



*Immediacy Practices in a Virtual Learning  
Environment: Perceptions of Tutors and Female  
Students at a Saudi University*

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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## **Declaration**

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

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## Abstract

With the exponential growth of web-based learning technologies in Saudi higher education, online teaching methods have become increasingly important for enhancing the learning of female students. However, most Saudi institutions for female students depend mainly on asynchronous learning tools, such as discussion boards, blogs or email, which are used in virtual learning environments (VLEs) to deliver online courses and communicate with students. While these innovations offer a wide range of teaching and learning experiences – for instance, increased access to and interaction with rich content – they also pose a number of challenges, for example a failure to overcome the sense of physical and psychological distance between the students and tutors. This potentially leads to poor interaction and hinders what is essentially the core of online learning. The literature review for this study revealed that tutors' immediacy practices have proved to be a valuable teaching method that can foster student interaction and learning, whether in a face-to-face or VLE setting. This study therefore explores the perceptions of female students and their tutors regarding the use and importance of immediacy in a VLE at a Saudi university. To achieve this, a mixed-methods case-study design was adopted under the umbrella of a pragmatic paradigm. The participants included female students and their male and female tutors at an Education College in a Saudi university, where fully online courses are provided solely to female students. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach and included 129 female undergraduate students, with 47 of their tutors. The data were collected using both quantitative (closed-ended questionnaires) and qualitative methods (focus groups and one-to-one interviews).

The findings from this case study demonstrate that some immediacy practices are effective for improving interaction, participation and satisfaction among female students and helping them overcome their shyness when communicating in a VLE. The evidence shows that the tutors and female students were clear about the importance of immediacy in online teaching and learning, as well as being aware of the use of practices applied in a VLE. They were also aware of specific considerations influencing the implementation of immediacy practices via VLE tools. In addition, they recognised specific immediacy practices that were frequently used within the female students' virtual environment. The findings from this study therefore contribute to the understanding of e-immediacy in Saudi online education in general and the female students' virtual learning context in particular, as a means of enhancing student learning. Furthermore, this study suggests appropriate e-immediacy practices for Saudi female students, taking into account their culture and background factors. Recommendations and implications based on this study are consequently offered to both tutors and policymakers for the development of best practice, with strategies to enhance immediacy and the use of VLE tools to foster learning amongst female students.

## **Dedication**

*To my mother;  
may her soul rest in peace.*

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## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

SHE	Saudi higher education
VLE	Virtual learning environment
F2F	Face-to-face
MOE	Ministry of Higher Education
ICT	Information and communication technology
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
M-W	Mann-Whitney Test
K-W	Kruskal-Wallis Test
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development
TDT	Transactional Distance Theory

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1. Overview

Virtual learning environments (VLEs) are well-known avenues that are currently widely used to support flexible and distance learning in higher education institutions. The use of these platforms generally provides students and tutors with a wide range of teaching and learning experiences, including access to sources of information at all times and exposure to a diversity of content, including videos, slides, and interactive activities. In short, a VLE represents a web-based learning software that is becoming increasingly prominent in educational contexts, whether for fully online or blended courses.

VLEs consist of tools designed to support teaching and learning experiences (Urwin, 2011). Some of the most popular VLEs are Blackboard, WebCT, and Moodle. VLEs encompass the use of synchronous learning models (e.g., audio and video conferencing) and asynchronous tools (e.g., discussion board participation and email messaging) to create a successful learning environment in which students feel connected and motivated. Also, one important element that can be provided by VLE tools is interaction, which positively influences learning through its stimulation of idea exchange and knowledge construction (Wanstreet, 2009). The interaction that takes place between students and their tutors or peers in VLEs also reduces the sense of distance between them. These arguments are supported by Nandi, Hamilton, and Harland (2012), who suggested that the success of a VLE depends upon student interaction and communication.

At the same time, students and tutors face challenges that can affect their use of VLEs as an interactive environment. Issues with VLEs relate to feelings of isolation and a lack of contact

and presence (Salmon, 2013). Researchers have consequently attempted to explore and document more effective ways for tutors to address the barriers to student learning that exist in VLEs (Fahara & Castro, 2015). Pedagogical methods and models to promote student learning and reduce tutors' concerns have emerged in the literature. Examples of tutor models that can be associated with improved student outcomes include Laurillard's conversational framework (1993) and Salmon's five-stage e-learning model (2002). Such models have had a significant impact on supporting students' acquisition of knowledge through interactive and motivating activities. One of the effective pedagogical practices that is indicated in some studies is immediacy, which has drawn the attention of scholars as an important method of enhancing online learning and improving student progress.

The multidisciplinary concept of immediacy relates to areas of study including communication, culture, and psychology. It was developed by Albert Mehrabian in the 1970s and refers to verbal and nonverbal interpersonal communication behaviours that increase a sense of closeness and reduce the social distance between communicators. In an educational context, researchers have recognised that tutor immediacy behaviours are strong contributing factors to successful learning (Conaway, Easton, & Schmidt, 2005). The effect of immediacy on student motivation has consequently been verified (Velez & Cano, 2008). Moreover, a positive relationship has been revealed between immediacy practices and affective and cognitive learning (Asiri, 2013; Mullane, 2014; Scales, 2016). Most studies have investigated tutor immediacy and its impact in face-to-face (F2F) classrooms, while relatively few studies have examined tutor immediacy in VLEs (Spiker, 2014).

In online learning, immediacy takes on a new form and is enhanced through practices that are more appropriate for the digital environment. E-tutors can enhance student learning by creating positive social, emotional, and psychological learning environments using the same methods found in F2F classroom practices (Manarte, Lopez, & Pereira, 2014). Specific forms

of immediacy have consequently been adopted based on the tools for synchronous and asynchronous learning settings. In these instances, immediacy can be perceived as verbal or nonverbal practices in audio and video conferences, or written practices in text-based settings. Verbal practices in VLEs include giving feedback, asking questions, and encouraging students to talk, while nonverbal practices may include using emoticons (e.g., ☹, ☺). Other practices, such as timely responses and the incorporation of rich media, are also considered part of tutors' immediacy practices (Baker, 2004; Farewell, 2011; Spiker, 2014; Walkem, 2014). Some researchers have acknowledged that tutor-initiated immediacy practices strongly contribute to effective online learning (Conaway et al., 2005), and others have demonstrated the effects of these practices on student online satisfaction, participation, and learning (Al Ghamdi, 2017; Farwell, 2011; Zapf, 2008).

Nevertheless, in the Saudi higher education (SHE), VLE initiatives create considerable pedagogical challenges that influence the processes of learning and teaching for institutions. In the Saudi context, teaching is generally based on delivering lectures and then testing students on the content presented (Alebaikan, 2010), while learning is focused on memorisation (Asiri, 2013). These features illustrate the lack of interaction and communication in learning environments—problems that cause students to disengage and lose the motivation to complete online courses (Al Ghamdi, 2017).

Moreover, in the context of female online education in Saudi Arabia, most VLEs in higher education institutions are limited primarily to asynchronous tools like email, discussion boards, and blogs, which can have a negative effect on supportive online environments in some disciplines such as the sciences (Al-Abdullatif, 2011). The use of asynchronous tools exclusively can be attributed to female tutors' potential lack of skills in using audio and video conferencing tools (Al Ghamdi, 2017). Employing only asynchronous tools may also reflect the female tutors' and students' aversion to digital conferencing technologies, given the

Islamic regulation around the display of women's faces or voices when they meet a foreign man in real life.

With these issues in mind, the adoption of immediacy practices could have a significant effect on the learning experiences of Saudi students, many of whom face challenges due to a lack of communication with their tutors in VLEs, both in asynchronous and synchronous learning settings.

## **1.2. Motivation for Conducting the Present Research**

My work is centred on a case study institution that provides full online courses for undergraduate female students of education. I have been a member of staff in the faculty of the Institute of Education at the targeted university since 2011, teaching pre-service teachers the Curriculum and Instruction Design model. Therefore, in this context I am an insider research- this concept will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

Therefore, the motivation for conducting this study grew from my experiences as a lecturer. Many female students found it difficult to learn via the university's VLE because most tutors followed a tutor-centred approach and interaction opportunities were not encouraged or expected. In addition, I heard from my students that they had transferred from F2F classrooms to exclusively online courses due to fears associated with conflict on the southern border of Saudi Arabia. However, they complained that the VLE made them feel dissatisfied, disengaged, and disinclined to continue with their courses because they lacked a sense of the tutor's presence. Because the students' needs for clarification and timely answers were not met, student learning suffered.

Therefore, in the Saudi context, tutors need to use methods in their online teaching that can reduce the specific problems encountered in such an environment, many of which are not experienced in the F2F classroom. Tutor immediacy practices, as part of interpersonal

communication implemented in online teaching, can in fact affect students' experiences and learning outcomes in virtual environments. This study can be significant for female students learning in either F2F classrooms or VLEs. It focuses on how to facilitate the learning of female students by enhancing their interactions in both learning environments and by improving communication with their tutors and peers. The study also emphasises the extent to which immediacy practices impact female students' feelings of presence and closeness in their online courses, which can influence their learning outcomes. In addition, this study strives to explore how immediacy practices can help shift common teaching methods in Saudi education from a teacher-centred model to one that incorporates a facilitator who guides students in achieving their online learning goals.

Moreover, only a limited number of studies have been conducted on the impact of immediacy practices in a virtual environment. To the best of my knowledge, no existing study has examined the differing perceptions of students and tutors regarding the use of immediacy practices in VLEs, or its importance. In addition, during the current study, only two other studies have emerged that investigated students' perceptions of immediacy practices in the Saudi context. One of these was carried out in a F2F classroom using a sample of male students (Asiri, 2013), while the other was conducted in blended courses delivered exclusively via asynchronous learning tools to a sample of male and female students (Al Ghamdi, 2017). Consideration of the issues discussed in this section point to the research aim and questions presented below.

### **1.3. Research Aim and Questions**

Based on the clarification in the previous section, the aim of this research is to investigate the use and importance of immediacy practices as perceived by female students and their tutors in a VLE and with particular reference to a university in Saudi Arabia.

This research aim gives rise to the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions of tutors and female students concerning the use of immediacy practices in VLEs?
- How do tutors and female students perceive the importance of immediacy practices in VLEs?
- In what way do the perceptions of tutors and female students differ on the use and importance of immediacy practices in VLEs?

#### **1.4. Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study is based on three concepts: VLEs, immediacy and culture. *Virtual learning environment* is a synonym for online learning, web-based learning or Internet-based instruction. The concept refers to systems and platforms that use the Internet as a method of delivering courses and facilitating learning for students who are geographically separated from their tutors. Such platforms include Blackboard and Moodle. This definition of a VLE is consistent with Wallace (2015), who describes it as software that can be accessed via the Internet to provide an integrated online learning environment, thus allowing tutors to deliver course materials and assignments, track students' progress and develop communication networks.

