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From Isolation to Connection: Peer Support and Community in Online English Learning for Vietnamese Adults

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ABSTRACT: *This qualitative multiple-case study (with seven embedded units of analysis) investigates the role of peer support and community engagement in shaping adult learners' experiences, motivation and persistence in a fully online Bachelor English Language program in Vietnam. Guided by Adult Learning Theory and the Community of Inquiry framework, this study explores how seven adult learners develop peer networks, engage with their learning community, and navigate cultural expectations in a collectivistic context. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, online classroom observations, and institutional documents over one academic semester.*

Abductive thematic analysis revealed that learners persist in their online program because they were able to construct their own social and motivational support networks. In response to the absence of institutionally facilitated community, participants relied on self-initiated peer groups. These helped reduce isolation, sustain motivation, regulate learning, and recreate the kind of group engagement they valued culturally. Technology played a dual role; it not only functioned as a medium for connection but it also caused fragmentation.

Findings demonstrate that peer support promotes learners' commitment to their studies, enhances social presence, and serves as a crucial buffer against motivational decline. However, community engagement remains inconsistent and relies heavily on learner initiative rather than program design. The study highlights the necessity of intentional community-building mechanisms, structured peer interaction opportunities, and integrated technological tools that align with Vietnamese learners' social learning preferences. Implications for instructional design, institutional policy, and future research on adult online language education in collectivist contexts are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Adult learners, peer support, community engagement, Community of Inquiry, persistence.

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1. Introduction

Thanks to technological advancements, online education has rapidly expanded across the globe, particularly in developing countries like Vietnam. Favorable conditions such as increased internet access and government initiatives for lifelong learning have accelerated the adoption of online programs in higher education. This shift has enhanced learning opportunities for individuals, particularly adult learners who often juggle study with work, family and other responsibilities. However, while virtual learning environments offer flexibility and convenience, they also present unique challenges for this demographic. Adult learners experience feelings of isolation, lack of motivation, and weakened sense of community, which can hinder their academic success and overall satisfaction.

Adult learners have distinct characteristics and learning needs. In online settings, social interaction and peer networks are vital for them to sustain engagement. Research from Western contexts has consistently shown that peer support and community engagement play important roles

in promoting learner satisfaction, collaboration, and academic achievement (Martin & Bolliger, 2022; Kaiser & Ford, 2023). Systematic reviews confirm that social presence fosters emotional engagement and better performance (Hu & Xiao, 2025; Li et al., 2025). Yet, in Vietnam, where cultural values emphasize collectivism and communal learning, these social aspects of online learning remain underexplored. There is still a paucity of studies exploring how social interactions, specifically peer support and community engagement, influence adult learners in a Vietnamese context.

This case study aims to explore the role of peer support and community engagement in shaping adult learners' experiences within an online education program in Vietnam. Specifically, it seeks to examine how adult learners interact with peers, build learning communities, and derive motivation from these interactions. By focusing on a single institutional context, this study provides an in-depth understanding of how social and cultural factors influence online learning dynamics among Vietnamese adults.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do adult learners experience and perceive peer support in online education settings?

2. In what ways does community engagement influence learners' motivation, persistence, and satisfaction?

3. How do Vietnamese cultural and contextual factors shape these experiences?

The findings have practical implications for educators and instructional designers. They can design online programs that better meet the needs of adult learners and foster a supportive online learning environment. Moreover, insights from this study may inform institutional policies and national strategies for promoting inclusive and effective lifelong learning in the digital age. By situating the case within Vietnam's unique educational and cultural context, this study also contributes to the growing body of literature on online and adult education across diverse settings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundations

Adult learning theory

Adult learners typically bring diverse experiences and motivations into their educational environments, which necessitates instructional techniques that acknowledge these factors (Arghode et al., 2017; Gardner et al., 2021). The development of adult learning theory has served as a guide for those working in adult education, providing a framework for educators to tailor their teaching methods to better suit the needs of adult learners, emphasizing experiential and self-directed learning (Darden, 2014).

Knowles and colleagues (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998) developed a set of assumptions to describe attributes of adult learners.

• Need to know — Adults want to understand why they need to learn something.

• Self-concept — They are self-directed learners.

• Experience — Prior experiences are a rich resource.

• Readiness to learn — Tied to life roles or transitions.

• Orientation to learning — Problem-centered and contextual.

• Motivation to learn — Internally driven.

One of the key assumptions is that adults are characterized by self-directedness; they are driven to study by real-world requirements and issues (Cassidy, 2004; Ross-Gordon, 2003; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Adults have the intrinsic motivation to learn; they are interested in applying knowledge in the real world, and want to feel like they are in control of the learning process, and want to enjoy learning (Knowles, 2000).

Knowles also listed four principles: involving adults in planning/evaluation, drawing from experience, emphasizing immediate application, and focusing on relevance and problem-solving. Stimulating and engaging opportunities, such as experiential learning, project-based activities, collaboration, and self-directed elements, supports adult learners in their cognitive development and motivates them to persist. They can construct knowledge through

experimentation and collaboration as opposed to merely replicating knowledge.

