap paradigm at the tertiary levels especially within online learning and teaching. This study shows that there is a need to consider online students’ PsyCap as a process and tool whereby students capitalize upon their inner H.E.R.O.s in order to complete their programs. Additionally, there are instances where the interviewees’ quotes reflect more than one psychological capital, which indicates that they are linked and do not occur along a straight line but merge into one another. This is the quintessential nature of softer skills and qualitative research.

More knowledge is needed on how some students are able to cope and why others decide to drop out or fail out of the system. One wonders if the system is failing them by not trying to understand and cater to those intangible aspects of their inner H.E.R.O.s rather than them failing the system. This was echoed by one of the participants who indicated that the support systems, communication, and interactions she had with her online instructors were more frequent than those with her previous face-to-face instructors—an irony in itself but a reflection of how technology continues to change the socialization landscape in the classroom. This reflects the current trend of tertiary students to choose online learning over face-to-face, “brick and mortar” classrooms. This is also an indication of the importance of the instructor-student relationship within the online environment and how important the three presences were to Jane’s persistence within the online environment and lack of persistence within the face-to-face environment.

It remains to be seen as to how PsyCap could be integrated as the fourth presence of the CoI into the andragogical instructors’ online repertoire. However, consideration of it via the other three presences could have a positive influence on students’ motivation and their decision to stay in the program. The onus is on online instructors to make a concerted effort to ensure that they are reaching students through a variety of techniques and integrating elements of PsyCap as exemplified by Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2017). Additionally, Daspit et al. (2015) concluded that a synergistic relationship exists between the three online teaching presences (social, cognitive, and teaching) and PsyCap, and this correlation predicts individuals’ work performances. They found a significant correlation between PsyCap and online teaching presence and recommended that teachers set high expectations for students, give developmental and meaningful feedback, and ensure that there are opportunities for vicarious learning.

The current study finds that these ideas espoused by Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2017) and Daspit et al. (2015) could positively influence students’ online experiences. The more driven students are the ones who were willing to participate in this study; however, if students who had dropped out or failed their courses were interviewed, the levels of each variable of the PsyCap would have been different. Therefore, the study only represents those participants who were motivated to respond as participants, which in itself shows that they already possess strong components of PsyCap.

**CONCLUSION**

The enrollment of students for online education has grown in magnitude over the past few decades and this is not likely to stop although attrition rates are also on the rise. This study attempted to find some explanations of the causes of the success or failure from the point-of-view of PsyCap and teachers becoming more mindful of students’ inner H.E.R.O.s when managing their courses and facilitating online instruction. Specifically, this study set out to determine what aspects of students’ psychological capital lead to success. It took into consideration the main obstacles that psychologically affect outcomes via a qualitative approach. The study revealed that indeed PsyCap influenced the drive of the surveyed students to complete their online graduate programs of study. Participants credited their online instructors for
motivating and demotivating them based on their feedback, grading, and overall communication. This points to the possible influence of the three online teaching presences in communities of inquiry (cognitive, teaching, and social) upon their PsyCap. More research is suggested to determine whether gender does play a critical role in online students’ PsyCap, especially resilience.
REFERENCES


Part 3: Motivation and Persistence

In our survey, we asked a number of questions that pertained to your motivation to persist in working towards your goals. Some influences will be cultural to your heritage, such as the influence of family upon your persistence, or the importance of having the degree, the reputation of a Liverpool degree, and so on. Other questions addressed your own individual traits and perspective. Now, if ok with you, I'd like to let you share with us more detail on this. Again, you can decline to answer any question of your choice.

With the challenges we just talked about:

How much did your family influence your ability to persist, and in what ways? Would you say this is typical of your culture?

Thinking in terms of status and respect, was the perception of you by your work colleagues, superiors, clients important to you staying in the programme? Which was more influential—your family and friends, or those associated with your work and profession?

What if you had failed in pursuit of your goal? How would that affect you and others important to you? {RESEARCHER: explore honor, duty, and feeling of inclusion from the studies, and if these are associated with family/culture, professional life, both or neither.}

Now I have a few questions that look at some of your own personal traits and abilities. You are encouraged to give examples. Again, you can choose to decline any question:

Would you say it’s just part of your personality and nature, just who you are, to address challenges and find a way out of them? To redirect paths and find ways of accomplishing goals? Or is this a struggle? For example, do challenges motivate you even more to succeed, or are they demotivating?

Our survey asked: “I believe my ability to succeed is reliant upon others, which then affects my motivation to persevere.” How would you explain this?

To what extent do you feel you should exert yourself to take control of situations? Do your cultural values influence the importance you place on taking control? {RESEARCHER: will they do whatever is necessary? Or is it a struggle? Duty, honor?}

When faced with barriers and challenges, how did you overcome these? For example, is it your usual approach to problem-solve or some other approach? (Share examples)

Our survey asked: “I have always relied upon my self-determination as my primary motivator to persevere” … do you agree with this? Do you feel you came into the program with a high level of self-determination? Or did that grow as you progressed from module to module? Why or why not? Does it diminish when seriously challenged?

Coming into the program, how would you describe your level of self-confidence to succeed? To overcome challenges? Did this confidence grow during your studies? Why or why not? Does it diminish when seriously challenged?

From where did these abilities come? Examples would be your professional development and work experiences, your upbringing, other life experiences, your cultural values. {RESEARCHER: we are looking for self-efficacy, perseverance, resilience, optimism of PsyCap, particularly to identify socio-economic-cultural influences.

Finally, we have some questions pertaining to the effect of external factors like challenges and the module experience impacted your persistence in the program. Again, you can decline to answer any question.

How important was it to develop your own systematic methods of managing your studies in order to achieve your goal? Did you have these in place when you entered the program? Did these develop...
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

throughout your program? If it did develop throughout your program, what advice would you give to someone now coming into the program?

How would you express the level of your desire to master the content of each module, and the importance of this to your motivation? In other words, did learning the subjects excite and motivate you, and how did that impact your persistence to continue?

How important to you was it that you felt supported by your instructor?

Did the instructors positively influence your ability to persist, and if so, in what ways? If the instructors were not a positive influence, how did you overcome the lack of positive influence from your tutors?

How important to you was it to have connections with other students or feel included in a university programme?

Did class discussions, networking with students, and other connections with students influence your ability to persist, and how?

Were you involved in any social media groups with your peers in order to discuss and share experiences and information? If yes, which groups and how did this affect your desire to stay in the program as well as your desire to succeed?