

Understanding Issues Affecting Students' Commitment to Online Discussion Forums in Undergraduate Courses

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Abstract—Online education complements traditional pedagogies and strengthens students' learning. However, students' commitment impacts their participation, and it is essential to understand the factors responsible for their commitment levels in the online learning context. Thus, this study explored students' commitment and factors impacting their commitment to the online discussion forums that complement teaching and learning in two undergraduate courses. Using quantitative and qualitative strategies, we collected and analyzed data to address our research questions. The findings indicate that students were reasonably committed to online discussion forums in this study. This could be because they have technological skills, found the platform beneficial, and were less distracted when engaging online. That said, our findings reveal that students' commitment to online discussions can be fostered with prompt faculty support, exciting topics, and time to adjust to the new learning platform.

Keywords—Online discussion forum, students' commitment, undergraduate courses

1 Introduction

Online teaching strategies are gaining popularity as they help overcome issues like classroom time constraints, inadequate resources, and high student enrollment that limit in-depth participation in classroom discussions [1]. The need to supplement the traditional face-to-face (f2f) teaching with asynchronous activities offering students the flexibility to engage with learning resources and peers at their own pace is also well-documented [2, 3].

Research indicates that students' learning is strengthened through asynchronous learning conversations using educational and social computing software such as online discussion boards, blogs, and wikis. Students' knowledge development and education improve when f2f teaching is combined with online activities [4]. It is also explained that online discussion boards allow students to learn, engage, and develop critical thinking skills through asynchronous learning conversations [2; 5]. Furthermore, online discussion boards can be readily accessed through mobile technology anywhere and anytime, thereby ensuring learning both within and outside the classroom [6]. Besides, asynchronous online discussion boards promote meta-cognitive reasoning, essential

skills of analysis, personalized, interactive, and experiential learning experiences for students without time or location constraints [7].

Despite its functionalities and capacities for helping students to gain knowledge through online collaborative activities, our experience led us to believe that students' commitment to online discussions needs to be strengthened. In a recent study, scholars report that students appreciate the flexibility elements of the online learning platforms but appear to have a low disposition to reflection and collaboration [8]. Studies also indicate that students' cooperation [9] and commitment to sharing ideas in online discussions can impact their engagement and learning [2]. The faculty's approach may also affect students' commitment and engagement in online discussions [2]. As the primary and end-users of educational technology in the classroom, students' feedback can also improve the teaching technique [9]. Not surprisingly, it is argued that more studies are needed to explore students' acceptability of online learning and the factors responsible for their decisions [10]. As explained, this is essential as educators need to understand students' views for practical design and delivery of online learning platforms [3].

Therefore, this study examines students' commitment and factors, guiding their commitment levels in online discussion forums in undergraduate courses where the f2f teaching was supplemented with online learning. In doing this, the study provides insight into students' commitment levels to online discussion forums, and their contributing factors to the levels reported. Besides, the study results will enhance the strategies for stakeholders in higher education, including faculty, course designers, and university leadership, to strengthen students' commitment to the online discussion forum. As such, we contend that this study contributes to the body of knowledge on the ever-changing online education issues in higher education contexts.

In the next section, we present our literature review, followed by the methodology section. After that, we present our findings, discussions, and conclusion, highlighting the study's implications.

2 Literature Review

Today, we are witnessing changes informed by the invention and application of technology in all spheres of our lives, including and, most importantly, the digital platforms in education [8]. Indeed, technology has infiltrated the classroom and is viewed to help develop a learner-centered environment in higher education. The eLearning market is growing continually and evolving, reaffirming the shift to online learning [11]. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has also necessitated a radical change to online education across the globe. There is, however, a wide range of technological tools to facilitate learning in the digital world. Some of these digital tools are mobile technology, online discussion boards, blogs, learning management systems (LMS), enabling on-the-go learning experiences. For instance, the LMS is extensively used by most universities worldwide as an excellent platform for the exchange of information and communication, enhancing active learning [12]. Online learning benefits are its flexibility, accessibility, and interactivity, enabling students to access learning materials and services anywhere and anytime [3; 4; 6].

