

# Gender Analysis of Writing E-Mails Received from Graduate Students at Saudi Universities

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## Abstract

The relationships students form with faculty play a critical role in their success at university, it can ease students' fears about seeking assistance on assignments and other issues they may encounter. Therefore, e-mails have become an important part of the educational process. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the impact of gender orientation on the language used by Saudi students writing e-mails to their instructors at Saudi universities. The study depends on Media-Richness Theory (MRT). It intends to stay away from misinterpretation or disarray in cross-gender communications and encourage instructors and students to gain more familiarity with common communication styles in Saudi Arabia. MRT is used to analyze three linguistic features, namely abbreviations, emoticons, and word length. This study utilized a quantitative research design. Considering 24 e-mail samples, 12 were received from male students and 12 were from females. Among male students, the findings indicate that abbreviations are used in their e-mail communications but less often by female students. With regards to emoticons, female students tend to use them more frequently than male students. Lastly, in the case of word length, female students appeared with a significant number of words per e-mail, whereas few male students did.

**Keywords:** differences, gender analysis, Saudi universities, writing emails

## 1. Introduction

Due to an explosion of studies over the last few decades that explore differences between men and women, as well as their nature and existence, Ige (2010) has discussed the role of "language and culture in influencing power, recognition, writing, and prestige as a central theme of language and gender research" (p. 3048). Moreover, Wodak et al. (2008) as cited in Hall et al. (2020), mentioned that approaches such as "conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, discursive psychology, linguistic anthropology, variationist sociolinguistics language, and gender research are methodologically diverse" (p. 2).

There was a frequent question regarding language differences between men and women; in part, Newman et al. (2008) have elaborated that this popularity of language comes mainly from the fact that it is a social phenomenon, which reveals insights into how men and women interact. Flasch et al. (2019) concluded that women show "feelings and empathy better than men, while men lack the ability to express emotions" (p. 178). Furthermore, he argued that females express themselves differently than males, who control their language through assertiveness.

In regard to the previous studies and despite progress in technology, the use of language between men and women still poses a significant problem in the e-mail communication. Thus, these differences often lead to misunderstandings or disappointment between people. Since these differences have been mentioned, in this study, the main focus would be to investigate gender differences in writing e-mails received from male and female graduate students.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Scholars of different fields have recently begun to pay increasing attention to communication that crosses gender lines as a branch of intercultural communication (Wang et al., 2019). Accordingly, Wang et al. highlighted that different gender communication patterns may have led to misunderstandings. Colley et al. (2004) have clarified

and demonstrated the nature of the differences between males and females in their emails and letters from a style and content perspective. Thus, this study attempts to shed some light on previous debates by taking a close look at the phenomenon of gender differences in the use of language in e-mail communication and attempts to clarify if these differences still exist nowadays.

Among some universities in Saudi Arabia, in particular, the researcher investigated how male and female graduate students write emails to communicate with their instructors. Boneva et al. (2001) had shown that e-mail was used differently by men and women, and this study added to that by exploring how gender differences in e-mail writing occur.

### *1.2 Aims of the Research*

This study seeks to answer:

- 1) What are the differences, if any, between male and female graduate students in writing e-mails?
- 2) How do gender differences affect the use of language in e-mail communication?

## **2. Literature Review**

This review of the literature will focus on the theoretical framework, the importance of using technology among instructors, using technology differently by men and women, gender differences in language use, patterns of cross-gender interaction, how gender affects Internet use among students, writing styles among women and men, gender in online language, and lastly, gender differences in using e-mail.

### *2.1 Theoretical Framework*

Media Richness Theory (MRT) describes media that communicating efficiently requires that media be matched to the students' task information needs and it states having varied "richness" or ability to convey information (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Moreover, as asserted by Daft and Lengel, the richness varies according to the characteristics of the media, such as its ability to provide immediate feedback, the degree of message personalization, the range of languages available, and its communication capabilities. However, since the dependent variables are components such as word length, emoticons, and abbreviations, it is worthwhile to summarize and define each element in more detail.

