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Exploring the experiences of social loafing in group work among online psychology students

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Abstract

Social loafing is the tendency for individuals to put in less effort when working in a group, compared to working alone. This behaviour can be amplified through challenges in online learning environments. These challenges include maintaining engagement, reduced task visibility, and the physical distance created by technology, all of which can encourage some group members to contribute less. The absence of face-to-face interaction can lead to feelings of isolation and reduced accountability, further complicating group dynamics. Through a qualitative approach, this research explores how online psychology students perceive and experience social loafing during group assessments. Semi-structured focus groups with nine participants from a Graduate Diploma in Psychology program were conducted to co-create possible solutions to social loafing in online group assessments. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, four themes were developed. These themes reflect students' interest in co-creating solutions that suit an online (mostly asynchronous) context. Students recommended alternative channels to communication (such as social media), as learning technologies native to the Learning Management System can create barriers to engagement. Students prefer to reduce the weighting of any group grades and balance their grade against their individual contribution. Findings suggest that evaluative judgement training is needed to improve the peer assessment of group contributions. Online students also require more investment/facilitation in the group introduction stage, as their competing demands mean they are less able to synchronously meet.

Practitioner Notes

The following Student co-created strategies for reducing social loafing recommendations include:

1. Recognising the tension of high-stakes online assessments. Where possible, allocate 50% of grades to the group, and 50% to an individual grade.
2. Develop evaluative judgement skills for valid peer assessment: practice the evaluation of group contribution with an example first.
3. Increase the visibility of individual contributions by mandating a shared document with version history.
4. Social media can reduce the stress associated with learning new technologies in the LMS. Provide clear guidelines for social media use in groups.
5. Recommend against any group decisions in this casual communication channel. Formalise workload distribution through a group contract.

Keywords

Social Loafing, Higher Education, Group Work, Psychology Education, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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Introduction

There has been an increase in online work in Higher Education disciplines (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020). Particularly in community-serving disciplines like Psychology, interpersonal skills and teamwork competencies are needed for effective client interaction and collaboration with colleagues (Donelan & Kear, 2023). Graduates are expected to demonstrate these skills in real-world settings (APAC, 2019), highlighting the importance of group work in psychology education. Given the increase in asynchronous education opportunities, it is important to reconsider how online group work is managed (Donelan & Kear, 2023).

The online learning environment introduces 'transactional distance', which is the distance introduced between students and teachers by technology (Moore, 2018). Technology platforms like Learning Management Systems (LMS) aim to support these efforts by offering discussion boards and collaborative tools (Gkrimpizi, 2023). However (as with any communication technology), there can be technical issues and a learning curve to master the various tools and features available (Chang & Kang, 2016; Gkrimpizi, 2023; Moore et al., 2011). As such, challenges in communication can create issues for group dynamics in asynchronous learning environments.

One such issue is social loafing, where individuals contribute less effort in a group setting compared to when they work alone (Karau & Williams, 1993; Latane et al., 1979). Historical literature from 2015 advocated for approaches to managing social loafing such as making the distribution of work and communication norms explicit (Lam, 2015). Studies indicate that social loafing behaviour among students remains widespread and presents an ongoing complication that educators must manage (Luo et al., 2021; Chang & Kang, 2016). Luo et al.'s research suggests that traditional management approaches may not address how collaborative work has evolved. Student communication has evolved from 2015 and students are using tools separate from the LMS that often remain hidden from educators, including WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams. As such, students are moving their communication beyond the LMS via social media platforms, which may impact educators' awareness of task progression and who is engaging in the work; these issues may encourage social loafing (Sagayno et al., 2023). The shift towards external communication platforms challenges attempts to maintain the transparency of student contributions, which earlier research identified as important for managing social loafing (Luo et al.; Sagayno et al.).

