

ASSESSING THE SENSE COMMUNITY IN ONLINE COURSES: INTERNAL CONSISTENCY AND CONVERGENT VALIDITY OF THE SSCC

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Sense of community concerns the perception of similarity and strong interdependence with others, and the feeling of being a member of a stable group (i. e.: Davidson & Cotter, 1991). According to the model of McMillan and Chavis (1986), main theoretical reference in the field, the sense of community made up of four distinct interrelated dimensions: (1) Membership, (2) Influence of member on the community and vice versa, (3) Personal fulfilment and integration of needs, and (4) Shared emotional connection. In online courses the sense of community contributes significantly to the success of the course in terms of quality of learning and individual students' satisfaction (i. e.: Rovai, 2002). Supporting it, it's therefore essential to foster the development of adequate levels of motivation and involvement in activities (Battisch et al., 1997) and to prevent academic failure and early school dropout caused by physical separation from the University (Rovai e Wighting 2005). However, despite its potential advantages, currently there are few tools that allow a valid and reliable assessment of sense of community in online courses. For this purpose, the Scale of Sense Community in online Course (SSCC, Perrucci et al. 2008, 2009) has been developed with reference to the model of McMillan and Chavis. The aim of this study is to verify the internal consistency and convergent validity of the questionnaire, comparing with other Scales that measure the Sense of Community and related although distinct constructs, such as Social Support and Perceived Social Identity.

The SSCC was administered to 114 students, attending 8 online courses of 5 Italian Universities. Students attending each course were randomly divided into two groups. During the second half of each course, all participants filled out the SSCC, together with other two questionnaires, already validated and opportunely adapted to the context of online courses. After completing the SSCC, the first group of students [N = 52] filled out the Italian Scale of Sense of Community (Prezza et al., 1999) and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988), while the second group [N = 62] completed the Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002) and the Social Identity Questionnaire (Cameron, 2004).

SSCC internal consistency was .92, excellent according to the International Test Commission (ITC) criteria. Correlations between scores of SSCC and other scales of the sense of community by Prezza et al. (1999) and by Rovai (2002), were respectively equal to .84 and .83 ($p < .01$); excellent according to the ITC criteria, but not so high to assume an overlap between instruments.

Correlations between scores of SSCC and scales by Zimet et al. (1988) and by Cameron (2004), measuring close but distinct constructs from sense of community, were respectively equal to .77 and .61 ($p < .01$). that are average magnitude according to the ITC criteria and lower than those obtained with both the other scales of Sense of Community.

According to these results, it can be argued that the SSCC is reliable in measuring the sense of community in online courses, and valid in discriminating from other similar constructs. Further investigation of psychometric properties will determine whether the factor structure of SSCC is consistent with the dimensions assumed by the model of McMillan and Chavis (1986). The SSCC should be used to verify if students perceive themselves as a part of community, comparing different models oriented to create a community focused on learning (e.g Community of Inquiry Garrison & Anderson, 2002) and another oriented to create a Knowledge Building Community (KBC hereinafter) (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006). In addition we can the study the role of the sense of community in a KBC in two main directions. First of all it will be possible to analyse the relationship among knowledge building activity, quantitatively checked in terms of reading and

writing in Knowledge Forum, and sense of community perceived by participants, to verify if an higher level or knowledge building is associated to a stronger perception to be part of a community. A second direction of inquiry could foresee the use of qualitative instruments (e.g. Content Analysis) to analyse if the participant recognize in their on line activity the presence of the 12 principles of the KBC model (Scardamalia, 2002) and to verify if these principles measured through these instruments are correlated, overall or in part, to the 4 factors of the sense of community measured by the SSCC.

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