

Social Media as an Educational Tool in English: Examining the before and During-Lockdown Trends and Attitudes at Kuwait University

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Abstract

This research aims at investigating the use of social media by students of Kuwait University (KU). Kuwait has been one of the first countries in the Arab world to have recognized the importance of English in the socio-economic development of its people. Accordingly, English enjoys a favorable position in the educational paradigm of Kuwait with it being a compulsory school subject alongside Arabic. With the outbreak coronavirus (COVID-19), Kuwaiti educational authorities, and many other countries, were obliged to enforce closure to all educational institutions and substitute traditional learning with online learning. A large number of tech tools came into prominence to ensure the continuance of education, so great was the desire to innovate that social media platforms came to be exploited for the purpose. Through a quantitative method, this study collects data from 400 students of English at Kuwait University to investigate the nature of change in the use of Social Media in English classrooms before and during the pandemic period. Results show that the students, both male and female, are positively disposed to its use now and in the future in learning, that is gender is not a differentiating variable in the use of SM in learning, a finding which is novel given that it diverges from previous findings in the field. Further, the language learners at Kuwait University recognize the benefits of SM in education implying that, regardless of gender, students share almost equal levels of favorable perceptions. The study importantly concludes that SM has a lot of untapped potential to offer when it comes to being used as part of the educational process. As a result, this study recommends a wider scope of using SM in universities and institutions so as to improve the process of teaching and learning.

Keywords: education, e-learning, Covid-19, kuwait university, social media, students

1. Introduction

Social media (henceforth SM) is a modern tool that has come to occupy a substantial and prominent place in our everyday lives. Through SM, people can easily communicate with each other in a matter of seconds, access various sources of information which would have needed large investment of time and manpower earlier, and accomplish a lot many tasks at the click of a key, and all of these at almost any place and any time. In fact, so pervasive is the presence of SM that many of the functions of modern life have been shifted to it: Education is no exception. Whereas the shift to online education was compelled by the onset of the covid19 pandemic, to begin with, the use of the applications of electronic devices as educational tools is a relatively new dimension in the sector. The driving force behind this innovation has been the popularity of these applications and tools with the tech-driven younger generations for whom life is inconceivable without technology. Once again, the impetus to look towards the multiple tools that tech offers came from the circumstances created by the coronavirus spread.

Kuwait has an outstanding education system evidenced by a literacy rate as high as 96.2%, a large network of public and private education options, and a focused education policy that aims to impart a practical skill set to people graduating from school. The state recognized the importance of English as an important language of international communication as well as in all domains of life. Consequently, English is to be taught compulsorily alongside Arabic though the former is neither a national nor an official language in Kuwait. However, given its massive international presence in the economic dispensation of the region, Kuwait was amongst the first Arab nations to have given English its due de-facto status to ensure the socio-economic development of its people. As for students in Kuwait, the English language is a primary requirement set by the Ministry of Higher Education. Kuwait University requires students to sit for an English language placement test before being admitted into any of its colleges. Moreover, students in all colleges have to pass English language courses as a graduation requirement. During the pandemic, a

large number of students were enrolled in English language courses. In order to maintain the progress of the academic process, KU implemented SM tools to reach out to students and ensure their academic attainment.

2. Literature Review

SM is an effective medium of communication among people regardless of the distance; thus, facilitating sharing information, files and pictures, and videos as well as creating blogs and conducting real-time conversations (Al-Ahdal & Alqasham, 2020; Moghavvemi et al., 2018). Hence, SM enjoys a pristine position as an essential aspect of modern living. This is not a novel status. What is indeed novel is the intensive use that SM has been put to during the years that the world halted due to the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. It has become a preferred method of communication between people of various parts of the world, serving various purposes. The most important purpose of SM in this period was completing the interrupted academic year so as not to delay the academic progress of students enrolled at different levels. Online courses, offered via SM, offered a new and exciting pathway for education. Nowadays, language learners around the world have access to multiple SM platforms. These platforms provide access to endless sources of knowledge (Zhang et al., 2015). Students can access lectures, webinars, and online classes through SM. For learners of the English language, SM gave anytime-anywhere access to a large number of free lessons that are available online. The ease of listening to these lessons and the attached exercises have proven to be important factors in facilitating the learning process, most notably in the event of quarantine (Leighton et al., 2021; Pathak et al., 2021).