Strategies like group charters, peer assessments, and regular check-ins by educators have been suggested to mitigate issues related to group communication and task visibility (Lam, 2015; Chang & Kang, 2016; Piezon & Donald, 2005). These strategies aim to improve communication and task management, but recent research confirms that fairness issues around grading and reward distribution (also known as 'distributive justice') continue to drive social loafing behaviour (Karau & Wilhau, 2020; Luo et al., 2021). Traditional approaches to distributive justice often involve disciplinary measures, like reducing grades for social loafers, but these methods have mostly been studied in the context of traditional classroom settings (Karau & Wilhau). Little is known about how these concepts translate into online environments, and whether reducing grades for social loafers is the most effective approach to reducing social loafing. One way to visualise social loafing is through peer evaluation of group contributions (Lam, 2015; Piezon &

Donald, 2005), but students' ability to accurate assess group contributions depends on their evaluative judgement skills.

The development of evaluative judgement is defined as the ability to make informed decisions about the quality of one's own work and that of others (Tai et al., 2018). Evaluative judgement is increasingly recognised as an essential skill for students. Peer assessment is a common strategy in online group work, and not only serves as a tool for evaluation but also helps students develop evaluative judgement. These skills are acquired through requiring students to assess the contributions of their peers against established criteria (Tai et al., 2018). Developing evaluative judgement is relevant in online learning environments where social loafing and reduced task visibility can obscure the contributions of individual group members (Lam, 2015).

While prior studies have examined some of the antecedents of social loafing, contemporary research is needed to consider how the design and management of group tasks influences social loafing. As such, this study explores social loafing in online learning environments through the experiences of online psychology students. This study aims to provide an understanding of social loafing within the context of online group work, with online psychology students acting as the cohort of interest.

The first research question is: what are the strategies that students perceive will minimise social loafing in online group work? This question allows us to explore strategies that students perceive will minimise social loafing in online group work, including how students experience communication during online group work, such as communication modes within/outside of the course (e.g., social media). We are also interested in the perceived effectiveness of teaching strategies to reduce social loafing like group charters, peer assessment, check-ins, and scaffolding interpersonal skills (negotiation strategies, conflict resolution).

Method

Design

This study is grounded in a critical realist epistemology. Embracing a critical realist perspective acknowledges that the meanings individuals create from their experiences are real for them, yet these experiences are still shaped and influenced by social contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, we collected data using focus groups that were designed and conducted in a semi-structured format. This approach enabled participants to introduce build on each other's responses and explore aspects of social loafing that developed naturally from their discussions, rather than being limited to predetermined questions. The interactive nature of focus groups allowed participants to expand on their views through hearing others' experiences. As such, we gained richer insights into social loafing than individual interviews might have provided.

Information Power

Sample size was determined using 'information power' (Malterud et al., 2016), which suggests that studies with focused objectives and relevant participants require fewer participants. This approach suited the study's specific focus on social loafing in online group work, with participants drawn from online psychology students who had completed group assessments. The focus groups ranged from 100 to 120 minutes, with participants providing detailed discussions about

their experiences. As such, nine participants provided sufficiently rich data to explore social loafing in an online education setting.

Participants

Nine students who are currently enrolled in the Graduate Diploma in Psychology program at The University of Adelaide were recruited for this study. Participants were recruited from several courses within the program. Although all students enrolled in the same program, they had completed different numbers of units at the time of data collection. All had experience with at least one group-based assessment, though not necessarily the same task or course. The group was diverse in terms of academic and professional backgrounds, as many brought prior experience from earlier degrees/careers (being a 'Graduate Diploma'). These earlier experiences also informed their reflections on group work and managing social loafing.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a convenience sampling strategy. Convenience sampling involves advertising to potential participants in physically-proximate communities in which the research team are located and drawing upon existing professional networks in which the researchers already operate. Additionally, a passive snowball sampling approach was used during recruitment. Participants were requested to pass on the details of this study to any relevant personal connections, while maintaining a passive recruitment approach by not asking for the details of these personal connections (and allowing any potential participants to contact the research team without pressure). The second author acted as a supervisor to the lead (student) researcher.