The second concept relating to this research is *immediacy*. There are several definitions of immediacy according to the context in which it is applied. In the current study, the definition of immediacy adopted corresponds to Richmond and McCroskey (2000), namely that immediacy behaviours are communication behaviours that reduce physical and psychological distance through communication actions to elicit attraction and liking from the communication partner. Thus, for the purpose of this study, immediacy especially refers to tutors' practices that can influence female students' learning in VLEs by creating a positive

learning environment where students feel motivated to participate and exchange ideas and knowledge. However, the use and importance of immediacy practices in VLEs will depend on the perceptions of the students and tutors, which may in turn be influenced by their culture.

In light of the above, *culture* is the third concept and a crucial component of the conceptual framework for this study, because in general, communication behaviours will vary according to the culture of the communicators; for example, eye contact is an immediate behaviour in Western culture, but it can increase psychological distance in many Asian cultures (Kelley, Johnson, Broadus & Fall, 2014). Moreover, individuals' perceptions will differ according to their experiences and cultural factors. Saudi culture is very conservative particularly in communication between men and women in daily life and also learning environments are very formal (Asiri, 2013), which can impact the views of female students and their tutors, as well as their understanding of e-immediacy practices. Female students may also be limited in their ability to use VLE tools in rural areas (Al Alhareth, 2014), which will have an additional effect on their perceptions.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia has a high cultural heterogeneity regarding tribal and family values, with cultural factors differing between urban areas and rural areas (Al Alhareth, 2014). According to Hofstede and McCrae (2004), culture is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from another” (p.58). Therefore, every society has own culture, which in turn influences the life of people.

In Saudi, This cultural diversity can influence individuals' views and attitudes on their practices in both daily life and education. Therefore, the perceptions of Saudi students and their tutors about pedagogical practices could differ according to the city or the context of the study. As a result, Saudi participants may perceive certain practices as important and

effective forms of immediacy in their virtual environments, but these could differ from those valued by participants in studies conducted in Western cultures.

Thus, in order to explore and fully understand the perceptions of female students and their tutors as regards e-immediacy practices, these three concepts will be examined in the literature review of this current thesis. Furthermore, these perceptions will be interpreted using sociocultural, social presence and transactional distance theories, which explore how learning as develops as a result of interaction, and communication between students and their tutors or peers. The conceptual framework applied will influence the design of this study and the methods implemented to collect and analyse the data, which are considered in Chapter 4.

Figure 1, below, illustrates the conceptual framework adopted in this study.

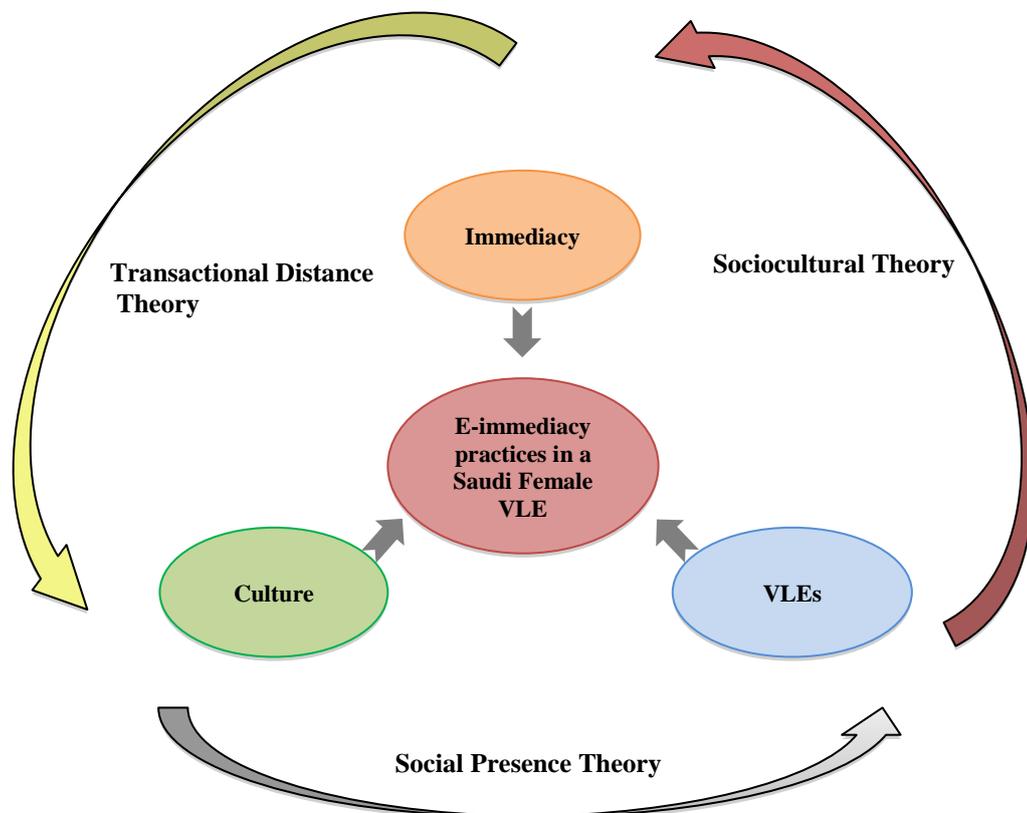


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of this study.

## 1.5. Significance of The Research

This research makes some specific contributions to existing knowledge, as outlined below.

1. It provides an opportunity to capture the voices of female students in a higher education institution. In such a context, there has been a shortage of women's voices in education decision making, issues and practices in Saudi Arabia. Although female tutors and students may make changes that will improve teaching and learning in both F2F classrooms and online environments, they are not asked what is important to them in the education process.
2. It offers interesting insights into the importance of immediacy practices in supporting the online learning of Saudi female students. It presents a detailed explanation of the main forms of immediacy practice that can enhance female students' online learning, from the perspective of the students and their tutors.
3. It discusses the differences between the perceptions of female students and their tutors regarding the use of immediacy practices and their importance to female students' learning experiences on fully online courses. As a result it contributes to further considerations of planning for positive online learning environments by improving the tutors understanding of the way in which immediacy practices affect female students learning outcomes.
4. It shows the effect of Saudi female students' culture on their perceptions and on their tutors' perceptions of immediacy practices in VLEs. As a result, it could offer guidance to tutors who teach female students in VLEs whereby the most important immediacy practices are identified from a female perspective – aimed at enhancing their online learning and taking into consideration the relevant cultural issues.
5. It marks a significant shift from the traditional positivist paradigm, which has dominated the research on immediacy practices in online courses. The adoption of a

pragmatist paradigm and mixed-methods case study design was deemed important for answering the research questions by investigating multiple perspectives, using different data sources.

## **1.6. Organisation of the Thesis**

This thesis contains eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the topic and the motivation for conducting this study in the Saudi context. It also includes the research aim and questions. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the general study context and, in particular, VLEs in Saudi Arabia. It builds a comprehensive picture of Saudi culture and the general styles of communication and immediacy behaviour encountered in that context. In particular, it looks at the role of Saudi women within their culture and education, mainly focusing on access for women in higher education and the use of VLEs, as well as the barriers they face in online learning and teaching.

The literature review in Chapter 3 then presents an overview of how immediacy practices provide an effective means of enhancing students' F2F learning, and the barriers tutors, who use immediacy practices in the F2F classroom, face. The benefits, obstacles and pedagogical models of virtual learning environments are discussed and the most common immediacy practices applied in VLEs are also considered, as described in the literature, together with an explanation of their importance. The final part of the literature review illustrates the theoretical framework adopted for this study, namely Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (sociocultural theory), social presence theory and transactional distance theory.

Meanwhile, Chapter 4 reveals the paradigm guiding the methodology for this case study, and the methods used to answer the research questions and achieve the study aim. This chapter presents all the steps and factors relating to the research methods applied, such as the setting,

sampling technique, research instruments, reliability and validity of the instruments, and the ethical considerations guiding the study throughout its different stages.

The analysis of research findings is presented in Chapters 5 and 6, with Chapter 5 presenting the quantitative results of the case study while Chapter 6 provides an interpretation of the qualitative findings. Chapter 7 subsequently discusses the main findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data. The final chapter (Chapter 8) then summarises the case study findings while also explaining their implications for theory, tutors and policy-makers. It also discusses the study's limitations and makes recommendations for future work.

### **1.7. Summary**

This chapter presented an overview of the research topic, including a brief review of the key literature. It described the motivation for the research, based on the researcher's past experience and a review of the relevant literature. Additionally, the research aim and questions are presented, followed by original contributions to knowledge that this research makes. Finally, it sets out the structure of the thesis.

## **Chapter 2: Context of the Study**

### **2.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, the aim is to present background information about the context of this study. The chapter begins by outlining key aspects of the Saudi context, which include its location, demography and economy. This is followed by an overview of the Saudi cultural climate and the influence of this culture on Saudi communication behaviours, especially the role of Saudi women in society. It then presents a section on higher education and the improvements made in Saudi universities and institutions over recent years. Particular emphasis will be placed on the teaching and learning practices and the use of the Internet in higher education and how this tool has helped Saudi Higher Education (SHE) to develop. The chapter closes by presenting the main challenges that hinder students and academic staff in higher education from using VLEs for the teaching and learning process.

### **2.2. General Aspects of the Saudi Context**

This section gives an overview of Saudi Arabia's location, population, economy, culture and individual communication behaviours, as well as the role of women in Saudi society, before describing higher education and the Internet in Saudi universities. This is in order to provide an understanding of the development of online teaching and learning in SHE.

#### **2.2.1. Geography**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) (see Figure 2) is located in south-west Asia. It is the second largest country by surface area in the Arab world and has the largest population of any of the countries in the Arabian Peninsula. It is bordered by several other Arab countries:

Jordan, Iraq and Kuwait to the north, Yemen and Oman to the south, Bahrain, and Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the east. Moreover, its coastline spans the Arabian Gulf in the east and the Red Sea to the west. It is divided into 13 regions, each composed of cities and villages. The city of Riyadh is the capital, but other large cities in KSA include Makkah and Dammam.



Figure 2. Saudi Arabia’s borders (Alamy, 2017)

### 2.2.2. Demography

In 2016, the total population of Saudi Arabia was 31,787,580; the male population is 58% and the female population is 42%. Meanwhile, the non-Saudi population constituted 36%, concentrated in the bigger cities. The region surrounding Makkah is the most populous in the Kingdom, accommodating 26% of the country’s entire population. Meanwhile, the Al-Jawf region in the north of Saudi Arabia has the lowest population, amounting to around 15% of the total (GASat, 2017). Aside from this, in the most recent population statistics issued by the General Authority for Statistics in 2016, over 60% of the Saudi population is aged under 25 (GASat, 2017), which has led the government to take action by drawing up new

directives for the construction of an education system and economy aligned with the needs and aspirations of young people.