The online discussion board is another commonly used online teaching tool to encourage student participation, collaboration, and deeper learning [2; 13]. Students can communicate their ideas through discussion boards with thoughtful and composed dialogue unfolding over time, allowing for individual reflection and exploratory learning and literacy skills' development [14]. This is in line with the constructivist approach to teaching and learning, which ensures active and deep understanding [2] and encourages socialization through scaffolding [15]. As proposed in the literature, collective efficacy and the perception of group capability to achieve a goal positively affect group collaboration [16]. The social ability, which is the measure of how students use their social context resources to achieve goals, is suggested to impact collaborative works [17].

The educator's role is vital in creating and ensuring the appropriateness and success of online learning discussion forums. Two fundamental factors impact the faculty adoption of digital technology [6], including the faculty's comfort level with the adoption of information technology skills. Further, the educator needs to be an active participant and moderator with the technological skills and knowledge to guide or assist learners in the right direction [18]. If the facilitator does not possess this skill of moderating the online discussion, students can lose interest in learning and potentially fail the course. Educators also need to regularly visit the online learning environment, respond to questions, suggest different views, and provide relevant information [19]. More so, facilitators need to monitor students' activities carefully and ensure that they respect the netiquettes of online forums [20]. It is also worth mentioning that the success or failure of the online pedagogy depends on the instructors' comfort level to introduce and sustain the effective use of technology in the online learning context [21].

Students' comfort and familiarity with technology have also been found to affect their learning in online education settings. The present generation of students is well versed in using smartphones from their childhood. That explains why they find it easy to use mobile devices to learn and socialize in formal and informal educational contexts [22]. In the literature, it is argued that students can be bored, unmotivated, and disengaged when old teaching methods are believed to be outdated used in the educational world [23]. Stressing further, the scholars advocated for online teaching and learning environments supported by the deployment of digital games (gamification) to foster students' engagement and learning [23]. That said, students with more experience using technology and a positive attitude can potentially do better in an online education environment [24]. So, students need to be active participants in the learning process, and the learning theory underpinning the curriculum needs to be transparent for effective teaching and learning in online education [15]. Students' learning and success in the online education have also been associated with their engagement's level [15]. However, unorganized students' engagement can lead to a situation where students feel isolated [25].

Online education has helped students overcome the challenges associated with time and distance [26]. The asynchronous feature of the online pedagogy where students engage at their pace makes them feel that they have control of their education, unlike the traditional teacher-led methodology [21; 27]. Thus, creating an online student community is vital because it enables students to establish professional and supportive com-

munication channels that transcend time and geography [28]. Factors supporting student participation in online discussions has also been explored in the literature. This includes interface characteristics, content and material, student roles and instructional tasks, and information overload. However, issues related to students' commitment to the online discussion postings have not been well-researched. As such, our study explored the issues, collecting and analyzing data with a focus on the following research questions:

1. How committed were students to online discussions in the courses?
2. What are the factors that influenced students' commitment to online discussions in the courses?

3 Methods

In this study, we employed a survey approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data for answering our research questions. We adopted this approach as the mixed methods strategy offers a basis for the triangulation of findings, better understanding of a complex phenomenon and the validity of an informed conclusion [29; 30].

3.1 Data collection

We selected two courses in the Departments of Education and Nursing, where a combination of the traditional pedagogy and online discussion forums was used to deliver course resources and facilitate students' learning. We then invited all the students in the courses at the end of the semester to anonymously complete a self-designed questionnaire. Students were assured of their rights not to be involved or pull out of the study at any time without any repercussions. We coded the students' responses in terms of their group, with A being those in the General Education class and B from the Nursing class. We validated the questionnaire by sharing our first draft with some students and colleagues with expertise in online courses, and we used their feedback to revise the final draft [31; 32]. We confirmed that the questionnaire items were suitable for achieving our research goals and are easily understood by the participants in our study. We sent multiple reminders through the announcement link of the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) of the University to increase students' participation.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section focused on the students' demographics, while the second part was arranged on a 4-point Likert scale to get students' views on issues related to their commitments to online discussions. The last portion of the questionnaire was designed to tap into students' nuanced and subjective thoughts on factors responsible for their level of commitment to online discussions in the courses [32].

