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**An Exploration of Student and Academic Uses and Perceptions of Social Network Sites in Foreign Language Learning**

By

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This thesis is submitted to in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy*

The University of Sheffield

The School of Education

**January 2018**

Abstract

In this thesis, I explore how Omani students use social network sites (SNSs) as part of their everyday lives and as a tool to learn English. I paid particular attention to the students’ uses of SNSs in their English learning. I adopted a sociocultural framework to explore and understand the students’ and teachers’ practices. I collected the data for this study using a mixed methods approach in the academic year 2014–2015. The data consisted of responses to a questionnaire of 549 students and focus group discussions with 32 participating students from five Colleges of Technology in Oman. The data also consisted of three semi-structured interviews with three English teachers. The findings show that the students’ daily uses of SNSs seem to be influenced by many contextual and cultural factors. The findings also show that the majority of Omani students used SNSs in their informal learning of English as a foreign language (EFL). Influenced by their positive approach to SNSs in everyday uses, the students expressed positive perceptions about using SNSs in formal English teaching. The teachers also had positive views about using SNSs in their teaching; however, they faced many challenges in integrating them in teaching. This study shows that integrating SNSs in EFL learning is not always as easy as many of us would believe because SNSs are already an essential part of youths’ lives. The findings contribute to our understandings of how the context influences and mediates EFL learning practices.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Reaching the final phase of my PhD research journey, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to many people without whom the completion of this thesis would have been impossible.

First of all, my greatest gratitude and utmost thanks go to my supervisor, Julia Davies, for her constant support, thoughtful guidance, and constructive feedback. Without her, I would have never been able to complete this research project. Her kindness and smiles assisted me greatly during the process of my research. I am very appreciative and thankful.

My heartfelt thanks also go to my colleagues who have supported me throughout my PhD journey.

My most profound appreciation I reserve for my mother, father, brothers, and sisters who believed in me and provided me their support and prayers.

Last, but by no means least, I wish to thank my husband Saif Sultan Al-Ghafri. I appreciate having you every single moment in my life and throughout my study. Thank you for your love, confidence, patience, and overwhelming concern that made this dream come true.

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# CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

## Introduction

With a particular focus on social network sites (SNSs), in this study I explore students’ and teachers’ uses of SNSs for learning English in and outside of class. I also explore the students’ uses of SNSs in their daily lives. In this chapter, first I set out the background of this study, which gives a general overview of the topic related to the use of SNSs and learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Then I introduce the context where this study took place, the purpose of the research, and the research questions. Finally, I introduce the significance of the study and outline the structure of the thesis.

## The Research Background

Digital applications including SNSs are growing rapidly. There has been an explosive increase in both the number of SNSs and the number of people using them around the world. Many researchers have confirmed that SNSs have become an integral component of the lives of young people (Dron & Anderson, 2014; Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2014; Greenhow, Gleason, & Li, 2014; Ha & Shin, 2014; Hughes, KO, Lim, & Liu, 2015; Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014; Manca & Ranieri, 2015; Rodríguez-Hoyos, Haya Salmón, & Fernández-Díaz, 2015). SNSs provide interactive platforms that allow users to communicate with other members to establish or reinforce relationships online. They enable users to share posts, pictures, information, activities, events, interests, and real-life experiences. Existing studies have suggested that SNSs have challenged and changed how individuals understand and manage their daily practices and relationships, particularly in sharing, interacting, and collaborating (Greenhow et al., 2014; Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014). This research project began by exploring the participants’ social uses and practices of SNSs as well as how they perceive these uses. This adds to the existing literature about how young people use SNSs socially in their daily lives and adds to our knowledge and understanding of how young Omani adults perceive SNSs in their social contexts.

The impact of SNSs has spread to the educational field. SNSs have influenced learning, research, and education in general (Hughes et al., 2015; Manca & Ranieri, 2015). Many educators see potential benefits in using SNSs in education to promote learning, whereas others argue against using these technologies in education (Hughes et al., 2015).

SNSs have attracted the attention of educators in the field of learning and teaching EFL as to whether higher education institutions need to adopt SNSs as a teaching and learning tool in EFL settings (Yunus, Salehi, & Chenzi, 2012). According to Blattner and Lomicka (2012), the development of SNSs has influenced language learning through its technological features. Many features associated with SNSs, such as the user-centred, participatory, and collaborative and interactive features, are consistent with the sociocultural understanding of second language acquisition (SLA). Sociocultural SLA theory states that interaction is crucial for learning a language, as learners acquire language socially (Lantolf, 2006). In this understanding, language learners integrate new verbal structures in developing linguistic competence through scaffolded interactions. These interactions lead to language learning taking place through language use in conjunction with other language users (Cook, 2008). Accordingly, SNSs appear to offer efficient space for scaffolded interactions because they allow learners to interact (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014; Tudini, 2015). McBride (2009a) stated that SNSs could certainly enable language learning and could also develop students’ communicative competence.

Prichard (2013) stated there are many learners who learn languages through online means, including SNSs. Teachers have also explored different ways to integrate SNSs into formal EFL instruction (Prichard, 2013). Many higher education institutions have looked into implementing SNSs, and some have acknowledged their possible potential in language learning (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Kessler, 2013; Prichard, 2013). Research projects have studied learners and teachers’ perceptions regarding using SNSs in language learning; however, they have presented contradicting and conflicting findings with and against their use. Yet all research projects have supported the need for further research in this topic (Ansarey, 2012; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Prichard, 2013). According to Kessler (2013), the use of SNSs must be explored from both the learners and teachers’ perceptions to study how SNSs can present opportunities for both of them to work collaboratively and reach the goals.

Bearing in mind the existing literature and the need for further research, I explore in this study learners’ and teachers’ uses of SNSs in learning EFL. It also explores their perceptions towards using SNSs as learning tools to improve EFL learning.

In the Omani context, there is an increasing emphasis on EFL in higher education institutions (discussed in detail in Section 1.2.4). All Omani colleges and universities currently offer their courses and programmes in English. It has become a compulsory subject and the official language for instruction in Omani higher education. Accordingly, the realisation of quality regarding graduate programmes requires, among others, the development of English language education, as it is the language of instruction and a global language that can greatly expand access to knowledge worldwide.

As an English language teacher who has a background in and experience of EFL learning in the Omani context, I am aware of the need to use all means available to help learners acquire English language skills. There is very limited exposure to the English language outside classroom doors. There are also very limited opportunities to use and interact in English. So, with the availability of the World Wide Web which has many interactive features, are language learners and teachers in Oman motivated to use SNSs to interact in English and improve language learning? Do they value learning opportunities offered by SNSs for EFL learning in and outside of class? In this research project, I did not focus on the novelty of SNSs and their potential benefits for EFL learning and what they can possibly do. Instead, I explored the learners’ and teachers’ experiences and perceptions. This is driven by my interest to explore their voices and their actual practices, which I think is not to be marginalised by our desire and determination to implement new technologies. Overall, this study is in the exploration stage of how SNSs are or can be used in EFL teaching and learning.

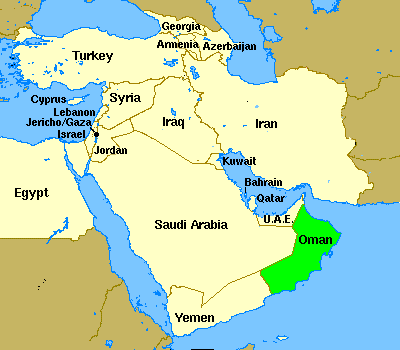
It is worth mentioning here that this study focusses on EFL formal and informal learning. Informal learning can be unintended, implicit, and unstructured (Eraut, 2004). However, informal learning can also become more structured and intentional through engaging in activities related to particular educational tasks such as practicing particular skills. Nevertheless, informal learning is not guided and less structured than formal learning. Thus, in this study, I use the term *informal* learning to refer to the students’ learning practices without teachers, which can either be incidental or in an intended manner and structured way. I use the term *formal* to refer to learning and teaching practices that take place with the teacher or with the guidance of the teacher.

As mentioned earlier, I began this research by exploring the participants’ social use of SNSs. I hoped that attaining an understanding of students’ general practices on SNSs and how they were communicating and connecting with others may help towards understanding how these young adults interpreted themselves, others, and their society. It also may help in understanding how they perceived SNSs in general and their attitude towards them, which may influence their attitude towards using them in EFL learning. While these students might be using SNSs to learn English, I found they are mainly using these sites as social spaces where they perform important identity work as friends, family, and members of society. Therefore, although they might use SNSs to learn English, there might also be tension in how to use the same sites at the same time for both social and academic purposes.

## The Context of the Research

### Introduction

This research took place in the Sultanate of Oman, which is an Arab developing country, located on the Arabian Peninsula. This section provides an overview of the Sultanate of Oman as a context for this research project. I briefly describe its location, demography, government, economy, and, most importantly, education. Subsequently, the English language and English language learning in Oman are discussed and described in detail. Finally, I explore technology and SNS in Oman to offer a starting point for this study.

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**Figure 1.1: The location of the Sultanate of Oman (Ministry of Information, 2002)**

The Sultanate of Oman is about 309,000 km**2**. As can be seen in Figure 1.1 above, it is located between Yemen, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Hormoz Bay in the Arabian or Persian Sea (Ministry of Information, 2015).

The northernmost area of Oman, Musandam, has a very strategic location in the Canal of Hurmoz at the mouth of the Arabian Gulf. Around 40% of the world’s oil go through this area each day, as stated by the U.S. Energy Information Administration (Ministry of Information, 2002). Since 1967, the main sources for income in Oman are oil and gas. As will become clear throughout this study, the sudden increase in wealth for the country after the discovery of oil has meant that Oman has been able to provide a great deal more for its citizens and to offer a more luxurious and advanced way of life than had previously been known.

The year 1970 is an important milestone for the Omani people, when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos took over the reins of government in the country and began the modern Omani renaissance. He established the development of the country in all different areas and transformed it to an oasis of peace, stability, and safety. Oman has achieved advanced levels of human development according to the United Nation (UN Development Report, 2010).

The population of Oman is around 4,550,538 people, including Omani nationals and foreigners (National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], 2015a). It has a great percentage of young people with around 48% of Omani nationals under the age of 25, and 27% are under the age of 15 (NCSI, 2015) a. There was a fall in birth rate, which led to this particular population profile, with a larger number of Omani people in the 15–25 age group more than in the age groups of 0–4, 5–9, or 10–14 (NCSI, 2015b). As Omani youth comprise a large percentage of the population in Oman, studying their behaviours and practices potentially provides a great deal of understanding to the society as whole. In addition, the sudden increase in wealth for the country and the increased number of Omani people might indicate the existence of a gap between younger and older people in Oman. Omani young people have obtained a more advanced way of life than had previously been known by their parents.

Around 36% of Oman’s population are non-Omani nationals. They dominate the Omani private sector jobs despite the *Omanization* effort (*Omanization* *is training Omanis to occupy professions taken by foreigners*). These expatriates’ skilful employees mostly came to Oman from other countries, for example, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan (Economist Intelligent Unit, 2008). This large number of expatriates created a need for learning EFL and emphasised its importance across the country (see Section 1.2.5 for more details).

The official language in Oman is Arabic. It is also the language of instruction in all government schools and all government workplaces. Some expatriates such as doctors and nurses who work in hospitals try to learn Arabic to be able to interact with Omanis. However, most expatriates and the Omani people who work in big companies such as oil and gas companies use the English language for interaction and communication.

Islam is the official religion in Oman (Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, 2015).Although the rulingsystem in Oman is a hereditary monarchy, the Islamic principle of democracy and consultation (*Shura* in Arabic) is manifest through the *Shura* Council, which plays an important role in the country (Rabi, 2002).

In the past, Omani women did not play an official role in the country’s decision-making process and were not allowed to vote. However, in 1997, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos pronounced that women are also allowed to vote in the *Shura* Council. Every Omani citizen who is 21 years old and above is now allowed to vote regardless of his or her gender. This has led to many women being elected as representatives in the Council over the years (Rabi, 2002). Women have also taken many high-status positions in the country, including as ministers.

The development in Oman over the past 47 years with His Majesty Sultan Qaboos government has been outstanding.The Omani economy has increased fundamentally. Keeping the increase ofthis notable economic development internally and internationally has demanded further development of human resources. The development of human resources is a high priority in Oman, and education plays a fundamental role in this development (Information of Technology, 2015). In the following sections, I discuss the educational context of the study. First, I provide a background overview about education in Oman, higher education, and, more specifically, the Colleges of Technology where my study took place. I follow that by discussing EFL in the Omani context and then the state of technology and culture in Oman.

### Education in Oman

A central goal for Sultan Qaboos from the beginning was to establish and spread education throughout the country. The focus was to provide free education for every citizen in Oman (Ministry of Education, 2002).

Prior to 1970 there were only three schools with about 900 male students, and all tuition was religious. Sultan Qaboos prioritised education from when he ruled the country in 1970. Moreover, since the socioeconomic status of Oman has changed rapidly, education has been developing systematically since then. Now, 47 years later, Oman has around 1,283 schools and more than 600,000 students. Oman provides free secondary education for Omani nationals and foreigners in the country. Basic education has been essentially realised, and secondary education’s *gross enrolment ratio* (GER) is high in comparison to many countries around the world (Ministry of Education, 2015).

The Omani government has achieved high school access results and is now directing efforts to ensure that Omani students attain a satisfactory level of schooling as an essential condition for economic development (Ministry of Education, 2015).

### Higher Education in Oman

The increasing number of secondary school graduates has certainly created a strong demand for higher education. However, it is fair to say that higher education institutions in Oman are relatively new. [Sultan Qaboos University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sultan_Qaboos_University) ([SQU](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sultan_Qaboos_University)) was the first higher education institution established in Oman in 1986. Before that, between 1970 and 1986, the Omani government sent selected Omani students to study in neighbouring Arab countries such as Iraq, [Jordan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordan), [Egypt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egypt), and Kuwait. Other students were also sent to complete their education in the United Kingdom or the United States.

Besides SQU, there are six [*Colleges of Applied Sciences*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colleges_of_Applied_Sciences,_Oman)which supply qualified graduates to the labour market in many specialisations including information technology, business administration, design, and engineering.

There are also another seven *Colleges of Technology* in various areas in Oman administered by the Ministry [of Manpower](http://www.manpower.gov.om/en/ministry_home.asp). A number of *Health Training Institutes* to train assisting medical staff such as nurses, pharmacists, and paramedics are run by The Ministry of Health. There is also the[*College of Sharia Sciences*](http://www.css.edu.om/) run by The Ministry of Religious Affairs and the [*College of Financial Studies*](http://www.cbfs.edu.om/)run by the Central Bank of Oman.

All these public institutions welcome a large percentage of Omani secondary school graduates every year free of charge. In 2015, about 19.3% of all Omani young adults in the 18–24 age group joined higher education institutions. Of the total admittance, 51% were female students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). Some students were also sponsored for further study (masters and doctorates) in universities overseas.

When the number of secondary school graduates increased, SQU and other governmental colleges were unable to meet the increasing demands for higher education. In response, the Omani government encouraged the private sector to establish private colleges and universities in the country. The first private college was established in the capital city of Muscat in 1994. Since then, many other private colleges and universities were established, and most of them provide programmes for studies including computer sciences and business administration with affiliations with [American](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States), [European](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europe), or [Australian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australia) universities. The language of instruction in higher education is mainly English for most specialisations (Ministry of Information, 2015).

#### The Colleges of Technology in Oman

All participants of this current study were students in the Colleges of Technology. These are relatively new educational establishments, as five technical industrial colleges were established in five different places in Oman between 1991 and 1995. The name of these colleges changed to Colleges of Technology in 2002. Another two Colleges of Technology were established in 2005 and 2008 in two additional locations. The purpose has been to train Omanis as skilled technicians for the local labour market. The colleges include the following programmes: engineering (electrical, electronic, and mechanical), business studies (business management and accounting), information technology, and laboratory sciences and construction. The Colleges of Technology are considered by Omani students to be one of the best choices for higher education and for better careers.

### English Teaching as a Policy: EFL

Like many other developing countries, Oman has language policies that consider the increasing demands for English, driven by globalisation and the world economy. The government emphasises the development of human resources that require English for communication (Donn & Issan, 2007). In Oman, local workplaces and big establishments have people of various linguistic backgrounds, and English is used as the language for communication and interaction. Moreover, Oman has realised the need to communicate across countries to expand mutual relations and reinforce them particularly after the discovery of oil. English is the common language used for communication even with non-English-speaking countries with mutual and economic interests. Just like the rest of the world, English receives legislative care and emphasis from the Omani government for political and economic reasons. The document *National English Language Policy* (NELP), which was produced by the Ministry of Education in Oman in 1987, considered English to be “a resource for national development and as the means for wider communication within the international community” (NELP, 1987, p. x).

This acknowledgement of the significance of the English language in the development of the economy and for international communication offers a rationale for the use of English curriculum and instruction in higher education in Oman (Al-Issa, 2005). This role of English was highlighted by Al-Jadidi (2009), who stated that English in Oman is for trading purposes and for international communication. English is also a medium for communication between Omani people and expatriates or foreigners from different countries of the world who comprise a large number of the population living and working in Oman. Al-Jadidi (2009) argued there is an increasing demand for one language which enables individuals from different language backgrounds to communicate and work together.

A document produced in 1995 entitled *Reform and Development of General and Higher Education* in Oman declares the following:

The government recognizes that facility in English is important in the new global economy. English is the most common language for international sectors such as banking and aviation. The global language of science and technology is also English as are the rapidly expanding international computerized databases and telecommunications networks, which are becoming an increasingly important part of academic and business life*.* (Ministry of Education, 1995, p. A5-1)

Because of this, teaching English has received significant consideration from the Omani government. The Omani Ministry of Education developed English language programmes for students based on these policies. It produced the Omani English curriculum in schools in 1987. English is acknowledged as the only foreign language to be officially used in Oman besides Arabic.

The English language is clearly regarded as a prerequisite for higher education and employment. Students who graduate with good English, both spoken and written, are extremely well valued, especially in the private sector and in oil companies. According to Donn and Issan (2007), graduates may not succeed in getting jobs if they do not know English, as it increases the future employability of young Omanis.

English is a compulsory subject in Omani schools starting from Grade 1 and throughout the formal twelve years of schooling. Omani children take a total number of 1,200 h of English teaching throughout this period (Al-Lamki, 2002). In higher education institutions, most undergraduate programmes in both government and private institutions are offered in English (Al-Issa, 2006). Students are also encouraged to pursue postgraduate studies in English-speaking countries by the Ministry of Higher Education through scholarships and funding (Al-Issa, 2007).

#### English Language Teaching at the Colleges of Technology

English is the language of instruction in Omani higher education, unlike schools. So, higher educational institutions such as the Colleges of Technology place newcomers in extensive English courses before they can begin academic studies. In the Colleges of Technology, newcomers are placed in an introductory extensive English programme called the *Foundation Year Programme* (FYP) to teach them the required English to start their specialisation. The students take an English test at the end of the programme to determine who graduates to their academic courses (Al-Issa, 2006). The participants of my study are newcomers from this English programme in different Colleges of Technology.

The newcomers’ English proficiency is measured by a placement test, which these students take upon their arrival. Students who receive high grades in the placement test may directly start their technical courses. Students who do not achieve the adequate English proficiency required to complete their technical courses are placed in the FYP, which is mainly an extensive English course, but students also study computer skills (3 h per week) and basic Math (3 h per week). Teaching English language skills is the core component of the FYP: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Al-Issa (2006) described the FYP as offering English instruction to students to achieve the English language requirements before students start their academic courses which are taught exclusively in the English language.

#### EFL in the Omani Context

Omani students have cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds that are distinctive from English speakers in other countries. These distinctive differences may create challenges in EFL learning. For example, Omani higher education institutions usually use textbooks that are produced in English-speaking countries (for instance, the United Kingdom or the United States), and they are imported to the international market (Al-Jadidi, 2009). There are some cultural aspects inherited in using these textbooks in a Muslim country that may cause challenges. Sharifian (1999), a Muslim researcher, discussed the challenges Muslim students face, where their value systems contradict some aspects of mainstream English language teaching. A large number of textbooks feature explicit cultural content, which is homogenous to the national culture of the United States or the United Kingdom (Bradley, 2013). According to Sharifian (1999), these textbooks do not always consider the cultural and contextual implications of Muslim culture such as the reference to alcohol, dating, and pictures of females with different types of clothing which are not compatible with Islam. Jenkins (2002) criticised the commercial globally designed textbooks produced for worldwide EFL learners, as they are not aimed at any specific groups of learners in any educational context (Jenkins, 2002).

According to Al-Jadidi (2009), the majority of Omani students learn English for practical reasons and for better careers, not for cultural purposes. They are not learning English to have an English social identity or to become part of the English-speaking community (Al-Jadidi, 2009).

Overall, EFL teaching is implemented as a main policy in education in Oman. It is an approach that has largely been reinforced in schools, colleges, and universities in Oman. In the next section I discuss the status of technology in Oman.

### Technology in Oman

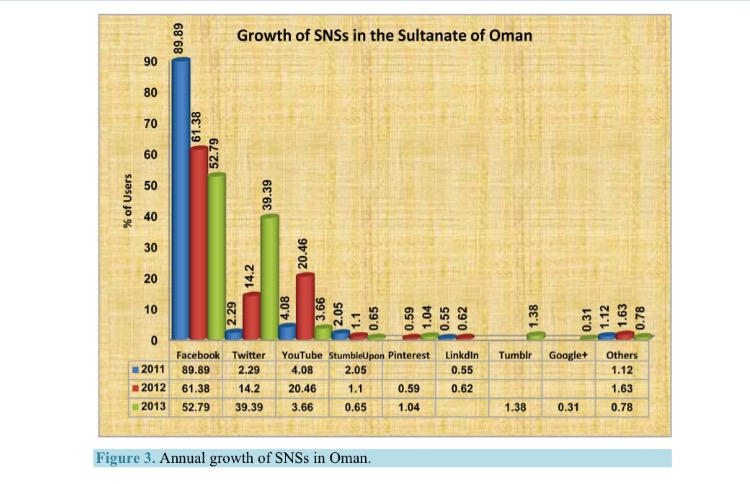
In this section I report on a survey designed and implemented by the Information Technology Authority in Oman (2014) on *Measuring Access and Use by Households and Individuals*. Although this survey was conducted in 2014 and the statistics and numbers might have changed, the findings of this survey provide a general overview about the status of technology in Oman, which is relevant to my research project that I started in 2013. The sample of this survey was collected to be representative of the population in Oman. The sampling methodology of this survey allowed for an accuracy of 5% for estimates of proportions at the national level. This required a sample size of 11,229 households across the country. Random sampling based on a stratified cluster design was applied. Data was collected through interviews and presented via tablets to a central server where data validation took place. The final collected results are reported below:

* Of households, 95% have mobile telephones; Omani people essentially use smartphones for communication almost as often as basic ones, with almost 95% of households having more than one smartphone.
* Omani people start using mobile phones at an early age. Thus, 91% of males and 83% of females of Omani youths (in the 15–19 age group) already have their own mobile phones and seem to make intensive use of smartphones.
* Regarding Internet access and connection, it is widespread in Oman. Thus, 80% of Omani households have Internet access, with 69% by mobile broadband or fixed broadband connection. Speed problems are found when browsing the Internet in almost all cases (95%). Internet access is less in rural and mountainous areas (27% of households have limited access).
* Individuals’ access to the Internet begins at an early age as school students, but the highest rate of access to the Internet is among young adults and college and university students. It decreases progressively with age, along with computer skills. Social media networks are used intensively in contrast with professional-related Internet tools that are hardly accessed in general.
* There is a relatively high-speed Internet, as indicated by the high usage of YouTube in Oman, for example (Information Technology Authority, 2014).
* Oman placed fifth in the number of Internet users among Arab countries. According to Worldbank (2015), there was exponential growth in the number of Internet users in Oman between 2000 and 2015, from 3.5% to 70.2%. This increase was mainly due to the spread of mobile devices, especially smartphones, tablets, and laptops, where users can access the Internet anywhere (Worldbank, 2015). The NCSI (2015b) reported that, by May 2015, there were around 195,549 Internet users in Oman. Oman’s country number was classified as 57 in technological readiness in the Global Competitiveness Report in 2014 (World Economic Forum, 2015).

#### SNS Usage in Oman

According to Mediate (2015), the use of social media in Oman is reported to be less than other Gulf countries. There are several popular SNSs in Oman as follows: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Google Plus.

Universally, according to Facebook (2015), Facebook is the most favoured SNS, with around 1.23 billion users around the world. The Arab Social Media Report (ASMR, 2015) has stated that Facebook is the most often used SNS in the Arab countries as well. As for Omani Facebook users, reports show that the number of Omani Facebook users is declining. In 2011, the number of Facebook users decreased from 89.89% to 61.38% in 2012, with a further decrease to 52.79% in 2013. This might be because of the growing market share of other SNSs which have become popular over the years. For example, Twitter users increased from 2.29% of the total social media users in 2011 to 14.2% in 2012. They increased again in 2013 to reach 39.39%. Thus, from 2011 to 2013, Facebook lost around 37% of its share in the Omani market to Twitter. Figure 1.2 provides an overview of SNSs in Oman according to a survey carried out by Ahmed and Reyaeel (2014:



**Figure 1.2: SNS annual users in Oman between 2011 and 2013 (Ahmed & Reyaee1, 2014)**

According to Twitter (2015), there were around 500 million Twitter users in February 2015, of which around 302 million are monthly active users; around 500 million tweets are posted on Twitter globally every day (Twitter, 2015). A report produced in 2015 by Dubai School of Government mentioned that the number of active users of Twitter in the Arab countries increased by more than 79% in just 2 years. In their study, Salem, Mourtada, and Alshaer (2014) observed that Twitter users who are active in the 22 Arab countries numbered around 5,797,500 users on a monthly basis in 2014. They have an estimated 17,198,900 tweets published by Twitter users from the Arab countries per day (Salem et al., 2014). The ASMR (2015) stated that, in Oman, the number of monthly Twitter users nearly tripled between 2012 and 2013 from 14,000 to 38,000 users in 1 year.

Instagram was the fastest growing SNS in the world in 2013. It has around 150 million subscribers, and there are around 40 million photos published on Instagram per day. In 2015, Instagram had monthly active users of more than 200 million (Instagram, 2015). Instagram is popular in the Arab countries, as it is reported that 34% of SNSs users in the Arab world have Instagram accounts, and four out of five of them check their Instagram daily. Thus, 40% of Omani users of SNSs have and use this SNS, and 86% of them access their Instagram accounts daily, many of which access it through smartphones (ASMR, 2015).

In addition, the report’s findings also showed that the main used language on different SNSs in the Arab world is Arabic. The increased use of SNSs among Arab users has increased the use of Arabic online and introduced many Arabic spaces, which in reverse increased the use of SNSs in the Arab world (ASMR, 2015).

### Omani Culture

Throughout the thesis, I sometimes refer to Omani culture as if it is a monolithic thing that is the same for everyone, but it is not. I am aware that it is more complicated than that, as all cultures are different. One person’s experiences in a certain space will be different from someone else’s experiences in the same space. Besides, culture is always in flux. In this way, it is difficult to pin down (see Section 2.3 for a discussion on culture). In this work and within the data, it became clear there were assumptions the participants were making and that various protocols and behaviours they were following were part of what they understood to be the Omani way of life. So, when I use the term *Omani culture*, to indicate this, I understand that scholars have written widely and in depth about culture and that it is not simple (Belshek, 2006; Chiu, Leung, & Hong, 2010; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Hofstede, 1980),see Section 2.3. However, for the case of moving the argument, I use this word.

In general, Omani society is strongly rooted in religious values and traditions. Religion and traditions play fundamental roles in defining social norms. Islam is used as an organising principle in much of Omani daily life. Maintaining religious values and societal norms and traditions is important. The Omani community considers it unacceptable to break from these rules. As culture is a very broad concept and there are many aspects that constitute Omani culture, as well as any other culture, I only discuss those aspects of the Omani culture that are related to my findings only*.* The findings and discussion chapters of the thesis shed light on the components of the culture that have had an impact on my research.

## My Positionality

Many researchers have criticised qualitative research for its lack of objectivity, as it is argued that researchers are influenced by their subjective positions when conducting the research but also that their findings may be distorted by personal bias (Yin, 2009). However, others have defended the position for qualitative research, such as Robson (2011), who argued that bias exist in all kinds of research projects, which involve studying people. In my study, I used self-reflexivity throughout the research process to increase the trustworthiness of the study.

Researchers conducting qualitative research, especially those researching human experiences, are largely criticised for bringing their subjectivity to their projects (Cousin, 2010). Subjectivity is described by Jupp (2006) as “the inner state of the self-constituted by thinking, experience, emotion, belief, intentionality, self-awareness of others” (p. 293). Not only is subjectivity inevitable but is also needed and desired. Carr (2000) argued that it is important for researchers to take a position and to make that position clear. He argued that there is no way a researcher can present the results as they are. Presenting findings and analysis can only be done through theoretically biased perspectives. Thus, objectivity in research projects is not possible. In the case of my research, objectivity is particularly challenging, as using new technologies such as SNSs in EFL learning is an evolving and controversial issue. I have made an attempt to be reflexive throughout the research process by identifying possible concerns as they have emerged. Greenbank (2003) also argued that the methodology for any research project are affected by the researchers’ values. He also suggested that researchers have to be reflexive regarding how different factors influence their study.

The researchers’ biographies may impact data collection, interpretation, and presentation. Wellington, Bathmaker, Hunt, McCulloch, and Sikes (2005) stated that the methods that researches choose are affected by a range of factors, such as the their preferences, interests and background. Moreover, the dimensions of positionality interweave complexly and affect researchers’ production of knowledge (Scheurich, 1997). These dimensions include gender, race, social status, and history. The positionality of a researcher may be well-defined through self-reflexivity which is the process of reflecting on oneself as a researcher according to Guba and Lincoln (2005).

The aim of this section is to talk about my background, philosophies, and beliefs in so far as they have influenced the choices and decisions I made through my research, such as my research focus and methodologies. Sikes (2004) emphasized the importance of the researcher’s position and philosophies as they influence the choice and use of procedures and methodologies. Wellington et al. (2005) also emphasised that it is impossible to separate the researcher from any type of research, as the researcher influences different stages of the research process. Wellington et al. (2005) highlighted the importance of the biography of researchers, their positions, their perspectives, their assumptions, and their beliefs, which affect the research focus, research questions, research paradigms, methodologies, and how research findings are presented.

In view of the above, my choice of exploring students’ and teachers’ uses and perceptions of SNSs and my research questions were influenced by my personal background as well as my personal interests and experience.

My motivation to continue my postgraduate studies in English language learning and technology was derived from my personal experiences. As a learner of EFL and later as an English teacher, I found that the traditional teacher-centred approach and setting, which is very common in my home country, to be demotivating. I was interested in using English in my daily life; however, there were rare chances to use English outside the class. My English language learning was limited by a receptive language learning model. As years passed, it was clear to me that I had to completely rely on myself, as I was pressured to learn English to communicate effectively. The use of online self-study played an essential role in the development of my English language. I also remember using Hotmail messenger to talk and practice in English. Hence, I conducted my master’s exploration on EFL students’ use of online self-study materials and the influence of their daily use in providing meaningful opportunities to practice English. Later, as a foreign language teacher, I also experienced that students sometimes find it difficult to practice English due to limited opportunities. These experiences provided me significant awareness and knowledge of the struggles faced by EFL students in Oman when they learn English. It also equipped me with considerable understanding of the potential of technology, such as SNSs, as tools for EFL learning.

Technology such as SNSs can be used by language learners to compensate for the gap of having limited opportunities to use English. In addition, through my readings, I noticed there were very few research projects related to the issue of using SNSs in English language learning and how EFL students and teachers perceive them in the Omani context. Therefore, I became more motivated to explore this in the Omani context.

I recognise that it is not achievable to be completely objective, as my background and my views as a teacher have unavoidably impacted my research interest, approach, exploration, and presentation of findings. However, drawing on Carr’s position about the benefits of partisanship, my engagement with the topic aided the research process as I shared certain cultural dispositions with the participants, and I had useful insider knowledge of the SNSs and the benefits they could offer education. This meant that I was able to think about appropriate questions to ask and understand the different uses and challenges the participants talked about.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to explore the use of SNSs in learning EFL among young Omani students and teachers. It also addressed the use of SNSs in general and in daily life. As I started reviewing the literature for this project, I identified a gap, as I found relatively little literature on this topic. I also planned right from the beginning to consider the context where this study took place, as the use of SNSs in EFL was less explored.

First, in this research project I explored the general use of SNSs among young people in Oman and their perceptions regarding this use in their daily lives. This was essential to provide a basis for the adoption of these technologies in education. It also provides an insight to understand students’ views about SNSs in general and in their context. Then I explored the students’ and teachers’ perceptions on the use of SNSs in EFL learning and teaching with specific emphasis on both the formal and informal integration of SNSs in English language learning as a foreign language.

Broadly speaking, this research aimed to explore the range of uses of SNSs for social reasons and for EFL learning purposes as reported by young Omani college students and teachers. This may help in appraising the potential implications that SNSs may offer to EFL learning as experienced and perceived by these participants.

## The Research Questions

The research questions were identified as follows:

1) How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs in their daily lives?

2) How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs in their informal EFL learning?

3) How do three Omani teachers and Omani students use and perceive SNSs in EFL formal teaching?

## The Significance of the Study

Ito et al. (2009) stated that “basic access to technology, the ability to navigate online information, and the ability to communicate with others online are increasingly central to our everyday participation in public life” (p. 28).

Using SNS in education and in language learning and the related benefits and challenges have been studied in many parts of the world (Barton & Potts, 2013; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Hafner, 2013; Hafner, Chik, & Jones, 2013; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010; Kessler, 2013; Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2010; Mills, 2009, 2011; Prichard, 2013). However, this has not yet been widely researched in the Middle East educational context, particularly not in Oman where English is a foreign language. This research is carried out to expand our knowledge about the online practices of students whose learning needs and experiences are quite different from other learners in other educational contexts. This study is important because it acknowledges the different learners’ needs, limits, and potentials, as well as different learners’ willingness to use digital applications, which is a key element in improving learning experiences (O’Toole & Essex, 2012).

Presenting the actual use of SNSs by learners and teachers of EFL might have the following significance. First, I explored students’ use of SNSs in and outside of classrooms, which identifies what these online applications can offer to language learning and teaching and their possible changes and benefits in learning practices. Understanding the learners’ uses and experiences may offer great insights into how SNSs can function as learning and teaching tools for EFL learning. Second, in this study I also explored the contextual challenges underlying the use of these technologies. Third, this study offered implications that may increase the potential benefits of SNSs for EFL students in higher education. Therefore, the findings of this study have the potential to extend knowledge from present research about EFL learners’ use of SNSs in informal and formal settings. EFL teachers might benefit from gaining a better understanding of SNS use in EFL learning contexts that can help support or hinder the learning of EFL through SNSs. This understanding may benefit practitioners and policy makers by enabling them to take into consideration different individual and contextual factors before integrating SNSs into formal instructions to promote students’ learning performance. The findings may also help in identifying strategies for the successful implementation of these technologies in higher education and identifying different challenges and issues related to implementation. Similarly, the results of the study might be of value to Omani curriculum developers and designers to offer approaches for learning that best suit EFL learners in Oman. EFL learners in both formal and informal contexts might benefit from the findings of this study, especially for less motivated learners. It is vital for such learners to understand how others use these technologies to learn English, as well as the factors that motivate others to learn through SNSs. It might also help learners to understand the challenges others face and in turn help promote their own learning motivation and critical thinking skills.

## The Structure of the Dissertation

In this project I addressed the research questions on which I outline through seven chapters in this thesis, as follows:

**Chapter One** describes the background of the research, the purpose and the research questions, the context where the study takes place in detail, and the potential significance of the research.

**Chapter Two** presents the literature review relevant to the main questions of the research as well as the theoretical basis.

**Chapter Three** describes the methodology of this research, which is the mixed methods case study approach in which quantitative and qualitative methods were used. The data collection procedures include surveys (self-reported questionnaires) for gathering quantitative data and focus group discussions and interviews for gathering in-depth qualitative data.

**Chapters Four, Five, and Six** present the results and findings from the data of both the quantitative and qualitative stages. The findings are presented and discussed in three chapters to provide in-depth and rich explanations of why and how SNSs were used by participants in their daily lives and EFL learning in informal and formal learning spaces.

**Chapter Seven** presents the conclusions and a summary of the key research findings followed by reflections on the research process, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future work.

## Summary

In this chapter I presented the research questions, the study background, the context of the study, the potential significance, and the outline of the study. The following chapter, Chapter Two, reviews the literature related to the research questions and aims of this study.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## SNSs

### Definition

The most commonly cited definition comes from research by Boyd and Ellison (2008). They defined SNSs as

*“web-based services that allow individuals to: 1) construct a public or semi-public profile; 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”* (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211)

Boyd and Ellison (2008) defended using the term *social network sites* to refer to these new types of network, as their main aim is to connect people from already existing social networks.

It is worth mentioning here that, in many research projects, scholars distinguish between the following two terms: *social networking site* and *social network site,* although they are both used to refer to those services offered online. However, most researchers advocate the use of social network site because the word *networking* suggests the commencement or the start of a connection between people who do not know each other—or strangers (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). These online services connect people who do not know each other on an online platform, and they also connect people who know each other offline. Establishing a connection is definitely one of the main functions of these online services, but it is not the only or main practice on these applications. Networking emphasises connection initiation where individuals meet and interact with strangers. This suggests that users use these online sites to build new networks. SNSs are distinguished from other computer-mediated applications by enabling users to communicate with people who share some offline connection and make their social networks visible to others (Haythornthwaite, 2005). On many SNSs, users are not networking or meeting new individuals; instead, they are mostly interacting with people from existing relationships. To highlight this social network as a main feature of these web applications, scholars use the term SNSs (Barnes, 2006). Most SNSs help maintain preexisting social relationships, whereas other sites bring strangers together based on shared interests (Jones et al., 2009). In this study, I choose to use the term *social network sites* or *SNSs* to refer to these online services where individuals connect with established, existing relations and establish new social networks with people outside of their offline, existing social circle.

### Enabling Features

According to Hester Group (2010), SNSs are highly accessible as communication tools to facilitate social interaction. They enable users to socialise, discuss, and share information online to all members in a two-way communication. This interactive feature facilitates two-way access and instant interaction. Jones (2009) stated that SNS features enable staying linked to other sites, resources, and people, and they possess unique features that distinguish them from other online services. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), these features involve being Internet-based, mobile, flexible, focussed on users, interactive, and supportive of two-way communication and multigroup interaction at a low cost. SNSs depend on having Internet access as they are web-based. Users can use any device with Internet access to access SNS applications and a large amount of information and content. Moreover, SNS users can connect to other links and to other webpages, as this enhances the usefulness and effectiveness of SNSs.

De Souza and Dick (2007) stated that the features of SNSs enable multimethod group interactions that connect people in remote places with Internet access. This contributes to knowledge and content and facilitates interaction among millions of users, with group communications prompting posting content to be read, heard, and viewed by other users (De Souza & Dick, 2007).

Another important feature of SNSs mentioned by Boyd and Ellison (2007) is mobility, which is enabled by smartphones and small-sized laptops to easily run SNS applications. Ali and Lee (2010) stated that small-sized laptops and smartphones hold many features such as a digital camera that enhance many practices on SNSs such as posting images from anywhere. SNS users can take, edit, tag, and post pictures quickly and send them to other users on a whole range of sites.

Focussing on users is another enabling feature of SNSs that allows users to take part and participate by viewing, reading, producing, providing feedback, and editing online content. Gardner (2011) stated that online users can also share, learn, and distribute ideas through cocreation, which is another interactive low-cost feature. It is therefore inexpensive to produce and publish content online, unlike many more traditional media services, such as newspapers and television. According to Tufekci, (2008), SNSs may empower users and improve distribution of knowledge. He stated that traditional media are limited in services, that they are regulated by authorities, and that they are very expensive. On the other hand, SNSs are widely accessible, flexible, inexpensive, and efficient and provide information and knowledge globally.

One technical feature of SNSs involves visible profiles comprising pages unique to each user where individuals can represent themselves online (Gardner, 2011). In other words, the profile is created by the users themselves, about themselves. Gardner (2011) stated that SNSs usually prompt users to upload a photo in their profile. By joining a SNS, users can find and identify other users in the site with whom they have a relationship or explore other users’ accounts on the same site, or they can track hundreds of people and read their content and feeds. The labelling of these relationships differs from one site to another such as *Contacts, Friends, Followers,* and *Fans*. Most SNSs necessitate acceptance for Friendship, whereas other SNSs do not. According to Boyd (2006), using the term *Friends* may be confusing, as people connect to others for many reasons, and these connections on SNSs do not necessarily mean friends in the non-SNS sense of the word (Boyd, 2006). Another feature that makes SNSs different from other online services is the visibility of one’s social networks to others, and this may lead to different kinds of connections between people not available in other services (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Profiles, friends or followers, comments, and public and private messaging are common on most SNSs. However, these sites differ significantly in other features and uses. For example, some SNSs allow sharing photos or videos, whereas some SNSs allow blogging and microblogging. Some SNSs are mobile or web based and some support limited mobile features. Some SNSs focus on people from particular areas or language groups, although this does not control the SNS population. SNSs are intended to be broadly accessible by all. Yet, groups of users use SNSs and separate themselves by age, nationality, education, interests, and other aspects (Hargittai & Hsieh 2010). It is beyond the scope of this study to go in depth about the different SNSs and their different functions and features. Instead, in this study I focus on the uses of these SNSs in general.

### SNSs

In this study I focussed on five different SNSs: Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

**Facebook**

Facebook is a social network site that enables users to produce individual profiles and send messages, photos, and video. Users can also create *Groups* that enable those who have shared interests to interact in one group. In the personal profile, there are several key features. First and probably the most popular is the *Wall*, which is basically a virtual bulletin board. Users can leave messages on other users’ Wall which may include text, video, or photos.

**Twitter**

Twitter is a social network site that offers a microblogging service that allows users to create and send short text messages 140 characters in length (at the time of this study) called tweets to your friends or followers. People may follow other users and retweet or repost their tweets for others. According to Ezumah (2013), Twitter is “an online version of text-messaging with the capability of sending the same message to several thousand people all at once” (p.1).

**Snapchat**

Snapchat is a social network site that allows users to send photos and videos that expire in seconds. It is a mobile application for messaging images, multimedia, and videos. The main concept in this social network site is that messages and images are accessible for a short time and then become unavailable. This allows the users of this application to send images and videos that are self-deleting and live for a short time. Massages are accessed temporarily, which may therefore encourage interactions with a natural flow that resembles other interactions that usually disappear after we have uttered our words.

**Instagram**

Instagram is a SNS that enables users to take, send, and share pictures and videos. It is owned by Facebook. The name Instagramcomes from combining the words *instant* and *telegram*. Image filters transform photos into professional-looking snapshots. Many selfies or self-portrait shots are shared via Instagram.

**WhatsApp**

Thisis a smartphone application for instant messaging which is end-to-end encrypted. It uses the Internet to offer the following services to users: sending voice calls, video calls, text messaging, pictures, videos, voice notes, location, documents, audio messages, and contacts to others using mobile numbers. WhatsApp comes from the English phrase “What’s up?” which means “What’s new?” Also, the word *app* comes from the word *application*. WhatsApp has become a substitute to SMS messaging, which is relatively expensive due to roaming charges as it depends on a Wi-Fi network.

### Users of SNSs

Many research studies have already explored youths’ use of SNSs and have focussed on which SNSs are the most used and popular, for example. The findings of these studies may be considered slightly confusing, as the popularity of different SNSs are consistently changing, especially from one context to another. For example, some studies have claimed that Facebook is no longer one of the first choices among university users and younger teenagers in many parts of the world (e.g., Lomicka & Lord, 2009). In contrast, other researchers have indicated that Facebook is still the most popular among young adults in the United States (e.g., Ballance, 2012). So, depending on the source of information, Facebook is either still at the top in terms of the number of users among college students or has lost its place to other platforms. Additionally, other studies have suggested that the number of Twitter users is decreasing and that the numbers of Snapchat and Instagram users are increasing (e.g., Beck, 2014), whereas other studies say the opposite.

One finding is obvious though, which is that SNSs in many different forms are certainly an essential part of young people’s lives, and indeed adults have always been the main users of SNSs. According to a statistical study by the Pew Research Center (2015b), an overwhelming 90% of American young adults are more likely than not to use social media including SNSs. Twelve per cent were using social media in 2005, signifying a 78% increase over 1 decade only. Approximately 93% of young adults have Internet access at home, and nearly 89.5% of young adults use Facebook, with Instagram in second place (55% of young adults), followed by Twitter (48.7%).

Statistical data for Snapchat are slightly subjective or circumstantial. A report in Business Insider (2015) reported that since launching, Snapchat’s growth has been overwhelming. Snapchat users exchange more than 7 billion images and videos in this app daily. Further, 45% of Snapchat users are between 18 and 24 years old.

According to Global Digital Statistics (2016), statistical data of the most popular SNSs used by young adults worldwide showed that 66% of Internet users are between 13 and 24 years old globally. Facebook continues to be the most popular SNS used by adults (12- to 24-year-old age group) in 2015. Currently, approximately 74% of Internet users use Facebook, 59% use Instagram, 57% use Snapchat, and 39% use Twitter. However, teens rated Instagram and Twitter as their most favourite SNS, whereas Facebook was given less important ratings. Of interest, Instagram and Twitter are more increasingly used in smart mobiles (Global Digital Statistics, 2016).

The most popular SNS activity among young adults is text messaging. Then there is Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. The use of Facebook might be decreasing amongst young adults since they have started using other multiple SNSs, although this does not mean that they use Facebook less, as it is still first in terms of the number of users (Global Digital Statistics, 2016).

According to Facebook statistics, the site has an average total of 1.94 billionmonthly active users worldwide in March 2017, an 18% increase in a 1-year period from 2016 (Facebook, 2016).

Twitter is also a popular SNSs worldwide with 328 million monthly active users (Twitter, 2016), and Twitter is growing at a very fast pace.

Instagram is another popular SNSs in the world with around 300 million active users (Instagram Press, 2016). Instagram users mainly post individual images or videos with a description on their profiles. Around 70 million images and videos are posted daily on Instagram according to Instagram Press (2016).

WhatsApp is claiming that it has 833 million active monthly users around the world (WhatsApp, 2016).

According to Smith (2015), an estimated 100 million people use Snapchat daily, most of them being women. Wagner (2014) stated that 77% of university students use Snapchat on a daily basis, and around 23% of his participants indicated that Snapchat is easier to use than text messages.

Free SNS monitoring platforms such as InternetWorldStats.com and SocialBakers.com collect data from different countries about different SNSs. According to them, 93% of young adults have Internet access via the use of phones, tablets, or other devices. The country that ranks first according to one of the Facebook platforms is currently the United States, as there are 163 million Facebook users. Young adults from North America aged 16–24 spend nearly 200 min a day on their mobile phones. This is the most time spent online via mobile for any other age group (SocialBakers, 2017). The list of other countries with a large total number of monthly active Facebook users includes Brazil, Indonesia, India Mexico, Turkey, the Philippines, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (InternetWorldStats.com, 2016; SocialBakers, 2017). According to Salem and Mourtada, (2012), at present, Twitter is deeply rooted in contemporary society around the world (Salem & Mourtada, 2012).

In the Arab world, the ASMR (2015) stated that the top two SNSs in 2012 were Facebook and Twitter. The number of Twitter users in 2012 was 2,099,706. In March 201, the users were sending 172 million tweets. A report produced in 2015 by Dubai School of Government mentioned that Twitter users had grown in number by more than 79%. In their study Salem et al. (2014) observed that the total Twitter users who are active in the 22 Arab countries is around 5,797,500 on a monthly basis in 2014. They have an estimated 17,198,900 tweets published by Twitter users from the Arab countries per day (Salem et al., 2014). Instagram is popular in the Arab countries, as it is reported that 34% of SNSs users in the Arab world have Instagram accounts, and four out of five of them check their Instagram daily (ASMR, 2015; for statistics about Oman, see Section 1.2.5.1).

Besides the abovementioned SNSs, there is a large number of other SNSs that are extensively used worldwide such as Myspace, Google+, Xing Tumblr, and Pinterest. Some SNSs are designed for specific users who share similar interests so that they can establish instant connections and interactions about topics of interest.

### Why Do Young People Use SNSs?

Boyd discussed the use of SNSs extensively (Boyd, 2007; Boyd, 2011; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), SNSs connect people around shared interests, language preferences, and racial or cultural features. People use SNSs to share messages, files, photos, and videos. They also text and interact in real-time conversations. SNSs are social because they enable users to connect with friends and strengthen social ties with family members in an online space. SNSs also help share data, news, and information in a very efficient manner. According to Chang, Wong, and Park (2014), the idea of sharing has taken many new dimensions through SNSs at social and personal levels. Sharing of important information and very mundane everyday information is carried out in these online spaces. Several research projects have been carried out to explore what motivates people to use SNSs, as they have attracted millions of users (e.g., Chang et al., 2014, Yoo, Choi, Choi, & Rho, 2014).

One of my research objectives is to explore how and why the Omani student and teacher participants use SNSs in their daily lives. As SNSs have redefined how individuals relate and connect to each other (Solis, 2008a), connection and communication on SNSs are some of the key reasons why users use SNSs, which I will discuss in detail.

### Connection and Communication on SNSs

According to Al-Mukhaini, Al-Qayoudhi, and Al-Badi (2014), the supporters of SNS use say that if you are not using SNSs, then you are not alive.

Urista, Dong, and Day (2009) indicated that SNSs help people satisfy their connection needs. They are useful and convenient ways for interaction, as they enable users to stay connected with family and friends. According to Boyd (2007), youth have embraced SNSs to interact with friends, share experiences, and display parts of their social lives. The popularity of SNSs among young adults shows a shift in traditional communities and encourages the creation of new online communities.

Golder, Wikinson, and Huberman (2007) indicated that SNS interactions can be managed the users’ own way, as they choose when and what they want to read or respond to. One-to-many communication through SNSs offers quick connection with people and the quick spread of information. They researchers specified that the connections users make with other users on SNSs vary in nature and type. Individuals connect with others on different SNSs for many purposes shaped by a need to establish, continue, or improve relationships with others in their daily lives.

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), as shown in the title of their paper, the key component of SNSs is the “public display of connection(s)” (p. 1). These connections contain friend lists and links to their profiles, allowing users to navigate others’ networks and expand their own connections. The list of *Friends*, *Followers,* or *Fans* is displayed to those allowed to view the profile on most SNSs.

The common objective of SNSs is to offer online spaces for social connection; however, the use of these SNSs varies considerably across different sites. Many research projects have attempted to categorise the use of SNSs based on their features and have tried to explain the patterns of users’ practices and the motivations of usage (e.g., Barker, 2009; Kumar, Kumar, Gupta, Kumar, & Sinha, 2013).

As SNS users constantly evaluate the value of their SNS memberships and participations, they build their own perceptions towards the advantages and disadvantages of these SNSs. Tiffany, Yevdokiya, and Sandra (2009) stated that the participants of this study perceived risks in using SNSs. Most of these risks are related to the following: identity theft, harassment, fraud, hackers, spread of private information, and blackmail. Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, and Hughes (2009) stated that perceived risks may alter users’ uses of SNSs over time. According to Papacharissi (2009), the value of membership and participation on SNSs is influenced by users’ practices, especially the frequency of use and updating information, the time they spent on these sites, the types of information they share, and the strength of online social ties. Kumar et al. (2013) indicated that while making connections with other people with shared interests, young adults learn and exchange information with people with whom they would not have had the opportunity to connect otherwise.

Malaterre, Rothbard, and Berg (2012) discussed the impact of overlapping in online interactions within the workplace. They indicated that virtual connection for employees, who are also interacting with family and friends, as well as workplace colleagues on SNSs, is problematic as they connect on public-personal SNSs. They concluded that when individuals interact with colleagues in the physical workplace as well as on SNSs, conflicts may occur because of the differences between the online and offline environments. According to Leonardi, Huysman, and Steinfeld (2013), the offline environment provides certain principles that manage impressions and interactions through which people develop organisational and social awareness. In this sense, face-to-face communication provides cues for social interaction. On the other hand, online spaces have an ephemeral audience and minimal socialisation cues and principles that are learned over time. Malaterre et al. (2012) argued that overlapping interactions may result in a clash between different audiences (e.g., the personal and the professional, the public and the private). Such studies are significant to my study, as they show that overlapping interactions between different groups of audiences on SNSs may shift boundaries and alter how people interact offline and may cause conflicts.