### **2.2.3. Economy**

The Saudi economy depends upon oil, which was first discovered in 1935 in its Eastern Region. Most Saudi companies, such as Aramco and Sabic, work with petroleum products. However, Saudi Arabia is currently attempting to stimulate its private sector, as a means of diversifying its economy and employing more Saudi nationals, in a bid to move away from oil dependency (Kinninmont, 2017). Accordingly, in 2016, the Saudi government released its Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program (NTP) to work towards a better future for the country (Vision 2030, 2017). This Vision has been adopted as a roadmap for economic and developmental action in the country and seeks to identify new directions, policies and goals. Furthermore, the plan is not focused solely on developing the economy, but also includes elements that refer to relations between the citizens and the state; for example, moves that would imply greater social freedom, ranging from entertainment to exercise and give more rights to women in business and politics (Kinninmont, 2017).

### **2.2.4. The Culture of Saudi Society**

A society's culture will reflect the way in which its members think and speak; encompassing their customs, language, art, literature, feelings and beliefs (Alkahtani, Dawson & Lock, 2013). Hofstede and McCrae (2004) define culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from another" (p.58). Therefore, every society has own culture, which in turn influences the lifestyle of its citizens.

In Saudi Arabia, the main feature defining Saudi culture is Islam. The religion of Islam first developed in Makkah and Medina, in Saudi Arabia's Western Region. The country hosts the

two holiest sites for all Muslims: *Almasjed Alharam* in Makkah and *Almasjed Alnabawi* in Medina. It is the aim of all Muslims around the world to visit these places (Alahmari, 2017). All aspects of people's lives in Saudi Arabia, including their customs and laws, are in fact based on the Holy Quran and Sharia (Islamic law), as established by the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) over 14 centuries ago. Islam is therefore not only a belief, it is a conceptual framework and a set of regulations and practices that guide law, education, media, entertainment and the daily lives of the Saudi people (Almutari, 2008). In turn, Islamic disciplines influence people's communication with each other, personal behaviour and include a prescribed dress code for men and women, as well as gender-segregated spaces (Almutari, 2008).

Therefore, it is perhaps this gender segregation that is the essential factor distinguishing Saudi society from other societies around the world. Al-Saggaf (2011) asserts "one of the important features that profoundly influence every aspect of public and social life in Saudi Arabia is the segregation of sexes" (p.5). In Islam, this segregation is intended to preserve chastity in both men and women, protecting them from temptation and sin (Buisson, 2013). As such, the segregation of men and women may be observed in every physical place in Saudi society (for example, educational institutions and even hospitals), with a division between male and female sections (Al Lily, 2011), This even includes the home, where houses are designed with one section for women and the another for men, especially where men and women are not immediate relatives (Albugami & Ahmed, 2016). Consequently, gender segregation has a significant impact on women's work and learning, as they are obliged to work in appropriate environments and to avoid mixing with men, which is referred to as *Ikhtilat* in Saudi society. Women also study in departments and institutions where they are unlikely to work with men after graduating, such as schools of engineering or medicine.

However, according to Al-Saggaf and Weckert (2011) not all practices in Saudi society are dictated by religion; some are derived from social norms or the tribal nature of Saudi society. In fact, Al Lily (2011) argues that it is difficult to distinguish between Islamic rules and traditional Saudi norms; for example, patriarchy in the family structure. Patriarchy prevents views or ideas being challenged and obliges individuals to follow the prevailing social rules (Almutari, 2008). Moreover, this patriarchy is imposed upon women, who are expected to stay at home and take care of their children. As a result, women are kept safe, their chastity is protected and they are kept away from unrelated men.

Up until recently, these complex rules of tribal society were limited to small cities and rural areas in Saudi Arabia, where the population was inter-related through blood relationships or marriage. However, the main cities (for example, Riyadh, Makkah, Jeddah) are less dominated by tribal and family restrictions, because they are home to people of different ethnicities and from diverse cultures, because of the job market, Hajj or Umrah (Al Alhareth, 2014).

### **2.2.5. The Impact of Culture on Saudi Communication Behaviours**

In addition, culture also plays a significant role in communication between people. Numerous studies have demonstrated that individuals from different cultural backgrounds have varied expectations and interpretations of communication behaviours (Powell & Harville, 1990; Thompson, 1992). With this in mind, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Model lists the factors clarifying the differences between groups and their communication behaviours: low and high power distance; individualism and collectivism; femininity and masculinity, and high and low uncertainty avoidance (Ke & Chaves, 2013). The following Table (Table 1) describes each dimension of Hofstede's Model.

Table 1. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Model

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Low and High power distance</b>	Concerns the degree of equality and inequality between individuals in a society.
<b>Individualism-collectivism</b>	Emphasises the degree to which the community reinforces individual or collective achievements.
<b>Femininity-masculinity</b>	Indicates the degree to which society favours distinct gender roles.
<b>Low and High uncertainty avoidance</b>	Emphasises the degree to which individuals feel threatened by uncertain situations.

Adopted from (Hofstede, 2001)

In light of the above, Alamri, Cristea and Al-Zaidi (2014) point out that Saudi culture has a high power distance and is collectivist, whereby group goals take priority and individuals pay attention to the needs of their communities. In other words, individuals place a premium on loyalty to the corresponding society and the groups or families who are related to them, which in turn influences their communication acts with each other (Zaharna, 2009).

Moreover, in the high power distance and collectivist cultures, there is considerable dependence of people on more powerful individuals (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkove, 2010). As discussed before, for example, in Saudi society, father or older relatives in the family structure. Therefore, respect and obedient toward those people are expected to continue in a person life as longer as the parents or older relatives are alive (Hofstede et al., 2010). This is type of relationship between people may influence on distributing of power particularly in institutions (e.g. schools, the places where people work) which leads to inequalities and very formal relationships or conversations between communicators in some situations (Hofstede et al., 2010).

However, limited studies have investigated communication behaviours in Saudi society, whereas most research on communication has been conducted in other Arabic countries, such

as studies by Feghali (1997) in Lebanon and Zaharana (1995) in Jordan. Moreover, these studies have investigated communication behaviours in general and not just in terms of their context. However, these other Arabic cultures have also been identified as high power context (HPC) and collectivist (IDV), based on Hofstede's dimensions (Zahrana, 2009).

Zaharana (1995) identified the main verbal communication behaviours exhibited by Arabic communicators, with Arabic culture differing from other cultures in terms of 'direct' and 'indirect'. This means that Arabic peoples tend to communicate in 'indirect' ways, which may conceal or bury the intended message, in order to maintain harmony in their relationships (Zahrana, 1995). This indirect communication style is likely to be 'intuitive' and 'emotional', which refers to a style of presentation or argumentation that is not linear, but rather circles around issues (Mooij, 2014, p.166). Furthermore, Merkin (2015) points out that the main feature of indirect communication is that the meaning is outside the message or hidden which means indirect communicators do not make a direct statement or directly response that causes tension particularly in an uncomfortable situations. According to Hammer (2005), indirect communication style includes influencing through nonverbal communication behaviours such as facial expressions or eye contact. The Arabic people prefer to be indirect because they become more comfortable when avoiding *losing face* which is the distinctive aspect of a collectivist culture (Rebecca, 2015). Hofstede et al (2010) describe the losing face as an expression that means "the sense of being humiliated" (p.110).

Repetition is another characteristic of speech in Arabic conversation and it involves repeating "something over and over again" to hold the attention of the listener and facilitate comprehension (Zaharana, 1995, p.248). Feghali (1997) asserts that repetition is a key feature of the Arabic language and Arabic speaking communicators. One example of repetition in Arabic verbal communication is the formula that includes *inshalla* [if God wills it] and *el hamdulilah, hamdillah* [Thanks be to God] (Feghali, 1997, p.358).

Non-verbal communication is also important in Arabic culture, with much more physical contact than people are accustomed to in the West (Mooij, 2014). Feghali (1997) presents the most common non-verbal communication behaviours between communicators in Arabic societies and these are displayed in Figure 3, below.

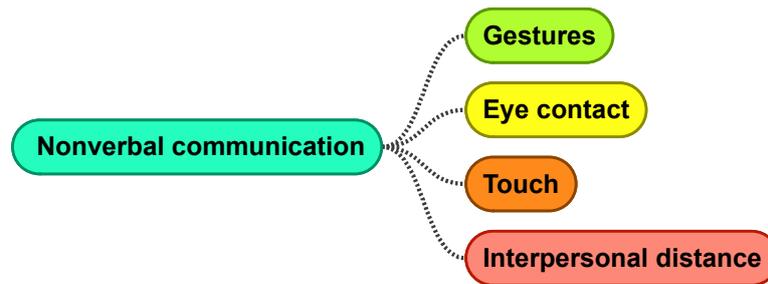


Figure 3. Nonverbal communication behaviours in Arabic culture  
Adopted from Feghali (1997)

Common nonverbal communication behaviours are consistent with nonverbal communication in Western and other cultures (more details on these are given in the literature Review in Chapter 3). Eye contact is a common nonverbal behaviour in Arabic culture, which may relate to ‘indirect’ verbal communication expressions, whereby communication also takes place with a direct body orientation (Feghali, 1997). However, touch behaviour only occurs between communicators of the same gender, where it frequently “replaces the bowing and handshaking rituals” (Feghali, 1997, p.364).

These verbal and nonverbal behaviours are common communication styles in Arabic culture. Saudi culture is Arabic, but it is considered to be the most conservative culture. Therefore, communication styles between Saudis can differ from one social or professional context to another such as in F2F classrooms, VLEs, business environments, and daily life, as well as according to gender, age, ethnicity, tribe and city.

Therefore, communication behaviours between tutors and students may be influenced by sociocultural factors in the classroom. According to Yoo (2014), teacher-student interaction is deeply rooted in the culture of a society and will differ from one society to another, as it is based on cultural factors and dimensions. This impact of culture can be extended to online courses. Wang (2007) suggests that cultural factors in online learning can affect students' learning experiences, perceptions and engagement. Saudi culture may influence communication styles and actions amongst students and tutors in VLEs. It is likely that these variations also engender different immediacy practices which reflect the culture and restrictions of the Saudi society.