We collected 36 completed questionnaires accounting for 40% of the students in the two classes. We understand that the sample involved in the study was not enough to generalize based on our conclusion. Our intention was not to generalize but to collect

rich data related to students' commitment to our online discussion classes [32]. However, transferability may be possible due to the rigor and conclusions drawn using a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. Table 1 shows the students' demographic characteristics with a higher number of them being female, in their early twenty, single, and attended private schools.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

S/N	Variable	Description	Percentage
1	Group/Course	General Education	22
		Nursing	14
2	Year of Study	Year 1	5
		Year 2	10
		Year 3	7
		Year 4	10
		Year 5	2
		Missing	2
3	Age	18 – 22	16
		23 – 27	6
		28 – 32	5
		33 and above	7
		Missing	2
4	Gender	Male	8
		Female	26
		Missing	2
5	School Attended	Public	10
		Private	22
		Missing	4
6	Marital Status	Married	6
		Single	28
		Missing	2

3.2 Data analysis

We analyzed our quantitative data descriptively using SPSS (Version 24). In doing this, we started by clustering the twelve items in the quantitative part of our questionnaire into five underlying themes (new variables). Then, we calculated the median (central tendency) of the items in each theme, after which, we calculated the interquartile range of each item in the themes. Calculating the median helped us to determine what most of the participants believe in regarding the available options. On the other hand, the interquartile range offered insights into the closeness or spread (variability) in the participants' responses across the items in each theme [33].

We present the findings in graphs and the summary in a table, showing median and interquartile range related to each of the new themes. Further, we provide our interpretation of the median figure to indicate high or low possibility from the participants' thoughts. We also highlight and discuss the interquartile range to show the extent to which the participants agreed on an idea or position, with IQR 1 indicating consensus from the participants' perspectives.

Our qualitative data analysis followed the three steps for qualitative coding data suggested in the literature [34] and influenced by the grounded theory methodology [35; 36]. We started by generating generic codes emerging from students' thoughts. Then, we decided on more precise themes capturing the salient views of our participants, after which, we select categories around the fundamental ideas derived from the students' opinions.

4 Findings

In this section, we report the findings of our study, starting with the quantitative data.

4.1 Quantitative data

As earlier explained, we clustered and analyzed our survey's quantitative components using descriptive statistics of median and inter-quartile range. The first cluster explored students' commitment level to online discussions in the courses.

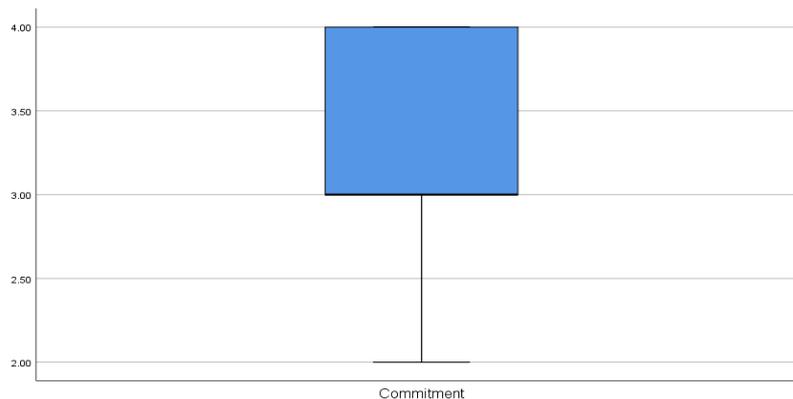


Fig. 1. Students' commitment to online discussions

As Figure 1 shows, we found a median of 3.0 and an interquartile range of 1. With a median of 3.0, the participants are not highly committed. Instead, they were reasonably dedicated to online discussions in the classes. IQR of 1 indicates that most of the participants hold the position that they are relatively committed to online discussions. We also checked the participants' engagement level to strengthen our understanding of the participants' commitment to online discussions. In the next cluster, we checked the students' engagement level.

