

# Gender Differences in Language Learning Strategies and Social Networking Use

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**Abstract:** *Online Social Networks (OSNs) have become part and parcel of everyday communication among people. Many organizations and individuals have taken this opportunity to direct the use of social media for educational purposes. The current study investigates the use of OSNs, namely Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Google+, and LinkedIn, on English learning. Specifically, the study focuses on the difference in use between males and females. Sixty Yemeni EFL learners participated in the study; 37 were females and 23 were males. The results reveal that both men and women have equal access to OSNs and perceive them as equally beneficial for their English skills. There was only one statistically significant difference concerning the frequency of using Facebook as men reported higher frequency of use than their female counterparts.*

**Keywords:** *Gender Differences, Social Networks, English Learning, EFL Context*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender differences in the use of technology have been explored alongside other technology-related issues. However, there are very few studies on gender and the use of Online Social Networks (OSNs). Of these few existing studies, none has examined gender differences in relation to language learning practices and benefits. One of the few studies that were found was conducted by Mazman and Usluel (2011). This study investigated the possible differences between men and women in the use of OSNs, such as Facebook. A group of 870 Facebook users participated in an online survey designed by the researchers. The study concluded that men and women were significantly different in their reasons for using Facebook. Women used Facebook more than men for maintaining existing relationships, for academic purposes, and for keeping a specific agenda. On the other hand, men used Facebook more for making new relationships.

Another study by Lim and Meier (2011) investigated the gender differences in the use of computers and the Internet in South Korea. The 673 participants (340 male and 333 female) were selected from a Korean high school. The study used a quantitative questionnaire and interviews in the collection of the data. The results of the study showed that male and female participants generally used computers for four purposes: social networking, personal knowledge, formal learning, and entertainment. However, prevalent among male participants was the use of computers for entertainment, namely playing games, whereas female respondents used them mostly for social networking.

Other gender differences were reported in Thompson's (2012) study, which found that female participants were more likely to use Facebook (Mean = 61.7%) than male participants (Mean = 44.0%). They were significantly different from each other ( $p < .0001$ ) in terms of the time spent on such sites and their purposes for using Facebook. Similarly, Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, and Kruck (2012) observed that male and female participants had different motives for using OSNs. They reported that female participants tended to use OSNs to compare themselves with others or to look for information, whereas male participants were more likely to use them to look for new friends.

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTION

The current study investigated whether there was a significant relationship between learners' gender and the use of OSNs in English as a foreign language. The study was guided by the following research question:

1. Is there a difference between male and female Yemeni EFL learners in their frequency of and perceived benefits of using social networks in English?

### 3. PARTICIPANTS

This study is extracted from a bigger mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) research project that examined in details the use of online social networking sites on Yemeni English learners' incidental or intentional building of their English language skills. An online survey was distributed to 100 Yemeni EFL learners, 60 of whom responded and completed the survey successfully. All participants were undergraduates studying English as a foreign language at a public university in the central part of Yemen. Aged between 19 and 33, this group represents young people who are frequent users of online social networks. According to the data collected, the majority of the participants (72%) reported their daily use of social media. Also, 83% of them stated that they were comfortable using computers and the Internet.

### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics and independent t-tests were used to analyze the data. Since there were two groups of participants, t-tests for independent samples were deemed appropriate to investigate any significant differences. So, five independent t-tests were used to examine the frequency of using the five OSNs. Additionally, 13 independent t-tests were performed for each of the questions regarding the overall usefulness of the OSNs for specific language aspects. For all 18 t-tests, effect sizes were calculated, using Cohen's *d*, following the formula  $\text{Mean1} - \text{Mean2} / \text{SD pooled}$  (Cohen, 1988).

### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study questioned the possible association of gender and OSNs use in English. For this purpose, the male and female mean scores of using each of the five OSNs (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Google+, and LinkedIn) were compared through independent t-tests. For all five t-tests, homogeneity of variances was considered in reporting the t-test results. Levene's statistics and the corresponding *p*-values showed that for all five t-test comparisons the homogeneity of variances was observed at  $\alpha = .05$ .

