



Perceived Teacher Confirmation and the Online Classroom: Capturing Student Descriptions of Experiences With Faculty Online

Ashley Jones-Bodie , Lindsey B. Anderson, and Jen Hall

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Abstract: This study explored and examined students' perceptions of teacher confirmation, those behaviors that teachers engage in that make students feel confirmed as valuable, significant individuals, as experienced in online courses. With over 450 students' written descriptions of experiences in online classes across three different universities, this study provides an important initial examination of teaching practices in the online context. While prior research has situated study of students' perceptions of teacher confirmation in the traditional in-person course experience, the current project extends understanding of teacher confirmation into the online setting. The study provides detailed descriptions, in students' own words, of specific tactics instructors can use and avoid in order to promote feelings of confirmation in their students.

Introduction

Over the past 4 decades, numerous studies have supported the notion that effective teaching consists of not only content-related variables but also consists of an equally important relational dimension (e.g., Gorham et al., 1989; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986; Teven & Hanson, 2004; Witt et al., 2004) and has supported the view of the teacher-student relationship functioning as an interpersonal relationship (Frymier & Houser, 2000). One important framework for viewing the teacher-student relationship and ultimately student learning is the notion of teacher confirmation—teachers' behaviors that confirm

Ashley Jones-Bodie, University of Mississippi, University, MS
Lindsey B. Anderson, University of Maryland, College Park, MD
Jen Hall, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN

CONTACT: ajb@olemiss.edu

students as individuals (Ellis, 2000, 2004). While other concepts about the teacher-student relationship, for example student rapport and immediacy, focus on characteristics of the relationship and behaviors, teacher confirmation examines teachers' characteristics and behaviors as the outgrowth of a conceptual foundation for the relationship—the belief in the importance of students as “valuable, significant individuals” (Ellis, 2000, p. 266). Indeed, previous research has argued that teacher confirmation is a broad communicative construct that subsumes other teacher behavior concepts including immediacy and one that impacts students' learning, motivation, and apprehension in the classroom (Ellis, 2000, 2004). Additionally, research has indicated that perceived teacher confirmation is linked to student communication, participation, and greater learning (Goodboy & Myers, 2008) and is more directly linked to student motivation over other factors as well as students' perceptions of teachers' pro-social power (Turman & Schrodt, 2006).

While an important construct for positive impacts on student learning, to date the study of teacher confirmation has generally been examined within the in-person classroom, despite the clear establishment of online learning as a mainstay in the collegiate landscape. As recent discussions of online teaching argue, the online course experience for current college students is a substantial and enduring part of the college experience and should be informed by scholarship directly exploring pedagogy issues in the online context (Broeckelman-Post & Mazer, 2022). Despite numerous studies exploring perceived teacher confirmation in the college classroom demonstrating its positive impact on students as well as the clear establishment of online instruction in the university setting, to date, studies have not specifically explored the application of teacher confirmation in the online classroom. This project responds to calls for exploration of online teaching generally and is a step in examining online teacher confirmation specifically.

Literature Review

As an important and foundational aspect of the teaching and learning process, the original notion of teacher confirmation is complicated by the various forms of online instruction that have permeated higher education in recent years. Indeed, online instruction has impacted the ways that faculty and students communicate with each other and, as such, underscores the need to understand how confirmation is enacted in online contexts. In the following sections, we weave together extant literature in these foundational areas—teacher confirmation and virtual instruction.

Online Instruction

In 2013, over 6 million college students in the United States took at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013). This number increased to over 25 million students during the Spring 2020 semester when the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the teaching and learning process out of the physical classroom and into mediated spaces (Entangled Solutions, 2020). Indeed, the prevalence of online instruction has made online teaching and learning more visible (Lang, 2020). At its most basic level, online instruction is a form of distance learning that is characterized by a student's “interaction with content and/or people via the internet for the purposes of learning” (Means et al., 2014, p. 6). While this type of instruction can take a variety of forms—including hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous, online instruction in general has been linked to increased access to higher education (Goodman et al., 2019) and has existed for decades (see Chatham-Carpenter, 2017; Morreale et al., 2019). Additionally, although the transition to online learning occurred rapidly in 2020 and was seen as a potentially temporary change to common instructional practices (Hodges et al., 2020), it provided insights into the various ways instructional

communication could take place in online contexts. For example, Brophy and colleagues (2021) identified elements of online courses designed to facilitate supportive instructional spaces and found that clarity, flexibility, and instructor communication were associated with students' online learning experience. In addition, past scholarship has started to examine how nonverbal instructional communication is enacted in online contexts (e.g., email, graded feedback, and online course page design) (Dixson et al., 2017). Through this work, instructor behaviors, such as the use of emoticons and course decisions (e.g., color and imagery) were identified as indicators of immediacy and potential ways to improve online effectiveness. Yet, there are still calls for continuing investigations that better account for the various modes of instruction (e.g., online, hybrid, in-person) (see Dixson et al., 2017).