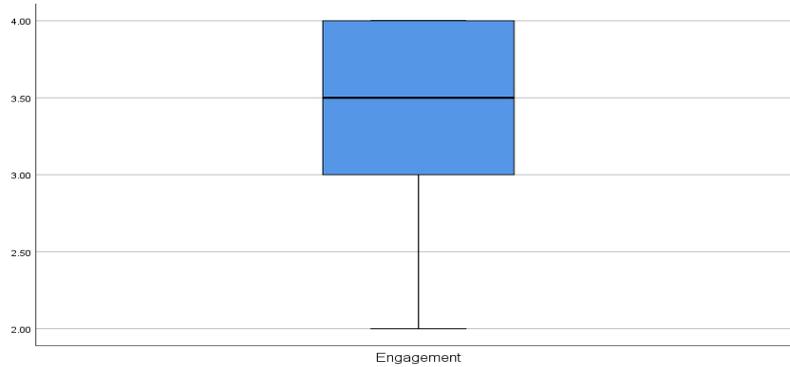


Fig. 2. Students' engagement to online discussions

As shown in Figure 2, we found a median of 3.5 with a 1.0 interquartile range. The median indicates that the participants' level of engagement in the online discussions was high. On the other hand, an IQR of 1 shows a consensus on the view that participants' engagement level was high. In the next cluster, we checked the students' level of technological skills.

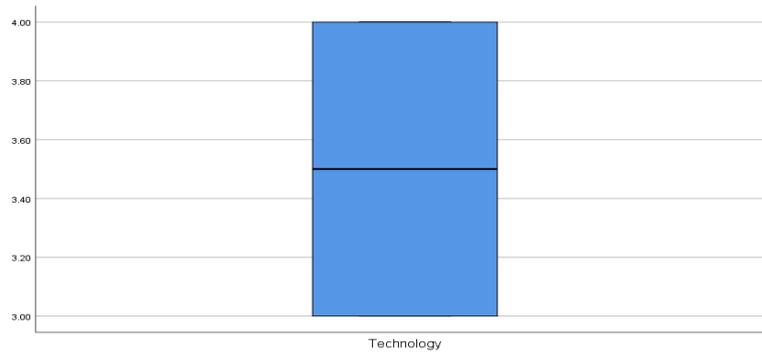


Fig. 3. Students' technological skills

Figure 3 shows a median of 3.5 with an interquartile range of 1. Given that the median is high and the IQR is 1, the finding suggests that most of the participants agreed that they have considerable technological skills. In the second cluster, we checked the students' level of technological skills. In the next cluster, we checked the extent to which the participants found the online discussion beneficial.

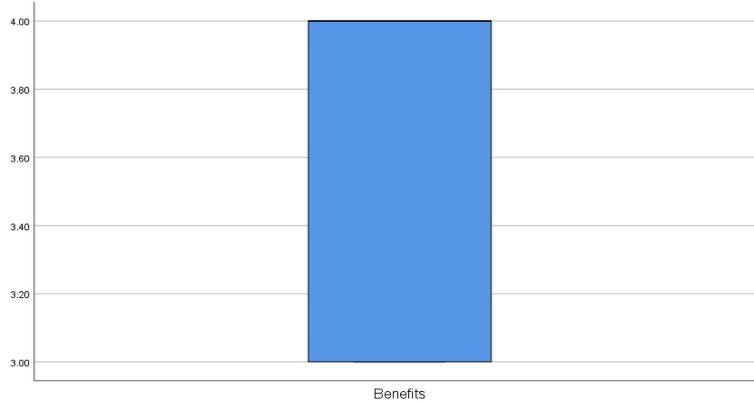


Fig. 4. Students' perceived benefits of online discussions

As shown in Figure 4, we found a median of 3.5 and 1.0 interquartile range. With a median of 3.5 and IQR 1, we conclude that most of the participants found the approach beneficial in the classes as the median of 3.5 is high, and IQR of 1 indicates a strong consensus. Lastly, we checked with the participants if there were some distractions when engaging in online discussions. Figure 5 below shows the findings.