### SNSs’ Impact on Individuals and Society

Everyday life has become associated with SNSs, with SNSs influencing the lives of young people in many significant ways. Greenhow et al. (2014) stated that young people increasingly conduct their interactions and relations with friends online through SNSs. Therefore, in today’s world, online interactions are important as they affect the way that people behave and interact offline and how they perceive themselves and the world around them. Cho and Park (2013a) indicated that SNSs shape the way in which individuals engage themselves in different communities. They enable users to join in and interact with different cultures online without changing their physical places. Their study showed that through exposure to other contexts online and interacting with people, individuals gain an understanding of the shared practices in different cultures. Individuals use this knowledge and awareness as guides for their behaviours in future interactions.

Al-Mukhaini et al. (2014) argued that the massive popularity of SNSs has transformed how people interact online. In the past, the Internet was a source of information, but because of SNSs, Internet platforms have become spaces for social gatherings. Aljabre (2013) stated that SNSs enable users to search for information and exchange it with others. They have affected the spreading of news and how news is acquired, as well as the way people interact. SNSs have evolved to become news sites and sources of information as well as a channel for advertising, discussion, investigation services, photo records, game centres, and a social gathering place. Thompson (2011) explained that SNSs have changed the spatial structure of social life by creating a new form of communication and new types of relationships. According to Thompson (2010), SNSs have created new opportunities for connections in the public domain including easy access and the exchange of information and opinions. SNSs have impacted society by empowering users to construct content and knowledge.

Another effect of SNSs is the spread of freedom of speech. Alkubasi (2014) claimed that SNSs have eliminated restrictions on freedom of expression and reduced limitations on what can be published; they also help individuals determine what is newsworthy. According to him, due to the growing number of online users, and with elaborate profiles and pages that can be created in minutes, it has become difficult to control what can or cannot be said on SNSs, even though most sites have moderating policies to regulate prohibited language.

Parameswaran and Whinston (2007) argued that one impact of SNSs is that people behave differently online than offline because of the degree of anonymity achieved through online interaction. When people interact on SNSs, they feel a sense of freedom to behave without constraint because they know they are not to be evaluated or personally identified. In addition to the benefits of anonymity, Parameswaran and Whinston (2007) argued that SNSs allow people to become more confident, open-minded, flexible, and less shy.

Although countries around the world value their individual cultures and traditions that distinguish them from other countries, at the same time, SNSs have linked people around the world regardless of these differences. Chen and Zhang (2010) claimed that SNSs have compressed time and space and made the world a small village. People around the world interact seemingly easily with different cultures that have been brought together online. They claim that through SNSs, people learn about different cultures, which leads to thinking globally as an integral part of daily life interactions. People become more interdependent and interconnected with cultures around the world. However, as I show later, things are not always as harmonious as they have suggested.

Few research projects have captured the voices, practices, and experiences of adult users, which is what I attempted to accomplish through this research. Learners’ online activities might provide insight into their attitude that may influence learners’ preferences in education. A growing interest is paid to SNS use among academics and researchers in the field of EFL, especially with the growing number of users joining and logging into these accounts daily and integrating these sites into their daily practices (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In Section 2.2, I discuss the research projects that have studied the use of SNSs in language learning.

## SNSs’ Use in EFL Learning

The popularity of SNSs and their effect on peoples’ everyday lives has attracted researcher and academic interest in how SNSs can be used to facilitate the learning of languages (Dron and Anderson, 2014). It is essential to note that SNSs were not technically or intentionally developed to facilitate instruction and learning. The key objective for SNSs has been to enable socialisation and interaction (aside from, of course, opportunities to make money—not a focus of this study). Nevertheless, it has been argued that SNSs may have a lot of potential to facilitate language learning as well as satisfy social needs and maintain interest and motivation (Sitthirak, 2013).

According to Rembe (2011), SNSs have gradually established their significance as an efficient tool for language learning. Language teachers have been prompted to experiment using SNSs to explore the possibility to benefit language learning. Some language teachers use certain SNSs such as Facebook or Twitter to improve instructional content. Other teachers have experimented with SNSs to explore the ways in which users interact and connect with other users online to learn language skills. Dalton (2009) indicated that learners in his study showed substantial progress in language proficiencies once they used SNSs to practice their language with other learners.

Thorne (2010) argued that SNSs could enable learners to produce language content, which may result in SNSs being used by language learners as learning tools. They may also stimulate expression, freedom, and creativity, which could motivate language learning significantly. Goertler (2009) stated that SNSs could expose learners to real-life language resources and interactions; thus, learners can observe how language is used. According to him, SNSs may offer many ways to practice language skills. For example, they could enable learners to enter dialogue with the speakers of the language they are seeking to learn. The presence of language speakers on SNSs may enable interactions, which may help learners develop the required communicative proficiency (Goertler, 2009).

After conducting a study using SNSs in language learning, Ota (2011) stated that the assistance given by peers seemed to offer many advantages for language acquisition. He concluded that peer learning is a significant benefit that could be achieved from using SNSs for language learning. Swain and Lapkin (2013) also stated that peer cooperation on SNSs may generate effective activities to construct knowledge of grammar, syntax, and phonetics as well as an understanding of the use of the language in context. They indicated that collaboration between peers through SNSs may allow students to obtain problem-solving skills with high language intelligence. Their research concluded that peer collaboration encouraged greater language achievements for learners. Many studies have revealed that SNSs have impacted different levels of academic settings and opened new ways for learning and teaching for both language teachers and learners. For example, Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, and Witty (2010) found that Facebook has the potential to be used in education and can be a useful platform to support students’ educational interaction and collaboration between the learners themselves and with the teachers. The researchers discussed how online platforms such as Facebook can be used in language learning contexts.

Findings from different studies have revealed that language learners who learn language through SNSs showed great potential in SNS language activities, and researchers reported great improvement in students’ language abilities and skills. For example, in a study by Thurairaj et al. (2012), it was noted that Facebook and Twitter may enable language production, and the use of SNSs could help in attaining the required language skills. They also noted that SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter can lead to the positive learning of language. Therefore, the researchers recommended the use of SNSs as language learning tools. In their study, the participating language learners indicated that language activities on SNSs were interesting, made language learning easy and fun, and helped them improve their communication skills. The students also maintained that they have many various preferred activities on SNSs that lead to more positive language learning experiences and improved their language skills, especially their writing skills. Moreover, the students stated they have expanded their vocabulary when they read posts and updates on SNSs. Students of the study welcomed the use of SNSs to support classroom language learning activities such as classroom discussions. The students were willing and motivated to include different SNSs into their language learning process. Thurairaj et al. (2012) concluded that SNSs could help learners to participate in language discussions and have a more interesting and productive learning environment. The researchers of this study also specified that language teachers could offer interesting teaching materials on SNSs which may help students improve their language. Consequently, language learning activities through SNSs are motivating to develop positive learning. Thurairaj et al. (2012) also stated that the complex learning process differs largely among individuals. Thus, they argued that teachers could vary their teaching methods by using SNSs, which may help with different learners.

Kabilan et al. (2010) indicated that students in their study considered Facebook a good tool that can facilitate English language learning. The students claimed that using this SNS had developed their English language and increased their motivation to interact in English. Students also stated that SNSs had also positively developed their attitudes towards language learning. Findings of the study seem to suggest that the majority of participating students thought that Facebook was an effective learning tool because it supported writing practices in English. Learners felt that writing in public online spaces have provided them with a purpose for writing more than the traditional writing viewed only by teachers. They considered posts on SNSs to be much more public in nature than standard writing. Students in this study also thought that Facebook was an effective learning space for reading practice in English to improve reading skills. Kabilan et al. (2010) concluded that English teachers could focus on using SNSs as educational tools with specific learning aims to provide meaningful learning experiences to students.

Some researchers have also showed that allowing language students to use SNSs as tools for learning have significantly motivated students. For example, Munoz and Towner (2009) noted that using SNSs to learn specific activities on the SNSs, regardless of the type of language activities, all led to significant progress in language productive skills and developing a positive attitude to learn. Further, they found that SNSs allowed students to share information and learn from classmates and to interact with them. According to them, students could interact with their teachers and discuss class information. Therefore, with the assistance of students’ most preferred online activities such as text messaging, sharing, participating in discussions, and interactions with other users, learners may improve their EFL abilities and skills. Learners may get involved in different and plentiful activities on SNSs which may result in developing a significant body of vocabulary by reading, listening, and observing content online.

Researchers have also shown that motivation is essential in language learning and could be enhanced through the use of SNS. For example, in a study on the advantages of SNSs on social learning, Aydin (2012) concluded that Facebook is an effective educational tool for language learning and teaching to improve learners’ language skills and learning motivation. He stated that SNSs can be used as a space for literacy practices and social learning which necessitate collaborative effort among educators and students. Aydin (2012) stated that the number of SNS users is continuously growing, particularly among young adults and students, and many of them are motivated to use SNSs to communicate and express their thoughts and learn a language. According to him, using SNSs in language learning contexts has not been adequately studied despite the significant growth of SNSs around the world. So, he argued, further research should be carried out to explore the different uses of SNSs in education (Aydin, 2012).

Yunus et al. (2012) explored the benefits and drawbacks of incorporating SNSs into EFL and ESL writing lessons by discussing the different learning activities and how to plan them. The findings showed that using SNSs in ESL writing classrooms had a positive impact in terms of expanding students’ learning, broadening their knowledge, and enhancing their motivation to practice writing. However, the main drawback in incorporating SNSs into English writing lessons was that students struggled to keep focussed and became easily distracted from the learning materials when using computers. Other challenges included a shortage of computers, a poor or lack of Internet access, and having limited time for teachers to interact with students online.

Mitchell (2012) studied the reasons why EFL learners use SNSs. The findings showed that SNSs enabled learners to acquire English language. He focussed on the effectiveness of using SNSs in EFL learning. He did not study EFL students’ engagement and perceptions in different activities on SNSs. This is what I am trying to accomplish, as the quality of EFL learning depends greatly on the participants’ contribution. My research project is a qualitative study designed to provide a description for using SNSs in EFL learning.

According to Ahn, Shehab, and Squicciarini, (2011), using SNSs in EFL learning requires careful planning, as it can be beneficial for language learning, especially when combined with the traditional face-to-face instruction. There are some considerations that need to be taken into account for the successful use of SNS in language learning. For example, using SNSs in language learning requires investing effort and time, as some learners may be unaware of the ways to benefit from SNS activities, or they may resist using them for educational purposes, and other learners may not feel comfortable with learning through SNSs. However, Chartrand (2012) concluded that despite the existence of many obstacles, foreign language learners who used SNSs achieved improved language proficiency and accomplished positive outcomes in learning by using SNSs as a learning tool. Sitthirak (2013) stated that the attitudes of language learners and educators to try out SNSs for language learning can effectively facilitate language development and advancement. In this way, it is argued that educators can improve language acquisition and encourage students to participate and interact in online practices that improve language skills.

According to Hafner et al. (2013), using SNSs can permit EFL and ESL learners to direct their learning activities. However, they argued that learners need direction from teachers in using SNSs in language learning even though leaners can use SNSs in informal learning. SNSs encourage students to actively work together to produce content and construct knowledge. Harisson and Thomas (2009) studied EFL and ESL learning through SNSs, and they found out that SNSs may enable forming connections with speakers and other learners of that language. Users predominantly formed new social networks with language learners who were not present in their existing social networks.

Blattner and Fiori (2011) studied the engagement on SNS communities through Facebook groups. The researchers found that learners may develop communicative competence through the use of online spaces. They emphasised the importance of creating a sense of community among students in the educational contexts for a productive learning process. They suggested that successful use of online communities for learning needs guidance and feedback from teachers. The researchers, however, did not study students’ perceptions regarding why Facebook groups were effective in their EFL and ESL learning.

In reviewing the relevant literature in EFL learners’ attitudes towards the use of SNSs for EFL learning, I identified some conflicting findings. Some findings showed that learners feel reluctant to write posts in EFL publicly because of many reasons such as being worried about the negative judgement from language users of a higher level (e.g., Hitosugi, 2011). On the other hand, other research projects’ findings showed that students were motivated to learn EFL and ESL through different SNSs. Mills (2011) claimed that students did not worry about negative judgements, as most writing on SNSs is informal.

Blattner and Lomicka (2012) surveyed the use of Facebook to expand classroom practices among students. The findings showed that students have positive attitudes towards using Facebook in language learning. Students of the study mentioned that interacting with both peers and speakers was more meaningful compared with a traditional classroom setting.

Prichard (2013) studied whether students’ attitudes towards the use of SNSs for language learning would be influenced by a training course on how to use an SNS effectively, in this case Facebook. The findings of the survey before the training course showed that students who had not used Facebook before reported negative attitudes towards using it to learn more than their counterparts who were already familiar with the site. After the training and the use of Facebook, all participants surveyed showed positive attitudes concerning the benefits of using it. Prichard (2013) also suggested that learners’ attitudes depended mainly on each individual’s personality, learning style, and confidence. One of the reported benefits of using SNSs in EFL learning was the availability of social contexts where learners could acquire the language. SNSs offered the students opportunities to become involved in meaningful social exchanges with speakers and learners of that language. Prichard (2013) stated that using SNSs may develop writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills, as well as develop vocabulary, grammar, and sociopragmatic awareness skills. At the same time, he argued, there were challenges to the success of this learning environment.

Eren (2012) also explored learners’ attitudes towards using Facebook in classroom for language learning. The findings showed that learners demonstrated positive attitudes towards the use of Facebook activities to complement language teaching in classrooms.

Tilfarlioglu (2011) stated that SNSs may have transformed the way teachers and learners use the Internet for foreign language learning and teaching. In this study I contribute to this relevant existing literature by using SNSs for EFL learning in the Omani context.

## Culture, Social Network Use, and EFL

In this research, I am not comparing the cultural or contextual differences in SNS use in general or in EFL learning. However, as will become clear in the findings and analysis chapters, what the participants seemed to understand to be the Omani context and culture appeared to be integral to my research findings. The students’ perceptions of the use of SNSs and their perception of EFL learning were greatly affected by their perceptions of their context and culture. Their perceptions were not uniform; however, they were points of view on a continuum. There was not one, single, or monolithic view but multiple views, including ideas which did not remain stable through the project. Thus, while they frequently referred to cultural expectations, their interpretations of these expectations and their opinions of them were not uniform. In this way we can see that although participants assumed they were of a particular culture, they had diverse views on what defined that culture. Their responses reflected Street’s (1993) notions of culture as being dynamic and in flux.

However, as I focussed on predominant social activities on SNSs as well as their use in EFL learning, I found that the participants emphasised that their practices on SNSs were motivated by different needs driven from their context. There is much to be learned about this phenomenon, especially in the Omani context where there is a little data that could be used to provide an overview of SNS use patterns for this population. Therefore, in Section 2.3 I start by discussing the term *culture* as a concept. Then I discuss literature related to the role of culture in learning EFL. Then I move to discussing different studies related to SNS use in different cultures or contexts.

The existing literature contains many different definitions of culture (Belshek, 2006; Hofstede, 1980), and no single definition has achieved uniform acceptance by scholars (Belshek, 2006). This is because each definition leads to different understandings of human behaviours. For example, Hofstede (1980) suggested that culture is somewhat monolithic and stable: “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another” (p. 25). This notion sees individuals in a bound community as being of one mind. Culture was defined by Deal and Peterson (1999) as learned and socially acquired behaviour, referring to a group’s shared customs and beliefs. In this description we see individuals separately learning cultural ways of behaving, but the notion of shared beliefs and so on remains. Going further than this, Chiu et al. (2010) defined culture as a group of roughly structured norms, values, and practices shared by an interrelated group of people in a community. To them, culture is reflecting the lives, attitudes, and behaviours of people in a community. In all these definitions, culture relates to how group of individuals think and behave and what distinguishes them from other cultures or groups. In these definitions, these scholars assert that understandings of cultural beliefs and norms are always consistent and agreed upon amongst the people within a culture; however, such definitions have been critiqued for their lack of acknowledgement of diversity within cultures and of how people interpret their culture in different ways over time. These scholars’ opinions are all points of a view along a continuum and are not all the same.

In my own study, it quickly became clear that although participants often made general overarching statements about Omani culture, these views were neither static nor consistent with each other; they did however have enough similarity to be able to understand that my participants were collectively part of something they understood to be Omani culture, even if their perspectives varied. Therefore, I adapt the above definitions as they refer to the overall high degree of cultural homogeneity. In these definitions, culture embraces the features of a certain group of people which include all man-made products as well as people’s beliefs and thoughts.

There is a general agreement among scholars that culture is socially constructed and affects thinking as well as behaviour. According to Hofstede (1980), social groups are central to culture. However, the social group for Hofstede is at the country level or the nation level, which he considered to be the most powerful. This understanding disregards the idea that there might be different cultures within one culture at the country level. However, Hofstede accepted the notion that people might simultaneously be members of different cultures at the same time (Hofstede, 2001). In this study and within the data, it became clear there were assumptions that the participants were making and various protocols, and behaviours that they said they were following were part of what they understand to be the Omani way of life. So, I have used the term *Omani culture* as a shorthand way to refer to this idea. The understanding which views culture as country specific, or as a national component, is now cautioned against by many researchers, as it leads to stereotyping people and assuming one culture for all people in one country (Baker, 2012; Belshek, 2006; Chiu et al., 2010; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Hofstede, 1980; Kumaravadivelu, 2008). Cultural beliefs and ways of behaving may differ within one country or group of people, and smaller social groups within the country can also have their own microcultures.

Street (1993) argued that it is easy to stereotype and say that a culture is a particular way, but culture is constantly changing, and “culture is an active process of meaning making,” (p. x) so it should be treated as a verb rather than a noun. Individuals are both the products of the culture and the makers of the culture as well. Culture exists as an accumulation of the practices of individuals. They are part of their culture, but at the same time, they cocreate it (Street, 1993). This way of understanding culture fits my study; although I refer to Omani culture, I mean by this phrase cultural tendencies which may be reflected in ways of behaving and speaking using social media. Culture, seen as a verb, is a way of living, is always in flux, and is amenable to change; thus, it is not a reified construct. There were times when my participants referred to their culture as if it were monolithic, universally accepted, and understood, yet the data showed a diversity in their understandings of cultural norms and beliefs, and these differences changed across time and were evident as patterns of gendered beliefs. Exploring and reflecting upon any culture demonstrates that culture is not static. It is constantly changing. According to Herskovits (1945), existing cultures might partly change as a reaction to new ideas, practices, or inventions. This change does not necessarily arise from within, as most new ideas, practices, and inventions come from outside (Herskovits, 1945). In addition, different aspects within a culture do not change at the same time or speed. Hofstede (2001) provided an example of fundamental values in a certain culture such as a respect for elders, and he stated that such values change at a slower speed than behaviours and other external displays of culture such as fashion. Overall, my data reflect arguments that culture is subject to change and that changes in values might lead to changes in practices and behaviours. On the other hand, new inventions and technologies may change attitudes, values, and behaviours accordingly. In this way we can see a push and pull relationship between culture and technology, just as we might for example see a push and pull relationship between culture and language. According to Fairclough (1992), “discourse makes people as well as people make discourse” (p. 39).

This idea of culture being fluid is relevant to my research, as is clear in a later discussion.

### Culture and Learning EFL

English is a globally known and spoken language. It is an international language for science, computing, business, and entertainment (Ellis, 2001). Presently, English is one of the most extensively used languages around the world. People around the globe learn English for different purposes. A great number of people speak English as a first, second, or foreign language. Crystal (2006) indicated there were about 400 million speakers of English as their first language (L1); around 400 million ESL speakers, and 600 to 700 million EFL speakers. He estimated there are clearly over 1 billion people speaking English to some extent. Ellis (2001) also suggested there were around 1.5 billion speakers of English around the world, with 400 million speaking English as their L1. He also estimated there were around 125 million ESL speakers in English-speaking countries. He also estimated that around 1 billion people speak EFL or ESL in 70 non-English-speaking countries. All the above figures are about 15 years old; thus, the number of English speakers must have grown greatly since then. In 2016, around 67 countries reported officially using English as their main official language. Another 27 countries have English as a secondary official language.

Consequently, one question is important to discuss here in terms of English language teaching, and it is whether to learn and teach culture. This is a topic which has been much debated by sociolinguists and others. Some scholars have stated that teachers should teach what they have called target language culture besides English language to familiarise the students with the cultures of English-speaking countries (Littlemore, 2001). Littlemore (2001) claimed that learning English is about learning Western culture as “culture finds its expression in language” (p. x); so, learning English without learning culture makes learning English inadequate. He claimed that learners need to learn what he referred to as the Western culture if they want to acquire English.

Other scholars have stated that language teachers should not teach what they have called target language culture with the language in places where it is already used (Canagarajah, 2013; Kachru & Nelson, 1996). They rejected teaching the target language culture and supported teaching the local culture in English classes (McKay, 2003). Many other scholars have claimed that English language is now becoming a *lingua franca* and that there are many English dialects that have emerged in different places around the world. According to them, a group of “Englishes” have evolved around the world. They believed that English teaching should be in a context which does not teach culture at all (Jenkins, 2007; Kachru, 1997).

As a researcher and an English teacher, I am in favour of the latter perspectives. According to Jenkins (2007), the increasing awareness of English language as a *lingua franca* led to a reconsideration of the role of culture in the learning and teaching of a language (Jenkins, 2007). If language is seen as being closely connected to culture, learning a culture means that we assume that this culture is the only one connected to the language being learned. This is why many researchers like Atkinson and Sohn, (2013) called for avoidance of what they called the top-down view of culture in teaching of EFL. Many scholars are in favour of the idea of bicultues, which is supported by the existence of problems experienced by people who have lived for a period of time in a foreign culture and find themselves in an indeterminate state with regards to each culture (Kanno & Stuart, 2011). Other scholars like Bhaba (1994) developed the idea of a hybrid culture, and Kramsch (1993) called for the idea of a third culture in between both cultures.

Oliver and McLoughlin (2001) argued that the culture where students live generally affects their views towards learning a second or a foreign language, and therefore curriculum designers must take cultural inclusivity into consideration. According to Boulter (2007), different English language learners establish different orientations to English and English learning through their culture, context, and L1s. He stated that localised appropriation of English creates a common language and promotes understanding and comprehension between individuals from the same nationality (Boulter, 2007).

Baker (2012) suggested an approach of intercultural awareness where the cultural content in class should be around a greater understanding of students’ own culture. He suggested that students come to understand cultural diversity and then transfer this understanding onto other national cultural groupings.

According to Singh (2004), EFL and ESL learners have views and learning styles that are influenced by their backgrounds, needs, experiences, and other local environmental factors in which they grew up. There is an educational need to develop curricula that take culture into account to satisfy the different needs of students from different cultural settings. As language is socially constructed, cultural norms have powerful implications for basic learning and development processes (Singh, 2004).

Kirkpatrick (2006) stated that relatively small numbers of learners learn English to understand and adapt to a new culture. He suggested that English materials for language teaching should represent the cultural norms of the learners. Teachers and learners should move beyond having filters and constraints to the leaners’ cultures. Instead, it is important to deeply understand and adapt culturally sensitive methods in planning English language curriculum in the complex world of interacting cultures (Benson, Chik, & Lim, 2003). According to Deal and Peterson (1999), culture generally shapes individuals’ behaviour to a certain degree; thus, educational contexts and students’ learning are culturally and contextually shaped. Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) stated that instructional principles and teaching styles vary across different cultures and within one culture. So, to them, educators must consider social and cultural constructs. It is therefore essential to be aware of students’ cultures and the influences of their L1s on their learning of another language to address and satisfy the needs of learners from a certain cultural background. Dennett (1991) indicated that considering cultural differences in learners’ perceptions can support teachers’ abilities to satisfy the learning needs of learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. Warschauer (1999) argued that this is important because students from different backgrounds need to know whether, when, and how to use language and discourses that reflect critically on their contexts to develop language competences. There is a need to expand awareness and views on how a second or a foreign language is acquired and the context of its learners to improve language learning. According to Boulter (2007), effective English language teaching and learning necessitates using all aspects of communication including social and cultural aspects. This is because it could deliberately incorporate opportunities for students to build upon their previously acquired language skills to be used alongside English to achieve competence.

According to Kirkpatrick (2006), considering cultural paradigms and the differences between students from distinct cultural backgrounds and learning styles is important. Teachers should be able to incorporate a greater consideration of students’ needs and backgrounds. Singh (2004) stressed the significance of exploring the sociocultural backgrounds and the cultural patterns that form the educational system in different spaces to facilitate expanding educators’ abilities to deal with learners from different backgrounds.

This is relevant to my study, as modern EFL teaching increasingly emphasises the importance of identifying the individual needs of language learners. EFL learners are diverse in terms of their needs within each context. EFL teaching should be responsive to this diversity and take it into account. This includes using approaches which consider the learners’ L1, their context, background, learning needs, and experiences, and this is what my study explored.

### Culture and SNSs’ Use

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), the key purpose of SNSs is maintaining social relations by self-expression and social interaction through photo posting, texting, tagging, and commenting. However, although SNSs are somewhat similar in their overall purposes and functions, research projects have shown that different users from different contexts have different online practices. In the literature, many research projects have been conducted to compare the use of SNSs at the country level. For example, Chapman and Lahav (2008) studied the SNS practices among users in many countries including the United States, Korea, China, and France. They found that users from the United States and France used SNSs for more personal purposes than users from Korea and China. American users liked to share personal pictures and post personal information about themselves; French users liked to have discussions on general topics and issues that are not personal such as interests and hobbies. Users from Korea liked to connect with their close friends and share pictures, and Chinese users liked to exchange resources with others and play games online. These results show that SNS practices differed across countries and from culture to culture, assuming culture at a country and nation level (Chapman & Lahav, 2008). Marshall, Cardon, Norris, Goreva, and D’Souza (2008) compared SNS interaction among Indian users and American users, and he concluded that American SNS users have more privacy concerns than Indian users. Vasalou, Joinson, and Courvoisier (2010) studied SNS use in the United States, the United Kingdom, Greece, France, and Italy. They concluded that culture influences the motives to use SNSs, the uses, and the amount of time they spend on these SNSs. For example, the time spent on Facebook was higher in the United Kingdom in comparison to the United States and significantly lower in France. Jackson and Wang (2013) studied the use of different SNSs among Chinese and American users. The findings showed that U.S. students used SNSs to connect with friends and family members more than Chinese students. Shin (2010) studied the purposes and the motivation that influence the adoption of using SNS in the United States and South Korea. His finding showed that Korean students had few intimate friends in their SNS accounts and that they tended to keep their profiles public and anonymous. His findings also showed that Korean users did not use SNSs for self-disclosure and that they used nonverbal communication more frequently. In contrast, American users had more intimate friends online and they used SNSs for personal self-disclosure more frequently. In addition, American users used direct text-based communication more than nonverbal communication. Kim, Sohn, and Choi (2011) also studied SNS use among students from South Korea and the United States. Their findings showed that South Korean students valued the social support they obtained from existing social relationships. In contrast, American students sought out entertainment relatively more frequently on SNSs. They found that the patterns of SNS use were remarkably different for U.S. and Korean students. Their findings show a big difference in use patterns, as the U.S. students on average used SNSs almost five times more often in comparison to Korean students. The researchers attributed this to cultural factors, as the reported U.S. students lived in a culture that appreciates sharing and participation in social life more than Korean students. Cho and Park (2013b) also reported that Korean students showed stronger relationships on SNSs than their American counterparts.

In another study, Jackson and Wang (2013) compared SNS use between Chinese and U.S. college students. Their findings show that U.S. students used SNSs to keep in touch with family, parents, and friends and to get more information than the Chinese students. According to them, there were cultural differences in their use of SNS, which impacted the individuals’ online behaviour.

In general, the studies mentioned above suggest that the use of different SNSs seems to differ from one country to another. Thus, cultural differences in SNS use and their impact are expected. In addition, Cho and Park (2013) indicated that the popularity of certain SNSs in one country more than other countries suggests that the use of SNS differs across different nations and contexts.

The abovementioned studies on the use of SNSs took place in countries and contexts different from the context of my study. In this sense, then, they are beneficial in certain sociocultural contexts; however, they might not work in other contexts. This might restrict the usefulness of these studies’ findings in cross-cultural contexts. However, the findings of these studies suggest that there are cultural differences in SNS use, and they assume that culture may influence online practices in SNSs. There is growing interest to explore individuals from different contexts and the way they use SNSs differently. My study focussed on the use of SNSs among users of a context which I believe had not been studied extensively before. My study sought to develop a better understanding and awareness of the local use of SNSs and to explore SNS practices that might match with or differ from practices in other contexts, which may broaden our understanding of how SNSs are used in different contexts.

The nature of SNSs as an international tool makes culture an important factor to be considered. Universal connectivity challenges the understanding of culture at the country and nation level. So, how do young adults in Oman perceive cultures online? Does the exposure to other cultures on SNSs change the individuals’ cultural practices? These are some of the issues that this research considers through the exploration of participants’ perceptions.

Referring back to our discussion of culture, although these researchers have argued that, various ways of using SNSs have evolved in different communities. Therefore, it can be said that there are broad cultural tendencies within the communities and that these tendencies could help loosely define the parameters of a culture. Nevertheless, someone who was of that community and did not follow those tendencies might still consider him or herself to be part of that culture. Thus, we can say there may be individual variance and that there may also be variations in behaviours dependent on a wide range of factors, within a particular culture. Thus, it may be possible to refer to an Omani Culture, while also acknowledging important variation in that culture.

## Gender, Social Network Use, and EFL

This section about gender is a retrospective addition in light of the findings, as gender emerged as an important factor in the data. I subsequently researched literature which explores the intersectionality between gender and education. Much of the research around gender has been carried out in contexts other than Oman and has a strong feminist perspective. Therefore, I needed to think about the relevance of the literature in relation to Oman whose engagement with feminism has not followed the same trajectory as in nations such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe, for example.

Regarding gender, the following questions are really significant in literature: Are individuals merely performing in ways determined by their gender? Are they socialised into particular gender roles? Or do individuals develop in ways regardless of their gender?

Role theory (Biddle 1986) studies the roles that individuals perform, particularly social situations. The fundamental argument is on the influence of social structures on individuals’ behaviour. Are individuals’ roles in life dictated by society to a certain extent? Are persons’ behaviour guided by the social setting? Role theory is concerned with patterned practices and behaviour that people follow and abide by in any particular social situation through expectations and beliefs (Biddle, 1986). According to Biddle (1986), roles are not inevitably determined in the strictest sense; however, depending on their roles and situation in life, individuals’ behaviours are predictable or may be reformed. Biddle (1986) made the assertion that life is like a theatre, where there are performers and audiences. Spectators are people in power (e.g., family, teachers). They ensure that the performers perform their roles properly, giving the societal expectations and norms. The general view is that individuals follow their gender or social roles, as they will be rewarded and reinforced when they act out their roles properly and will be held accountable when they do not.

Biddle (1986) argued that roles are a continuous negotiation between social rules, the participants’ attitudes, and their understanding of the context in a certain setting. Therefore, a role is not fixed. As individuals perceive and understand certain information and contexts, they react with certain practices and behaviours to act out and reinforce their role. They show and establish a social role by repeatedly depending on social codes, such as clothing, sex, and race. This theory fits well with the notion that culture is forever in flux, negotiated in and across contexts.

Former studies and approaches have emphasised the notion of *sex role socialisation,* which means that a child picks up how to perform his or her gender roles appropriately in relation to the child’s setting and surroundings (Risman & Davis, 2013). For instance, a man is encouraged to carry out masculine behaviour by playing with cars, for example, whereas a woman would be encouraged to perform feminine behaviour by playing with dolls. On the other hand, new studies have shown the notion of *doing gender* or that gender is something individuals perform or act out as a routine or an execution, not what they are. This idea was proposed by West and Zimmerman (1987). Sex role socialisation emphasises the natural occurring of binary opposition made up by gender, whereas “doing gender” reinforces nonbinary opposition. This conceptualisation sees gender as a performance that is ongoing; gender is not set but is constantly in the making. For example, Davies (2003) argued that males in her study in secondary schools in the United Kingdom needed to repeatedly demonstrate to their peers that they were male; being a boy was constantly challenged, so boys in her study needed to constantly demonstrate, through macho behaviour, their membership to the male group. In this way we can see gender is not just a given but a performance in context.

Butler (1990) suggested that individuals “do gender by performance,” where binary gender opposition is maintained in a mutually exclusive way (p. 6). Understanding the term *Performance* can mean linguistically that speech acts name anything into being (p. xxi). The baby’s genitalia determine the declaration of the sex of a baby at birth. The gender of the baby becomes a reality by announcing the gender of the baby and as people surrounding the baby treat him or her according to the gender. However, according to Butler, being female is not assumed naturally. Being female is a performance of gender which is formed and shaped culturally as cultural rules are imposed on females (Butler, 2011). Moreover, Butler (2011) claimed that as people are always referred to by the grammar of gender, gender is unavoidable in language. She argued that gender is constructed through what you do and perform. It is not part of one’s identity (Butler, 1990). According to Butler (1990), “Identity is performatively constituted” (p. 25). Performativity reproduces and sustains the dominant rules, which consecutively might be challenged by gendered behaviour. Gender is created, recreated, and challenged by meaning such as words and signs (Butler, 1990). The gendered behaviour formerly creates a reality with an illusion of a “true gender identity” (p. 136). Just as a language might be an expression of a culture’s values and beliefs, so too the way gender is expressed may be specific to a culture. For example, in one culture a particular garment might signify a particular gender, but a different garment code might apply in another culture. Gendered behaviour is short performance of gender, whereas gender performativity is a repetition of habitual acts over a long time.

Overall, gender cannot be considered a “natural given” but rather a “doing.” It is a performance which comes to be meaningful through using styles such as clothes and speech. One’s gender is not determined based on his or her sex category. A person acts out the same repetition of gendered behaviour. Language has been linked to gender, as some researchers have suggested that gendered behaviour and interactions demand a linguistic style (e.g., Coates, 2004; Davies, 2003). Therefore, language makes gender meaningful through social expectations and pragmatic considerations. Earlier, many researchers talked about gender difference in the use of language. However, the new feminist theory in linguistics has debated that these studies have a damaging stereotypes of females’ language use, which is not acceptable. It theorises that gendered language is a source of one’s identity regardless of gender.

In this research project, my research participants seemed to have gendered expectations about how female students should behave and how they perceived themselves and their roles in the family and in society (Section 4.2.2 and Section 4.2.3). These expectations were not, however, always the same, and the men and women held diverse views on what was expected and appropriate. Moreover, as I later show, whereas some seemed to have conformist views about behaviour, they also sometimes sought ways to deviate from these norms

### Gender and SNSs’ Use

There are many studies of users of SNSs, where gender seems to have influenced online behaviour. According to Li and Kirkup (2007), males are more likely to use the Internet more than female students. However, in a study conducted by Madden and Zickuhr (2011) and a study by Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) relating to SNSs’ use, female students seem to use SNSs more than male students.

Research projects have studied gender differences in the purposes of using SNSs. For example, Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2008) pointed out that females and males seem to have SNS accounts; however, the purposes for using SNSs differ largely based on the gender of users. Bonds-Raacke and Raacke argued that males use SNSs to make new friends. On the other hand, females predominantly use SNSs to reinforce and maintain preexisting relationships. According to Giles and Price (2008), females seem to use SNSs for chatting and downloading music. Moreover, Rafferty (2009) indicated that females primarily use SNSs to post pictures of themselves. Merten and Williams (2009) stated that female students seem to share their personal lives on SNSs more than male students. In a study done by Merten and Williams (2009), 55% of females shared personal issues and information such as about their relationships on SNSs. On the other hand, only 15% of males shared personal information.

Khan (2010) showed that a majority of males used SNSs for searching information more than female students. Lin and Subrahmanyam (2007) stated that in the past decade males spent more time online than females. This was interpreted because of the earlier types of technologies popular at the time such as video games. According to Thompson and Lougheed (2012), females are more “heavy users” of Facebook than males. They spend more than 1 h per day on Facebook. Shen and Khalifa (2010) studied gender difference in using Facebook. The findings of their study showed that females spent less time on Facebook than males because they thought that spending a long time on Facebook was a waste.

In a study by Ahsan and Chand (2012) about favourite SNSs, they found that Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp to be favourite sites. Of both male and female students, 87.5% indicated they had accounts on Facebook. The gender differences observed in the study were that male students seemed to have more Facebook friends and that female students spent more time on Facebook than males. According to Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr (2010), females tend to have a personal profile on Facebook more than males. However, according to them, males seem to sustain their profiles on LinkedIn more than females.

Burke, Marlow, and Lento (2010) studied SNSs’ activities, and the findings of their study showed that female participants of the study spend more time on SNSs. They also tend to use SNSs more actively than male participants. In a study by Tufekci (2008), the findings showed that the majority of female participants seemed to use SNSs more than males by four or five times. Aghazamani (2010) studied users’ purposes for using Facebook. The findings showed that male students spend much more time on Facebook than females. Other research projects (Giles & Price, 2008; Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009) revealed that male students spend more time than females on computer games and that female students spend more time than males chatting on SNSs.

The review of this literature seems to suggest that research looking for connections between gender and choice of site did not find consistent results. It may have been more fruitful to have explored what the characteristics of male-dominated sites might be, and of sites most favoured by women. Looking at just the sites is probably not enough; it may be that females play games through SNSs; it may be that they acquire information through SNSs. Furthermore, it may be that males are engaging socially through gaming. While gender may sometimes indicate tendencies, a nuanced understanding of data is always required. In my study, I have avoided using gender as a simple lens to say that “females behave this way” and “males behave that way.” Gender may be significant but is not necessarily a determinant, as will be shown in my data.

## Sociocultural Theory

**Introduction**

As I mentioned earlier, the Omani context is affected by global English (see Section 1.2.4.3). This section sets out the theoretical orientation of this study as a sociocultural view of using SNSs for EFL learning. It defines the sociocultural theory of learning which can be used to understand learners’ uses of SNSs for language learning. Sociocultural learning theory is central in drawing links between students’ learning in their own and other contexts. I examine sociocultural theory that argues that learning is a social process.

Sociocultural theories have been used extensively in language learning research (Warschauer, 2005). I chose to adopt sociocultural theory because it offers theoretical perspectives to explore learning as a social practice. It also perceives language learner as active partakers in the learning process. I discuss the main concepts of sociocultural theory which are commonly discussed in ESL and EFL learning research projects, including: (1) mediation; (2) the zone of proximal development (ZPD); (3) scaffolding; and (4) self-regulation. In the analysis and discussion chapter of this thesis, I provide an exploration of students’ use of SNSs framed by sociocultural perspectives, which accounts for the Omani context.

### Sociocultural Theory: An Overview

A sociocultural view highlights the social dimension of learning and focusses on social interaction involved in language learning processes. From this perspective, learning not only takes place through the learner’s cognitive processes but also through social and cultural contexts. Language, mental, and social development are mediated through social interaction among individuals’ collaborations and out of learners’ unique experiences. This view of intellectual growth emphasises the importance of mutual peer support (Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural theories stress the social nature of learning at an individual level, for instance, individuals’ needs, motivations, perceptions, experiences, and pragmatic practices (Duke, 2010).

As mentioned by Salomon and Perkins (1996), the learning process involves active engagement in constructing knowledge out of experience and information resources. Thus, using digital technologies including SNSs evidently supports sociocultural theories by engaging learners in the learning context (Duke, 2010). The educational technologies have evolved to now include virtual worlds and social media (Boruta, Peperkamp, Crabbe, & Dupoux, 2011). Sociocultural principles have a significant relevance in educational practices in the present time, as learning motivates students to practically apply and construct knowledge through engaging in independent and critical thinking (Duke, 2010).

### Sociocultural Theories’ Central Concepts

#### *Mediation*

An important concept in sociocultural theory is mediation (Lantolf, 2000). This concept refers to the use of tools or things that are implemented in problem-solving or in achieving goals. Of these tools, indeed one of the most significant is language. In *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2016), the term *mediate* means “to act as a peacemaker between opposing sides.” Many tools may mediate a child’s development of different skills. One of them is language, which is considered a mediated psychological tool in mental activities (Lantolf, 2000). According to Vygotsky (1981), individuals use psychological tools to control and direct mental and physical behaviour. Psychological tools, including language, act as mediatorsfor mental activities and development. For example, people look for ways to plan activities and use different information and tools to solve problems. In Vygotskyan theory, human activities are viewed as part of active participation in the psychological process that enables individuals to cooperate with others and plan their goals (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). Moreover, Haas (1996) expanded Vygotsky’s idea of psychological tools for mediation when he proposed using technologies as psychological tools that can mediate interactions between individuals and the environment. This argument views technologies as systems that expand human psychological processing and development. Thinking about children and learning, according to William and Burden (2000), adults are consideredmediatorsbecause they play a role in developing skills*.* They present and shape learning experiences, and interaction with people with different levels of skills or knowledge such as parents, peers, or teachers often improves learning. This motivates moving to another level in learning. Mediators are considered more than just knowledge providers. Mediators empower learners with essential skills and information that help them to become self-regulated learners. However, they argued that the willingness and the needs of learners could be considered during mediation. Learning involves constructing knowledge through interaction and negotiation of meaning. This interaction takes place between the learners, materials, activities, contexts, and mediators. Instead of perceiving learning as a one-directional input of knowledge; in this theory, learning involves interaction that emphasises the role of mediators, such as peers, teachers, curricula, and learning activities in the learning contexts. Overall, mediated experience for learning through mediation, as interpreted by Vygotsky, is essential. Learning is regarded as a social process mediated through the use of psychological tools and depends on interaction and negotiation (Mitchell, Marsen, & Myles, 2013).

#### *ZPD*

The concept of ZPD has been extensively studied for its significant implications in learning and teaching. Vygotsky (1978) defined ZPD as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Vygotsky described two different developmental levels: the actual developmental level recognised by the actual skills, and the potential level of development, which is the learners’ skills after assistance from other people (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000).

Furthermore, Mitchell and Myles (2004) defined ZPD as “the domain of knowledge or skills where the learner is not yet capable of independent functioning, but can achieve the desired outcome given relevant scaffolded help” (p. 196). ZPD is also considered “the distance between the child’s independent capacity and the capacity to perform with assistance” (Harvard, 1997, p. 40). Thus, social aspects such as feedback and help from others are essential in the ZPD to develop learners’ abilities and skills to be more capable and self-regulated.

Vygotsky (1978) examined cognitive development in learning and studied the dynamic relation between learning processes and development processes. For Vygotsky, learning processes and development processes work independently and at the same time are equally significant. However, learning precedes development and shapes it (Vygotsky, 1978). It is worth noting that Vygotsky highlights the importance of interaction between individuals and context for learning and development. Consequently, social influences are critical, as they activate learning within the ZPD. In the sociocultural view, learning takes place at the social level first and then at the individual level. Thus, learners are considered to be active in the act of learning (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). According to Vygotsky (1978), learning creates ZPD, as it helps developmental processes through learners’ interaction with adults or peers to achieve development. Lantolf and Appel (1994) noted that within the ZPD, the advanced mental processes that occur through interaction are more important that the successful completion of tasks (Lantolf & Appel, 1994, p. 10).

In addition, in the ZPD, peer collaboration and communication with more capable peers are considered important when exploring language learning. It is worth noting that the help for learners is not limited to capable others or adults. Thus, peers with equal or lower abilities can also be a source of help within the ZPD. Van Lier (1996) maintained that language learners who interact with peers exhibiting similar or lower language proficiency could benefit more than when they interact with fluent language speakers or more capable peers. It encourages the production of interaction opportunities and learning strategies. He also argued that interaction between new and experienced learners benefits both. Interaction helps the experienced participants to examine their strategic process with other participants (Van Lier, 1996).

Researchers have suggested that the concept of the ZPD is useful in second language (L2) learning even if it is studied in a L1 situation (Anton, 1999). Ohta (2000) defined ZPD as “the difference between the L2 learner’s developmental level as determined by independent language use, and the higher level of potential development as determined by how language is used in collaboration with more capable interlocutor” (p. 96). L2 scholars expanded the notion of ZPD beyond novice–expert interaction (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2000). Researchers have argued that all language learners can provide help and assistance to others through collaborative learning regardless of their language proficiency level. The ZPD is a way to understand interactions with their context and the effects of these interactions on development. Human knowledge is a result of cultural interaction with its surroundings and with others, and Vygotsky (1978) concluded that mental development is exposed through exploring the responses of an individual to different types of mediation. He supported a method of evaluation that involves autonomous performance to show the zone of actual development and the performance with the assistance of a mediator (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008, p. 15).

#### *Scaffolding*

Scaffoldingis the third central concept of relevance to this study. It refers tothe adult’s construct of interactions based on what a child knows or can already do. According to Bruner (1983), who explored the interaction between children and mothers, scaffoldingis a representation for a mothers’ conversation with her child to promote language acquisition. He defined scaffolding as a conceptualising process to help the child’s development and learning. As the child becomes more capable and skilful, mediators gradually hand the role to the child to manage (Bruner, 1983). This concept emphasises the support given by a knowledgeable member in the social interaction. It also highlights the high level of knowledge competence and skills a learner can develop to competences (Wood & Middleton, 1975). Scaffolding also outlines the importance of working within the ZPD. Learners receive assistance within the ZPD to construct knowledge and achieve self-regulation, which is another central concept that I discuss in this section. Scaffolding can be applied in learning contexts in many ways. Wood & Middleton, (1975) presented the following suggestions for scaffolding: engaging and recruiting interest and attention; simplifying, maintaining, and directing research and work; marking important features; monitoring and managing frustration during problem-solving; and demonstrating an ideal solution. Mercer and Fisher (1992) suggested a number of criteria of scaffolding, which include the following: helping learners develop competence to eventually complete tasks by themselves without help; and provide evidence of achieving a better level of independent competence through scaffolding.

Donato (1994) explored how learners learn a L2 in the social context of the classroom. He suggested that scaffolding may result in language development as students work together in tasks. Thus, learners themselves can be considered a source of knowledge in the learning process, which supports the importance of group work between students. According to Donato (1994), learners may equally and mutually support each other in many ways. Therefore, interaction between peers can expand learning and thus should be taken into consideration when planning language learning activities. Swain (2000) discussed the significance of collaborative learning because the use of language mediates language production. Language is considered a mediating tool and helps individuals to construct knowledge. Language mediates the individuals’ physical and mental development. Swain (2000) recommended *negotiations* as a mediator for language learning, as it supports learners in becoming aware of their learning. Daniel (2001) claimed that scaffolding does not fully reflect the notion of the ZPD. Yet, teaching is applied through scaffolding within the ZPD (Wells, 1999). Scaffolding has three main features: the dialogic discourse; the activity; and the artefacts that mediate knowledge. Moreover, in educational psychology, the notion of scaffolding was extended to refer to the help given by teachers or peers to solve a certain problem. It was used as a broad concept to refer to all support offered to learners (Swain, 2000).

#### *Self-regulation*

*Self-regulation* is where a learner is able to learn how to make plans for action to control behaviours and skills and transfer them to new situations in the learning process. The concept refers to the changes that take place in the ZPD (Harvard, 1997). According to Vygotsky (1981), self-regulation is a developmental process described by the concept of *two planes.* First*,* the process of development is intermental or social, which is the process where learners become familiar with new skills, concepts, and language with the help of different tools, instruments, or others. Second, the developmental process becomes psychological, personal, or intramental plane. Here, learners adopt the new languages, skills, and concepts autonomously, therefore moving beyond other-regulation to more self-regulation which signify the increasing control of a learner over their learning process and practices in the ZPD (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). Tharp and Gallimore (1988) extended the two concepts based on Vygotsky’s theory of learning to a model of four stages. This model clarifies the association between self-regulation and the ZPD and emphasised both teaching and learning. Tharp and Gallimore (1988) consider the teacher’s role as mediatorsto offer support to learners to develop their learning within their own ZPD. In this four-stage model, the first stage involves the help of more capable individuals, which helps the learners to regulate their behaviours and provide modelling and guidelines. Initially, learners have limited knowledge of the purposes or circumstances, and with time they develop the necessary awareness to complete a certain task independently. Thus, interaction, negotiation, explanation, and feedback are, in this theory, seen as essential throughout the learning process to eventually take responsibility for one’s own learning. In stage two of the model, there is more self-control and regulation, as learners begin to direct themselves about what they want to do. Learners develop self-talk, meaning that they are able to articulate and direct what should be done to reach a certain knowledge or skill. In stage three, the learning practices no longer need assistance from others as they are internalised. Nevertheless, in some cases, at this stage, help or assistance from others may cause disruption. The abovementioned three stages refer to the processes of learning new knowledge or skills. In the final stage of this model, learners might need the earlier type of help when they want to develop their performance (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Vygotsky (1978) referred to this process as “de-automatization and reclusiveness” (p. xi). In summary, these concepts show the process that learners go through to reach the ZPD and how learners may attain self-regulation using tools such as language or technology to interact with others.

According to Vygotsky (1978), the child engages in social interactions as an individual with peers or more knowledgeable or experienced individuals from the same culture. Subsequently, the child gradually acquires individuality and control through three levels of regulation: object, other, and self-regulation. Object regulation is the process in which an individual is directed by context or the environment. Individuals cannot control the environment, and instead it affects them significantly in the first stages of development.

The second stage is other-regulation. This is the stage where individuals are regulated by others, such as more knowledgeable people. At this stage, individuals can complete tasks with help from a teacher, a parent, or a peer which is linguistically mediated through interactions (Frawley & Lantolf, 1985). Other features such as facial expressions are also considered mediated tools (Foley, 1991).

Nevertheless, self-regulation is relative, as a person might be self-regulated in some exercises and not self-regulated in other exercises. Moreover, people do not achieve self-regulation at the same time for the same tasks. Self-regulation is a result of initial regulation and assistance from other people (DeVries, 2000). The concept of self-regulation, as viewed by Piagetians, differs greatly from the psychological viewpoint. DeVries (2000), in summarising Piagetian perspectives of self-regulation, showed that it existed in early infancy. Consequently, it may be encouraged by offering the child broader opportunities to be able to choose and make decisions. A Piagetian viewpoint perceives that other-regulation may delay the child’s self-regulation.

Many educators use this concept of self-regulation in EFL and ESL classes. Foley (1991) claimed that object-regulation and other-regulation dominate EFL and ESL classes and instructions: Learners are regulated by teachers and/or tasks. In traditional language teaching, teachers permit limited two-way interactions, unlike the natural settings where individuals learn through the two-way interaction.

### Sociocultural Theory and Using SNSs in EFL Learning

Some researchers such as Lantolf (2000) have promoted using sociocultural approaches in exploring the language learning process. Lantolf argued that sociocultural approaches are ideal because of the weight they put on interactions between learners. Knowledge is constructed through cultural practices shared by members of the community through interaction and language, which are fundamental elements in development. SNSs offer online interaction with other language learners and language speakers from around the world. This provides rich contexts for sociocultural language learning (Harrison, 2013). SNSs offer online spaces to learn through observation and interaction. Learners may observe other learners, analyse their practices critically, and then choose their way of interacting in different SNSs (Ryberg & Christiansen, 2008). Interacting and working with others on SNS spaces offer learners opportunities to gain confidence by establishing relations with others and through their sense of being part and members of that particular community. Gradually, online connection and interactions in online communities may assist learners to learn and become experts. Reinhardt and Zander (2011) suggested that SNSs offer numerous opportunities for interacting and exchanging content as SNSs have many technological features that enable sharing and communication. SNSs expose learners to meaningful language use and interactions. Interaction through SNSs leads to human development in relationships and in identity. Reinhardt and Zander (2011) stated that SNS spaces can be considered social practices shared by individuals in the community. Mills (2011) suggested that SNSs allow individuals to express themselves and their identity online through the exchange of posts, ideas, news, feedback, preferences, and views. Individuals construct identity online in these online social spaces (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Therefore, from a sociocultural perception, communication and collaboration in online communities are two important aspects for language learning.

Appel and Lantolf (1994) studied the mediation role of L2 speaking. They stated that mediation works as a cognitive amplifier that facilitates interaction and socialisation in L2. Language learners also reconstruct their sociocultural and linguistic practices. Foley (1991) argued that L2 learning is a self-regulating process where social interaction between L2 learners is the main element in that process.

Scaffolding is generally considered to be a kind of help or assistance in the completion of tasks that supports the child’s development and learning. The term *scaffolding* was originally used to describe the interaction between the adult and the child. However, L2 studies such as Donato’s (2004) seem to confirm that scaffolding also takes place among peers when they cooperate in group work. Donato (2004) further identified mutual scaffolding among L2 learners where collaboration takes place within shared work to mutually construct knowledge (Donato, 2004). Scaffolding enables learners to attain a high level of performance and success more than they might accomplish by working alone. Donato (1994) suggested labelling this collective scaffolding to demonstrate learning through interaction with peers. In collective scaffolding, the learner is individually novice and collectively an expert at the same time, and the learners guide each other through complex linguistic tasks (Donato, 1994). Subsequently, in 2004, Donato emphasised the features of collaboration on groups by having shared objectives and common efforts. He also highlighted and acknowledged the importance of the contributions of all individuals to serve big objectives. Collective scaffolding provides a theoretical support for group work. The sociocultural concepts such as scaffolding and collective scaffolding form the theoretical framework for my research to explore the learners’ online SNS interactions in EFL learning practices.