The second author also acts as a Course Coordinator within the program we recruited from. To mitigate issues related to power imbalances in recruitment, we did not actively recruit from any course that the second author was Coordinating. In addition, the student researcher initiated contact with other Course Coordinators and asked them if they could post recruitment information as an announcement into these courses. Importantly, the student researcher was careful to clearly outline that they were initiating the recruitment, and that this optional participation would, in no way, impact (or have influence on) their current studies.

Data Collection

Three focus groups (see Table 1) were held in June 2024, with focus group lengths of 100 minutes or more (indicating rich data collection). A Focus Group Guide was developed to facilitate discussion. The guide (presented as Supplementary Material) contained 15 questions to guide the conversation. Not all questions were asked in each focus group, maintaining the flexibility of the semi-structured design. As these students are engaging in an online program of study, these focus groups were held over Zoom. To avoid power imbalances, the student researcher led the focus groups, with the second author (the students' supervisor) not present in these focus groups.

Table 1

Focus Group Details

	Number of Participants	Length of Focus Group
Focus Group 1 (FG1)	3	100 minutes
Focus Group 2	3	113 minutes
Focus Group 3	3	120 minutes

Data Analysis

The intention of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of social loafing in online group work, thus Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2021, 2022), was employed for its capacity to handle “rich, nuanced, complex and detailed” data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 23). An audit trail was maintained throughout data analysis to document decisions made (Koch, 1994).

Data Familiarisation

After conducting the focus groups, data were transcribed verbatim using digital transcription software. During the data familiarisation stage, focus groups were checked for digital transcription errors. Member checking was conducted with five of the nine participants to verify transcript accuracy and ensure their voices were authentically captured. The transcripts were then re-read multiple times by the first researcher, and initial codes and ideas were documented in the audit trail.

Analytical Process

We systematically followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Using NVivo 20, an inductive approach drove the development of codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Galdas, 2017; Patton, 1990). The first researcher completed the initial coding phase independently, generating codes that captured semantic and latent meanings within the data. Codes were organised within NVivo to facilitate thematic development.

Following initial coding, the first and second researchers collaborated in one-on-one working sessions to review codes and develop potential themes. This collaborative approach involved the discussion of code groupings, with decisions based on conceptual coherence and thematic distinctness. The researchers created a thematic map to visually represent the relationships between codes and developing themes.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Themes were systematically checked against the original dataset to ensure they accurately represented participants' experiences. The collaborative theme development process enhanced the credibility of findings (Tracy, 2010), particularly given the differing institutional positionalities of the researchers: the first researcher maintaining ‘insider’ status as a student at the same university, and the second researcher positioned as an educator in the online programs. This difference in positionality provided complementary perspectives during theme development and helped balance the reflexive lens through which data were interpreted.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process, with particular attention to how the first researcher's insider status as a student was reflected in the interpretation of participants' talk. Reflexive considerations were documented in the audit trail alongside coding decisions and theme development rationale (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). The study design and analytical approach aligned with Tracy's (2010) 'Big-Tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research; specifically: rich rigour through systematic methodology, sincerity through reflexive practices, credibility through collaborative analysis and member checking. Meaningful coherence was also considered through the use of conceptual coherence and thematic distinctness as organising principles (Tracy; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ethics

Low-risk ethics approval for this study was granted by The University of Adelaide's School of Psychology Human Research Ethics Low-risk Subcommittee (HREC-2024-0044). Participant confidentiality was protected during the recruitment and data collection phase, including the use of de-identification processes (pseudonyms). Other potentially identifying information was redacted from transcripts.