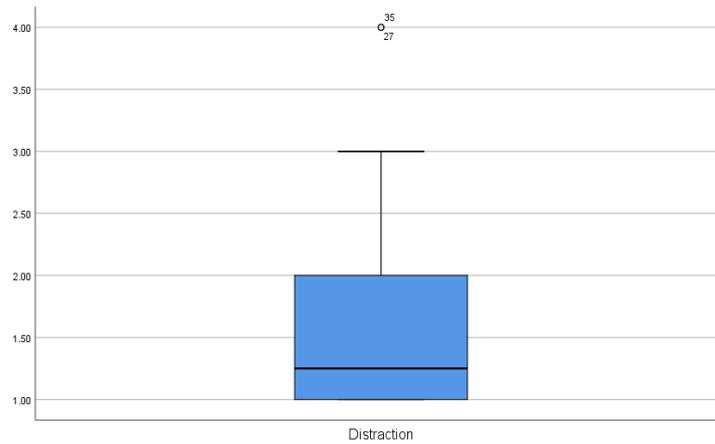


Fig. 5. Students' perceived distraction to online discussions

From the data analyzed, we found a median of 1.25, which shows an insignificant or low distraction with an interquartile range of 1, indicating that most of the participants agreed with the position. Thus, we conclude that our participants were minimally or insignificantly distracted when engaging with one another in the online discussions.

In the Table 2 below, we provide a summary of the quantitative findings.

Table 2. Summary of the quantitative findings

Theme	No	Median	SD	IR	Skewness	Kurtosis
Commitment	36	3.0	.364	1.00	-.487	-.582
Engagement	36	3.5	.55563	1.00	-.468	-.557
Technology	36	3.5	.43095	1.00	.000	-1.677
Benefits	36	4.0	.50000	1.00	-.353	-1.989
Distraction	36	1.25	.84186	1.00	1.436	1.672

Our quantitative data indicates that students were not highly committed, but they are reasonably committed to the online discussion forum. Even so, the results show that students' engagement level is high when involved and interfacing with colleagues on the platform. This could be because they have high technological skills and they also found the forum to be highly beneficial. As the data revealed, this could also be because they were minimally or not distracted in the classes' online discussion forum.

We will now turn our attention to the qualitative data collected and analyzed to clarify our quantitative findings further. As mentioned earlier, we garnered some open-ended data, allowing our participants to share their nuanced sentiments related to our study's goals.

4.2 Qualitative data

Drawing on the thematic analysis of the qualitative part of our questionnaire, we present our qualitative findings as follows:

Question 1: How would you describe your level of commitment and general experience in the online discussion?

We asked the students to describe their commitment and broad experience in the online discussions used to complement our classes' f2f interaction. From the data analyzed, we found three common themes representing the thoughts of our participants. These are enunciated as follows:

Engaged and Committed

Our participants indicated that they were very engaged and committed to the online discussions in the classes, as shown below.

Very engaged and committed (A1)

High level of committed (B5)

Committed to the discussion (B8)

Supporting this sentiment, some participants explained that they were not only committed to the online discussions; they also found the experience exciting and enjoyable.

Very committed and interesting (A8)

Very committed and a great experience

Committed and enjoyed the features of the online discussions (A18)

In the same vein, some participants indicated that even though the online discussion was a new experience, they found it interesting:

New experience but interesting

A good and new experience (A9)

A new experience and interesting (A11)

New experience and interesting (B2)

These findings suggest that the participants had a good experience learning through the online discussions in the courses. Despite that it was new to some of them, they found it interesting. Thus, facilitators need to consider using the platform to stimulate students' interest in their courses.

Helpful

As our data showed, the participants did not just find the online discussions exciting, but they also found it helpful. In confirming how useful they found the platform, some participants explained that it helped them understand the concepts explored in the courses:

Gained a better understanding of topics (A4)

Helped to understand opinions and with expression of opinions freely (A6)

Provides an opportunity to gain more knowledge (B8)

Others indicated that they found the online discussions beneficial in that it helped them develop research and soft skills such as communication and confidence.

Easy way to learn and a good way for communication (B9)

Feel confident and a knowledgeable experience (B11)

Helpful with research (A14)

Despite reporting that the platform was helpful, some found it difficult:

Fun experience but was hectic (A17)

The findings show that online discussions can help students better understand course content and develop some transferrable skills. Even so, it may be hectic for some students to engage and collaborate through the platform. This may explain why some students indicated that their commitment level was low.

Low commitment level

Even though the participants reported that they found the online discussions useful, some indicated that their commitment level was moderate. Despite their considerably low commitment, they also stated that they found the experience enjoyable:

Not too committed but favorable experience (A2)

Moderate level of commitment and it interesting experience (A16)

An average level of commitment (A21)

Explaining this further, some participants indicated that they were unable to get involved perhaps enough as they would have liked but later developed more interest in the platform.