Additionally, recent work argues for exploring the dialectic between the integrity of online courses and faculty ability to provide instruction and frame their pedagogy in compassionate ways (Sellnow et al., 2022). The authors argue that faculty should transform instructional communication pedagogy by enacting "compassionate care pedagogy" while maintaining course integrity and argue that one suggestion for doing so which emerged during the pandemic is for faculty to "be intentional and strategic about reminding students of their inherent worth as individuals rising to the challenge of learning while balancing complex life experiences" (Sellnow et al., 2022, p. 159). This is, in essence, the guidance provided by the notion of teacher confirmation. The authors' guiding question "is not whether to embrace compassionate care pedagogy, but how" (Sellnow et al., 2022, p. 160). The continued exploration of students' perceptions of teacher confirmation responds directly to this question.

Confirmation

To begin, the concept of confirmation signifies those communicative behaviors that highlight a person's significance in a given setting while also emphasizing their interconnectedness with others (Sieburg, 1976). In early work, confirmation behaviors were classified as recognizing, acknowledging, and endorsing the individual (see Cissna & Sieburg, 1981). Recognizing refers to immediacy behaviors that create a sense of psychological closeness between interlocutors and include nonverbal (e.g., eye contact) and verbal (e.g., turn-taking in conversation) behaviors. Acknowledging is the way in which conversational partners recognize and allow for other viewpoints to be expressed. Endorsing is the acceptance of another person's perspectives. While originally conceptualized within interpersonal interactions, confirmation has also been applied to instructional contexts (see Frymier & Houser, 2000; Schrodtt et al., 2006). In the classroom environment, confirmation refers to "the transactional process by which teachers communicate to students that they are endorsed, recognized, and acknowledged as valuable, significant individuals" (Ellis, 2000, p. 266) and has been tied to decreases in student communication apprehension and increases in students' motivation, participation, reported learning, and satisfaction (Ellis, 2004; Goodboy & Myers, 2008).

In the classroom context, confirming behaviors take the form of (1) the instructor's response to student comments/questions, (2) the instructor's perceived interest in the students and their learning, (3) the instructor's teaching style, and (4) the absence of disconfirming behaviors in the instructor's communication (Ellis, 2000). Indeed, this work laid the foundation for the development of the Teacher Confirmation Scale (Ellis, 2000), which includes 27 items designed to measure students' perceptions of instructor's confirmation in the classroom through specific teacher behaviors. As a product of the teaching landscape at the time, the Teacher Confirmation Scale was developed based on in-person

instructional settings. Thus, it does not account for the way communication—including confirming behaviors—might be impacted and changed when in online teaching and learning environments.

Indeed, the need to explore confirmation in online settings has become increasingly important. In her 2018 article reviewing strategies for rapport building, Frisby (2018) argued that for online courses (as well as large lectures) instructors need to implement communicative strategies that humanize themselves. Specific strategies included posting both instructor and student self-introduction videos, utilizing discussion boards that encourage connectedness, personalizing student feedback, and holding virtual office hours. This research closely aligns with confirmation's focus on the relational component of faculty-student classroom interactions and supports the continued exploration of these ideas in the online context specifically. One prior study began this move toward viewing teacher confirmation in an online context. During the transition to emergency remote instruction that occurred during Spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students were asked to rate their instructor's teacher confirmation and reported decreased learning outcome achievement as well as a decrease in teacher confirmation, seen as less instructor interest in their learning and less response to their questions (Armstrong et al., 2022). Although this work asked participants to rate their perceptions of teacher confirmation during both face-to-face and then virtual instruction for the same course, the vehicle used to gather this information was the original Teacher Confirmation Scale, developed for the in-person classroom. So, while the study asked students in online classes, albeit sections experiencing an emergency switch to online instruction, to rate perceptions of teacher confirmation, the study did not explore views of confirmation in the online context from the students' perspective. In other words, the project provides an initial move toward putting confirmation into an online context but did not fully examine it for online distinctions. Indeed, the researchers themselves call for continued exploration of ways faculty "can confirm their students in online classes" (p. 66). As such, it underscores the need to examine the nuances of confirmation and those teacher behaviors, as identified by students, that indicate confirmation specifically within online instructional settings.