According to Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006), sociocultural ideas represent ideal conditions for using technology in learning. Technologies’ mediation influences the learning process by expanding the repertoire of what learners can do using new technologies. Sociocultural theories view learning as interaction with resources, people, and information, which takes place through the mediation of technology. Furthermore, interactive technologies such as SNSs support establishing connections and engagement in collaborative settings. This engagement depends on the ability to connect activities mediated by technology to the cultural practices where students negotiate meanings (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). The sociocultural context impacts technology-based learning and engagement through mediating technologies. In his study, Dale (2010) explored learning through SNSs that embrace interaction and connection in communities to empower learners. He strongly recommends the use of SNSs around institutions’, instructors’, and learners’ levels. As SNSs exert a substantial effect on learners’ engagement, therefore, educators have had to update their teaching methods (Dale, 2010). Lee (2012) discussed the importance of using SNSs through sociocultural interaction, reinforced by scaffolding and collaboration with others including teachers, peers, and the whole community. In this regard, learners take responsibility to inquire, learn, and actively participate in the learning process to develop their self-regulation and collective learning. In addition, the sociocultural principles in learning with SNSs reinforce community building and the distribution of content created by learners themselves. This supports learning through contribution, collaboration, problem-solving, idea generation, and the sharing and exchange of ideas. Consequently, learners acquire the necessary abilities to develop their own informal learning strategies and become actively engaged with others, working with others to support mental behaviours by building shared objectives. This highlights the significance of the role of information and communication technologies as mediators.

Franklin and Van Harmelen (2007) suggested that both sociocultural theory and SNSs focus on the learner or the user. Learners construct knowledge in the contexts obtained through social interaction. The role of the learner within the sociocultural approach is to explore how he or she can use the web to mediate learning interactions. According to Salomon and Perkins’s (1996) view of learning, SNSs focus on users as learners, readers, and editors of content. SNSs are primarily focussed on learning activities, intellectual, and social activities which SNSs offer. Thus, in interactive SNSs, learners can learn or implement what they have learned by establishing, evaluating, and understanding interactions to develop and construct knowledge (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2007).

Another central idea in sociocultural theory that is important to learning in online spaces is that learning is internalised only when the context of what the learner already knows is taken into consideration (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). In this regard, learning in these online spaces accounts for what EFL learners know and bridges the gap to what needs to be learned through their mediating technologies. The ZPD could be used to describe the knowledge and skills learners share with peers and more capable others (Dale, 2010). Peer support improves personal learning and problem-solving skills as well as promotes advanced behaviours for meaningful reflection on new content (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). In my study, sharing reinforces the use of SNSs, which enables learners to extend their ZPDs based on previous knowledge and experiences. Learners gain an awareness through online social interaction and consequently enhance their perceptions and activities. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that mental development is mediated through two types of tools: technical and psychological. In this case, SNSs are technical mediators in EFL learning. Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) also suggested that the main possible influence of using Web 2.0, including SNSs in learning, is that of contributing to knowledge and developing individuals’ everyday sociocultural practices.

My study is set within the increasing interest in studies to link knowledge as a social practice with human cognition (Van Lier, 2000). I particularly direct my exploration on the SNS online practices on different SNSs to develop English language proficiency. In this study, sociocultural theory is the study framework in the field of language learning that explains how people develop the mental capacity in learning a new language. SNSs are theoretically ideal platforms for interactive learning, scaffolding, and mediation. However, whether learners and teachers perceive the potential of SNSs, in this way, was the focus of this study.

1. **METHODOLOGY**
   1. **Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology and methods I used to address the research questions and research objectives. I discuss the rationale for the research approach adopted followed by a discussion of the choice of data collection methods, sampling techniques, and matters concerning trustworthiness. Furthermore, I outline the ethical considerations and limitations associated with my methodology.

* 1. **Research Questions**

This study’s overall design is expressed by its research questions (Flick, 2009). I carried out my study to explore Omani undergraduates’ uses and views of SNSs in general and for learning EFL in particular. The research questions were identified as follows:

1) How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs in their daily lives?

2) How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs in their informal learning of EFL?

3) How do three Omani teachers and young Omani students use and perceive SNSs’ uses in formal teaching of EFL?

The three questions are linked to the study’s quantitative and qualitative phases (see Table 1).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Research Questions** | **Methods** |
| 1) How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs in their daily lives? | Questionnaires (quantitative)  Focus groups (qualitative) |
| 2) How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs in their informal EFL learning? | Questionnaires (quantitative)  Focus groups (qualitative) |
| 3) How do three Omani teachers and young Omani students use and perceive SNSs in EFL formal teaching? | Questionnaires(quantitative)  Focus groups(qualitative)  Teachers’ Interviews  (qualitative) |

**Table 1: Research Questions and Research Methods**

The research phases were hierarchical in nature. First, I explored a broad overview concerning the use of SNSs through questionnaires. This exploration provided a background of how students were using SNSs in general and for informal and formal EFL leaning. The second phase of the study ventured more into the use of SNSs and EFL learning practices through the focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews.

* 1. **The Study Design: Inductive, Exploratory Case Study**

This study employed inductive research to study a specific phenomenon and explored evidence related to it. Karleskint et al. (2009) stated that inductive research is exploratory and general, especially at the start. It may lead to a theory after the researcher completes the analytical stage. Inductive research is a reasoning process in which explanation comes from observations (Karleskint, Turner, & Small, 2009). The aim of this study, as defined in chapter 1, was not to solve a certain problem or prove a certain theory. This research was exploratory based on this definition by Sundqvist (2011): “Exploratory research is conducted into a research problem or issue when there are very few or no earlier studies to which we can refer for information about the issue or problem” (p. 11). This study aimed at exploring various ways to improve a situation as is the objective of basic studies (Fitzpatrick & Kazer, 2011).

This research also involved the use of a case study as it explored a current phenomenon in a real-life context (Yin, 2009). Case study research enables researchers to obtain detailed and all-inclusive descriptions of a case of social behaviour (Yin, 2009). Accordingly, it helped me explore how the students (Omani undergraduate students) perceived SNSs for EFL learning. Yin (2009) also stated that a case study is suitable for research in the early and formative stages of research when the participants, participants’ behaviour and views, and the contexts in which they take place are important. Duke (2010) supported this idea and stated that the case study approach provides an understanding of practices and their use in various contexts. My study was conducted as an attempt to achieve insights into the participants’ (Omani undergraduate students’) perceptions in their contexts and settings.

I chose a single case study, which was English language learning in Omani higher education—it included multiple colleges as well as Omani undergraduate students and teachers. Therefore, it was a single case study with embedded case studies that included students from various colleges to participate and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the use of SNSs in Oman. In this study, I attempted to select the participants for the two phases in a way that helped me gain a broad and diverse sample of EFL students in Oman. In the following section, I describe the framework I used for the research approach

* 1. **Research Approach: Mixed Methods**

Three research approaches are available to researchers: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods(Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2009). This study used a mixed method approach for collecting data. Recently, mixed methods have gained popularity and acceptance in social science research. The following section presents a rationale for choosing a mixed methods approach. According to Creswell and Tashakkori (2007), researchers must pay attention to the justification for their choice of approaches.

* + 1. **The Justification for Mixed Methods**

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) defined mixed methods research as “the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study” (p. 17). The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in a research project has many pragmatic benefits as they can complement each other with their strengths (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Combining methods allows for compensation by balancing the strengths (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007). Therefore, the mixed methods approach employed in this study provided more evidence and better understanding than the use of a single method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For example, a quantitative method’s main advantage is the large sample size suitable for generalisation. However, quantitative studies are criticised for not presenting contextual realism. They report generally and exclude quotations from participants. All these disadvantages of quantitative methods are considered qualitative methods’ main advantages. Qualitative methods are beneficial because they allow for in-depth understanding and reflect the participants’ voices directly. However, they also have weaknesses as researchers have difficulty generalising findings because of small sample sizes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

This study’s objectives, as described in Chapter 1 of the thesis, match the conception of mixed methods, which is characterised by pairing the explorations of a phenomenon’s various aspects using more than one approach. The combination of the methods and analysis provides multiple perspectives and establishes the base for an effective synthesis of the results. A mixed methods approach allows for diverse ways of knowing and valuing and uses several lenses to answer complex questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). According to Yin (2009), integrating quantitative and qualitative methods into a single case study enables researchers to study many aspects of any research problem. This approach suited my study with its multiple, interrelated objectives that require measurement of various aspects of the research phenomenon. My objectives included determining how the participants used and perceived SNSs; whether they used SNSs for EFL learning and teaching; and if so, how and why. It was obvious that the research objectives necessitated multiple methods. Data from multiple methods for each objective is used to support the other objectives.

Moreover, my research questions determined my choice of a mixed methods approach. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) mixed-method studies are “practical in the sense that the researcher is free to use all methods possible to address a research problem” (p. 10). The mixed methods approach, then, addressed more complex questions than I could answer using one approach, as Creswell and Tashakkori (2007) suggested. Using only a qualitative research design would not have helped me fully answer the research questions, which suggested the need to first identify the overall patterns of SNSs used among the students using quantitative tools. This was followed by the need to use qualitative research to explore the research topic in depth; however, it would not have revealed the overall patterns of use (Robson, 2002). The quantitative data explores the overall and general use before the qualitative research is conducted. According to Morse (1991), the implementation of quantitative research before a qualitative phase has several pragmatic advantages. One main advantage is that the overview projected by the quantitative phase sheds light on the research problem and lays a foundation for the research’s qualitative phase. This use of quantitative and qualitative designs helps the researcher explore the findings that might arise from the quantitative analysis and prepares him or her for more in-depth study in the second, qualitative phase (Morse, 1991).

Furthermore, using a large sample in the study’s first phase allows the researcher to choose a purposeful sample in the qualitative phase (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Because one of this study’s objectives was to explore how students used SNSs in EFL, it was necessary for me to identify students who used SNSs in EFL learning because this study’s objective is to explore their practices. Therefore, the mixed methods design was an efficient way to locate a purposeful sample for exploration. In this respect, I used the quantitative data to offer a broad picture of the research area and build a background for the following qualitative phase of the research (Creswell, 2009).

A common question regarding the use of mixed methods is the priority of the research phases, or which phase gets more attention (Ivankova et al., 2006). The quantitative questionnaire in this study is mainly descriptive. Although the questionnaire’s sample is larger than the qualitative sample, I feel that the qualitative analysis carries more weight for the in-depth exploration. In this study, I gave the qualitative phase more weight because this was an exploratory study that explored students’ practices and their perception of SNSs.

* 1. **Research Population**

The research questions defined this study’s sample population. In order to provide a reasonable exploration and understanding of the use of SNSs in EFL learning, I needed to explore the use and views of students and teachers because they are the two core groups at any college. Gathering data from only students, for instance, would considerably limit and bind this study’s scope. Therefore, Omani college students in their first year and English teachers at the colleges represented the population from which I selected the sample used for this study. The ages of the questionnaire’s student respondents ranged from 18 to 22. In Oman, Colleges of Technology have extensive English programmes for newcomers. This introductory English programme (the FYP was established to teach students the required English to start their specialisations. All of this study’s participants (students and teachers) were from this English course programme in multiple Colleges of Technology (See Section 1.2 for more details).

* 1. **Research Phases**

This section describes the data collection procedures. As explained above, the mixed methods design had quantitative and qualitative phases. I describe each phase, including sampling and instruments.

I collected data from early January 2015 to July 2015. Collecting the data took over six months because I intended to get a relatively large sample size in the first stage. Moreover, the study had a sequential nature. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), sequential research design takes a long time because the qualitative and quantitative studies are not carried out simultaneously.

* + 1. **Quantitative Phase**

In the quantitative phase, I used questionnaires to collect quantitative data. I chose questionnaires to gather survey information (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Questionnaires are useful in exploring patterns and tendencies in a large sample (Creswell, 2009).

I used two methods to administer the questionnaire: online and paper-based. Both tools had the same content. I started with the online questionnaires as it was easier for me to distribute and export the responses for analytical purposes. However, because of the low response rate (only 64 responses from online questionnaires sent to all first-year students), I also used paper questionnaires (N = 485 responses). This strategy turned out to be useful for two reasons. First, it resulted in a high response rate, reducing the possibility of weakening the data and the findings (Cohen et al., 2007). Second, this study attempted to help explain participants’ use of SNSs in general and in EFL learning in particular. Using a paper questionnaire seemed a better approach because it did not exclusively include active Internet users and exclude the inactive ones. Therefore, paper questionnaires helped me collect statistics that reflected SNS use among these respondents. However, in comparison with online questionnaires, paper questionnaires require more effort and more time (Schonlau et al., 2002).

* + - 1. **The Questionnaire Structure**

I constructed the questionnaire questions based on my research questions and the literature on SNSs and EFL learning that I had already reviewed for this study. It is worth noting that I did not aim to use the questionnaire to find various relations but instead to offer descriptive information that could provide an overview of the patterns of SNS use among respondents.

I designed the questionnaire in a way that is clear to the respondents so they could complete it without any diffuculty. For example, I started the questionnaire with an introduction of the study’s aim. I also avoided using any long sentences; instead, I used simple wording to ask questions. Finally, because Arabic was the participants’ language, I constructed and administered the questionnaire in Arabic to ensure that the students fully understood the questions and to avoid misinterpretation and confusion (see Appendix 3). The questionnaire included three sections and 17 questions. In the first section, I asked about the respondent’s demographic and academic data. In section two, I asked questions related to the use of SNSs for general purposes in the students’ daily lives. Section 3 focussed on the use of SNSs for EFL learning purposes and dealt with the respondents’ use of SNSs for the purpose of formal and informal EFL learning.

Below, I describe each part of the questionnaire in detail.

* + - * 1. **Section 1: Demographic Information**

This section (the respondents’ background information) consisted of five questions designed to obtain the student’s general demographic profile, including nationality, gender, age, level of education, institution, and student department. However, I did not use this information to measure the differences between categories of students. Instead, this information was used to ensure that the participants were between 18 and 23 years old and that this study’s objectives were clear and understood by the participants. No personal information was requested that could be used to identify the participants unless they volunteered and provided contact information for the study’s second phase.

* + - * 1. **Section 2: Students’ Use of SNSs in Their Daily Lives**

In this section, I addressed the first research question, “How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs in their everyday lives?*”* It included questions 1–6 (see Appendix 3) aimed at obtaining data on the use of SNSs in their daily lives, such as the type of SNS application the respondents used, the number of SNS accounts they used, their preferred applications, and how they perceived their importance.

* + - * 1. **Section 3: Students’ Use of SNSs for EFL Learning**

Section 2 aimed to collect data related to the students’ use of SNSs for EFL learning. This section was developed to address the second research question, “*How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs for EFL informal**learning?”* and the third research question, “*How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs for EFL formal*teaching*?”* This section explores the students’ use of SNSs for EFL learning. An exploration for this question is discussed more in the qualitative phase in the focus group discussion. This section only includes five items (7–12; see Appendix 3).

In the questionnaire, I asked the respondents to provide contact details if they used SNSs in EFL learning and were willing to participate in the focus group discussions.

* + - 1. **Pilot Study: The Questionnaire**

To ensure validity and reliability, prior to the sample’s final administration, I piloted the questionnaire with 15 volunteer undergraduates from the University of Sheffield whose L1 was Arabic. My purpose was to determine whether respondents would misunderstand any of the questions while completing the questionnaire. Two issues came up for my consideration. The first was that some participants asked about the first question in Section 1, “Do you use any SNSs?” They needed more clarification. They typically asked about one certain SNS and whether it is considered one of the SNSs because it is the first question. I did not originally have examples of this question. To address this issue, I used examples of some popular SNSs and added them to the question for more clarification. The second issue was that some participants felt that questions 3 and 4 were repeated and confused them. Question 3 originally asked, “Which SNSs do you know?” and Question 4 originally asked, “Which SNSs do you use?” Therefore, I deleted Question 3 as all the respondents ticked all of them because they know all of them in general.

In Section 3, some respondents asked for clarification about the phrase *formal* *teaching* as the equivalent translation in Arabic was unclear and unfamiliar. They asked whether formal teaching included teachers’ use of SNSs only in English class time and space or whether it also included activities and interactions teachers gave outside of the class time and space. I gave explicit clarification that the relevant questions included English learning with the teacher in or outside of class. Accordingly, I wrote two specific statements (11 and 12) to clarify this issue: “I like to use SNSs in EFL learning with the teacher or without the teacher or both” and “I like to use SNSs in EFL learning inside the class or outside the class or both” In-class and outside of class learning with or without the teacher are straightforward concepts. Students did not necessarily have to know the concept of formal teaching. They only needed to report what they thought about their teachers using SNSs in or out of class. This approach was beneficial in answering the fourth research question and understanding the students’ perceptions of SNSs to be used by teachers.

* + - 1. **Sampling and Accessing Participants**

The sample included in this study aimed to maximise sample size and achieved a large and relatively representative sample linked to the survey style (Cohen et al., 2007). Nevertheless, I faced many obstacles while trying such sampling.

I was aware that the colleges’ English departments provided English courses for all first-year students in the seven colleges involved. Therefore, I tried to obtain permission from the relevant English departments to obtain EFL students’ emails so I could send them the questionnaire link as well as the teachers’ emails to ask for teacher volunteers. On January 2015, I sent emails to the heads of the English departments of the seven colleges of technologies stating the following research details: my research objective, research background, and research purpose and plan (contained in an information sheet). I only received replies from two colleges. Therefore, this approach to gain permission from the colleges was unproductive.

In the middle of January 2015, I contacted three of my friends, who worked in three English departments in three Colleges of Technology. With their help, I contacted three other English lecturers in the other colleges as they previously studied together for their master’s degrees and were subsequently appointed to work in different colleges. I emailed them the information sheet along with the questionnaire link that I expected the students to complete. They helped me gain permission from their respective English departments to email the students the online questionnaire, which I did.

However, despite this assistance, as I mentioned previously, I received only 64 responses, a very low response rate. Therefore, I had to use another approach to obtain more responses, so I resorted to using paper questionnaires and had to find a way to deliver them to the participants.

Where the colleges were located nearby, I travelled and met my friends so they could help me secure a large representative sample. They introduced me to the respective heads of the English departments, and I discussed with them the possibility of conducting fieldwork there. They agreed to the distribution of the questionnaires to the first-year students. I summarise the procedures for distributing the questionnaire below:

1) I printed around 600 questionnaires and sent them to three English departments in three Colleges of Technology. I delivered them to the head of each department and then collected them when completed.

2) The questionnaires were administered to English teachers in each department. They distributed the questionnaires to their students and handed them back to the heads of their English departments after completion.

3) The teachers administered questionnaires to the students. It is worth noting here that I am aware of the power dynamics between the teachers and the students and that some students might have felt obliged to complete the questionnaire. However, many students chose not to complete the questionnaires, so I was happy that they did not feel any obligation. The questionnaires were distributed to students in March 2015, and the English teachers agreed to spend the last 10–15 min of class time on my questionnaires. Students who agreed to complete the questionnaire took around 10–15 min to complete it. Other students who could not complete the questionnaire in time could finish them during class breaks and gave the questionnaires to the teachers who collected the questionnaires.

4) Students completed the questionnaires and gave them back to the teacher. The teacher gave the questionnaires to their department heads. I collected the completed questionnaires from each head of the three English departments.

Thus, the questionnaire administration process took a long time. Although I aimed to achieve random sampling, the participants from these colleges represented convenience sampling. It is obtainable to the researcher primarily through consideration of accessibility (Bryman, 2008). This approach minimised the “researcher effect,” which can affect the findings from the questionnaire. On the other hand, this method had the disadvantage that the students could not ask any questions or seek clarification (Cohen et al, 2007). However, piloting the questionnaire in the early stage helped minimise any misunderstandings on the students’ part.

For the other four colleges, I contacted my friends again for help in March 2015, and they agreed to help me distribute the paper questionnaires. One of my friends works at a college of technology. She arranged the distribution of the questionnaires in her department. She also kindly contacted a colleague who worked at another college of technology, to whom I was subsequently introduced. I received generous help. My friend followed the same four steps listed above at both Colleges of Technology (I distributed 300 printed questionnaires and information sheets for this purpose). The completed questionnaires were then returned to her, and she delivered them to me.

I also delivered 150 printed questionnaires with the information sheet to another friend based at another college of technology, and she followed the same steps to distribute the questionnaires and returned the completed ones to me.

I could not deliver questionnaires to the seventh college of technology as I had no acquaintances or friends there and it is far away. It takes 8 h by car to reach the college from my home town.

All the difficulties I faced in this phase were related to administrative issues, but I also received a relatively low number of completed questionnaires. Many of the questionnaires were returned incomplete. After this long process, this shortcoming was frustrating. I am convinced that a large sample was difficult for me to obtain alone.

Overall, I managed to distribute around 1,150 questionnaires to first-year students in the six participating colleges and obtained only 485 valid responses. Approximately half of the participants (55.3%) were male students, and the other half (49.7%) were female students.

It is important to acknowledge here the limitation of sampling as the findings might not be generalisable for all the first-year students in the colleges. However, I managed to access first-year students from geographically distant places in Oman, from which I could infer how other students use SNSs in other Omani higher education institutions.

* + - 1. **Choosing Participants for the Qualitative Phase**

I used the questionnaires to determine the participants for the qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). At this stage, I did not analyse the questionnaires; I only identified the students willing to participate. I obtained the sample of focus group discussion participants through purposive sampling from the quantitative phase. According to Bryman (2008), this strategy allows researchers to select participants to include in the sample based on required characteristics or features. Purposive sampling fits well with the research objectives here as I want to explore the students’ practices on SNSs for EFL learning. This research stressed the use of SNSs for EFL learning; therefore, I identified only the active users of SNSs for EFL learning and recruited them in the qualitative study. The initial findings from the questionnaire helped identify the sample for the qualitative phase.

Only 79 respondents indicated that they used SNSs for EFL learning and were willing to participate in the second qualitative phase. These potential participants provided contact information on their questionnaires. I contacted them all to start arranging the focus groups. Of the 79 students, 16 did not answer my emails, and 12 apologised for not being able to participate. The number of respondents who answered my emails and were still willing to participate was narrowed down to 51. Then the list was narrowed down to 36 because either the time or place did not fit the participants’ busy schedules. I needed 6 or 7 participants in each group from each college. In the end, the participants were males and females from four colleges for five focus group discussions: College 1 (N = 7), College 2 (N = 6), College 3 (N = 6), and 2 groups in College 4 (N = 7, 6). Two students were willing to participate in the second phase from College 5 and two from College 6, but I excluded them because they were the only ones, and I needed more than two students to conduct the focus group discussion. Moreover, both of these two colleges were far away, and getting transportation was difficult. Organising the time for the focus group took a long time, which I explain further in Section 3.6.2.

* + 1. **Qualitative Phase**

In this study, I chose to use focus group discussions for students and one-to-one interviews for teachers. In this section, I present the data collection procedures for both participating groups. It is essential to note here that “qualitative methods are more sensitive and adaptable to the many mutually shaping influences and value patterns that may be encountered” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40). Therefore, it was important for me as a researcher to carefully organise the qualitative phase. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that a qualitative approach is used to gain detailed findings about a certain phenomenon, such as emotions and perceptions, that might be hard to collect and explore using other research methods. Therefore, qualitative methods were justified for my study to further explore the phenomenon of SNS use in general and in EFL learning.

* + - 1. **Focus Groups**

In this study, the focus group discussions did not mirror the questionnaires. They elicited information to explore SNS use and perceptions. I used brief semistructured questions related to the research topic to stimulate responses, which had a significant influence on the quality of the focus group discussions (Barbour, 2014). I used the general introductory statements and questions across all five focus groups as I deliberately made the questions semistructured and open to allow the participants to raise issues related to their personal interests and concerns. In doing so, participants decided the direction of the discussions, which disclosed their perceptions, with relevance to their sociocultural contexts (Barbour, 2014). This stimulated discussion was based on their contexts and the contexts’ impact on perceptions. I finalised the questions and compiled them only as a guide. The questions for the focus groups were grouped into three main sections related to general use, use in informal EFL learning, and use in formal EFL teaching (see Appendix 4 for a copy of the focus group questions).

The focus groups were of mixed gender. I have mentioned in the “Context of the Study” that the participants attended single-gender high schools but mixed-gender institutions of higher education. Accordingly, it seemed appropriate that because mixed-gender settings are the norm in higher education, I should follow it. I did not want to impose a single-gender environment on my participants as this seemed an artificial way to organise the groups. Indeed, because this organisation was associated with school education, such an imposition would have possibly been interpreted as patronising or undermining. After a review of the data, it could be interpreted that the female students may at times have felt inhibited in what they wanted to say because of the men’s presence. Whatever manner in which I organised the groups would have had an impact on participants; for example, if I had also mixed the student groups with the lecturer group, the results would have been different because of the power imbalance.

Although I intended to keep the groups mixed, after data analysis, it seems that the female students in my study may have said more if I had placed them in single-sex groups. I discuss this concern later in the conclusion and in my discussion of the data.

* + - * 1. **Justification for Focus Group Discussions**

In this study, I chose to use focus group discussions for students rather than one-to-one interviews. Focus groups help the researcher obtain rich and in-depth perceptions based on the students’ viewpoints, which helped me identify the students’ online practices and their underlying reasons. It also helped me explore all important issues related to students’ use of SNSs, which may not have been reflected with other methods.

The choice to use focus group discussions was based on a number of advantages, including flexibility and the collection of the perceptions of a larger number of participants in comparison with carrying out individual interviews. In addition, according to Kitzinger and Barbour (2001), focus groups enabled more responses and discussions and encouraged communication among participants, such as adding to each other’s points of view. Barbour (2014) stated the use of focus groups allowed for exploration of participants’ perceptions and experiences in detail, especially why they perceived things in a certain way.

* + - * 1. **Sampling and Accessing Participants**

According to Kitzinger and Barbour (2001), focus group discussions involve participants who have awareness, knowledge, or experiences related to the research topic. The students’ background and disposition were relevant because they were newcomers to the Colleges of Technology who were also placed in extensive English programmes before they started their academic courses. They were in a special introductory English programme (the FYP) set to teach students the required English to start their specialisation. All participants of this study were from this English programme in various Colleges of Technology.

The focus group participants contributed to the online or the printed questionnaires. I chose the focus group participants to gather more details about SNS practices. I made the selection from participants who volunteered in the questionnaire. As mentioned previously, I received only 79 questionnaires from respondents who indicated that they used SNSs for EFL learning and were willing to participate in the second qualitative phase. They provided contact information on their questionnaires. After I sent them emails to invite them to the focus group discussions in April 2015, the number of the participants was narrowed down to 51 candidates, males and females, who answered my emails.

Then I sent the 51 students an email with the time and place for each group in the five colleges, but I received few confirmed responses. Therefore, I tried to change the time and place several times to suit most of the participants. I decided to create WhatsApp groups with those who agreed to give me their contact numbers along with their emails to message them and obtain a direct response to organise the time and place for the discussions. I chose to do this because it used a medium of communication which the students had made obvious that they were happy to use. The WhatsApp groups helped organise the communication with the whole group at once, and students could see each other’s responses and as a result make the organisation process much easier for everyone.

Subsequently, I scheduled the discussions according to the students’ availability. The WhatsApp groups facilitated organising the time and place for the discussions, which took some time to organise as each group contained five or six students. In the five focus group discussions, 34 students agreed on a time and place, but only 32 showed up to the interviews. Between April and July 2015, I conducted five focus group discussions in Arabic. I chose Arabic to enhance student understanding and participation during the discussions. Each focus group discussion lasted around 90 min. Then I transcribed the discussions and manually coded them.

Barbour (2007) recommends three to eight participants for each group. He gives no definitive number of focus groups and claims that more is not inevitably better. The number relies heavily on the research topic as well as the desired types of data and analysis to be used. I arranged three groups of six students and two groups of seven for the discussions.

* + - 1. **Teachers’ Interviews**

I chose semistructured interviews for the teacher interviews to carry out an in-depth study of the research problem and gather information related to the research aims for a deeper analysis (Cohen et al., 2007). The aim of the interview was to explore teachers’ use of SNSs and their perspectives regarding them.

* + - * 1. **Justification for Semistructured Interviews**

Wellington (2000) suggested that interviews enable the exploration of interviewees’ views, perceptions, and values. Therefore, I decided to use face-to-face interviews as the qualitative method to gather information from teachers and reach the reality of teacher practices, experiences, and attitudes that would otherwise remain inaccessible to me as the researcher (Perakyla, 2005).

I directed the interview questions towards the teachers’ experiences using SNSs, their role, their perceived benefits, and challenges of using SNSs in EFL teaching. I used these main points to guide the face-to-face interviews with the teachers. I planned to explore their SNS use in EFL teaching from their viewpoints (see Appendix 5). The semistructured interviews added significant additional reflection as teachers opened up when they talked about their SNS use and their perceptions. The interview method aligned with the study’s exploratory manner. According to Fontana and Frey (2005), a semistructured interview allows the participants to answer a predetermined set of inquiries and on-the-spot additional questions that might arise, and it reveals interviewees’ real concerns and points of view. I used semistructured interviews because they allowed me to change and develop the questions during the interview and elaborate on the interviewee’s points of interest regarding the research problem (Bell, 2010). I also wanted the interviews to be as open as possible as I was not sure what the participants would say.

* + - * 1. **Sampling and Accessing Participants**

To obtain the sample for the interviews, I used purposive sampling. I emailed all English teachers at the seven Colleges of Technology and asked for volunteers to participate in one-to-one interviews if they used SNSs in teaching EFL with their students. I sent the potential participants invitation emails containing the full details about the topics of discussion. According to Cohen et al. (2007), purposive sampling helps researchers choose a sample on the basis of the research objectives. I aimed to explore the use of SNSs for EFL learning, and only teachers that used SNSs were included in the sample for the qualitative research.

Only six teachers indicated that they used SNSs for EFL learning with their students and were willing to participate in the second qualitative phase. I excluded three teachers from far away colleges and narrowed down the respondents to three candidates: two males and one female in three Colleges of Technology. Subsequently, I called the respondents and organised the time and place to conduct the interviews. The interviews were conducted in English, and they lasted between 90 min and 2 h. Then I transcribed the interviews in preparation for the analysis.

While conducting the interviews and focus groups, I faced many challenges. For example, although I planned the schedules and the interview guidelines, interviewees sometimes talked little about a certain issue related to the research topic and roamed far from my questions. Nevertheless, in general, the interviewees were helpful and cooperative as I made the discussions and interviews as comfortable as possible. The interviewees were particularly expressive about their experiences when using SNSs and appreciated the opportunity to talk about them.

* 1. **Research Analysis**

For the questionnaires, I used descriptive statistics, and for the focus group discussions and interviews, I used thematic analysis. The stages for analysis are presented in Figure 2.1 below.

**Questionnaires**

**Descriptive Statistics**

**Focus-groups & Interviews**

**Thematic Analysis**

**Presenting Findings**

**Figure 2.1: Analysis plan**

I explain the analysis of each phase in detail in this chapter’s following sections. The researcher is the driver of research, who guides the process of collecting and analysing data (Creswell, 2003). Understanding the context guided my analysis, and all conclusions that I made about the data were distinguished and clarified regarding the context from which the data were gathered.

* + 1. **Quantitative Data Analysis**

I coded the data from the questionnaires to analyse them statistically. As all the information obtained was descriptive in nature, I used Excel rather than the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). I am more confident and proficient in the use of Excel, having used it before. I also think Excel was simpler to use, and the calculation of the frequencies and percentages was straightforward, especially because I was looking for descriptive statistics.

I entered the responses to the paper questionnaires manually into Excel. I gave each paper-based questionnaire a code number before entering it. I numbered the questionnaires from 65–549. Online questionnaires were given a code by Excel from 1–64. This way, online and paper questionnaires could be analysed together. I performed descriptive analysis in Excel to display the data, such as the total and the percentages. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I aimed for the questionnaire to be primarily descriptive to offer background for the study’s second phase. I did not need to use inferential statistics. Therefore, I only used basic descriptive analysis, which was appropriate to produce an overview of SNS use. Later, I used the data from the questionnaires to help enrich the collected qualitative data (Creswell, 2003).

* + 1. **Qualitative Data Analysis**

I applied thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected for this study. According to Clarke and Braun (2013), “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 77). The main advantage of thematic analysis is its flexibility (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Today, a wide range of computer software exists, which can help researchers analyse qualitative data and may help reduce the time spent on analysis. NVivo is perhaps one of the most commonly known programs. Coding is this software’s main task, which is known to help organise results quickly. However, researchers need to identify the codes and generate the themes based on their research topic. Therefore, I did not use any computer software to analyse the qualitative data as it could be pointed out here that the analysis can be done manually (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). In this study, I did not use any software in the analysis of the qualitative data, mainly because the data obtained was in Arabic, which most analytical software does not sufficiently support. As I mentioned previously, for many reasons, I decided to code the data in Arabic and only then translate the examples I reported in English, so I could not enter that data into Nvivo in Arabic, and there was no point in inputting the data after translation as I would have already organised the codes and themes manually.

Next, I explain the procedure of thematic analysis: how I coded the transcripts and generated themes manually.

First, I transcribed the focus group discussions, which were carried out in Arabic. I did not translate at this stage as I thought interpretation and identifying themes would be easier and less time consuming if they were applied to the Arabic versions. I also did not want data to be “lost in translation”. Translating transcripts to another language might lead to the loss or misinterpretation of some important data, which might undermine the research’s validity.

I read the transcripts to start my coding process and identified general and initial themes from the data. This process included generating common categories or broad themes (Cohen et al., 2007), and it was a significant part of my analytical process as the first step to achieve a general view of the collected data. Next, I read the transcripts line by line to identify specific codes and explore the participants’ viewpoints from the focus groups. By repeatedly reading the transcripts, I developed a close relationship with the data. I highlighted various codes, which I later grouped into the students’ initial themes. I used the research questions to group, organise, and order the codes that emerged from various perspectives for deeper meanings. Managing these codes was overwhelming and took a long time. I changed the codes several times and added many other codes as I read through the transcripts. I organised the codes and themes and reported my initial interpretations in separate Word files.

I then grouped the codes into themes. Many of the themes were further separated, changed, and revised throughout the analysis process. The themes and sub-themes were generated by the students, from the existing literature, or by me, and they were modified several times. Subsequently, I further reduced those codes and themes that overlapped and repeated, combining them into key themes. The aim was not to generate a new theory with this research; instead, I aimed to search for repetitive themes to extend and revise them into the area of using SNSs for EFL learning.

I presented the findings from the quantitative and qualitative phases in a mixed analysis to further enrich the understanding of the research topic and provide and draw conclusions (see Figure 2.1 in this chapter).

* 1. **Ethical Considerations**

In this project, I followed the ethical procedures set out by the School of Education at the University of Sheffield. It is vital to consider ethical issues before any data collection takes place. All research projects entail common ethical considerations, such as voluntary participation, getting informed consent for participation, confidentiality, and protecting participants from any possible harm (Drake, 2014).

Participation in my study was voluntary as participants were free to participate in the questionnaires, the focus group discussions, and the interviews. I asked the participants to read the statement of informed consent provided at the top of the online questionnaire and click a link if they agreed to complete it. Students were also required to do the same before they started completing the paper questionnaire. I reminded them that they were free to answer or skip questions or leave the questionnaire incomplete if they wanted to. Some students did not answer all questions on the questionnaire, which clearly demonstrated that they did not feel pressure to answer every question.

During the introduction of the focus group discussions and interviews, the participants were invited to read and sign an informed consent sheet, which explained the study’s purpose and content. I provided an information sheet containing details about the study for clarification. I also provided them with full contact details in case of any inquiries, feedback, concerns, or a desire to withdraw (see the participation information sheet and consent forms in Appendixes 1 and 2). I informed and reminded the participants that they had the right to withdraw without any risks or penalties at any time, even after the interviews and discussions were conducted. I also reminded them that they should not feel pressured to participate if they were quiet for a while or chose not to respond to certain questions.

I informed the participants that they did not need to provide any identifying details. They only provided contact information on the questionnaire if they wanted to be contacted for the project’s second phase.

I also informed the participants that any information they provided during the interviews and discussions would not affect them in any way. I asked the participants if they agreed for the discussions to be recorded. I informed them that the recorded data would only be used in the context of this PhD work and related publications. Data were collected anonymously, which was essential to protect the participants’ information while collecting the data. Anonymity decreases the risk of harm as data is not accessible to unauthorised people (Fuchs, 2008).

n addition, regarding gender, I thought at the time that it was most ethical that I placed my study’s participants in mixed-gender groups as they had the expectation of working in mixed-gender settings in higher education. The students may have interpreted single-gender arrangements as a retrogressive step and as somewhat patronising. Higher education in Oman is seen to acknowledge a certain maturity in its mixed-gender arrangements. However, as mentioned above, I have reflected that single-gender groupings may have given me a richer data set, especially from the women. One cannot assume, however, that women in single-gender groups would not be influenced in some way by other women present. One cannot make assumptions either way. As Davies (2003) found in her research, same-sex groups often invigilate each other’s comments.

* 1. **Summary**

In this methodology chapter, I discussed this research study’s design and my approach to data collection and analysis. I also presented ethical issues and considerations in this study’s various phases. I used a mixed methods approach, which I justified as appropriate and useful to address my research questions, particularly by combining quantitative and qualitative methods. I used mixed methods of data collection and analysis in a case study design that enabled me to conduct a detailed and productive exploration of the research topic. In the following chapter (Chapter 4), I present this study’s findings. I report and discuss the findings from the questionnaires, focus groups, and teacher interviews, with attempts to explore and understand SNS use for EFL learning.

1. **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:**

**Using Social Networking Sites in Daily Life**

* 1. **Introduction**

In this chapter, I present the findings related to how this study’s participating students used SNSs in daily life. I also discuss the students’ views regarding their general SNS use and attempt to answer this study’s first research question: *How do Omani students use and perceive SNSs in their daily lives?* The data from this chapter comes from two sources: questionnaires and focus-group discussions.

The questionnaire data consists of responses from Omani undergraduate students. I used this data to discuss SNS use as I report on the various SNSs that students used in daily life, how they prefer to use those sites, and how often they used them.

The focus-group discussions are the second source of data. I used these discussions **t**oexplore the students’ SNS practices. In Section 4.2, I describe the students’ SNS activities and the views they expressed regarding those in the focus-group discussions. The focus-group participants volunteered to participate in those discussions as part of their questionnaire responses. I identified the themes of the students’ SNS use to gain a more detailed understanding of their online practices. In this chapter, I do not identify types of SNS users; rather, I explore and discuss the students’ various types of activities. This exploration is meant to expand the understanding of how students such as this study’s respondents use SNSs. I present the quantitative data and then the qualitative data.

* 1. **Students’ Perceptions From the Questionnaire Data (the Questionnaire)**

In this section, I present and discuss the findings regarding general SNS use from the questionnaire, which included six items related to students’ general SNS use: (1) the respondents’ use of SNSs in their daily lives, (2) the frequency of their SNS use, (3) the number of SNS applications that they use, (4) the most frequently and widely used SNSs, (5) the respondents’ attitudes about SNSs, and (6) the students’ reasons for using SNSs in their daily lives. I present the findings for these six items below.

* + 1. **General Daily SNS Use**

The first finding from the questionnaire is that a significant proportion of respondents (99.3%) indicated that they use SNSs (see Figure 4.1). This shows the respondents’ interest in using SNSs in generaland their near-complete embrace of those sites.

**Figure 4.1: Students’ SNS use**

The questionnaire respondents were between 18 and 22 years old. The strong SNS usage rate in this demographic confirms statistics published by the Pew Research Center (2014), which found that the number of SNS users is increasing steadily and that 89% of young adults (ages 18–29) used SNSs in 2014.

* + 1. **Frequency of Use**

For question one, the students stated how often they use SNSs; 85% stated that they are *always or several times a day* doing so; 8.6% of the students reported that they use SNSs *often or once a day. Around* 4% of students said they do so *sometimes or 2-3 times a week*, only 2% of the students responded *rarely or 2-3 times month* and just 0.4% said *never* (Figure 4.2).

**Figure 4.2: Students’ frequency of SNS use**

These findings show that the respondents considered SNSs to be integral parts of their lives. These respondents identified their SNS use as being very high, based on the fact that most said they were *always or several times a day* using SNSs. These findings show the strength of the claim that young people are enthusiastic about using SNSs as most stated that they were not only *often or once a day* but *always and several times a day* online. Lenhart et al. (2010) stated that 72% of students have SNS accounts and that 45% of those students use SNSs. Sheldon (2008) found that about 50% of students use SNSs several times per day. According to Althemairy (2013), young people’s frequent SNS use could justify SNS use in educational settings. Yeboah and Ewur (2014) studied the influence of WhatsApp on students’ academic performance and found that, on average per day 48% of the students said that they spend more than 8 h using WhatsApp; another 31% spent 6 to 7 h, and 17% spent 3 to 5 h.

* + 1. **Number of SNSs Used**

According to the questionnaire responses, 33% of the students use five or more SNS applications; 18.3% use four; 20.1% use three; 17.2% use two, and 11.4% only use one (Figure 4.3).

**Figure 4.3: Students’ number of SNSs used**

This possession of multiple SNS accounts is associated with these sites’ various enabling features, which encourage students to use different spaces for different purposes. Using a given SNS can also encourage the use of other sites.

* + 1. **Choice of SNSs**

The third item on the questionnaire is related to the respondents’ use of various SNSs (Figure 4.4).

**Figure 4.4: Students’ use of various SNSs**

.As shown in Figure 4.4, the Omani students used a variety of SNSs; however, the most widely used SNSs were clearly WhatsApp (96.7%) and Instagram (73.7%), followed by Facebook (44.0%), Twitter (41.1%), and Snapchat (25.4%). Facebook, which has over 500 million users around the world (Facebook, 2016), was only ranked third among these users. The respondents, however, did show an overwhelming interest in WhatsApp.

The quantitative data indicates which SNSs the participating students were most likely to use. The students’ choices can be better understood by exploring the nature of their online practices and activities, so I conducted a qualitative data analysis to explain potential reasons for the respondents’ preferences for particular applications.

In a study of users’ favourite SNSs, Ahsan and Chand (2012) found that Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp were the most preferred. Kanagarathinam (2014), studied the influence of SNSs on academic performance in India, they concluded that students used Facebook, Skype, WhatsApp, and YouTube more than other SNSs and that Google+ and LinkedIn which were the least favourite SNSs. Mazman and Usluel (2010) showed that Facebook was the most popular SNS, most likely because of its features and multiple uses (e.g., for education and sharing information).

**4.1.5 How Young Adults Feel About Their General SNS Use**

In the questionnaire, the students also described how they feel about SNSs. Some students selected two or three statements, but others selected only one. A high percentage (36.4%) of the respondents stated that they like to use SNSs; 28.6% said they cannot live without SNSs, and 32.4% said that they are comfortable using SNSs. On the other hand, very few students reported that they were just starting out in SNS use, were timid or anxious, or did not use SNSs at all (5.6%, 2.2%, and 2.9%, respectively). These findings are shown in Figure 4.5.

**Figure 4.5: Students’ feelings towards SNSs**

**4.1.6 Reasons for Using SNSs**

The students’ reasons for using SNSs varied. Figure 4.6 shows that the two dominant reasons were connecting with friends and family (73.2% of respondents) and procrastinating or passing time (60.6%). This is consistent with the results of a Bayt.com and YouGovSiraj Research and Consulting study of the Middle East, which indicate that the main reasons for Internet use are social activities and entertainment (Masmah, 2011).

**Figure 4.6: Students’ reasons for using SNSs**

In a similar study, Hargittai and Hsieh (2010) concluded that socialisation is the motivation for the majority of SNS users. In a Saudi Arabian study, Althemairy (2013) highlighted that SNS use in education was one of the least-pressing concerns among that study’s participants. Althemairy showed that most of the activities of young adults were social and they showed little interest in SNS use in education. The current study’s results, however, indicate that many students (47%) reported using SNSs to help with their education. This does not necessarily signify a cultural difference; rather, it may just be due to a difference in the studies’ samples. In addition, given this study’s small sample size, it is not possible to use it to make a national comparison.

**Summary of the Key Findings on Students; SNS Use**

Section 4.1 focusses on the respondents’ patterns of SNS use. The main findings are summarised as follows:

* Nearly all of the respondents used SNSs.
* The strong majority of the respondents used SNSs several times a day.
* The majority of the respondents used multiple SNSs. Many used five or more SNSs.
* The respondents predominantly used WhatsApp and Instagram.
* Many of the students stated that they liked to use SNSs or even that they cannot live without them.
* The two most common reasons for using SNSs among the respondents were to connect with friends and family and to procrastinate or pass time. Educational uses were also common, with 47% of the students mentioning that they used SNSs to help with their studies.

These findings provide a general idea regarding how the respondents used SNSs, which SNSs they used, and how often they used them. The findings are specific to these respondents, however. Chapman and Lahav (2008) found that online behaviours clearly vary from one context to another. In Section 4.2, I explore SNS use in more detail based on the focus-group discussions.

* 1. **Students’ Perceptions: Qualitative Focus-Group Data**

In the focus-group discussions, the participants predominantly named online social connections as the most important aspect of SNSs. This coincides with the main focus of this study, so I prompted them to elaborate further. The major SNS use that the participants talked about was to connect with friends and family. They also used SNSs as networking platforms to connect with the wider community and to build new meaningful relationships within their communities. Thus, in this analysis, I have identified four major uses of SNSs: to connect with (1) family members, (2) friends of the same gender, (3) friends of another gender, and (4) members of the wider community. The participants talked about each type in a distinct way, and they used SNSs differently when targeting different audiences. These four online social connections did overlap, however.

Each type of online social connection had distinct characteristics and themes, which I discuss in detail in the following sections.

The findings of this study suggest that the Omani sociocultural context had powerful effects on students’ perceptions of their SNS use as well as on their online connections. This study’s data relate to not only the students’ views but also how those views relate to the sociocultural context. The participating students talked about SNS practices—which they considered to be culturally oriented and influenced by their context. They also reflected that their practices changed, thus creating cultural values. As Street (1993) argued, culture is an active process of meaning making, so it should be treated as a verb. Individuals are both the products of and the makers of their culture. Culture exists as an accumulation of individuals’ practices; people are part of their culture, but they also impact it and create it (Street, 1993).

Therefore, in this discussion about the participants’ online activities and views, I identified their sociocultural practices (based on the data) and determined the characteristics of the Omani context.

In other words, to expand the understanding of the participating students’ online social connections, I highlighted the sociocultural context, which they reported as having a great impact on their SNS use and their perceptions. Figure 4.7 portrays the students’ perceptions of their online practices.

**Sociocultural context**

**Figure 4.7: The types of online social connections**

Figure 4.7 shows how the participants viewed their SNS practices and indicates what they valued. This process provided insight on the impact that sociocultural context has on SNS use (and vice versa).

The purpose of this introduction is to provide a guide to how I approached the discussion and how I organised the findings. First, I analysed each type of online social connection and the related themes. I also explored all the themes together to provide further insight into SNS use for each type of online social connection. Subsequently, drawing on the focus-group discussions, I examined the students’ perspectives regarding the influence that sociocultural context has on SNS use. I also built on previous studies of SNSs and on the broad background information on SNS use. Collectively, this information provides insight into how the participating students used and viewed SNSs.

The first type of online social connection is *connecting with family*.

* + 1. **Connecting With Family**

Overall, the findings of the focus-group discussions indicate that the participants’ online social connections with their families and with their friends were mutually exclusive. In other words, the students organised their online interactions so that their family groups and friendship groups were intentionally separate. In this section, I discuss the participants’ online social connections with family members and the views that underpinned such uses, based on the participants’ perspectives. Using a sociocultural lens, I also list the factors that impact the ways in which the participants connected with their family members.

The themes that emerged for connecting with familymembers are (1) The predominance of instant messaging (IM), especially WhatsApp; (2) low familial involvement in SNSs other than WhatsApp; and (3) sharing through screenshots rather than links.

In Figure 4.8, I provide an overview of these themes with regard to students’ perceptions of their online connections with family members. This includes a summary of the related themes and sub-themes.

**4.2.1 Connecting** **with family members online**

**4.2.1.2.3 Parental attempts to control SNSs**

**4.2.1.2.2 Parents’ negative opinions of SNSs**

**Why?**

**4.2.1.2.1 Students’ view that SNSs are their space**

**4.2.1.1 Predominant use of IM (WhatsApp)**

**4.2.1.2 Low familial involvement beyond WhatsApp**

**4.2.1.3 Sharing through screenshots**

**4.2.1.2.2.1. Parents’ view that SNSs are unsafe or time wasting**

**4.2.1.2.2.2 Parents’ view that SNSs conflict with traditions**

Figure 4.8**:** Themes for connecting with family **members** online

Below, I provide an explanation of each of the themes and sub-themes found in Figure 4.8.

* + - 1. **The Predominant Use of IM (WhatsApp): Family Communication**

The first theme that arose was that the predominant use of IM was to connectwith family members. The participants reported that they predominantly used IM to share online experiences with their families. The students indicated that they shared posts, photos, and messages with their family members on the SNSs’ secure, closed networks. The most used IM application among this study’s participants was WhatsApp.

The following students’ responses reflect the importance of WhatsApp to these students for keeping in touch with family members (especially parents). One female participant said,

“*To remain in contact with family members. WhatsApp is very useful for me because I am far away from my parents and sisters. I can send them messages. I can talk to them and text them as much as I want anytime.*”

One male student said,

“*I use WhatsApp to chat with my family every day and I send my mother voice messages and photos. We also have WhatsApp groups for the extended family who we do not meet a lot. It is a good way to stay in contact with them.*”

Another male student said,

*“I chat with my family on WhatsApp group daily . . . all the time.*”

A female student said,

“*I text my parents and talk to them on WhatsApp but they do not follow me on other SNSs or anything* [laugh]*.*”

These examples suggest that WhatsApp was the participants’ main means of communicating with family members. The students’ comments also emphasised their need for persistent and continuous connection with their family members, which WhatsApp facilitated by offering them a space to easily connect, especially by enabling group interactions and rapid connections. The participants used WhatsApp to keep in touch with their family members, including their extended family members, as well as other loved ones—especially those who were in different places. The participating students considered WhatsApp to be a social medium that facilitated the maintenance of close relationships with their family members. They also stated that connecting with family members was the major reason for using WhatsApp.

In response to why they used WhatsApp to connect with family members, one of the male students gave a typical answer:

“*It is private, we interact in the family group and we know each other’s updates every day. It has things we do not want to share with others. No other SNSs can replace this group for this purpose. They won’t work. These WhatsApp groups are the main way of interaction for my family.*”

This student’s comment indicates the significance of WhatsApp, which he considered irreplaceable. Connecting with family members on SNSs other than WhatsApp could lead to limited sharing. The participants said that they needed to share personal and private information, and they wanted to make sure that they shared this information with their family members only. This included photos of themselves and of special occasions. The kind of content that the participants shared on WhatsApp was simply different than what they shared on other SNSs. The students interacted with family groups on WhatsApp through conversations, discussions, memories, and photos; they intended for all of this information to stay within the family sphere.

The participants’ emphasis in all their IM interactions was to access their existing online connections. The participants used WhatsApp to create safe, comfortable, and privately accessible spaces that were only accessible through the use of phone numbers. The students also used WhatsApp a substitute in the absence of face-to-face communication.

* + - 1. **Low Familial Involvement Beyond WhatsApp**

The second theme was that the participants demonstrated a relatively low level of family involvement in SNSs other than WhatsApp. They restricted their family members’ access to their SNS accounts and invested time in ensuring that their other online SNS interactions occurred away from their parents and other family members. One female student said,

“*I text my parents and talk to them on WhatsApp but they do not follow me on SNSs or anything* [laugh]*.*”

A male participant stated,

“*I do not interact with my parents on SNSs.*”

Another male student said,

*My parents do not know that I am using SNSs Thank God . . .* [laugh]*. They are really old.*”

From the students’ discussions, I identified three main factors that contributed to students’ choices to distance their parents from their other SNS connections. The first was their eagerness to have their own private online space. The second was their parents’ negative attitudes towards SNSs. The third and final reason was their parents’ attempts to control the participants’ online practices. I discuss these reasons in further detail and provide supporting examples below.