#### *2.1.1 Abbreviation*

An abbreviated word is defined as a phrase or word that is shortened or abbreviated (Oxford Lexico, 2021, as cited in Al-Moqbali & Al-Amrani, 2021). Al-Moqbali and Al-Amrani stated that abbreviations are used mainly to save time; in instant messaging, they are made use of because of the limited character limit.

#### *2.1.2 Emoticons*

The word "emoticons"—short for "emotion icons"—as explained by Dresner and Herring (2010), refers to "graphic signs, such as the smiley face, that often accompany computer-mediated textual communication" (p. 249).

#### *2.1.3 Word Length*

Last but not least, the lengths of words used in the e-mail are evaluated in comparison to the number of words that appear in the e-mail (Al-Moqbali & Al-Amrani, 2021).

### *2.2 The Importance of Using Technology Among Instructors*

There is strong evidence that academic staff is not just prepared for online instruction but even susceptible to it if it becomes necessary due to the Coronavirus pandemic (Cutri & Mena, 2020). Shin and Kang (2015) stated that universities use Learning Management Systems (LMS) in order to facilitate educating and learning processes, and Blackboard, as an example, was among the most popular LMS used in universities. Therefore, there are a great many existing studies on how mobile LMS affects achievement and learning satisfaction which were investigated by Han and Shin (2016). Last but not least, Reid (2019) elaborated that in the future, you may be able to use learning management systems to completely transform face-to-face instruction.

### *2.3 Using Technology Differently by Men and Women*

Research has indicated that men and women have different behavior when it comes to electronic mail, information retrieval, online learning, and telephone conversations (Orji, 2010). His study revealed that men's behavior is dominated by positive characteristics. From his point of view, to develop new technologies more effectively, it would be beneficial to understand why women are less likely to accept new technologies than men. Although males reported being significantly better computer programmers than females in both university and

field placement environments, the difference between males and females was not significant for any computer use constructs identified (Kay, 2006).

#### *2.4 Gender Differences in Language Use*

Many notions and concepts have been developed in areas such as pragmatics and sociolinguistics to explain gender differences in language use (e.g., Tannen, 1990; Holmes, 1992). For example, Tannen conducted his study on 2nd-, 6th-, and 10th-grade same-sex best friends who talked to each other for 20 minutes. He found that girls are more concerned with avoiding arguments and anger, furthermore, they encounter difficulty when talking about any topic, as they “exhibit minimal or no difficulty finding something to talk about, and they talk about a small number of topics, all related to troubles” (p. 73). Compared to the younger boys, the 10th-grade boys use highly personal topics to describe their feelings; two pairs of younger boys produce more small amounts of talk, and they generate large amounts of talk on a great number of topics but “each develops his own topic and minimizes the other’s” (p. 73).

#### *2.5 Patterns of Cross-Gender Interaction*

Although gender differences play a large role in language behavior, it is important to keep in mind that they are interconnected with all the other factors: Ethnicity, class, region, age, and professional training, among others (Tannen, 1996).

Surveying studies of interruption and gender such as (James & Clarke, 1993 as cited in Tannen, 1996), researchers found that women tend to interrupt men more than men interrupt women and that all-female conversations tend to be interrupted more often than all-male conversations. James and Clarke clarified that although these interruptions usually attempted to reinforce the original speaker’s point rather than to wrest the floor from them, they tend to be supportive in nature.

During every age level of Tannen’s (1990) study, he observed that female friends quickly established topics for conversation and produced extended talk related to a relatively small number of topics; whereas, boys at the young age levels engaged in very little talking about a wide range of topics. On the other hand, he noted that “at the two older ages, the boys and men, like their female counterparts, produced a lot of talk about a few topics, but the level at which they discussed the topics was more abstract, less personal” (p. 74).

Kuhn (1996) conducted a study that provides a clear example of this approach by studying the classroom discourse of professors at German and United States universities. She found the language used by female professors in the U.S. strange at first: They gave students direct instructions more assertively than their male colleagues. In Kuhn’s study, the significant difference was not in the form of language used in the classroom discourse between men and women, but rather in the way they approached their respective groups’ requirements and students, and they framed their discourse accordingly.