The massive inroads that technology found into the language classroom threw the earlier practices into infamous contrast. Teaching English through traditional methods has a number of drawbacks, such as, limitations on time, space, and facilities (Al-Ahdal, 2020 a, 2020b). The scarcity of research on understanding the effect of a distance learning environment on communication and collaboration skills led to conducting a slew of investigations (Camilia et al., 2013; Zarzycka et al., 2021; Smith, 2021). Other research also identified the benefits of SM for learning and teaching (Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021; Chugh & Ruhi, 2018) indicating that SM has improved students' performance, provided a convenient learning environment, and increased the level of engagement.

As a result of the Covid-19 outbreak, educational institutions throughout the world were forced to close, and severe controls were implemented in an effort to stop the spread of the disease. Universities, shopping malls, mosques, and public and private offices were forced to close their doors. As a result, school closures affected more than 1.2 billion students in 186 countries, leading educators throughout the world to turn to e-learning and social media (SM) to keep the educational process going on (Yuan et al., 2021). As a result of the lockdown, lectures and lessons were halted for a long period of time, posing a possible negative effect on the academic progress of KU students which was obliged to look for alternative methods so as to ensure continuance of learning. The most suitable alternative was to use SM because it was what learners were familiar with. In order to continue their education, students shifted to use SM platforms including Zoom, Teams, and Google Meet. English being one of the essential elements of their academic progress, many KU students joined online discussions, Whatsapp groups, and Facebook groups in order to communicate with other students and instructors. Their frequent access to SM platforms and websites motivated the researcher to examine the effect of these tools and their efficiency in assisting students in improving their English language.

Technology has become a vital part of the educational process generally and its use in language classes is becoming increasingly common. This interface has helped students to develop learning a new language (Ahmadi & Reza, 2018). In today's environment, social media plays a critical part as its influence on sustainable education is becoming a critical and motivating aspect. The globe has become a village because of social media and the way it is changing instruction (Abbas et al., 2019). Thus, many instructors have embraced digital technology in the classroom, particularly social media, in order to improve the quality of learning of their students (Nadeak, 2020). From projectors to smartphones, students no longer require paper and pen to take notes or practice a newly acquired subject, technology has significantly influenced teaching and learning. Many students were already using computers and iPads to take notes and perform their schoolwork before the COVID-19 epidemic. Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, students also used SM as a technique of integrating technology in the classroom in addition to the ones listed above. This study explores the effects of using SM as an educational tool by students enrolled at KU on their academic performance.

Despite the fact that they are largely used for social interaction and marketing many application like Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter are having an influence on English language acquisition, (Al Fadda, 2020). According to Malik and Asnur (2019) social media has an effect on learners' ability to communicate in a foreign language. Students who use social media have get the access to a much broader variety of sources for language

acquisition. Additionally, Reinhardt (2019) stated that without a doubt, social media literacies will be critical for attainment of future and contemporary language competency. What makes social media a very convenient tool in the learning process is that students own cellphones and other gadgets irrespective of socio-economic status and access to equitable means? With the rise of millennials, who have grown up with a broad range of electronic gadgets in their everyday lives, it is increasingly becoming common to see technology being used in higher education as an important instrument in the creation of a new reality of collaborative learning (Jang, 2015). Students are never without their cellphones, no matter where they go or what they are doing, almost all students have cell phones and are active on social media a large part of the day and night. Accessing information at any time and from any location has become simpler with social media (Malik & Asnur, 2019).

Students who utilize social media to learn a new language have a greater access to learning materials. There are many benefits and some drawbacks of using social media and mobile devices in the classroom. The most notable benefits are the easier access to course materials, such as videos and written notes. Students often feel that social media and mobile devices are the most cost-effective and convenient ways to obtain relevant information (Ansari & Khan, 2020). Sharing ideas, spreading knowledge, and building relationships are all positive aspects of social networking. On the other hand, students who are overly engrossed in social media are missing out on valuable academic time. Excessive social media usage destabilizes adolescents emotionally and physically, resulting in dull or irritating conduct (Abbas et al., 2019).

For educational and professional growth, SM platforms like Zoom and Teams were the only options because there was no break from following waves of the epidemic. Students were able to keep in touch with their teachers and peers. The SM platforms were also used by students to take part in lectures and submit homework as well as take tests and review lectures. Students discovered new methods of retrieving and disseminating their learning materials (Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021; Radwan et al., 2020).