Thus, in this study, we provide an initial exploration providing detailed answers to this question and directly respond to the numerous prior calls for examination of online teaching practices more broadly. Specifically, this project directly uncovers students' perceptions, described in their own words, of instructors' communicative behaviors indicating confirmation in the online setting. With this background in mind, we pose the following research question: *What do students perceive and identify as confirming and disconfirming faculty behaviors in the undergraduate online course experience?*

Materials and Methods

Participants and Courses

Participants for this study were recruited from introductory communication courses at three universities during the fall semester of 2020. The initial screening questions at the start of the survey asked students if they (1) had been enrolled in at least one fully online course (a course that is delivered completely online with no in-person components at any point in the course) in the past year, (2) were currently enrolled in at least one fully online course at the time of the survey, or (3) only had an online course experience where the course started in person and then switched to fully online for part of the semester. Students who indicated they had been or were currently enrolled in at least one fully online course were allowed to complete the survey. Qualifying courses were not limited to communication courses but instead were

open to any university course across disciplines. Because of the disruption to teaching brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent move to online teaching for many during the middle of the Spring 2020 semester, the exclusion of course experiences that began in-person and switched to fully online allowed us to only gather responses from students in courses that had been intended for fully online classrooms from their start. In all, 470 student participants indicated they had been or were currently enrolled in a fully online course and thus completed the survey.

As the final component of the questionnaire, participants were asked a number of demographic and evaluative questions which resulted in the following responses: 58% female ($n = 274$), 40% male ($n = 190$), 1% non-binary ($n = 3$), and 1% prefer not to say ($n = 3$); 21% Asian ($n = 99$), 7% African American/Black ($n = 34$), 4% bi-racial ($n = 20$), 60% Caucasian/White ($n = 276$), 5% Latino ($n = 24$), 1 tri-racial, 1 Iranian-American, and 2% prefer not to answer ($n = 8$); 42% first-year students ($n = 199$), 24% sophomores ($n = 111$), 19% juniors ($n = 91$), and 15% seniors ($n = 69$). Student participants were almost all between the ages of 17 and 22 ($n = 461$, 98%) with eight respondents between ages 23–29 and one respondent between ages 30–39. A number of participants ($n = 62$, 13%) indicated they were first-generation college students and 25 (5%) noted their status as international students. Students also listed 167 different majors including those in larger categories of academic study including *business* (e.g., business analytics and operations management, general business, business management and finance, management), *computer science* (e.g., computer science and math, computer science and biology), *communication* (e.g., communication studies, communication and public relations, communication and French, corporate communication, communication and human services), *engineering* (e.g., aeronautical engineering technology, civil engineering, electrical engineering), *sciences* (e.g., neurobiology, microbiology, nursing, kinesiology, med lab science, physiology), *liberal arts* (e.g., linguistics, public policy, criminal justice, law and society), and others.

Additionally, participants were asked specific questions about the fully online courses in which they had been enrolled and for which they would be referencing when completing the remainder of the survey. These questions covered the academic home, size of course enrollment, reason for taking the course, course length, and the primary form of communication and technology used in the course. First, these courses represented over 20 different schools and academic areas across the universities—from accounting to dentistry to education and many other areas. Second, respondents also indicated that the online courses they experienced ranged in size from 11–30 students ($n = 259$), 31–50 students ($n = 214$), 51–100 students ($n = 201$), and more than 100 students ($n = 242$). Third, respondents were asked their reason for taking their online courses and were able to indicate all reasons that applied to their experiences. The most common reason selected was requirement for major/minor ($n = 398$) followed closely by general education requirement ($n = 377$). Some students ($n = 135$) indicated they enrolled in their online course as an elective. Fourth, respondents indicated that their online course experiences were overwhelmingly a full, regular semester course length ($n = 469$), with minimal other course length experiences—8 weeks ($n = 40$), summer session ($n = 24$), condensed semester such as winter or 4-week summer ($n = 10$), and other 4-week courses ($n = 4$). Respondents listed the primary method of communication and technology used in their online course experiences and asked to select all that applied. These responses included: Zoom ($n = 300$), Blackboard/Canvas/LMS ($n = 246$), email ($n = 123$), Brightspace ($n = 107$), and other ($n = 23$), for example Piazza, VHL Central, Tophat, Mylab IT. Although many respondents described use of technology that indicated both synchronous and asynchronous formats for their online courses (i.e., Zoom, recorded lectures), we did not directly ask all participants to identify the a/synchronous nature of the courses. Instead, this project focused on

uncovering students' experiences related to confirmation overall, across all versions of fully online courses. In all, the referenced online courses were housed across university departments, varied in size, were primarily selected as a required course of some form, were experienced during a standard-length semester, and used common online platforms such as Zoom and Blackboard/Canvas/LMS as a means for engaging the course with students.