#### *2.6 How Gender Affects Internet Use Among Students*

Jackson et al. (2001) reported that students at colleges “used the Internet equally often, but used it differently” (p. 374). Moreover, Jackson et al. assigned that women’s tendency of the Internet for more communication is explained by their more interpersonal inclination compared to men’s, as well as “the fact that men are more information- and task-oriented” than women (p. 368). Forston et al. (2007) pointed out, as cited in Jones et al. (2009), that male college students “are more likely to use the Internet as a source of entertainment, while female college students are more likely to go online for communicative and educational purposes” (p. 246). They note that in their study, however, males and females “exhibited similar academic uses of the Internet and similar rates of e-mail use” (p. 246). Moreover, Sherman et al. (2000) reported in their findings that “female college students spent significantly more time using e-mail than male college students” (p. 893).

#### *2.7 Writing Styles Among Men and Women*

Numerous studies have investigated how gender affects First Language (L1) writers’ abilities (Al-Saadi, 2020). In the United Kingdom and the United States, for instance, previous research into L1 writing has shown that girls are highly proficient in many aspects of writing than boys (Adams & Simmons, 2019; Zhang et al., 2019). As cited in Al-Saadi that Adam et al.’s (2015) study findings revealed a significant correlation between “text quality and the mastery of lower-level transcription skills, e.g., spelling, and girls master these skills earlier and more effectively than boys” (p. 3). Likewise, Verhoeven and Van Hell (2008) revealed that compared to boys of a similar age, 10-year-old girls composed longer texts and used more lexical items.

Despite the fact that Babayigit (2015) investigated that language and gender do not interact significantly, her study indicates that “girls outperformed boys on all dimensions, except for organization, and the interaction

between language group and gender was nonsignificant, but there was a trend for the language group differences are larger for boys” (p. 33) and girls’ written scripts were “longer and received higher scores than those of boys on vocabulary and holistic quality even when the gender differences in spelling skills were taken into account” (p. 38).

As cited in Al-Saadi (2020) through Zhang et al. (2019) study compared female and male writers’ writing processes and written work was done by using six essays produced by participants, it reveals that “females consistently obtained higher essay scores, composed more fluently, edited their texts more and paused less compared to males” (p. 3). Thus, the fact that females write fluently and create quality text may account for their superiority in writing.

### *2.8 Gender Differences in Online Language*

According to Rosseti’s (1998) gender study, gender differences in how people use e-mail revealed that men tended to present their viewpoints in order to demonstrate authority, while women, on the other hand, tended to focus more on the substance of their contributions. He reported that men tended to express appreciation less directly and used more ‘tight’ and less direct expressions of appreciation and thanks, while women expressed far more support and deepened their relationship with the readers.

Furthermore, a study was conducted by Trudgill (1974) on males’ and females’ language choices. His data suggested that women or females, in general, were showing greater preferences for formal forms in various situations. In comparison with males, they tended to use informal forms in most cases. Similarly, Fischer (1958) found that 83% of girls preferred formal forms, while only 42% of boys did. Thus, it indicated that girls adopted standard forms and variants more often than boys.

As reported by Herring (1993) in her examination of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), she provided the characteristics of women’s language such as “attenuated assertions, apologies, explicit justification, questions, personal orientation and support of others”, men, on the other hand, their language was “strong assertions, self-promotion, rhetorical questions, authoritative orientation, challenge” (p. 8).

### *2.9 Gender Differences in E-Mails*

Due to technological advances, Lachée and Anderson (2001) as cited in Boneva et al. (2001), stated that women find it easier than men to “maintain a larger circle of distant friendships because technology makes it easier to share thoughts and feelings at a distance than to engage in common activities at a distance” (p. 532).

Increasingly, results in the social sciences suggest that the majority of women prefer language to verbal communication for socializing, while men prefer it for communicating information (e.g., Brownlow et al., 2003; Colley et al., 2004). Moreover, in terms of email content, Boneva’s (2001) study findings showed that a woman’s message sent to someone far away is “more filled with personal content and are more likely to be exchanged in an intense burst. Furthermore, the fit between women’s expressive styles and the features of e-mail seems to be making it especially easy for women to expand their distant social networks” (p. 530).