Many research have examined the advantages and disadvantages of employing SM technologies in the education sector (Ahmed et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2020; Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020; Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021; Qazi et al., 2021; Tuli et al., 2020). However, there is a lack of focus on the attitudes and the perspective of students on the use of SM. Teachers may use social media as a useful teaching tool to help their students learn more effectively, and it can serve as a foundation for student-teacher cooperation and communication. It has also been emphasized that faculty supervision is critical to attaining the goals of e-learning; lecturers must be skilled in the use of methodologies and techniques, as well as in the use of suitable learning resources and facilities, in order to make the teaching and learning process engaging. Furthermore, Ghouali and Benmoussat (2019) conducted a study on the level of writing skills among Algerian students. The study reflected a significantly decreased level of writing skills due to the use of SM in education. The participants were unable to differentiate between official and informal environments, according to the researchers. Al-Jarrah et al. (2019) conducted a study on students' perceptions and attitudes about the usage of SM. According to the findings, many students used SM to expand their English vocabulary which improved their writing abilities. English has long been viewed as an oppressor's language, and cultural and psychological barriers to learning English have existed (Sheela & Ravikumar, 2016). However, English has grown in importance as a second language and a language of international communication (Elaish, 2019). Globally where English is not the native tongue, teaching students how to communicate effectively in the 21st century has placed a high value on mastering the language (Bai et al., 2020). Since its inception, it has served as a common language for people from a range of ethnic and linguistic origins (Thao & Tai, 2017).

3. Research Objectives

Language is a means of communication. Understanding the importance of language is one of the motivations for pursuing studies in this field. KU students understand the importance of acquiring reasonable proficiency in English so as to perform well in their tertiary studies. To put it another way, pupils are aware that the English language is a vital part of daily life. To develop their use of the English language in various life situations, students need to develop their listening and speaking skills. These two skills facilitate expressing needs and positively communicating with others. Additionally, SM has great potential if it is properly incorporated into the teaching process. However, the negative impact of SM should be avoided to serve the intended educational purposes.

The importance of this study stems from shedding light on the use of SM and the purposes it serves during university lockdown due to Covid-19. It is being conducted to see whether the lockout has any effect on the number students who are using social media for educational purposes. In addition, young people are more open to using new technology, especially when it comes to integrating new learning methodologies. Thus, this study examines the usage of SM by Kuwaiti students of English at KU. It answers the four questions below.

3.1 Research Questions

1. What is the impact of the lockdown on KU EFL students' use of SM?
2. What is the role of SM in improving the KU EFL students' English?
3. What are the KU EFL students' attitudes on the usage of SM?
4. How can the uses of SM be enhanced under similar future circumstances?

3.2 Hypotheses of the Study

- The use of SM by KU's students increased due to university lockdown.
- KU students' responses concerning the use and attitudes closer to SM are above the common level.
- KU students' perspective about using SM in future studies is above average.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

For this study, a descriptive survey and quantitative correlations were used to outline respondents' opinions and knowledge regarding social media in education. Accordingly, researchers employed quantitative and descriptive methodologies in this study to identify and explain current trends in educational usage of social media. The term "description of patterns" describes a study in which the researcher tries to isolate the overall trend from individual answers and examines how this overall trend changes from person to person.

4.2 Respondents of the Study

Purposefully selected 400 students participated in the study. During the Covid-19 epidemic of the academic year 2019-2020, the participants were all KU students enrolling in the English Department. They belonged to the same cultural background and their ages range between 22-24 years. Table 1, and Figure 1 show that the participants comprised 150 male and 250 female students and the courses they were enrolled for (Course 100, 101, 102 & 103). All of them were randomly chosen from the researcher's online connections, the criterion being their accessibility at the time of data collection since the university remained unavailable to physical access due to Covid-19 restrictions. The sample was purposive as identification and selection of individuals or groups with specific knowledge or experience in relation to a phenomenon of interest was the preferred course in this study. By minimizing selection bias and accounting for unknown and known confounders, probabilistic or random purposive sampling ensures that findings may be generalized.