**Table 1.** Gender Comparison for Using OSNs in English

	Males			Females			T	df	Sig.	Effect Size
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD				
Facebook	25	5.48	1.005	35	4.66	1.413	2.636	58	.011*	0.66
WhatsApp	25	4.12	2.007	35	3.86	2.102	.486	58	.628	0.12
Google+	25	3.12	2.007	35	3.14	2.158	-.042	58	.967	0.009
Twitter	25	1.84	1.573	35	1.17	.857	1.931	58	.062	0.52
LinkedIn	25	1.60	1.155	35	1.43	1.267	.536	58	.594	0.14

**Note.** An asterisk (\*) marks a statistically significant difference between male and female use.

In addition, effect sizes were calculated, using Cohen's *d* following the formula  $\text{Mean1} - \text{Mean2} / \text{SD pooled}$  (Cohen, 1988). The values of the effect sizes were considered in interpreting the magnitude and practical importance of the observed gender differences, following Cohen's reference values of .2, .5, and .8 for small, medium and large effects, respectively. Table 1 contains the descriptive and t-test statistics for the gender comparisons on the five OSNs examined by this study.

Based on the mean values shown in Table 1, it appears that the male participants' meanscore of four of the OSNs, except for Google Plus, was higher than that of their female counterparts. However, only one of the mean differences was statistically significant. This statistically significant result was observed in relation to Facebook, with a male mean of 5.48 vs. a female mean of 3.86,  $t(58) = 2.636$ ,  $p = .011$ . The value of Cohen  $d = .66$ , showing a moderate to high effect, provided further support for the relatively large difference between the two genders (Cohen, 1988).

For the rest of the comparisons, no significant differences were found, as shown in Table 1. For WhatsApp, a mean score of 4.12 for male and 3.86 for female participants showed that men used WhatsApp more than women, but the t-test failed to reveal a statistically significant difference between the two groups,  $t(58) = .486$ ,  $p = .628$ . The value of Cohen  $d = .12$  was small, which further indicated that the use of WhatsApp in English was not significantly associated with the gender of the participants.

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For Google Plus, the female mean use (Mean = 3.14) was slightly higher than the male mean (Mean = 3.12), but the difference was not significant,  $t(58) = -.042, p = .967$ , and the value of Cohen  $d = 0.009$  was very small.

Twitter was used more by men (Mean = 1.84) than by women (Mean = 1.17), but the difference was not sufficient to produce significant t-test statistics,  $t(58) = 1.931, p = .062$ .

The next comparison concerned the use of LinkedIn in English. The mean scores as well as the t-test results showed that there was only a slight difference (male Mean = 1.60, female Mean = 1.43), with no significant difference,  $t(58) = .536, p = .594$ . Overall, the gender comparisons revealed that both genders used the five OSNs in English at almost equal frequency, with the exception of Facebook, which was significantly more frequently used by male participants.

Previous studies concluded that male and female participants differed significantly in their purpose and use of OSNs (e.g., Lim & Meier, 2011; Mazman & Usluel, 2011; Thompson, 2012). According to Thompson (2012), female users were more likely to use Facebook than male users. Another study by Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, and Kruck (2012) came to similar conclusions that female participants were more likely to use OSNs to compare themselves with others or to look for information, while male participants tended to use them to look for new friends. These findings are not directly relevant to the purpose of the present study because none of the previous studies (at least to this researcher's knowledge) have examined the specific language purposes and benefits of using OSNs in terms of gender differences. Therefore, the results could not be directly compared. However, one new insight that this study provides is that there were no significant differences between the practices and perceived benefits reported by the male and female Yemeni students. The only significant difference was found in relation to Facebook. This absence of significant differences suggests that both male and female Yemeni students take advantage of OSNs in English in similar ways and see analogous language benefits of this use.

