Abstract
The study addresses the relationship between gender and online social presence among undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia. Few previous studies have investigated the relationship between gender and online social presence in co-educational online learning environments. Thus, the purpose of the study is to extend the research to the gender-segregated educational system and blended learning environments. The study utilizes a survey research design to collect descriptive and inferential data from the foregoing respondents. As this proposed study is still in progress, the results are not available yet. The study should be completed in the Spring of 2020.

Keywords:
Online Social Presence, Gender Differences, Gender-Segregation, Blended Learning

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Introduction

Lack of interaction among distant students is a critical issue in online learning due to the low level of online social presence (Hung, Flom, Manu, & Mahmoud, 2015). When the online social presence is low, the students’ interaction and performance tend to be low and vice versa (Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012). In addition, the lack of online social presence can cause negative psychological perceptions among online students such as feeling of isolation (Hung et al., 2015; Misanchuk & Anderson, 2001), frustration (Harskamp, 2002), and dissatisfaction (Cobb, 2011; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). A high degree of online social presence is necessary to promote the interaction and sense of community among distant learners (Cui, Lockee, & Meng, 2013; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Gunawardena, 1995). In the last few decades, researchers have conducted several studies to identify the factors that impact the level of online social presence. For example, researchers examined the relationship between online social presence and such topics as communication and emotions (Angelaki & Mavroidis, 2013), satisfaction (Cobb, 2011; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), collaborative learning in computer-mediated communication (Gunawardena, 1995), feelings of closeness and interpersonal relationships (Gooch & Watts, 2015), affective learning (Jolivette, 2006), critical thinking (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Tu & Corty, 2003), and user interface and social cues (Wei et al., 2012).

However, few studies have been conducted on the relationship between gender and online social presence, and these studies provided mixed results about the differences between male and female students in perceiving online social presence. For instance, some studies (e.g., Angelaki & Mavroidis, 2013; Thayalan & Shanthi, 2011; Thayalan, Shanthi, & Paridai, 2012) indicate that women have higher level of social presence than their men peers. In contrast, other studies (e.g., Cho, Yim, & Paik, 2015; Fehnhofer, Kothgassner, Hau, Beutl, Hlavacs, & Kryspin-Exner, 2014; Tu, Yen, & Blocher, 2011) found that gender has no effect on the level of online social presence among online learners. Therefore, it remains unclear whether or not gender impacts the degree of online social presence among distant learners. It should be taken into consideration that the previously mentioned studies took place in Western and Asian contexts; hence, they primarily examined the effect of gender factor on the online social presence in mixed-gender communication environments. Thus, the findings of these studies cannot be generalized to the Saudi Arabian context, which employs gender-segregation in most of its educational institutions (Najj, Nachouki, & Ankit, 2012; Parahoo, Harvey, & Tamin, 2013).

Significance of the Study

There is a need to extend the research to a new population to examine the impact of gender on a separate-gender communication environment. Gender-segregated education influences the interaction among students due to gender differences in interaction styles (Martin & Fabes, 2001; Monaco & Gaier, 1992). For instance, Mael (1998) points out that males and females prefer the same rather than opposite gender. Also, Hughes (2006) assumes that female students may feel more comfortable to participate in single-gender than co-educational learning environments due to the absence of distractions that results in the sexual attractiveness to the opposite sex. Ding and Harskamp’s (2006) concluded that female students performed better in collaborative problem-solving activities in the single-gender environments than those in the mixed-gender ones. They also indicated that female students were more sensitive to the presence of the opposite gender than male students.

Male and female students also differ regarding their interaction in online learning environments. For example, some studies (e.g., Alstete & Beutell, 2004; Arbaugh, 2000; Chyung, 2007; Coldwell, Craig, Paterson, & Mustard, 2008; Gunn, McSporran, Macleod, & French, 2003) show that female students perform better and participate more than male students in terms of reading content, viewing pages, and posting messages in discussion boards in mixed-gender online learning environments. With regard to single-gender online environments, Bostock and Lizihi (2005) found that female students tend also to post more messages in single-gender than mixed-gender online learning environments, and vice versa for male students. Likewise, Savicki and Kelley (2000) found that females in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) environments were more satisfied in female-only groups than males in male-only groups.

Based on the above discussions, a single-gender education can be considered as an important factor that may impact gender differences in interaction, either in face-to-face or online learning settings. Song, Restivo, Rijt, Scarlatos, Tonjes, and Orlov (2015) point out that “gender segregation in educational settings may be an undervalued factor in the explanation of gender differences in student performance” (p. 281). Therefore, it is critical to examine the impact of gender on online social presence because gender differences may influence students’ learning, which in turn affects their educational needs (Biocca & Harms, 2002; Francis & Skelton, 2005). Thus, what is appropriate for male students may not be suitable for female students (Maceli, Fogliasso, & Baack, 2011). Rovai and Baker (2005) agree that learners’ characteristics (e.g., gender, age, learning style, online learning experiences) may require certain instructional strategies. Therefore, examining gender differences is needed to ensure equality between students in education as well as enhance their learning experiences in online learning settings (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Harvey, Parahoo, & Santally, 2017).