* + - * 1. **Students’ View of SNSs as Their Own Spaces**

The participants first talked about how they wanted their SNSs to be spaces for themselves. One example of this came from a male student (emphasis added):

“*It is not as if we are doing something inappropriate but we post funny messages and have fun. Nothing outrageous or cruel.* ***I do not tell them everything. I mean they do not have to know.*”**

Another male student said,

“*My father does not want me or my brothers and sisters to use SNSs. So, we do not tell him that we do. It is better this way. My mother would laugh at many of my photos and posts. She would prefer that I do not share many of them... but well . . . They look at the negative side only. It is like everything else has pros and cons. It is not all bad nor dangerous or waste of time.*”

From these comments, one could argue that these young adults’ online interactions resemble their offline interactions. The participants simply wanted to keep their interactions away from their parents in the same way that they did in other scenarios. For example, young adults typically do not like having their parents listen to their conversations with friends in their own rooms; in the same way, they do not like having this happen in any other space, including online. This is simply because, when communicating with friends, they seek a sense of liberty, or self-expression, that parents or other family members might judge to be exaggerated, worthless, or even shameful. The focus-group interviews provided evidence that students consider SNSs to be personal spaces for self-expression. (I elaborate on this in Section 4.2.2.)

* + - * 1. **Parents’ Negative Views of SNSs**

These students also reported that their parents have negative views towards SNSs. This study’s aim was not to expand on parents’ orientations towards SNSs; nevertheless, its results captured the parents’ attitudes towards SNSs (filtered through their children’s perspectives). The participants reported that their parents’ views were that SNSs were either (1) unsafe or time wasting or (2) in conflict with Omani traditions and culture. Below, I explain these two views.

***SNSs as Unsafe or Time-Wasting***

The participants’ responses showed that their parents often considered SNS spaces to be unsafe or time wasting. Below, I reflect again on a quotation used above—this time drawing attention to key words using bold.

One male student said that his parents did not use or like SNSs. His parents thought that the disadvantages of SNSs were much greater than their advantages (emphasis added):

“*My father does not want me or my brothers and sisters to use SNSs. So, we do not tell him that we do. It is better this way. My mother would laugh at many of my photos and posts. She would prefer I do not share many of them... but well . . . They look at the negative side only. It is like everything else has pros and cons. It is not all bad nor* ***dangerous*** *or* ***waste of time****.*”

Many other participants in the same group made similar remarks, as reflected here. For instance, a female participant said (emphasis added),

“*My father does not use SNSs and does not really know them. Yes, he does not like me using my phone all the time and he thinks I am* ***wasting my time*** *on the phone. But what else can I do . . . I have SNSs accounts that they do not know about*”

Another male student said (emphasis added),

“*My family would not like it if they knew that I am using SNSs. But I only talk to friends. It is not* ***wrong****. There is no* ***harm*** *done.*”

These examples show that SNSs provoked problematic conflicts between parents and their children, at least from the students’ perspective. In these comments, the participants indicated that their parents typically believed that online spaces were unsafe or useless. The parents also thought that just being online and talking to strangers was risky or time wasting. On the other hand, given the current popularity of SNSs, the students were very interested in using those sites to expand their daily real-world interactions into online spaces. They used SNS accounts that were untraceable to their real names or offline identities. The participants told only a select group—usually friends—about these accounts. They liked to use SNSs to express a new form of freedom that they could achieved only in spaces that their families were unaware of. The participants stated that they did not admit to their parents that they had these SNS accounts; they did not even talk about their SNSs with their parents.

In this way, the participants accessed a new form of online communication in a manner that helped them manage contradictions regarding how they wanted to communicate and what their parents would expect of them and impose on them. They adopted new practices, experiences, and moral codes that affected how they saw themselves, other young people, and members of the other gender, as well as society as a whole and the world around them. This seems to reflect a fluidity within their culture; the participants seemed to be not just participating in the culture but also involved in making and remaking it through their thoughts and behaviours. As mentioned earlier, Street (1993) argued that culture exists as an accumulation of individuals’ practices. Individuals are part of their culture even as they impact it and help create it. Culture is constantly in flux, but it remains recognisable to those who see themselves as its constituents.

The participants also mentioned that they considered themselves to be more skilful than their parents at using SNSs; as mentioned earlier, one female participant said, “My father does not use SNSs and does not really know them.” They considered their parents to be largely uninterested in SNSs. Although their parents refused to allow the participants to use SNSs, the participants indicated that they always found ways to work around those parental restrictions. Some denied that they had SNS accounts to avoid their parents’ guidance and to express themselves more freely, without supervision and censorship. Some stated that they had two sets of SNS accounts: one for family members, and another (based on a nickname) for communicating friends without monitoring from parents or relatives.

***Conflicts With Traditions and Cultures***

In addition to viewing SNSs as unsafe and time wasting, parents’ negative attitudes towards SNSs was also due to a fear of other cultures, according to the participants. The parents widely feared the new cultural experiences that were available through SNSs and worried that their children would adopt aspects of behaviour from other mainstream cultures, including what they refer to as Western modes of thinking and lifestyles. As an example, a male student expressed this point as if he was describing the situation on behalf of everyone in his age group (emphasis added):

“*Our parents don’t like the* ***Western thinking and life style****. They don’t want us to open up to their norms. They are afraid that we follow their life style. ‘We are not in America; you will listen to me’ or ‘All this mischief is from your phones’ they say. They make a big deal out of it. It is not like that at all. We just like SNSs and we have fun.*”

This student reported that his parents thought that young people were at risk of being suffering from negative influences that spread rapidly from other cultures through SNSs.These parents viewed all kinds of online interactions as contradicting their cultural inheritance and values. They considered SNS use to be a rebellion against their culture because, when students adopt SNSs, they adopt a way of communicating that is freer than their cultural default. The parents saw Western culture as promoting, for instance, a lack of respect for older adults, in the sense that it is acceptable in Western culture (according to the parents) to be confrontational and to not listen to one’s parents. The participants told me that their parents saw online Western culture as a threat that could undermine their parental authority. The participants did not necessarily want to rebel against their traditions or their parents; rather, they wanted to try to balance the SNS culture with the culture that their parents reinforced (and which they grew up in). The students, by contrast, treated SNS use as simply a basic need, an urgent desire, and most of all, a normal behaviour. This study’s findings suggest that there is a generational difference in how younger and older people perceive culture. These groups do not seem to have homogenous perceptions regarding what is culturally appropriate. Some parents disagree with their children on which kinds of behaviours and practices are appropriate (and which are not). The participants believed that their parents perceived culture as static and unchanging, whereas the students perceived culture as fluid. As I did not ask the parents for their own views, this study’s results are reliant on the students’ perceptions of their parents’ views.

***Parental Attempts to Control Online SNS Interactions***

Regarding the acts of separating parents from parts of online communication, another factor is the control that the parents attempt to exert on the participants’ online activities.

According to the participants, their parents prefer that the participants engage in no, or very little, online sharing. A female student clearly supported this point, saying that her parents tried to control the way she used SNSs (emphasis added):

“*My parents would not understand****; they do not want me to post anything about myself.*** *I want to post whatever I want. I always feel I want to post when I am sad or stressed out or when I need my friends and some entertainment.*”

The same thing happened with thisThis female student’s older brothers have also tried to dictate her behaviours, as men in this society often do (emphasis added):

“*My older brothers pass* ***judgments*** *on my profile accounts especially my cover photos. They* ***don’t like*** *my profile photos and advise me to change them and put something else to maintain the family reputation. They are not photos of me or anything. I deleted the accounts they know and opened new ones with a different name.*”

Another male student said (emphasis added),

“*My mother would laugh at many of my photos and posts. She* ***would prefer I do not share*** *many of them . . . but well . . .*”

The participants’ family members, especially their parents, greatly influenced their SNS use. The context of family was critical. The parents and participants each had their own ways of thinking about the participants’ SNS use. The participants’ desire to not jeopardise their family relationships influenced how they used SNSs—and interacted with other new tools, trends, and phenomena, for that matter*.* The participants seemed to not want to behave in accordance with their parents’ perceptions or in line with their culture’s traditional values, so they sidestepped surveillance by using SNSs without their families’ knowledge, thus avoiding supervision or censorship; one female participant described her actions this way: “I deleted the accounts they know and opened new ones with a different name.” These actions are related to many issues, including privacy, reputation, self-presentation, life roles, and managing various audiences in offline and online social interactions.

Donath and Boyd (2004) stated that, in the physical world, people keep all the parts of their lives separate by using time and space. SNSs can make many types of interactions visible to the public and can thus eliminate some of the privacy borders that people use to try to keep their connections separate. It is clear, however, that not all borders break down online; however, users’ online and offline boundary markers may differ greatly. For example, as I show next, this study’s participants found ways of providing family members with partial access to their online spaces. Therefore, this study’s participants created privacy borders in these online spaces as a creative way of resolving small social difficulties.

* + - 1. **Sharing Through Screenshots Rather Than Links**

The third theme regarding family connections was the trend of using screenshots for sharing. The participants who enjoyed using certain SNS tools often used screenshots from one SNS to share content with people who did not use that SNS, especially their parents and other family members (who predominantly used only WhatsApp). This allowed the participants to reveal selected parts of their online interactions to their family members without providing a full view of those interactions. This represents a form of censorship on the part of the participants, who sought to involve their parents in their lives in ways that protected aspects of their privacy. For example, one female student said,

“*We send screenshots from Twitter to the family WhatsApp group.*”

Another female student said,

*“We screenshot, so we discuss what is happening elsewhere, on the WhatsApp group.”*

These actions are examples of importing and embedding. The participants liked to share content from Twitter and other SNSs with people who did not use these platforms, such as their parents. One reason for this practice is that the participants enjoyed continuing conversations about online content from Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram with people who were not on those platforms. They used screenshots of tweets, for example, as unofficial retweets in other spaces. They also preferred that content be accessible across platforms, which also explains why they used this tactic of using screenshots to present content across platforms. . In other words, screenshots are a sharing mechanism; instead of just sharing content directly via hyperlinks, the participants chose to share screenshots. This indicates the participants’ desire to share content without providing official SNS links to the sender or indicating the origin of that content. This tactic could be seen as a strategic rhetorical device. The participants shared the content, but they did not always share the context of that content. Because they did not use hyperlinks, they did not reveal the provenance of what they shared. In online contexts, provenance is always clear when a hyperlink is used.

Rose (2001) explained, *provenance* refers to history; it indicates where an object or term came from. Thus, although this study’s participants made content available to parents and other family members using screenshots, they did not enable those family members to follow up and see the context of that content. This limited what the receivers could learn about the information’s source and its validity, which narrowed the possibilities for how the receivers could interact with that content. This method also protected the senders, as the content could not be tracked back to or discussed in the original space.

This trend of capturing screenshots from SNSs and sending them to family members across platforms (e.g., in WhatsApp groups) suggests that the participants exercised both kindness and power. It may show how considerate the participants were, as they knew that other people (such as their parents) could not join these other online spaces, so they brought these people some content of interest from those spaces. They did not use links, however, as they may have recognised that their parents would not appreciate the other content in those online spaces. I see this as a filtering and controlling mechanism. This mechanism is powerful because it allowed the participants to manipulate what their parents saw by limited it to just the screenshots that the participants chose to capture and send.

This trend also suggests that SNSs play a prominent role in social life today and indicates SNSs’ increasing importance, particularly as a source of information.

From a sociocultural and contextual lens, many of the participants’ views can be better understood in reference to society. As mentioned previously, Omani society is strongly steeped in religious values and cultural traditions—notwithstanding, as stated earlier, the notion that these cultures and traditions are multifariously viewed and practiced. These traditions play a fundamental role in defining social norms (Al-Issa, 2006). One of the key aspects of Omani society is the central role of the family. According to Donn and Issan (2007), families are expected to show respect for social norms and to maintain those norms. Individuals are seen as representatives of their families. According to this view, parents influence their children’s behaviour—even when those children are adults. The fact that this study’s participants mentioned their parents when discussing online interactions shows that they were mindful of their parents’ viewpoints. However, this does not mean that they do not deviate from what they perceive to be their parents’ expectations; they may conform or choose not to. However, although the participants spoke respectfully of their parents and listed ways in which they conformed to expectations, they also sometimes chose to deviate from those expectations. This shows that cultural attitudes are sometimes perceived but not practiced.

Virtues are extremely appreciated in Omani society. For instance, a family’s honour and reputation are based on the extent to which each of its members upholds social norms and morality. Each person is pressured to avoid doing anything inappropriate that may affect the family’s honour. This includes restrictions (i.e., expectations rather than explicitly articulated rules) on public activities, movement, speech, and sometimes even mode of dress (Al-Shemeli, 2009). These restrictions come from both Omani traditions and Islamic rules and are based on virtues such as modesty, respect for one’s elders, and good manners or politeness. Certain types of behaviour are not socially acceptable, and many of these restrictions present challenges to young adults, who may ignore or disrespect those restrictions. Thus, although young people ostensibly both practice and recognise these norms, they also may privately find ways of deviating from them.

Social norms play an important role in Omani culture (Al-Shemeli, 2009). Parents use such norms—more than religious pronouncements—to encourage good manners. One female participant explained that the main justification for her parents’ rules was “to maintain the family reputation,” rather than the actions being wrong or forbidden in religious terms. Therefore, maintaining Omani societal norms and traditions is important, and breaking from them is unacceptable in many Omani families. Actions that disregard these norms are thus considered to bring shame upon not just the actor but the family and even the extended social circle or tribe. In other words, Omani society holds individuals responsible for the actions of their family members and relatives. In this society, the reactions to the breaking of a tradition or a norm indicate the importance of good manners and shed light on why students may choose to distance their families from their online SNSs (i.e., to explore these new spaces in ways that society might consider unacceptable). These reactions also might indicate how students seem to challenge the notion that cultural rules are changeable in different times and also shows how students see online spaces as having different norms: although they say they do not change at home, they might act differently online. In this way, they seemed to satisfy themselves that they were conforming, whilst also managing to deviate from norms.

* + 1. **Connecting With Same-Gender Friends**

This section brings together a collection of themes that emerged from the focus-group discussions with regard to connections that participants formed with friends of the same gender. These themes are (1) the importance of SNSs in connecting with friends, (2) the simultaneoususe of multiple SNSs in connecting with friends, and (3) gender differences in the use of SNSs with friends.

In Figure 4.9, I provide an overview of this section, with reference points for students’ perceptions of these connections and a summary of the themes and sub-themes.

**4.2.2.1.1 Friends as the main reason for SNS use**

**4.2.2.1.2 SNSs as the dominant mode of interacting with friends**

**4.2.2.2 Simultaneous use of multiple SNSs**

**4.2.2.2.1 Different spaces for different purposes**

**4.2.2.3 Gender differences**

**4.2.2.1. Importance of SNSs**

**4.2.2 Connecting with same-gender friends**

**4.2.2.3.1 Amount of SNS use**

**4.2.2.3.2 Limited self-exposure**

Figure 4.9: Themes **related to connections** with **friends**

I now discuss each of the themes and sub-themes summarised in Figure 4.9.

* + - 1. **Importance of SNSs**

The first theme is that the participants placed great value on SNSs as a means to connect and interact with friends. Indeed, connecting with friends was the main reason that they identified for using SNSs, and SNSs were the dominant way in which they did so.

* + - * 1. **Friends as the Main Reason for SNS Use**

Overall, the participants used SNSs as a means to connect with their friends by talking and socialising. Connecting with friends was their most frequently listed purpose for using SNSs, in part because it was the most convenient means of doing so, as a female student said,

“*SNSs are mainly for friends. I can easily be in touch with many of my friends at the same time.*”

Another female student added,

“*SNSs are to keep in touch with my classmates from the college and friends I have from school. Mainly I chat with them on SNSs.*”

A male student said,

“*I talk with my friends on SNSs and know what is happening in their lives.*”

Many of the participants agreed that they used SNSs mainly to connect with friends. They used SNSs as spaces to gather with their friends, and they fully integrated those sites into their daily lives.

* + - * 1. **SNSs as the Dominant Way to Connect With Friends**

The participants indicated that SNSs were their dominant means of communication with other students. Their responses suggest that this generation of young adults cannot even imagine a world without smartphones or SNSs. These tools are officially rooted in their lives, as one female student said (emphasis added):

“*My father does not use SNSs and does not really know them. Yes, he does not like me using my phone all the time and he thinks I am* ***wasting my time*** *on the phone. But* ***what else can I do?*** *. . . I have SNS accounts that they do not know about.*”

This participant felt that she would not have a life without SNSs.

Another female student explained that she felt disconnected from her friends’ lives without SNSs. She explained that she found SNS interactions to be very important and that, without them, she would be constrained to only connect with people whom she saw in person. She found this prospect unexciting:

“*Without SNSs, I feel cut off from my friends. I need to talk to my friends and other people. This gives you fun and enjoyment.*”

This feeling of disconnectedness suggests that the participants are socially dependent on SNSs. Face-to-face meetings and phone calls with their friends are not sufficient interactions. SNS spaces allow them to feel connected to their friends at all times.

Furthermore, the participants talked about the importance of being online and having access to SNSs at all times, and they explained that they needed for this constant access to connect with peers and friends. A male student said,

“*On SNSs we share things very quickly all the time which is very difficult to do face to face. I really feel lonely without them.*”

Another male participant said,

“*I record what is happening in my daily life and share it with close friends. I post every day and my friends do the same even in tough times and busy days.*”

Statements such as “I really feel lonely without them” indicates the significance of SNSs to these groups. SNSs have created spaces that allow for more opportunities to interact with friends; exchange content; and share feelings, discussions, and opinions in many ways. This would not have been possible before SNS and is not possible today through any other means of communication.

In the focus groups, on some occasions, the participants were very clear that they saw online spaces as qualitatively different from offline spaces and indicated a preference to meet online rather than offline. The participants gave reasons for this preference. All of these reasons are related to what online spaces offer that offline spaces cannot. For example, the participants appreciated the accessibility and convenience of online interactions, as SNSs are available everywhere and anytime. This allowed the participants to interact anywhere and on their own time, which made online interaction appealing to many of them. They sought it out as a space of their own, as one female student noted:

“*In social networking sites, we can easily talk any time as we are all together in one place, discussing and talking.”*

This participant stated that all her friends could gather in one space online, which she explained was difficult to achieve in face-to-face interactions because of classes and work.

One of the male students expressed the way that he and his friends used SNSs as follows:

*“We always say let’s discuss this later-online . . . all of us.”*

Another male student said*,*

*“We postpone discussions to online spaces for better timing.”*

These examples indicate that the participants felt that it was easier to build focussed interactions and discussions with their friends online than offline. SNSs gave them confidence because they created the spaces themselves and could thus be sure of the spaces’ trustworthiness. A male student added,

*“It is easier and quicker to connect with friends online.”*

This participant felt that online interactions and discussions were quicker and simpler to set up than face-to-face interactions. Offline interactions also require more resources (including time) to organise, especially when they involve a large number of friends. Rather than driving up to meet friends, for example, participants opted to meet them online via SNSs, which required less effort and had no significant costs, as a female participant explained:

*“If we want to organize something we do that online as we want it to be written and approved by everyone. We can go back any time and check what we have agreed upon.”*

From this participant’s point of view, being able to access previously posted information can be useful, and face-to-face interaction does not offer that option.

These participants’ comments seem to have slight contradictions. For instance, they talked about preferring to talk online rather than face to face. However, at several points during the discussions, they also talked about how offline and online spaces complemented each other (i.e., one type of interaction did not replace the other but instead enhanced and expanded it). The participants, in other words, wanted combined experiences that included interactions across many platforms, both offline and online. They desired a consistent experience and the ability to move easily from online to offline, and vice versa.

* + - 1. **Simultaneous Use of Multiple SNSs**

The second theme related to connecting with friends, which was frequently recurring, related to the use of a variety of SNS platforms. The participants indicated that they used multiple SNS platforms to create spaces in which they could keep up informal interactions with friends in many spaces at the same time.

A male participant was quick to explain that he used many SNSs that were also popular among his friends:

“*I use SNSs to communicate and keep in touch with my friends. I use Snapchat, WhatsApp and Instagram. Nowadays I use WhatsApp and Snapchat a lot because all my friends use them all the time. They have good features. Yes, mainly, I use Snapchat and WhatsApp now. I’m not on Twitter a lot. I use it now a little. My friends use it, so I use it a little. I normally use it once in a while, you know to see what is happening, but I don’t use it a lot.”*

There were many other examples. For instance, a female participant said,

“*For me I use Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp. Nothing else. They are good... I’m on WhatsApp all day. My friends talk on WhatsApp all day.*”

Another female student said,

“*I use SNSs a lot to talk to my friends. I use Instagram a lot, Facebook. Twitter a little now but I don’t follow many people. . . . I follow friends on Snapchat and use it quite actively.*”

A male student said,

“*I post on Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat for myself and close friends.*”

Finally, another male student said,

“*I can say that a lot of my time is on WhatsApp, Twitter and Snapchat. I use Instagram too. Me and my friends are always online talking.*”

These comments show that these young adults were likely to use a mix of SNSs but that they interacted with more or less with the same friends on each site. They also used platforms that were popular among their friends. This tendency resembles real life, where friends do not always gather in one place; instead, they use various spaces (each with distinct features) to gather, meet, and explore. The participants were also tempted to try new spaces in addition to the ones they regularly used to see what other SNSs have to offer.

These examples show that the participants were choosing the ways in which they used SNSs. Through interaction, they formed new ways of interacting and created meaning through collaboration. This supports Davies’ (2013) findings about young people’s uses of online spaces and shows that the participants were skilful and creative in their ways of using various platforms. They were also innovative in their uses of language in these interactions, formed new ways of interacting, and negotiated meaning in collaboration.

Although there are some features that are common to all SNSs, these spaces differ significantly in their features and functions, such as photo and video sharing, blogging or microblogging, and IM. They offer varied features that enable and facilitate interaction in many ways. Each SNS provides a distinct designs for its users. The participants joined different SNS spaces so as to experience their different visions of social interaction. Despite the fact that SNSs are intended to be available to diverse people, many SNSs attract young people simultaneously. Thus, it is not uncommon for young adults SNSs at the same time to express themselves in different ways to interact with friends in different spaces using SNS different enabling features (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, 2013).

* + - 1. **Purposes of SNSs in Friends’ Interactions**

When interacting with friends, the participants felt free to explore and express themselves in the ways that they wanted. Furthermore, online communication with friends provided opportunities for self-expression on many levels. In the focus groups, the participants demonstrated that they considered SNSs to provide spaces where they could easily share many sides of themselves on a personal level. In fact, this study’s results show that SNSs strengthened their offline friendships by allowing the participants to continually keep in touch with each other in various SNS spaces.

The participants in this sample interacted with their friends to share life experiences, emotions, information, and gossip; get help, guidance, or emotional support; and have fun. Next, I describe each of these uses, with examples and discussion.

* + - * 1. **Sharing Life Experiences, Emotions, and Information**

The following quotations provide examples of how the participants interacted with their friends to share life experiences, emotions, information, and gossip. One female participant said,

“*It is more like an online album for me to record my daily life and share it with close friends. I post daily and my friends do the same even in tough times and busy days.*”

Another female student explained that she used SNSs to get personal updates from her friends:

“*I know what my friends are doing in their lives and they know about my life.*”

Another female student explained,

“*On SNSs, I know about my friends’ gatherings, their travels and entertainment activities because my friends post everything, like videos.*”

One male student seemed to be very active in posting videos, and all his friends followed him and commented on his posts:

“*Me and my friends are always online talking. We post photos and videos and we talk about them and comment on each other’s posts.*”

It is not surprising that the participants felt better connected to their friends’ feelings because they received SNS updates about what was going on in those friends’ lives. They spent time chatting with their friends and checking their profiles and posts; they felt connected when they saw their friends’ updates. This concurs with Davies’ (2014, 2015, 2017) findings that Facebook formed a platform participants saw as both another space to meet, but also one which allowed them to enrich offline experience.

* + - * 1. **Getting Help, Guidance, and Emotional Support**

The participants received help and social support from their friends via SNSs. Those who faced problems turned to their friends for online support and guidance. For example, one male participant said,

“*Actually, I post more when I need emotional support and when I am bored, so I start conversations, so I feel better.*”

A female student added,

“*I always feel I want to post when I am sad or stressed out and need my friends and some entertainment.*”

Another male student said,

“*On SNSs I share things which are very difficult to share with face to face. . . . I really feel lonely without them.*”

The participants indicated that they expressed their emotions, including depression and disappointment, with their friends. In other words, SNSs offered them a space for social and emotional support.

* + - * 1. **Having Fun**

The participants also used SNSs for entertainment purposes. They played games, shared music, and downloaded files as part of their online social interactions. One female student explained that she used SNSs for entertainment. She said,

“*I need to talk to my friends and other people. This gives you fun and enjoyment.*”

Another male participant said,

“*We post funny messages and have fun.*”

Another male student said that he used SNSs

“*just for fun and amusement . . . we share music, games and many interesting stuff*”

This study’s findings fit with those of other studies on SNSs by showing that students use SNSs for fun, to pass the time, and to meet friends or make new ones (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

At several points throughout the focus-group discussions, the participants talked about how they used online spaces as a refuge where they could experiment with various ideas, identities, and ways of being. However, they also talked about the blending of online and offline spaces. They engaged in both strategies but at different times. Although the ways in which they used online spaces may seem contradictory, they in fact reflect the developing nature of their perceptions of those spaces. In addition, as Davies (2013) also found, online spaces are not identical; they have different characteristics for different people at different times. This relates well to sociocultural theories of learning (which I discussed in Section 2.8), which state that individuals make meaning together on a moment-by-moment basis.

* + - 1. **Gender Differences**

The third theme related to connecting with friends was the obvious gender difference between male and female students.

It is worth noting here that I did not study gender systematically, as that was not part of this study’s aims. However, the students talked about gender differences in their SNS use. They only talked about this issue in relation to connections with friends. They discussed two main gender differences: in the amount of use and the amount of self-exposure.

##### **Amount of Use**

Based on only the focus-group discussions, it was hard to say which gender was more engaged with SNSs. Both female and male participants seemed to be passionate about SNSs and were willing to interact with friends from the same gender when online. However, based on the students’ perceptions, both male and female students believed that female students used SNSs more than male students.

For example, one female participant explained that women need SNSs more than men do because women (including herself) spend most of their time at the college and then they return to their homes, they need spaces in which to interact and socialise. This participant thought that female users feel restricted to expressing themselves on SNSs and or connecting with their friends through these sites:

“*If you asked me, I think we—females—use SNSs more because we need them more. There’s a greater need for us to use SNSs. I’ll tell you why. We do not go anywhere except for the college . . . you know. Male students meet in many different places after the college. We go to SNSs, and this is where we meet our friends and talk to them.*”

This participant considered women to be more active online than males. According to her, thisthan men on SNSs in the Omani context. This, she argued, was due to a lack of real-world platforms for women’s self-expression. Thus, the female users had a greater need than the male users for a platform in which to express themselves and share their daily experiences. Unlike female users, male users had many alternative (real-world) spaces in which to meet their friends and share their life experiences. This participant reported that she and her friends had found spaces in SNSs, which allowed them to meet regularly, too.

This participant used the phrase “you know” to refer to Omani social constraints that confine women to certain expectations in the community and in the family, that limited women gathering outside homes and educational settings. These constraints apparently pushed some of the female participants to online spaces. ‘You know’ was also referring to the fact that I am an Omani woman and I would know what this is like.

The following examples (all from female participants in the mixed-gender groups) show that the female participants actively interacted with others and shared their life experiences via SNSs:

“*Without SNSs, I feel cut off from my friends. I need to talk to my friends and other people. This gives you fun and enjoyment. I do not meet them anywhere else.*”

“*I post on Instagram for myself and close friends. It is more like an online album for me to record my daily life and share it with close friends.*”

“*I don’t have lots of followers. I choose friends carefully. I keep logging in on SNSs to check out and respond to my friends and comment on their pictures and updates.*”

These views very clearly indicate the relative freedom that these female students found on SNSs. The SNSs offered a space in which they could push the limits of self-expression and interaction beyond their offline circumstances. They described their online gatherings as being like those from offline spaces and mentioned that they used SNSs to spend time with their friends and share their daily experiences.

Previous researchers have shown that there is a gender difference in SNS usage. One viewpoint is that women use SNSs significantly more than men; for instance, Brenner (2013) found that 71% of all women used SNSs, as compared to only 29% of men. Nevertheless, other researchers have argued that men use SNSs more than women do. For instance, Akyildiz and Argan (2012) stated that men (compared to women) used Facebook more, had more friends, and spent significantly more time on Facebook. The evidence seems inconclusive at this time; perhaps variables other than just gender are at play with regard to the use of specific SNSs.

* + - * 1. **Self-Exposure**

The second gender difference that the participants talked about was in online self-exposure, which was more limited among female students than among male students. For instance, a male student talked about how female students shared photos:

“*They only take pictures of their hands* [laugh] *or their shoes or their scarves or fingers* [laugh] . . . *no photos of themselves.*”

This participant mocked women for following what are commonly perceived as cultural norms and constraints on women’s behaviour. Comments such as these indicate that women have a difficult situation, as they are sometimes criticised for being both too circumspect and too immodest. A female participant said, in this regard,

“*Many of the women do that. They only share pictures of their hands in a certain place for example to say that they are in this place or that or doing a certain activity . . . holding a flower* [laugh] . . . *having a dinner somewhere.*”

In the focus-group discussions, some female participants agreed with this viewpoint and even laughed about it. One of them explained that the reason for this behaviour was that they did not want photos of themselves to be online. The women used SNSs to share their life experiences and express emotions with limited self-disclosure. For example, they used photos of parts of their bodies (mainly their hands) instead of photos of themselves as a whole. They used these photos to indicate where they were or what they were doing. In Oman, photos of the face or the full body are considered private and sensitive.

As I discussed earlier, I used only mixed-gender focus groups, but it may have been useful to have also offered single-gender focus groups. This may have allowed the women and the men to detail their views more freely. Given the female participants’ reticence to share photos of themselves online, they may have also been reticent to share their beliefs in the presence of the male participants, who seemed quite outspoken.

In another group, another female student explained that she made her accounts private because they contained personal information and photos that she preferred to be accessible only to her friends, not the entire world:

“*My SNS accounts have personal information and pictures. So basically, I want this information and pictures to be inclusive to* [female] *friends not anybody else.*”

In the focus groups, the female participants had more privacy concerns than the male participants. They considered excessive exposure of personal information and experiences to an unknown audience to be unsafe. This explains why many of the female participants mentioned that they only allowed their friends to view the contents of their SNS accounts. Friends were the main target audience for female participants’ sharing of experiences and personal details. There was a significant gender difference in terms of target audience. Female participants tended to make their social accounts private more than male participants They could control the number and type of audience members—for example, by limiting them to family members and friends. The above examples show that, to the female participants, privacy and the opportunity for self-expression were equally important. Their self-censorship on SNSs was due to their awareness of Omani society and the outside world. Thus, they used SNSs in their daily lives but did not violate social norms, and they created spaces within SNSs where they had relative freedom. Although some of the participants’ parents may see their behaviours as transgressive, the female participants operated within their own moral framework, which was different from that of their parents but which still drew on cultural morality and beliefs.

Privacy is an important issue for many researchers on SNS use. Some scholars have found gender differences between SNS users, but others have presented contradictory findings. For example, Cho and Park (2013a) concluded that female users are more concerned than male users about online privacy. Joinson (2008) and Lewis, Kaufman, and Christakis (2008) found that female users, compared to male users, seem to be more concerned about—and more protective of—their personal information; as a result, female users are more likely to open private accounts. In the Pew Internet and American Life Survey of users of SNSs, Madden and Zickuhr (2013) found that male and female users had different perceptions of privacy and related practices. Female users were more protective than male users of their information (including their last names, and their addresses and phone numbers), as this information could be used to identify or locate them. Salaway and Caruso (2008) linked this tendency to female users’ concerns and to security problems.

Kolek and Saunders (2008) found that, regardless of privacy concerns, female college students were more likely than male students to post pictures of themselves to their profiles and to have publicly viewable Facebook profiles; this finding contradicts those of other studies. Regardless, it is clear from this study’s results that cultural expectations strongly influenced the female participants’ behaviours.

Likewise, Strano (2008) found that women seemed to place the most recent photos for themselves on their profiles. Strano mentioned several examples that indicate differences in how men and women display profile photos to reveal relationships, as well as in how they interpret and perceive those photos.

Roesner, Gill, and Kohno (2014) studied privacy on Snapchat; their findings show no statistically significant gender differences in privacy concerns, as Snapchat allows for posts that automatically disappear after a while.

As a traditional and a conservative country, Oman, to some degree, has limited openness in the public sphere (Al-Issa, 2006). Donn and Issan (2007) stated that female users consider SNS platforms to be open spaces for self-presentation, in contrast to how Omani women are generally expected to behave in certain ways in other spaces. This is not to say that Omani women are oppressed or threatened in the real world as a result of these social traditions and norms. However, the image of Omani women and the social expectations regarding how they should behave may impose certain limitations on the ways they act. This can in turn lead to a preference for using SNS platforms instead of offline spaces. The female participants in this study enjoyed more freedom on SNSs than in the real world but still identified limits in online interaction, especially when their audience consisted of friends. They also appeared to be very conscious of managing how they presented themselves across platforms and to various groups.

Having said that, with regard to the characteristics of young women, both the male and female participants seemed to hold more open views than the ones they believed their parents held. Some of them also were more tolerant than their parents of various ways of behaving in modern society, and many of the women interacted more widely than their parents were aware. There was, however, diversity in the group as a reflection of the participants’ cultural heterogeneity.

* + 1. **Connecting With Friends of the Other Gender**

There are two themes related to connecting with the other gender*.* These themes are predominantly gender-segregated in that each arises from societal expectations of gendered behaviour patterns. The themes are limited to men’s and women’s perceptions of online connections between the genders. This issue is significant, as (for cultural reasons) communications with unrelated individuals from the other gender are limited in Oman.

In Figure 4.10, I provide an overview and reference point for this section’s examination of students’ perceptions with regard to online connections with members of the other gender. Figure 4.10 also provides a summary of the themes related to this type of connection.

**4.2.3.1 Male participants’ perceptions**

**4.2.3.2 Female participants’ perceptions**

**4.2.3 Connections with members of the other gender**

**Online interactions disturb cultural norms (permissive).**

**Online interactions keep the same cultural norms.**

Figure 4.10: Themes for connecting with **friends of** the **other gender**

Below, I discuss each of the themes and sub-themes from Figure 4.10.

Table 4.1 shows the focus-group discussion about connecting with members the other gender.

Table 4.1

*Male and female students conversation regarding gender*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Male Participant 1: | “*For me, I want to know my classmates: males and females. I definitely meet the guys everywhere and talk to them all the time. I want to go to SNSs and interact with the women. I believe we will have good conversations with each other. I do not understand what they are afraid of or why they are this shy. It is not as if they do not know us . . . or as if we are going to hurt them. Well we can’t even if we want to* [laugh] *. . . it is online... I think online interaction between men and women is really beneficial if they allow it. But they don’t and I do not understand why. Please ask them why!*” |
| Female Participant 1: | “*Because there is a huge possibility for exploitation of women. We have heard of many cases like that have happened. SNSs made it easier to access and reach information. They easily can use these interactions to spread wrong things about you. “She is talking to me” they say telling all their friends. No one wants to have that reputation. This is why women refuse to talk to them. They are complex. They want you to talk to them but they do not respect you if you do.*”  [Other female students nodded in agreement.] |
| Female Participant 2: | “*Our families are very conservative for certain behaviour such as this. The reputation of a woman is important.*” |
| Female Participant 3: | “*Did you believe that they want formal beneficial academic interactions and discussions? What they are looking for is informal nonsense interactions* [smile]*.*”  [Other female students in the group agreed.] |
| Female Participant 1: | “*Many young men want to be able to have fun, enjoy their time and talk to the women. But when they want to get married, they do it through an arranged marriage. They never get married to the woman who they have talked to or who has the reputation of talking to men. They get married through their parents. They might check her SNSs and admire the woman who never talked to a man on SNSs.*” |
| Male Participant 2 | “*I would not like my sister to talk to men no matter what. The same applies here, with my female classmates.*”  [Male Participant 1 shook his head in disagreement.]  [The female participants smiled.] |

I discuss this dialogue in detail below in terms of how male and female participants view their online connections to people of the other gender.

* + - 1. **Male Participants’ Perceptions**

The male participants expressed a desire to use SNS spaces to interact with female classmates. They wanted these women to be able to use SNS spaces in the same ways that they do. One male participant explained that he did not understand why his female classmates refused to interact with male users on SNSs, and the other male participants agreed:

“*For me, I want to know my classmates: males and females. I definitely meet the guys everywhere and talk to them all the time. I want to go to SNSs and interact with the women. I believe we will have good conversations with each other. I do not understand what they are afraid of or why they are this shy. It is not as if they do not know us . . . or as if we are going to hurt them. Well we can’t even if we want to* [laugh] *. . . it is online... I think online interaction between men and women is really beneficial if they allow it. But they don’t and I do not understand why. Please ask them why!*”

The male students saw SNSs as spaces that provide opportunities to connect with members of the other gender. In fact, they viewed SNSs as a solution for the physical and social obstructions that limits male–female interactions in the rest of Omani society. This indicates that the male participants viewed online interactions on SNS spaces as being completely different from offline interactions. They understood and approved of the women’s behaviours in terms of limiting male–female face-to-face interactions because of sociocultural rules. However, they did not understand why the women maintained these cultural rules online and why they would not interact with male users on SNSs. The male participants said that online interactions should be more permissive and should allow more freedom. They argued that they could not hurt the women online because they would not be in the same physical space. They also thought that there should be a level of trust between men and women who knew each other offline as classmates.

However, the male participants’ eagerness to speak to members of the other gender was exclusive to their classmates, as they said they did not want to talk to women from other parts of the world or even from other parts of Oman. They wanted to talk only to women they knew, and they wanted to nurture their existing relationships. This shifted the focus-group discussion from the desire for online interaction with members of the other gender in general and highlighted these young men’s desire to interact with female classmates from their small communities.

On the other hand, one of the male participants in one of the discussions clearly admitted that he disagreed with his male classmates and agreed with his female classmates regarding their attitudes towards online interactions with men:

“*I would not like my sister to talk to men no matter what. The same applies here, with my female classmates.*”

I discuss this male participant’s opinion below, after discussing the female participants’ point of view.

* + - 1. **Female Participants’ Perceptions**

The female participants’ perceptions of mixed-gender interactions were different from the male participants’ perceptions. The female participants seemed to perceive SNS interactions in the same way that they perceived face-to-face interactions; they believed that the same rules applied. To them, the offline societal and cultural norms transferred to the online spaces. Apparently, changing the space in which the interaction took place did not change the way in which they wanted to interact with male users. The female participants said they did not want to expose too much of themselves to their classmates or risk being misinterpreted or misrepresented. One female participant explained that women limit their interactions with men

“*because there is a huge possibility for exploitation of women. We have heard of many cases like that have happened. SNSs made it easier to access and reach information. They easily can use these interactions to spread wrong things about you. ‘She is talking to me’ they say telling all their friends. No one wants to have that reputation. This is why women refuse to talk to them. They are complex. They want you to talk to them but they do not respect you if you do.*”

This comment clearly indicates that, according to the female students, informal interactions between men and women are not accepted in Omani society, even if they take place online. This female participant explained that, as a single woman, the men she interacts with could easily ruin her image and reputation. She worried that her male classmates might misunderstand or misuse her interactions. She did not trust their mentality, particularly as they contradicted themselves. This viewpoint implies that women have no choice except to abide by their culture’s rules (or risk being judged)—irrespective of the opinions of relatively enlightened men. Again, a follow-up, single-gender forum would have helped to clarify this. Another female student said, in this regard, that

“*our families are very conservative for certain behaviour such as this. The reputation of a woman is important.*”

This female student argued that the limited online mixed-gender conversation is associated with a wide range of factors, including cultural and family concerns and women’s reputations. In general, this study’s female participants felt that they needed to maintain their integrity, reputations, and privacy in their SNS interactions. It is clear that these women felt the effects of being monitored, even in situations when they might not be. None of the participants said anything about how men’s reputations might be affected by such interactions; there was a lack of symmetry in the cultural expectations for how each gender should behave. In this sense, although culture is fluid, the female participants seemed to often be in a deficit position in which they had to behave in ways that were not clearly delineated. This is not dissimilar to the findings of U.K. feminist researchers (e.g., those by Sarah Delamont, Sue Lees, and Carrie Paechter) since the 1980s.

It clearly would have been useful to have also conducted single-gender focus groups or follow-up mixed-gender discussions with a single-gender review. It seems that there are not equal rights to voice points of view after all.

In the same discussion excerpted above, another female participant discussed this topic:

“*Did you believe that they want formal beneficial academic interactions and discussions? What they are looking for is informal nonsense interactions* [smile]*.*”

This suggests that the female participants oppose informal interactions rather than academic discussions.

Another point that a female participant raised was that there is a double standard related to men’s interactions with women. She said that, if men want to get married, they choose an arranged marriage (which is a common practice in Oman); they never choose to marry a woman they have talked to on a SNS. She also assumed that any potential husband would check her SNS accounts:

“*Many young men want to be able to have fun, enjoy their time and talk to the women. But when they want to get married, they do it through an arranged marriage. They never get married to the woman who they have talked to or who has the reputation of talking to men. They get married through their parents. They might check her SNSs and admire the woman who never talked to a man on SNSs.*”

The rise of SNS use means that information about individuals can be accessed far more easily than was the case in the past. Such information could pose challenges for women in the future. Men might prefer to obtain information about women in this way. This could lead to misunderstandings of SNS interactions because they are gleaned out of context, which could affect women’s reputations and future opportunities. This study’s female participants showed awareness of these potential difficulties and, as such, tended to be cautious regarding the idea of interacting with members of the other gender.

Overall, the male participants considered engaging in informal interactions to be very important. However, the ability to have these interactions online did not free the female participants from worries about those actions’ appropriateness. The female participants viewed online and offline conversations in the same way and did not see any differences between them—especially for SNSs where they use their real names, as they cannot avoid being held accountable for their behaviours and interactions on those sites. The female participants felt that using SNSs did not really lessen the potential for destroying their reputations.

At one point, a male participant 2 disagreed with his male classmate and agreed with his female classmates. In response, the women chose to react to what have been said by smiling and male participant 1, who was in favour of online mixed-group interaction, shook his head in disagreement. It would have been good in retrospect, to have asked what these women were thinking and why did they smiled– maybe in single-gender group. I also could have followed up with a later discussion about how paralinguistic behaviours (e.g., smiling and head-shaking) betray unspoken feelings or points of view.

The male and female participants did not express the same viewpoints as each other. This indicates that these students disagreed in how they perceived culture both as fluid and static. In the above example, this in Table 4.1, a male student shared the same perspective as the female students that culture is static and that the cultural rules and norms should not change simply because they get to connect and communicate online. The same rules seemed to apply online too. The students do not seem to have homogenous views on what is culturally appropriate. Sometimes, the male participants disagreed with the female participants on what kind of cross-gender interactions are permissible. This suggests that for some, there are strict rules, for others there are not.

### *Discussion*

The above perceptions can only be understood when we understand that the existing male-female interactions in Oman are limited only inside universities and workplaces. Informal meetings outside these two contexts are rare and are neither socially nor culturally acceptable (Badawi, 1979).

Unlike Saudi Arabia, Oman does not have complete gender segregation, except from fifth grade through the end of high school. In Oman, people of each gender study together from first grade through fourth grade but do not do so again until university. People of each genders also work together in the same workplaces. Unlike other countries that practice gender segregation, Oman has no legal requirement to separate men and women or to limit public interaction between the genders. Donn and Issan (2007) stated that Omani women are not confined to their own gender and noted that interaction between the genders is allowed in Oman, as segregation is not legally required; however, this study’s results suggest that cultural and traditional norms play an important role in shaping perceptions of mixed-gender interactions. Also according to Donn and Issan, formal interactions between the genders are acceptable, and cooperation is even encouraged within formal institutions. However, informal interactions are not socially acceptable. Under this cultural paradigm, there are still few opportunities for Omani men and women to meet outside of universities and workplaces, where the dominant social norms dictate formal interactions. Generally speaking, young Omani women do not communicate freely or informally with men in public. This means that online interactions between the genders can be considered breaks from social convention.

This study’s participants were in their first year of university. They previously studied with members of the same gender from fifth grade through the end of high school. At the time of the focus-group discussions, they were studying with members of the other gender for the first time as young adults. The male participants may have viewed SNSs as allowing them to engage in informal interactions with their female colleagues, but the female students seemed to be intimidated by such interactions. Within this discussion, members of each gender seemed to hold opposing views, albeit to varying degrees. In reviewing this study’s data, I started to wonder whether it would have been helpful to have probed each gender more in single-gender groups. The female participants may have had opinions that they did not wish to express in front of the male participants.

This study’s participants seemed to have gendered expectations about how female students should behave, how they should perceive themselves, and what roles they should play in families and in society. These views were not always consistent within each gender, as individual men and women held varied views on what was expected and appropriate. Moreover, although some participants seemed to have traditional views of behaviour, others sought ways to move away from these norms when they felt it was appropriate to do so.

### Connecting With the Wider Community

The main theme with regard to online social connections with the wider communityrelates to inhabiting a new space. The participants joined SNSs as new online spaces and occupied or inhabited these spaces; therefore, they virtually lived online. The participants sought to inhabit SNS online spaces by connecting with strangers and the wider community, and they had specific motivations. In this context, the term *inhabiting* refers to seeking and joining new spaces. The participants’ motivations for doing so included building new relationships; opening themselves up to new information and content; expressing opinions about general or local events, topics, and people; communicating transgressive thoughts; and joining other online communities of interest.

In Figure 4.11, I provide an overview and reference points for connections with the wider community. Figure 4.11 also provides a visual summary of the themes and sub-themes for this type of connection.

**4.2.4.2 Learning new information**

**Anonymity**

**4.2.4.4 Expressing transgressive thoughts**

**4.2.4.3 Expressing opinions**

**4.2.4.1 Building new relationships**

**Inhabiting new spaces**

**4.2.4.5 Joining online communities of interest**

**4.2.4 Connecting with strangers and the wider community**

Figure 4.11**:** Themes **related to** connecting with the wider community

Below, I discuss each of the themes shown in Figure 4.11.

* + - * 1. **Building New Relationships**

The participants stated that they used SNSs to connect to and interact with people whom they did not know and establish new relationships with those people. They said that they established new friendships through these online interactions. For example, a male student said,

“*I like to know more people from different places and talk to them.*”

Another male student said,

“*I talk and comment on people’s posts a lot. I reply to their questions even if I do not know them.*”

One female student said,

“*I have lots of new friends on SNSs, from different countries. It is really nice to be able to talk to people from around the world and get to know them at a personal level. I enjoy talking to them. You do not have to see them to know them.*”

These participants said that they appreciated the way that SNSs have allowed them to communicate with people whom they have never met. They also appreciated the ability to have close relationships with people from other places, which SNSs made possible. As a result, they believe that these SNSs had a beneficial influence on their social lives. SNSs also increased the participants’ social connections and provided them with more ways to share and connect with new people. SNSs allowed these participants to connect with strangers freely in spaces where social characteristics are relatively insignificant.

* + - * 1. **Learning New Information**

Some participants indicated that they turned to SNSs to find new information and identify trends. In other words, they sought to learn about what was happening around them. A good example of this involves a female student, who explained that there was no better way to learn more about recent events than via SNSs. In such situations, she used SNSs to obtain up-to-date news and information. She also used these sites to gain immediate access to other people’s views about what was happening:

“*When something happens, SNSs are the easiest way to know all about it. The whole story is there since people will be talking about it and discussing it. You see different views and opinions about what is going on.*”

Given the many trending topics on SNSs, this student was exposed to extensive information and news about what was happening around her; this expanded her knowledge on issues that she had not been familiar with. She indicated that she learned from the various viewpoints she found on SNSs. This helped her to form her own views.

The participants generally thought that the broad knowledge and diversity of opinions they found on SNSs had helped shape their own views. For these users, SNSs provided information about issues that they had not been familiar with and widened their scope by connecting them to new people and helping them to move away from their familiar, offline space to explore new spaces. The participants’ comments indicated that the new SNS spaces also alerted them to a massive amount of information and resources, which mainly came from other individuals who used these spaces**.**

However, some participants were unaware of the algorithms that SNSs use, which affect who sees what information online. For example, SNSs make suggestions and recommendations for users to follow certain people based on their existing connections or on their similarities in interests or orientations. This process might affirm individuals’ own points of view. Although one could argue that SNSs provide opportunities for users to easily expose themselves to new ideas, facts, and opinions, SNSs’ methods tend to keep individuals within particular groups, so they often are not exposed to diverse opinions.

* + - * 1. **Expressing Opinions, Including Transgressive Thoughts**

Some participants indicated that they used SNS spaces to express their opinions on local or global issues. They considered SNSs to be new spaces that allowed them to speak out. This ability was very important. For example, a male student said,

“*Now you can use Twitter to say your opinion to thousands of people and get them to hear what you want to say no matter how old you are.*”

From the focus-group discussions, it was clear that students are increasingly using SNS spaces to voice transgressive thoughts (i.e., those that they would not normally say in public) and to break cultural rules. These participants are taking advantage of SNSs to create a distinct online presence. For example, a female participant said,

“*I give my opinion on everything and comment on everything on what’s happening on Twitter and Instagram but most probably say what I think. I feel I like to give my opinion. So, everybody can benefit* [laugh]*.*”

A male student said,

“*I like to contribute to a discussion or a conversation without people knowing who I am . . . just for fun and amusement. I am not doing anything embarrassing.* *Sometimes someone blocks you for no reason just for saying your opinion and they do not like it.*”

According to Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo (2007), the evolution of SNSs seems to have challenged the traditional norms related to the exchange of knowledge and information. This evolution has created a new form of public space that is accepting of a more diverse array of views and opinions than existing spaces but that is also more capable of overcoming the domination of a single opinion. These online spaces also provide fewer social limitations related to the expression of conflicting views. Ho and McLeod (2008) stated that SNSs offer users the freedom to express ideas with minimal risk. For example, people who are unwilling to express opinions face to face find it less intimidating to express them online.

* + - * 1. **Joining Communities of Interest**

The participants’ online connections often focussed on topics from popular culture such as celebrities and shopping. They formed groups or communities based on specific topics, shared reflections on those topics, and held discussions on common interests. They both joined groups and searched for hashtags so as to join particular conversations.

PThe participants looked for online spaces and communities where they could talk about popular topics. They invested their time in enjoyable activities, and not just their interests but also their peers’ and friends’ interests influenced these choices. The following students’ responses contain examples; for instance, a female student said,

“*I like fashion and the information on the SNSs is the fastest and the most up to date.*”

Another female student said,

“*The main purpose to log into SNSs nowadays is to get the latest news and fashion designs.*”

Another female student said,

*I like music accounts. I follow all celebrities, especially singers, movie stars, drama* [stars, and] *soap-opera stars.*”

A male participant said,

“*I search for local News and football matches’ feedback on SNSs.*”

The examples above show that SNSs encouraged these individuals to share their experiences and interests with others through posts, photos, videos, and other media. The SNSs encouraged the participants to come together in shared spaces and to express their interests, whether they were related to sports, music, fashion, books, or other topics. Through SNSs, the participants could easily find others who shared the same interests; in particular, the SNSs gave recommendations to follow certain people or join certain communities based on shared interests. This may have given the participants senses of validation and acceptance by making them feel like part of communities that they had chosen based on similarities shared and interests.

In terms of connecting with the wider community,the participants mentioned anonymity as a feature of SNSs that facilitated the building of new relationships, the expression of opinions and transgressive thoughts, and the joining of communities within the wider network of SNSs. Next, I discuss anonymity on SNSswith details and examples.

* + - 1. **Anonymity**

The participants, on several occasions, mentioned anonymity as a unique feature of SNSs. They were able to inhabit these new online spaces anonymously, which is not possible offline. According to Neuman, Bimber, and Hindman (2011), people use new spaces such as SNSs to express their opinions. The relative anonymity of online spaces can free people from social constraints and expectations. Consequently, these spaces reduce social pressure in online practices. Anonymity has, therefore, added a new feature to communication in societies (Neuman et al., 2011).