Methodological Process

The study asked student participants to complete a brief, online survey where they explained teacher behaviors they experienced related to teacher confirmation.¹ Students who answered "yes" for either of the initial screening questions indicating they had either completed or were currently enrolled in a fully online course were allowed to complete the survey.² They were then asked three, open-ended questions about their online course experiences (see Appendix for direct questions). Participants were asked to think of and describe specific experiences or incidents where they felt confirmed by their college teacher (Question 1, $n = 469$ responses), to describe specific teacher behaviors that communicated they were valuable, significant individuals (Question 2, $n = 460$ responses), and to describe behaviors that communicated they were not valuable, significant individuals (Question 3, $n = 456$ responses). Across these responses, 1,947 individual references to specific teacher behaviors were identified.

Analytical Process

After the survey responses were gathered, the research team compiled and analyzed the responses to all items on the survey, both the closed-ended and open-ended questions. Specifically, for participants' written responses, we engaged in a process of thematic analysis to analyze the open-ended responses, guided by both Owen (1984) and Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) 6-phase approaches to Thematic Analysis (TA). These guidelines provide a methodical way to engage with and analyze qualitative data and allow overall themes to emerge from the collected data. Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical method for the final stage of the project because of its ability to uncover the overall sentiments, in this case, in the students' responses about their own experiences. According to Owen (1984), an idea is counted as a theme when three criteria are met: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness. Recurrence occurs when the same thought or meaning occurs throughout the text though different words may be used in each reference. Repetition occurs when there is "explicit repeated use of the same wording" (p. 275) with forcefulness referring to the emphasis placed on certain ideas. Through continued reading and re-reading of the analyzed texts in search of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness of ideas, we identified the major emergent themes. It should also be noted that in preparing for this project, two of the researchers who were not previously familiar with earlier work on confirmation purposefully did not familiarize themselves with the literature before engaging in the analysis. This general methodological choice was made as a supportive step to allow for a more inductive review of participant responses in the study.

1. Survey explanation of confirmation: "When people think about the college course experience, research has identified a number of specific teacher behaviors that communicate to individual students that they are *valuable, significant individuals* where teachers exhibit qualities such as *interest, acceptance, respect, like* and *trust*. When teachers act in this way, students often feel 'endorsed,' 'recognized,' and 'acknowledged' as a unique, valuable human being. These types of behaviors, which can include anything the teacher does during the course experience, are referred to as teacher confirmation."

2. Students were provided the following explanation: "A fully online course is one that is delivered completely online with no in-person components at any point in the course. *For example, a course that meets for a few weeks in person and then switches to online delivery does not count as a fully online course.*"

To begin, each evaluator individually reviewed the same first 50 responses. When these initial reviews were completed, 563 individual codes emerged. Some of these initial individual codes included “*asks me questions*,” “*being considerate of our schedules*,” “*answering questions*,” and “*answering questions in detail*.” After discussion and combining similar individual codes from the three evaluators, we condensed initial subcodes into broad categories for initial full analysis. In all, the following sections provided analysis of these overarching themes and the foundational categories and types of resources that emerged from the data.

Results

Analysis of student responses to the two open-ended questions revealed six major categories of behaviors: use of email, personal engagement with students, class engagement, course structure, feedback, and instructor personality. Within responses to both the confirming and disconfirming questions, detailed behaviors in each of the broad categories emerged. The following sections provide more details about these findings.

Use of Email

Respondents included abundant commentary that referred to their instructor’s use of email as a communication tool. The most frequently mentioned behavior was the time it took for the instructor to respond to an email. Quick and timely responses to emails were valued by students and seen as a sign of confirmation and was highly valued by students. On the other hand, slow or even no responses to emails were viewed as disconfirming. At the most basic level, students saw email response or lack thereof as a significant indicator of how the instructor viewed them as a person and student, “*When teachers don’t respond to emails or other forms of communication, that tells me that they do not see me as a valuable, significant individual.*”