Personal Reflexivity Statement

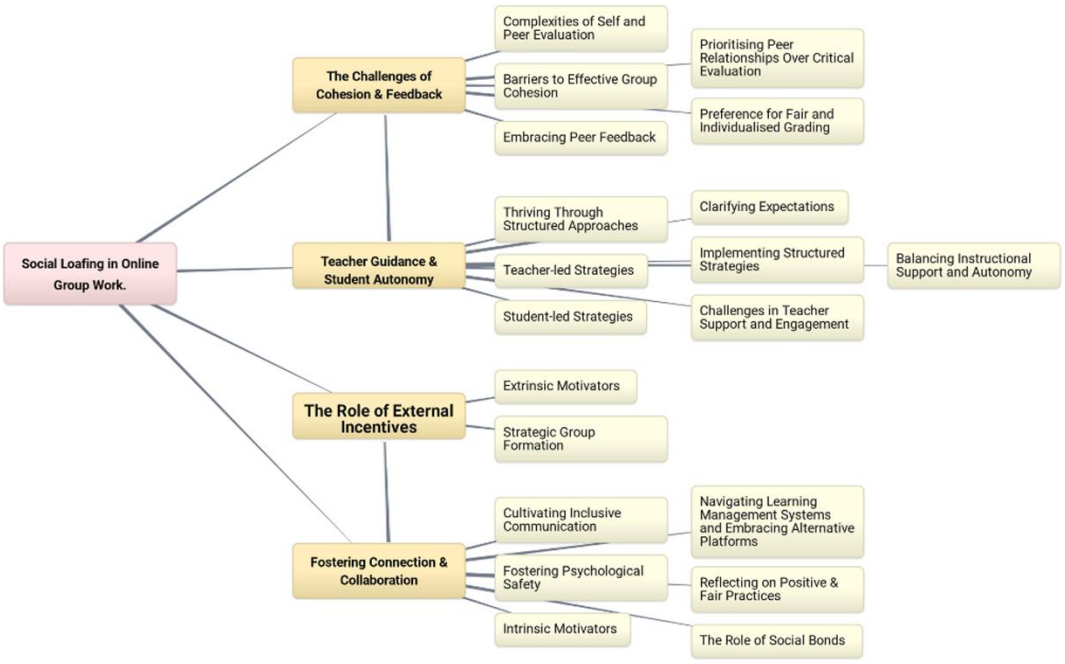
The first author holds membership as a 'university student' insider, whilst identifying as an outsider in the online learning context. Within focus groups, the insider 'student' status facilitated deeper connections with participants. As an in-person psychology student at The University of Adelaide, an informed understanding of student experiences was brought to the analysis. Their in-person group work experience fostered curiosity and an openness to challenge assumptions. For instance, expecting online students to struggle with engagement; instead, many students discussed high levels of collaboration and a desire for accountability.

The second author is a lecturer at the same university where the research was conducted. They bring an insider status to the project, through their active coordination of online courses (including those with online group work assessments). They have experience in managing online group assessments and engage in 'action research' to continuously improve the experience of group work. As an online educator, they have been exposed to examples of group dysfunction.

Results

Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the data resulted in the development of four major themes. The developed themes are: "the challenges of cohesion and feedback", "teacher guidance and student autonomy", "the role of external incentives", and "fostering connection and collaboration." These themes were created to reflect the core experiences of social loafing in group work among online psychology students. A thematic map (see Figure 1) illustrates the relationships between the themes and their associated codes. During further analyses, the themes of "the challenges of cohesion and feedback" and "teacher guidance and student autonomy" were collapsed, as both centred on perceptions of teaching strategies (aligning with the second research question). Similarly, "the role of external incentives" and "fostering connection and collaboration" were connected, as they reflect the student-centred strategies for minimising social loafing (aligning with the first research question).

Figure 1. *Thematic Map*



Behind the screen: The challenges of cohesion and feedback in online group work

Students feel particularly challenged when asked to grade their peers during online group work, and many participants expressed discomfort with the idea of “rank[ing] yourself and others… I just think it's hard” (FG2). This comment reflects the difficulty of both self-assessment and peer evaluation in an online environment, where asynchronous interactions can increase the difficulty of gauging others' contributions. The complexities of grading in such contexts led to feelings of discomfort, as students struggle with the perceived accuracy of peer evaluations. This discomfort was said to result from a perceived lack of evaluative judgement skills. Additionally, students raised concerns about the fairness of the grading process in online group settings, particularly when peer evaluations were used. One participant questioned, “what qualifies me to be making a decision that is potentially fairly detrimental to your mark?” (FG1). This view exemplifies the need for targeted support in fostering this skill. The perceived underdevelopment of evaluative judgement skills results in a concern for peer grading and views that group marking is problematic, resulting in requests such as “it'd be nice if you had an individual mark” (FG1). Without regular practice to develop these skills (particularly in environments where peer interactions are managed through technology), students feel less prepared to make well-informed evaluations.