Table 1. Demographics of the participants

Gender	No	Percentage %
Male	150	37.5%
Female	250	62.5%
Total	400	100%
Courses	NO	%
course100	95	23.75
course101	103	25.75
course102	105	26.25
course103	97	24.25
Total	400	100%

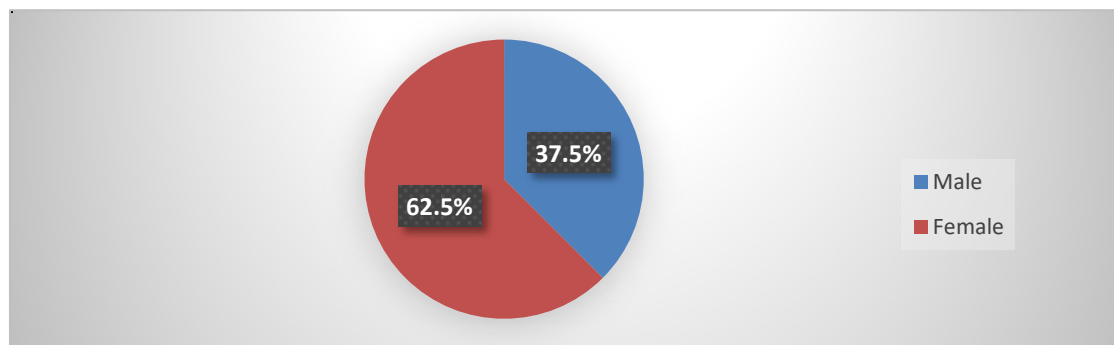


Figure 1. Gender distribution of the Participants

The results in Table 1 and Figure 1 show that 37.5% are male students while 62.5% are female students in this study, showing a tilt in favor of women which in turn, demonstrates the higher concentration of females than males in a typical Kuwaiti university. This indirect finding is also supported by Stoet and Geary (2020) which reported that in most developed nations, males attend post-secondary education at lower rates than women, putting the country’s social cohesion and economic development at risk. As to the data on courses enrolled by the participants, a majority of the respondents were from Course 105 (26.25%), followed by Course 101 (25.75%), and the least were from Course 100 (23.75%).

Research Instrument and Data Collection

The quantitative questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument. This comprised two sections: Part I asked the respondents to provide background and personal information such as gender and educational level. The goal of Part II was to gauge how knowledgeable the respondents are about social media usage in learning in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Choosing an item format that matches the study’s overall purpose is an important step in validating the research instrument. All responses were sought in the five-point Likert Scale gradation (strongly disagree =1, and strongly agree = 5). To verify the authenticity of the content, it is important to look at how well the individual items that make up the subscales assess the respondents’ perceptions and beliefs. To ensure instrument validity, Cronbach's Alpha was computed which came to .841 showing good internal consistency of the test items. Table 2 below summarizes these findings.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
23	.841

The questionnaire was broken up into two main parts. There were items on participants' gender and educational level in the initial section of the survey. The second section consisted of 23 statements, designed on five parameters: (1) KU students’ use of SM before Covid-19; (2) KU students’ use of SM during Covid-19; (3) KU students’ use of SM for learning English; (4) KU students’ attitude towards SM; and (5) KU students’ prospective towards SM. The questionnaire was electronically distributed to students enrolled in the English Department of KU after requisite permissions were sought from various departments in the university.

3. Data Analysis and Results

Online responses to the questionnaire were automatically collected and organized into a spreadsheet for analysis using SPSS. A combination of means and standard deviations were calculated to classify the participants' responses.

5.1 Difference on SM Use before and during Covid19 by KU Students

There is a considerable difference in the use of SM by KU students before to and during Covid-19, as demonstrated in Tables 3 and Figures 2. An increase in SM usage for educational reasons was reported during the Covid-19 period, with a median of (66.13) when compared to the mean of (55.84) before the Covid19 period. A significant rise in the use of SM in the process of learning English is shown by the P. value, which stands at 000.