Community of inquiry framework

Proposed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is an influential model for understanding and designing effective online learning experiences (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Grounded in John Dewey's concepts of collaborative constructivism, CoI posits that meaningful learning occurs within a community where participants engage in purposeful inquiry. Its core constructs include teaching presence (design and organization, facilitation of discourse and direct instruction), social presence (emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion), and cognitive presence (sustained inquiry and meaning construction).

Empirical validation of CoI's constructs has been generally positive. Through psychometric analysis, Heilporn and Lakhal (2020) confirmed the reliability and validity of the categories within the CoI framework, reinforcing its structural integrity. Recent empirical studies have increasingly associated stronger CoI elements with improved student engagement. Gökoglu et al. (2024), for instance, employed stepwise multiple linear regression and reported that social and teaching presence were significant predictors of behavioral and emotional engagement. Interrelationships among presences are well-documented - teaching presence is closely related to both cognitive and social presence (Kozan & Richardson, 2014). Cognitive and social presence of learners should complement each other in addition to the teaching presence of instructors, suggesting that balanced presences enhance outcomes (Kozan & Caskurlu, 2018).

Driven by technological advances and global shifts, CoI has evolved and its adoption has accelerated, particularly in online learning communities (González Miy & Herrera Díaz, 2015). From a socioconstructivist perspective, CoI's widespread adoption reflects its practical appeal in online education (Redstone et al., 2018; Castellanos-Reyes, 2020). The CoI has been useful in guiding research and practice in online higher education (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Garrison et al., 2010; Kozan & Richardson, 2014; Stenbom, Jansson, & Hulkko, 2016) and specialized contexts like role-playing simulations (Junus et al., 2022). Garrison & Vaughan (2007) suggest that one of the reasons the CoI framework has been so successful "is that it builds upon two ideas that are essential to higher education-community and inquiry" (p. 9). Its three components—teaching, cognitive, and social presences—have long been considered important antecedents that affect students' intentions and behaviors related to online learning (Zhou et al., 2024).

2.2. Peer support in online education

Peer support may take the form of one-on-one mentoring or mutual help. Peer support could also take place in a group where peers collaborate with each other. Peers provide support through online forums and webinar-facilitated exchanges, which contributes to the formation of virtual online learning communities (Kember et al., 2022).

Research has consistently noted that the primary advantage of peer support lies in rebuilding social presence and community in virtual spaces. Le et al. (2024) found that peer mentoring supports students in several ways, but most importantly by fostering social integration and sense of belonging, which emerge as key drivers of retention and course completion. Similarly, Mensah (2024) showed that peer support can boost students' computer self-efficacy and online communication, which helps them sustain long-term engagement in e-learning platforms. Peer interactions also compensated for weaker connections with instructors, enabling students to collaboratively focus on key content and build transformative relationships across diverse cultural and professional backgrounds (Dulfer et al., 2024). In fully online higher education, Tibingana-Ahimbisibwe et al. (2022) observed that interacting with peers fosters social connectedness and capital, helping them feel less isolated.

Peer support is particularly beneficial for adult learners in online English programs. According to Lu et al. (2022), peer review is especially helpful for lower-proficiency adult writers, as

they can gain diverse perspectives and practical strategies. This aligns with adult learning principles, which emphasize experiential and problem-based collaboration. Huang (2023) found that peer support positively predicted self-efficacy, enjoyment, and anxiety, demonstrating the roles of social and psychological factors in online language learning.

2.3. Community engagement in online learning

In recent years, research on community engagement in online learning has attracted substantial scholarly attention. An online learning community is typically defined as an environment where members interact via digital platforms to pursue shared educational goals (Rovai, 2002; Tu & Corry, 2002). When a group of online learners come together for a common goal, such a community may function as a community of practice, which facilitates collaborative knowledge construction and achievement of shared objectives (Yuan & Kim, 2014). However, recent systematic reviews suggest that these optimistic views may overlook important challenges, such as digital divides, the limitations of asynchronous learning, and varying levels of learner readiness, which can hinder the development of genuine community formation in virtual environments (Hu & Xiao, 2025; Limbu & McKinley, 2025).

Existing research indicates that community engagement plays a key mediating role in shaping student persistence, satisfaction, and motivation in online learning environments. Zhao et al. (2022) suggested that sense of community (SoC) in virtual environments positively influenced learning outcomes by fostering perceived support and alleviating isolation. Drawing on 55 empirical studies (2020–2023), Hu and Xiao (2025) identified collaboration, interaction, and social presence as key environmental factors that can help reduce the sense of isolation in digital learning environments. However, several investigations highlight persistent disparities. These studies show that underrepresented, first-generation, and lower-socioeconomic learners tend to report weaker sense of community and lower engagement, partly due to limited digital literacy and access (Limbu & McKinley, 2025; Prodgers et al., 2022).

Although higher education institutions increasingly recognize the challenge of promoting student connectedness and visibility in virtual environments (Lu & Zhang, 2024), much of the literature remains descriptive rather than critically evaluative. For instance, in their study integrating online communities with digital learning systems in English language instruction, Lai et al. (2019) found no significant differences in learning achievements between experimental and control groups, though it greatly enhanced student engagement. Longitudinal and experimental designs are still underrepresented in the literature. Furthermore, few studies fully account for variations across cultural, disciplinary, or technological contexts. Overall, although online learning communities play a crucial mediating role in promoting engagement and interaction, their broader transformative potential has yet to be consistently demonstrated across contexts. Thus, there is a need for more comprehensive evaluation of disparities in engagement and retention.