In addition to the time it took to respond to emails, students also noted that qualities of the email such as tone, length, and content contributed to feelings of confirmation or disconfirmation. For example, one student replied that it was confirming when the instructor “*responded to emails with more than just one word.*” Another student wrote, “*He also replied to emails in a warm manner, where I felt like he cared about each student and their needs.*” In addition, students also noted that it was confirming when instructors responded to questions asked in emails and it was disconfirming when their questions were ignored or not responded to. Many students wrote similar comments about the issue of emails not being answered, “*When a professor does not respond to any of my emails.*”

Personal Engagement With Students

This category of responses included comments about the ways in which the instructor interacted with students on a personal, one-to-one basis as well as how the instructor engaged with students in ways not directly relating to course materials. Specific behaviors that students identified included using and knowing the student’s name, actively reaching out to students, asking about life outside of the course, listening to students, and being willing to meet and answer questions outside of class time. One of the most commonly identified behaviors was the use of the student’s name either in conversation during synchronous class sessions or via email and feedback. For example,

In my sociology course, I feel recognized by my professor. He has us start our course with meditation, and uses our names throughout the class to recognize us as human. In my communications class, my professor usually starts with her individually asking all of us to speak, which recognizes us as people. These experiences made the courses more engaging, and like they recognized us as humans.

Conversely, students identified an instructor not knowing or using names as highly disconfirming, “because it feels like the teacher could care less to get to know me.”

Another type of behavior that students felt was highly confirming was the use of communication that indicated to students that the instructor cared about them and their classmates as people. One student wrote,

Every zoom I have for a class, all my teachers begin by asking how everyone is doing and wants a genuine answer. They make sure that we know that they care about our health and wellbeing during this unprecedented time.

Another important behavior respondents identified was being available to meet with students outside of class in office hours or other meetings, for example students listed “teachers who engage with individuals beyond the classroom in the form of one-on-one zoom meetings and emailing” as being confirming.

Class Engagement

These responses included descriptions of behaviors instructors used or did not use when engaging with the class as a whole. Due to the online nature of these courses, some of the responses identified behaviors that would take place during a synchronous session such as a virtual meeting while other responses described behaviors that instructors would use in asynchronous courses. Much like behaviors categorized as personal engagement, students appreciated when instructors engaged with the class as a whole regarding their well-being and lives outside of the classroom. One student described,

Although my professor has hundreds of students, he constantly reaches out to us saying we can email him or come to office hours if we need to talk about anything. As well, the day before election day, he had a zoom call to talk to students and guide relaxation activities to try and help students de-stress. This may not have been towards me specifically, but this made me feel valued as a student.

The tone of instructor communication, whether written or verbal, was described by students as an aspect of behavior that encourages feelings of confirmation or disconfirmation for students. One student explained that they feel confirmed when instructors “speak in a friendly tone of voice. They are not condescending when you ask a question.” Another student described the benefits of having the instructors take time to speak with the class,

My two teachers and four TA's were all very accepting, understanding, and patient with having to do zoomU. After every class, the teachers would say 'If you want to hang back after our lesson ends to tell us about your week or what you're doing this upcoming week, feel free to stay and chat' and a LOT of students would stay and all take turns listening to each other and talking. This almost surpassed the feeling of being in class because even after lectures in person, that doesn't

really happen. They made us feel included and it definitely helped build a relationship closer to everyone in the class!!

When students did not experience any substantive interaction between the instructor and students, it was difficult for students to feel confirmed and connected to their class and instructor. One student described the difficulties they had in online courses,

Thinking about my experiences in fully online classes in college I unfortunately cannot recall a specific incident where I felt confirmed by my professor as a vulnerable, significant individual. Being fully remote caused for no personal face-to-face introductions or connections to be made. I watch lectures of my professors and submit my assignments through Brightspace, never speaking to my professor, so it sometimes really feels like you are learning completely on your own.

Course Structure

Responses in this category were focused on the ways the courses were structured in terms of both the learning platform and the activities and components of the course. Many of the responses in this category addressed structural elements that are unique to online courses. For example, participants wrote about the use of cameras by both the instructor and students during synchronous sessions. Students appreciated instructors who had their camera on during live sessions and encouraged or required class members to keep their cameras on as well. One student replied, “*She requested everyone to have their cameras on and explained how important that meant for her to make this an interactive class.*” Camera behavior that a majority of students saw as disconfirming was the instructor keeping their camera off and allowing students to not have cameras on during live sessions. The complexity of this finding was demonstrated in the descriptions by a smaller number of students who conversely preferred not having to be on cameras themselves and appreciated not having a requirement.