Beyond the challenges of peer grading, participants discussed other barriers that can complicate online group settings. Students admitted that they hadn’t taken advantage of "opportunities to really interact with the other students” (FG3). This may not be the result of those designing the online learning space but acknowledges that online students are typically less available than on-campus students; one of the reasons that students study online is because they are unavailable during the day. While the online programs recruited from in this study offer weekly tutorials and weekend drop-in sessions, some students admit to not engaging with these opportunities. As a result, they may not have a good awareness of their colleagues, stating, if “you don’t have that relationship, you don’t know if this person [is] a chronic slacker, or are they a chronic over-bearer,

or a chronic workaholic?" (FG3). Those not investing in peer relationships state that it is then harder for them to accurately assess their peers' contributions.

The lack of non-verbal cues and informal communication in the online learning environment was also cited as a barrier to group cohesion, and to giving effective feedback. One participant was frustrated when students "don't have the camera on, or they give very, very little. You have to physically call their name out and ask the opinion for them to speak up" (FG2). When interaction is limited, students can feel disengaged in group work. This disengagement then decreases the students' ability to assess their peers' contributions.

Finding the balance: Teacher guidance and student autonomy in online group work

This theme explores the dynamic between students' need for educator support and their desire for autonomy in online group work. Considering the previously perceived lack of evaluative judgement skills, focus groups revealed contradictions in students' views of their need for support from educators. It also highlights the challenges that educators face when scaffolding for varying needs, with one student stating "if I had to sit through 25 minutes of a lecture explaining how to work in a group, I'd feel like I was wasting my time. I don't think at this level that is necessary; it should be expected" (FG2), contrasted against "you're just not giving me enough information" (FG2). In general, students express that they are looking for "a gentle reminder, not a lesson" (FG1), which includes brief, targeted guidance to help them navigate group tasks. They desire specific support around group work dynamics, rather than a full explanation of how to work in groups.

A suggestion for improving educator presence was a pre-recorded masterclass focusing on when 'group work goes wrong'. One student specifically mentioned the value of guidance on "what to do, and what *not* to do for a group assignment" (FG1) emphasising practical advice. The value of including tips or strategies for dealing with common issues in group work was also stated: "if [educators] could give us little sayings and tips or strategies for dealing with some of the common issues that happen in groups, that would be super useful" (FG3). These suggestions highlight the importance of explicitly teaching skills such as conflict resolution; as one participant remarked, "it is just assumed that we all know how to collaborate, but that is absolutely not the case" (FG3). Such strategies aim to find a balance between educator involvement and student autonomy, ensuring that groups remain accountable while allowing students to manage their own tasks effectively.

In response to these concerns, both students and educators have developed strategies to promote accountability and improve group dynamics. One participant praised their tutor for reinforcing collaboration by "intentionally encouraging us to comment on each other's posts, and rewarding that by jumping on and posting herself" (FG3). Student strategies included to "[meet regularly… every second day in the evening because all of us are full-time working people" (FG3).

Similarly, group charters were a highly-praised tool for managing group responsibilities. As one participant explained, "the charter was the thing that saved us in that terrible group situation because we all agreed to it. There was clear evidence it wasn't followed" (FG2). Another student shared the use of the group charter to ensure fair distribution of tasks, "it was just a good anchor, I suppose, for us to keep referring back to, and when people required help, or we're struggling...like the job was becoming bigger than what they had envisaged" (FG1). The group

charter served as a framework for accountability, allowing students to reference the “black and white” (FG1) rules (as one participant described them) when issues arose. Participants also expressed specific ideas about the creation of template that “should suggest some minimums or provide a recommended template to follow, which groups could then adjust. This way, people could say, ‘well, it’s recommended that we put our cameras on,’ or ‘it’s recommended that we meet once a week,’ or ‘it’s recommended that we all turn up on time’” (FG3). Additionally, participants felt that the group charter should summatively contribute towards their assessment; as one participant noted, “there are students that would just think, oh, well, it’s not going to be marked, no one’s going to see it” (FG1).