2.4. Cultural dimensions in Vietnamese education

Vietnam is widely recognized as a collectivistic society which highly values social harmony, hierarchy, and community interdependence (Dinh & Ho, 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). Despite evolving priorities amid modernization, Vietnam's social fabric remains strongly community-oriented. Positive attributes such as community spirit, diligence, and hard work further characterize Vietnam's cultural identities (Nguyen & Vu, 2020). Within such a cultural framework, individuals' personal goals are subordinate to group objectives; they tend to exhibit lower levels of self-expression and self-esteem, which reflects an interdependent sense of agency (Ho et al., 2022). Thus, the question of if and how such collectivist values translate into online learning environments arises (Grothaus, 2022).

Gunawardena (2014) emphasized that culture shapes every aspect of online learning—from course and interface design to communication

patterns and the social construction of knowledge. In this regard, collectivism, as conceptualized in Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, may influence learners' sense of belonging and result in certain attitudes toward peer support. Moreover, research has suggested that collectivism may particularly appeal to mature learners who prefer group-oriented learning contexts (Chu & Chu, 2010), a finding that holds important implications for adult education in Vietnam.

However, this cultural orientation presents challenges in digital contexts. For instance, the open-endedness of asynchronous communication causes collectivistic learners to simultaneously experience a sense of connectedness to their peers and a sense of disconnectedness from the instructor (Gaspay et al., 2009). Although collectivistic values seem to support community formation in online learning, their impact is context-dependent and potentially double-edged. This highlights the need to thoroughly examine how Vietnamese learners balance individual autonomy with group values in virtual learning environments.

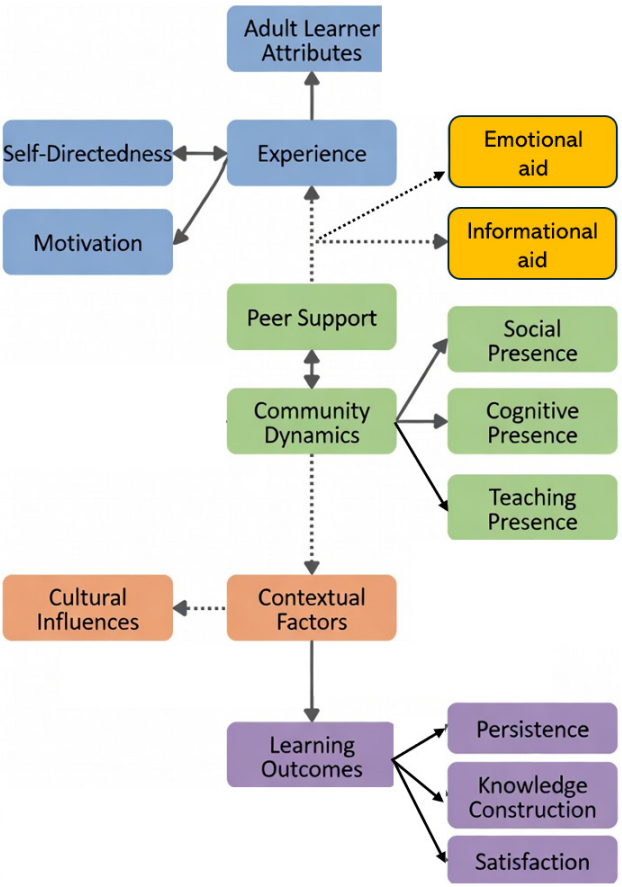


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

2.5. Conceptual framework

This conceptual framework integrates Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy) and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework to explore how peer support and community engagement influence adult learners' experiences in online education. The framework adopts a socioconstructivist lens. It views learning as a socially constructed process where knowledge emerges from interactions within a community, highlighting bidirectional relationships: peer support and community engagement. These two elements are positioned as central elements; they not only facilitate learning but are also shaped by adult learners' characteristics and the online environment.

The framework is structured around three interconnected pillars: Adult Learner Attributes (drawn from andragogy), Community Dynamics (drawn from CoI), and Outcomes (Figure 1). Cultural complexities (e.g., from Rasikawati et al., 2024) are incorporated as moderating factors.

Adult Learner Attributes (Input Factors from Andragogy):

Based on Knowles et al. (1998), these include self-directedness, prior experiences, and intrinsic motivation. These attributes predispose adults to value peer interactions for practical application and validation of experiences. In this sense, peer support is essential for overcoming isolation in online settings.

Community Dynamics (Process Factors from CoI):

Drawing from Garrison et al. (2000), this pillar emphasizes the interplay of social presence cognitive presence and teaching presence.

- Peer Support includes emotional encouragement (e.g., empathy during challenges), informational sharing (e.g., resource exchange). It directly enhances social presence by building trust and reducing dropout risks.
- Community Engagement: Involves active participation in discussions, group activities, and shared inquiry. It fosters cognitive presence

through collaboration, and real-world application, which aligns with adults' experiential learning preferences.