#### **2.2.6. Women in Saudi Society**

In Saudi Arabia, the position of women may differ from that of women in other societies, even across the Arab world. Although the Quran promotes gender equality in all its articles, the role of women and gender equality is diminished and influenced by traditions and rules in the corresponding societies and cultures. As discussed in section 2.2.4, above, Saudi culture has a significant impact on people's lives in the nation, especially among women. Hamdan (2005) asserts that Saudi women may lack the power to manage their lives or work independently from men. This is because under Saudi regulations, women cannot study, work, marry or travel without the permission of a male guardian, such as their father, husband, brother or even son, if he has reached the age of 18 – the legal age of majority.

Moreover, male honour and the family's reputation are strongly related to women's actions and behaviour; for instance, if a woman has a relationship with a man outside her family even a friendly relationship, she will be punished by her family. From the perspective of Saudi social norms and traditions, she will have failed to uphold her family's honour and reputation, which means that she deserves to be punished. In this respect, female family members are

expected to be shy, reserved and modest (Al-Saggaf, 2011) and to assume the role of either a wife or mother in the home in her future.

Therefore, the impact of cultural and social factors has influenced women's education, whether in traditional or online environments; meaning that they cannot study or take full advantage of opportunities to pursue higher education without the permission of a male guardian (Al Alhareth, 2014). Another issue is mobility, since, although female Saudis now have access to all levels of education, restrictions to their mobility remain a major barrier. As a result, they are obliged to employ a private driver if they want to attend classes, which could influence a woman's desire to complete her education or find a job (Baki, 2004).

Nevertheless, in the past few years, the government has attempted to make some progress toward gender equality by creating more opportunities for women to learn and work, thus changing some of the regulations governing them. It is believed that these reforms have been implemented because of pressure from Saudi women who have obtained their higher degrees abroad, or who have been exposed to other cultures and societies through the Internet and social media (Al Alhareth, 2014). These women have had a huge impact on the position of women in Saudi society and have campaigned for women's rights. Al Alhareth (2014) argues that Saudi women living in the main cities, such as Riyadh and Jeddah, especially those with higher qualifications, are unhappy with the status of women in Saudi society. Therefore, during the reign of the previous monarch, King Abdullah, important reforms were made, with crucial changes being made to improve the position of women in Saudi society. For example, King Abdullah endeavoured to help women attain a higher position in Saudi society by empowering them with more rights (Alsuwaida, 2016). For example, women can now vote in local elections, participate in sport and compete in the Olympics. Today, Saudi women are freer than they were even five years ago, in terms of their work and daily lives. According to

Alsuwaida (2016), the government is encouraging women to work and establish businesses, without needing to consult their male relatives.

### **2.3. Saudi Higher Education (SHE)**

The higher education in Saudi Arabia consists of colleges and universities, all of which provide undergraduate, postgraduate and professional programmes. The main goal of Saudi education as stated by national policy, is achieving the needs of the Saudi society and reflecting Islamic cultural living ways and norms. The SHE sector was afforded special attention early in 1957, Saudi Arabia's first university was established in Riyadh with nine lecturers and 21 students, due to the need for a state university to provide higher education, instead of sending students to obtain higher degrees abroad (Alamri, 2011). Several other institutions were subsequently founded to offer Bachelor's degree programmes in particular subjects, such as Islamic Studies, Arabic language, and Education.

In 1975, the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education was formed to take responsibility for the nation's universities; for example, authorising their curricula to fulfil the aspirations of the country and bring about changes in technology, industry and the labour market (Alharbi, 2011). According to Smith and Abouammoh (2013), Saudi universities should follow general policies of the Ministry of Higher Education providing programmes that link to social development and the economic growth, supporting the talented and gifted students by offering opportunities to meet their needs. The universities are also expected to provide tools that help Saudi researchers to participate and make contributions in scientific research to improve the knowledge of the nation.

The Saudi government is responsible for establishing new universities, providing funding for students, and dealing with issues that relate to higher education institutions and hinder the

improvements of higher education. In 1998, the government built eight universities, 18 more in 2006 and 25 by the end of 2014, with a maximum rate of 212% growth in registration between 1999 and 2009. Between 2015 and 2016, 393,131 students were enrolled in higher education, with females representing over 51% of the student population at Bachelor's degree level (MOE, 2017).

Meanwhile, Saudi higher education institutions offer segregated undergraduate and postgraduate degrees to female students. In this regard, Saudi universities have opened specific institutions for female students by establishing separate campuses for women. All-female higher education institutions provide education with buildings, facilities and classroom tools that support the process of learning and teaching to promote women's access to higher education. At present, there are 300 colleges for women across the Kingdom (Kassim, Bogari & Zain, 2015). Moreover, in 2006, an all-female university was established in Riyadh, known as Princess Noura University, which houses four colleges and 14 departments (PNU, 2017).

Although the financial factor is globally the main shortcoming in the higher education field, the Saudi government is generously spending on that sector. For example, according to the growth of student enrolment in higher education, the Saudi government has offered government-funded scholarships for male and female students to study abroad (Alahmari, 2017). The number of students taking up these scholarships is estimated at between 110,000 and 125,000 in more than 20 countries around the world, mainly specialising in medical and scientific disciplines. Most of these are sponsored by the King Abdullah Scholarship Programme (KASP), which is one of the main Saudi educational initiatives. It was launched in 2005 and extended to the end of 2017. The vision of this Programme was to "prepare distinguished generations for a knowledge society built upon a knowledge-based economy" (Pavan, 2013, p.26).

In 2015, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education were amalgamated into the Ministry of Education, which then implemented important changes for the future of Saudi Arabia's higher education institutions. This reconstruction is to be achieved across a wide range of programmes, with short, medium and long-term plans to include a number of aspects, such as finance, scholarships, scientific research and information technology. The changes of the new ministry are in accordance with the 2030 national plan vision.

### **2.3.1. Teaching and learning in Saudi higher education (SHE)**

Generally, teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia have been influenced by two features: the culture of Saudi society and past educational traditions. As discussed in section (2.2.5), the Saudi culture is a high power distance and collectivist culture, which means the teacher has the authority to control the class and deliver knowledge to the students (Hofstede et al., 2010). Additionally, students in the class speak up when the teacher allows them to talk or ask questions, which illustrates the student's passive role inside the classroom (Alamri, 2016). Also, Saudi students are dependent on their teachers to provide information and knowledge, and to promote student communication and participation (Asiri, 2013).

The second distinctive feature that shapes teaching and learning practices in Saudi education is the impact of traditional education. According to Elyas and Picard (2010), traditional Saudi learning emerged from Qur'anic school, where content was exclusively based on Qur'an and Hadith (Prophet Mohammed saying) interpretation. Usually, this type of education took place in mosques where students of all ages met with their teachers to learn the Islamic rules and practices. The teaching, which resembles a *halgah*, took place in the front where the teacher was surrounded by seated students who listened attentively, willingly, and exclusively to him (Elyas & Picard, 2010). No interaction or communication occurred between the teacher and the students, or among the students, until the *halgah* had been finished.

As a result, teaching and learning styles in SHE have been shaped by cultural and traditional factors, the impact of which extends to universities. The teaching method adopted in traditional education by Saudi universities is teacher-centred, with the tutor merely delivering knowledge that the students are expected to learn by rote memorisation. Students become passive receivers of knowledge and follow the prepared curriculum to the letter (Asiri, 2013). Hamdan (2014) describes the Saudi education context as follows: “Knowledge and truth are fixed concepts and what is taught in school is unquestionable” (p. 312). Consequently, student work depends on the lecturers’ guidelines, and learning is guided by the lecturers (Alamri, 2016). Alnassar and Dow (2013) note that the key challenges facing Saudi lecturers in the current educational model are the dominance of the teacher-centred approach and the rigidity of a strictly followed curriculum. However, these problems may be related to rapid increases in student enrolment, which may lead academics in universities to use a lecturing style that focuses on delivering knowledge to students because of class size (Alamri, 2016). Recently, growing concerns over students’ poor interaction and participation through lectures led Saudi academics to try other effective teaching methods such as small group instruction (Alnassar & Dow, 2013). However, there is a clear absence of studies that investigate the teaching practices in F2F education and the reasoning behind the use of specific pedagogical methods in lectures.

#### **2.4. Internet Provision in Saudi Universities**

The number of Internet users in Saudi Arabia continues to increase rapidly, reaching around 24.1 million by the end of 2016, with a population penetration of 76% (CITC, 2017). As the following chart indicates, Internet penetration grew from 5% of the population in 2001 to over 70% of the population in 2016.

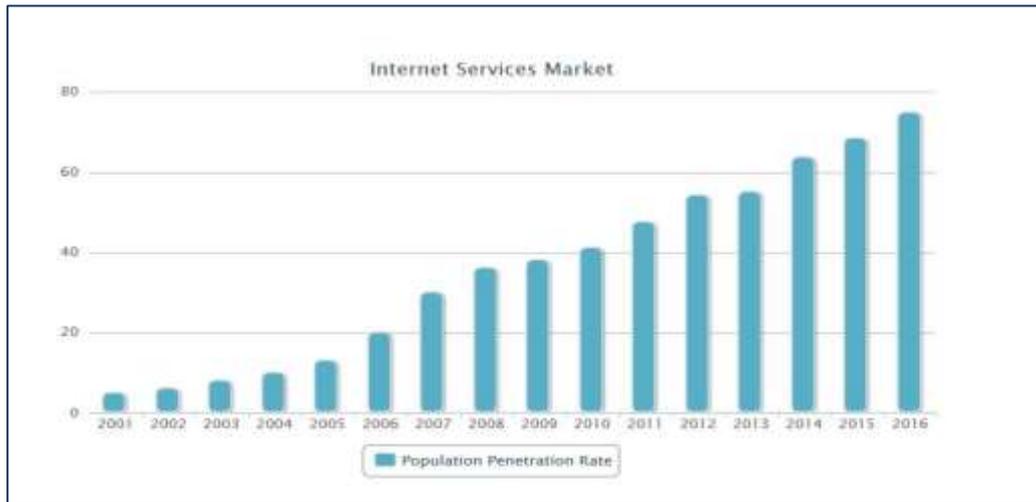


Figure 4. Internet penetration in Saudi Arabia (CITC, 2017)

Internet access opened up to the Saudi public in 1999, but was previously prohibited by law (Alshahrani, 2016). Recently, the increasing number of Internet users has helped change the government’s perspective of Internet usage and it is now considered as an important technology across all the nation’s sectors (Mirza & Al-Abdulkareem, 2011). With an increase in the number of Internet services and users in the country, the Saudi government has prioritised the use of new electronic systems to replace all paper systems leading to the establishment of the National Communication and Information Technology Plan (NCITP) in 2007. This is aimed at developing the ICT industry and creating initiatives such as e-governance, e-health and e-learning (CITC, 2015).