Table 3. KU students' use of SM before and during Covid-19

	Test Value = 0					
	No	t	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		Sig. (2-tailed)
				Upper	Lower	
Before	400	55.84	4.35	4.50	4.19	.000
During	400	66.13	5.04	5.19	4.89	.000

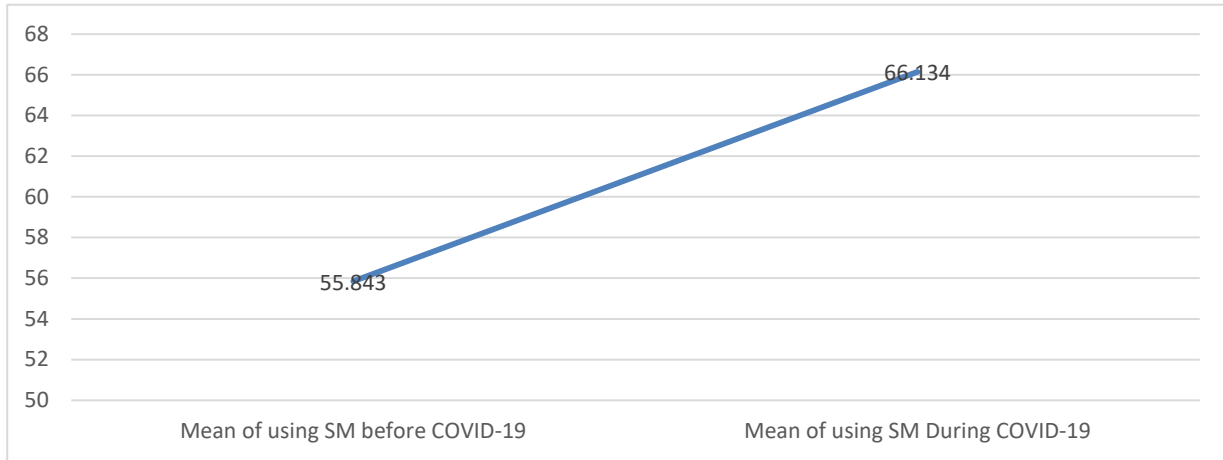


Figure 2. Line graph of the mean of using SM before and during Covid19 by KU students

Overall, the participants' answers in Table 4 indicate that they are in agreement with the use of SM in education, with most of the replies being higher than 4. On the parameter of utilizing social media to study English, their mean replies are as follows: 4.2448 on using SM for learning English, students' attitudes on using SM ranged 4.3034, and their perceptions toward using SM reached a mean score of 4.3908. All of the main scores indicate a positive attitude toward using social media in education. There appears to be a strong preference for the usage of social media (SM) in the classroom at KU. However, it may be noted that there are some respondents who disagree with the use of SM in learning English.

Table 4. Overall mean of using SM by KU students

	Mean	Interpretation
Using SM for learning English	4.2448	Agree
KU students' attitudes toward using SM in learning English	4.3034	Agree
KU students' perspective toward using SM in education	4.3908	Agree

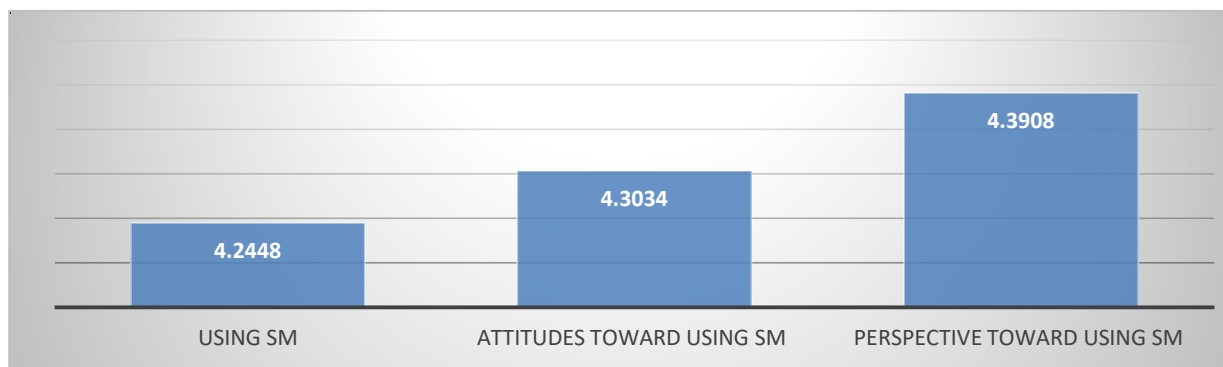


Figure 3. Bar graph of the overall mean of using SM by KU students

The findings of a survey suggest that 12.1 percent of participants feel that learning listening using SM would not be effective, while 9.4 percent say that SM is not useful for learning writing. Other abilities, such as speaking and reading have just 8% of responders who oppose utilizing SM. Aside from the fact that SM can be utilized more effectively for skills like speaking and reading, it could not meet the students' needs to require such skills as they learn in both face-to-face and SM tools integration.