Some of the participants expressed joy at experiencing anonymous interactions on SNSs. Three male students made statements to this effect:

“*Who would know it is you? You can say whatever you want. Even my close friends would not know it is me.*”

“*It can’t be linked to you or your name.*”

“*Do not bother searching about me because I always use a fake name and wrong login details.*”

These participants’ attraction to anonymity seems to indicate that they seek independence in opinions and new forms of social interaction. They also seemed to be looking for a space with fewer judgements of their opinions. One female student explained why she has anonymous accounts:

“*You are free to say whatever you want especially when you give your opinion about something that has happened in the local community or different people. I do not really care about the people who do not know me and how they look at me. But, people who know me are important to me and I really care about what they say about me.*”

Regarding these anonymous online interactions, the participants indicated that they could express thoughts anonymously that they were not brave enough to say under their real names. They liked to be involved in social issues, but they chose mainly to join such discussions in an anonymous manner, which entailed (in their view) no consequences. This desire for anonymity could also be related to family reputation; when anonymous, the participants could be free from the formal social stress that restricts them to structured modes of interaction. For the participants, it was not the SNSs themselves but the anonymity that provided this judgment-free space in which to interact. One female participant said,

“*I am careful to never put personal information in my account so I can say my opinion freely and talk freely. No one can trace it back to me. They don’t know it is my account.*”

Some participants argued that the anonymity of SNSs freed them from boundaries and influences, but (as discussed previously) they still remained tied to particular cultural values. They found this issue to be complicated and did not seem to realise the inconsistencies in their views and practices.

On the other hand, one male participant criticised the anonymity of SNSs because

“*many of the users use a lot of dirty words because of it.*”

This is another inconsistency that I found within the views of the focus-group participants;I touch upon this issue in the conclusion to this thesis.

According to a Pew Research Center (2013) poll, around 25% of Internet users have sent comments anonymously. The unwillingness to post online comments under a real name is higher among younger people. Pew Research Center also stated that 40% of individuals from 18 to 29 years old have posted comments anonymously. Neuman et al. (2011) stated that the most common criticism of online spaces is the disconnection between users’ real names and their interactions and comments. Neuman et al. also stated that anonymity encourages online sharing and participation.

However, the issue of whether SNS users are actually anonymous is complex and has sparked controversy. One might argue that these participants were actually concealing a dimension of themselves that they did not want other people to know about. Those dimensions could not be traced back to their physical selves. Advocates of identity theories regard the self as a set of repertoires (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010; Brubaker & Cooper, 2002, Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin, 2010; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Therefore, if individuals can be different in different spaces, regardless of what their SNS account names are, then these anonymous interactions actually form part of who they are. The participants might have believed that they were hiding, but this behaviour could be considered to reveal other dimensions of their identities. They may be developing themselves as virtual beings by choosing their expressions and communications from a range of representations. Their offline interactions do not represent the full scope of their life interactions and self-expression; their online interactions are also part of this scope—just in a different space. Whether online or offline, a full life cannot be expressed in only one space. The participants were not being dishonest or inappropriate in the online context; they just used that context to make statements that, in another context, may be seen as inappropriate. This can actually be viewed as appropriate rather than transgressive in context. The participants were making judgments about how to interact in their social world, and the SNSs allowed them to broaden that world. However, SNS spaces are complex and require many decisions, so the participants sometimes decided to be anonymous.

### *Discussion*

The participants tried to understand their society, which—in part because of SNSs—is undergoing substantial changes in socialisation and relationships. Oman is transforming from a very conservative society into a more open one. Although the participants have not necessarily simply rejected their societal norms, they are re-examining forms of communication without the absolute control of that society. SNSs have given these students distance from the spaces where they are socially accountable for their actions and interactions. The participants have thus created spaces to express their opinions and to speak out in manners that may not be culturally acceptable. Many skills are involved in this process, including self-expression, exploration, understanding oneself and society, trust, and censorship.

According to Alkubaisi (2014), SNSs’ impact in developing countries such as Oman is not limited to the provision of new means for communication and interaction. SNSs are also used to create new ways of accessing and producing information and of expressing opinions. According to , in developing countries, SNSs have played a role in spreading knowledge in the public domain. Young adults in these developing countries have traditionally faced many challenges to the effective distribution of public information and knowledge. They are now finally gaining opportunities to increase their contributions, thanks to the Internet in general and SNSs in particular. SNSs help users overcome barriers such as the traditional infrastructure that often obstructs the dissemination of information in developing countries. SNSs have thus played a major role in supporting freedom of expression and in facilitating change in developing countries (Alkubaisi, 2014).

Alkubaisi (2014) made strong statements about what SNSs could offer youth. He talked about SNSs as being the answer or the solution to all problems as if SNSs are sweeping through society in an uncomplicated way. However, my research shows that a more complex situation was emerging in Oman. It shows that young people see potential in SNSs and many use them regularly, but it is actually more complicated than that as they are approaching SNSs with caution. SNSs did not immediately free these young people as they thought they need to be subversive or hiding or use subterfuge to avoid detection. So, it was not as open and positive in providing total freedom of speech and expression as Alkubaisi argued they would. My results indicate that young adults recognise the potential of SNSs but also value their traditional culture and follow its rules so as to remain part of Omani society. They did not all consider it another world as they were aware that people can oversee what they were saying online; in the meantime others did see the space as different, as liberating. They were taking some of the potential and the opportunities offered by SNSs but not all.

Generally, in this study, I have pinpointed the complexity culture brings to SNSs, in regard to how SNSs were used by young people. This study’s results seem to challenge the idea that the SNSs promote the notion of Westernisation and ‘one culture’. Appreciation for one’s own culture seems to be increased in response to the fast flow of what some call it Western norms across the world. The influence of the participants’ own culture and context influenced their activities on SNSs, indicating a lack of alignment. On the one hand, this study’s participants were seeking far more freedom on SNSs than they could otherwise realise in traditional surroundings. On the other hand, they seemed aware of certain barriers and therefore did not take advantage of every idea from other cultures. They carefully considered the openness of SNSs and critically appreciated their distinct cultural backgrounds. This study’s results suggest that students interpret SNS interactions and knowledge through the lenses of their own cultures. When intercultural interactions occurred on SNSs, this study’s participants sometimes rejected Western values, particularly when those values conflicted with Omani religious or cultural traditions; at other times, however they moved towards a more liberal way of interaction, as with gender.

Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) raised a significant question that also relates to this study: “Will the Web and mobile communication networks lead to one worldwide culture?” (p. 471). In this study, Hofstede et al. noted that individuals from different cultures use new technologies differently, largely according to what is important to them. This suggests that communication technologies do not remove group boundaries but instead allow existing groups to unify by effectively building on existing cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010). This question helped me understand the participants’ cultural differences in SNS use.

This study’s results show that context—including the family, the local community, and the broader culture—fall into traditional patterns. Context is thus a significant factor in users’ views of SNSs. However, the ways in which the participants perceived these traditions and reacted to the related pressures were not uniform.

Regarding the participants of this study, there are three main assumptions in the classical perspective of would involve three main assumptions about these young Omani adults: (1) They are from a community which shares a common culture and traditions; (2) The majority moves toward maintaining the norms (the participants of this study somehow fit into the traditional stereotype of conservative communities); and (3) Some individuals show a desire for the abandonment of ‘old’ cultural behaviours in favour of ‘new’ ones online. For example, few male students wanted to seek the means of talking to the opposite sex without being criticized as being inappropriate. Thus, these students showed both an attempt to demonstrate obedience to the mainstream Omani sociocultural norms and an eagerness to detach themselves from those norms. The students both agreed and disagreed in the ways that they perceived their culture, with some seeing it as fluid and others seeing it as static. Some of them felt that they could push boundaries by replacing the existing cultural rules with new ones from SNSs, but others believed that cultural rules should not be changed in the online context.

Some participants in the focus-group discussions felt constrained in many areas of their lives, including in terms of self-presentation, social interaction or communication between the genders, enjoyment or entertainment, and freedom of speech. SNSs empowered these students by providing them with spaces of their own; they used SNS platforms to explore ways of expressing themselves that they could not engage in before. This helped them to feel that they had a voice and a presence.

* 1. **Summary of Chapter 4’s Key Findings and Discussion**

Firstly, the students’ views were not uniform, as they existed on a continuum. In addition to the lack of a monolithic view, their views did not remain stable throughout the project. When looking at the data, I found inconsistencies within the groups’ perceptions, including variations in the students’ views—both between students and within individuals. In other words, there is diversity in the data. The discussions included a lot of uncertainty and instability, and many ideas were not clear-cut for these students, which may explain why the students’ perceptions were so varied. This could be interpreted as part of the complexity of the participants’ social culture, as they felt that they were limited in how they were supposed to behave and interact. This does not challenge the idea that culture is fluid, however. Omani culture seems to be changing in different ways for different young people. The participants’ viewpoints about their culture were fascinating; it seems that the act of using SNSs has made these students more aware of issues that they had glossed over in their face-to-face experiences. Moreover, cultural changes disturbed the students’ perceptions that the culture was static. This made some students feel unsettled, as they seemed to believe that culture not only was but should be static. Thus, although they were involved in new ways of behaving, they found these new ways to be unsettling or even disturbing.

One of the explanations for this finding could be that these young adults’ perceptions of SNS spaces are still emerging and that the participants are still in the early stages of evaluating these new spaces, which are under continuous development. SNS spaces are thus transitional in terms of how they are perceived, as are these students’ understanding of those spaces.

Secondly, the participants indicated that their cultural beliefs affected their views and their uses of SNSs.

Online connections within SNS spaces happen within new social contexts that are evolving and dynamic in nature. The users’ context was rooted within online spaces, too. These spaces have opened up the boundaries between the offline and online worlds; in other words, they are no longer always separate. SNSs are influenced by the users’ cultural context. One might think that the general culture would be dominant in SNSs and in almost every corner of students’ lives, but the opposite can also be true, as the findings of this study indicate. The impact of an individual’s culture can be large in SNS spaces.

This study’s findings seem to indicate that the participants’ distinct levels of social awareness influenced their views of SNSs within their sociocultural context. In this case, individuals’ distinct needs and beliefs are shaped by their backgrounds and surroundings. According to Greenhow et al. (2014), SNS use satisfies the diverse needs of individuals from a range of cultural backgrounds. SNS access and usage reveals a lot about individuals and about their communities in relation to their social and cultural paradigms. The research on the associations between cultural differences and SNS use is limited; however, there is evidence that culture might have an impact on his/her perception and use of SNSs. Hugl (2011) argued that users’ national culture significantly impacts their concerns regarding online privacy, as older users from certain cultures worried more about their online privacy than did older users from other cultures. Nevertheless, some researchers have disagreed with this view and argued that cultural differences do not significantly impact SNS use. Ji et al. (2010) studied the use of Facebook functions among participants from the United States, Korea, and China, and their findings showed that the use of these functions was associated with the formation and preservation of social relations. Individuals from the United States used SNSs to communicate and connect with their friends, but Chinese and Korean individuals used SNSs to search for and connect with professional contacts or to maintain offline relationships (Ji et al., 2010). These results show that there are cultural differences and similarities in SNS use, and both merit further exploration. Kim et al. (2011) found that Korean students used SNSs to gain social support from pre-existing relationships, whereas students from the United States used SNSs mainly for entertainment and had significantly more online friends online than did the Korean students. Cultural differences thus influenced the establishment and maintenance of social relationships on SNSs (Kim et al., 2011).

Thirdly, in the participants’ own views, these young adults looked at online activities in a much more positive way than their parents did. The participants saw the constant presence of SNSs in their lives as completely normal—unlike their parents, who apparently saw SNS use as risky or time wasting (at least, according to the students). The participants hardly saw their own use of SNSs as problematic. They reported that their parents’ worries did not seem to be based on real concerns and that these worries did not really affect their own views or the greater part of their everyday online behaviour (e.g., online chatting, texting, and surfing of the Internet). Indeed, these young people found that their uses of SNSs were beneficial—both useful and entertaining. This was true in terms of their social lives as well as for their education, as I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6.

Previous researchers have shown that there is an inverse relationship between age and the adoption of technology; this is true across various contexts. These scholars have argued that older individuals are more likely than young individuals to hold more negative attitudes towards new technologies and are less likely to accept those technologies; older adults also seem more reluctant than younger adults to use new technologies. For instance, Akindehin and Akindehin (2011) concluded that young adults are more likely than other groups to adopt and use technologies such as SNSs. Likewise, Nemetz (2010) studied age differences in the types of information that people post on SNSs, finding that older and female students perceive some faculty members’ conventions and posts to be more inappropriate than younger and male students do. On the other hand, Svorc (2012) indicated that age had limited influences on peoples’ views, both generally on regarding Internet use. Svorc concluded that age alone does not cause older individuals to show negative perceptions towards new technologies.

Fourthly, I observed a typical trend; many of the participants, despite familial and societal restrictions and their upbringings, sought out more independent thinking and more exposure to SNSs. They used SNSs to try to overcome what they perceived as fixed cultural restraints. In their own ways, many of them were trying to explore alternatives without disturbing the conventional norms of mainstream society. These cultural norms still mattered to the participants. This indicates that the participants faced a dilemma; they wanted more freedom and were excited about the new spaces offered by SNSs, but they expressed understanding of their parents’ fears and concerns about those sites. They encountered a lack of harmony and feelings of discomfort about what should and should not be happening in SNS spaces. They seemed to have an omnipresent fear of disturbing traditional boundaries and behavioural protocols. They pushed for what they thought was appropriate and seemed to be negotiating these decisions amongst themselves. This tendency relates to the notion that culture is fluid: co-constructed, malleable, and open to change. Culture is obviously not monolithic or static, and it is not always possible to see it in the way that Hofstede (1985) described it, as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another” (p. 25). Thus, although the participants acknowledged and even made concessions to cultural constraints, they also gently pushed the boundaries and did not behave at all as if they had been programmed.

Fifthly, an important takeaway from this study’s findings is that these students used various strategies in their online interactions. This usage could be described as strategic. The participants showed full awareness of their audiences during their online interactions. They tried to avoid conflicts due to overlapping offline and online interactions by adjusting their online interaction and directing them towards specific audiences. This adjustment reflects the same complex and strategic communication skills that they would use offline. The participants’ actions and decisions ensured that their online behaviours would not affect their relationships. They considered both their public participation and the consequences of their online behaviours. The participants also showed understanding of the consequences of their individual actions for themselves, their family members, and society in general. They aspired to communicate online without worrying that their engagements would be considered inappropriate or fearing that they would bring disgrace to their family members. These students consequently tried to manage each group’s co-presence. They took their audiences into account and tried to manage their co-presence in various ways. For example, they established boundaries between their online social connections and formed separate groups for more sharing information with relatives. In addition, they knowingly managed the type and amount of information that they shared, as they wanted to reveal personal information in a limited way. They used these strategies to avoid potential harm due to a loss of privacy or other anticipated social consequences.

1. **CONT: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Using SNSs for Informal EFL Learning**

* 1. **Introduction**

In this chapter of the analysis and findings, I explore how the study’s participating students used SNSs to learn EFL on an informal basis. As I mentioned earlier, in this study, I use the term *informal learning* to refer to all learning activities outside classrooms and by learners themselves without the teachers, where learning is planned and structured.

I also discuss the students’ views regarding such learning through SNSs. This discussion attempts to answer the following research question: *How do students of this study use and perceive SNSs for EFL informal learning?* The data used in this section comes from two sources: questionnaires and focus group discussions.

The questionnaire findings (Section 5.1) provide an overview of the students’ use of SNSs in language learning. The focus group discussions (Section 5.2) describe the students’ online activities in SNSs to improve their English language proficiency. I have identified themes for the students’ uses of SNSs in language learning. This exploration helps to expand our understanding of how SNSs are used or could be used for language learning. Further, I discuss the challenges students faced in their SNS use.

* 1. **Students’ Perceptions from the Quantitative Data (the Questionnaire)**

In this section, I present and discuss the questionnaire findings regarding SNS use for English learning. In the questionnaire, there were four items related to students’ use of SNSs in English learning: (a) whether the respondents used SNSs for English learning; (b) the students’ commonly and widely used SNSs for English learning; (c) the SNSs that had the best enabling features for EFL learning from the students’ perspectives; and (d) how the students chose to conduct their SNS activities. Next, I present significant findings on these items.

* + 1. **The Use of SNSs for English Learning**

From the questionnaire, the first important finding is that the respondents commonly used SNSs for English learning. A significant number of respondents (88.2%) indicated that they used SNSs for language learning (see Figure 5.1). This was evidenced by the majority’s use of SNS online spaces because only11.8% of the respondents did not useSNSs for learning English. Overall, most respondents used SNSs for learning English.

**Figure 5.1: The use of SNSs for English learning among students**

* + 1. **Frequency of SNS Use**

When students were asked how often they used SNSs for EFL learning, 29% stated *always or several times a day*, 20% of the students reported *often or once a day* use SNSs for EFL learning, 47.3% reported *sometimes or 2-3 times a week*, 2.3% reported that they *rarely or 2-3 times a month* do, and 0.7% reported *never*. The findings are shown in Figure 5.2.

**Figure 5.2: Frequency of SNS use for English learning**

* + 1. **Choice of SNSs for English Learning**

The second item in the questionnaire related to English learning was the respondents’ choice of different SNSs. The findings are shown in Figure 5.3.

**Figure 5.3: Choice of SNSs for English learning among students**

As can be seen from Figure 5.3, the respondents who used SNSs for learning English were likely to use more than one SNS space. There was also variety in terms of which SNSs students chose. However, the most widely used SNSs were WhatsApp (68.9%), Instagram (34.6%), Facebook (29.4%), Twitter (23.7%), and Snapchat (5.2%). This pattern was consistent with the students’ choice and use of SNSs in general. The dominance of WhatsApp in general was reflected in their choice for learning English (See Chapter 4). This finding suggests that this study’s participants were more likely to incorporate the most commonly used SNSs among them for learning English, which in this case was WhatsApp. In addition, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter were also widely used for learning English. As such, to these students, these SNSs held potential benefits for English learning activities.

The overwhelming interest of WhatsApp in English learning shows that most respondents were using closed groups with people they were acquainted with offline to enable online learning of English. This is because WhatsApp is an instant message service that depends on phone numbers (See Chapter 2). It also indicates that cooperation with peers in groups was a common use of SNSs for English learning because the main enabling feature of WhatsApp is groups and group messaging.

Findings from the quantitative data give an overview of what SNSs students were more likely to use in EFL learning. The students’ choices can be better understood when exploring the nature of their online practices and activities in the qualitative data analysis.

* + 1. **The SNSs that Have the Best Enabling Features for English Learning**

In the questionnaire, students were asked to list and order the SNSs that they thought had the best enabling features for learning English. Some students listed three or four online SNSs, whereas others mentioned only one or two. The vast majority stated Whatsapp (59.6%), followed by Instagram (30.5%), Facebook (27.8%), and Twitter (27.8%). These findings show that SNSs were considered and used as social platforms and as helpful tools in EFL learning. The findings are shown in Figure 5.4.

**Figure 5.4: SNSs with enabling features for EFL learning**

This is inconsistent with many studies in other contexts, such as Selwyn (2007), whose study emphasised that Facebook offers perhaps the most appropriate online space which is suitable for higher education according to the students.

* + 1. **Formal or Informal Use of SNSs in English Learning Activities**

Students in the questionnaire were asked two questions related to formal and informal use of SNSs in English learning ; the first question was whether they liked to use SNSs with or without the teacher. The second was whether they liked to use SNSs in the class or out of class. The findings are shown in Figure 5.5.

**Figure 5.5: Formal or informal use of SNSs in EFL learning**

Most respondents (86%) indicated that they liked to use SNSs for English learning without the teacher, and 91% indicated that they liked to use SNSs outside of class. This indicates that the overall preference for SNS use in English learning was informal. The questionnaire findings indicate that students’ preferences for using SNSs for English learning were relatively categorical for most participants. Most respondents indicated that they liked to use SNSs for English learning in an informal manner. Some respondents chose both categories because they liked to use SNSs informally and formally for EFL learning.

* 1. **Summary and Key Findings**

This section identified the use of SNSs in EFL learning among the students of this study. The main findings are summarised below:

* The majority of respondents used SNSs in their English learning activities;
* respondents preferred to use SNSs that were closely linked to their use in general;
* very few respondents would have liked to use SNSs with a teacher in a formal language-learning manner inside English classes;
* the respondents’ SNS use was more likely to take place in their own time, after class; and
* many respondents preferred using SNSs for EFL learning in an informal manner.

The quantitative analysis of the data from the questionnaire shows positive use and interest by the Omani students towards SNSs in their informal EFL learning. The data shows a growing appreciation and use of SNSs in informal learning. Students seemed to perceive an association between SNS activities and EFL development. These findings provide a general idea about how most respondents used SNSs for learning English. Section 5.3 explores the use of SNSs in more detail from the focus group discussions.

* 1. **Students’ Perceptions From the Qualitative Data (Focus Group Discussions)**

This section explores in depth the nature of the participating students’ SNS use in EFL informal learning from the focus group discussions. All the focus group participants were English language students who had used SNSs for learning English. Therefore, this section forms a significant part of our understanding of the research topic. In the following section, I have identified themes related to how these students approached and used SNSs for learning English. The themes are categorised according to students’ online practices.

The focus group discussions showed examples of how students used SNSs in an informal manner to improve their EFL learning. I discuss and analyse these examples in this section. The students of this study used SNSs in the following ways: (a) exposing themselves to English, (b) writing posts or commenting in English, (c) interacting with peers in English, (d) interacting with English speakers, (e) seeking interesting and different ways to learn English, (f) extending and individualising their English learning, (g) finding help and support related to learning English, (h) pursuing other English learners’ strategies and experiences, (i) sharing and helping others, (j) enhancing motivation, (k) expressing emotions related to studies, and (l) following SNS accounts created for English learning. Next, I discuss the above findings in detail. However, the order I present these themes in does not indicate the students’ frequency or amount of SNS use.

* + 1. **Exposing Themselves to English**

In Chapter 1, I described the context of EFL learning in Oman. The students of this study were learning English in the Omani context, which provides very limited exposure to English and few chances to be involved in English conversation. The students of this study purposefully tried to listen to and read in English on SNSs to increase their language exposure. In doing so, they tried to expose themselves to English to overcome their EFL contextual limitations. SNSs offered them access to input and images created by English-speaking communities and English speakers. Ullrich et al. (2008) stated that most of the content on SNSs is not intended for teaching purposes; however, it is real-world content, expressed by individuals in real conversations. For example, a female participating student said,

*“We need to read and listen to English as much as we can if you really need to improve our English. On SNSs I try to read and understand what is written in English.”*

This example indicates how this student was aware of the importance of language exposure to improve English proficiency. She used SNSs as an integral part of English learning to expose herself to English. This was the most popular use of SNSs among these students.

Another example came from a female student, who said,

*“I go to English SNSs and I pay attention to language structure and how people express themselves in English, how they say things. I pay attention to everything; words, phrases and expressions. SNS accounts in English improve my English skills and they are exciting and fun, I understand many of what is said and translate the rest [laugh]. “*

This comment suggests that SNSs facilitated this student’s exposure to the English language. She exposed herself to English input, which consisted of words, phrases, and expressions. Therefore, SNSs provided her with the kind of English she felt she needed for English learning because she was exposed to English used in contexts. According to Kabilan et al. (2010), reading English speakers’ posts on SNSs has been found to improve reading skills and absorption of context and culture.

In addition, some students in this study were aware of the challenges that the EFL context might bring to their learning. They seemed to have a concern that such limitations in their exposure to English might create challenges for them if they wanted to improve their English proficiency. However, these students described their practices to overcome these challenges through SNSs. One male student said,

*“We have no chances to use English outside the college. We listen and use English only in the classroom with the teacher. That’s why we go online. We could read, listen, speak and write in English.”*

This student believed that SNSs offered him direct access to a large amount of English input to overcome the limitation of the EFL context. Therefore, the EFL context necessitated this use of SNSs in language learning.

* + 1. **Writing Posts in English**

The participants of this study indicated that they posted in English on different SNSs. They indicated that they used English on SNSs through posts and comments. One example came from one female student, who said,

*“Sometimes I would write some English posts on my SNSs to practice my English.”*

Another example came from a male student, who said,

*“I use new words and expressions and try to write something in English and see if I have good comments. I also post or re-tweet English inspiring quotations.”*

In these cases, the students used SNS accounts to write and produce English in order to practice and improve their language. The students were motivated to post and share anything of interest to them with others.They showed learning potential offered from using SNSs for English production.

* + 1. **Interacting with Peers and Other Learners in English**

Many of the participants have used SNSs to interact with their friends, peers, and other learners in English. This was one of the commonly used practices mentioned by the participants of the study. These learners pursued English interaction opportunities mainly by creating groups on WhatsApp or Facebook to interact in English with their peers or other English learners.

Many students reported this as a strategy they used to learn English. For example, a female student said,

*“We have a group for English where we use English to communicate. We are trying to interact in English* *. . . all of us trying to do the same thing.”*

Another participant mentioned a similar use. She actively interacted in English with her friends who were also English learners. They used SNSs to practice English with their peers. One male participant said,

*“I have joined a big group of English learners who learn, discuss and interact only in English. My friend told me about it, but I do not know all the people in the group. .* *.* *. Three of my classmates are there too.* *.* *.* *. But they are so active, and we learn a lot. Many students send information, resources, links and there is a lot of interaction in English in the group.”*

Another example came from a female student, who said,

*“We have a group of English learners with lots of my friends who study English in different universities. Some of them are studying abroad, so they sometimes chat online in English. Their English is really good. This helps me with my English. Sometimes I look up the words to say what I want to say.”*

Another male student mentioned,

*“Me and my classmates have a WhatsApp group for English, and we try to communicate in English.”*

These motivated English learners tried to join or createonline spaces where they could use English in their interactions; this was a way of creating and extending their opportunities for English production through online interactions outside the immediate learning contexts. They created a space where all the members had the same learning aim topractice and interact in English. This large use of peer groups indicates that the students valued these language practices with friends and peers. In addition, the students viewed their friends to be supportive of their EFL learning. This is consistent with Lai and Gu’s (2011) study, which found students to be motivated to use Facebook’s interactive features for language learning with offline friends.

However, some students who used SNSs to practice English with peers online indicated that many of their attempts gradually failed. One female student said,

*“All our high school friends and new ones are in one English group and we try to practice and talk in English. At the beginning, we talked in English a lot, but later we chatted less often in English and more in Arabic [laugh]*. . . . *We do not continue speaking in English. Only for a little while and then return back to speaking in Arabic. No matter how much we try, we always talk in Arabic in the groups established to speak in English.”*

This student’s comment exemplifies the use of SNSs for peer interaction in English. However, as suggested from her remark, the students in this learning group had difficulty maintaining and limiting their interactions to English. These practices in English were not sustainable because of the use of Arabic.

The above example was not the only such case. Another male student also reported the challenge of practicing English with peers who spoke Arabic. He said,

*“I am a member of an English learning group on Facebook and on WhatsApp. I am still in the WhatsApp group; we sometimes speak in Arabic sometimes in English, sometimes in Arabic and English at the same time [laugh]. I quit from the Facebook group because it was not active, people rarely talk.”*

Overall, these comments suggest that access to online English learning groups on SNSs did not necessarily lead to communicative practices in English. These students used SNSs to reach individuals or join online groups dedicated to learning English, and they tried to interact in English. Sometimes they were successful, and sometimes they were not. However, their attempts show that the students viewed SNSs as a potential learning tool.

Besides the use of Arabic in English conversation, students faced other difficulties when interacting in English with peers online. The students’ different English proficiency levels were an issue. Some students thought that they might not benefit from less competent English learners. Presumably, peers’ abilities played a role on the students’ interactions in English on SNSs. One female student reported that she was not satisfied with the feedback she received from her peers:

*“I would prefer to talk with my teacher or an English speaker or at least some with better level of English. My friends do not check grammar because they do not know* *. . .* *my friends are not sure about English grammar just like me. How would I know my mistakes and improve my English skills? When they have little English . . . I do not think working together will help me.”*

This student seemed to value teachers’ feedback, unlike most of the examples discussed earlier of students who acknowledged their peers’ roles in their English learning. This student, however, thought that joining and working with others in groups in a collaborative manner depended on the ability of members to give constructive feedback. She thought that her friends lacked a good English level and that this did not allow them to help her. She argued that collaboration in SNSs would not help if peers’ English level was the same as or less than her own. She was not in favour of collaborating on SNSs with her friends, and she had presumably decided not to participate in speaking English with peers on SNSs. This suggests that this student’s goal in learning English was clearly not for socialising, because she did not want to prioritise socialising over learning English.

One male student perceived his online interactions with peers as useless; he said,

*“They have low-level English just like me*. . . .T*hey also want to practice their English, who will correct for whom and who will help whom*. *If we talk, we talk in very simple dialogues. “HI, how are you and so on” and nothing after that [laugh].”*

This student concentrated on improving his English through online interactions in English. However, he considered his efforts in interacting with peers online to be unsatisfactory. He thought that their language interactions failed to offer English beyond their knowledge.

The varying levels of knowledge and English proficiency posed a challenge to students with higher English proficiency because they thought interactions with relatively less proficient students would not be useful to them. This shows how students with different proficiency levels viewed the advantages of collaborative learning differently. One female participant said,

*“Sometimes we are not in the same English level. How would other students help me in English when my English is better than them?”*

Claiming to have advanced English skills, this student thought that other students could not assist her in English learning. This student was unwilling to receive any feedback from students who she thought to have lower English proficiency because she assumed that they could not help her.

Another thing these students found challenging in practice was what they described as “showing off”. Some students indicated that sometimes some of their peers behaved by showing off their English knowledge to impress classmates and teachers. This was considered inappropriate in class and online. For example, this female student was irritated by this action, thought it was quite problematic, and presumed that SNSs stimulated this kind of behaviour:

*“Some students show off online. They frequently try to prove themselves and use online spaces to show their competences. They are too busy making others feel inferior. They write English with big words* *.* *.* *. which generally is inappropriate, and I do not like it. I think it is unfair for other students who do not understand. I would never do that. I do not see why some students can’t be friendly and supportive rather than be showing off and being uncomfortable to deal with.”*

For this student, it was important to address this behaviour because she thought it was unacceptable. She stated her opinion with quite good humour, but she also sent a clear message of her disapproval of this behaviour.

This student’s view was somewhat surprising and might be argued as contradictory because she supposedly joined the group to interact in English. She claimed that she wished to improve her English. However, at the same time, she thought that those who showed high proficiency in English were doing the wrong thing. There was a conflict of interests. She implied that her friends must have just the right level of proficiency to be socially accepted. If they were too good, they were not socially accepted. It was complicated for her, and she tried to weave a way through this social situation and negotiate how it worked because she joined this space wanting to interact in English. Other students probably were strongly influenced by the presence of peers in their study groups who disapproved of them using English in a proficient manner and judged how they should interact in English online. One female student when talking about her use of SNSs said,

“I use SNSs and learn new words and improve my English myself and then impress everybody including my friends and my teacher. I do not ask the teacher. My friends and classmates come to me for help and assistance.*”*

This student’s comment shows that she used SNSs in the best possible way to practice and improve her English. However, her perception of SNSs as online EFL learning spaces might be seen as showing off behaviour, although it is a matter of how each student perceives and interprets these online spaces.

This student’s comment and the comment mentioned previously seem to indicate that students saw the online SNS spaces differently and had different understandings of what these spaces were for or of the protocol for decent behaviour. It also shows the complexity of online spaces. One student looked at the SNS space as a classroom where it was acceptable to speak in English in the best possible way and to try to be the best she could. The other student saw it as a social space wherein speaking fluent English was not acceptable because she did not see the space as a classroom.

* + 1. **Interacting with English Speakers**

SNSs provide spaces for worldwide learning collaboration (Armstrong & Franklin, 2008). Students may use language online not to complete certain tasks or exercises, but to communicate about their daily activities and life experiences as they would do in their mother tongue (Gardner, 2011). On SNSs, students may interact with English speakers to develop their skills concerning the real-world use of and communication in English (Ullrich et al., 2008).

However, regardless of this potential, only two students from my study talked about interacting with English speakers via SNSs for EFL learning. These students viewed SNSs as spaces which offer opportunities for English use that did not exist in their EFL learning context and that such opportunities were really difficult to achieve in spaces other than SNSs. These two students seemed to seek opportunities for informal interaction and English conversations and dialogues with English speakers. Although this practice of SNSs was not used by the majority of students, it was an important finding because it suggests one of the potential ways SNSs could be used for English learning.

The first example of this was provided by a female student, who said,

*“I use SNSs and approach foreigners just like that and talk to them* *[and] I try to write in English. I make lots of mistakes in grammar actually, so, my sentences might be very wrong, but they are understandable. I practice to be able to say what I want to say. I learned several words too.”*

The student appeared to have enjoyed this strategy of English learning. Presumably, she did not use a private group on SNSs but perhaps a wider interaction enabled by SNSs such as Twitter. This indicates that what social application the students used depended on what they planned to do. On Twitter, for example, there are more people involved and not simply a small group. Students in general showed many examples of their understanding of the social implications and benefits of different SNSs.

This is yet another example which highlights what SNSs may bring to English learning. SNSs provided chances for informal meaningful interactions, which this student considered quite appealing. This motivated her to put more effort into practicing English; she paid attention to the content and the flow of conversations. She acquired new words from the online interactions. Her focus was on the interaction and on conveying messages, not on grammar, as suggested by her not being afraid of making grammatical mistakes online. This is considered positiveby some language-learning approaches, such as the communicative approaches in which communication, not grammar, is given top priority (Nunan, 1991; Savignon, 1972).

The lack of interactive opportunities outside the classroom made this student explore communicative opportunities on SNSs. She talked about how she tried to expand her English production online and continued talking about her experience, focussing on the advantages she got from it:

*“In the past, after saying, “How are you”, it’s over [and]* *I could not say anything else. I did not like that. So, I tried to speak to English speakers from around the world. I speak to them in English. I have a much better language basis now. It really helped.”*

This student talked about her need to improve her communicative English competence because she was not satisfied with her competence in speaking and communicating. She described her experience of using SNSs to expand her interaction in English. Her comment suggests that her English-speaking and communication abilities dramatically improved from using SNSs. She explained how she started talking with English speakers:

*“I choose them carefully, I go to their SNSs accounts and choose those who have nice pictures and nice decent life or have interesting hobbies and I talk to them.”*

The second example of a student using SNSs to interact with English speakers for EFL learning came from another female student, who said,

*“I like to meet people from different cultures and countries and know about their life. . . . Although I have started because I was interested in talking to other people, but I found it really helpful and now I use it to improve my English.”*

This student’s online engagements improved her EFL proficiency. Her comment indicates real evidence for learning. SNSs offered this student valuable opportunities for English production and motivated her to communicate with people from other countries. Interaction on SNSs seemed to capture her attention and motivate her to produce English. She started her interactions for social and leisure purposes and moved beyond that to the aim of improving her English language ability. Muehleisen (1997) pointed out that students in his study realized the usefulness of learning and speaking English as it allows them to connect with people from around the world. They also realized the benefits of learning English as the majority of information online is in English. Feng (2009) also highlighted that students’ motivation is enhanced because of their awareness of the significance of English as a universal language.

However, one male student argued that it was impractical and almost impossible to find English speakers who would interact with low-level English learners. He tried to contact English speakers via SNSs, and he indicated that such opportunities were very rare and difficult, which was why he had asked his classmates how to locate them. He identified locating English speakers as a challenge of using SNSs:

*“It is really difficult to get opportunities to interact with foreigners. It is difficult to find foreigners who are willing to engage with you in informal conversations in English. Who would take time to speak with a learner who cannot even say one English sentence without mistakes or who takes forever to say something. And what will we talk about?”*

Although this student also chose online interaction with English speakers on SNSs as a way to improve his English, he was unsuccessful in his learning attempts. He found it difficult to locate language practice opportunities with English speakers on SNSs. This is consistent with the finding from Kinginger’s (2011a) study, which is that finding fluent speakers who are willing to interact with speakers with low language proficiency is challenging.

Another female student talked about her previous experience in interacting with English speakers:

*“I was shocked with their different way of thinking. I did not like many of the things they were talking about. Different culture* . . . *I suppose. Next time I talk to a foreigner would be through someone I know. Someone educated and may be mature.”*

Sometimes the culture English speakers presented was in disagreement with the students’ culture and thinking. Online interaction seemed to have pushed this particular student away from using SNSs for EFL learning because of cultural differences, instead of motivating her. This might be one of the reasons this practice was not common and was mentioned by only two students in this study.

The examples suggest that supportive online interactions could enhance English learning and promote opportunities for language production. However, locating ideal English speakers to interact with in English was difficult. In addition, inadequate previous experiences might discourage language learners from making use of SNSs for English learning.

* + 1. **Seeking Different Ways to Learn English**

Students of this study sought to find exciting ways to learn English. They tried to find interesting ways of learning that they did not have in formal EFL teaching contexts. They mentioned that SNSs were good learning tools for them because they were bored with the old traditional way of learning English. One male student said,

*“Using SNSs encourages me to learn English. SNSs make learning English interesting and exciting. For example, I prefer to go to SNSs and read in English* more than doing the boring English exercises in the English books.”

This example suggests that this student was a strong supporter of English learning via SNSs. The student’s explanation indicates that SNSs appeared to offer a different and interesting way to learn English. This also shows the student’s need for a more interesting and lively way to learn a language which enhanced his motivation to learn. Gardner’s (2011) study supported the idea that Web 2.0 tools, including SNSs, provide effective and fun learning spaces where students can engage in authentic online activities.

This example shows students’ motivation to improve their English through socialising. According to the students, this is something which the online context was good in providing. One male student mentioned that he used SNSs because they were simply entertaining:

“I love English. But attending English classes are not so much fun. I could learn after class, in SNSs for example and it is more interesting and useful. I am not saying English classes are not useful, I am just saying we need daily interaction to speak the language. I like to speak English on a daily basis and I really would like to be able to speak confidently and express myself. It is difficult to speak in the class with all the grammar we are learning.”

This indicates that this student considered online SNS activities in English as supportive of classroom learning. Therefore, he benefited from both settings.

Another male student seemed to think that the online English experience on SNSs brought a different learning experience. He complained about English learning in class:

*“Sometimes I feel it gets a little boring to learn English in the classroom the traditional way. It is all about memorizing vocabulary and revising grammar and completing writing and reading exercises. But adding SNSs to our learning could make learning English more fun.”*

Thus, this student’s interest in learning English was increased by the entertaining nature of SNSs. He liked the fun activities and the happy experiences SNSs provided, which enhanced his enthusiasm to learn English. This could eventually maximise students’ learning efforts and subsequently their English learning.

One female student said,

“*I really think it is a good idea to learn English through something we really like or something we are actually interested in . . . like SNSs or videos or films or music. It is a kind of change.”*

This student perceived SNSs in addition to other multimedia resources as a positively joyful way to learn English. According to her, SNSs improved her English-learning opportunities in an interesting way that he liked and enjoyed.

Another related finding was the use of popular culture topics. Students tried to search for fun and interesting activities in English, which kept them entertained while improving their English. Some of the students found entertainment from online SNSs produced in English. For example, they used English in their personal interests on SNSs intentionally to improve their English. Some students reported using and reading English in topics related to their personal interests for learning purposes. One male student said that he was very active on SNSs and used them to improve his English using his interest in sports:

*“I follow English sports online. So, I read sport news in English. I think this has helped me with my English and it is interesting.”*

The student’s choice to follow sports news in English indicates his intentional desire to improve his English proficiency using something he was interested in. It shows that improving and learning English was the main drive for using SNSs in an attention-grabbing space. Students who used SNSs in English stated that English learning was their main purpose. However, they tried to do that through seeking fun and interesting activities on SNSs. Another male student said,

*“I go to SNS accounts in English to improve my skills and for fun, I understand much of what has been said and translate the rest [laugh]*.”

A male student who was a fan of a famous English singer provided another example. This student listened to a large number of the singer’s English songs and followed this singer on all of his SNS accounts and further translated his posts to understand them. According to the student, this helped him acquire many words and extended his vocabulary. He noted the following:

*“My interest started when I came across this singer’s Instagram account by chance. I loved his voice and started following him on all his SNS accounts. I thought I will learn a few new English words too. Now, I listen to his English songs on purpose to assist me with my English.”*

Therefore, this student’s choice of SNSs started by following his interest and ended in him using SNSs as spaces for English learning. He considered this as having great relevance to learning English. It was intentional, but it was also related to his interests.

The students’ comments show that learning English may take place on SNSs. Indeed, learning English was common among students when English was a means for activities and pursuing personal interests. Students followed SNS accounts for English music, films, and TV shows and series. They followed celebrities and read their feeds. They found these activities to be entertaining as part of popular culture.

One female student clarified the effect of SNSs on English learning:

*“Nowadays many of my friends learn Turkish and Korean not English because their drama is much more popular among them [laugh].* . . .A*t least I learn English from the accounts of celebrities. . . . I am learning English which I need in my study [laugh].”*

These students appeared to be aware of the learning outcomes achieved from following their interests on SNSs. They followed their interests and used that to improve their English positively.

In another finding related to seeking different ways for learning English, one female student explained the advantages SNSs brought to her English learning:

*“Practicing English is different online. I can take time even in the middle of the conversations to plan what to say. I can talk for a long time. I sometimes can’t understand everything, but I take my time to do that.”*

This student seemed to like online written interaction because it offered a relaxed setting for English production different from face-to-face interactions in English. She had more time to plan what to say in written online interactions, which removed the stress of English production. She spoke and interacted in English at her own pace.

Another finding from this study emphasises an advantage in favour of SNS online spaces: Students indicated that they used online translation buttons or links a lot to facilitate understanding and comprehension. In other words, they used them as a shortcut to facilitate understanding of what had been said. This feature is only available online and is not available in face-to-face interactions, of course. One male student said,

*“I am happy with the translation links on SNSs. I use them a lot . . . when I find something that I do not understand. . . . Online translations are very beneficial. . . . Where will you find an interpreter who works for you when you interact face to face? I used it less by time. It is a good way to understand what has been said and learn English.”*

Here the student’s goal was to understand the language. He showed a positive attitude towards the use of online translations to L1, which he thought was helpful in meaning-focussed interactions and activities and could lead to more understanding and discussions. This student empowered himself by using language translator links to support his understanding of English posts.

Different learners in Boruta et al.’s (2011) study also found translation helpful and useful to learn English. It supported the development of meaningful engagement and language-learning skills. In a French immersion context, students used their L1 English to complete tasks more efficiently. Swain and Lapkin (2013) further said that the use of L1 in learning should rather be encouraged because this involves cognitive and social functions that can facilitate learning.

* + 1. **Extending Learning Time and Individualising Learning**

Thefocus group discussions suggested the students used SNSs to learn individually to improve their English. Students talked about their need to work by themselves after class time in order to achieve their goals. They mentioned reasons for this such as not having enough English classes to acquire the language. For example, this female student thought that the English classes she was taking were not sufficient for her to learn English:

*“English classes are not enough. . . . I have to work hard myself to improve my English.”*

Another example came from this female student, who said,

“We use SNSs to improve our English because we do not have enough English classes. We barely get enough time to practice English in class.”

These examples show that students felt that English classes were not frequent enough and provided little time forthem to learn and practice English. These students considered this as being quite inadequate to acquire the language. As such, it was a limitation that they overcame using SNSs. Another female student expanded on this point:

“We need more to be able to improve our English. We learn in the class, but I think it is only one step. We need more time and more practice and definitely more interaction in English.”

This student seemed to think that her formal English classes should be supported by her own informal learning after class on her own time. She thought that she should invest more time, practice, and interaction to achieve a better English level rather than depending solely on formal English classes, which to her were only one part of the learning process. She extended her learning of English to SNSs.

Boruta et al. (2011) highlighted that SNSs allow students to create content and share it to meet their social needs to connect with others. In this sense, SNSs offer contextually appropriate features that enable students to meet their individual needs and purposes. It seems that if students can find the right social mix, socialising online can potentially aid their learning rather than detract from it. This may mean students need to be highly motivated and disciplined or that they should not interact with others who can speak their L1.

Students mentioned another reason underlying the need for individual learning, which was that the teacher was not available all the time. For example, one male student said,

“If I want to have better English proficiency, I need to study hard by myself using all available resources like SNSs. We can not only depend on the teachers. They are not available all the time *. . .* only for class time. How about the rest of the time which we can invest to improve our English?”

From this comment, the student viewed SNSs as a means or a resource that he could use to overcome a challenge he faced in learning English. Using SNSs helped the student to improve his English and added to what he thought as narrow and restricted assistance provided by his English teacher due to limited class time.

Another male student justified his use of SNSs to find English learning support and guidance:

“I try to find answers myself or I ask for help online. It’s helpful because many people learn and speak English and they help you instead of asking the teacher all the time.”

Another male student said,

“I feel SNSs are significant when you do not know or do not understand something, especially if it is hard to contact your teachers to get answers to your questions*.* *You ask and get answers online.*”

The above examples show the importance of SNSs to these students in getting answers and support to learn English. Their use of SNSs decreased their dependence on the teacher. These examples came from students who were motivated to improve their English and asked many questions. They used SNSs to ask questions to an online audience and to learn online.

However, according to some students, they used SNSs even when learning support was available from their teacher for other reasons, like to compete with others. For example, one female student said,

“I use SNSs and learn new words and improve my English myself and then impress everybody including my friends and my teacher. I do not ask the teacher. My friends and classmates come to me for help and assistance.”

This student seemed to be motivated to learn English via SNSs to supplement her learning of English. She made and effort to improve her English using SNSs. In particular, she did this because she was highly motivated to compete with others and show off her English proficiency to her classmates and teacher. Competition with peers and wanting to excel, therefore, led this student to use online spaces to seek help that she did not want to look for offline. She depended entirely on herself and online help. She expanded her social groups online and chose online spaces that provided her with the support she needed without conflicting demands from classmates with whom she was studying. She preferred to get support from strangers online. She added,

“My friends depend on the teacher’s guidance to learn English and they ask her all kinds of questions. But not me. I learn online and I come to the English class knowing lots of things they do not know*.”*

This student seemed eager to present herself as a good English learner.   
Although she and her friends received learning support and guidance from the teacher, she chose to learn and find answers to questions online with the help of SNSs, stating,

“Idon’t like to ask many questions to the teacher. When I have questions, I search for answers by myself or ask people online. You can find answers easily or you can ask people online and get the answers.”

This comment seems to show the student’s autonomy with regard to learning and solving problems herself. She was an independent student who developed autonomous techniques to improve her English using SNSs.

Students also stated another need for learning individually via SNSs to practice certain language skills independently. Some students had specific skills that they needed extra time to work on by themselves at their own pace. For example, some students mentioned that they went online for reading practice because their reading skills were low. They read certain online materials over and over again. They made use of texts, audio, videos, or pictures to deepen their understanding. Others mentioned that they wanted to practice their communication and listening skills and build their vocabulary independently. One example came from a female student, who explained,

*“I have always been weak in reading. I started with reading small posts in English online. I used to translate many words but now I understand most of it. I practise my writing skills and try to expand my vocabulary. I try to learn at least one vocabulary item per day.”*

This student had developed a strategy to practice specific English skills with the help of SNSs, and her practice using SNSs seemed to be persistent because she tried to learn one word a day.

This was a frequently occurring and commonly adopted strategy, to develop and expand vocabulary online, so one male student explained the following:

*“I hate that sometimes when I want to say something, I cannot find the right words. It is frustrating. I need to learn English words. Sometimes, I write down new vocabulary and English expressions I come across online. I practice them and share them with friends. I think this is useful and I try to memorize them.”*

Another female student echoed this view:

*“I pay attention to everything; words, phrases and expressions.”*

Students seemed to commonly encounter and learn English vocabulary or expressions on SNSs. Thus, this strategy seemed to be an important one in online learning.

* + 1. **Seeking Help and Support Related to English**

One commonly perceived benefit in using SNSs is collaboration, meaning that students could work together in a pleasurable, collaborative manner for specific purposes related to learning English. Some of the students said they took advantage of the opportunities to help each other and to give and receive answers and feedback with their peers. They used SNSs as spaces for peer support and as means for learning from others. This positive stance towards collaboration was exemplified in the following ways students used SNSs for English learning. Some students mentioned that they used SNSs instead of search engines to address inquiries. They searched for information from other English learners online; for example, one male student said,

*“SNSs made it easier for us to work together and help each other. My friends help me to study and write in English. They help me with things I don’t know. I improved my writing skill because of them.”*

Another male student said,

“I feel SNSs are significant when you do not know or do not understand something, especially if it is hard to contact your teachers to get answers to your questions*.* *You ask and get answers online easily.”*

This is consistent with Ota (2011), who mentioned that peer learning is one of the major benefits of using SNSs for learning languages. Ota’s study concluded that assistance from peers offers advantages for L2 learning such as feedback and enhanced motivation (Ota, 2011).

This benefit was challenged by other students who perceived the answers and information gained from friends through SNSs to be confusing. Some students complained that the information from SNSs was offered by mixed groups of people which led to a multidirectional flow of information and in turn led to confusion and a lack of clarity for them as English learners. This was shown in one of the student’s comments:

“*Sometimes when I ask a question, I get many answers . . . I do not know which one is correct which one is wrong. Some other students may give you wrong answers and I do not know whether it is right or wrong. . . . That is why I asked the question in the first place.”*

In this example, the student’s English knowledge and proficiency did not assist her indeciding on the correct online information. This was especially problematic to those students with a lower level of English proficiency.Their English level did not allow them to be critical users of online information, especially in coping with large amounts of information with speed and accuracy. This could be one of the teacher’s roles because the students need to understand that there is often more than one correct answer. So, the students perhaps need guidance to be able to evaluate language, content, and online information and to learn who and what to trust online.

Students also sought help and support in online English groups. They used online spaces they were familiar with, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, to create English online communities. One female student noted,

*“We always have groups for our English classes. . . . Without them communication becomes difficult. How can you manage your studies otherwise?! We sometimes also interact in English.”*

Many students stated that they created groups on WhatsApp for their English classes which were informal because they were set up by the students. Students embraced SNS interactions in online groups, especially those created for English classes. They asked about deadlines and other practical information about the English classes; they also shared reminders and assignments with each other. This use of SNSs appeared to be an important part of their academic studies.

To these students, interaction and collaboration on SNSs produced answers that would have not been reached individually or quickly. As such, SNSs encouraged and enhanced these students’ learning by providing them with spaces for cooperation and helping each other.

However, students’ cooperation in any context was not as perfect as it would seem. Sometimes, competition became so severe that students refused to collaborate for that reason. Some students were not enthusiastic about online peer cooperation. One female student said,

*“Not everyone deserves help and good support.”*

When I asked her why, she explained,

*“Because they themselves are not willing to help and cooperate. Actually, SNSs sometimes tend to reveal the competition among students. The group is there. It is open and accessible. A student who never contributes nor helps others and turns out to have all the answers the next day is not a cooperative student and does not deserve help when he needs it.”*

This student thought that SNSs triggered competition instead of collaboration because of their display and availability features. She rejected collaborating with those who gained advantages from other students’ help and efforts without sharing and helping in return. She was offended by this perceived unfairness and decided to punish those classmates who were not helpful.

* + 1. **Pursuing Other English Learners’ Successful Experiences and Strategies**

The data derived from this study shows that the students used SNSs to find highly frequent experiences and common strategies that others used for successful English learning. This practice shows the value students put on others’ experiences and strategies. The students wished to build up their successful English learning strategies using strategies used by others for learning a language. One female student said,

*“When I started college, I did not know how to develop my English. I read other learners’ posts and strategies and they guided me in my English learning. . . . I found advice and many strategies online.”*

Another female student said,

*“I was able to find many English learners with good English on different SNSs. I aim to be like them. I focused on how they managed to improve their English. And when you talk to them, they help you and sometimes they give you resources online, perhaps links and they advise you what to do.”*

These two students had the goal of improving and developing successful strategies to learn English. They used SNSs as a platform to find good experiences and practice to improve their English language strategies. Other learners’ online learning experiences influenced how these two students approached and managed their own learning. These were not the only examples. A third example came from a male student, who said,

*“When I find online good students of English, I would join them immediately to benefit from their experiences.”*

In this student’s opinion, other English learners may reveal useful strategies and experiences online. He regularly joined and interacted in former English learners’ online communities to benefit from their experiences. Another male student said,

“*I ask other English learners about the experiences and strategies they used to improve their English (online) . . . learning techniques and better ways or programs to learn English.”*

Therefore, students seemed to like to follow former English learners to gain a more strategic use of SNSs for English learning. They were motivated to put effort into using others’ successful strategies to achieve the same results.

Swain and Lapkin (2013) stated that through learning and cooperating with peers on SNSs, students may create effective learning activities. They can also find weaknesses and improve their understanding.

* + 1. **Sharing and Helping Others**

A number of the students in this study indicated that they tried to help others in their English learning. They not only sought and got help, but they also voluntarily used SNSs to share knowledge and help other learners. Some students indicated that they joined SNSs because they thought many of their friends and other English learners looked for help. In other words, these students not only produced English but also produced and shared knowledge in their online communities. One female student said,

“*I sometimes write about how I learn and practice English. Many times, I answer my friends’ questions when I know the answer . . . when I learn something new, I share it online with them.”*

This student made an effort to share her knowledge online with other learners. While helping her friends, she also produced and contributed to knowledge online. One of the findings of this study is that sharing was valued with regard to learning English because it was used as a means to help others and to spread knowledge. One example of this came from a male student who was active in an English online learning community. He shared learning experiences and resources online and said,

“I share the strategies I use to improve English and upload many of my useful resources for others to use and benefit from. My friends ask for help on the group. Sometimes I help them. They ask about things that they consider difficult. I like helping them *. . .* my classmates and friends are in this group *and we are all learning English.* I have lots of useful learning resources that I can share.”