Not able to get involved (B1)

Difficult to commit at first but later got used to it (B4)

Through these findings, it could be deduced that students may not be as committed as their facilitators may like, probably because the experience is new. It also suggests that they may need time to adapt and tune in to the platform in line with their facilitators' advice.

Question 2: What are the factors responsible for your level of commitment and general experience of the online discussion?

We wanted to determine the factors responsible for the participants' level of commitment and their broad experience of the online discussion in the classes. So, we invited them to clarify the factors informing their experience. Four themes emerged from the data analyzed, and they are highlighted as follows:

Interaction and learning with colleagues

As the participants indicated, the online discussions offered them the chance to engage and interact with one another in the courses.

Interaction between students (A2)

Sharing knowledge and interaction with colleagues (A4)

Not only did they interact through the online discussions, but the approach also allowed them to share thoughts and feedback, thereby strengthening the learning process.

Feedback and students' interaction (A9)

Learning from others (A1)

The data showed that the online discussions supported the students' learning in that they were able to share thoughts while engaging on the platform.

Interesting Topics and good grades

Besides the opportunity to learn and engage, the participants explained that they found exciting topics stimulating and encouraging while learning in the courses through the online discussions.

Interesting topics (A12)

Interesting topics (A14)

Adding to interesting topics, some noted the need to get good grades as a reason for their commitment to the courses' online discussions.

Interesting and need to get a high grade (A22)

Obtaining grades and interesting topics (A12)

Without a doubt, these findings indicate that educators should consider covering topics that could be exciting in stimulating students' interest and commitment to the learning process.

Instructor guidance

Further, the participants found the instructor's guidance and advice as impactful and encouraging in the courses' online discussions, as shown below.

Instructor's guidance (A10)

Level of instructor's direction and advice (B11)

Instructor's guidance (A16)

From the data, it is apparent that instructors need to provide clear guidelines and advice to students as a measure for fostering their commitment to online discussions.

Time factor

Time is another factor influencing the participants' commitment levels to online discussions in this study. On the one hand, some participants indicate that lack of enough

time due to workload, which may include University, work, and home-related responsibilities impact their commitment to online discussions:

Shortage of time is a factor (B1)

Time and work overload (B6)

On the other hand, some explained that being able to manage their time efficiently helped and influenced their commitment level to the online discussion forum in the courses. This is highlighted as follows:

Time management (A13)

Time efficiency and communication (A3)

It is clear from the data that time plays an essential role in students' commitment levels in the online discussion forum. While some may be impacted negatively because of time constraints and heavy workload, some were able to engage effectively online because of the time management skills.

Question 3: What do you think should be done differently to enhance students' commitment and learning experiences in online discussions?

We checked with the participants to clarify things that can be done differently to strengthen students' commitment to online discussions. From the data analyzed, we found three themes as commonly expressed sentiments.

Instructor's involvement and encouragement

A salient point raised by the participants is that the instructor should get more involved in the online discussions when used to complement the f2f sessions.

There is a need for the professor to get involved in the discussions (A2)

More instructor's involvement in discussions (A22)

In doing this, it is believed that the instructor can help validate students' views in the course of engaging with one another in the courses' online discussions. A participant explains thus:

Instructor's presence to validate views (B4)

From the data, instructors have to be more involved in online discussions to provide the necessary support, including feedback and clarification of thoughts. Besides, the participants noted that the instructor should encourage the students to understand the importance and purpose of the online discussions in the courses. Below are some remarks:

Encourage the purpose of online discussion and debate in class (A8)

Emphasize the importance of discussions (B6)

The findings confirm the vital place of the instructor's role and active involvement in online discussions when deployed as a measure to strengthen the learning process.

Introduce online discussions to other courses

The other point raised by the participants is that online discussions should be incorporated into different courses and disciplinary areas across the University.

More online discussions (A11)

Availability to other courses (A16)

Add online discussions to all subjects (B4)

The participants explained further that the online discussion could be used to foster students' learning, especially the courses requiring discussion. Also, they felt students could learn about homework and assignments through the online discussion.

Online be available to other courses requiring discussion/participation (A10)

Doing all the assignments and home works through the board discussions (B9)

From the data, students appeared to support the use of online discussions to complement f2f teaching across different disciplines. In doing so, it is believed that students can have thorough discussions and address concerns related to home assignments.