5.2 KU Male and Female Students' Use of SM before and during Covid19

Table 5 and Figure 3 show the data and description on students' perceptions and attitudes to SM use in education before and during the COVID-19. Looking at the data generated for during the pandemic, males scored a mean of 5.08, and females scored 5.01. Men had an average of 4.18main score, while women had an average 4.48 before the epidemic. What can be interpreted from these readings is that all computed means fall on favorable to highly favorable trends. As gleaned from the data, when gender is taken into account, both groups of students, whether male or female, shared a statistically equal level of perception and attitude to the use of SM in education. When it comes to using social media to teach English, there appears to be no substantial difference in the usage of the technology between male and female pupils.

Table 5. KU male and female students' variation in using SM

	N	gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
During	150	Male	5.0868	.78692	.10809
	250	Female	5.0159	.85557	.10779
Before	150	Male	4.1887	.83979	.11535
	250	Female	4.4889	.82053	.10338

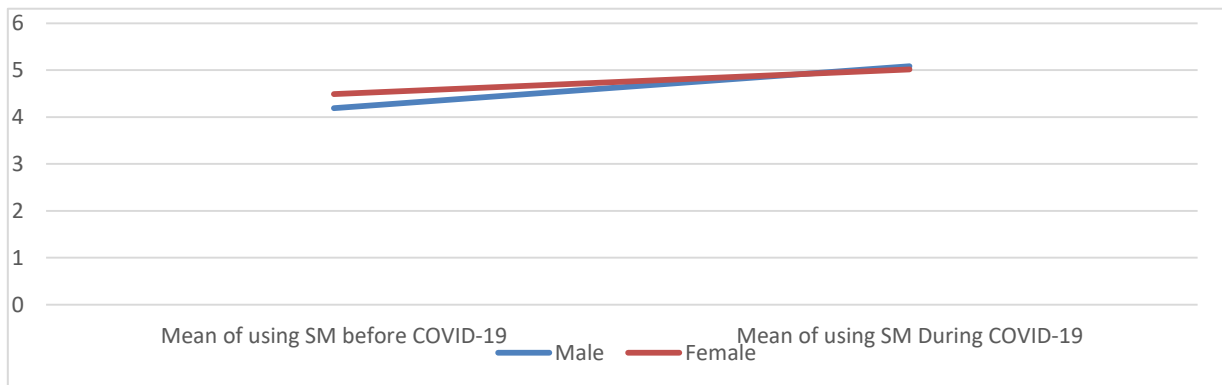


Figure 3. Line graph of KU male and female students' variation in using SM

6. Discussion

According to the data compiled from the questionnaire replies, students at KU, both male and female, have positive attitudes and view toward the use of social media as a learning tool during the COVID-19 pandemic than they did before the outbreak. Data demonstrated that online learning achieved a huge shift in the educational paradigm, considering its popularity amongst the learners who are accustomed to using technology. Responses clearly indicate that the students were able to realize the usefulness and benefits of SM in learning since, according to the learners, their teachers' online teaching skills seemed to have improved, and it enabled them to learn better with ease afforded by anytime, anywhere access to learning that technology offers. Given the fact they were accustomed to teaching in conventional classrooms before the pandemic, most professors had little experience teaching online. In the last six months, they have learned new skills while students became accustomed to receiving instruction through the internet. According to Daumiller et al. (2021), there are many different ways instructors are delivering course content during the change brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Modern teaching tools include diverse choices such as videoconferencing, online educational platforms, and social networking sites. Sharing notes of the studied courses and assignments via online platforms such as Blackboard and Google Classroom is made possible due to the multimedia resources. Moreover, online educational systems allow students to submit assignments to professors while also keeping track of their progress. Zoom and Microsoft Teams, videoconferencing tools, have made it simpler to plan lectures and discussion sessions over the web. For example, many of these apps have slideshows and a chatbox for instant feedback. Learner management systems and websites are used by institutions to deliver educational content (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021). Not only in language education, the findings of Truzoli et al. (2021) show that teachers are supplementing their classroom teaching with virtual laboratories (Ray & Srivastava,

2020). Students may use virtual laboratories to duplicate experiments they learned about in class (Kaup et al., 2020). This has drastically improved the scope of electronic education. There have always been simulators and data visualization tools, but their use has lately increased dramatically (Tandon, 2020).