Interrelationships: As per Kozan and Richardson (2014), social presence (bolstered by peer support) amplifies cognitive presence (enabled by engagement), with teaching presence acting as a facilitator (e.g., instructors moderating peer discussions).

Learning Outcomes (Output Factors):

This pillar involves enhanced persistence, motivation, and knowledge construction (e.g., applying learning to real-world issues). Other qualitative indicators include increased sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and satisfaction, which leads to long-term impacts such as improved retention in online programs and transfer of skills to professional or personal contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The bounded case was the fully online Bachelor of English Language program at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City. Within this setting, seven adult learners were selected as embedded units of analysis. This qualitative design is a suitable choice because it allows in-depth understandings of how peer support and a sense of community developed among learners, with their experiences being grounded in the broader context of the program. Using a multiple-case approach at the participant level, comparisons can be made across individuals while maintaining the program as the overarching case boundary.

3.2. Research context and case selection

The case was purposively selected as an established online English language program offered by a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The program targets adult learners who are working professionals or recent graduates seeking to improve their English proficiency for career advancement. It operates primarily through a fully online mode using platforms such as the learning management system (LMS) for asynchronous activities, and Zoom or Google Meet for live lecture sessions. The program consists of approximately 47–52 subjects and around 125–130 credits, depending on exemptions and study pathway. The minimum study duration is about 3.5 years, comprising 9-12 semesters.

This program was selected because it includes some peer interaction elements, such as peer review tasks and occasional group projects. However, it is mainly delivered through a one-way LMS with very limited social features. This made it a useful setting for exploring how learners cope and adapt when formal opportunities for building a learning community are restricted. The Vietnamese context adds further unique values. First, the cultural emphasis on collectivism may shape learners' willingness to participate and collaborate, especially in online environments. Second, there has been a rapid shift to online education after the Covid-19. Third, adult learners often face challenges of balancing work, family, and study commitments, which can constrain their level of participation and engagement. Together, these contextual factors offer a nuanced setting to examine how online learning communities operate under real-world conditions.

3.3. Participants

Seven adult learners (4 females, 3 males; ages 20s–50s) were purposively sampled from the program's 2025 cohort. Maximum-variation sampling was used to ensure diversity in age, occupation (e.g., office workers, teachers, business owners), prior online learning exposure and college status. Maximum-variation sampling was employed to capture diverse experiences of peer support and community engagement, including both persisters and those who withdrew. Inclusion criteria were: (a) currently enrolled or having withdrawn from the program after at least one month of study; (b) working full- or part-time; and (c) willing to share both reflective accounts of their experiences. Participants were recruited via an email invitation sent through the university LMS. 11 individuals responded to the email invitation. The first 6 who met the diversity criteria were selected. The 7th

Table 1. Participant demographic information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Prior online learning	College status	Program status
Mai	Female	40s	Sales executitve	Some	Second degree	Persisting
Thanh	Male	30s	Pre-school division manager	Limited	Second degree	Withdrew (~1.5 months)
Xuân	Female	40s	Executive assistant	Some	First degree	Persisting
Nhi	Female	20s	English teacher	Some	Second degree	Persisting
San	Female	20s	Lab technician	Some	Second degree	Persisting
Huy	Male	50s	University lecturer	Extensive	Second degree	Graduated
Khoa	Male	20s	Pharmacist	Limited	Second degree	Persisting

Note. Ages are approximated to the nearest decade to protect participant anonymity. Occupations are self-reported.

participant, who withdrew after approximately 1.5 months, agreed to join the study after his former classmate told him about this study. This case was deliberately added because it offered rich insights. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity (pseudonyms are used throughout the study). Ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' institutional review board prior to data collection.

Demographic information for all seven participants is summarized in Table 1.

3.4. Data collection

Data were collected between March 2025 and July 2025 using multiple sources to enhance trustworthiness through triangulation:

1. Semi-structured interviews: In-depth individual interviews (45–90 minutes each) were conducted with all 7 learners via Google Meet (at participants' convenience). The interview guide contained 12 open-ended questions plus probes involving experiences of peer support, sense of belonging, challenges in online community participation, and perceived impacts on English language development and motivation. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

2. Online classroom observations: Non-participant observations were conducted in 2–3 synchronous videoconference sessions per learner (total 19 sessions, 28 hours). An observation protocol was used, focusing on frequency, nature, and quality of peer-to-peer talk or group work.

3. Document analysis: 87 archived documents were collected and analyzed, including LMS discussion threads, assignment submissions, and LMS analytics reports (participation logs) for the participants' courses.

4. Researcher field notes: Reflective notes were maintained throughout the data collection process to capture contextual observations and researcher reflexivity.

3.5. Data analysis

Data analysis followed an abductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved deductive codes derived from the Community of Inquiry framework and andragogy with inductive codes emerging from the data. The full analysis was conducted in the following steps:

1. Familiarization: all interview transcripts, observation notes, field notes, and selected LMS documents were read repeatedly and reviewed carefully.

2. Initial coding: Open coding of the entire dataset using both deductive codes (derived from the Community of Inquiry presences, andragogy assumptions, and sense-of-community constructs) and inductive codes that emerged

directly from participants' accounts. Coding was performed manually.