This student helped his friends, classmates, and other online learners and found helping them to be enjoyable. He felt some responsibility to help and to share useful learning resources with his classmates if they asked for help. In addition, his friends and classmates were also his SNS friends, and he shared what he thought were useful English learning resources on SNSs. Shihab (2008) stated that SNSs allow for sharing through a range of features which are not only exclusive to experts but also to novices. They can equally make their work available to everybody (Shihab, 2008).

Another male student said,

*“I share a lot of useful information online on my account . . . for everyone to use.”*

As shown in these examples, sharing was part of these students’ learning process. Most of these students were active learners in groups which consisted of individuals from their offline contexts, but some also helped learners they were not acquainted with offline. These findings demonstrate that this sharing practice was motivated by the students’ sense of understanding and caring for others’ needs. They had a sense of responsibility to share knowledge with friends who asked questions and had inquiries online.

The above examples show that some students did not only practice and produce English but also produced content and knowledge in what could be termed *affinity spaces* (Gee, 2004). They were language learners who actively shared their experiences related to English learning on SNSs and helped others.

* + 1. **Enhancing Motivation for English Learning**

SNSs are highly recommended for motivating students to use language in natural contexts (Boruta et al., 2011). Mortimer (2010) mentioned that if a student is familiar with SNSs in daily life, he or she feels motivated to use them in education. Furthermore, SNSs are also considered to be fun and interactive, which leads to enhanced motivation. The findings of my study show that students were motivated to learn English via SNSs, and they used SNSs purposely to motivate themselves to learn English through collaboration with others.

Students were motivated to use SNSs in learning English because of others’ good experiences. Many students were motivated to use SNSs to improve their English as recommended by their peers. One male student said,

*“My friend said that she used SNSs to improve English skills. She strongly recommended using SNSs to read and write in English. It worked with her.”*

Another male student said,

*“I have received advice from my friends to use SNSs to improve my English. They have even told me how to use them.”*

This study shows that students’ motivation was closely linked to peers’ motives and uses in learning English. Peers seemed to influence the students’ choice to use SNSs for EFL learning. This means that learners were more likely to be motivated to learn English because of their friends, and consequently, they were more active in learning. On the other hand, these students felt encouraged to learn English because they encountered English learners who had good English and who talked in English on SNSs. One male student said,

*“I was able to find many English learners with good English on different SNSs. I aim to be like them.”*

This student was inspired by what others had achieved, which was demonstrated on SNSs. He had developed an interest in learning English and a strong motivation to learn it because of that. This influenced his persistence, commitment, and determination to learn English. Another example came from one female student, who said,

*“Some of my school friends are now abroad; sometimes we talk in English on SNSs. Seeing how good their English is, encouraged me to learn English on a daily basis.”*

Another female student said,

*“I saw my classmates reading in English every day. Trying to talk in English, use SNSs to improve their language. I wanted to do the same. When you see your friends motivated to learn English that makes you motivated too.”*

It seemed that the students’ motivation was greater because of the influence of other language learners learning online; the open nature of online interaction meant that these learners’ interactions were public and thus influenced other learners, in a manner unlike, for example, listening to the radio or reading a book.

One student mentioned that he was surrounded by unmotivated friends. He escaped their influence on his learning and sought motivation through SNSs English communities online. One female student reported the following:

*“All my friends do not like to learn English like I do. I do not think we have much choice. No matter what we decide to do in the future, it will definitely involve English. My friends do not encourage me to learn as they don’t really work hard to improve their English language. I met many individuals online who are really hard-working. I try my best and work hard too.”*

This comment shows the students’ awareness of peers’ significant influence. She invested effort to distancing herself from peers who she perceived as having a negative influence on her as an English learner. She joined online spaces which she strategically chose to motivate her. She thus moved away from contexts she found to be demotivating. Moreover, her motivation to use SNSs for English learning was enhanced by her realisation of English’s significance for a career. This finding is similar to a study by Gardner (2011), who studied the effects of Web 2.0 tools in English programmes. Overall, most students in his study were very positive, and they seemed generally enthusiastic about using interactive Web 2.0 tools for language learning. For his students, these tools were a good way to learn English for future academic and career opportunities.

The students from my study confirmed peers’ influence on the learning process, especially in relation to motivation. The findings provided examples for the peers’ positive and negative impact on motivation. Some of the enthusiastic students may have enhanced their friends’ motivation, but they could be affected by others’ lower motivation.This is in agreement with other relevant studies by Franklin and Van Harmelen (2007) and Yang, Wang, Woo, and Quek (2011).

Many other studies reported increased motivation for learning. For example, Kabilan et al (2010) stated that students considered Facebook groups as a beneficial online space to learn English because they allow English practice and increase students’ motivation. They argued that Facebook groups offer students opportunities for meaningful interaction with peers. In Yalcinalp and Gulbahar’s (2010) study on WhatsApp groups in EFL learning, the authors highlighted the benefits of these groups, including motivating learners and creating useful, cooperative learning. According to Bere (2013) and Chipunza (2013), SNS groups, namely WhatsApp groups, are used by students as shared spaces that maintain accessibility to peers and classmates, prompt collaboration, and enhance motivation for active learning and engagement.

* + 1. **Expressing Emotions Related to Students’ Studies**

Initially, I had not considered this use as a main use of SNSs related to learning until a later stage. It slowly emerged, however, that it was highly relevant to learning. Some students of this study indicated that they expressed emotions about their studies on SNSs because of the stress they were exposed to as students. The following example clearly indicates that the benefit of expressing emotions is related to learning. One female student said,

*“It is not only the help I get in my studies that I like, but also the emotional support when I am upset or confused or stressed out from my studies.”*

On various SNSs, these students posted expressions of their emotional status regarding studies and things that occurred in their learning. A common thing they did was post or send messages of emotional support and to trigger conversation of how they felt regarding a certain issue. For example, another female student said,

*“We talk a lot about how we feel. There are conversations that start when one of us sends a sad face or a confused face. Or changes their profile to a sad or distressed picture which shows that she is not in a good mood and needs to talk about it. Most of the time we will be doing a project or doing an assignment or having an exam and we are all going through the same thing.”*

This student talked about her friends who used SNSs to express emotions. They used the groups on SNSs to express to friends their feelings and frustrations related to their studies. They even changed their profile pictures more often to reflect their emotional status.

The rationale behind this may be that students benefited from the feeling that they were connected to others. They also got emotional help and support from others who might be in the same position. For example, when they felt anxious or stressed from exams, they expressed this in their posts to get the support they needed from their peers who were going through the same circumstances. Another example came from a female student, who said,

*“Sharing my feelings and frustrations on SNSs influences my mood and gets me back to my studies again with a more cheerful attitude. I am not alone in this. Everybody is stressed out.”*

A male student said,

*“My friends make fun of everything, but it is useful. It releases the stress.”*

This shows that one of the central aspects of emotional expression on SNSs was to intentionally get support and release tension. A male student said,

*“We are always grumbling on SNSs about our studies, assignments, exams, our classmates, what is happening during the day and even about teachers.”*

The word *grumbling* here shows that these students expressed negative emotions, not positive emotions – such as ,feelings associated with anger, frustration, tiredness, depression, confusion, boredom, and sadness about certain situations related to studies. It was also a way to voice conflicting views about everything. This finding breaks away from the norm often associated with SNSs, that so-called perfect lives are portrayed.

* + 1. **Following SNSs Dedicated to English Learning**

Students also stated that they joined SNS accounts that were established for learning English. One male student said,

*“I have joined many accounts on SNSs for learning English. They give you explanations for grammar rules and give you listening and reading practices and they help you improve your English.”*

Another male participant said,

*“There are English learning accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram established by good English teachers. I have joined and made use of “ask the SNSs accounts”. They give instructions and explanations in Arabic. And he even helps you if you ask him anything.”*

Another example is from a female student as follows:

*“I follow some SNSs which help me build up my vocabulary as they give me new words every day to know and learn. New words with their meaning in Arabic appear while I am surfing. I try to study them.”*

This is yet another practice that students mentioned. They followed SNS accounts that were directed towards English learners. However, all the English learning accounts that students mentioned had been established in both Arabic and English. They were professional English learning sites. These examples suggest that students preferred SNS accounts that were specifically dedicated to them as Arab learners learning EFL.

* 1. **Summary of Chapter 5’s Key Findings and Discussion**

Overall, students of this study chose to explore SNSs for language learning purposes. Their use of SNSs was judicious and often sophisticated. They tried to find interesting input and activities in English via SNSs, and they increased their language exposure through sustained use of SNSs for specific learning purposes.Students tried to create opportunities for English production and for interaction with peers, other language learners, and English speakers. They tried to seek help from other individuals online, and they also provided help for others. With the help of SNSs, students also found new learning communities and new interesting ways of learning which kept them motivated to learn English.

I started this chapter by describing the online practices which showed how and why students used SNSs for EFL learning. Next, I attempt to make links and discuss these practices in depth. This is central to answering the second research question: *How do students use and perceive SNS in informal EFL learning?* Looking at the students’ SNS online practices, I foundthat they fell into three major themes. Students in this study used SNSs to (a) learn with peers and other English learners, (b) learn individually, and (c) interact with English speakers. The three themes and sub-themes for this discussion are summarised in Figure 5.6.

**Interacting in English with peers**

**Seeking and getting help**

**Seeking learning strategies**

**Sharing and helping others**

**Expressing emotions related to studies**

**Enhancing motivation for English learning**

**Interacting with English speakers**

**Exposing themselves to English input**

**Seeking interesting ways to learn English**

**Enhancing motivation for English learning**

**Individualised learning for specific needs**

**Following SNSs dedicated to English learning**

**Extending learning English outside class**

**Students’ SNS Practices for Informal EFL Learning**

**Learning with peers and other EFL learners**

**Learning individually**

**Interacting with English speakers**

**Figure 5.6: Students’ SNSs practices for informal EFL learning**

Next, I explain each theme illustrated in Figure 5.6. I also refer to and discuss c*ommunicative competence*, which was a recurring and salient learning theme for all students’ SNS use for EFL learning throughout the study.

* + 1. **Learning With Peers and Other EFL Learners**

It is worth emphasising that the findings of EFL learning practices I have previously presented overlap with the findings from other studies. My findings indicate various uses that line up with other research, such as different and enjoyable learning settings, interactions with other language learners, access to English speakers, exposure to language, collaboration, and motivation (e.g. Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Kabilan et al., 2010).

However, my study’s data shows the extensive use of small SNS groups with shared goals and interests, which is the main theme that highlights the differences between my findings and other researchers’ findings.

Many of the students’ SNS practices involved joining or creating small groups. Indeed, according to Beck (2014), earlier generations of SNS users have mainly used SNSs for status updates, networking, likes, getting followers or friends, following or friending a large number of people, and keeping up with everything. The second generation of SNS users, in contrast, has shifted their focus towards what Beck called “ephemerality and digital tribalism” (Beck, 2014, p. 2). They tend to use smaller subgroups with shared interests. Beck (2014) said that current SNSs users

*“follow a small circle of close friends on Instagram, pin with a small handful of followers on Pinterest, message with a girlfriend or schoolmate on WhatsApp or Snapchat, or follow a co-worker’s check-ins on Foursquare. Or, they will build the next platforms and apps that don’t exist yet.”* (p. 3)

This is consistent with my study’s findings because students’ online SNS practices indicated that students mainly used relatively small SNS groups for informal EFL learning. Indeed, they used SNS groups as affinity spaces(Gee, 2004). The participants mainly used SNS groups especially with peers or other EFL learners to improve their English proficiency. Next, I discuss the students’ use of groups on SNSs in light of affinity spaces that encouraged sharing related to a particular interest.

* + - 1. **Small SNS Groups With Shared Goals and Interests**

Gee (2004) described the gathering of individuals around shared interests and goals as an affinity space: “An affinity space is a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals” (p. 67). Although Gee (2004) described the features or hallmarks for affinity spaces in video games for learning, many of these features are also largely found in SNS spaces. His criteria for affinity spaces consist mainly of shared interests, goals, or activities; individual and distributed knowledge; and various ways for meaningful participation. I do not use these criteria as themes for this discussion, but they are clearly embedded and discussed within the themes I identified here.

In this study, most students’ SNS practices for learning English involved groups with a certain number of students and had the following features: (a) shared goals, (b) safe space for English production, and (c) peers as a source of knowledge. As could be noted, these features overlap with affinity space features, which I mentioned above and which Gee (2004) identified. The following analysis discusses these features in light of the affinity space features.

* + - * 1. **Group Features: SNSs as Affinity Spaces for EFL Learning**

***Groups With Shared Goals and Interests***

Students of this study indicated that they mostly used SNSs to informally connect with their peers and classmates to enhance their EFL learning experiences. They gathered in SNS groups with an English learning goal which was consciously apparent to all members. Creating or joining these spaces was clearly associated with that shared goal. Students stated that they created groups mainly on WhatsApp for English classes and for learning English with their peers or other English learners. For example, one student reported,

*“We always have groups for our English classes,* and, *I have a group for English where we use English to communicate.”*

The students chose to interact within these SNS groups in discussions about the most contemporary, local, and cultural everyday issues and events besides pop culture topics. Students were English language learners, but they did not create new, stand-alonemessages in the groups nor make explicit requests that they were looking for conversational partners to help them improve their English. Instead, they contributed to discussions on different topics in the groups in English. They used their limited language skills to contribute to the discussion threads and to express an opinion on different topics or a response to other members’ messages. The students’ contributions were accepted andresponded to by others. They received feedback on thecontent and language of their posts. They used English and Arabic in their posts, which was accepted by other users because they were contributing to thediscussion and following the unofficial rules of the discussion group. Their contributions to the discussion outweighed their limited language proficiency. I found evidence that these interactions within a group reflected a social constructivist view, in which learning is a social construct (Vygotsky, 1986).

Moreover, in these online groups, there were negotiations of meaning which improved the students’ communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). Negotiation showed a basic element of sociocultural theory to support learning. Similarly, students often received feedback from others which referred to working and collaborating in groups (Vygotsky, 1997).

A key concept in this analysis is communicative competence, which focusses on contextualised meaning rather than on correct standard language forms (Lamy & Zourou, 2013).

Here I feel it is important to explore the principles underlying this sociolinguistic concept of communicative competence. Communicative competence lies behind communicative language teaching, which includes the social and linguistic knowledge essential for effective interaction. Hymes (1972) first suggested this idea and emphasised how people construct meaning in social interaction. Communivcative competence broadly refers to the effective use of language in context and is closely related to awareness of social considerations. Hymes (1972) stated, “socio-cultural factors have an explicit and constitutive role” (p. 271). In other words, communicative competence depends on social aspects before linguistic aspects because language is bound by the context in which it is produced. In this regard, within online spaces, students of this study engaged in conversations with peers, which enhanced their communicative competence. They considered their daily English conversations with peers as providing them with exposure to different types of English besides academic English. This knowledge gave them tools to comprehend and use the language communicatively in different contexts.

According to McCroskey and McCroskey (1988), learners are exposed to various types of communication during collaborative learning activities on SNSs such as conversation, discussions, and expressing opinions. Therefore, the students’ communicative competences played an important role. Students expressed diverse forms of communicative competence based on context. Exposure to any setting helps in developing appropriate communicative competence (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988).

Because my discussion focusses on the common use of affinity spaces, it is easy to overlook the students’ use of other spaces or how they used different spaces together. The students used many online spaces together; however, the main affinity space was the online groups on WhatsApp that they created for language learning. Other SNSs also played an important role in their language practice and allowed them to obtain new content, news, and information and to connect, discuss, and interact in English. This indicates how students had a main SNS they preferred and at the same time used many other spaces to maintain connections and to open themselves to new information, news, and updates.

According to Balter and Brunet (2012), it is common for many students to face the same learning concepts, objectives, or challenges. SNS groups can help a group of learners or an entire class collaborate to make studying, interacting, and cooperating more effective for everyone.SNSs enable users to create or join groups according to their interests. Balter and Brunet (2012) mentioned that SNS groups’ main purpose is to help members interact around any topic or community; group discussions are probably one significant feature of SNS groups.

The students of this study commonly felt a benefit of using SNSs is that SNSs provide opportunities for collaboration where they could work together for specific purposes related to learning English. One male student said,

*SNSs made it easier to work together and help each other. My friends help me to study and write in English. They help me with things I don’t know. I improved my writing skill.*

This comment shows that the student considered SNSs as ideal spaces for collaboration, which he considered valuable for learning. He reported that SNSs provided good spaces to work with peers and to learn from them.

***Safe, Comfortable Space to Improve Communicative Competence***

A second feature of students’ SNS groups that I identified during this subsequent analysis was how students considered SNS groups as safe spaces for language learning. Students chose to use SNS groups because they allowed for efficient and comfortable EFL learning with minimal criticism and judgement. Almost all of this study’s participating students (with some exceptions) preferred interacting in English with groups of peers and other EFL learners more than with English speakers. This included interacting with their English course classmates and other English learners from other universities. They believed that working with others in SNS groups provided them with secure settings for learning.

Students joined groups established to facilitate learning English in a low-stress situation with other English language learners. Students’ low anxiety might be related to their ability to engage in a level of English which they understood because it came from peers who were also in the process of learning. They learned English and still had fun interacting with others.

Students’ low anxiety in SNS groups might also be related to the psychological benefits of being part of a community and among others. Heller and Rook (2001) stated that social relations and social groups may support satisfaction and confidence because they offer support and help in achieving goals and success. It was clear in my study that students received these benefits from social interaction with their peers and other English learners. Their choice to connect with English learners had the potential to create safe and relaxed feelings of belonging.

Having a precise and perhaps limited number of learners in groups also provided a secure setting for students. They could have private discussions in their separate online communities. Students could consider to some extent general interactions on SNSs to be confusing or chaotic. Such interactions may also be difficult to follow or benefit from. On the contrary, these students used groups which were relatively small and usually had a certain number of individuals, which reduced the number of topics and discussions. This made informal interaction and collaboration easier to take place and conversations easier to follow, track, and engage in at a more self-directed pace.

In SNS groups, students were sometimes not concerned about using Arabic for communicative purposes. They used Arabic because their interactions were within groups of peers and language learners who understood their needs and circumstances and sometimes used Arabic too. They used both Arabic and English to express opinions and emotions and to participate in conversations. They enjoyed online groups because they could communicate with peers using Arabic and English, unlike when talking with English speakers, during which they could feel insecure or unable to express themselves well. Participation in small groups encouraged students to interact in English. Therefore, my analysis highlights the acceptance of the use of more than one language in any given conversation, which helped create a safe and comfortable space for learning.

In this study, communicative competence is significant in SNS online spaces for comprehension and conveying messages. Thus, although speaking in Arabic might seem out of place in SNS groups established to improve English, it was acceptable for these students during interaction with their peers because using both languages enhanced comprehension and maintained the flow of communication. It is worth noting that it took some students time to decide whether certain groups were beneficial because their peers spoke in Arabic. However, all the students who talked about the use of Arabic laughed, which indicated that they accepted the situation in a relaxed way. One student said,

*“All our high school friends and new ones are in one English group and we try to practice and talk in English. At the beginning, we talked in English a lot, but later we chatted less often in English and more in Arabic [laugh]*.”

So, in spite of demonstrating their active need to interact in English, the students laughed, which expressed their agreement and acceptance of Arabic as a fixed part of their interactions. Bilingualism is something they valued. These students appreciated their interactions together and appreciated their use of languages in a more fluid way. When they came together as groups of learners, they moved between languages; however, instead of resisting the use of both languages in one space, they thought it was inevitable. They did not mind using both languages in one context, especially in online contexts, which was new and less stable than in classrooms and with peers who perhaps regularly did the same. The online spaces seemed freer, more relaxed, and more informal.

In this regard, these students emphasised the use of bilingual or multilingual practices on SNSs more than practices in one language. Their bilingual or multilingual practices in SNS groups showed their critical use of SNS spaces. The term *translanguaging* is accredited to Williams (1994), who used it to describe bilingual classroom practices in which the input and the output were in two or more different languages. My understanding of translanguaging is based on the process of using language to gain knowledge and to make sense of and express one’s ideas to communicate. Baker (2012) talked about the benefits of translanguaging in bilingual classrooms to develop skills in more than one language. The participants of my study used SNS groups in a way that led to a contextual use of language, which led to communicative competence. These students interacted with other English learners who were also trying to learn English and who shared a lot of similarities. Students chose to engage in SNS interactions because they could use English for real communication with peers, although they did not use English all the time and sometimes used Arabic.

Snell (2012) argued that local dialects interrelate with semiotic resources within children’s linguistic repertoire. Her analysis of children’s interactions highlighted the use of hybrid language as children made certain linguistic choices in their speech for social purposes. Although Snell studied the language of working-class children in England, her work was useful to this study. The notion that people draw from linguistic repertoires and from different ways of speaking for different purposes and for different times applies here. The students of my study also had a linguistic repertoire from which they chose or combined to suit certain situations and to address specific communication purposes. They used a range of available semiotic resources including Arabic and English to communicate with their peers and convey their message.

The participants of my study wanted to speak English to use it in Oman with other people in Oman who shared many similarities. They were learning and speaking English so that they could get access to information or cultural resources (e.g. pop songs or sports). They used English in a more fluid and exciting way online than in their EFL classrooms. This is because the online use of English had the characteristics of Western culture, although they did not adopt the Western culture as a whole. So, these students’ contexts worked as a filter of what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to speak English.

In another point related to considering SNSs as safe and comfortable spaces, the students’ comments suggest that groups on SNSs provided a safe, continuous connection with their peers. Students used these spaces to ask for and receive clarification for anything. For example, students’ comments indicate that they felt comfortable in asking questions and sharing. The role of peers, classmates, and other English learners involved providing direct information related to their exact concerns and exact learning needs. Mitchell (2012) suggested in her qualitative study that developing friendships on SNSs increases motivation. Her findings suggest that learners interacted with friends to increase their language and cultural competencies (Mitchell, 2012). Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2007) stated that students like to work in cooperation with their peers because interaction is meaningful to them as a way to advance their own and others’ learning needs. Giving and receiving information and feedback from peers leads to learning (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2007).

As is apparent in my findings presented earlier, SNS interaction between peers was a practical way to exchange information to support EFL learning. This study’s participating students used SNSs for their daily EFL learning because SNSs supported them by providing daily practical information and resources. For these reasons, students felt comfortable when seeking daily help from their peers.

Barseghian (2011) mentioned that students learn actively when interacting with classmates easily and more frequently. He further mentioned that it was useful that class resources were available for all students to access anywhere and anytime. Students can also get access to extra activities, practices, and assignments.

This study’s findings show that SNS group members had guidelines for everyone to follow to keep these spaces comfortable for all members to appreciate and take ownership. They had unarticulated ideas and rules to guide interactions among members of the groups, and they had implicit rules regarding what was allowed in peer interactions. For example, they rejected those interacting in an unacceptable manner. One example a student gave was that when the students did not help uncooperative individuals. Greenhow and Robelia (2009b) mentioned the existence of social rules among students which can be flexible, implicit, and unwritten behaviour guidelines. These social norms might change and evolve over time because these SNS spaces are relatively new, and the students’ perceptions and their social context might change as well

Students also determined the kind of English writing they should use online, such as avoiding using long or obscure words, which was considered inappropriate. A student said,

*“They write English with big words . . . which generally is inappropriate, and I do not like it.”*

In other words,having just the right amount of English proficiency made it socially acceptable to interact with others. Interacting in so-called expert English was socially unacceptableThey went to these spaces wanting to interact in English, but they wanted these spaces to be comfortable to do so, which is why they created and adhered to guidelines that were not quite articulated, although members perhaps knew and tacitly enacted them.

Hanna and de Nooy (2003) explained the significance of being conscious of theaccepted rules within an affinity space, such as being aware of the audience, using other published works as resources for content and structure, and using an opportunity to express one’s thoughts and opinions. I also argue that because students frequently used SNSs to connect with friends, they might build an awareness of the society, the language used, and the construction of meaning in different contexts. According to VanDuzer and Florez (2003), students question the social, cultural, and ideological elements in what they say, hear, read, and write.

***Peers as a Source of Knowledge***

Because students in this study organised their activities in affinity spaces consisting mainly of peers, they had many means of exchanging and sharing information with others. It is important to say that these students gathered in SNS groups exhibited different levels of English proficiency. As such, SNS groups functioned as affinity spaces which enabled many types of cooperation and were not formed on the basis of English abilities. Therefore, all members of the groups, including low English proficiency students, were able to give support to others in these groups and play a role in each other’s learning process.

In addition, SNS groups were useful because they brought a degree of accountability and responsibility among members to assist and help each other. Some students demonstrated their use of SNS groups to help each other in EFL learning. According to the students, SNSs offered spaces in which students who were more proficient in English were able to share knowledge, help others, and practise English. They seemed to take a role in collaborative sharing and exchange practices in SNSs. Boumarafi (2010) stated that learning is especially useful for SNS online informal learning in which sharing is fundamental. Many studies investigated sharing and exchanging information between learners, which are essential aspects in the language learning process (e.g. Mills, 2011). In Mills’ (2011) study, the majority of the participants described their desire and willingness to communicate with each other in order to provide all members with information and support.

Students of this study learned English via SNSs on the basis of giving support and sharing ideas. This study’s data shows that some students explicitly categorised themselves as having a good level of English in comparison to their group peers. They mentioned that other students would ask them for help. Because they thought they could help, they often shared their experiences, knowledge, and strategies with others. They also worked with others in the SNS groups and attempted to complete any challenging tasks, even the more demanding ones. While other English students explored interactions, asked questions, or made inquiries, other students in the groups took the role of helping others in their studies.

These students demonstrated an awareness that they could largely benefit from SNS interaction with other learners who were also learning English. Hence, for most of them, interaction with other English learners locally or in their social circles was a key element in using SNSs for EFL learning. This shows that most students seemed to believe that other students on SNSs could be a source of knowledge and information for them. This is one of Gee’s (2004) criteria for affinity spaces: in an affinity space, anyone may produce content. The idea that content and knowledge production can come not only from elite individuals but from all members is a feature of affinity spaces (Gee, 2004). Some students, though, appreciated help from and collaboration with more capable peers; they found it useful mainly when their peers communicated with them in English.

My analysis suggests that there were benefits to using SNSs that opened opportunities for collaboration between all members regardless of their language proficiency level.

* + - * 1. **Challenges**

Although this study suggests that groups of EFL learners and peers can provide safe learning and opportunities for language production, the findings also suggest that these uses were not without challenges.

My findings suggest that although EFL learning through SNSs is naturally collaborative, there are also challenges which may lead to the avoidance of their use. The data shows that students put much weight on SNS groups’ members for English production and interaction. However, the data also suggests some challenges related to SNS group members. For example, a few students communicated their disappointment in finding a few members who did not have a group work spirit. Therefore, although there were examples to show that working in groups was enjoyable and comfortable for students, there were also examples of challenges related to encountering members who were unwilling to help, who were competitive, or who did not follow the tacit group guidelines. SNS groups depend a lot on members’ willingness to contribute to the group and to help and receive help from others in return.

* + 1. **Learning Individually on SNSs**

Besides learning with peers, the second major theme in EFL informal learning suggests that SNS spaces offer English learners many ways for learning independently and individually to achieve certain EFL learning goals. This finding is consistent with Gardner’s (2011) findings, which are that Web 2.0 tools and SNSs offer students spaces in which to engage in many ways of learning for their advantage.

In my study, there are two main sub-themes that describe SNS spaces for individual learning: (a) They support different learning styles and needs, and (b) they are motivating.

* + - 1. **Supporting Different Learning Styles and Needs**

EFL students perceive SNSs as spaces that enable English learning regardless of their different learning styles, needs, skills, and capacities (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). Students of this study chose to independently work on different activities according to their learning needs and preferences. This practice on SNSs reflects the benefits that SNSs could provide, such as a variety of choices and a wide range of materials and different activities for EFL learning. Students used and promoted different SNS features based on their EFL learning needs. For example, one student said,

*“I practice my writing skills and try to expand my vocabulary. I try to learn at least one vocabulary item per day.”*

Gardner (2011) stated that because students learn in different ways, a majority of them think that using Web 2.0 tools including SNSs is helpful. Students try to utilise SNS spaces individually to reach their goals because SNSsoffer them the chance to work and learn in a space that greatly suits them. They can customise their SNS spaces based on their learning needs, styles, and strategies. SNSs also enable students to have freedom to choose activities which range in difficulty according to their proficiency level and to choose the SNSs they are familiar with for EFL learning, which takes place in their daily habits and experiences (Boruta et al., 2011).

The students’ individual SNS use for EFL learning indicates their desire to direct and regulate their activities and interactions by choosing what suited them. This can be seen in the following student’s comment:

*“I have always wanted to improve my reading skills. I started with reading small posts in English online.”*

Another student said,

“*If I like to have better English proficiency, I need to study hard by myself using all available resources like SNSs.”*

Students agreed that SNSs enabled them to practice English repeatedly as frequently as they deemed necessary to strengthen their EFL skills. According to the students, SNSs also offered self*-*paced practice in many flexible ways for EFL learning; most of these SNS activities covered all EFL skills. Students also perceived SNSs as beneficial for their EFL learning because these spaces were always available to them.

In this regard, one of the most powerful drivers for using SNSs for EFL learning was their availability over time and space for independent EFL learning.

* + - 1. **It Is Motivating**

Students considered SNSs as spaces that enabled them to have different and more interesting EFL learning experiences than learning in the classroom (Reinhardt & Zander, 2011). Students of this study considered SNSs as intrinsically motivating, interesting, engaging, and fun. Data shows that the students were motivated to engage in EFL activities, leading to expansion and enhancement in their learning opportunities. Gardner (2011) also talked about Web 2.0 tools and SNS activities offering entertainment and fun. The students in his study, in agreement with this study’s findings, believed in and had positive feelings towards using SNSs for EFL learning because SNSs offered lively and enjoyable ways to learn English information and vocabulary. Thus, students became engaged in SNSs as part of their daily learning practice:

*“Using SNSs encourages me to learn English. SNSs make learning English interesting and exciting. For example, I prefer to go to SNSs and read in English* more than doing the boring English exercises in the English books.”

*“*I met many individuals online who are really hard-working. I try my best and work hard *too.”*

In this regard, students saw potential for improving their English while following their interests. Thus, the process of learning English moved from being a process directed by a goal to improve English to a learning process which evolved around interests in the SNS setting. Students considered this learning powerful; for example, a student might follow celebrities and read their daily posts and conversations in English. Once students were motivated, they were willing to spend more time on learning English.

Communicative competence was important even when students used SNSs individually. Students talked about the importance of learning language in a context that exposed them to the language. For example, one student stated,

“*I pay attention to everything; words, phrases and expressions.*”

Purposefully engaging in informal learning on SNSs meant that students felt responsible for their learning. It indicated their perception of learning as a self-regulated process which depended largely on learning goals. In this way, students became actively engaged in constructing their learning independently outside of class (Chamot, 2005).

To sum up, in this study, SNSs seemed to allow these learners to enjoy learning and to take responsibility and ownership of the means available to accomplish learning goals.

* + 1. **Interacting With English Speakers**

Much research has cited the benefits of SNSs’ interactive features, which offer opportunities for students to interact with English speakers for learning (Ullrich et al., 2008). This suggests that spaces such as SNSs may have many benefits and can enhance students’ communicative competence by providing opportunities for interaction between individuals and a global audience. SNSs function as a link between learners and speakers in ways that allow for reflection on language learning and production (Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013). However, despite the benefits associated with having English language interaction on SNSs, only two students who participated in this study reported establishing interactions with English speakers. These two students perceived these interactions as beneficial in facilitating communicative competence. They perceived SNSs as spaces that offered them worldwide interaction with English speakers. One said,

*“I like to get to know people from other countries and know about their life and culture.”*

However, the data indicates that other students thought that interaction with English speakers was either unattainable, impractical, or undesirable because of cultural differences. Some tried to establish this type of interaction, but their attempts were incomplete or unsuccessful. For example, one student said,

*“It is really difficult to get opportunities to interact with foreigners*.”

This is consistent with Kinginger’s (2011) finding that finding speakers who are willing to interact with other speakers with low language proficiency is challenging and demanding. He reported low language proficiency as a challenge in contacting fluent language speakers and elaborated that low English proficiency increases the struggle of sustaining interactions with capable language speakers because of the effort needed by all speakers to maintain a smooth, flowing conversation and sustained interaction.

Although English level proficiency may act as a barrier to interaction with English speakers, this study suggests that there were students who had both low and high levels of English proficiency and still chose to engage and interact with peers more than seeking opportunities to interact with fluent language speakers. Therefore, students were not only unable to interact with fluent English speakers, but they also expressed little interest or no desire in the benefits of expanding their online interaction to fluent English speakers from other countries.

Students also had concerns about their ability to interact with English speakers. Further, they questioned the usefulness and transferability of this communicative language use to their context. One student commented the following:

*“Who would take time to speak with a learner who cannot even say one English sentence without mistakes? or who takes forever to say something? And what will we talk about?”*

To this student, SNS spaces did not offer points of connection and collaboration. They did not provide a shared aim that encouraged interactions between students and English speakers. It is worth emphasising that students of this study stressed their appreciation of English interactions with their peers and talked about their daily English conversations with them as being easy and beneficial.

In terms of learning, the students viewed all opportunities for English interactions as useful. However, the findings suggest that interaction with peers on SNSs was considered to have a more positive influence on students’ communicative competence than interaction with English speakers. This was because interaction with peers enhanced the students’ willingness to interact in English on a daily basis, and students and their peers had shared goals to improve their language skills and common ground to share. These students did not want to speak to English speakers, because they did not want to move to any English-speaking country, and they were not trying to become best friends with English-speaking people. Instead, they wanted to stay in their country and obtain a level of English that was useful to their context. They wanted to communicate by using a language that was used in their context and did not include big, long English words but still had a certain amount of accuracy and provided a sufficient level of English to communicate socially. In other words, they did not aim to sound like other English speakers, and they did not mind if they articulated so-called imperfect or unpolished English.

Students wanted to be able to communicate in a meaningful way that was understandable in their context in order to achieve social goals. They also wanted to speak English as an academic goal, which would ensure a better career. They wanted to acquire English language rather than become part of English culture because they valued their own Islamic culture (however they interpreted this), and they wanted to emphasise their own way of being. I previously discussed in chapter 1parents’ concerns about their children being influenced by Western ways and values; here I note these young people resisted their parents’ grip by using SNSs, but they also used English in the way that they felt was culturally comfortable, picking from parts of Western culture that suited them (e.g. sports). In a sense, they did what their parents wanted them to do in terms of valuing their culture and rejecting the aspects of other cultures that conflicted with it. This highlights another challenging element when interacting with English speakers, namely the different cultures between the English learner and other speakers. This study suggests that cultural differences might make it difficult for students to make friends with English speakers from other countries. One student said,

*“I was shocked by their different way of thinking.”*

Learning a language today means being a part of a global community (Bates, 2004). This study shows that it was not a great compliment to any student in this study to be accused of being westernised. These students re-evaluated and appreciated their culture; they were critical users and only took the things they liked from other spaces and others’ cultures on their own terms. They wanted to be able to understand a little bit of popular culture and enjoy it, but in a way that suited them and their culture, and they tried to use English in the manner they wanted.

According to Littlemore (2001), many students learn EFL to use it in their own countries. Different learners have their own languages and their own perceptions of English language. Boulter (2007) mentioned that different students use English locally to have a common language to communicate in and to increase understanding between people from different countries and nationalities. Kirkpatrick (2006) stated that only a minority of learners learn English to adopt its culture. This was evident from the findings of my study, too, wherein the students clearly did not aim to adopt the culture of other English speakers and were, conversely, conscious of cultural boundaries. (Please see Section 2.3.1 on the discussion on this issue.)

I could not discuss the status of English language in Oman without viewing the role of English language in the global context. According to Widdowson (1994), “English is spreading rapidly outside the historic ‘native’ countries” (p. 337), and many researchers debate the idea of nativeness and the possession and ownership of English language. Many researchers support the concept of plural “Englishes” to emphasise the existence and the importance of many varieties of English language around the globe instead of promoting only one standard version of the language. There are many varieties of English, and there is no single spoken English variety which is better than other varieties used elsewhere in the world (Kachru, 1997). Mastering and having proficiency in one standard English may hinder learners’ ability to express their needs or opinions; this might lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretation. The students in this study did not use the word *native*, because there is no exact word equivalent for it in Arabic. They used Arabic words equivalent to *English speakers* or *foreigners* to mean fluent English speakers. As such, I use the term *English speakers* to mean fluent English speakers from any country. In affinity spaces, the students of this study were connected by common interests and the context in which individuals learned a new language in their home country with peers who spoke the same language.In other words, the process oflanguage learning took place in surroundings that were highly influenced by the context inwhich the language was being learned. Overall, when language learners interacted in English, they engaged with linguistic and cultural resources to create meaning.

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# CONT: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

# Using SNSs in Formal EFL Teaching

## Introduction

In this chapter, I explore and discuss how the participating teachers and students used SNSs in formal EFL classrooms. As I mentioned earlier, in this study, I used the term *formal* to refer to learning and teaching activities that take place with the teacher or with the guidance of the teacher. I also discuss the teachers’ and students’ views regarding using SNSs in formal teaching. This discussion attempts to answer the third research question: *3) How do Omani teachers and students use and perceive SNSs in formal EFL teaching?* The data used in this chapter come from two sources: (a) teachers’ interviews and (b) students’ focus group discussions.

The first source of data consisted of interviews with three teachers. I used these data to discuss their use of SNSs in English classes and how they perceive them. This exploration helps to expand our understanding of how SNSs can be used in formal EFL teaching.

Focus group discussions were the second source of data. They were used to explore the students’ views regarding the use of SNSs in formal teaching.

I start with the teachers’ interviews and then later explore the students’ views.

## Teachers’ Use of Social Networks in Formal EFL Teaching

Teachers who indicated that they used SNSs in formal EFL teaching and were also willing to participate in one-to-one interviews were chosen to take part in the second phase of the research. I interviewed three teachers to explore the use of SNSs in EFL formal teaching, referred to here as Fatma-M, Salim-Mct, and Ahmed-Sh. I report their individual practicesand discuss them collectively because the aim is not to carry out a comparison not between the different teachers’ practicesbut between the different ways of using various SNSs. The table below lists the participating teachers in this study and the SNSs they used in EFL teaching.

**Table 2: The Teacher Participants and the SNSs They Used in EFL Teaching**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Teacher** | **Gender** | **SNSs Used in Teaching** |
| Fatma-M | F | Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter Instagram |
| Ahmed-Sh | M | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter |
| Salim-Mct | M | Twitter, Instagram |

The three teachers talked about using SNSs for EFL teaching and provided examples of their practices. I categorise the teachers’ uses into two main purposes (language skills practice and interaction purposes) according to the nature of their activities and summarise them as follows:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Activities** | **Examples Provided by Teachers** |
| 1. **Language Skills Practice** | **1.1 Prompting practices & activities for specific skills:** Writing activities, grammar and vocabulary activities, reading, listening, speaking | . On Twitter, hashtag created by the teacher: Write one sentence describing your dream job;  . On Twitter: Write the first sentence of a story, and each one of your friends will add a sentence to the story until you finish the whole story;  . On Instagram: Describe your feelings about the posted picture;  . On Twitter: Read the following article and tweet about it. |
| **1.2 Assessment tool** | . Grading, achievements, and praise regarding participation on various SNSs. |
| * 1. **Feedback tool** | . Giving feedback and commenting on students’ posts on various SNSs. |
| 1. **Interaction Tool** | * 1. **Inquiry tool** | . Asking and answering questions regarding the English course on various SNSs. |
| * 1. **Resource sharing tool** | . Posting and sharing materials on various SNSs. |
| **2.3 Administrative & organisational tool** | . Deadlines, announcements, assignments, and submissions on Twitter. |

**Table 3: The Teachers’ Activities on SNSs**

Here, I present and discuss the teachers’ uses and perceptions of these SNSs. Collectively, all three teachers used Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Three teachers used Twitter and Instagram. Two teachers used Facebook, and one teacher attempted to use WhatsApp but did not succeed. In this study, teachers highlighted the fact that some SNSs offered various benefits for formal EFL instruction. The main themes and sub-themes for the teachers’ use of SNSs are summarised in Figure 6.1:

**6.1.2 Interaction tool**

**6.1.2.1 Inquiry**

**6.1.2.2 Uploading resources**

**6.1.2.3 Administration and organisation**

**6.1.11 Similarities in teachers’ use: Different uses based on enabling features of various SNSs**

**Disagreements in teacher’s use of feedback & assessment**

**6.1 Teachers’ Use of SNSs for Formal EFL Teaching**

**6.1.1 Focused language Practice**

**Figure 6.1: Teachers’ uses of SNSs for formal EFL teaching**

Next, I explain each of these themes and sub-themes as shown in Figure 6.1.

### Focussed Practice for Writing

The three teachers in this study talked about how they used SNSs mainly for students to practice various language skills, particularly writing skills. The teachers created SNS accounts specific to courses that students joined. They gave their students instructions on how to access these accounts and how to post and use the basic functions.

#### Similarities in Teachers’ Use: **Uses Based on Various Features of Each SNS**

Teachers typically used short writing activities that required creating or postinga few sentences or a few paragraphs online.

##### ***Twitter***

Fatma-M (female) mentioned using writing practice activities on Twitter because writing is central to this SNS. She said,

“*The main function on Twitter is writing Tweets. So, I try to make students tweet in English. I give them writing activities and encourage them to write and express themselves on Twitter.*”

Ahmed-Sh also reported that Twitter is good for writing practice. He argued that Twitter writing is natural, meaningful, and interactive, more so than in-class writing practice. He said,

“*As opposed to writing in the classroom, Twitter provides a natural meaningful way to writieby providing people who read and interact with what you have written.*”

This teacher talked about how Twitter and other SNSs created audiences for students’ work. This is consistent with the established view in the computer-assisted language learning literature, where researchers argue that it encourages language learners to have a potential online audience (Lee, 2012)

Another agreement among the three teachers was that Twitter provided an opportunity for students to use the language that they had learned in class. For example, Ahmed-Sh said he actively used Twitter to get his students to practice the vocabulary they had learned in class. Salim-Mct mentioned that he used Twitter to give students extra writing activities to do in their own time after class. Salim-Mct said,

“*After writing lessons in class, I give the students Twitter activities as an assignment to review what they have taken in class. I try to give them practice activities every day . . . it is only one tweet I require them to write. I give them feedback immediately.* *Twitter works well this way.*”

This teacher’s comment reveals that he perceived Twitter to have a positive effect; in the quotation above, the interactive aspect is highlighted. When a student writes, the teacher can immediately react. It is this benefit of interacting while physically distant that the teacher seemed to value here.

An essential component in language learning is the practice of giving and receiving feedback (Liu & Carless, 2006). Ahmed-Sh commented on his students’ tweets. He said,

“*I always comment on their tweets to encourage them write in English . . . and I give them feedback.*”

This comment suggests that Ahmed-Sh tried to interact with his students. He tried to comment on what had been said in the students’ tweets to motivate them to write in English.

He also gave them feedback on their work. According to Liu and Carless (2006), students develop reflection skills by receiving and giving feedback. This is in line with the increase of online communication that that gives students the chance to generate content and contribute more to the learning processes of others.

Next, I discuss Twitter’s enabling features for EFL teaching. They are: (a) communication features and (b) limited tweet length.

###### **Communication Features on Twitter**

The three teachers mentioned that they had used many communication features that were available on Twitter. For example, they used Twitter for interaction between themselves and the students (teacher–student interaction). This involved using Twitter to tweet to the entire class or to one of the students in the class in public tweets or private messages. (Private interaction is possible on Twitter by sending a direct message to one student only.) This was also used by teachers and students. The teachers also talked about the use of hashtags (#). Salim-Mct gave a clear explanation of using these communication features:

“*On Twitter, I interact with students through public and on direct messages, they interact with each other in public and maybe in private I do not know.*”

Ahmed-Sh talked about directing a tweet or a reply to a certain individual:

“*Asking questions and inquiries are so easy on Twitter. . . . It is simple; students could mention their teachers and ask questions.*”

Fatma-M also suggested that students could use hashtags to tweet in English. According to her, using hashtags allowed students with the same goals to meet and speak in English:

“*Sometimes I create a hashtag for students who are motivated to speak English because it is very hard to find a space to actually use English in daily life.*”

This shows the teacher’s awareness of the hashtag function to make gathering tweets easy, which facilitates following information associated with a specific class or topic.

Most of the interactions involved the teachers, while fewer interactions took place between students without their teacher. Most of the interactions were evidently between the teachers and the students for administrative and organisational reasons. There was little interaction among students without the teachers, and these were mainly to ask questions. This is discussed in more detail with evidence and examples in Section 6.2.

###### **Limited Tweet Length**

In the interviews, teachers talked about Twitter’s limit of 140 characters as an important feature (now, the character limit for a tweet is higher), which leads to many advantages for EFL learning. Ahmed-Sh said,

“*It is time consuming and difficult for me as a teacher to read messages of all students I teach on other SNSs whereas on Twitter I can easily track what they are saying. Short tweets are easier to read or reply to.*”

Fatma-M believed Twitter can be a good writing practice tool for students at the beginning stage of learning English or with low English proficiency because of the character limit for tweets. She said,

“*I particularly like the short length of tweets. It is beneficial for us as language teachers because it gives the students the opportunities to write at ease because it is not too demanding. It is specifically beneficial for teaching writing for beginner learners of English.*”

Ahmed-Sh said,

“*I think Twitter is a good place to start using English. I think that tweeting is a very effective way to use English. Unlike other SNSs, it does not need to be long, and that decreases the distress of making mistakes or not having enough time to spend on writing every day.*”

Although this Twitter feature is considered by some educators to have minimal significance for learning, Fatma-M and Ahmed-Sh noted that the 140-character limit can encourage their students to easily try writing on Twitter. According to Lovejoy et al. (2012), one feature that discourages teachers from using Twitter as a learning tool is the limit of 140 characters per tweet. Tweets, according to Lovejoy et al.’s study (2012), are perceived to be too short for meaningful interaction and information to be shared. However, the English teachers in my study considered it an important and productive feature in language learning, and according to Grosseck and Holotescu (2008), the character limit could help students to word sentences clearly.

Fatma-M subsequently talked about this feature as a limitation for developing lengthier writing. She said,

“*This is sometimes a disadvantage with activities that require longer writings as students cannot type all that they want to in one tweet.*”

During this study, this feature raised significant advantages for these EFL teachers, even more so than the writing options available on other SNSs, especially as a starting point and for beginning-level learners of English. The three teachers used tweets in many different ways to fully utilise Twitter in formal EFL teaching.

Overall, in this study, teachers used Twitter as a supporting tool for students to practice writing in English. This pedagogical use of Twitter in EFL teaching encouraged English production by providing writing activities, raising open questions, and encouraging students to respond to their classmates’ tweets.

##### ***Instagram***

According to the three teachers, Instagram has features that could benefit EFL learning. The teachers created Instagram accounts that they made private for their students only. The teachers posted the students’ homework, assignments, announcements, and images, as well as activities. The three teachers mainly used the Instagram account as a practice tool for descriptive writing. Ahmed-Sh said,

“*Instagram gives students a chance to practice writing in English. Images and short videos make writing more interesting. Students do not have to write long posts, just a few sentences in English describing the pictures.*”

Instagram primarily provided students with the opportunity to read and write through photo descriptions, video comments, and direct messages. The teachers uploaded pictures and videos and shared them with their students, asking them to write observations or descriptions. According to the teachers, this encouraged students to use their English language. For example, Fatma-M asked her students to compose a post based on a certain picture. She posted images or videos on Instagram with an example description. Fatma-M said,

“*I post regular images and videos related to each unit or chapter in the course and I ask them, for example, to comment on them. The images are used as writing prompts for students. I also get students to participate in collective writing of a story, for example using the images I post.*”

Salim-Mct said,

“*I post images and have students create sentences or stories around them. These images are related to the topics students are studying. For example, if they are studying about different countries, then I post an image of a country, then I ask the students to talk about it.*”

Instagram includes features that have potential benefits for language learning. The main feature that made Instagram appealing to these language teachers was the visual content and its popularity among students. Fatma-M said,

“*Instagram is very popular among students. They really like pictures and photos and this is what Instagram is all about. It is good in learning English because students can learn in an entertaining way.* *Students like to discuss and talk about pictures.*”

Furthermore, Fatma-M suggested in her comment that many of her students used Instagram, noting that they were all eager to talk about pictures. This social popularity of sharing images and pictures on Instagram encouraged her to use it and upload images for students to talk about in English.

Ahmed-Sh talked about the benefit of having access to English speakers’ photos and videos of everyday life on Instagram. He said,

“*There are many English speakers who post videos and pictures with comments about their daily life. Reading these posts is more motivating than reading about people in the course books. And students can comment on their posts too.*”

According to Ahmed-Sh, Instagram could be helpful in learning English because there are many accounts of famous people that students can follow. Photos on Instagram can provide clues to the verbal meanings in the text that go alongside them. Images and comments have been found to improve reading and comprehension skills. Instagram provides a chance for students to read in English language, and the words are memorable due to the visual context (Kabilan et al., 2010; Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2010).

Ahmed-Sh also talked about some Instagram accounts that were created to teach English. He said,

“*There are so many English language accounts that students can follow. I think they can be helpful and appealing to encourage students to use them to improve their English.*”

 Fatma-M also said,

“*Using Instagram as a learning tool is simple much like using Twitter. I use Twitter for beginners and Instagram for advanced students. I ask them for extensive writings and description.*”

Salim-Mct said,

“*Instagram allows for longer writings more than Twitter. It is good in this sense.*”

Fatma-M and Salim-Mct compared Twitter and Instagram. Fatma-M mentioned that Twitter and Instagram have a lot in common. They are essentially SNSs used to interact and share information: Twitter with 140 characters and Instagram with photos, short videos, and comments. Although Twitter has a photo and video sharing feature, Instagram requires users to post photos or to comment on photos. It also allows for more than 140 characters per comment. This Instagram feature allowed Fatma-M to use it to practice writing longer comments and therefore, she argued, was suited to advanced learners who could write extended texts. According to her, this resulted in a different use compared to Twitter.

However, in 2015, after the data of this study were collected, Twitter removed the 140-character limit from direct messages. It also added a group function to direct messages. Users can communicate privately with a group of people, which isa great complement to the largely public experience on Twitter. The ability to interact privately with groups gives EFL teachers more options to use Twitter in EFL learning. All these new Twitter features could lead to more adoption of Twitter in EFL because they can overcome the challenges mentioned by the teachers in this study.

##### ***Facebook***

Two out of the three teachers used Facebook groups as aspace for English courses. The first step was to create a Facebook group for the class, with the purpose of practicing language skills. The teachers asked their students to complete writingactivities on Facebook**.** The teachers mainly used the discussion wall to offer opportunities for practice.

The distinctive enabling feature that these two teachers liked about Facebook was that the students were able to incorporate multimedia content such as photos and videos in Facebook groups. Fatma**-**M talked about this feature on Facebook, stating:

“*I give them writing practices on varied topics on Facebook to increase English production and writing skills. I think what I like the best about Facebook is that it allows students to upload pictures and videos to the group.*”

Ahmed-Sh also provided examples of the activities he used with his students on Facebook and mentioned that his students can upload multimedia content to the group. He said,

“*In writing activities, I ask the students to write about a famous person for example. They sometimes incorporate photos, videos in their written responses which is really good.*”

One feature available in Facebook groups and used by both the teachers in this study is the ability for the students and teachers to incorporate video. The teachers mentioned that their students would incorporate more material, pictures, and videos in the group. Warschauer and Meskill (2000) stated that wider exposure to English materials such as videos is largely agreed tobe very significant for students.

However, Ahmed-Sh, who reported using a Facebook group for his English class, claimed that there were more disadvantages than benefits. He said,

“*I tried working with students using a Facebook group… well it didn’t go very well. The students didn’t like it. They weren’t up-to-date with Facebook features and many of them did not use it before. These days, students are not active on Facebook. For me, Facebook wasn’t as easy and smooth to use. Then, I decided to stop using it… as my students prefer Instagram and Twitter rather than Facebook.*”

The quantitative data from the questionnaire (Section 5.1.3) showed that Facebook, out of the four SNSs studied here, was one of the least preferable for formal teaching purposes.