The results of this study show that no gender differences are evident in the pathways of online learning before and during COVID 19. As the pandemic spread, so did the number of online students exposed to learning from all walks of life. In fact, many studies have examined how learners' demographics influence the outcomes of learning online (Hosny et al., 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Tandon, 2020; Yu, 2021). Further, Chung et al. (2020) and Yu (2021) looked at how gender and educational levels affect online learning outcomes. Online learning outcomes are not much influenced by gender, although educational levels may help predict them very well (Huang & Fang, 2013). Similarly, Bin-Hady et al. (2020) observed that gender differences in the use of language learning techniques in an ICT learning environment had no significant impact on their findings. As previously found, women are more dedicated and persistent in their studies than men, which may translate into better learning results for women (Richardson et al., 2020). In a study by Smith (2021) too, females outperformed males in self-regulation, which translated into much higher outcomes for them in online learning). This study also established that whereas men's opinions were more stable, women's engagement was high, with no significant differences in learning between the genders (Vettori et al., 2020). Learning styles also revealed no significant differences in learning outcomes between men and women. Among online millennial learners, there were no significant gender disparities in terms of learning satisfaction (Chakraborty et al., 2021).

KU students relied largely on SM to complete the 2019-2020 academic year and learn the English language effectively. The participants have an optimistic outlook on SM. Female students, on the other hand, were more enthusiastic about using this media as a learning tool. A similar study by Balakrishnan and Gan (2016) also found that students benefit from having a positive outlook when it comes to using social media for educational purposes (Bin-Hady et al., 2020). They also showed enthusiasm for social media as an educational tool by admitting to their embrace of technology, describing how easy it is to use, and describing the benefits they believe it offers. The prospects of using SM in the future are very promising. According to Reinhardt (2019), social media literacies, as they are investigated and characterized, will undoubtedly be critical for future as well as current language proficiency.

7. Conclusion

SM tools are innovative means of communication that have affected learners' lives in various aspects of education. Its efficiency was highly noted during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic when life seemed to have stopped, especially with learners at all levels stranded at home. However, students as much as their guardians and teachers were eager to continue their academic development, and they were willing to take all possible measures to achieve this goal. SM, hence, provided a new pathway for education. Through its various tools, SM served as a lifeline to students and instructors to keep in contact through these difficult times. KU students' attitude towards SM and using it for educational purposes has been proven positive by this study. It also addressed their views on SM and the prospects for future investment in SM. When the COVID-19 epidemic broke out, students were found to have a more positive attitude and view of social media learning than they were previously. The students were able to recognize the usefulness and benefits of SM in learning since, according to the students, the instructors' online teaching skills seemed to have improved, and it enabled them to learn better than before. When gender is taken into account, both groups of students, whether male or female, shared statistically equal levels of perception and attitude. In terms of learning English through SM, there appears to be no major gender difference. In other words, regardless of gender, students shared almost equal levels of favorable perception to SM as an educational tool. The study concluded that SM has a lot of potentials to offer when it comes to it being used as part of the educational process in the future too. Students at the Kuwait's educational institutions and universities exhibit a keen interest in SM as a teaching and learning strategy, and this enthusiasm extends to their social lives as well. However, training courses and a proper infrastructure should be provided to serve this purpose.

8. Recommendations and Implications

In the lack of face-to-face interaction, learners have embraced digital technology as a tool for learning. E-quality learning has to be enhanced to help students study well throughout the Covid-19 epidemic era. Universities in Kuwait need to foster stronger professional development of the teacher community, which will allow them to deliver online lectures efficiently in the electronic era. Likewise, the strategic and gender needs of students must be addressed with regard to technological advancement in learning. Finally, the learning management systems of Kuwait universities need to be mobile-based to allow higher participation and academic success among students.

9. Limitations

This study is only limited to the data generated before and during the COVID-19, and only at Kuwait University. Similar studies need to be conducted with the inclusion of a longer time, and more variables. It is also felt that the mixed methods research design usage in the succeeding studies may generate more valid findings regarding the problem of inquiry in Arab countries. This will offer a complete picture of the online learning engagement of students, which will serve as international data for governments around the world to introduce and sustain projects and plans on online learning modalities.

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