3. Theme development: Codes were grouped into candidate themes and sub-themes. The codes were then iteratively compared with the raw data. These were reviewed, refined, and consolidated into five final interconnected themes.

4. Interpretation: Themes were interpreted in relation to the Vietnamese adult learner context, with particular attention to cultural, technological, and socio-economic factors.

To enhance trustworthiness and reduce researcher bias, several strategies were employed. First, member checking was conducted with all the participants. A summary of interview themes was sent to each of the seven participants and they were invited to give comments on accuracy and interpretation. Feedback collected from four participants was incorporated. Second, an audit trail of all analytical decisions such as theme refinements and analytical memos was maintained. Third, in order to document potential biases and preconceptions, the first author engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the process. Finally, preliminary findings and draft themes were presented and discussed with two experienced qualitative researchers (one from the first author's institution and one external advisor). Thanks to their feedback, minor adjustments in theme labeling and emphasis were made.

4. Results and discussions

Following an abductive approach, the analysis moved iteratively between the data and the conceptual framework. For instance, initial inductive codes like "no class group," "created Zalo myself" were connected to deductive codes such as "social presence" from the CoI framework and "self-directedness" from andragogy. Through this iterative process, five interconnected themes emerged, highlighting the interplay between institutional design, learner agency, cultural expectations, and technological mediation.

Although the themes were shared across participants, important cross-case differences emerged in how learners responded to the program's limited social infrastructure. Those who built their own peer networks (e.g., Mai, Khoa, and San) generally reported stronger persistence, had higher motivation, and felt more satisfied with the learning process. In contrast, Thanh experienced isolation more intensely. Despite attempts to create peer networks, he was unable to establish stable support and dropped out early. Other learners like Xuân and Nhi adopted more individualised strategies and persisted without relying on peer interaction. This suggests that strong self-regulation can help sustain persistence. These cross-case differences indicate that while institutional limitations were experienced broadly, learner responses varied according to personality, prior experience, social initiative, and preferred learning orientation.

Theme 1: Isolation and the absence of institutional-facilitated community

Across all seven cases, participants described some degree of isolation caused by the program's limited communication structures. However, the intensity and consequences of this isolation varied considerably. For instance, Thanh noted the platform's complete lack of communication features, leading to frustration: "*I was just sitting there studying alone with my laptop—no class, no teachers to motivate me. I didn't have an environment where I could interact or exchange ideas. That was the biggest issue*." Others share similar experiences. Xuân said that "*There is almost no interaction with classmates*" and thought that this is a "*self-study program."* Nhi echoed this, stating, "*If I don't do group work, I don't know anyone at all*." Because communication is only through the message section on the LMS, social presence is lowered. This isolation contributed to reduced motivation, and, in some cases, early dropout. Mai highlighted early class-wide confusion and a 70% dropout rate due to inadequate initial guidance: "*In the first semester, I had already intended to drop out. At that time, I just wished someone had been there. Right from the start, if there's a session—aside from the study skills class—there should be someone else there too, someone to really guide us enthusiastically*."

Apart from limited opportunities for peer interaction, participants also described restricted

access to instructors or advisors. Mai said: "*I really enjoy interacting with lecturers. But there are some lecturers where I email questions about lessons and even after a whole week, I still don't get a reply—that drives me crazy!"* Similarly, Khoa noted limited advisor contact, saying "*As for the teachers, I find some of them are quite active, but their engagement is limited to the course content. As for my academic advisor, I haven't even seen her in person yet."* The absence of communication channels, as a result, was a common regret among learners: *"I think it would be better if the teachers created a common group chat for each class group… But currently, we can't message the whole class."* (Nhi)

For the participants, their interpersonal relationships with their peers and instructors serve as a crucial foundation for the development of a sense of community. When there were fewer opportunities for collaboration or a lack of responsiveness from the instructor, chances for connection and help seeking are lowered. This finding aligns with previous research on online learning which emphasizes the importance of teaching presence and social presence. Gillen-O'Neel (2021) and Farrell and Brunton (2020) respectively pointed out that teacher-student and student-student relationships contribute to students' sense of belonging. In this context, the absence of structured community-building mechanisms appears to weaken learners' sense of belonging, a factor widely recognized as essential for persistence in higher education. As noted by Dulfer et al. (2024), inadequate teaching presence increases alienation and undermines persistence in online environments. Also, a recent study affirms that low social presence heightens isolation by undermining relatedness needs (Dyer, 2025).

In the Vietnamese context, these solitary experiences stood in stark contrast to collectivist norms. Feelings of discouragement are intensified, leading to diminished self-efficacy and attrition. This is in line with research on cultural mismatches in Asian online learning, where relational expectations heighten disconnection (Wut & Xu, 2021; Duong & Le, 2025).