5 Discussion

As documented in the literature, students' engagement in online education can be supported by well-designed courses that promote interaction and allow for efficient use of students' time [37; 38]. In this light, we employed the online discussion forum to provide our students with a platform to engage asynchronously to help each other learn. However, we wanted to know their commitment levels to strengthen the platform's use and thus conducted this study. Our quantitative findings indicate that students committed to the online discussion forums cannot be described as high, but reasonable. However, their engagement level was high when involved.

On the other hand, our qualitative findings revealed different levels of students' commitments to the online discussion forums. For most of them, their commitment level was high, and their engagement level was high. In line with this, it is reported that students' feeling that they belong to a community of learners has a significant impact on their learning experiences in the online learning environment [37]. Among others, factors that can support the development of a sense of community and belonging in students are establishing a social presence and high levels of interaction in the course [36/39]. Thus, educators should consider using the online discussion forum to enhance students' learning experiences giving them the impression that it is a learning community where all ideas are treasured. Perhaps, it is because of the values seen in the forum that the students suggested that the platform be introduced to other classes.

However, some students explained that their commitment level was moderate or low as they could not dedicate more time to the platform as they would have liked. They stressed further that it was challenging at the initial phase, but they got used to the platform after a while. The findings indicate that students' participation in online discussion forums was influenced by the challenges of balancing studies with other commitments, including job and family responsibilities. Previous studies have shown that multiple tasks are related to high-stress levels for students in learning contexts [40]. That said, fostering a strong sense of community among students in online courses and establishing social presence can decrease students' feelings of isolation and disconnection [41]. Thus, educators must maintain their presence by checking on students regularly and clarifying any questions or concerns when using this approach to facilitate students' learning. Doing this is highly necessary, especially in the current COVID-19

educational landscape, where most classes are conducted online. Not only this, but students may also need some time to adjust to the new platform, and educators need to bear this in mind when using the forum as a tool for teaching and learning.

Additionally, some participants reported a low level of commitment as they could not get involved and disinclined to post on the discussion forums, especially at the initial stage. The outcomes of online student disengagement included minimal participation in the online discussion forums, and responses were limited to yes and no, without the justification of their positions. This finding differs from the literature, which indicates that active communication between students and faculty using asynchronous discussion forums promotes interaction and social presence [37; 42]. This means that the online discussion forums did not meet some students' needs at the initial stage as they might be used to the traditional forms of teaching. Even though the students indicated that the forum was beneficial, the initial disengagement could be because they needed time to adjust, felt isolated or were mildly distracted because of other responsibilities. This is in line with previous research, which evidenced that online distance students often experience feelings of isolation [41]. From our perspective, this disengagement calls for emphasizing the online discussion forums' values, as some participants mentioned. It is also crucial to share a well-laid-out plan, exciting topics, and marking rubrics with the students early to ensure enhanced student engagement among peers.

As noted in the literature, online students who possess digital skills competently engage with online learning's technological aspects [37; 43]. Our quantitative findings show that our students are equipped with technological skills. We calculate that this may have impacted our students' high commitment level as knowing how to navigate the platform can make it easy for them to engage in the forum. Considering the discussion board as a platform where they can have fun while learning from one another may have also accounted for high student commitment levels. This explains why most of the students reported that they were not distracted while engaging in our classes' online discussion forum. Consistent with these findings, our qualitative results indicate that students found the platform helpful in that they could interact and learn with their colleagues. Not only this, but the qualitative findings also show that students' engagement was impacted by exciting topics, the need to get good grades, and the tutor's clear guidance. Besides, our qualitative findings reveal that time plays a vital role in students' commitment and engagement in the online discussion forum. Students need to have time management skills to manage their workload at home, work, and the University. This finding is consistent with the literature that students who engaged in self-regulatory behavior and proactively addressed their perceived academic weaknesses gained confidence in their online courses [44]. Strongly emphasized within-participant data was the importance of the time and effort they invested in this new learning mode, which they referred to as novel and exciting. Not surprisingly, it is argued that students need to be organized and plan their studies around their responsibilities effectively, resulting in personalized learning habits such as studying at night or early in the morning [37]. There is also evidence in the literature that online student self-efficacy is a predictor of success. A recent study reported that student self-efficacy influenced interest, enjoyment, and behavioral engagement with successful online classes, including time

management, study skills, and digital competencies [40]. As such, students should devise strategies for managing multiple responsibilities to excel in their academic activities, including those undertaken online such as the online discussion forum.