The Saudi government has also directed a great deal of attention towards implementing the Internet and ICT in higher education for a number of reasons. For example, annual student enrolment in higher education has increased and the shortage of institutions to accommodate this influx has become the greatest challenge that higher education has faced. Moreover, the shortage of female staff to teach female students F2F in universities is another issue that has obliged universities to assign male academic lecturers to teach female students (Alkrajji & Eidaroos, 2016). As for the students themselves, some parents are hesitant about sending their

sons to remote cities to study because the accompanying living costs can be high. As discussed in section (2.2.5), in the case of female students, some parents prevent their unmarried daughters from travelling alone or studying away from the home town (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014).

In consideration of the issues outlined above, the Saudi government established the National Centre of E-learning and Distance Learning (NCeL) in 2006 to implement a national plan for developing and facilitating information technology (IT) use at all the levels of the education system. This plan helped implement e-learning systems and online courses in higher education and made them available to all students on degree programmes (Jabil & Qahmash, 2013). In 2017, the National Centre of e-Learning was established, distinct from the Distance Education branch. Its aim was to promote the quality of e-learning and implement its applications, in order to increase the effectiveness of teaching, learning and training processes in the Saudi education system (NCeL, 2017).

Generally speaking, the Internet is an important resource implemented in higher education to achieve an institution's administrative goal of quality teaching and learning, as well as to support distance learning (Alkraihi & Eidaros, 2016). In this regard, the NCeL has launched several Internet-based initiatives since its beginnings in 2006, namely MAKNAZ, a repository for the storage and retrieval of online course materials to help higher education institutions adopt new systems; the Saudi Digital Library (SDL), which is a digital library to support teaching and learning in higher education institutions, with more than 310,000 digital books and access to 300 publishers, and SANEED, which is an advice and support centre providing educational guidance to all e-learning practitioners by phone or email (Al Mulhem, 2013; Jabil & Qahmash, 2013; Aldiab, Chowdhury, Kootsookos & Alam, 2017).

Aside from the above, in 2007, the NCeL created JUSUR, which is a Saudi virtual learning system for managing online learning processes and distance education. Most Saudi universities use it as a virtual learning platform. JUSUR was developed according to universal standards for VLE systems and it has 17 tools, such as the ‘Announcements’ tool, a forum tool, a user administration tool and tools for grading and drafting reports. It allows lecturers and academic staff to design, deliver and measure students’ progress with ease. It also helps students to complete their tasks quickly and correct their mistakes (Al-Khalifa, 2010; Asiri, Mohmud, Baker & Ayub, 2012). However, JUSUR does present various obstacles that can make its implementation difficult. For instance, lecturers cannot delete students from the system without technical support, the discussion forum does not show which students are currently online and it cannot be linked to other university tools or systems such as the registration portal (Asiri et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, with the support of NCeL for online learning, all Saudi universities have begun to use different systems of virtual learning (such as Blackboard, JUSUR, Moodle) and have established centres for online courses and learning, so as to improve the quality of teaching and learning, as well as to offer online degree programmes and online training programmes. For example, from 2007-2008, King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah offered online programmes in its Arts and Humanities, Economics, and Administration Departments. These programmes combined asynchronous and synchronous learning tools to facilitate students’ learning. In addition, Al-Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University has provided all its courses via a VLE. It also uses asynchronous and synchronous learning models to promote students’ learning and communication (Alrashidi, 2014).

Meanwhile, online education in Saudi women’s institutions is essential, because male academic staff can only teach female students electronically and remotely via video or audio-conferencing. Before integrating virtual learning features, male lecturers used to teach

through closed-circuit television. Female students consequently viewed their lecturers in real time on a TV monitor, with the male lecturers using a microphone system to ask questions or give feedback (Alahmari, 2017). In these classes, however, communication between female students and their lecturers was limited because the relationship between tutors and students very formal in these environments, thus influencing student engagement and learning (Kassim, Bogari & Zain, 2015).

In light of the above, the new communication tools in virtual environments such as discussion boards or blogs could encourage female students' learning and empower them to overcome barriers that affect their online learning outcomes.

## **2.5. Barriers to Internet Provision in Saudi Universities**

In general, integration of the Internet into higher education has faced a number of obstacles. The literature reveals that there are general barriers the use of VLEs in SHE (Almegren & Yassin, 2013; Al Alhareth, 2014; Albugami & Ahmed, 2016; Al Ghamdi & Samarji, 2016). These barriers include the following:

**Cultural issues:** Culture is a critical issue Saudi students and lecturers face when using VLEs. Cultural and traditional norms have a huge impact on students' and lecturers' views and awareness of these environments (Alrashidi, 2014). As mentioned in section 2.2.4, above, religion is a characteristic feature of the Saudi culture. As a result, its education system has been influenced by Islamic regulations. According to Al Alhareth (2014), Saudi social norms and beliefs are also associated with the adoption of the Internet and advanced technology in education. Almegren and Yassin (2013) assert that in particular, female students experience numerous problems in their learning, because of religious and traditional norms. For example, female students have limited opportunities to access the virtual learning offered via

on-campus wireless connections, because they are not allowed to stay on campus after lectures and are prohibited from entering lecture rooms occupied by male academic staff and come into direct contact with male lecturers (Almegren & Yassin, 2013). In addition, Al Alhareth (2014) highlights the fact that Saudi female students can only access and use a VLE under the supervision and with the permission of a male guardian. Thus, some female students may be denied the opportunity to complete their online degrees or even to study via online education, if they are not empowered to use it freely (Al Alhareth, 2014).

Moreover, the shortage of female lecturers has led to male educators teaching female students via synchronous communication tools (for example, audio- and video conferencing tools with male peers to discuss topics relating to lectures, without meeting face-to-face). However, this method is considered to be ineffective, because it excludes female students from discussion and participation (AlMegren & Yassin, 2013), given that there is no close or personal relationship developed between female students and their male tutors or peers.

**Pedagogical issues:** These are important factors influencing the integration of virtual learning which need to be resolved and demand serious consideration from Saudi universities. Virtual learning tools differ from F2F classrooms, in that they require communication and interaction between lecturers and students, and students with their peers to exchange information and knowledge, as well as support their learning and overcome their sense of isolation. According to Alebaikan (2010), Saudi universities focus on improving lecturers' skills in using virtual environments tools, while the application of appropriate theory or practical models receives less consideration. In this sense, students could feel dissatisfied and disconnected which lead them to withdraw from their online courses.

**Institutional support:** This is a problem affecting students' and lecturers' use of virtual learning platforms. The lack of Internet access, limited number of computer laboratories,

need to hire technicians to resolve computer issues, and provision of training courses are the main issues requiring the attention of Saudi institutions (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014). AlMegren and Yassin (2013) suggest that virtual learning environments in SHE require professional support, which is not available in all universities.

Furthermore, organisational support has been found to be an important factor motivating lecturers to use virtual environments and to create new teaching methods for enhancing students' learning (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014). This has led the NCeL to run a competition for e-learning called the 'Excellence Reward for e-Learning in University', open to universities and their academic staff. The goal of this initiative is to raise awareness of the importance of e-learning and online courses in higher education. It sets objectives and standards of excellence in e-learning and promotes initiatives to assist the implementation of e-learning in institutions (Almulhem, 2013). Al-Asmari and Khan (2014) also suggest that institutional support for raising awareness of virtual learning among academic staff can include rewards to motivate their performance, including salary increases, fringe benefits and promotion.

Support from higher education institutions could also take the form of providing training sessions and workshops, using virtual learning systems to help lecturers create effective teaching and learning environments. Professional development for lecturers can assist them in designing, creating and selecting content materials and teaching methods to facilitate learning and encourage student interaction because the role of the lecturer changes from one of delivering content to that of a facilitator and moderator (Asiri, 2013).

Training courses are also important for teaching lecturers and students basic IT skills and how to use virtual learning tools. The lack of skill in using such technology is a common problem that faces students and academic staff in Saudi universities (Al Ghamdi & Samarji,

2016). The development of lecturers' basic IT skills in using virtual learning features could consequently help them support their students in addressing technical issues.

**Internet connection:** The Saudi literature on educational technology reveals that the main problem encountered in the integration of virtual learning into higher education institutions is Internet access and availability (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014; Al Gamdi & Samarji, 2016). AlMegren and Yassin (2013) assert that connection to the Internet may be lost during lectures and when attempting to send or receive materials relating to these lectures. This represents a serious challenge for universities and students. The reason for its occurrence is inadequate IT infrastructure and a lack of robust networks (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014). Moreover, in her study, Al Othman (2016) argues that while Internet services in Saudi Arabia's larger cities have excellent coverage and accessibility, this is not necessarily the case in rural areas and smaller cities. Another obstacle to Internet access is that some higher education institutions have no Internet access on campus, rendering it difficult to use it in the classroom or during lectures (AlMegren & Yassin, 2013). This can then lead students and academic staff to gain negative attitudes toward virtual learning, thus influencing students' learning and communication by these means (Kadi, 2015).

## **2.6. Summary**

This chapter has highlighted key factors related to the study context. It has also provided some background information on Saudi Arabia's geographical location, demography, economy and culture, including the position of women in society. In addition, it has outlined the aims of Saudi higher education and the improvements made in this area over recent years. Finally, online learning in higher education has been explored here, looking at the reasons, objectives and barriers to integrating virtual environments in the teaching and learning process.

## **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter explores the term ‘virtual learning environment’ (VLE) and the literature relating to tutor immediacy practices in F2F and online learning environments. It begins with an explanation of the term of virtual learning. This is followed by an exploration of VLE pedagogies and the challenges faced by students and tutors in these environments. The existing literature on the concept of immediacy in F2F classrooms will subsequently be reviewed, as well as the benefits and challenges of immediacy practices in F2F classrooms.

Also included, however, is a section on immediacy practices in VLEs, as found in the literature, while outlining their importance. This is followed by an examination of the perception concept, and these online immediacy practices are discussed from the point of view of tutors and female students. Finally, a theoretical framework is proposed at the end of the chapter, with Sociocultural Theory, Social Presence Theory and Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) being clarified in detail; highlighting the relationship between these theories and tutors’ immediacy practices in VLEs.

### **3.2. Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)**

This section discusses the VLE as an application to support the teaching and learning process. It begins by clarifying what is meant by the term, *virtual learning environment*. VLE tools and pedagogies will then be described in relation to such an environment. It also explains the benefits and challenges students and tutors face in VLEs.

### **3.2.1. Clarifying the Term Virtual Learning Environment**

VLEs first emerged in the mid-1990s (O’Leary, 2007) as a form of distance education that takes place on an Internet-based learning platform. They are therefore a means for delivering and supporting e-learning (Wallace, 2015). Clarke (2013) argues that a VLE offers on and off-campus access to learning resources at any time, while at the same time supporting and accommodating e-learning. Thus, a VLE is software that can be accessed via the Internet to provide an integrated online learning environment, allowing tutors to deliver course materials and assignments, monitor students’ progress and develop communication networks (Wallace, 2015). E-learning can facilitate and deliver content materials via computers, the Internet, intranets or disks (Wallace, 2015).