Maximising success: The role of external incentives in online group work

This theme explores how online psychology students in group settings are driven by external incentives. Also, how these incentives influence strategic group formation. While one participant stated that “getting a good mark is what makes me contribute” (FG1) similar thoughts were expressed by many others. These views suggest that external rewards (like grades) drive participation and reflect a reliance on external rewards in the online learning environment. This reliance on grades as a motivator revealed that students are concerned with getting ‘value for money’, with one student stating that “if I get bad grades, or if I fail, I waste my own money” (FG3).

Despite students’ previous concerns around peer grading, peer evaluation does offer a powerful motivator to contribute to group work; as one student explained: “we have to mark everyone at the end… I better contribute because otherwise, I’ll get my marks taken” (FG2). This talk is another variation on the ‘value for money’ concerns outlined earlier and demonstrates extrinsic motivation among students. Another participant stated how high-stakes grading motivates them, expressing that “if 50% of my grade comes from the group collaboration, I’d be 100% committed” (FG3).

Alongside these extrinsic motivators, participants discussed the strategic forming of groups as a motivator for collaboration. Many students deliberately chose to work with peers they were familiar with, as they believed this would enhance their ability to achieve good grades. One participant reflected, “we knew how each other worked, and we made a very deliberate decision to make sure that we’re in the same group” (FG2), demonstrating how prior relationships were utilised to maximise efficiency and outcomes. Similarly, another participant mentioned, “ideally you want to choose your group and know people” (FG2). Students regularly expressed the importance of allowing students to select compatible group members that share similar goals (and work ethics). In cases where students were unable to form groups with familiar peers, they expressed uncertainty about the group’s dynamics, stating that “I don’t know how I’d handle it if I didn’t have groups of people that I already knew” (FG2). Students’ desire to engage in strategic decision-making when forming their assessment groups illustrates to educatorsthat providing opportunities for choice may reduce concerns around social loafing.

“Communication is key”: Fostering connection and collaboration in online group work

This theme explores how online psychology students in group work are motivated by intrinsic factors, like the desire to contribute meaningfully and a sense of connection. It also explains how effective communication strategies are needed to bridge technological divides in the online

learning environment. By establishing clear expectations and promoting open communication, educators can support both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Although educators cannot control students' intrinsic motivations, they can set the tone for a respectful and supportive environment that fosters psychological safety.

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of creating an environment where they feel connected and valued, as this increases their intrinsic motivation. One participant noted, “when everybody is on the same page and thinking, ‘I’m trying to help somebody else,’ then it works” (FG2). This positive sentiment reflects the value of a collaborative mindset where some students are motivated not just by personal success but also by a sense of responsibility to support their peers. However, it is important to recognise that, as reflected in the previous theme, many students are also driven by extrinsic motivations like grades or peer evaluations. Rather than shifting students' intrinsic or extrinsic motivators, the focus for educators and peers should be on creating an environment where both types of motivation can co-exist, encouraging students to contribute meaningfully, regardless of their individual motivations.

The intrinsic motivation to contribute was closely tied to the group dynamic. Specifically, the nature of online communication requires more deliberate efforts to ensure everyone is heard. A participant reflected on the importance of direct engagement by stating, “when someone physically [addresses you and] says, ‘what do you think about this and this?’ You will be more likely to speak up” (FG1). One participant explained, “your ways of communication have to be more gentle, but more to the point” (FG2), suggesting that effective communication in the online environment involves balancing empathy and clarity to avoid misunderstandings. Part of building that empathy among online students is recognising their competing demands, as an understanding of each other’s situations fostered psychological safety within the group. One participant shared, “we react and respond to each person respectfully… we’re mindful of the different walks of life that everyone comes from” (FG3). Another participant stressed the importance of this shared online experience, stating that “there were a lot of barriers in this last subject that I could have tanked completely, but because they were so understanding and supportive of my situation, it worked” (FG3).