More so, instructors need to be more involved in the activities on the platform. As argued, teaching support in online courses, with teacher engagement, directly impacts student participation in the study [27]. Similarly, it is reported that online teachers' timely support is indicative of the personal presence and active involvement in students' synchronous and asynchronous activities [45]. From our findings, it is evident that instructors' participation will not be limited to their online discussion platform's presence but provides different support forms. These will include providing training on how students can comfortably navigate the online platform, regular and prompt feedback, and students' guidelines to strengthen their time and study skills.

6 Conclusion

This study explored the students' commitment levels to online discussion forums in two undergraduate courses and the factors responsible for the engagement levels. The study's findings indicate that students' commitment to the online discussion forums was not high but reasonable and encouraging. Even so, the results show that when involved, students' engagement on the platform was high. This could be because they have technological knowledge, were less distracted when interfacing with colleagues, and found the platform beneficial. Some students would have liked to be more committed but need to strengthen their time management skills. Thus, instructors may incorporate time management skills as a topic to be explored when providing students with an orientation about using the online discussion board. Students may also be provided tips on staying committed and motivated in online discussions, including a process of reflection where issues discussed are linked to real-life situations. Among others, factors for fostering students' commitment to the online discussion forums are the tutor's active involvement and presence, explicit guidance on expectations, and educatively exciting topics.

One limitation of this study is that it is a relatively small in-depth qualitative case study, and generalization is impossible. However, it provides insights into essential themes related to students' learning and engagement through the online discussion forum. Knowledge of the issue explored can inform pedagogical and evidence-based policies for those designing teaching and designing online courses in this COVID-19 era. Large scale studies could further examine the influence of variables such as time, job, and family responsibilities on online student engagement and commitment, drawing on different subject areas. The trend to employ digital technology is currently essential more than ever in the COVID – 19 era and will grow exponentially in the coming years. Thus, there is also the need to evaluate educational administrators' role and efforts to make advanced digital technology available to students in higher education. Besides, the impacts of faculty members' human elements and demographics as front-liners in educational technology deployment need further investigation.

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10 Appendix - Questionnaire

Dear student,

You are kindly requested to complete this questionnaire as honestly as possible. Your contributions are anonymous, and findings from the survey will solely be used for a study on students’ experiences of online discussions. The study aims to enhance students’ commitment and learning experiences through online discussions.

You may please choose and write as you deemed appropriate. Thank you!

Section 1: Demographic Characteristics

Gender	Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/>
Level/Year of Study	Year 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Year 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Year 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Year 4 <input type="checkbox"/>
Marital Status	Married <input type="checkbox"/> Single <input type="checkbox"/>
College	
Age	18-22 <input type="checkbox"/> 23- 26 <input type="checkbox"/> 27-30 <input type="checkbox"/> 31 and above <input type="checkbox"/>
High School Attended	Public <input type="checkbox"/> Private <input type="checkbox"/>

Section 2: Students’ Experiences of Online Discussions (Quantitative)

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	I completed all the online discussions as expected within the specified time given.				
2	I was able to commit between 1 and 2 hours to each online discussion.				
3	I understood the guidelines and instructions for each online discussion.				
4	Engagement and interactions among my fellow students were high in each online discussion.				
5	I gave reasons to support my arguments in each online discussion.				
6	My technological skills’ level is high.				
7	I was able to use and contribute to online discussions easily.				
8	I felt some distractions by my professor during online discussions.				
9	I was distracted by my fellow students in online discussions.				
10	I understood the online discussion forum as a platform where I can learn collaboratively with my fellow students.				
11	I was motivated and also able to learn through online discussions.				
12	I will like other courses at the university to have online discussions.				

Note – SA: Strongly Agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

Section 3: Students’ Experiences of Online Discussion (Qualitative)

Question	Response
How would you describe your level of commitment and general experience in the online discussions?	
What are the factors responsible for your level of commitment and general experience of the online discussions?	
What do you think should be done differently to enhance students’ commitment and learning experiences in online discussions?	