In general, men utilize the Internet for amusement and leisure while ladies use it for correspondence and schooling; as far as tomfoolery, ladies tend to use and evaluate sending e-mail and speaking with their lovers, families, friends, and for educational use higher than men rated those activities (Weiser, 2000).

## **3. Methods**

This study chose MRT to ensure that the results of the analysis are preserved while answering the research questions. MRT provides a solid foundation for analyzing the information richness of the communication channel, primarily focusing on differences among gender in the use of such tools. Besides, Al-Moqbali and Al-Amrani (2021) clarified that it helps explore whether “instructors perceive that the e-mail communication channel’s information richness is appropriate to simplify communication at work” (p. 4). Gender is the independent variable in this study, and the dependent variables are components such as word length, emoticons, and abbreviations.

This element describes the methodology of this study and is arranged into four sections: Research design, data collection procedure, data sources, and data analysis.

### *3.1 Design*

The methodology of the current study is quantitative. Since data will be analyzed in numerical terms.

### *3.2 Sample and Data Collection*

In the present study, the researcher sent e-mails to 35 different instructors from different universities in Saudi

Arabia, using their universities' e-mail addresses. The researcher started the e-mail by introducing herself and the university she had affiliated with, after that, she clarified the purpose of her study to the instructors. Finally, they were asked to provide e-mail messages they had received from their graduate students for communication and education purposes during their current courses in 2022. The total number of responses was 24 whereas 11 of the instructors did not reply to the e-mail.

After the given responses, the total e-mail samples were 24. They are 12 received from males and 12 from females. Both are Saudi graduate students. The age of the students was from 24 to 36 years.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The present study is based on a holistic analysis of the collected data. In light of this, it aims to examine the process of studying things holistically instead of focusing solely on the linguistic interactions with the participants (Oshry, 2007).

## 4. Findings

In a sample composed of 24 e-mails sent by male and female students, three characteristics were analyzed: Abbreviations, emoticons, and word length. Table 1 illustrates the differences between female and male characteristics in terms of linguistic characteristics.

Table 1. A comparison between linguistic features in e-mails sent by male and female students

Linguistic Feature	Gender	
	Male students	Female students
Abbreviation	11	3
Emoticons	2	7
Word Length	4	10

*Note.* These linguistic features are adopted from Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

### 4.1 Abbreviation

Table 1 shows that females and males use abbreviations differently when they emailed their instructors. As shown in Table 1, 91.7% of male students utilized abbreviations in their e-mails (e.g., SA, which means Salamu Alaikum, BB, which refers to BlackBoard, how r u prof, r u are abbreviations of are you, and BTW, refers to by the way).

In contrast, females are less likely to use abbreviations in their content; however, only 25% of female students used abbreviations in their e-mails (e.g., WA, which means weekly assignment, and BB, which refers to BlackBoard). Regarding their e-mails, only these two abbreviations were commonly used.

### 4.2 Emoticons

As for emoticons, female students are more common to use them than male students, as Table 1 indicates that more than 58.3% of females use emoticons, while only 16.7% of males use them. Based on students' e-mails, female students used various emoticons (e.g., smiley face to express their agreement and politeness, flower to end their e-mails, and two hands performing a handshake gesture, which means a cordial greeting).

Male students, however, used fewer emoticons in their e-mails compared to female students. Out of the whole males' sample, only two students used emoticons in their e-mails, and they only used thumbs-up emoticons to express their agreement, indicating that it sounded good to them.

### 4.3 Word Length

According to the collected data, there are critical distinctions between male and female students when it comes to word length. In the case of female students, 83.3% appear a number of words per e-mail, whereas only 33.3% of male students did.

Among students' e-mail contents, the longest word length was 147 words for females, and the shortest was 43 words. As for males, the longest word length was 52 words, and the shortest one was 17 words.

## 5. Discussion

These findings have demonstrated a clear detailed representation of the impacts of gender differences on the way in which e-mails are written on particular occasions. Furthermore, they provided sharp differences and answers to the research questions. In terms of the abbreviations used by males in their e-mails were ambiguous and some of

them are uncommon (e.g., BTW, which refers to by the way) and considered as informal as in the case of writing an e-mail to instructors. Another abbreviation was used, such as (how r u prof, r u are abbreviations of are you), as it is considered non-standard and informal language.