Theme 2: Proactive self-initiated peer support as a coping mechanism

This theme demonstrates learners' resilience, illustrating the role that peer support plays in fostering engagement and emotional sustenance. To tackle the difficulties caused by the absence of formal community structures, learners took initiative to build informal peer networks, predominantly through external platforms like Zalo. These self-initiated efforts served as a compensatory mechanism for institutional shortcomings. Cross-case comparison revealed that proactive and socially confident learners were more successful in reconstructing community support systems. Outgoing learners like Mai were particularly active in forming and sustaining these groups: *"As for classmates, I'm also very open and easygoing, I connect with many groups… Since I created a group, whenever I ask a question, if someone knows, they answer; if not, they'll also enthusiastically ask others to help."* She also extended these networks to include instructor contacts for faster support. In contrast, Xuân engaged minimally with peers, and Nhi intentionally avoided collaboration unless required. Thanh attempted to establish peer contact through Zalo: "*I had to take the initiative to create a Zalo group. I messaged people through the LMS chatbox, and when someone responded, I asked for their phone number and created the group myself*." . However, the effort was insufficient to prevent dropout; Thanh dropped out after one and a half months into his first semester, saying that "*the stress was unbearable."*

Resource sharing and mutual encouragement were common. San shared that "*For the same subject, if it's taught by two different lecturers, the materials might be different. So I also ask for materials from students in other classes… Sometimes if I come across any useful information, I share it with my friends, and if they see anything helpful, they also let me know."* Interaction through these channels often exceeded instructor contact, as noted by Huy: "*Interaction with classmates is sometimes even more than with the teachers"* via Zalo. These contrasts suggest that peer support functioned unevenly across cases.

In addition, this depended partly on learners' social initiative and interaction preferences.

This learner-driven approach strongly reflects the assumptions of adult learning theory. As asserted by Knowles (2000), adult learners assume responsibility for their own learning and proactively seek resources to address real-world issues. These self-directed and problem-centered learners actively constructed their own learning environments and used peer networks not only for social interaction but also to address practical academic challenges. This initiative provides emotional sustenance and relatedness, compensating for slow instructor responses. Literature support this compensatory function: informal peer interactions enhance belonging, help students overcome feelings of isolation and boost course satisfaction (Bloomberg et al., 2025; Samuel-Azran et al., 2025).

However, engagement varied significantly by personality. Some participants reported minimal peer contact: "There is almost no interaction with classmates. Because communication is only through the message section on ELO…" (Xuân) Others preferred independent work: "If group work isn't mandatory, I usually ask the teachers to let me work alone." (Nhi) This variability suggests that although peer networks can mitigate institutional shortcomings, they cannot entirely substitute formal support systems, as not all learners possess the same social confidence or initiative. Self-directed learning alone is insufficient, adult learners still require structured guidance, feedback and opportunities for collaboration.

Theme 3: Peer support's influence on persistence and self-regulation

This theme demonstrates how peer support strengthens motivation and self-regulation (e.g., accountability, time management). Robust peer networks functioned as a powerful buffer against dropout, enhancing persistence amid challenges. Participants acknowledged that peer groups helped them stay motivated. Thanks to strong ties, they gained practical knowledge about course requirements, exam strategies, and assignment submission procedures. Mai's experience reflects a transition from initial discouragement to gaining a sense of control over her learning process: "*After the first two semesters, I formed a study group. We would try to listen to the lectures in advance… I've gained a lot of experience—like how to submit assignments on time, how to create a group of close friends to share homework and support each other—and now I feel like the learning process has become much easier."*

Similarly, San highlighted the motivational role of collective accountability: *"Because we're studying together, so we try to pull each other through (laughs)."* Khoa persisted while peers dropped out: "*When we first started, there were 7 or 8 of us, but now only 2 of us are still continuing."* He attributed his persistence to the shared "challenges" that learners face and the support they receive from each other: "*Only my classmates, who are also studying, know about the challenges I face during the learning process, and we support each other. ... In general, we exchange support and advice to pass the subjects and perform well on the exams."*

This is consistent with research showing that a strong sense of community and social presence promotes engagement, contentment, and retention (Dulfer et al., 2024; Farrokhnia et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2024). Furthermore, the presence of peer networks also contributed to cognitive presence. Through peer interactions, learners could engage more deeply with course content and develop practical problem-solving strategies. Thus, peer networks played an important role in maintaining the inquiry process, which is crucial for meaningful learning as identified by the CoI framework. In contrast, weak or limited peer support contributed to discouragement and withdrawal: *"I felt like I was falling behind, missing out, and failing. That led to a breakdown in my motivation—I felt mentally exhausted, discouraged, and eventually, I stopped studying altogether."* (Thanh)

At the same time, the findings indicate that peer support is not universally required for persistence. Xuân, for example, with low peer engagement, relied on individual strategies ("*I work on it bit by bit every day*") but still progressed, though with lower initial grades. Similarly, Nhi preferred to "work alone", finding

group tasks "troublesome." This suggests that while peer networks significantly enhance persistence for many learners, some individuals may succeed through strong personal self-regulation strategies.