Another area of course structure that students frequently mentioned was the use of videos. There were situations where instructors’ use of videos and the content of the videos was seen as negative. Students listed using only pre-recorded video lectures and no other forms of interaction with the instructor as disconfirming. One student wrote “*Uploading pre-recorded videos and pre-written emails that completely disconnect you as a professor from your students.*” This same respondent went on to equate posting only videos as being equivalent to, “*Not TEACHING YOUR CLASSES.*” Other students noted that when instructors did not interact with the class in other ways and only used what appeared to them to be pre-produced videos it felt as if the instructor was not doing anything to actively engage with students and “teach” the class.

Another feature of course structure not related to videos that was frequently mentioned was the organization of the course in terms of schedule and the layout of the course itself within the learning management system. One respondent bluntly stated, “*They made the schedule in the beginning of the semester and stuck to it.*” In contrast, students reported that having an inaccurate or frequently changing course schedule and difficult-to-locate course materials felt as if the instructor was not attending to their needs. One student explained, “*I’ve had instructors change the syllabus without telling students, leaving us confused and overwhelmed.*”

Personality

Responses in this category identified personality traits of instructors—such as being kind, understanding, empathetic, respectful, and flexible—that participants connected to feelings of confirmation. In addition to identifying specific traits, the responses often provided examples of behaviors that demonstrated those traits. One response mentioned several personality traits that made the student feel confirmed as they described their instructor,

When a student voices a concern about an assignment/deadline, he relays that concern with the class and is very flexible. If a majority of the students are having issues, he is welcome to the idea of making adjustments for the benefit of the students. He is fair and really listens to the students and implements changes when needed.

Another student described the value of patience in an instructor. Here, they wrote,

When my teacher called my name and waited for me to carefully piece out a question—though I was doing so very slowly and not forming a super coherent thought, I felt like I was valued and significant to her. When teachers listen with patience and understanding in general, I feel as though they care about me.

Students also wrote about the importance they placed on instructors being flexible in terms of due dates, accepting late work, and even in changing elements of the class. When an instructor listened to students' concerns or issues and was willing to make a change to accommodate students or classes with challenges, students felt seen and valued. One student responded,

Our teacher stays in really good communication with all the students via email and Brightspace. When a student voices a concern about an assignment/deadline, he relays that concern with the class and is very flexible. If a majority of the students are having issues, he is welcome to the idea of making adjustments for the benefit of the students. He is fair and really listens to the students and implements changes when needed.

In contrast, instructors who were perceived as being inflexible and unwilling to make changes to assignments and due dates were viewed as disconfirming and students noted that they felt like in these situations the instructor was not willing to consider personal issues and difficulties that students were experiencing, “*being inflexible and not understanding, refusing to acknowledge and validate hardships, treating students like inferiors or subordinates.*”

Frequently mentioned personality traits included being kind, caring, and empathetic. Students described how an instructor's personality when answering questions, responding to emails, and when interacting with students made them feel valued and as if the instructor cared about them and the class. One student wrote, “*Thankfully, he was very kind when it comes to the time he gives us during an exam, being very quick with responding emails, keeping contact with the students, and holding very helpful midterm review sessions.*” Another student reported,

When I met up one-on-one over zoom with some of my teachers to discuss my accommodations, they made it very clear that I would get all of the help and accommodations I needed and that I could come to them if I needed anything. They were very caring and made me feel as if my issues mattered.

Similarly, the word understanding was often used to describe what made an instructor's behavior feel either confirming or disconfirming. When students wrote about an instructor being understanding they referenced examples when the instructor was sympathetic to them, cared about the student's circumstances, and was willing to make adjustments to the course or assignments based on students' issues and concerns. One student wrote,

I was struggling with mental health and trying to stay on top of my assignments at the same time, and my STAT 100 professor talked to me during office hours and was very understanding and really seemed to care about my wellbeing.

The opposite of an understanding instructor was one that did not seem to take students and their situations in account. For example,

When teachers are not understanding. For example, many teachers have hard deadlines, or a significant portion of the grade comes from participation. When we are fully online, there are always bound to be internet issues. Not being able to join zoom one day because one's internet is down is not an excuse to say they did not participate in class. Not being able to submit something on Canvas because too many people are on and the site is down is not an excuse to dock a grade. These things are out of our control, and we should not be getting punished for it.