The technological aspect of online group work can present barriers to communication and engagement. Several students expressed frustration with the LMS as a new tool that was challenging to navigate. Instead, students turned to Google Docs as their collaborative platform. One participant explained, “because there was a live document going, you felt that pressure to get it done and to make sure that you were contributing each day, and doing that little bit more” (FG3). This approach not only facilitated smoother collaboration but also increased accountability, as students could see the real-time contributions of their peers. Some participants suggested that the use of familiar communication platforms (like social media) can enhance accessibility. One student mentioned a preference for Messenger while another pointed out that “being accessible” (FG2) is key to successful group work. By using tools that students already use in their daily lives, group members were able to communicate more easily and stay connected. Students stated that these platforms facilitated engagement and prompt responses.

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of social loafing in group work among online psychology students, with a focus on the strategies students believe will minimise social loafing. Through

Reflexive Thematic Analysis, four key themes were developed: “the challenges of cohesion and feedback,” “teacher guidance and student autonomy,” “the role of external incentives,” and “fostering connection and collaboration.” These themes reflect the nuanced ways in which social loafing exists in online learning environments, and the strategies students believe can address these challenges.

Participants expressed concerns about the fairness of group assessments, difficulties in maintaining task visibility, and the complexities of peer evaluations. These concerns stress concerns with ensuring both individual accountability and collective responsibility in online group work, aligning with previous literature on the topic. Distributive justice emerged as an issue, as students were concerned that group grades may not always reflect individual contributions. Donelan and Kear (2023) emphasise that balancing individual accountability with collective group responsibility is a persistent issue in online education, especially when task visibility is limited.

This study builds on Moore’s (2018) transactional distance model: how asynchronous group settings contribute to social loafing through barriers to cohesion and engagement. Participants linked a reduction in synchronous communication (due to their own reduced availability), and complexities around task visibility to disengagement. Consistent with prior findings (e.g., Lam, 2015; Sagayno et al., 2023), asynchronous communication has the potential to increase social loafing, if peer interaction is not intentionally built-in to the group work experience. Despite contradictions and the need to scaffold for varying needs, the discomfort with peer grading revealed the need for targeted training in assessment-related evaluative judgement.

While the literature acknowledges the benefits of using Learning Management Systems (LMS) to facilitate group work (Gkrimpizi, 2023), participants in this study described them as difficult to navigate. This echoes Moore et al. (2011), who noted that LMS platforms can be associated with a steep learning curve. This learning curve may prevent students from fully utilising their collaborative features. Past literature emphasises the potential downsides of using social media platforms for group work, such as reduced task visibility and increased social loafing (Sagayno et al., 2023), yet this study provides a more nuanced view. Several participants indicated that using familiar communication platforms like Messenger enhanced accessibility, made group interactions smoother, and allowed students to respond more quickly, contributing to stronger engagement within the group. However, externalising communication from the LMS to social media may pose challenges in terms of tracking individual contributions and maintaining accountability (Sagayno et al., 2023). As such, strategies to make contributions visible may balance out the risks associated with communication that has been externalised to social media platforms.

Practical implications and recommendations

Increasing task visibility through real-time collaborative tools (like Google Docs) can reduce uncertainty around individual contributions and promote accountability (Chang & Kang, 2016; Gikandi et al., 2011). Educators can require students to use them for all group work, as the version history tool in Google Docs allows for a clear record of individual involvement (Gikandi et al.). Educators could also create shared documents (with each group member assigned specific sections or tasks) and edits made visible to the group. This transparency encourages consistent participation and identifies unequal contributions. Educators can also set deadlines where

students are required to review and comment on each other's work within the shared document (facilitating formative peer feedback).