In comparison with the females, they tend to use the most common abbreviations that are known by both students and instructors, and they often avoid ambiguity in their content. Therefore, abbreviations are used more frequently in male e-mails than in female e-mails, and this is in harmony with Trudgill's (1974) and Fischer's (1958) studies. Whose results suggested that women and females, in general, were showing greater preferences for formal forms in a variety of situations. At the same time, males were more common to use informal forms in the majority of cases.

When it comes to emoticons, female students, compared to their male counterparts, were more often used emoticons when writing their e-mails, expressing their ideas and feelings by using a variety of emotions, and trying to convey their thoughts in a complete manner as much as they can. They usually tend and attempt to provide detail as possible in their e-mails.

Alternatively, male students tended to be more direct and used fewer emoticons when they wrote to their instructors. The fact that they only used thumbs-up emoticons, as mentioned earlier, showed that male students are not interested in using emoticons. These findings are consistent with Rosseti's (1998) study, which indicated that men used more tight-lipped expressions and expressed appreciation directly, while women utilized more supportive language and deepened their relationships with the readers. In addition, the study seems to match the conclusion of Jackson et al. (2001), which claimed that men are highly task- and information-oriented than women. Moreover, the statements of male students appear to be in harmony with Herring's (1993) findings which suggest that men are more self-promotional and authoritative in attitude.

Considering word length, as shown in Table 1 previously, there is a great distinction between the two genders, as female students are prone to writing long messages and content, as it seems that they lack the ability to express their ideas concisely and succinctly, which harmonizes with Verhoeven and Van Hell's (2008) study, which concluded that 10-year-old girls compose longer texts and use a broader vocabulary than boys of the same age. Additionally, the results fit together with Babayiğit's (2015) study, which revealed that females' written scripts were longer, had higher vocabulary scores, and had greater overall quality, even after accounting for gender differences in spelling skills. While male students wrote shorter emails to their instructors, this is in agreement with Zhang et al.'s (2019) study, comparing the process of writing and written products of female and male college students, which was based on six essays produced by participants. The study found that males consistently scored lower on essays, composed their texts with less fluency, and edited them less than females. As well, this statement is consistent with Brownlow et al. (2003) and Colley et al. (2004) in the social sciences, which revealed that women in general; prefer the language of verbal communication for socializing, while men prefer it for communicating information.

## 6. Conclusion and Future Research

The role of language in human societies is not limited to communication; every individual within a given community writes differently, and every individual has his/her own sociolectal features and writing style (Soori & Zamani, 2012). Among the sociocultural influences on language, including those who learn languages through writing, the gender component has been prominent in many studies (Kamari et al., 2012). Writing, therefore, is a form of social interaction, and it can be achieved by adapting ideas and expressions created by others to fit within accepted discourses (Prior, 2001). This study highlights and provides valuable information about distinctions between men and women in the ways they write e-mails, including the use of abbreviations, emoticons, and word length. In addition, the current study is helping people in general and instructors in particular to understand the linguistic features common to everyone, males and females. This information will enhance communication between these two groups and can eliminate misunderstandings between them. Such topics should be studied and studied in depth.

Over and above, it has been observed that females are writing more than males, which logically implies that e-mail writing requires more time for females. In light of such outcomes, instructors should take steps to ask their departments to spend an equal amount of time on assignments, tasks, and exams as for understanding the gender differences nature among students. For teachers, it may be necessary to be familiar with more diverse learning tactics in writing are important for learners, particularly those learners who are not good at writing.

Furthermore, shed light on male students could benefit from more concrete processes for improving their writing strategies if they have access to more concrete writing development processes. The gender difference observed here may simply be an artifact of either the sample or the cultural context of Saudi Arabia, but the fact that

language proficiency was explicitly measured and impacts were clearly identified in writing indicates that this phenomenon can be general in nature. For the future, therefore, instruction and research will be needed in this area.

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