Other personality traits that were mentioned as being disconfirming included inflexible, arrogant, not understanding, and rude. One student described these types of negative traits, "*being inflexible and not understanding, refusing to acknowledge and validate hardships, treating students like inferiors or subordinates.*" Another student wrote, "*distant, rude, hard to talk to, condescending, intimidating.*"

Feedback

The type, quality, content, frequency, and timeliness of feedback were frequently named as confirming or disconfirming behaviors. Students reported that receiving feedback on everything from comments made in class to discussion boards to assignments was a way that they knew the instructor was seeing them and their work. One explained, "*My journalism professor gave me valuable feedback about my participation and engagement in the course as well as how my writing has improved over the semester.*" Another offered similar sentiments,

The biggest area in which I feel recognized and endorsed by my teachers is when they are giving me direct feedback on my work. In both ENGL and COMM (both are fully online) my teachers leave comments on my presentations and essays. These comments are for the most part positive and really make me feel good about the work I've accomplished for the assignment.

Students repeatedly listed giving little to no feedback as a disconfirming behavior—"Teachers giving grades with little or no feedback." Students also described delayed and late feedback as being disconfirming.

Discussion

The guiding question of this study aimed to uncover teacher behaviors that communicate confirmation or disconfirmation to students in online courses through students' own descriptions of their experiences. Analysis of student responses in which they listed confirming and disconfirming teacher behaviors

revealed that students identified a wide variety of behaviors as confirming and provided numerous examples of how those behaviors were enacted in online classrooms. From the analysis, we identified four major areas of behaviors that instructors can use or avoid in order to promote feelings of confirmation among online students: communication through email, engagement with the course and students, building a course with an appropriate structure, and behaviors connected to instructor personality.

The first area of behaviors involved instructor's use or lack thereof of email as a communication tool. This is significant given that in an online class, email may often be a primary or even sole form of direct communication between instructors and students, especially in asynchronous courses where there is no live interaction. Prompt and engaged email responses from instructors were a way for instructors to demonstrate that they were engaged with students and recognized their questions and concerns. Emails that were not answered or were very delayed sent a message to students that they were not important and valued. Knowing this, online instructors may need to prioritize their email and may also need to set expectations for students about likely response times. These findings confirm prior work indicating the importance of timely communication between faculty and students (Pate et al., 2022; Tatum, et al., 2018) as well as research that has found that email communication is a way to create relationships and indicate caring in online courses (LaBarbera, 2013; Oyarzun et al., 2018).

The second area of behaviors pertained to the ways instructors engaged with students on an individual level and engaged with the class as a whole. In general, students valued communication that demonstrated that the instructor cared and was invested in the students, their success, and their ability to successfully navigate the course. These behaviors are consistent with other research that has documented the positive impacts of caring and recognition of students (Burke & Lamar, 2021; Sellnow et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2021) as well as work on social presence in online classrooms (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Turk et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). In addition to being responsive to email, students mentioned a variety of behaviors such as responding to student questions posted in a chat feature and sending out frequent announcements about upcoming course content. In the online format, instructors have a variety of options regarding how and when to communicate with students depending on the format of the course. For example, in synchronous classes, in addition to answering questions posed verbally by the students during live sessions, several students mentioned answering questions posed in the chat function of the course. This can present a possible challenge for instructors in synchronous sections who are managing the ongoing conversation and trying to keep up with the chat function. Another behavior that may be unique to students' preferred teaching style in online courses is frequent and proactive communication about the course which includes behaviors such as sending out a weekly email or using course announcements.

Another form of engagement commonly mentioned was providing feedback that was informative, helpful, and timely. In an online class, the feedback instructors provide is again one of the primary forms of communication and interaction. While students in a face-to-face class have the opportunity to receive informal feedback from an instructor during classes and lectures, this channel is often absent from online courses and especially asynchronous ones. This means that written and verbal feedback provided by instructors in online courses can be even more important as an opportunity for personalized communication with each student. When planning for and teaching an online course, instructors should consider the amount of time and effort it will take to provide individualized communication that students connect to feelings of confirmation.

Another specific behavior that students identified when writing about engagement was instructors showing interest in the students as people outside of the context of the classroom. Frequently, students mentioned the importance of the instructor knowing and using their name. Even in asynchronous courses, instructors could demonstrate knowing a student by using their name in feedback or referring to a student's previous work or comments. Behaviors such as asking about students' lives out of class and inquiring about their general well-being were also frequently mentioned. Students mentioned the importance of feeling like they were not just another face or number in the class and feeling that the instructor saw them as an individual and unique person.