In addition to using collaborative platforms, educators can enhance communication and collaboration by integrating familiar social media tools alongside the LMS. While Google Docs ensures task visibility, social media tools like Messenger can be used for quick, informal communication that keeps group members connected. For example, Gikandi et al. (2011) suggest using social media for casual check-ins or reminders. However, key group decisions and progress updates can be required to be documented within the LMS to ensure visibility and accountability. A designated group member could be responsible for transferring any decisions made via social media to the LMS as needed. Panadero et al. (2016) noted that peer assessments are most effective when students are given clear, objective criteria to follow. Providing rubrics that clearly outline expectations for group work (including collaboration and contribution quality) could help address participant concerns about peer grading fairness. Grades could also be awarded to students whose work integrates feedback from peers (Panadero & Romero, 2014).

To lessen the anxiety around peer grading, educators could focus on developing students' evaluative judgment skills with exemplars. Providing students with examples of both high-quality and lower-quality peer assessments can help them better understand how to apply rubrics effectively (Panadero et al., 2016). These examples could also be discussed in class, allowing students to compare them against rubric criteria and collaboratively decide how each could be improved. This process helps students grasp the standards of evaluation and apply rubric criteria more consistently. This approach may improve the fairness and accuracy of peer assessments and help students build evaluative judgment skills (Tai et al., 2018). To foster intrinsic motivation, educators can implement structured opportunities for students to build rapport early in the course. Panadero et al. (2016) also advise the use of group charter template to facilitate a safe group environment. These charters should outline minimum expectations like keeping cameras on and attending meetings regularly. This approach allows groups to adjust the template as needed, while maintaining clear communication and accountability.

To address the need for individual accountability and collective responsibility in group work, educators can implement a hybrid assessment model that combines group and individual grading. Freeman and McKenzie (2002) recommend that a portion of the grade be allocated to the overall group outcome (50%) and the remaining portion to individual contributions (50%), evaluated through peer assessments and self-assessments. This approach helps address concerns about distributive justice and ensure that the distribution of grades fairly reflect group and individual efforts. At the start of the project, each group member could be assigned specific tasks or roles, and these individual contributions are documented on the LMS. The group grade reflects the overall quality of the final product, while the individual grade corresponds to the engagement and quality of each student's contributions.

Limitations and future research

This study provided rich, detailed insights into the experiences of group work for online psychology students; however, the findings may not be transferable to other online learning environments. For example, the group work experiences of online students in disciplines like

engineering or the arts may differ due to the nature of the tasks, or the collaborative processes involved. In addition, although this research involved co-production through collaborative interpretation between a student-researcher and educator-researcher, the recommendations were not validated with the original participants. The first author's student identity, whilst valuable for understanding student perspectives at the same institution, does reflect their in-person (rather than online) learning experiences. Future research would benefit from returning proposed recommendations to participants for validation and refinement.

There is a need for research into the long-term effectiveness of interventions designed to build evaluative judgement and increase task visibility. Longitudinal studies could explore how students' perceptions of peer review evolve over time and how these changes influence their engagement with group work. Future studies could explore how different academic disciplines experience social loafing in online group work, and how it may vary across various educational and professional contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of social loafing in group work among online psychology students, providing insights into barriers for collaborating in the online environment. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was employed and resulted in four themes, including: “the challenges of cohesion and feedback”, the balance between “teacher guidance and student autonomy”, “the role of external incentives”, and the importance of “fostering connection and collaboration” in online group work. Participants in this study viewed the experience of feeling connected in their online groups as an intrinsic motivator and a way to reduce social loafing. Being connected was viewed as a precursor for being able to accurately evaluate the contributions of others, and thus their ability to engage in peer assessment of group work. Although participants expressed discomfort with the potential subjectivity of peer evaluations, they recognised the extrinsic motivation that peer assessment provided. Peer assessment was cited by students in this study as a potential strategy to reduce social loafing in online group work. Students simultaneously shared their discomfort with peer assessment, indicating this is an area for targeted skill development in evaluative judgement.

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