##### *WhatsApp*

The teachers mentioned that the main benefit of WhatsApp was its simplicity and popularity among their students. They named a variety of advantages for this SNS which to them resembled Facebook groups in its enabling features. However, one teacher who had used it experienced disappointment in her previous attempt to incorporate it into her English class. WhatsApp’s simplicity and popularity were challenged by the privacy setting (in comparison to other social networks such as Facebook or Twitter). This is because WhatsApp is an instant messaging service that depends on phone numbers. Fatma-M said,

*“The widespread use of WhatsApp among students in everyday life made it a good choice to make learning and interaction more effective.* However, WhatsApp failed big time as *I experienced low agreement from* most *of my students to use it, due to gender and the refusal to give their numbers to each other.”*

I elaborate on this issue and the effect of gender in Section 6.1.4. In conclusion, the interviews suggested that WhatsApp is not preferred by most teachers and students as a means of formal EFL teaching and learning.

### *Discussion*

According to the teachers, SNSs were good for carrying out writing practices outside of class**.** The findings indicate that there is a correlation between the practice activities that teachers used on different SNSs and the enabling features of each SNS. In addition, the teachers used SNSs as media to post written activities associated with the curriculum to allow students to practice writing. The findings indicate that the topics covered in the English course books were embedded by the teachers in the SNS activities. Teachers encouraged students to review the concepts and vocabulary studied in the classroom in these SNS writing activities.

According to Prichard (2013), writing in public settings such as SNS spaces with real audiences provides students greater authenticity and purpose compared to traditional writing. Various SNSs, with all their interactive features, have the power to naturally engage students in writing and interacting (Prichard, 2013).

#### Disagreements in Teachers’ Use

The three teachers differed in their use of SNSs in two main ways: (a) assessment and (b) feedback.

##### **Assessment**

The three teachers differed in their use of SNSs for assessment. For example, Ahmed-Sh used SNSs as part of the students’ assessment tool. He thought students would participate more when the activities were mandated, so they would fully utilise and take advantage of SNSs. He gave his students detailed introductions to the activities and then gave them assignments and tasks to be completed at home. Ahmed-Sh said,

“*Completing these activities and tasks and participating on SNSs partially determines the students’ grade for this component. Some of my students used it because it was part of their assessment.* *Instead of accuracy, I evaluate how much they write, their effort . . . because I would like to force them to work harder.*”

He used SNS activities for students’ assessments. Out of the three teachers interviewed, he was the only one who mentioned this use. His main reason was to encourage students to work hard and use SNSs to their benefit.

Other teachers appeared to be partially opposed to this idea and preferred to use SNSs in a more relaxed manner. Fatma**-**M did not use SNSs for assessment. She said,

“*I encourage students to participate online. The idea is to get them to be comfortable to regularly use English and interact naturally. I do not take into account spelling or grammar mistakes on online interaction, but of course, they should also work toward improving their English.*”

Fatma-M did not give mandatory activities to her students that affected their grades. She just encouraged students to participate online because she thought that they could participate naturally in a more relaxed way. With a similar attitude, Salim-Mct said,

“*My students had only little exposure to SNSs. I am still trying to relate it with the content of the course, and I do not think it is a good idea to use it in assessment at this stage.*”

There seem to be different opinions among teachers regarding how SNSs can be used for assessment purposes.

##### **Feedback**

The teachers also differed in how they provided feedback to students on SNSs. Ahmed-Sh believed the English teacher’s role on SNSs was to review and provide feedback:

“*I give them an assignment every day. If they leave postings, I would give them feedback on grammar and structure. One of the disadvantages of class writing assignments is that it does not allow for a great deal of, or constant feedback.*”

According to the data analysis, Ahmed-Sh seemed to believe the teacher’s role on SNSs was to make students aware of English sentences and their form. He seemed to believe that teachers should be concerned about students’ mistakes and that was part of his role as a teacher. Ahmed-Sh worked hard to provide feedback to his students on their English sentences in this online language activity. He mentioned that sometimes, he copied the texts from participants’ posts into a Microsoft Word document to provide corrective feedback. The document with the corrective feedback was then emailed to the students. He also provided examples of good writing and of mistakes to the entire class for collective feedback.

To some extent, Salim-Mct had a different view about providing feedback on SNSs. He said,

“*The students shared their posts with me and I immediately gave feedback. . . . I am not overly concerned about grammar, but instead I concentrate on meaning and content. I also try to avoid direct corrections.*”

Salim-Mct did not give feedback on his students’ grammar mistakes. He wanted to highlight both the meaning and the form of students’ postings and concentrated on the importance of meaningful interaction.

Fatma-M did not provide the students with a lot of feedback, which she thought might indirectly discourage them from using SNSs regularly. To her, accuracy seemed less important. She said,

“*In SNSs, students can see all the writings of their classmates. They can profit from their peers. Students were motivated to improve their English not because of feedback, but instead because they saw peers writing at higher level. I do not like to give them feedback in public. I believe that is inappropriate.*”

In Fatma-M’s opinion, interacting with peers online allowed students to reflect on and enhance their writing. Fatma-M did not mention peer feedback; however, she acknowledged the benefit of peers sharing the same space. She argued that because students were connected with peers, this motivated them and allowed them to look forward to studying English. Fatma-M also believed that providing feedback to individual students in the public space of SNSs was not the right thing to do because it would be seen by all the other students.

### Interaction Tool

All teachers stated that they found significant value in SNSs as spaces for interaction. When asked to reflect about their use of SNSs, teachers mainly mentioned that SNSs have the great advantage of providing space for teacher–student interactions. However, interactions over SNSs were mainly for: (a) inquiry, (b) uploading course materials and sharing resources, and (c) administrative and organisational reasons.

##### **Inquiry Tool**

Fatma-M described teacher–student interactions over SNSs as follows:

“*Interaction between me and the students is easier and more regular over SNSs. . . . They can talk to me on SNSs and ask anything.*”

This shows that she saw SNSs as platforms that established an ongoing relationship with her students and helped her build closer rapport with them. This also implied the importance (to her) of teacher–student interactions to improve learning.

Teachers also indicated their use of various SNSs to provide an opportunity for student–student interactions. However, students mainly asked questions outside of the classroom setting and received answers from friends. In this regard, Fatma-M said,

“*Students ask questions and get answers instantly from their friends*. *It promotes group interaction.*”

Salim-Mct noted that SNSs allowed his students to

“*ask questions easily and get answers and ideas. I have noticed that when a student asks about something, other students answer his question . . . it allows the students to post questions and to get answers quickly.*”

Ahmed-Sh said,

“*They answer each other’s questions and they help each other*.*”*

This indicates that teachers considered SNSs positive spaces in which students could come together and collaborate. With this kind of interaction between students, the teacher would not be the only one who provided information. The enabling features of SNSs worked really well to provide students with the answers they were looking for. SNSs allowed students to help each other, which allowed additional information to be gained through the students’ research and thinking.

The three teachers also agreed that SNS online interactions were a valuable addition to and expansion of classroom interaction. For example, Ahmed-Sh talked about students’ preference of using SNS spaces to ask questions regarding the assignments and other issues related to the English class. Ahmed-Sh said,

“*Students ask all kinds of questions regarding the English course and they are really active online*.*”*

Fatma-M also said,

“*Some students feel more comfortable asking questions online than in the classroom.*”

This could also have been due to the reserved and reticent nature of some students in face-to-face interactions or other reasons such as limited class time or convenience.

The teachers’ responses indicated that there were chances to support discussions about learning. Teachers mentioned students asking questions that were answered either by the teachers themselves or by classmates. This interactive feature was mainly used for administrative purposes.

Overall, however, teachers saw the benefits of using SNSs in formal EFL teaching. The basic interactive features and functions of SNSs that led to their popularity and common use were the same features that were perceived to have potential benefits in teaching.

Regarding various SNSs, teachers considered Twitter an effective forum on which to post short questions and obtain answers. In other words, Twitter was good for providing quick information. For example, Ahmed-Sh said,

“*Asking questions and inquiries are so easy on Twitter. It is simple; students could mention their teachers or other students and ask questions or exchange ideas and quick short information.*”

This teacher talked about the inquiry tool on Twitter. He simplified this function into tweets and mentions (which involve the @ sign followed directly by someone’s username to mention the person or send a direct message or link to profile). The mention function on Twitter was used as an inquiry tool by most students, in addition to the commenting function.

##### **Uploading Course Materials and Sharing Resources**

Another very useful function of SNSs that teachers mentioned was sharing resources and materials in public or directing them to certain people. SNSs allow for spreading information quickly due to the direct networks of users. The teachers in this study uploaded resources and materials for students on SNSs. Ahmed-Sh said,

“*I upload all kinds of resources and materials to the students online.*”

Salim-Mct said,

“*All the course materials are uploaded online.*”

The teachers talked about SNSs being easy and ideal platforms for sharing files. This was enhanced by other functions and SNS features such as file transfer and picture, audio, and video posting. Fatma-M said,

“*I send files, documents, videos, links and images.*”

This indicates one of the enabling features of SNSs and their use in learning*.* However, SNSs differ in their resource-sharing features. Facebook groups, for example, have an original function with limitless storage suitable for uploading course materials, which is perhaps why it was the most mentioned SNS by participating teachers. The visibility of an uploaded file also depends on the group privacy policy, which can be set to either public or members only. Fatma-M said,

“*To upload a file to a Facebook group, just click the ‘Upload File’ option and select a file to upload.*”

Fatma-M believed that Facebook groups could easily be used to exchange learning materials in any format.

Fatma-M compared Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp in terms of uploading various kinds of files and documents. On Twitter, learners can upload anything they want to share with others, but only by using links. The difference between these two SNS functions is that the files shared in Facebook groups and WhatsApp groups may be downloaded by all group members, while files on Twitter are usually open to all. However, the administrator of the Facebook group can control who can download files. Fatma-M said,

“*It is a long process to upload PDFs or documents on Twitter. I need to provide a link to where the PDF can be found on the web. Then by clicking the link, students can access and read the file.*”

A PDF and a document must exist online before it can be shared on Twitter. This means that one cannot upload and attach a document to a tweet unless he or she provides the relevant link. Then he or she can attach it to a tweet. This is the long process that Fatma-M discussed, stating that it made it difficult for her to share resources through Twitter.

The teachers did not mention using Instagram for uploading materials and sharing resources because Instagram only supports information in picture or video format. Therefore, it does not support documents.

##### **Administration and Organisation Tool**

The three teachers relied on SNSs to provide important details and information concerning university work or other events to students. Teachers indicated that SNSs are an effective way to convey details to students and get word out about requirements, assignments, deadlines, and events.

SNSs helped teachers with organisational duties using functions and features that were easy to use in a friendly space. Therefore, teachers used SNSs to connect to their students for practical reasons and to pass on quick, practical information such as notices and reminders. In this sense, they found SNSs efficient. Salim-Mct stated,

“*I used to send my students emails . . . but I think, after using SNSs, they are better and more user-friendly*. . . . *SNSs are an easy way for me to quickly connect to students and they reply instantly. . . . I can provide them with instant quick information they were looking for such as times and deadlines.*”

Fatma-M said,

“*I try to keep my students on track and up-to-date with reminders and quick information on SNSs.*”

The teachers used various SNSs for administrative and organisational purposes; however, they agreed that Twitter in particular is good for posting quick information. Twitter allows for quick interaction anytime and anywhere, offering an effortless and quick way to organise the learning process outside of classrooms. Ahmed-Sh said,

“*Twitter is instant and it’s to-the-point . . . easy to follow and read. This can support in the organisation of the course process.*”

According to Ahmed-Sh, Twitter was a useful teaching support tool because it provided an easy way to carry out interactions beyond the classroom. Twitter can also replace many means that teachers already use, such as emailing lists for announcements. Facebookgroups and Instagram were also used to spread information**.**

In addition, Fatma-M pointed out that she used Instagram as an e-portfolio space. She said,

“*I use Instagram to showcase the students’ work by actually capturing it and sharing it on Instagram. I display the good examples from everyone to benefit from. This helps students to compete and write to prove that they are good too.*”

This teacher took advantage of Instagram to create a window to display students’ work. The students might be motivated to work harder and excel to prove themselves. Furthermore, it motivated the students to achieve the set tasks.

### Key Findings and Discussion

1. Different teachers used different SNSs differently in different circumstances;
2. Teachers selected specific applications based on how they understood the functionality of those applications. They were strategic and well-informed about the “right tool for the job”;
3. Language learning practice was still the main use of SNSs. In second place came interaction for inquiry, uploading resources, and organisational reasons;
4. SNSs were mainly used after class time, not in class.

One of the key objectives of this study was to explore exactly where language teachers were regarding SNSs use in formal EFL teaching and their views towards it. It was clear that the use of SNSs in language teaching in Oman, as with many other countries, was still a novelty practiced by a small number of language teachers. It was also a new experience for the three teachers participating in the interviews. It was obvious that the teachers were still in the process of understanding how it worked and what their role would be. As such, they were mostly at the very beginning of building their perceptions about the use of SNSs in formal teaching. They were open and ready to use SNSs in formal EFL teaching but were still not sure how because they were still trying and exploring different platforms.

It is important to note here that the three teachers’ initial uses of SNSs were not completely modest. The language for communicating on these SNSs was English, not Arabic (the teachers’ and students’ L1). The three teachers used SNSs as a teaching support tool, and they used SNSs in English classrooms for English language practice and interaction, as well as for administrative reasons and to share resources. The teachers encouraged their students to practice English on SNSs, and according to them, English production and learning was happening in these spaces.

However, the findings show that teachers used SNSs for English skills practice and to upload EFL learning resourcesand information, more than just making interactiveuse of SNSs for learning EFL**.** As discussed in Section 6.1, English teachers’ use of SNSs can be described mostly as “teacher-centred” and “textbook-based”. It is clear from the research findings here that teachers’ use of SNSs was not a central part of their teaching. The teachers in this study spoke of approaches ranging from traditional teacher-centred learning to collaborative student-centred learning. The findings of this study suggest that the three teachers’ use of SNSs was mostly teacher-centred. They incorporated SNSs using many teaching patterns that they used offline. For example, they gave the students the same writing practices online instead of paper and pencil. Therefore, the teachers did not use SNSs **to** completely facilitate a different approach to EFL teaching. They mainly used them to help expand EFL language practice beyond the offline classroom context. The teachers’ uses of SNSs can be described as mainly following the same offline teaching pattern. In other words, with the help of SNSs, these teachers provided additional experience**s** to the traditional offline learning context, but they did not use different approaches to teaching.

However, there was also a small indication of a move towards a more student-centred approach. Teachers showed a small shift in the focusof their teaching towards being more student-centred, allowing for more pedagogicalconcepts such as exploratory learning and peer learning on SNSs. The teachers saw SNSs as tools that could provideopportunities for students to help each other and learn from each other.The teachers also used various media such as small videos and images on SNSs to try and offer a new method of language by which they hoped students could learn English. However, the use of SNSs did not make teachers move away from their teaching approaches. Although SNSs were innovatively used, some of the themes identified in this studydid not involve a substantial amount of online interaction between students. As such, the findings demonstrate how teachers made useof new SNSs to expand the time and space for language practice, but this did not change the way they taught. Therefore, offline EFL teaching patterns were not changed by SNSs; instead, they were still mainly teacher-centred.

SNSs may have a lot more to offer**.** SNSs may offer many opportunities that line up with contemporary research in EFL learning. As evidence has shown in this study, teachers did not fully exploit the possibilities of SNS use in English teaching, which might increase language production as well as students’ interaction and collaboration (Wang & Vasquez, 2012). Although the interactivity enabled by SNSs could provide learners with opportunities for English production and communication, this was not fully empowered by these teachers. The teachers did not fully utilise the interactive features of SNSs for formal EFL teaching. They made little use of interactive features despite their availability and diversity on various SNSs.

### Challenges of Using SNSs in Teaching and Learning

Analysis of the interviews regarding the challenges faced by teachers in using SNSs in language learning was best understood here in reference to the Omani context. The findings support the significance of sociocultural contexts. The Omani teachers’ perceptions were greatly influenced by their culture. The Omani context affected the teachers’ views about learning and the use of SNSs.

The interviews suggest that the participating teachers believed that their Omani students’ qualities, features, and characteristics were the main challenges to using SNSs in formal EFL teaching. They viewed their students as being influenced by their cultural background because they seemed to see Omani students as having beliefs, needs, and learning preferences influenced by their background and their sociocultural context. These cultural features and restrictions impacted their online practices. The main themes I identified in the teachers’ responses regarding the challenges they faced while using SNSs with their EFL learners are: (a) students’ resistance and low motivation, (b) autonomy, (c) gender, and (d) language constraints.

In the following section, I discuss the challenges from the teachers’ perspectives. I also explore the sociocultural contexts of these themes and their effects in using SNSs to support EFL learning.

#### Resistance and Low Motivation

Evidence from the teachers’ interviews suggests that they considered students’ resistance or low motivation to use SNSs in language learning to be a big challenge. Fatma-M said,

“*Our students use SNSs every day and they love it. Learning through SNSs is quite different* a*nd difficult for them.*”

She added*,*

“*I think they need a push to try it and if you don’t they would not go for it, if they have the choice. That’s why I impose SNSs on them.*”

However, Fatma-M claimed that the surprising thingwasthat even after using SNSs for language learning and experiencing the benefits, the students still did not like to use them much in learning. According to her,

*“Although they* [students] *interact with you sometimes, but they would prefer not to use it again in learning . . . they really do not like to use SNSs in formal teaching . . . students do not want to use them even if they see the benefits.*”

This suggests that her students resisted the use of SNSs in EFL learning even after seeing the advantages. Thus, even if SNSs’ advantages were obvious to the students, they still refused to accept them as a formal teaching tool. Furthermore, SNS use was still not fully welcomed by students in education. Despite this, Fatma-M still supported SNS use and indeed was in favour of the integration of SNSs in EFL language teaching regardless of the level of students’ acceptance. She seemed keen to invest in SNSs as part of her teaching because she saw the possible benefits. Selwyn (2009) pointed out in his study about students’ use of SNSs that there was resistance from students to the formal use of SNSs by their teachers. Madge et al. (2009) observed a similar resistance to the use Facebook in formal teaching.

Ahmed-Sh talked about many of his students joining reluctantly. He said that he had used SNSs many times and that most of his students did not prefer using SNSs in formal teaching. He said,

“*They do not like using SNSs in teaching in general and do not like to use them in learning English either . . . few students are interested in participating online.*”

He said that he had tried to investigate several times why his students did not get involved more in online interaction via SNSs but that he was unable to obtain any answers. Ahmed-Sh seemed to think that his students varied in their views towards SNSs in learning. He showed a strong desire to understand the reasons behind his students’ low motivation to use SNSs in education. This shows that he strongly believed in the benefits of SNSs in language learning and that he could not help but ask why his students did not share his vision.

Both Fatma-M and Ahmed-Sh challenged the assumption that SNSs would be readily accepted by students just because they used them in their everyday lives.

Salim-Mct also talked about the issue of student resistance to adopting SNSs for English learning purposes. He said,

“*They simply do not see it as a learning tool . . . the main issue for me would be imposing using SNSs in learning.*”

He categorised his students in the following way:

“*Some students who do not know a lot about how to use SNSs might be a little afraid to use them. . . . Some students who**use them a lot**do not want to use them in education . . . and there are always students who do not want to try something new . . . who do not want change.*”

Fatma-M and Salim-Mct reported that their students did not see the significance or the relevance of using SNSs as part of their learning process, unlike their teachers. Salim-Mct’s comment suggests that he thought his students lacked a clear vision of how SNSs might be useful for language learning. His comment also highlights the importance of the students’ perceptions of the benefits of SNSs in formal teaching, which strongly influence the students’ use and participation. Consequently, his main concern was how to engage his “*low-motivated*” students in SNS activities.

In terms of the justification of low motivation, teachers in this study shared the opinion that their students had a low level of motivation to learn English through SNSs because of their context. The teachers’ explanations of low motivation among students clearly referenced the students’ characteristics and their context and background. For example, Fatma-M stated,

“*They study to pass exams, so many students make little effort in studying in general. They aim for the minimum English requirement to pass and succeed, and little effort is made to master the language.*”

In addition, according to Ahmed-Sh, students’ low motivation came from the society in which they lived and the educational system from which they graduated. He said,

“*Many students got the chance of free higher education with minimum effort and grades. Many of them also get jobs with the relatively minimum amount of requirements and competition* *and* *that’s why they cannot be expected to develop self-motivation for learning . . . they go for minimum work in everything.*”

In general, Fatma-M and Ahmed-Sh believed that the Omani society and its educational system influenced the students’ motivation. In their opinion, that was why students had low motivation to work hard and study.

The examples here also indicate the teachers’ tendency to make assumptions and draw on stereotypes about their students and their engagement to justify their low motivation for online interaction, although these reasons were general and could be applied to engaging students in interactive English activities offline as well as online.

#### Autonomy

Autonomy or the lack of it was another challenge that the teachers talked about in the interviews. It was considered another barrier to the integration of SNSs in language teaching. Fatma-M said,

“*Our students are not self-reliant . . . they are dependent learners. . . . They need guidance, support all the time. . . . I feel that our students are really lazy.*”

Ahmed-Sh said,

“*Many students try to get themselves out of anything which involves working by themselves. They are dependent upon their teachers.*”

The above examples show the teachers’ perceptions of their students’ qualities in Oman, including being listeners more than critical thinkers and dependent more than autonomous. They felt that their students were not trained in active participation, critical thinking, or autonomy. Instead, they were used to being provided with major guidance by teachers at all times. The teachers believed that their students did not have the self-responsibility that was required to achieve success in the mastery of the English language.

The teachers’ interpretation of the lack of autonomy was associated with the students’ Omani context and educational system. Fatma-M provided the following explanation:

“*They are dependent learners and have been since they were in schools and are used to being spoon fed. . . . When they come to college life they get shocked by the idea that they need to work by themselves and that they are expected to be responsible for their own learning.*”

Ahmed-Sh argued,

“*Schools had created dependent students. They are not able and not willing to learn by themselves. We cannot be responsible for everything. Students have to take some responsibility which is what SNSs offer.*”

Similarly, Salim-Mct said,

“*Students want the university learning just like when they were in schools, they want everything ready for them. I believe it’s my job to get my students to learn on their own, independently.*”

Teachers’ reflections on their students’ qualities were based on their social and cultural contexts*.* In their opinion, using SNSs was not preferred by students because they allow learners to proceed at their own pace, requiring a great deal of learner autonomy. In other words, the features of SNSs challenged students’ dependence on teachers. They claimed that autonomy, independence, and taking responsibility for one’s own learning were big challenges for their students because they were not used to this in their academic lives. This was in contrast to the evidence I obtained from the students’ focus groups.

However, these comments also confirm that the teachers were positive about the use of SNSs in language learning. They saw benefits in SNSs to train students to become autonomous learners. In other words, teachers saw their students’ dependence as a challenge to the use of SNSs in education and SNSs as a solution that could help overcome this challenge and promote learner autonomy.

Because I am accustomed to the educational system in Oman, I believe that teachers might have certain misassumptions about learning and teaching. These teachers and students were accustomed to a preset curriculum and teacher-centred pedagogies. According to the previous discussion about the Omani educational system (Section 1.2.4), autonomy is not an institutional part of Omani education. Education in Oman is characterised by a teacher-centred approach with instruction controlled by the teachers. The implementation of SNSs in education is based on a learner-centred approach and opens new spaces that might be controlled by the students themselves. This may challenge the teachers’ views about teaching and learning, as well as that of the students. SNSs demand a change in the roles of both students and teachers. This might have led these teachers to use SNSs in a way that matched their teacher-centred teaching style, to which the students seemed to respond in like form, behaving dependently. Nevertheless, the students’ evidence suggests that they act autonomously, creatively, and strategically when working in informal SNS contexts.

Moreover, teachers showed fear of the uncontrollable while using SNSs, which they believed justified their teacher-centred approach. Salim-Mct said,

“*Sometimes I feel MOODLE is better since I control everything and customize its features. . . . I think SNSs help interaction and communication in English, but I need students to use the interactions appropriately and professionally only . . . for college only.*”

Fatma-M said,

“*I try to make sure that interactions between students are formal. This is important in all interactions . . . It is inappropriate to talk about things that are not related to the course.*”

Ahmed-Sh said,

“*I do not like my students to have private interactions that I cannot read. It is important to me to keep everything professional.*”

The three teachers appeared to feel that they were giving up and losing control. Ahmed-Sh perhaps felt that some of his power was being taken away. However, arguably, on SNSs, the locus of power was transferred to the students because the interaction happened in a space that was not constrained by the classroom setting. Students and teachers were in a new space produced by SNSs, a space in which the teachers believed that they had no control despite their desire to have control. The teachers felt empowered in the classroom and needed that control. Ahmed-Sh emphasised his need to know about all his students’ interactions; interactions between the students that he did not read seemed to make him feel excluded and disempowered.

Salim-Mct was keener to use a learning management system (e.g., MOODLE) to expand a classroom discussion more than other SNSs. He preferred a social network that he could control. He believed that SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter easily affected the kind of student–teacher relationship he was determined to build with the students because of the informal interactions that SNSs might promote at the teacher–student level.

Fatma-M believed that SNSs allowed for informal communication that she was not willing to permit in an educational setting. She tried to maintain a certain distance between herself and her students. Like Salim-Mct, she wanted to maintain the same kind of teacher–student relationship online and offline. The teachers might have been eager to use SNSs, but they also showed a tendency to impose rules, guidelines, and boundaries in the online space.

The above examples show the complex nature of SNS interactions between teachers and students. Teachers wanted to use SNSs as teaching tools; however, there were concerns about maintaining power and proper boundaries between the students and teachers. This also suggests that the teachers were trying to find a middle ground to use SNSs without feeling disempowered.

These teachers’ points of view do not align well with what they talked about previously (discussed earlier in Section 6.1.4). Teachers were motivated to use SNSs but also wanted to control them. On one hand, teachers encouraged students to use SNSs for interaction; on the other hand, teachers imposed rules on the students’ interactions and engagements. This might create a challenge for the students because even though SNSs offered freedom of speech and interaction that students enjoyed, they were challenged by the fact that these spaces were still controlled by the teachers in the same way as in the classroom setting, which was different from how they wanted to use SNSs.

However, regarding students’ interactions on SNSs, Fatma-M said,

“*Students ask questions and get answers instantly from their friends.*”

Ahmed-Sh said,

“*Any other student may answer the question and they help each other.”*

Salim-Mct said,

“*I have noticed that when a student asks about something, other students answer his question*. *They* *allow the students to post questions and to get quick answers from others.*”

This shows that teachers acknowledged the learning in which their students engaged without them. The teachers talked about their students collaborating and helping each other and how they asked and answered each other’s questions. They was that their students learned from each other. However, these teachers still labelled their students dependent.

Teachers also expressed wanting their students to have an online space in which to cooperate and take responsibility for their learning. They demanded autonomy and self-reliance from their students; however, at the same time, they did not like feeling disempowered when interactions happened without their knowledge. The teachers could not fully give up imposing control on all aspects of learning, which might challenge the students’ attempts to take responsibility for their learning. Thus, although they liked the idea that the students were asking each other questions and collaborating, they were focussed on their teaching style and resisted the loss of power that these new spaces might lead to. They had this notion of autonomy and complained that the students were not taking responsibility for their learning, yet at the same time, they did not like it when it was on the students’ own terms, and they therefore reduced the students’ opportunities to do so. The teachers wanted autonomy, but only to a certain extent. They also seemed not to want to allow students to communicate with them outside of a controlled setting, for example, in a student’s territory.

Therefore, teachers were caught between two things: fear of using SNSs and appreciating SNSs’ potential for teaching and learning. Although the teachers acknowledged the educational value of SNSs in opening up a space for students to collaborate and showed that they wanted to use them in teaching, they also showed reservations about their use due to the fear that SNSs could negatively affect and disempower their teaching. Teachers resisted any change in teacher–student relationships that SNSs might bring. This might be related to concerns about the possibility that students had more knowledge of SNSs than they did. Overall,loss of authority and control had an obvious influence on the way these teachers used SNSs in the EFL classrooms.

According to Millwater and Ehrich (2009), incorporating SNSs changes the role of teachers to more of facilitators. The traditional role of the teacher, as the powerful provider of all information, could be changed through the use of SNSs. Some of the control over learning is transferred to students because they take on more responsibility and use SNSs to share and provide information, ask questions, and interact, not only with the teacher, but also with each other. There seems to be a shift from the teacher being the only provider of information and answers to a collaborative way of learning in which both the teacher and students answer questions and share information (Millwater & Ehrich 2009). Lloyd (2012) highlighted that it is the technology disempowerment and loss of power that the teachers do not like when using SNSs in the classroom. Teachers would have to renegotiate their position, values, beliefs, and knowledge in the new context. The use of SNSs has the potential to provide a more collaborative approach to learning in which everyone can contribute to the learning process. Therefore, SNSs challenge the more traditional approach of teaching and relationships between teachers and students. The teachers in this study thought this was not preferable and preferred maintaining the same role. Despite their interest in new technologies for learning, they retained a traditional view of teaching in which they wanted to strongly control teaching and learning.

#### Gender

Results from the interviews also presented gender as a challenge for these teachers in using SNSs in their formal English teaching. The teachers were challenged in how they could develop ways to use SNSs that were culturally appropriate for both males and females and suited their perceived diverse needs and cultural backgrounds. This is related to confidentiality, privacy, and the ethical behaviour of both students and teachers. One example was provided by Fatma-M, a female teacher, who though that gender was a challenge for her as well as for her female students. She said,

“*Only in the WhatsApp group I had two groups: one for female students and me and the other is for male students. I was in the female group of-course not in the male group. I do not want male students to know my phone number. It was impractical and really difficult.*”

She said that she asked a student to be the group manager for the male students’ group and requested that he screenshot all their weekly English conversations. It was interesting that she talked about separation being logical and the culturally appropriate way to manage this obstacle. She said,

*“Female and male students cannot be in the same group.*”

On Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, she asked everybody to use their college email accounts to create new accounts on these platforms specifically for her course. She said,

“*Even with the new accounts, I found resistance from women to participate at the beginning. . . . Facebook and Twitter do not require personal information. I force them and usually they don’t mind eventually or if the students refuse, I open two accounts; one for females and one for males and me in both groups. However, I always notice that in mixed groups students behave their best and participation is better and all in English.*”

Despite the fact that in colleges these teachers were teaching in, the classes are mixed, these teachers presumed that they were not living in a culture of collaboration between genders or interaction between male and female students. The teachers indicated that the students showed initial reluctance to use SNSs if they were forced to be in the same space with the opposite sex. This indicates that collaboration between the two genders was eventually possible through the use of SNSs in English learning.

Other examples of this challenge came from Ahmed-Sh and Salim-Mct (both male teachers). Ahmed-Sh said,

“*The women prefer separation of women and men. They like to keep the relationships strictly professional at all times. . . . I respect that and I gave the students the freedom to create a separate, professional account to keep the communication with me and other students for academic purposes only.*”

Salim-Mct said,

“*Women don’t like to work in groups with men . . . they do not speak freely in front of each other*. *I made it clear to the students, especially the men, that they must not interact in informal conversations with their classmates. It is for educational purposes only.*”

Based on the teachers’ interviews, there seemed to be a sense of agreement among the three teachers about the restrictions imposed on them by gender. Teachers agreed that handling gender has always been a concern and that risks could occur from not managing it properly. The teachers also thought that their students, because of their cultural backgrounds, found it difficult to interact naturally with each other. As a female teacher from the same context, I am aware that male–female interactions are limited in the Omani context and that this is deeply rooted in the cultural and social norms that might obstruct the integration of SNSs. However, it seems from my students’ data (Chapters 4 & 5) that not all women have this view and things might be changing.

The three teachers seemed to use certain techniques to handle gender dynamics and to protect the women’s integrity and privacy in that sense. Teachers took cultural norms in the social and educational setting into consideration and developed a clear understanding of these concepts before implementation. They tried to find practical solutions and used strategies such as separation or establishing clear rules for the students before using SNSs to encourage students to be positively engaged without feeling culturally offended.

#### Language Constraints: English as a Barrier

Teachers also considered English being a foreign language in Oman as a barrier to participation in SNSs. These three EFL teachers worked in a non-English-speaking country. English language in this case was both a target for using SNSs in formal EFL teaching and a challenge. Fatma-M thought that students’ online participation depended on their level of English. She said,

“*Students, whose English level is better, participate more. . . . Unfortunately, students with low level in English are not using SNSs. . . . High English level students find it easier to engage in English than low level students.*”

Fatma-M used SNSs to teach English to various groups of students (elementary, intermediate, and advanced). She noticed that students’ online participation in the advanced group was much higher than in the other groups. She explained,

“*The advanced group has a starting point to start with.*”

She was referring to their English being at a good enough level, where they could start to write in English without viewing the language as a barrier to use.

Ahmed-Sh also thought that using English was considered an obstacle by his students:

“*The thing is that they see English as a barrier so they don’t want to use it online or offline*. . . . *They want to use Arabic not English . . . getting them to speak in English in SNSs is a challenge. Students did not like* *the idea of shifting their communication to English.*”

Some of his students wanted to participate, but because they did not have the language level to do so, they did not. He said,

“*It was obvious since they sometimes send pictures or repeat certain known sentences or ask for permission to communicate in Arabic to express their ideas.*”

He mentioned that his students also complained about how hard it was to interact in English. He noticed that some students struggled to make conversation in English. He said,

“*Sometimes the students ask for time to look for a meaning in a dictionary or about how to say something in English or apologise about the amount of time they took to answer a certain question because they needed more time to understand what has been said and reply.*”

Fatma-M said,

“*Sometimes one student or two students who speak English well, increase the overall interactions and encourage other students who have less English skills to communicate. I discovered that my students have a group in WhatsApp where they ask their friends to translate in Arabic what has been said, in the English group . . .* *they miss the whole point why we had the WhatsApp group in the first place and used WhatsApp in the same way they used to. But at least they get to talk about the English course and help each other in a different way, it is not so bad.*”

Teachers agreed that their students found it difficult to use SNSs in a foreign language and that was why students were opposed to using SNSs in their learning. Salim-Mct said,

“*I have some students who use SNSs to follow celebrities like football players or singers who make posts in English. You would think that is good, they are reading in English, but all they really do is clicking the translate button without reading in English. . . . These students have a low level of English which does not encourage them to comment in English or use it in public. . . . Some may attempt to comment or reply in English but those are very few number and not worth mentioning when compared to the majority.*”

This teacher assumed that using SNSs in Arabic (the students’ L1) would be easier. Using SNSs in English would be more difficult.

### *Discussion*

In the previous section, I explored the challenges of using SNSs in formal EFL teaching thatwere prominent in teachers’ reflectionsfrom educational and contextual points of view.It is important to note herethat these challenges did not change the teachers’ perceptions of the use of SNSs in a way that is contextually useful. The long process of using a new space and trying to accommodate it and then later facing many challenges did not lead to frustration or withdrawal. This shows the teachers’ positive views that wereconnected to their beliefs because they conveyed pride and enjoyment in using SNSs in education**.** Using SNSs was mostly based on the individual teacher’s motives and what he or she thought might work in his or her contexts. The challenges perceived by teachers highlighted the importance of context in using SNSs because all of the challenges were linked to the personal level of the individual students and their cultural contexts.

Culture is an aspect that needs to be addressed in the domain of various educational systems (Oliver & McLoughlin, 2001). The nature of SNSs as an international medium makes culture an important factor to consider when using them in education. Benson et al. (2003) explored teaching English to students from Asian cultural backgrounds. They concluded that when teaching students from a variety of cultures, many concerns require attention. For instance, they mentioned that learning autonomy is a “Western construct” that was not developed by Asian cultural contexts; therefore, teachers should consider the suitability of stressing learner autonomy in Asian culture and with students who have grown up in this culture. They concluded that globalisation creates complex sociocultural contexts that require careful consideration when teaching EFL (Benson et al., 2003). They also stated that students who are learning English have different beliefs, needs, and learning styles based on their local setting and the culture in which they grew up. In their study, they took quite a static view of culture. This does not fit with the findings of my study, in which Omani students were more willing to be autonomous in their learning; the students in my study were able to talk about the different strategies they had tried and showed themselves to be motivated to learn independently. It may be that in different contexts there are salient characteristics that are assumed to be static, but cultures are not homogeneous, as discussed in Chapter 2. Moreover, the teachers in my study talked about culture as if it were monolithic but nevertheless expressed different beliefs in relation to gender; some were happy to give out numbers in mixed-sex forums, while others were not.

## Students’ Views on Using SNSs for Formal EFL Teaching

**Introduction**

The findings presented in this chapter address part of the third research question:

*How do young teachers and students use and perceive SNSs in formal EFL learning?*

One of the aims of this study was to highlight a number of real issues in using SNSs in teaching and learning, as well as to offer considerations for practice and further research. During the focus group discussions, student views varied. Their attitudes towards using SNSs in formal EFL teaching were influenced by their perceptions of the benefits and challenges. Many students indicated that they really liked to use SNSs in formal teaching and liked the benefits offered by them. However, some students disagreed and preferred not to use SNSs in formal teaching. They had either negative or neutral perceptions in this regard; they even stated that they wished their teachers would not use SNSs in the classroom. Having said that, the focus group discussions indicated that the students in general conveyed their preference to use particular SNSs in formal teaching under particular conditions. They also reported their dislike of using particular SNSs in particular ways. Students gave many reasons for their negative and positive perceptions. These reasons were mainly related to the perceived benefits and challenges, which are discussed in the following sections.

The themes in the students’ views regarding using SNSs for formal EFL teaching are as follows: (a) perceived benefits and (b) perceived challenges.

**6.2 Students’ Views on Using SNSs in Formal EFL Teaching**

**6.2.2.1 Teachers**

**6.2.1.2 Personal and Educational**

**6.2.1.1 Enabling Features**

**6.2.1 Perceived Benefits**

**6.2.2 Perceived Challenges**

**6.2.1.1.1. The Interactive Feature**

**6.2.1.1.2 The Use of Multimedia Content**

**6.2.1.1.3 Mobility and Convenience**

**6.2.1.1.4 Accessibility Anytime, Anywhere**

**6.2.1.1.5 The User-Friendly Features**

**6.2.1.1.1. Students’ Characteristics**

**6.2.1.1.1. Students’ Preference**

**6.2.1.1.1. Students’ Learning Needs**

**6.2.1.1.1. The Entertainment Factor**

**Figure 6.2: Students’ uses of SNSs for formal EFL learning**

The following sections are dedicated to each of the above-mentioned themes.

### Perceived Benefits

In the focus group, students talked about many potential benefits that they saw in using SNSs as part of formal learning. For the purpose of this study, I discuss these perceived benefits leading to the students’ positive views in two categories. This helps me express my reflections and insights on the issues I identified from the analysis. The first type of benefit was related mainly to the enabling features of SNSs (e.g., interactive features and group communication, multimedia content, mobility, accessibility, and individualised space). The second type of benefit was related to personal or educational reasons (e.g., students’ characteristics, students’ preferences, students’ learning needs, and entertainment factors).

#### Enabling Features

##### **The Interactive Feature**

The students mentioned that SNSs enabled them to interact, discuss, socialise, and share information. This enabling feature ensured multiway interaction and group discussions even with people in distant places. This was the first and the main feature offered by SNSs that students talked about. To them, it was useful for both student–student interaction and student–teacher interaction.

Students thought that teacher–student interactions were a significant benefit of SNSs. According to Patel (2003), students’ interactions with their teachers are useful and enrich the learning process. In the focus group discussions, the students reported that they liked the opportunities offered by SNSs to have an ongoing conversation channel with their teachers. One male student said,

“*Using SNSs to keep us connected to the teacher is important. In case of reminders, urgent stuff and updates regarding study issues. It is easy and quick to use SNSs.”*

Another example was from a female student:

“*I think using SNSs is really good. It is really nice to text the teacher on SNSs and get responses. Teachers could answer our questions outside of the class easily. We do not need to go to them.*”

These comments show the value these students place on using SNSs to interact with their teachers, for practical reasons more than for any other educational purposes. Cheung and Vogel (2011) studied teachers’ and students’ online interactions and stated that students are willing to use SNSs to interact with their teachers for academic purposes. Ota (2011) conducted a study about using SNSs in language learning; he stated that the assistance given by peers seemed to offer many advantages for language acquisition. He concluded that peer learning is a significant benefit that could be achieved from using SNSs for language learning. Swain and Lapkin (2013) stated that peer cooperation on SNSs may generate effective activities to construct knowledge of grammar, syntax, and phonetics as well as understanding the use of the language in context. They indicated that collaboration between peers through SNSs may allow students to gain problem-solving skills with high language intelligence. They concluded that peer collaboration encouraged greater language achievement for learners.

##### **Multimedia Use on SNSs**

Students talked about the effectiveness of using SNSs, which was enhanced by some enabling features such as file transfer and picture, audio, and video posting. Links also allowed users to access large content resources and information. Many students expressed that they liked and benefited from the visual features of videos and images, which were easy to transfer. One female student said,

“*Teachers can send videos and resources on SNSs that are useful for everyone.*”

Another example came from another female student,

“*SNSs make it easier to send videos and links that are useful to all students. We all like videos, and we like to share them with others.*”

According to Gardner (2011), SNSs enable users to stay connected to other sites and information resources.They can provide greater understanding and increase retention of any subject. SNSs offer access to information that may not be available otherwise. SNSs enhance students’ access to information in the form of texts, images, videos. They improve the exchange of various types of information resources and the speed of these exchanges. They also provide several information channels and open up new ways of accessing them (Gardner, 2011).

##### **Mobility and Convenience**

Mobility and convenience are enabling features of SNSs that are promoted by incorporating SNSs into smartphones. They facilitate the use of SNSs on the go and as such are another key benefit that students saw in using SNSs in formal learning; even if they were not in front of a computer, they were still able to access SNSs from their mobile devices and receive updates. One female student said,

“*They are easy to use because we do not have access to computers all the time. I like to use them because I get notification easily on my phone.*”

One female student said,

“*We mainly use our phones to access SNSs and our phones are with us all the time.*”

This shows that the students saw an advantage in having SNS applications on their smartphones instead of only on their computers. This gave them the chance to interact using their smartphones, which they carried all the time. From the students’ perspective, this feature of SNSs facilitates accessibility anytime, anywhere.

##### **Accessibility Anytime, Anywhere**

The ability to interact with the teacher at any time, especially outside of class, was also emphasised in students’ comments about the benefits of using SNSs in formal EFL learning. One female student said,

“*It is easy to talk to teachers any time in SNSs. We do not have enough time in the class to discuss everything.*”

Another female student said,

“*Teachers answer our questions outside the class any time . . . even at night. All the sources are available online all the time.*”

This shows how students perceived SNSs as spaces in which they could resolve the time and space limits in the educational process and continue learning online anytime they found appropriate. This feature of SNSs was really important for students because it allowed for more time in terms of interaction and engagement and offered the option of accessing learning materials anytime and anywhere. This could also reduce stress and increase satisfaction among students. Students mentioned that they did not have to be in class to communicate with their teachers or to post or access information resources.

One male student said,

“*The students or the teacher can answer my questions in their free time and if they do not want to, they do not. I do not waste the class time when I ask many questions on SNSs.*”

Another male said,

“*We do not have enough time in the class to discuss everything.*”

One female student was clear that she found using SNSs beneficial in learning:

“*I think using SNSs is really good. It is really nice to text the teacher on the SNSs and get responses. I like to talk to her face-to-face, but teachers are always busy or unavailable during the day and we are busy during the day too. There are many things we need to do during the day . . . so SNSs are good when we can’t meet face-to-face.*”

This student’s comment shows no concern about the boundaries between offline and online interactions; she supported the teacher’s use of SNSs to maintain continuous interaction. She indicated her positive attitude towards active interaction with the teacher through SNSs and thus did not resist use of SNSs in learning.

##### **The User-Friendly Features**

User-friendly features include the following: easy to use, cheap, and flexible. The students reported that SNSs are easy to use in education. In other words, SNSs provide these students with a familiar and easy way to learn EFL. One female student said,

“*This is an easy-to-use tool that had a lot of nice features that we like.*”

Another female student said,

“*It’s the fastest and easiest way for us to communicate with each other.*”

The second type of benefit was related to personal and educational perceived benefits, which I discuss below.

#### Personal and Educational Perceived Benefits

Another type of benefit to using SNSs in EFL formal teaching that was mentioned by students in the focus group discussion was related to the students’ personal and educational perceived benefits. I categorised these themes as follows: (a) students’ characteristics, (b) students’ preferences, (c) students’ learning needs, and (d) the entertainment factor. I discuss these themes below.

##### **Students’ Characteristics**

Some students believed that SNSs offered great benefits for shy students to enable them to interact with their teachers without anxiety due to sharing and participating.

According to the participating students, online interactions enabled them to develop as reflective learners and take the time they needed to participate at their own pace based on their emotional reactions. Park and Son (2011) argued that this may reduce any stress that they might experience in face-to-face participation.

One female student said,

“*I do not generally ask questions in class especially in English, I feel afraid of making mistakes. But not in SNSs, I get a lot of help.*”

Another female student said,

“*I believe that SNSs offer more chances for shy students to participate more than in classrooms. They feel shy to ask any questions in the classroom but on SNSs they are very active. I believe it makes participation easier.*”

Another female student argued that a shy student who did not speak in the classroom would not speak on SNSs, providing an example of her friend who kept telling her to ask questions for her on SNSs. She argued that SNSs were even more difficult for her friend to use because she considered them to be more public than classrooms. She said,

“*No, it does not. It is even worse because everybody can see it and comment on it. My friend, who is too shy, feels more embarrassed to ask questions in SNSs than in the classroom.*”

These two students had two different perceptions of what is public and what is not, at two extremes of the public–private continuum of SNSs. One of them considered the classroom to be more public than SNS spaces. She positioned the classroom as less comfortable for participation by shy students. She thought that shy students had the chance to be more engaged on SNSs. SNSs offer a more relaxed space for participation that would not be possible for shy, reserved students in public classroom spaces.

The other student considered SNSs as more public spaces. She assumed that many shy students, like her friend, did not like to participate on SNSs because of that. Her friend felt less comfortable asking the teacher questions in the more public spaces of SNSs, where the questions and posts would remain permanently visible to all other students.

The majority of students agreed, however, that shy students would go beyond their shyness while interacting on SNS spaces. One male student explained,

“*I like SNSs more. I feel more comfortable to ask questions.*”

##### **Students’ Preferences**

This perceived benefit is related to students’ preferences for engaging in online SNS interaction in learning over offline class communications. Some students showed their preference for online spaces in certain conditions and for specific purposes and reasons. For example, one male student said,

“*Nice, sometimes you need to go through the answers and the information and read them again. It is useful . . . you cannot do that when the teachers give the information quickly in the class.*”

And another male student said,

“*I like it when the teachers give the information online*. *It is good that you cannot miss anything such as information or resources. I can’t note everything in the classroom.*”

Another male student reported,

“*We always ask the teachers to send the information online instead of just saying it in the class. The teacher usually gives detailed and exact information online.*”

This suggests that online communication was sometimes more preferable for passing on information and resources and answering questions. This was related to another enabling feature, the permanent recorded history feature, which makes postings on SNSs relatively long-lasting. These students reported that they liked that SNSs gave them unique opportunities to visit and revisit postings, interactions, and activities, which classroom communication could not offer. It allowed these students to view the history of the communication at any time and as many times as they wanted. However, this feature might result in reluctance to freely communicate online for the same reason. A female student said,

“*It is different . . . when I send something online, they talk about it a lot . . . everyone will see it and comment on it . . . sometimes even till the next day or the next week or month. . . . I am careful what to say online. I pay attention to grammar, spelling and everything. Everyone thinks that they need to comment on it and give sophisticated answers showing of their knowledge. They tend to behave with a certain level of proficiency.*”

This shows that this student had concerns about her image and was aware of the fixed nature of online text. To her, what was said in the classroom was short-lived and so she felt more accountable and less comfortable online.

This suggests a significant point that sometimes SNS online interactions were perceived negatively because they were not all about students helping each other; sometimes, they were about competition with friends and classmates.

This also shows that the same feature of SNSs was considered positive by some students and negative by others. These findings are supported by the assumption that students are not homogenous and vary in their characteristics and preferences.

##### **Students’ Learning Needs and Styles**

Although students’ learning needs and styles was only mentioned by a couple of students, it seemed to be a salient underlying feature of SNSs. Individualised SNS spaces seemed to offer these students the opportunity to choose how, what, where, and when they learned. SNSs support various learning styles. According to these students, this is a useful aspect of learning in SNSs because it enables each student to learn at his or her own pace and speed (slowly or quickly). It also allows them to revisit information, communications, and answers to questions as many times as they want for better understanding. A male student said,

“*Sometimes I need to go through the answers and the information and read them again to have a better understanding* . . . *nice.*”

Another male student said,

“*I go again, and I read what the teacher and the students talked about.*”

These students talked about how they liked to revisit their online spaces many times. These students reflected the assumption that students learn differently. Therefore, to them, SNSs offered opportunities to revisit what was said, offering revision opportunities and chances to consolidate knowledge in a way that was not possible in the classroom. In the classroom, the voices and interactions are ephemeral and disappear, whereas SNSs capture interactions and maintain information, which permits students to revisit them at any time. The students’ comments also show that they did not all view learning in the same way because they each had diverse learning needs and styles.

##### **Entertainment Factor**

Students expressed their need to have some form of entertainment during studying. Thus, to these students, SNSs in themselves could add an entertainment factor and create an enjoyable atmosphere during the process of formal learning. Furthermore, the novelty of these SNSs attracted these students and motivated them to study. Using SNSs in formal learning could allow them to engage in numerous pleasant activities. One male student said,

“*It is fun and entertaining. . . . Something new and interesting.*”

Another male student said,

“*Having fun while studying is limited but if the teacher uses SNSs, that will be really entertaining.*”

Entertainment has always been a central element of SNS experiences. Students saw a huge potential benefit of having fun while using SNSs in formal teaching.

#### **Perceived Challenges**

The students in this study thought that teachers were the only obstacle to using SNSs in formal education. The teachers’ lack of interest in using SNSs in formal teaching, and their lack of awareness of how to do so, was the only mentioned challenge by the students. For example, one female student said,

“*Teachers do not like to use SNSs or any other technologies in teaching, they are stuck to the traditional way of teaching and do not want to change. Many of them do not know how to use them and do not want to use them.”*

This student seemed to think that teachers would not like to use SNSs or did not know how to use them in formal EFL teaching.

In general, students seemed to have positive attitudes towards the use of SNSs in formal EFL formal based on the number of benefits students mentioned. The findings of this study suggest that the students were willing to incorporate SNSs in their formal learning.

### ***Discussion***

Most students saw benefits to using SNSs in formal EFL learning because they thought SNSs provided a space for English learning outside of class. Very few participants held negative views about it. All the above-mentioned benefits perceived by the students were related mainly to one main benefit, which was *expanding learning time* *and* *having access to teachers outside of the classroom*. The students appeared to like being connected with their teachers both within and outside the university. They liked to use and access SNSs and as often as they wanted. The students also appeared to already be blending the two parts of their lives, that is, their educational and their social lives. Therefore, they did not mind using SNSs in formal learning to their advantage. They could access information in the spaces to which they were already connected, that is, SNSs. The students emphasised the importance of communicating with teachers, which led to enhancing the learning process. Students mentioned that they would like resources and information to be provided by teachers online. Students viewed SNSs as a tool to support traditional learning.

## **Summary of Key Findings and Discussion** for Chapter 6

There are two perspectives on the use of SNSs in formal teaching: the teachers’ and the students’. The findings of this study show that both teachers and students perceived the use of SNSs positively, albeit there was some variety in the details of their perspectives. Moreover, both teachers and students had different ways of looking at the use of SNSs. For example, this study has established that SNSs had good acceptance amongst students because they expanded interactions with teachers. On the other hand, the teachers worried about losing control if they engaged in social interactions with their students via SNSs.

Conole and Alevizou (2010) suggested that SNSs impacted students, teachers, and the education system in general. Their study suggested that SNSs are beneficial to students in many ways; they can share academic experiences, discuss topics related to their studies, and arrange their academic activities. SNSs, they suggested, are also beneficial to teachers because they enable organisation of schedules, which decreases the time spent passing information on to students and enables them to share course materials in a friendly way. Hafner, Chik, and Jones (2013) found that teachers were positive about the benefits of using SNSs for interaction; however, they had concerns about how to use them. They suggested that interaction on SNSs is different from interaction in classrooms. Interaction via SNSs is open and friendly because SNSs are designed to facilitate sharing of personal life experiences. The majority of the teachers in their study were not willing to have a friendly relationship with their students. Hafner, Chik, and Jones (2013)explored teachers’ perceptions of using SNSs with students. Many of them wanted to maintain the same level of formality in interaction with students that they have in the classroom.