Theme 4: Cultural expectations of community in conflict with online isolation

This theme concerns the role of cultural values in shaping learners' expectations of the online learning environment. Many participants expressed the belief that learning should involve collaboration and shared experiences. One learner explicitly linked culture to the desire for connection: *"Although studying online, I still believe that Vietnamese people tend to value community and collective living, as they have for generations. Cultural factors play a big role in this."* (Thanh) Similarly, several participants emphasized the importance of studying together and supporting one another. Mai shared societal encouragement for education: *"In society, there are three groups: the highly educated group, who always encourage you to study; the second group, people like us who are seeking knowledge; and the third group—those who are ignorant and lazy."* This drives her to form groups for collaborative learning, aligning with cultural norms. Cultural diligence was frequently noted, with Huy embodying cultural eagerness to learn: "*If we talk about Vietnamese people, they tend to be eager to learn and want to improve themselves, and they are diligent and hardworking."* Khoa benefits from family "emotional support," reflecting collectivist reinforcement.

The findings find support in recent research on belonging in online contexts, which stresses that relational norms shape expectations; unmet needs increase disconnection, while culturally attuned support (e.g., peer or family reinforcement) sustains motivation (Dulfer et al., 2024; Duong & Le, 2025). The results support recent research suggesting that the application of the CoI framework must be considered within specific cultural contexts. Participants frequently invoked Vietnamese cultural values of community and interdependence. The asynchronous, individualistic nature of the online program, however, clashed with these norms. These findings suggest a potential cultural mismatch in this context, leading to frustration and suggestions for hybrid interactions: "*I think the biggest motivation for me would be to have an actual class—at least online, but with some face-to-face interaction arranged once a week." (Thanh)*

The findings also reveal variation in learners' interpretations of cultural impacts. Although group learning was desired by some participants, others preferred independent learning. Xuân downplays cultural influence, saying "It depends on each person's abilities". Nhi favored working alone despite acknowledging the value of peer contact channels. These variations imply that while cultural norms influence expectations, they do not determine individual behavior.

Theme 5: Technology as a barrier and enabler of community engagement

This theme presents technology as a double-edged sword. Technology played a dual role: it both hindered and facilitated peer support. Institutional platforms (primarily the LMS) was widely criticized for limited opportunities for peer interaction or real-time support. Thanh said, "The LMS platform itself was completely one-way—it just recorded your test and assignment results. There was no communication or assistance at all." Social presence is reduced as a result of LMS limitations, as Xuân shared, she "*check the message section*" only. Participants also reported technical frustrations: "*The system often crashes, and when needed, it's not possible to immediately contact the hotline."* (Mai)

Some appreciated the LMS for structure. For example, Nhi praised LMS for deadlines but regrets no class-wide messaging: *"I find it very convenient to track my progress… But currently, we can't message the whole class… I think having a common group chat for a class is very necessary."* Similarly, Khoa shared that deadlines on the platform created shared pressure and connection: "*This is easy to use, I'm very familiar with it … what helps me stay motivated is probably the deadlines. Although (laughs) everyone gets stressed about them every week, when the deadline comes, we all have to dive into it and get it done. Everyone has to do it, so that's what keeps us connected each week."*

At the same time, technology also enabled learners to build alternative communication channels. External tools like Zalo enabled immediate peer engagement, allowing learners to quickly exchange information: "*Everyone has a Zalo group, so interaction between students is definitely happening."* (Huy)

This dual role that technology plays mirrors findings that platforms can hinder community, yet learner-adopted tools promote connectedness and belonging (Bloomberg et al.,2025; Dyer, 2025). In Vietnam, new technologies have been quickly adopted, the widespread use of platforms such as Zalo reflects culturally familiar communication practices, which suggests that integrating socially interactive tools into online learning environments may better support Community of Inquiry presences.

Looking at these cases together, the findings suggest that learners have different pathways to persist in the online program. Some built strong peer networks to stay motivated, others relied on personal self-regulation to keep themselves on track. And the absence of either pathway contributed to withdrawal. Overall, the cases collectively indicate that institutional design alone did not determine outcomes. Instead, it was the mix of the program's structure, learner agency, cultural influences, and technological mediation that made the difference.

Answering the research questions

The five themes emerging from the abductive thematic analysis directly address the study's three research questions. Each question is answered by synthesizing key patterns identified across participants' experiences.

Research Question 1: How do adult learners experience and perceive peer support in online education settings?

For adult learners in this fully online English Language program, peer support is experienced primarily as self-initiated and informal rather than facilitated by the institution. Because the LMS functioned mostly as a one-way platform with few communication tools, most participants reported limited opportunities for peer interaction. To stay connected, they had to proactively create Zalo groups on their own (e.g., Thanh). When peer support occurred, it was generally seen as helpful. It offers emotional encouragement, resource sharing, practical advice on assignments and exams, and accountability that helped reduce isolation.

However, perceptions varied significantly depending on individual personality and initiative. In the view of more outgoing learners such as Mai, peer networks were described as active and supportive, sometimes exceeding contact with instructors. In contrast, more independent participants like Xuân and Nhi reported little to no interaction with peers. They preferred working alone unless group tasks were mandatory, and sometimes consider peer engagement as unnecessary or even troublesome.

Overall, peer support functioned as a coping strategy to compensate for the gaps left by limited institutional structures. This reflects adult learners' self-directedness, yet its quality and availability depended heavily on learner agency rather than program design.

Research Question 2: In what ways does community engagement influence learners' motivation, persistence, and satisfaction?