Third, several comments pointed to the format of the course itself and how the instructor used the online platform as a way that could confirm or disconfirm students. For example, a poorly organized LMS site was viewed as disconfirming behavior and students attributed the lack of organization to an ineffective teaching style. This is unique from prior research on teacher confirmation that has looked at traditional in-person classes where class structure and format have not been a consideration (Ellis, 2000, 2004). This makes sense given that the online platform where the course is held, whether synchronously or asynchronously, highly affects the types of teaching practices that can be incorporated into a course and builds on prior research that has identified course structure as key contributor to student perceptions of the instructor in online courses (Brophy et al., 2021; Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). Additionally, the online format becomes one of the primary ways that students engage with the instructor and the course.

This is an important finding because some instructors, particularly those who have to quickly move a course to an online format, may not be familiar with designing and laying out an online course which can greatly impact their students' perceptions of them. One aspect of course setup that is typically unique to the online space was how instructors used video in their teaching. Instructors who are not meeting with their students in person must make decisions about how and if they will use videos of themselves covering course material and how they will use their own and student cameras during synchronous sections. Interestingly, a frequent comment students made was that highly produced videos did not make students feel confirmed as these types of videos felt more like something that was produced and reused in numerous courses versus authentic, tailored communication. Students differentiated between a streamlined and in some ways commodified class structure, where instructional items can be reused each semester and where students primarily read text and submit assignments, versus an online class with instructional items tailored to specific sections each semester and intensive from the instructional end.

Finally, one of the interesting things about the responses in this study was the focus on the instructor's personality and how instructors' behaviors demonstrate desired personality traits. Even when asked to describe specific experiences in online courses, student participants often wrote about the type of person or personality traits of their instructors that made them feel confirmed. It is from this long list of desired personality traits that one can begin to get a picture of what students desire in an instructor. Some of the terms that students used such as being understanding, caring, and being flexible could mean different things to different students and further exploration of the corresponding teacher behaviors students identify can provide guidance on teaching strategies and styles.

The findings of this study provide guidance for instructors in online courses on ways to increase students' perceptions of teacher confirmation. Given that the majority of literature of teacher confirmation has focused on in-person course experiences, these findings are beneficial in that they identify unique

ways instructors can enact confirming behaviors and traits in an online environment. Some examples of confirming behaviors identified here include responding promptly and thoroughly to emails, using email frequently to communicate with students about course happenings, showing a personal interest in students by asking them about their lives outside of the courses, and creating a structured online environment that is easy for students to navigate.

Limitations and Future Research

In any research study, there are limitations that need to be examined. First, the project was developed during the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and abrupt shift to online instruction. This was, and continues to be, a tumultuous time for higher education. Although the dramatic push for online instruction created some challenges, it also served as an opportunity for faculty and students to explore the possibilities of online teaching and learning. We propose that ongoing research is needed to understand how perceptions of and expectations for confirmation change as more instructors and students adapt to mediated learning environments.

Second, this project captured the perspective of confirmation from the student perspective without exploration of faculty perceptions of their experiences. While this project was focused on student perceptions and outcomes and follows previous guiding research in this area, this practice produces only a partial portrayal of the communicative process that underlies confirmation. As such, future research should not only examine instructor's perception of confirmation, but also highlight the co-construction of confirmation that is made possible through the interactions of both students and instructors.

Finally, this project identified broad communicative behaviors that students described as confirming. These behaviors are not ranked in terms of importance nor did we measure how each behavior impacted perceptions of confirmation. Future research should build on our work by using the identified communicative behaviors as categories to develop an online confirmation scale that better conceptualizes confirmation in virtual educational environments and analyzes differences from in-person instructional communicative practices when mediated. Additionally, we did not ask participants to directly identify whether the courses they referenced were (a)synchronous in format. While participants' written answers indicated a variety of online formats (i.e., references to Zoom or recorded lectures), future research should investigate the difference between synchronous and asynchronous online courses as this may impact instructor and student interactions and students' feelings of confirmation in those interactions.

Conclusion

As more and more of our higher education system moves to online and hybrid formats, this study provides detailed descriptions in students' own words of specific tactics instructors can use and avoid in order to promote feelings of confirmation in their students. It also demonstrated the amount of time and labor that teaching an online course requires and the impact that investment has on our students.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

After the brief overview paragraph explaining confirmation, participants were asked the following questions:

1. Thinking about your past experiences in online classes, can you recall a specific experience or incident where you felt confirmed by your college teacher as a valuable, significant individual? Using the space below, describe this specific experience and your teacher's behaviors that were important parts of that experience.
2. When thinking about your online class experiences in general, what teacher behaviors (things that teachers do) communicate to you that you are a valuable, significant individual? (*list as many examples as come to mind*)
3. When thinking about your online class experiences in general, what teacher behaviors communicate to you that you are **not** a valuable, significant individual? (*list as many examples as come to mind*)