Gender comparisons were also run on the overall usefulness of OSNs. The participants were given 13 statements and were asked to answer with *Agree, Somewhat Agree, or Disagree*. To measure the difference in use between males and females, 13 independent t-tests were performed on participants' answers to each of the 13 Likert-scale questions. Homogeneity of variances and effect sizes were also calculated for each t-test. The results are summarized in Table 2.

As clearly shown in Table 2, none of the 13 gender comparisons was statistically significant as the p-values (Sig column in Table 2) all exceeded the alpha level of .05. The lack of significant differences showed that male and female participants had similar perceptions about the usefulness of OSNs for their English language development.

**Table 2.** Gender Comparisons for the Overall Usefulness of OSNs

	Male			Female			t	df	Sig	Effect Size
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD				
1) Learn everyday <b>English words</b> , including slang such as "cool", "awesome"	25	2.60	.500	35	2.57	.608	.193	58	.848	0.053
2) Learn specialized vocabulary, such as words related to <i>sports, fashion, music, politics, etc.</i>	25	2.76	.523	35	2.66	.539	.738	58	.464	0.188
3) Improve my <b>English grammar</b>	25	2.44	.712	35	2.31	.676	.695	58	.490	0.187
4) Improve my listening skills in <b>English</b>	25	2.40	.816	35	2.43	.778	-.137	58	.891	0.037
5) Improve my speaking skills in <b>English</b>	25	2.28	.737	35	2.09	.742	1.002	58	.320	0.256
6) Improve my reading skills in <b>English</b>	25	2.76	.523	35	2.74	.443	.137	58	.892	0.041
7) Improve my writing skills in <b>English</b>	25	2.68	.557	35	2.74	.505	-.455	58	.651	0.112

8) Make friends with <b>native speakers of English</b>	25	2.76	.436	35	2.54	.701	1.477	58	.176	0.376
9) Make friends with <b>non-native speakers of English</b>	25	2.76	.436	35	2.51	.612	1.816	58	.075	0.470
10) Stay in touch with <b>English-speaking friends</b>	25	2.68	.476	35	2.66	.591	.160	58	.874	0.037
11) Learn things about <b>US culture</b>	25	2.72	.542	35	2.51	.612	1.345	58	.184	0.363
12) Learn things about <b>British culture</b>	25	2.60	.577	35	2.46	.611	.914	58	.365	0.235
13) Learn things about <b>different cultures</b>	25	2.76	.436	35	2.60	.604	1.192	58	.238	0.303

## 6. CONCLUSION

The most important contribution of the present study is that it provides evidence about the use of OSNs from a sample of Yemeni college students, a population that had not been included in previous studies. The findings not only corroborated the positive view of OSNs as having real potential for language learning, but they also showed that participants used them to learn about other cultures, such as the American and British culture.

Most of the participants found OSNs, especially Facebook, to be useful tools for building and developing their English knowledge and skills. Beyond this technology's implications for the language classroom, this study's findings showed that the Internet and OSNs have become an undeniable part of young Yemeni students' lives and learning among both genders and that young Yemeni people in this regard are no different from young people in other parts of the world. Moreover, the study suggests that learning is no longer limited to the classroom or to gender; in fact, a great deal of learning happens outside of it where males and females have equal access to different resources. This new reality presents new challenges to teachers in the 21st century as already noted by Chapelle and Jamieson (2008). So, instructors have to adapt to these new methods of learning and put an effort into using them in a way that would improve the teaching-learning process.

One limitation of the study was the small sample of respondents. It is well-known that surveys with larger numbers of participants are more representative of the whole population than surveys with smaller samples. Another limitation was related to the unbalanced distribution of male and female participants, with 61.7% of the participants being female and only 38.3% being male. This was of particular concern because gender was a variable of interest in the present study and certain comparisons were drawn between the practices and perceptions of the male and female participants. Further research on a bigger sample with equal number of males and females is recommended.

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