My study focussed on both the teachers’ views and the students’ views. Two things became clear from the findings: First, there was a disagreement in views between students and teachers regarding how to use SNSs in formal teaching. Second, each party highlighted the role of the other group for successful use of SNSs.

# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

## Introduction

In this chapter, I present the key research findings and discuss the contribution of my research project to the literature. I provide a summary of the key findings and address the value of the theoretical approaches as applied to this research. I also report the limitations of this research project and present recommendations for action and further investigation. As a final point, I provide concluding remarks.

## The Key Research Findings

Using SNSs in formal and informal language learning and teaching has received a lot pf positive review from scholars (Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Blattner & lomicka, 2012; Dron & Anderson, 2014; Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2014; Greenhow et al., 2014; Ha & Shin, 2014; Hughes et al., 2015; Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014; Manca & Ranieri, 2015; Mills, 2009, 2011; Murray & Hourigan, 2010; Roblyer et al., 2010; Rodríguez-Hoyos et al., 2015; Skon, Johnson, & Johnson, 2012; Thurairaj et al., 2012). Researchers have claimed that research on using SNSs in language learning is still in the early stages (Thurairaj et al., 2012). At the same time, the quantity of research on educational uses of SNSs is limited, and most studies have been carried out on the general use of technology. Therefore, it seems that more research is needed in the area of using SNSs in education in general and in EFL learning among students in Oman in particular. In this study, I first focussed on students’ uses and perceptions of SNSs in their daily lives. Then, I explored the practices and perceptions of EFL learners at Omani colleges concerning the use of SNSs in EFL learning, as well as three teachers’ usage and perceptions. The objectives of this study were achieved through mixed methods data collection to explore the practices of the participants. The research questions were guided by the assumption that learners’ ability to access socially driven SNSs might develop the learners’ EFL learning practices and skills. The data contributed to knowledge through three research questions:

***RQ1: How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs in their daily lives?***

***RQ2: How do young Omani students use and perceive SNSs in their informal EFL learning?***

***RQ3: How do Omani teachers and students use and perceive SNSs in formal EFL teaching?***

The implications of the research findings for the future use of SNSs in EFL learning and teaching and other related issues are addressed in this concluding chapter of the study.

The mixed methods approach facilitated exploring the research topic because it generated both quantitative and qualitative data and related evidence. I collected the quantitative data from EFL students through questionnaires. Then, I gathered the qualitative data from five focus group discussions and three one-to-one interviews. The quantitative and qualitative phases offered a complementary and in-depth understanding of the research topic. I used descriptive statistical analysis from the questionnaire data to identify and report the findings, followed by thematic analysis for the focus groups and interview data.

Based on the analyses presented earlier, this section summarises the findings related to the three research questions.

### RQ1: How do Young Omani Students Use and Perceive SNSs in Their Daily Lives

There were a number of key findings for this research question. **First**, the students’ views were not uniform; however, they were points of view on a continuum. There was not one single monolithic view but multiple views, and ones which did not remain stable throughout the project. When looking at the data, I found inconsistencies within the groups’ perceptions. There were variations in the students’ views—across students and even within an individual’s viewpoint. In other words, the data are diverse. In the students’ discussions, there was a lot of uncertainty and instability concerning their views, and things were not so clear cut for these students, which may explain the split in terms of the students’ perceptions that was observed in this research. This could be interpreted as part of the complexity of the students’ social culture; some participants felt that there were limitations to how they were supposed to behave and interact. This does not subvert the idea of culture as fluid. The culture seems to be changing for some in particular ways, whereas for others, the changes were not quite the same. These viewpoints about their culture were fascinating; it seems that the act of using SNSs made them more aware of issues that they had glossed over in face-to-face experiences in their lives. Moreover, the changes in culture were beginning to disturb some of the students’ perceptions of culture as static. This made some students feel unsettled because they seemed to believe not only that culture was static, but that it should be. Thus, whilst they were involved in new ways of behaving, they found this unsettling and disturbing, as well as, in some ways, exciting.

One of the reasons behind this finding might be that these young adults’ perceptions of SNS spaces were still emerging; they were still in the early stages of evaluating these new spaces and how to use them. SNS spaces are new and under continuous development, too. SNS spaces are transitional in terms of how they are perceived. These students’ understanding of SNSs is also in development.

**Second**, the participants indicated that what they believed as part of their culture affected their positions and uses of SNSs.

Online connections within SNS spaces are happening within new social contexts that are evolving and dynamic in nature. The context of the users was rooted within online spaces, too; it opened boundaries between the offline and online worlds. In other words, they were not always distinctly separate. SNSs had the imprint of the culture and the context from which users came. Although one would think that one general culture would be dominant in SNSs and in almost every corner of the students’ lives, the opposite might be the case, as the findings of this study have shown. The impact of the individual’s own culture was significant in SNS spaces.

The findings of this study seem to indicate that varied social awareness influenced the students’ views of SNSs. In this case, individuals had different needs and beliefs shaped by their background and local surroundings.

**Third**, these young adults looked at online activities in a much more positive way than they reported their parents did. These young adults saw the constant presence of SNSs in their lives as completely normal, unlike their parents, who apparently saw it as risky, unsafe, or time wasting, according to the students. Students hardly saw SNSs as being problematic. They reported that their parents’ worries did not seem to touch on real concerns. These worries did not really reflect the students’ views or the significant part of their everyday online behaviour, such as online chat, texting, and surfing. Indeed, young people found their SNS use to be useful, beneficial, and entertaining. This was true to them in terms of their social lives as well as their learning and education, as I discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

Previous studies have shown that there is an inverse relationship between age and the adoption of any kind of technology in various contexts. These studies argued that older individuals are more likely to hold more negative views and attitudes towards new technologies. Older people are less likely to accept new technologies and seem more reluctant to use them compared to young individuals (e.g., Akindehin & Akindehin, 2011).

**Fourth,** I have observed a typical trend: Many of the students, despite family and society restrictions and the way they grew up, wanted and sought more independent thinking and exposure to SNSs. The participants seemed to indicate that they were performing new practices across a range of online spaces, such as sharing pictures and experiences, talking with the opposite sex, and expressing and discussing opinions and ideas. They found joy and comfort in talking to friends online to share and express themselves. They also established new relationships, expressed opinions and transgressive thoughts, and joined communities of interest with people they did not know.

This social use suggests that Omani young adults seem to be exploring SNSs to discover what they may offer and how they should behave in these spaces without disturbing society and family rules. They were at an exploratory level, in which they were learning individuality, independence, accountability, open-mindedness, and playfulness with SNSs.

It seems that the participants shared a common desire to follow the rules and expectations of Omani society offline. They all wanted to be devoted to their parents, family, and society and not to break the rules. They did not want to be disconnected from the community. However, at the same time, they did not necessarily want to follow norms dictated by family and society in their entirety. Particularly, they might have felt that some of these norms contradicted the internal values that they had developed online away from their families. They seemed to be mainly concerned with the interests, interactions, experiences, and emotions that they were unable to share openly offline. This study shows that like other young adults around the world, these Omani young adults used SNSs primarily for socialising and for entertainment purposes. They showed a desire to express experiences and interests online. For them, expressing their experiences was a process of networking with other like-minded friends.

They seemed to realise that the context in which they grew up barred some emerging online practices and therefore tried to control them. They seemed to be trying to push the boundaries and negotiate their practices to reach a middle ground. In doing so, these Omani youths did not contradict themselves transparently; however, they tried to create an alternative world online that suited their internal values without disturbing social rules. They seemed to be engaged in expressing opinions regarding local and societal issues only if the condition of anonymity was present.

They used SNSs to try to overcome what they perceived to be fixed cultural restraints. Many of them were trying to find and explore alternatives without disturbing conventional norms and mainstream society. These cultural norms still mattered to them. This shows the dilemma these students believed they faced; they wanted more freedom and were excited about the new spaces offered by SNSs, but they expressed understanding of their parents’ fears and concerns. They were encountering a lack of harmony or feeling of discomfort about what should and should not be happening in SNS spaces. The fear of disturbing traditional boundaries and the behavioural protocol seemed to always be present. They were pushing what they thought was appropriate and seemed to be negotiating these things among themselves, too. This relates to the notion of culture as a fluid and co-constructed entity, malleable and open to change. Culture is obviously not monolithic or static, and it is not always possible to see it in the way Hofstede (1985) described it, as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another” (p. 25). Thus, although the students acknowledged and conceded to cultural constraints, at the same time, they were gently pushing the boundaries and were not behaving at all as if “programmed”.

**Fifth,** an important point from the findings is that these students used various strategies in their online interactions. Students could be described as “strategic”. Students showed full awareness of their audience during online interactions. They tried to avoid conflicts caused by the overlapping of interactions across the offline-online setting, so they adjusted their online interactions and directed them towards specific audiences. This adjustment of behaviour reflects complex strategic communication skills, just as can be witnessed offline. These students took action and made decisions so that their online behaviours would not affect their relationships. They knew how to consider their public participation and the consequences of their online behaviours. The participants showed understanding of the consequential associations that their individual actions would bring to themselves, their families, relatives, and society in general. They aspired to communicate online without the worry that their engagements could be considered inappropriate or the fear that they might bring disgrace to their families. These students consequently tried to manage the group co-presence. They took different audience groups into account and tried to manage their co-presence in various ways. For example, they established boundaries between their online social connections; they formed more separated groups for more relative sharing. In addition, they knowingly managed the type and amount of information they shared because they wanted to reveal personal information in a limited way. These strategies were used to avoid potential harm to privacy or other anticipated social consequences.

### RQ2: How Do Young Omani Students Use and Perceive SNSs in Their Informal EFL Learning?

This study has shown that the participating students acknowledged the learning possibilities in using SNSs for informal EFL learning. The descriptive analysis of the questionnaire showed positive views towards the use of SNSs to support informal EFL learning. Respondents reported using SNSs in learning English and agreed that SNSs were useful for EFL learning. The students in this study described the richness of SNS resources as learning tools that were available at all times to support their EFL learning. The findings of this research also showed that WhatsApp was rated as the most popular social tool among Omani students and was generally perceived as beneficial for informal EFL learning. (This was in contrast to their teachers, who preferred not to use WhatsApp).

In general, students talked about positive experiences with and perceptions towards the use of SNSs to enhance motivation for EFL learning. The quantitative data indicated that the majority of respondents used SNSs in EFL learning, which allowed them to learn in places that suited them better and provided more interesting learning experiences than the classroom.

The students used a rich range of ways to improve their English language informally through SNSs (discussed in detail in Chapter 5). Students used SNSs to learn with peers and other EFL learners, as well as to learn individually and interact with English language speakers. However, the findings also suggest that these uses were not without challenges. This was especially clear when students talked about being unable to find other individuals with whom they could interact in English or sometimes feeling uncomfortable getting support from classmates. My findings suggest that although EFL learning through SNSs is naturally collaborative, it also involves challenges. The data show that students put much emphasis on other members in SNS groups for English production, interaction, and information exchanges. The data also suggest a number of challenges related to this benefit. For example, a few students communicated their disappointment in others who did not have a group work spirit. Therefore, although there were examples showing that working in groups was enjoyable and comfortable for students, there were also contrasting examples of challenges related to encountering members who were unwilling to help, had a competitive attitude, or were perceived as show-offs. This was a challenge perceived by students because SNS groups and collaborative learning significantly depend on members’ willingness to contribute to the group, as well as to help and receive help from others to improve learning. Another challenge was that students on SNSs received many different and mixed views and information from peers, which confused and overwhelmed them.

### RQ3: How Do Omani Teachers and Students Use and Perceive SNSs in Formal EFL Teaching?

One of the objectives of this research project was to to explore Omani teachers’ current situation in terms of using SNSs in EFL classrooms. There are a number of key findings for Research Question 3. First, teachers selected specific applications based on how they understood the functionality of these applications. They were strategic and well-informed. Secondly, getting their students to practice English was the main purpose of SNS use among these EFL teachers. They also used SNSs for inquiry, uploading resources, and organisational reasons. Thirdly, SNSs were mainly used by teachers after class time, not in class. Fourthly, different teachers used different SNSs differently in different circumstances.

It was clear that the use of SNSs in EFL teaching in Oman, as in many other countries, was still a novelty practiced by a small number of language teachers. It was a new experience for the three teachers who participated in the interviews. It was obvious that the teachers were still in the process of understanding how it would work and what their role would be. As such, they were mostly at the very beginning of building their perceptions about the use(s) of SNSs in formal teaching. They were open and ready to use SNSs in formal EFL teaching but were still not sure how because they were exploring and evaluating different spaces.

It is important to note here that the three teachers’ initial use of SNSs was not completely modest. The language for communicating on these SNSs was English, not Arabic (the teachers’ and students’ L1). The three teachers used SNSs as a teaching support tool, and they used SNSs in English language classrooms for English language practice, for administrative purposes, and to upload resources. Students were encouraged to practice English on SNSs. According to the three teachers, English production and learning was happening within these spaces.

However, the findings of this study show far more use of SNSs to practice English skills such as writing and to upload EFL learning resourcesand information, rather than to learn EFL in a more sustained manner. These English language teachers’ use of SNSs can be described mostly as teacher-centred and textbook-based. It was also clear that SNS use was not a central part of their teaching.

The teachers in this study displayed approaches ranging from traditional teacher-centred learning to collaborative student-centred learning. The findings suggest that the teachers’ use of SNS was mainly teacher-centred. They incorporated SNSs in many of the teaching patterns that they used offline. Therefore, the use of SNSs did not completely facilitate a different approach to EFL teaching. Teachers mainly used SNSs to expand EFL language practices beyond the offline context. In other words, with the help of SNSs, these teachers provided additional practicesto the traditional offline learning, but not different approaches to teaching.

However, there was also a small indication of a move towards a more student-centred approach. Teachers showed a small shift in the focusof their teaching towards being more student-centred, allowing for more pedagogicalconcepts such as exploratory learning and peer learning on SNSs. SNSs were seen to provideopportunities for students to help each other and learn from each other.

Of course, SNSs have a lot more to offer, which lines up with present thinking about EFL learning.As evidenced in this study, teachers had not fully exploited the possibilities for English learning with SNSs, which may increase students’ interaction. The interactivity enabled by SNSs has provided learners with opportunities for English production and communication (Wang & Vasquez, 2012).

I also explored the challenges to using SNSs in formal EFL teaching, whichwere prominent in teachers’ reflectionsfrom educational and contextual points of view.It is important to note herethat these challenges—although there were a lot—did not change the teachers’ attitudes towards the used of SNSs in a way that was contextually useful.

Oliver and McLoughlin (2001) argued that culture needs to be addressed in the domain of various educational systems. In this regard, the Omani students learning English had different beliefs, needs, and learning styles influenced by the local setting in which they grew up. The teachers of this study considered the adoption of SNSs to satisfy the needs of students based on their backgrounds.

Thus, although learning English was a progressively significant policy in the Omani education system, the teachers participating in this study thought that the maintenance of social and cultural norms was even more important and that these norms should not be neglected. They believed that the implementation of SNSs required an understanding of the context to which they were introduced. The teachers critically reflected on how they used SNSs within the complexity of Omani society, trying to adhere to the norms that they believed were key to their culture.

Many participating students indicated that they really liked using SNSs in formal teaching and liked the benefits offered by them. However, some students disagreed and preferred not to use SNSs in formal EFL teaching. They had negative or neutral perceptions in this regard. They even stated that they wished their teachers would not use SNSs in the classroom. Having said that, the focus group discussions indicated that the students in general preferred to use certain SNSs in formal learning under certain conditions. They also reported their dislike of using SNSs in certain ways. Students gave many reasons for their negative and positive perceptions. These reasons were mainly related to the perceived benefits and challenges of using SNSs in formal EFL learning.

In the focus group, students talked about many potential benefits that they saw to using SNSs as part of formal learning. These benefits fell into two categories. The first was related mainly to the enabling features of SNSs (interactive features and group communication, mobility, accessibility, multi-modality, and individualised space). The second was related to personal or educational reasons (students’ characteristics, students’ preferences, students’ learning needs, and the entertainment factor).

The students’ main positive perception of SNS use was that it could enable extending English learning outside the classroom 24/7. The students’ perceived benefits were mainly related to one main advantage, namely expanding learning and class time and having access to teachers outside the classroom. The students appeared to like being connected to their teachers both within and outside of the university. In other words, they liked being able to use and access SNSs for EFL learning as often as they wanted. The students also appeared to already be blending the two parts of their lives, their educational and social lives; therefore, they did not mind using SNSs in formal EFL learning to their advantage.

## A Sociocultural Perspective of the Findings

The study results are consistent with sociocultural theories. Some researchers, such as Crook (2012), put emphasis on the role of sociocultural principles in understanding of the use of technology in education. Crook (2012) emphasized the role of context in mediation. The results of his study highlighted that the students’ use of any technology depends on their learning contexts and that context has a strong mediating power in technology use.

The theoretical framework of sociocultural theory and the work of Vygotsky (1986) reveal the relationship between learner motivation to learn the language and learning in a certain context. In terms of the contribution to knowledge, the analysis of this study includes the learners’ online practices. According to the findings of this study, students assist each other and construct meaning through sustained online EFL learning groups with peers. The students motivate each other to participate because they have shared objectives. They share practices mediated through SNSs in an informal sociocultural learning context. SNSs allow the EFL learners to practice the language through new sociocultural contexts that satisfy their specific EFL learning needs. Learning has been shaped by many contextual factors, such as interaction with peers and the development of shared objectives. Thus, this sociocultural theoretical framework captured the structure of interaction and the type of cooperation in SNS EFL learning. The sociocultural perspective also emphasises the role of the student as significant in the learning process. It encourages educators and researchers to understand the learners’ practices in relation to their students’ role, which I explored in my study.

## Limitations of the Study

Because this study relied on self-reporting methods for collecting the data, there were certain limitations. The data sources were the learners and teachers who reported their uses and expressed their thoughts. There was a possible gap between their actual use and practice and their articulated uses and practices, and due to that mismatch, they might have provided views that were not informed by an accurate perspective of their own practices. There were also some inconsistencies within each group’s perceptions. This was understandable because participants’ perceptions were still emerging and they were still in the early stages of evaluating these new technologies and how to use them. SNS spaces are new and in development, and they are transitional in terms of how they are perceived. The students’ and teachers’ understanding of these SNSs were also in development. As such, there was a lot of uncertainty and instability concerning their views, and things were not so clear cut for these students, which could explain the split in terms of the students’ perceptions that was observed in this research, especially regarding Research Question 1.

The findings of this study were based on the interpretation of the participants’ perspectives, which were difficult to describe, because I believe it is important to understand the students’ perspectives to improve the learning progress. Selwyn (2008) stated that studying informal learning is a challenge because it is not easily identifiable and the data are primarily based on participants’ perceptions and beliefs. Their beliefs are tacit in nature, which is difficult to describe (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). The data in this study were collected from students who used SNSs in EFL learning only. In addition, I did not look at any of the SNSs or analyse examples of practice. I could also have shown the analysis results to the participants to ask for their comments.

Another limitation of this present research project is that the participating students were not randomly selected; instead, they were obtained through a questionnaire, and their perspectives might not be representative of typical EFL students using SNSs. Only 549 students participated in this study. Compared to the large number of students in technical colleges in Oman, the number of participants is not large enough to be able to generalise the findings to the population. However, this research project offer implications for the colleges besides all HE institutions in Oman.

It is worth mentioning here that obtaining a representative sample was not a goal of this research project. The goal of this study was to develop an in-depth description and understanding of SNS use in general and in EFL learning in particular. Readers may decide later that these findings are applicable to other contexts accordingly. In addition, this study is not a small-scale case study and thus does not lack broader scope because the questionnaire contained questions for learners to quantify their use of SNSs in EFL learning. The study dealt with data obtained from multiple sources in relation to the research topic. I identified the relationships between the multiple data sources and linked the related findings (Saldaña, 2009).

One further limitation is that this study talks about SNSs, which rapidly change. I know that some SNSs are becoming less popular or more popular, and new SNSs might be introduced to the public in the near future. The trends in SNSs are always changing. This study was in the field of technology, which is changing rapidly; thus, the results might become outdated in few years’ time and no longer be relevant.

## Implications and Recommendations

This section presents the implications of the study. Implications are important to expand SNS potential for Omani students and support language learning in Oman.

### Implications for Future Practice

Oman, like many other developing countries, seeks to meet the international increasing demand for English language around the world and has instituted many policies that consider the dominance of English as a universal language (See Section 1.2.4). The findings of this study show that language learning can take place online and thus can be broadly expanded. It is important for higher education institutions to be open-minded about the benefits of online spaces in learning. This study indicates that it is significant to exploit this potential of SNSs for Omani higher education learners. Kennedy and Judd (2011) stated that we as teachers and educators can assist learners to move forward so they can harness new technologies for better academic advantages. Accordingly, this study emphasizes three main points to higher education institutions.

**First, higher education institutions ought to explore the potential educational** **advantages of SNSs.**

As shown in this research project, SNSs are becoming normalised in students’ everyday lives, and many of them use SNSs informally outside the classroom for academic purposes. However, many institutions still attempt to limit their students’ use of SNSs because they believe that they are overused socially. For example, the language centres in the Colleges of Technology in Oman do not have any official SNS accounts. This shows that the institutions do not take advantage of SNSs and the potential benefits they can bring to EFL learning. However, marginalising these new technologies is not recommended, and the learning benefits need to be widely disseminated. Evidently, many participants in this study use SNSs informally outside their classrooms. Moreover, many of the participants explicitly expressed their desire for their English teachers to use SNSs formally in the classroom. This shows how highly these young learners think of SNSs, which to them might turn out to be a learning tool with many potential advantages in formal EFL learning. As discussed in Chapter 5 and 6 of this thesis, participants in this study talked about how they used various SNSs in many different ways and how they believe SNSs have many advantages in formal learning. Thus, research could be conducted to explore how higher education institutions should not place themselves outside the so-called “new habitus of learning” (Pachler et al., 2010b). Results of this current research project do not provide immediate implications for higher education institutions regarding various ways of integrating students’ informal learning into formal teaching. However, the findings imply that training and research could be provided to explore how institutions can value these informal learning practices and use them to take advantage of the potential of new technologies such as SNSs while considering the students’ background and context. As established through this study, students’ contextual learning beliefs have a significant influence on their EFL learning practices and views. Pedagogies utilised in relation to SNSs value student autonomy in learning and recognise that while the locus of power being transferred to students may destabilise pedagogic norms, the benefits are great. Future research could help teachers develop pedagogies that facilitate autonomy, whilst guiding judicious use of SNSs for learning.

**Second,** research is needed to explore how higher education institutions can help students to gain knowledge and skills on how to use SNSs in EFL learning. This is valued in the policies of the Ministry of Higher Education in Oman, especially at the colleges of technologies, in which this study took place. However, based on this study, the students’ training may cover digital skills as well as the skills on how to use digital technologies in education. This takes account of introducing skills and practices, besides the roles of both students and teachers in learning process through these digital technologies. Dooly et al. (2008) suggested that “training the students is more than just getting them used to the technical aspects; it is also getting them to reflect on their roles and responsibilities in the interaction-taking place in the ICT format” (p. 82). As evident in Chapters 5 and 6, it is significant to introduce the students to the technologies, the knowledge and the skills that may possibly be of an educational use to EFL learning. The SNS practices and uses may include interaction and communication of all kinds. Moreover, teachers may also consider encouraging students to make educational use of SNSs informally and helping them to use SNSs in learning. Teachers may consider introducing students to methods for using SNSs in EFL learning to make use of the interactive features of SNS spaces to improve the students’ communicative competence of the language.

**Third**, training could be offered to explore how higher education institutions and teachers may provide students, where needed, with genuine motives to use SNSs for EFL learning purposes. Teachers cannot assume that such motives exist among all students. This recommendation arises from a basic finding of this research project because many EFL learners did not include the use of new digital technologies in English language learning. In Chapter 6, I noted that introducing SNSs in teaching does not necessarily ensure that students move towards these new approaches to EFL learning. Teachers complained that many of their students resisted the use of SNSs in learning. Thus, it is essential that teachers motivate students to use technology in learning and not impose technology on them. They can expand the students’ learning practices online and stimulate their motivation through a variety of online tasks and practices.

As evidenced in Chapter 6, students tend to have positive attitudes towards the use of SNSs in formal teaching. At the same time, in Chapter 5, it was clear that the students are motivated to learn English through communication and interaction. Therefore, for Omani students to value the EFL learning potential offered by SNSs, it is essential for the institutions and teachers to shift towards the communicative nature of EFL learning. That is, teachers are encouraged to recognise the significance of communicative language that has great use and advantage outside classrooms. This necessitates particular changes in teaching, assignments, and assessments, where more weight is given to learners’ communicative competence.

Moreover, research is needed on how to push the boundary of how students conventionally understand and view EFL learning and how to link their use of SNSs with their EFL learning. According to Pachler and Daly (2011), teachers may attempt to expand students’ perceptions of language learning so that they can appreciate and value the use of SNSs in learning. Greenhow and Robelia (2009) also suggested that teachers can explore the potential of SNSs as part of the educational process and attempt to identify activities that develop the students’ lifelong learning skills, as well as technology skills.

Finally, higher education institutions and teachers can encourage students to think about their learning practices and contexts and who they may influence the improvement of their English language skills. As was the aim of this study, students who have used digital technologies as EFL learning tools should share their practices with others and therefore promote a bottom-up change among EFL students.

### Implications for Future Research

There is a need for more research in many of the areas explored in this study.

One possible future study may focus on differences in SNS use among different participant groups. For example, participants of different ages and genders and from different family backgrounds use SNSs differently, so it is quite possible that the online practices would vary significantly. Therefore, this study could be repeated to explore possible differences between learners.

A further study could also research the impact of SNSs on different relationships, such as family relationships at home and student–teacher relationships in the classroom. Parents could be interviewed to learn their perspectives. Moreover, future research could attempt to explore how SNS users and young adults manage several social relationships online and maintain them simultaneously. Researchers could study the implications this may have for the development of future relationships and interactions in society.

This study focussed on perspectives; additional work could usefully explore and observe actual practice because this may vary from what is reported to be practice.

This study can also be replicated with a larger sample size including more representative sampling to enable better generalisation of the findings to a larger population. The research could be replicated with new participants to generate richer conclusions or to include other countries to compare the online practices of students from different contexts. It would be useful to widen the scope of the study to increase the generalisability of the findings.

One future project could integrate one SNS application into EFL curricula and explore its effectiveness based on the students’ practices and preferences. Findings from this study related to how students used and preferred to use SNSs in EFL learning contribute to the literature in this area. In this regard, a significant area of future research is to explore ways to ensure that the use of SNSs is compatible with learning objectives. Moreover, future studies could consider SNSs in different ways, such as creating online learning communities, and focus on exploring collaborative learning. Methodologies for future research may include other qualitative methods, for example, observation or content analysis, to study the increasingly complex use of SNSs.

Technologies are constantly changing, and there will always be new trends to explore as they emerge (Gardner, 2011). Therefore, future studies could include specific SNSs in EFL learning and teaching. One study could also compare different SNSs as learning tools for EFL learning. This current study showed that using SNSs for EFL learning can be beneficial for learners; however, it did not compare the effectiveness of certain SNSs compared to others. This is worth further exploration. Future research could consider SNSs that seem to be more interesting and popular among students in that context. Moreover, a study that looks into actual posts such as tweets or Facebook or Instagram feeds could expand our understanding of the use of different SNSs in EFL learning.

A future study focussed on other populations such as those who resist the use of SNSs in education and particularly in EFL learning could also help to understand reasons behind resistance to the use of SNSs in learning settings.

Overall, SNS use could be explored in a variety of contexts to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, future studies might be carried out to develop measurement tools which offer clear guidelines to study SNS use in general and education both formally and informally.

### Reflexivity

In Section 1.3, I discussed my positionality as I described my personal background, my experiences, and my motivation, all of which will inevitably have influenced my choices in conducting this research. According to Coffey (1999), it is impossible for researchers to separate themselves from their research projects because researchers have to make various real-life choices in order to obtain and analyse the data from the participants. The way I collected and analysed the data could not be objective; I was affected by my position in ways that were not known to me. Subsequently, my positionality might be considered a limitation. However, despite any precautions I could have taken, the results will have unquestionably been impacted by my positionality (Carr, 2000). Therefore, I have tried to shed light on my position within this thesis, as discussed in Chapter 1. I also tried to make the data trustworthy and as rigorous as possible by referring to other studies and keeping an open mind.

In this section, I reflect upon my impact as a researcher during all the stages of the research process. I intentionally placed this reflexivity section at the end of my thesis, in the final chapter, because I wanted to revisit my PhD journey and reflect upon it to draw an overall picture of this journey. However, I have been reflective during my entire research process since the very beginning.

According to Wellington (2015), being reflexive includes critically thinking about all the choices made at all the stages of the research process, for example, how and why the research was conducted and how it could have been enhanced. Wellington (2015) further stated that reflection is significant during all steps, such as in formulating research questions, choosing research methods, deciding on sampling procedures, presenting findings, and so on.

My background as an Omani English teacher with years of experience in teaching EFL in Oman influenced the way I managed the discussions during the data collection. It also affected how I related to and understood the participants’ perceptions with regard to their culture and background. First of all, I have an English teacher’s perspective, which values education and believes in the advantage of learning EFL in Oman. I also believe that SNSs’ have potential to aid in these processes. At the beginning of this study, I believed that the low level of English among Omani high school graduates who were taking a foundation course at the college could be ***easily*** improved through the use of SNSs and other technologies. My initial goal was to explore how independent learners and teachers used and perceived the use of SNSs in English language learning. Then, these practices can be used to raise awareness about their effectiveness and encourage their usage by other learners and teachers. This is still the main aim of this study; however, the findings seem to challenge my previous existing beliefs about the **easy** adaption to use of SNSs in EFL learning. As this study showed, integrating SNS use in EFL learning is not always as easy as many of us would believe because SNSs are already an essential part of youths’ lives.

Regardless of my initial high and very positive expectations of the effectiveness of SNS use as a single miracle solution to the low level of English among students, the findings of this study, as well as my readings of the literature, have affected my thinking significantly. They showed that the use of SNSs might be influenced greatly by learners’ individual and cultural views. Therefore, rather than just aiming to study learners’ and teachers’ practices that might or might not improve English language learning, I also became interested in how the participants of this study believed that their use of these technologies was influenced by their social and cultural contexts. In general, my current research project highlights the complexity that culture and other factors bring to the usage of SNSs, as discussed earlier.

The methodology that I chose provided opportunities for the students and teachers to discuss how they used SNSs in EFL learning and teaching in order to explore their practices and perceptions. Upon reflection, I am generally satisfied with the method I used to answer the research questions. The mixed methods approach that I used produced insightful and valuable data. In retrospect, I would have revised and modified the survey questions further to make it shorter because I most likely included too many questions. I think that using a large sample for the survey was effective and produced useful information.

In addition, during the data collection, I was aware that I held an insider position. However, later in the discussions, I discovered that I was also an outsider to the participants. I was an insider because I had common background with my participants; we shared cultural norms and lived in the same country. However, my position as a researcher based in a UK university positioned me as an outsider, too. This positionality may have potentially influenced the data and consequently the quality of the research.

During the data collection, I paid attention to the way I introduced myself to the participants and my appearance to suit the context (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2013). Coming from a UK university to conduct research is highly appreciated and respected by many people in my home country. However, at the same time, some of the participants might have seem this as me trying to act in a superior way, looking down on them and studying their context as a developing country.

Sensing this from one of the teachers made me ensure that she knew my background information in detail, as well as the aim of my study. Making my background and aims known made it possible for me to work closely with the participants to discuss their experiences and perceptions, as well as try to understand them. I also made sure that the participants knew that our discussions made a large contribution to my study. Their contribution was appreciated, and it gave me a great deal of satisfaction and pleasure to know their views and practices. Indeed, a simple goal of my study was to convey the views and practices of Omani students to other audiences because they are both similar to and different from other students and learners around the world.

Reflecting on the use of focus group discussions, I now realise the importance of ensuring homogeneity in the group because it can have many advantages in making the participants feel more comfortable articulating their opinions and expressing themselves. For example, I realised that I needed to consider gender when I conducted the discussions and needed to ask myself whether my participants, males and females, felt comfortable discussing certain topics in a mixed-gender group. Females might feel uncomfortable discussing certain issues if male participants are in the same group. Although I had the best intention of keeping the groupings mixed in terms of sex, after analysing the data, I realised that the female students might have said more if I had placed them in single-sex groups. Homogeneity of the focus group discussions can also be influenced by other factors that should be considered, such as age and hierarchy. The manner in which I organised the groups would have had an impact on participants; for example, if I had mixed the student groups with the teacher group, the results would have been different because of the power imbalance. My gender could have also impacted the data and how both male and female students reacted and responded to certain discussions about gender dynamics. Therefore, in their analysis and interpretation, researchers need to consider many factors that might affect the way the participants respond to certain topics and take part in the discussions. It is also important to interpret the participants’ experiences clearly and thoroughly as well as separately from one’s own personal experiences to enhance the rigor of the findings. I think it would have been helpful if I had returned to my participants after the focus group, especially the women, to discuss whether they felt free to express their views in front of the men. However, my position as a female in the culture could have made it difficult for me to see the effect of gender dynamics on the discussion at the time.

In this regard, my research has implications for the feminist approach to the educational field. First of all, it puts forward questions regarding how the experience of non-Western females should be theorised. As my research showed, Omani (“non-Western”) females do not necessarily focus on or look at the same issues in the same way as Western women(although we cannot generalise, of course). Without a doubt, many of the female participants did not acknowledge many of what might seem to be disadvantages to a Western audience. These female participants told their stories and described their experiences in a rather different way. It was more complicated and less depressing than it may seem to others outside Oman. Therefore, an important question that arises here is this: If female participants from a certain context do not see or perceive certain things as negatively as others, or if they are not conscious of certain issues and concerns, can we identify them as problems for the sake of feminism? Who should, or can, represent others and claim that these females are experiencing disadvantages if they do not perceive it in that way and do not agree with these concerns? I, as a female Omani researcher in Oman, am not necessarily as concerned with ideas of feminism as people might be in the UK. This was clear because many issues related to gender needed a far more thorough exploration than I originally anticipated or thought significant. This is an area that needs further consideration as international research partnerships develop in university research.

Regarding data analysis, I was satisfied with the analysis process, but I was probably too anxious about this part of the study. Upon reflection, I took a long time at every point of data analysis. Nonetheless, I gained many skills throughout the research journey that will definitely help me in future research projects.

I modified some elements of the research design throughout the research process, making sure that I consistently followed the ethical considerations. For instance, I modified my research questions as I improved my research skills during the process of my project.

In general, my research design allowed me to explore and demonstrate the practices and views of the participants, as specified in the research purpose and as initially planned. My background and experiences have influenced my research choices. At the same time, this research journey influenced me in numerous ways. My PhD journey was an exciting adventure that taught me many lessons practically and theoretically.

This research project provided me with the opportunity to use a qualitative research methodology. Previously, I only used quantitative research, which was the favoured design among researchers in my home country. Consequently, I gained significant experience as well as many skills that will help me conduct similar research projects in the future. For example, I gained experience in conducting interviews with both learners and teachers about their perceptions and experiences. I admit that it was not an easy task, particularly the focus group discussions, which required asking questions to a group of people and eliciting responses to generate the maximum amount of discussion about a certain topic within a set time period. I gained experience handling these discussions, which required careful planning and preparation, especially because I conducted more than one FGD. An essential skill that I learnt by conducting FGDs is effective facilitation or moderation. This involves ensuring equal participation to elicit information from all participants, including shy participants, and to deal with dominant participants by acknowledging their views and requesting other people’s opinions. FGDs require careful wording of questions to ensure that all participants understand the topic and feel comfortable communicating their views. They also requires summarising and reflecting on opinions fairly to show and ensure understanding.

Regarding data analysis, I found analysing qualitative data to be a new and a challenging task, especially at the beginning. My supervisor’s guidance in the supervision meetings, as well as my readings, helped me a lot in deciding on my analysis methods. Because I decided to use thematic analysis, I gained irreplaceable experience in the process of finding themes in my data and organising them. I also affirm that I benefited from all the challenges I faced while using this method; these challenges were really valuable in terms of how I managed to overcome them.

An additional skill that I gained during my study is critical thinking. I learnt to be critical in my readings of other’s work as well as my own. Critical thinking is a valuable and crucial skill for all researchers. It was the opposite in my home country because it was unacceptable to criticise published materials, especially if you were still a student. We, as students, believed that we were not in a position to criticise published materials because we assumed they were the most factual knowledge. Therefore, I found my readings and supervision meetings to be very helpful in increasing my reading and critical thinking skills. Another significant skill I found productive was ethical considerations related to conducting research projects. I think the emphasis placed on research ethics at the university made me realise the importance of ethics in research.

Moreover, in my research, the collected data was in Arabic. However, my research was to be reported in English. This is why translation of the data was a significant required step in my research process. In this following section, I reflect in details upon some issues related to the translation of my data and their implications in the validity of the research.

The PhD journey challenged me in many different ways. However, all the experiences were positive and constructive because they gave me the knowledge necessary to conduct qualitative research.

#### *Reflection on Data Translation Approach*

Some factors may influence data translation in social research. In the case of my study, some of these factors include who is translating the data and the timing of the translation. Next, I discuss these factors and I introduce the theoretical framework and the methodological procedures that I used in translating my data. In the conclusion, I discuss and reflect on what I have learnt through this process.

To maintain an open dialogue regarding my data translation and to demonstrate the way in which I maintained the richness of the original research data in the English version, I have made some important decisions. First, I have decided to translate the data on my own. Second, I have decided to translate the data after analysis and I have applied a conceptual equivalence translation, not a literal translation.

First, the choice of who translates the data is related mainly to the theoretical approach of the research (Esposito, 2001). Temple & Young (2004) note that a translator may be appointed in positivist studies and objectivist epistemologies. In research based on the positivist approach, the translation task becomes a simple and objective task of transferring words from one language to another. Knowledge in this type of research is not constructed; rather, it is understood as being discovered. In this case, the researcher can appoint a professional translator. In contrast, a translation task in research based on the constructivist approach is not aiming for objectivity nor simply to produce an accurate version of the data in another language. According to Temple & Young (2004), appointing a translator may raise concerns in the methodology and epistemology of the research as a translator may have his/her own positionality, which may influence the research process. Besides, objective and neutral translation is not believed to be possible in the constructivist research. There are also concerns regarding how much the translator knows about the research area, the participants’ culture and their local dialects. If the translator lacks this knowledge, he or she might misinterpret and mispresent the intended meaning of the data. Some important views and concepts might be lost in translation. One-way to avoid this problem according to Smith, Chen & Liu, (2008) is that the researcher translates his/her own data to ensure capturing the accurate meaning of the data. Shklarov (2007) claims that a bilingual researcher may play a dynamic and valuable role maintaining research quality and giving efficient solutions to ethical issues and concerns.

There was no need for me to engage a professional translator. My research is based on constructivism where social actors may construct knowledge, which is always vigorous and subjective. I was both the researcher and the translator, and together with participants, we played a fundamental part in making sense of the data and in constructing meaning. I consider translation as a practice, which goes beyond the neutral and technical task. It involves more than just transferring words from one language to another. Translation includes understanding and conveying the indirect intended meanings embedded in the original language. In this way, translation can be affected by social and cultural contexts. Intrinsically, I have seen myself in a place to do the data translation better than a professional translator because I am bilingual and I have the same social and cultural background as the participants of my research. A professional translator would not have been capable of capturing the exact social and cultural meanings embedded in the discussions with the participants. According to Smith et al (2008), intended meanings of any language are strongly rooted in context. Translating the data on my own minimised the possibility of loosing meaning.

During translation, I believe I preserved the intended meaning of my participants and, at the same time, kept the participants’ voices free from any misrepresentation, which might be caused by translation. I tried to translate the data to present authentic and comprehensive findings without any distortion.

Regarding the timing of translation, translation can be performed before, during or after analysis. There is no one-fits-all timing that suits all research studies as each timing has advantages and disadvantages. Translating the data before analysis is time-consuming. However, according to Hennink et al (2011) the main advantage of this way is that the researcher can easily use precise scripts from the translated version for reference in the analysis. In this respect, it is essential for the translator of the data to have knowledge of the subject area and the participants’ culture and dialect to guarantee capturing intended meaning. The second option is that translation may take place during analysis. This alternative is used when researchers on a team do not speak one common language. Alternatively, translation can be executed on the analyzed data.

As for my research, I translated the data after analysis for some practical reasons. The instruments for collecting the data were written in English first. Then, I translated the instruments into Arabic. After data collection, I transcribed all of my data into Arabic for analysis. The major themes derived from the data were in Arabic. I found it easier and more practical to analyse the Arabic version before translating it into English.

In the case of my study, a literal translation would not have been useful, particularly where there is no direct or single equivalent in English. According to Birbili (2000), the central aim of the translator must be to attain conceptual equivalence. Therefore, I intentionally used a conceptual equivalence method in translating the data from Arabic to English. In addition, I was flexible but cautious. I tried to keep the authenticity of the original data, and at the same time, I tried to ensure that the English text was easy to read. According to Cohen, Manion & Morrison, (2007), the participants’ nuances, style and sometimes their sentence structure convey valuable cultural meanings and display the participants’ understanding and perceptions. Being Bilingual in English and Arabic, I was also aware I was exploring universal concepts. For example, I knew that these terms in English; “social media”, “social network sites” and “social networking sites” share one single equivalent in Arabic.

According to Esposito (2001), translation is not just giving equivalents for words in another language. He noted that not all concepts in a language could be translated into another. Words may have meanings that are unique to one context or language and they may not exist in another. Sometimes words also may also have several meanings attached to them. According to Birbili (2000), translation is significantly enhanced if the translator has proficiency in the target language as well as knowledge of the culture connected to it.

A number of researchers claim that the most important required task for data translation in social research is not to translate words but meaning (Crane et al, 2009). Therefore, instead of simply using the literal equivalent of a term, translators need to obtain conceptual equivalence.

When translating quotes, translators may either use literal translation or free translation. Free translation for meaning can be considered as being more fair to what the participants intended to say and makes the readers have a better understanding of the participants’ way of thinking (Birbili, 2000). However, this may hinder readability of the translated version. In order to make quotations read well in the translated version, many researchers may tend to edit the original quotes. This, however, may risk misrepresentation of the original quotes that convey the participants’ actual intended meaning. Henning, Hotter and Bailey (2011) maintain that researchers should retain the original informal style of language used by participants as they signify cultural aspects that are valuable when presenting data.

In conclusion, it is important for all researchers to plan, discuss and reflect upon the translation approach they used in their research. Translating data can raise some concerns in social research if it is not addressed properly. I have already mentioned some decisions in data translation that may directly influence the quality and validity of research. According to Temple and Young (2004), it is important for any researcher to discuss the language background of the participants of the research. Readers cannot engage with a research that does not present information about the participants’ and the researchers’ language backgrounds. The translation approach should be explicit, and it should go beyond the description of the technical issues to a discussion that is more reflective. Researchers should view translation as an important variable, which may affect the analysis, results, and validity of research (Shklarov, 2007). According to Birbili (2000), researchers need to give a comprehensive picture of all decisions and issues related to translation, such as timing, people who translate and problems faced during the translation.

Every research should aim to maintain a constructive and critical report about the different ways in which the project can be explored, understood and improved. My work in this translation section has been rewarding to me in many ways. For example, I came across some beneficial insights and opinions about data translation which I did not know about before. These readings have prompted me to reflect upon the translation. I also discovered like-minded views that supported my decisions. Concerns, challenges and issues associated to translating data without a doubt deserve more exploration.

## Concluding Remarks

In this study, I identified many significant areas of contribution to knowledge and filled a gap in the existing literature and research. The findings brought insights to the understanding of SNS use and the potential of SNSs for EFL learning both in and beyond the classroom. In this study, I explored the patterns of practices and engagement with SNSs, such as the frequency of SNS use in general and EFL learning and the types of SNSs used. Furthermore, I developed an understanding of the learners’ perceptions of using SNSs in daily life and for EFL learning. I explored students’ use of SNSs in both formal and informal activities, as well as their perceptions about SNS use. In this study, EFL learners saw the benefits of incorporating SNSs in learning English because for them, the benefits outweighed the obstacles they faced, which were mostly contextual. Students’ exploratory use of SNSs show the benefits of SNSs in EFL learning. This study opens up a new path for language learning in Oman. I also hope this study inspires other research in this area so that educators can establish additional guidelines for learning and teaching in this context. Based on the findings of this research, I believe SNSs can introduce new, innovative methods for future language education in Oman.

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**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX 1: Participants’ Information Sheet**

**The title of the research project:**

An exploration of student and academic uses and perceptions of social network sites (SNSs) in foreign-language learning.

My name is Mariam Alghafri, a PhD student at the University of Sheffield. I welcome you to take part in this study about student and academic uses and perceptions of SNSs in foreign-language learning. Before you decide whether you want to participate in this project, please take the time to read about the aim of the study and what it will involve.

The purpose of my study is to explore the use of SNSs in learning English as a foreign language among young Omani students and teachers. It also addresses the use of SNSs in general and in daily lives. This is essential for providing the basis for the adoption of these technologies in education. It also provides some insight in understanding students’ views about SNSs in general and in their contexts. This research explores the perceptions of both students and teachers on the use of SNSs in EFL learning and teaching, with specific emphasis in both the formal and informal integration of SNSs in English language learning as a foreign language.

I appreciate your participation because it is important for the success of this research project, which will contribute to the growing research body on the use of SNSs in learning English as a foreign language. It also expands our knowledge about the online practices of students whose learning needs and experiences may be different from learners in other educational contexts. Moreover, the findings of this study are likely to be valuable to decision makers, teachers, and students by offering them insight about the uses of SNSs in education.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time without explanation and will be given a consent form to sign.

There are two phases to this study, and you might choose to participate in both of them. The first one involves questionnaires, and the second one involves focus-group discussions and interviews. The focus-group discussions and interviews involve questions about the actual experiences and uses of SNSs in EFL learning and teaching.

If you need more information about this research project, please do not hesitate to ask me at any time.

Best regards,

Mariam Alghafri

[msalghafri1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:msalghafri1@sheffield.ac.uk)

**APPENDIX 2: Participants’ Consent Form**

**Title of research project:**

*An exploration of student and academic uses and perceptions of social network sites in foreign-language learning.*

**Name of researcher**:

Mariam Saif Alghafri

**Participant’s identification number for this project:**

**Please initial the box.**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet

explaining the above research project and that I have had the opportunity

to ask questions about the project.

1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free

to withdraw at any time without giving any reasons and without

there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I wish

to decline answering any particular question or questions, I am free

to do so.

1. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential.

I give permission for the members of the research team to have

access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name

will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be

identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from

this research.

1. I agree to take part in the above research project.

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Name of Participant Date Signature

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Researcher Date Signature

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant*

Copies:

*Once this has been signed by all parties, the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form and information sheet. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be in the project’s main record, which must be kept in a secure location.*

**APPENDIX 3: Questionnaire**

This questionnaire asks you about your use of social network sites (SNSs). There is no right or wrong answer. I am interested in your experience with SNSs. Your responses will remain confidential. Please be aware that you are not obliged to participate in this research.

My hope is that your answers will help me understand how you engage with SNSs today and your perception of using them in EFL. If you have any questions related to this questionnaire, you can contact me: Mariam Alghafri (email: [msalghafri1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:msalghafri1@sheffield.ac.uk))

**Section 1: Personal Background**

**Nationality………………………**

**College…………………………..**

**Gender…………………………**

**Age………………………………**

**Year………………………………**

**Department………………………**

**Section 2: General Use of SNSs**

1. **Do you use SNSs in your daily life?**

Yes

No

(If your answer is yes, move to the next question)

1. **How frequently do you use SNSs in your daily life? (Check one.)**

Always online or several times a day

Often or once a day

Sometimes or twice to three times a week

Rarely or twice to three times a month

Never

1. **How many SNS applications do you use? (Check one.)**

1

2

3

4

5 or more

1. **Which SNSs do you use? (You can check more than one.)**

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Snapchat

WhatsApp

Other, please specify**….…………………**

1. **The way I feel about SNSs. (*Tick the right statement for you or describe how you feel yourself.*)**
2. \_\_\_\_ I cannot live without SNSs.
3. \_\_\_\_ I like to use SNSs.
4. \_\_\_\_ I am comfortable with SNSs.
5. \_\_\_\_ I have just started using them and know little about them.
6. \_\_\_\_ I am anxious around SNSs.
7. \_\_\_\_I don’t use SNSs and I don’t need them.
8. Other ……………………………………………….
9. **I use SNSs for . . .**
10. \_\_\_\_ Procrastinating and passing the time.
11. \_\_\_\_ Sending, sharing, and looking for photos.
12. \_\_\_\_ Connecting with family and friends.
13. \_\_\_\_ Finding and chatting with new friends.
14. \_\_\_\_ Chatting with a large number of people.
15. \_\_\_\_ Sending a message to the public.
16. \_\_\_\_ Getting information and news.
17. \_\_\_\_ Following famous people.
18. \_\_\_\_ Help with studying.
19. \_\_\_\_ Other, please specify …………………………………………………… ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………..

**Section 3: Students’ Use of SNSs for EFL Learning**

1. **Do you use SNSs to develop your English language?**

Yes

No

(If your answer is yes, move to the next question)

1. **How frequently do you use SNSs to develop your English language?**

Always online or several times a day

Often or once a day

Sometimes or twice to three times a week

Rarely or twice to three times a month

Never

Other, specify**…………………………………………please**

1. **Which SNS do you use for EFL learning? (You can check more than one.)**

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Snapchat

WhatsApp

Other, please specify………….

1. **Which SNS do you think has the potential to be a good tool for EFL learning?**

**(You can check more than one.)**

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Snapchat

WhatsApp

Other, please specify………….

1. **I like to use SNSs to develop my English language . . .**

With the English teacher

Without the English teacher

Both

1. **I like to use SNSs to develop my English language . . .**

Inside the class

Outside class

Both

1. Will you be interested in talking about your experience in using SNSs in supporting EFL learning?

**Yes** (Please provide an email address ………………………………………………….…..)

**No**

**APPENDIX 4: Focus-Group Questions for Students**

1. Which social network sites (SNSs) do you use in your daily lives? How, how often, and why?
2. How do you interact with other people through SNSs?
3. Can you describe how you feel towards SNSs in your lives?
4. What SNS did you use in EFL learning? How? Tell me some examples of the activities you used.
5. How frequently do you use SNSs to develop your English language?
6. What attracted you to use SNSs for EFL learning?
7. Which SNSs did you use for the first time in EFL learning? Why?
8. What were your initial expectations when using SNSs in EFL learning? Were they later the same or different? How?
9. How do you describe your overall experience of using SNSs in EFL learning?
10. What do you think of SNSs as an EFL learning tool?
11. How did you choose the SNSs that you used in EFL learning?
12. How often do you use SNSs in EFL learning?
13. What affected your use of SNSs in EFL learning?
14. How many times did you use SNSs in EFL learning?
15. Will you continue to use SNSs in EFL learning? If yes, in what way? If no, why?
16. Do you encourage other students to use SNSs in EFL learning?
17. Which SNSs do you recommend using in EFL learning? Why?
18. What suggestions can you give to other students if they choose to use SNSs in EFL learning?
19. What are the challenges that you faced when you used SNSs in EFL learning?
20. Which SNS do you think has the potential to be a good tool for EFL learning?
21. What do you think of using SNSs in the EFL classrooms?
22. Would you like your English teachers to use SNSs in EFL classrooms? Why?
23. What is the role that teachers should play when you use SNSs in EFL teaching?

**APPENDIX 5: Interview Questions for Teachers**

1. What SNS did you use in EFL teaching? Tell me some examples of the activities you used.
2. How did you interact with the students through SNSs?
3. What was your role as a teacher when you used an SNS in EFL teaching?
4. What attracted you to use SNSs for students?
5. Which SNSs did you use for the first time in EFL teaching? Why?
6. What were your initial expectations when using SNSs in EFL teaching? Were they later the same or different? How?
7. How do you describe your overall experience of using SNSs in EFL teaching?
8. What do you think of SNSs as instructional and learning tool?
9. How did choose the SNSs that you used in EFL teaching?
10. How was the level of the students’ interest and participation when you used SNSs in EFL teaching?
11. What affected the level of the students’ participation on SNSs?
12. How many times did you use SNSs in EFL teaching?
13. Will you continue to use SNSs in EFL teaching with your students? If yes, in what way? If no, why?
14. Do you encourage other teachers to use SNSs in EFL teaching?
15. Which SNSs do you recommend using in EFL teaching? Why?
16. What suggestions can you give other teachers if they choose to use SNSs in EFL teaching?
17. What are the challenges that you faced when you used SNSs in EFL teaching?