Khan (2005) defines e-learning as

an innovative approach for delivering well-designed, learner-centered, interactive, and facilitated learning environment to anyone, anyplace, anytime by utilizing the attributes and resources of various digital technologies along with other forms of learning materials suited for open, flexible, and distributed learning environment.  
(p. 3)

This definition of e-learning focuses on the pedagogy methods that can be applied to it to facilitate self-directed learning using a student-centred approach. Meanwhile, the design of online courses in general should emphasise the creation of an effective learning environment by promoting social interaction between students and their tutors and amongst the students themselves. Students’ online interaction exists when they exchange information or ideas and construct that information into knowledge through personal experience (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

While, the VLE consists of software that is designed to administer and manage various aspects and tools to facilitate online learning, support teaching activities and record students’

performance. In addition, VLEs not only provide rich learning environment tools and materials, but also facilitate the implementation of different teaching models to improve the quality of online learning and teaching (Pan, Cheok, Yang, Zhu & Shi, 2006). Mikropoulos and Natsis (2011) also assert that a VLE is a software package that can build on a certain pedagogical model (e.g., constructive or collaborative) and incorporate tutor-centred objectives to create an effective learning environment. Thus, a VLE is not only software, it is also a virtual community that includes tutors, students and management (Pan et al., 2006; Sinayigaye, 2010).

Moreover, VLEs are often linked to other information systems within institutions, such as libraries and student records, in order to support teaching and learning processes (JISC, 2006). They are primarily aimed at managing and facilitating students' learning activities, as well as providing the necessary content and resources to ensure that these activities are successful (Aslam, 2014).

Other terms are sometimes used synonymously with VLE, such as *managed learning environment* (MLE), which tends to be more commonly used in the UK, along with VLE. However, MLEs contain a whole range of information systems and processes that are relevant to an institution for the management of its finances, student records and so on (JISC, 2006; Mason & Rennie, 2006). In contrast, the terms *course management system* (CMS) and *learning management system* (LMS) are typically used in the USA to refer to a VLE (Halinen, 2011).

Higher education institutions can in fact create their own VLEs to support teaching and learning; for example, JUSUR in Saudi universities, as mentioned earlier in Chapter 2. However, the adoption of VLEs has been influenced recently by commercially produced systems, such as Blackboard and WebCT (Kadi, 2015). As an example, Blackboard Inc.

currently serves over 16,000 clients across 90 countries, reaching 100 million users (Blackboard, 2017). This is due to the fact that the Blackboard system allows educators to deliver multimedia course materials, enables assignments to be allocated and submitted and facilitates the posting of announcements and feedback. It also provides a platform for educators to share useful links to open educational resources, as well as support task preparation. More details on Blackboard may be found in the Methodology (Chapter 4), but it should be mentioned here that in the present thesis, the term ‘VLE’ specifically refers to Blackboard, which is the tool used by the targeted university to deliver fully online courses.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the Arabic word for *virtual learning* has been used in nearly all the Arabic literature, even though it is not a recognised term in most Saudi universities. Instead, the most popular Arabic term used translates as *e-learning*, while *virtual classes* is commonly applied to lectures that are delivered through video- and audio-conferencing. Thus, VLE is not yet a familiar term in SHE.

To conclude this discussion of the nature of VLEs, the following definition is used in the current study: A VLE is an Internet-based platform that can help tutors to design and deliver courses and to apply models for pedagogies that will facilitate student learning and foster students’ interaction with their tutors and peers.

### **3.2.2. Perceived benefits of virtual learning environments (VLEs)**

A review of the relevant literature revealed that the benefits of VLEs include improved student learning, access to resources and easier communication between students and their tutors (Urwin, 2011). Sinayigaye (2010) points out that the Internet has promoted the popularity of virtual learning, so that it is now a common learning environment in higher education institutions because it supports the sharing and distribution of information and materials for courses. Neto (2017) argues that the Internet links to external content, whereby

VLEs can yield extensive materials to support teaching and learning; he adds that the main advantage of using a VLE to support teaching and learning is that it organises all features and information in a single location to create an integrated learning environment. Thus, VLEs offer flexibility and deliver different types of resources and materials to support students' learning. In addition, students can easily access these resources and use them frequently, at any time and from anywhere (O'Leary, 2007). An important characteristic of the VLE is its interactivity facilitated by interactive tools. Interaction enables students to carry out their activities and tasks in the process of constructing their knowledge (Urwin, 2011). It also encourages students to adopt an active mode in learning environments by working with their peers or tutors (Halinen, 2011).

### **3.2.3. Virtual learning environment (VLE) tools**

VLEs are equipped with tools that can improve teaching quality. A number of studies have identified VLE tools according to their function in teaching and learning operations (JISC, 2006; O'Leary, 2007; Shahabadi & Uplane, 2015), classifying them as outlined below.

#### ***3.2.3.1. Communication tools.***

Communication tools in VLEs can support interaction between students and tutors and between students and students using synchronous (e.g., video- and audio-conferencing) and asynchronous tools (e.g., discussion boards and blogs). Students can access these tools to build upon their knowledge and generate new ideas through interaction. There are also other tools that can enhance students' communication by presenting the deadlines and directions for a course, in the form of online calendars, diaries or timetables.

Nevertheless, several researchers have asserted that online communication tools can cause anxiety for students and a sense of isolation, because of a lack of motivation and connectedness with their tutors and peers (Anderson, 2006; Al Ghamdi, 2017). Therefore,

tutors need to design activities or tasks and use teaching methods that are both suitable for these communication tools and appropriate to promote student learning, thereby overcoming low student retention in online learning. The main characteristic of communication tools is to enhance social interaction, which can help to create a successful learning environment by increasing social presence and a sense of community (Shahabadi & Uplane, 2015).

In Saudi VLEs, a number of studies have found that female tutors in higher education mainly use asynchronous communication tools, such as discussion boards and email, to communicate with their students and deliver their courses (Al-Abdullatif, 2012; Al Ghamdi, 2017). As discussed in Chapter 2 this could be due to many different reasons, including cultural, pedagogical and Internet connectivity problems.

#### ***3.2.3.2. Assessment tools.***

VLEs offer tools that can provide various types of feedback and assessment. For instance, students can use self-tests for quick concept-checking and formative feedback. Quizzes, on the other hand, can serve as a guide for both the tutor and the student, with results that will highlight any points that have not been understood by the student and which the tutor can then cover in lectures (JISC, 2006). Assessment tools can also help to generate data on students' progress in online learning. These tools are flexible in terms of time and place and sometimes provide immediate feedback.

In the Saudi context, Attia (2014) and Alsadoon (2017) claim that higher education students generally have positive perceptions toward e-assessment. In particular, Saudi students favour tests and quizzes such as multiple choices and short answer questions on VLEs because they receive immediate feedback (Alsadoon, 2017).

#### ***3.2.3.3. Collaborative tools.***

VLEs include tools that can support collaboration between students. For example, the file-uploading tool in a VLE allows tutors and students to share resources, such as articles, notes, images and PowerPoint slides. The Whiteboard tool has also been found to enhance collaborative learning by allowing students to draw images together, as one example of its features. Alternatively, students can upload images and then discuss them using a text-based communication tool, such as a discussion board (JISC, 2006). Discussion boards and blogs are also types of collaborative tools, because tutors can use them to form small discussion or work groups.

#### ***3.2.3.4. Course resource tool.***

With this tool, the tutor can share links to relevant sites and supporting documents with students. It enhances the tutor's capacity to present information and helps students access that information (O'Leary, 2007). For example, in the context of Saudi online education, there is the Saudi digital library, which provides e-books and published journals for different disciplines, and MAKNAZ, which is a repository for the storage and retrieval of online course materials.

#### ***3.2.3.5. Learning analytics***

Learning analytics provide teachers with information about when and how frequently students access a course and use the system features throughout the duration of an online course. Learning analytics provides opportunities to support and monitor students' progress (Tempelaar, Rienties & Giesbers, 2015). As a result, the efficiency and effectiveness of the learning can be enhanced. It also gives online facilitators a comprehensive view of how

students are performing and will indicate whether they need additional help with a particular topic (Avella, Kebritchi, Nunn & Kanai, 2016).

To summarise, in higher education institutions, VLE tools allow educators to deliver multimedia course materials, post assignment briefs, make announcements and provide feedback. They also enable educators to include useful links to open educational resources and assist with the preparation of tasks. In this respect, VLEs can support students' online learning by organising information and learning resources within a single setting.

### **3.2.4. Virtual learning environment (VLE) pedagogies**

Pedagogy is the relationship between learning theories and teaching practices. According to Beetham and Sharpe (2013), pedagogy is 'centrally concerned with how we understand practice (the 'evidence base' for theory) and how we apply that theoretical understanding in practice once again' (p. 44). Conole (2010) indicates that pedagogy describes how theory can be applied to learning and teaching practice. Therefore, it embraces the dialogue between teaching practice and learning theory. However, in the contemporary digital age and era of communication, pedagogy needs to be 'redone' and 'rethought' (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013).

For virtual learning, pedagogical frameworks have reconceptualised teaching practice and learning theories as various types of models. Virtual learning or e-learning models have been designed according to learning theories, but in a way that suits these technologies and is based on the distance between tutors and students. In this respect, researchers have grouped learning theories relating to virtual learning into three categories (Conole, 2010; Beetham & Sharpe, 2013), namely associative (learning through activities), cognitive (learning as a mental process) and situative (learning through social interaction). The following table (Table 2) shows some examples and common pedagogical models that can be used by tutors in VLEs from the perspective of previous theories.

Table 2. Pedagogical Models in VLEs

Perspective	Learning Theory	Characteristics	Models
Associative	Behaviourist Tutoring Didactic	Focuses on behaviour modification, controls and observations.	-Merrill's instructional design principles
Cognitive	Constructivist Problem-based learning Dialogic learning Experiential learning	Students build their own mental structures; self-directed activities and learning through tasks to transform experience into skills, values and knowledge.	-Laurillard's conversational framework  -The community of inquiry (CoI)
Situative	Case-based learning Collaborative learning Social constructionism	Social interaction and participation	-Community of practice  -Salmon's 5-stages model

Adapted from Conole (2010).