Community engagement positively influenced the participants' motivation, persistence, and overall satisfaction. When learners were able to build their own peer networks, their sense of connection was fostered. Participants who joined study groups reported higher motivation through shared deadlines, collaborative problem-solving, and emotional encouragement (e.g., "we try to pull each other through"). Self-regulation was also supported, such as assignment submission strategies and exam tips, which made learning feel more manageable and increased satisfaction.

Strong peer connections also helped learners persist in the program. Several learners attributed their persistence to classmate support. In contrast, a lack of community engagement often led to reduced motivation, frustration, and even early withdrawal, as seen in Thanh's case after just 1.5 months. However, some independent learners made progress thanks to personal self-regulation strategies despite low community engagement. This indicates that peer support was not equally important for all learners. Overall, these

findings illustrate that community engagement can enhance cognitive and social presence. In addition, it supports persistence and satisfaction in online adult education.

Research Question 3: How do Vietnamese cultural and contextual factors shape these experiences?

Vietnamese cultural values played an important role in shaping participants' expectations and experiences. Many learners linked their desire for connection to cultural norms, particularly collectivism and interdependence. They noted that communal learning and mutual support are valued by Vietnamese people (e.g., Thanh and Mai). In addition, emotional support from family and a broader cultural emphasis on diligence and education helped sustain motivation, especially for those who were actively engaged in peer networks.

On the contrary, this collectivist orientation did not align with the individualized, asynchronous program. Limited opportunities for interaction often lead to a stronger sense of isolation, frustration, and even a higher risk of dropping out. However, not all participants interpreted cultural influences the same way. Some learners, drawing on community spirit, created informal Zalo groups to interact with peers, while others prioritized individual ability. Technological and contextual realities in Vietnam, such as widespread Zalo use and the post-COVID shift to online learning, also shaped how learners adapted. Informal communities are formed, highlighting the limitations of the online program.

5. Conclusions

This qualitative multiple-case study explored the lived experiences of seven adult learners in a fully online Bachelor of English Language program at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Guided by Knowles' andragogy and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, the findings show how peer support and community engagement influence learners' motivation, persistence, and satisfaction within a collectivist context. Five key themes emerged: isolation stemming from the absence of institutionally facilitated community structures; learners' self-initiated peer support as a vital coping mechanism; peer networks as drivers of persistence and self-regulation; the tension between Vietnamese collectivist expectations and the individualized nature of online learning; and technology as both a barrier and an enabler of social connection.

The findings reveal that although the program offered flexibility for working adults, its design largely neglected social presence and teaching presence—two core elements of the CoI framework. As a result, many learners experienced emotional and motivational isolation. This reveals a mismatch with cultural values that emphasize community, interdependence, and shared responsibility. In response, learners took the initiative to reconstruct these presences through informal peer networks. These self-organised groups became important sources of emotional and motivational support. Thanks to resource sharing, practical academic advice, and mutual accountability, social presence is enhanced. Furthermore, cognitive presence is supported through collaborative problem-solving, and the risk of dropout is reduced. However, relying on individual initiative rather than structured program design resulted in inconsistent engagement. Not all learners possessed the personality, digital confidence, or time to build such networks effectively.

These findings extend existing literature in several ways. First, they highlight the compensatory role of informal peer support in online environments, where community features are underdeveloped. Second, they point to a cultural mismatch in applying largely Western-oriented online learning models to collectivist contexts like Vietnam. Third, the findings affirm that peer interaction can support both persistence and self-regulation among adult learners. However, its impact remains contingent on program design and individual differences. This suggests that peer support alone is not a guaranteed solution.

Implications for practice

The study carries important practical implications for instructional designers,

educators, and higher education institutions in Vietnam and similar contexts. Online English language programs for adult learners need to move beyond basic LMS functionality. Intentional strategies for building and sustaining learning communities are recommended. First, structured peer activities such as mandatory group projects and synchronous breakout sessions should be integrated in course design. Second, official class-wide communication channels (e.g., dedicated group chats or forums) should be facilitated from the outset. Third, instructors should be provided training on enhancing teaching presence through timely responses and proactive moderation of discussions. Fourth, design elements that align with Vietnamese values of collectivism, such as hybrid interaction opportunities or community-oriented orientation sessions, should be incorporated. Finally, institutions should also invest in interactive learning platforms that reduce reliance on external tools like Zalo.

Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The small sample size (n = 7) and focus on a single institution limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, data collection relied heavily on self-reported interviews, which raises the possibility of social desirability bias. Future studies could adopt larger-scale mixed-methods designs, longitudinal approaches to examine persistence over multiple semesters.

In conclusion, peer support and community engagement are essential yet fragile elements in adult online English education in Vietnam. When deliberately integrated into program design, they can significantly enhance learners' motivation, persistence, and sense of belonging. However, in the absence of these supports, even highly motivated learners may face challenges of isolation and disengagement. This study contributes to the growing call for more context-sensitive approaches to online adult education in similar collectivist higher-education contexts in Vietnam and beyond. Given the small sample size and focus on a single institution, the findings are not intended to represent all Vietnamese adult online learners. Instead, they provide insights that can be applied to other programs with similar design and learning conditions.

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