Tutors can use these models as guiding principles to design appropriate course activities and tasks, thereby enhancing students' learning experiences (Conole, 2010). Moreover, virtual learning pedagogical models are also used as analytical tools for understanding and to describe practices, for example, the Community of Practice and the Community of Inquiry models. However, these pedagogical models can be difficult for tutors to apply in VLEs, because they need to understand their applications and implications for practice (Vaughan, Innes & Garrison, 2013). For instance, as discussed in Chapter 2, sociocultural background can influence the adoption of VLEs in SHE and e-pedagogical practices. The tutor-centred is the most common pedagogical model in Saudi F2F classrooms can influence the adoption of a new pedagogical model in online learning environments. Beetham and Sharpe (2013) specify that the sociocultural context can influence practitioners' choices and practices in online learning environments. Therefore, the norms and regulations of the respective society may affect teaching practices. Other obstacles that can influence tutors' use of these models in VLEs are revealed in the literature, as will be discussed in Section 3.2.5.

With these challenges in mind, VLE pedagogies can be selected and applied using the following steps: First, the tutor needs to define the learning objectives. The tutor must then choose learning tasks and teaching methods to help students achieve the stated learning objectives. Finally, assessment should be conducted to test whether or not the desired outcomes have been obtained (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013).

### **3.2.5. The challenges of virtual learning environments (VLEs)**

Students and tutors face several issues in VLEs, relating to the type of course being delivered, namely fully online or blended. Moreover, there may also be issues relating to cost, infrastructure and institutional support. This section presents the challenges that students and tutors face in fully online courses, which constitute the type of course being explored in this study.

#### ***3.2.5.1. Challenges faced by students***

The challenges students face within a VLE can be categorised as deriving from students' expectations, readiness and lack of interaction.

***Students' expectations:*** Students who enrol in online courses expect them to resemble F2F classes. They also expect their tutors to be available at all times and easily accessible when they need help. According to Mupinga, Nora and Yaw's (2006) findings, students in online courses expect regular contact and communication with their tutors, as well as immediate feedback and the same quality and rigour as they experience in their F2F classes. However, these expectations may change if students start to struggle to access their courses or tutors due to their lack of online learning skills and traits, especially self-discipline, self-motivation and technical skills. Therefore, students may feel anxious and dissatisfied with their online courses, which could cause them to withdraw from the courses. It is therefore suggested that tutors clarify expectations by presenting a set of objectives and clear instructions at the

beginning of the course, as well as giving students their contact information so that they are accessible during the course (Kebritchi et al., 2017).

***Students' readiness:*** Readiness for online learning indicates a student's willingness to learn in that environment, and consists of three aspects: students' preferences for the form selected to deliver the course, students' confidence in their own technical skills and students' self-engagement and motivation (Hung, Chou, Chen & Own, 2010). However, not all students exhibit these aspects of readiness and, as a result, their learning and persistence in an online course may be affected. According to Kebritchi et al. (2017), students' readiness can be influenced by a number of different issues; for example, their technical skills, perceptions of and attitudes to the Internet, cultural and non-English language backgrounds and time management skills. Hung et al. (2010) suggest a model of five dimensions to measure students' readiness to study online, which includes self-directed learning, motivation, self-efficacy with technology, self-efficacy with online communication and student control. This model can be used to measure students' willingness in online courses and to support students who are not willing to participate, learn or address their areas of weakness.

***Lack of interaction:*** Interactivity is one of the most important elements of a VLE. It can encourage students to play an active role in the learning environment by working and communicating with their peers and tutors (Halinen, 2011). Conversely, a lack of interaction can increase the feeling of isolation and the perception of distance between students and their learning environment (Salmon, 2013). In contrast, online interaction can enhance students' learning by increasing the sense of presence and community. Kebritchi et al. (2017) point out that affiliation with a learning community influences students' sense of identity and learning. They argue that students' identity can be established through social interaction in learning environments, which is consistent with the sociocultural perspective. A sense of community and presence is largely based on how much students contribute to the class and the degree to

which they share identity cues through interaction with their tutors or peers (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017). In addition, a high level of student interaction in a VLE is a significant factor for predicting students' perceived learning outcomes (Nandi et al., 2012). Where this interaction is lacking, a number of reasons may be identified, such as students being insufficiently engaged or motivated to interact with their tutors or peers in a VLE. Aside from this, tutors may lack experience in delivering their courses or lack skills in designing activities and tasks to enhance student interaction. The following section presents the most common issues facing tutors in VLEs.

### ***3.2.5.2. Challenges faced by tutors***

The challenges tutors face can be categorised as related to changes in their role, course design or time.

***Changes in the tutor's role:*** One of the main challenges in online teaching is the changing role of the tutor. Learning in a virtual system is more student-centred than it is in traditional tutor-centred settings (Nandi et al., 2012). Such a shift in emphasis requires tutors to redesign their methods so that they promote student interaction with their environment, peers and tutors. The role of the tutor not only changes but also expands in VLEs (Kebritchi, 2014). In this extended role, the emphasis is on the tutor's ability to deliver learning content and materials, provide the appropriate resources and monitor students' progress (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Chakraborty and Nafukho (2015) argue that the tutor's role in a VLE is a significant factor of successful and positive learning experiences. According to Folley (2013), many tutors are unprepared for the change to their role when they transfer to an online learning environment, resulting from their fear of the unfamiliar technology. In particular, novice e-tutors may find that online courses are prone to communication barriers, technological issues and problems in transferring F2F content materials to the VLE

(Kebritchi et al., 2017). Moreover, tutors who have been teaching F2F for years may feel anxious about transferring to online courses, due to a fear of technology or a lack of confidence in their ability to teach online (Baran, Correia & Thompson, 2011).

Therefore, it follows that the changing role of the tutor from F2F teaching to teaching via a VLE requires both technology skills and professional online teaching knowledge and competence. Tutors' job satisfaction and confidence will inevitably be influenced by the pedagogical and technical issues associated with VLEs. Institutions also need to provide staff with extensive training sessions before the transition from a traditional setting to a VLE. Rapp, Gulbahar and Adnan (2016) even suggest that tutors should undertake studies in a VLE in their own training prior to becoming e-tutors. This will give them first-hand experience of the potential and problems of online learning. It is consequently considered a valuable basis for designing online content materials.

Furthermore, Anderson et al. (2011) are of the view that without clear guidelines and expectations for tutors to follow in online courses, there is no way of improving the quality of online teaching or learning. For successful online teaching, tutors must change their pedagogical beliefs and practices from a traditional to a more modern outlook, which can be applied in an online learning environment. According to Owens (2011), tutors who take a student-centred approach to incorporating new teaching methods in their F2F classrooms are more likely to be successful e-tutors. Owens (2011) also points out that tutors' practices could positively influence beliefs about their role in online learning environments.

***Course Design:*** The issue of course design presents the biggest challenge of online teaching. In a VLE, the tutor will have greater responsibility for achieving successful learning outcomes through his or her ability to design an appropriate course for the students involved. Therefore, content materials cannot simply be copied from an F2F to an online setting.

Instead, tutors are encouraged to design their online courses depending upon learning theories, because these theories provide ‘empirically-based accounts of the variables which influence the learning process, and explanations of the ways in which that influence occurs’ (Conole, 2010, p. 5). As discussed in Section 3.2.4, there are several pedagogical frameworks that can be applied in VLEs and which are associated with designing suitable courses for students. However, tutors may lack the skills to design activities or employ a pedagogical model. They may also lack training and support from their institutions (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Herman (2013) thereby asserts that institutions should be encouraged to communicate with their tutors in order to understand their needs and thus devise strategies for improving their skills.

***Time:*** One of the main challenges some tutors face is time. Tutors teaching on online courses require sufficient time to plan, prepare and teach. For example, they may need to spend more time with each student to facilitate their participation in and comprehension of a course, regardless of the size of the class (Folley, 2013). They may also find themselves preparing students who are unfamiliar with online courses and technology (Li & Irby, 2008). Conversely, in F2F teaching, the tutor is in control of the amount of material collected from students for review or to provide feedback on. What is more, a F2F classroom is time-limited, whereas some VLE tools are available 24 hours a day, such as discussion boards and blogs. This can lead to a high volume of contributions to read and moderate, which may be difficult to manage for tutors who lack experience in using communication tools or methods in VLEs (Kebritchi et al., 2017).

### **3.3. Tutors’ Immediacy Practices**

This section discusses tutors’ immediacy practices in the F2F classrooms and VLEs. It begins with a definition of the concept of immediacy and follows by outlining the types of tutor immediacy practices associated with the F2F classroom. It also discusses the advantages of

tutor immediacy practices for students and the barriers to applying them in the F2F classroom. In the following subsection, the most common immediacy practices are presented, as found in the literature in recent years and applied in VLEs. At the same time, the importance of such practices in the context of VLEs is highlighted.

### **3.3.1. The concept of immediacy**

Immediacy pertains to interpersonal verbal and nonverbal communication behaviours that enhance closeness and reduce the psychological and physical distance between people (Baker, 2004). Interpersonal communication refers to the conveyance of information, thoughts and feelings through signals and verbal expressions (Mandal, 2014). Mehrabian (1970), who developed the concept of immediacy, identified immediacy behaviours in clinical psychology by evaluating the behaviours of psychiatrists against low and high patient disclosures and liking rates (Kelly, 2012). Mehrabian (1970) described immediacy theory as ‘people [being] drawn toward persons and things they like, they evaluate highly, and prefer [while] they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer’ (as cited in Richmond, McCroskey & Johnson, 2003, p. 505). In his theory, Mehrabian (1970) describes immediacy behaviours purpose is to create a more positive interaction between message sender and message receiver by displaying approachable and availability.

According to Richmond et al. (2003), Mehrabian’s theory maintains that immediacy and liking are two sides of the same coin, because liking encourages greater immediacy and immediacy produces more liking. Witt and Wheelless (2001) asserted that a person’s affinity for another person may motivate individuals to approach each other and reduce the psychological distance between them. This reduced psychological distance points to the comfort that a person feels with another communicator (Kelly, 2012). Greater immediacy is

produced by communication through verbal and facial expressions, gestures, eye contact and bodily movements than communication through words alone.

Moreover, Richmond and McCroskey (2000) defined immediacy as follows: “The more communicators employ immediate behaviours, the more others will like, evaluate highly, and prefer such communicators; and the less communicators employ immediate behaviours the more others will dislike, evaluate negatively, and reject such communicators” (p.212). This definition of immediacy emphasises that practices can influence the responses of individuals and facilitate communication with others for the purpose of achieving desired outcomes. In other words, immediacy behaviours help to express a willingness to participate in conversation and transmit an invitation to carry on with communication (Potee, 1998). Therefore, the liking that a message receiver displays toward immediacy behaviours is the output of perceived immediacy (Kelley, 2012). Kelley (2012) clarified that rather than immediacy behaviours per se, it is the perception of such behaviours, via verbal and nonverbal cues, that is the key as this is the component that reduces physical and psychological distance and inspires liking. In this respect, Kelly (2012) defined immediacy behaviours as any communicative conduct that drives a message receiver to feel physically or psychologically close to a message sender (Kelley, 2012).

Anderson’s (1978) study was the first to examine the effects of tutors’ immediacy behaviours on students’ learning in the classroom context. After this development, immediacy became the focus of studies in the education field. Most researchers concentrated on the notion that immediacy supports students’ learning, with scholars exploring the outcomes of behaviours and how students perceive immediacy. With respect to immediacy behaviours, the current research adopts the definition of Richmond and McCroskey (2000) as it emphasises the effects of immediacy behaviours on the perceptions of a message receiver: a student, in this

work. The study centres on exploring the perceptions of female students and their tutors toward these behaviours within VLEs.

As will be seen in the following sections, there is a dearth of studies that examine students' and tutors' perceptions and experiences of immediacy as communication behaviours in education, whether in Saudi Arabia or other Arab contexts.

In general terms, verbal communication behaviours involve spoken or written language, while nonverbal communication is displayed through codes such as body movements and gestures (Manarte et al., 2014). According to Manarte et al. (2014), there is a clear difference between general communication behaviours and immediacy behaviours, in that immediacy applies to specific behaviour that can cause message receivers to evaluate message senders as more socially appealing than individuals who are not perceived to be immediate. These immediacy behaviours can also help message receivers to become more comfortable through communication. A more detailed description of immediacy behaviours will be presented in the next section.

### **3.3.2. Tutors' immediacy in the face-to-face (F2F) classroom**

Over the past three decades, immediacy in an educational context has been defined as one of the most important types of tutors' communication behaviours to influence the student-tutor relationship and promote students' learning (Nixon, Vickerman & Maynard, 2010). By reducing the psychological and physical distance between tutors and students, more motivation and engagement can be achieved in the classroom climate. Here, based on the definition of immediacy adopted in this study, students may be drawn towards and 'like' tutors who display immediate behaviours, but avoid or dislike tutors who are non-immediate, with a consequent impact on students' learning.

However, before discussing the use of immediacy practices in the classroom, the difference between *behaviour* and *practice* should be clarified. As defined by Bergner (2011), behaviour is “any observable overt movement of the organism generally taken to include verbal behaviour as well as physical movements” (p. 147). According to this definition, behaviour is observable physical action, such as a person raising a hand or saying ‘Hello’. In this respect, communication is a behaviour defined as ‘the behaviour of one individual (the sender) influenc[ing] the behaviour of another individual (the receiver)’ (Wilson, 1979, cited in Mandal, 2014, p. 417). However, Semi (2003) notes that behaviours become communicative only through students’ interpretative activity or based on the students’ responses. Semi (2003) asserts that the communication will occur if a student responds to tutor actions in the class.

Meanwhile, practices can be described as ‘a coherent set of activities that are commonly engaged in and meaningful in particular ways, among people familiar with a certain culture’ (Craig, 2006, p. 38). In an educational context, teacher practices are teachers’ actions and activities to enhance students’ learning in the classroom such as asking questions and providing feedback. Therefore, immediacy can be a part of teaching activities that create a productive and stimulating learning environment because it is not only including nonverbal behaviours (e.g. eye contact and facial expressions) but also verbal behaviours such as praise, humour and questioning as teaching activities.

As mentioned earlier, there are two types of immediacy that can be used by tutors in the F2F classroom: verbal and nonverbal. Both of these types can impact on students’ learning experiences and support learning environments.

### 3.3.2.1. *Nonverbal Immediacy practices*

Nonverbal immediacy practices generally include all communicative actions except speech (Mandal, 2014). Mehrabian (1971) refers to nonverbal immediacy as ‘silent messages’, which contribute as much as 55% of the meaning in a communication act. It conveys a sense of closeness through signals, use of body language, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact and smiling (Plumb, 2013). It can also be enacted by receiving messages and generating meaning through touch, sight, smell and sound (Schmitz, 2012).

However, previous studies on tutors’ communication behaviours have specified certain signals and actions as immediate nonverbal (Richmond et al., 2003; Richmond & McCroskey, 2004). Figure 5 lists the nonverbal immediacy practices of tutors that have been identified as increasing closeness and positive emotions towards their tutors and the class.

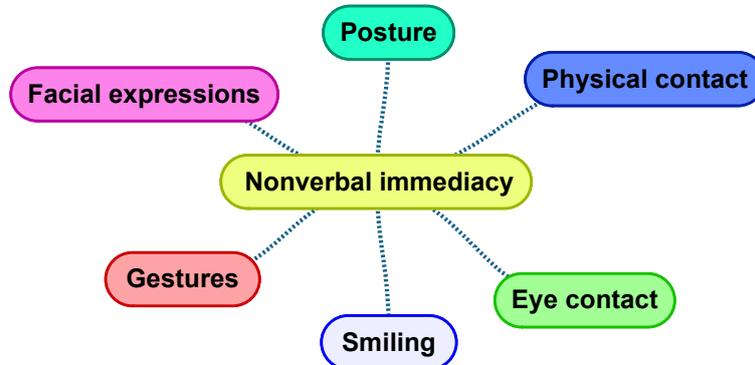


Figure 5. Tutor’s nonverbal immediacy practices.  
Adapted from Richmond and McCroskey (2004).

Figure 5, above, describes various forms of nonverbal immediacy that may be demonstrated by tutors in a F2F classroom.

**Facial expressions:** The face is an important feature of nonverbal immediacy practices of tutors in classrooms. It can show the internal emotions and attitudes of tutors towards their students (Semi, 2003). There are six main emotions that can be expressed by the face: happiness, surprise, fear, sadness, anger, and contempt (Sutiyatno, 2015). Tutors who do not show emotions through facial expressions in their teaching are likely to have more classrooms disruptions because students feel bored and uninterested (Richmond & McCroskey, 2004). Consequently, facial expressions are a significant practice in classrooms and help tutors to foster students' interactions and interest in their classes.

**Eye contact:** Lack of eye contact can affect the communication between tutor and student. Semi (2003) describes *gaze* as “looking at the other” and *eye contact* as “looking at each other” (p. 15). Students who avoid tutor eye contact and look away or down when the tutor calls on them are perceived as uninterested and dissatisfied. This reaction may lead the tutor to review his or her method of delivering information or dealing with students to increase their level of interest. On the other hand, some tutors may not have eye contact with their students, which leads students to perceive that their tutors are not approachable (Sutiyatno, 2015). Therefore, eye contact is an important indicator of a positive relationship between tutors and students.

**Posture and gestures:** *Posture* refers to “an individual’s position (seating or standing) and the ways in which body parts such as the hands and legs are kept” (Sime, 2003, p. 19). Mandal (2014) indicated that posture relates to other nonverbal immediacy practices, such as when a tutor is not interested in or does not like their students, or a class appears to be indicated by a leaning back posture and a lack of eye contact and angry facial expressions. Some researchers have also described gestures as mostly unconscious speech-related hand

and body movements to show a particular meaning, feeling, or intention (Semi, 2003). It is a way to help a tutor express what he or she means or wants. Furthermore, body position indicates that tutors are excited and interested in teaching in the classroom, which promotes student engagement and learning. Consequently, tutors' body movements can attract students' attention and facilitate learning, such as explaining complex issues or concepts, making them easier to understand (Sutiyanto, 2015).

***Physical contact or touch:*** Tutors can use this type of practice with students for reinforcement, to substitute for verbal expression, or to control student behaviours (Richmond & McCroskey, 2004). Examples of touching are the tutor touching a student on the arm, hand, or shoulder. However, touching should be done sparingly because, in some cultures, it can be harassment or offensive (Chase, 2009). Therefore, a student who is not comfortable with touching may avoid attending class or may react offensively towards the tutor. Richmond and McCroskey (2004) suggested that tutors should have sufficient information about students' backgrounds or cultures before class begins so that they know how to deal with them and choose appropriate teaching methods that help enhance student learning. Moreover, researchers have indicated some subcodes of nonverbal immediacy practices, such as tutor appearance, the classroom environment, and paralanguage (Richmond & McCroskey, 2004; Schmitz, 2012; Sutiyatno, 2015).

A number of studies have in fact shown that tutors' nonverbal immediacy across disciplines is positively related to the effectiveness of the teaching, the state of the students' motivation and cognitive learning outcomes (Manarte et al., 2014). It also creates an effective learning environment by encouraging students to interact and as a result it enhances their retention and understanding (Bunglowala & Bunglowala, 2015).

However, some studies have indicated that not all nonverbal immediacy practices adopted by tutors have the same impact on students in the classroom. For example, Zeki (2009) specifies that the use of eye contact and facial expressions are important actions that can help tutors to manage classrooms. She argues that eye contact is an important predictor of motivation, concentration and enthusiasm, as well as a tool for attracting and maintaining attention. Her findings also suggest that tutors' nonverbal immediacy creates a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere for students. Similarly, Bunglowala and Bunglowala (2015) emphasise facial expressions and eye contact as fundamental types of nonverbal immediacy that can enhance students' understanding and their classroom participation. However, previous studies have failed to examine the impact of tutors' nonverbal immediacy based on students' culture and background, such as identifying whether eye contact is perceived as appropriate by students from different cultures. The impact of tutors' nonverbal immediacy may differ according to the culture of the context or the gender of the students and tutors. For example, Kelley et al. (2014) acknowledge that eye contact is considered to be an immediate behaviour in Western culture, but point out it can increase psychological distance in many Asian cultures. More detail on this issue will be provided in section 3.3.4.

### ***3.3.2.2. Verbal immediacy practices***

Verbal immediacy as component of communicative acts create a sense of closeness with others through verbal expression. Verbal communication involves the use of language, which is made up of symbols. Schmitz (2012) defines a symbol as 'something that stands in for or represents something else' (p. 124). Verbal immediacy is defined by Mehrabian (1966) as "the degree of directness and intensity of interaction between communicator and referent in a communicator's linguistic message" (cited in Wolfe & Waters, 2013).

In an educational context, verbal immediacy is defined as spoken words and sounds, which increases closeness and comfortable feelings, which in turn increases students' learning (Manarte et al., 2014). This notion of the importance of verbal expression subsequently led Gorham (1988) to establish the verbal immediacy scale, asking students to identify those practices that characterised the tutors whom they found most effective in their schools (Zhang & Oetzel, 2006). Gorham's (1988) measurement of verbal immediacy includes the use of praise, humour and personal pronouns; addressing others by name; demonstrating a willingness to converse with others; asking questions; the use of personal examples; the use of the present tense; and the use of inclusive language (e.g. we or our). Figure 6, below, shows the main verbal immediacy behaviours identified by Gorham (1988).

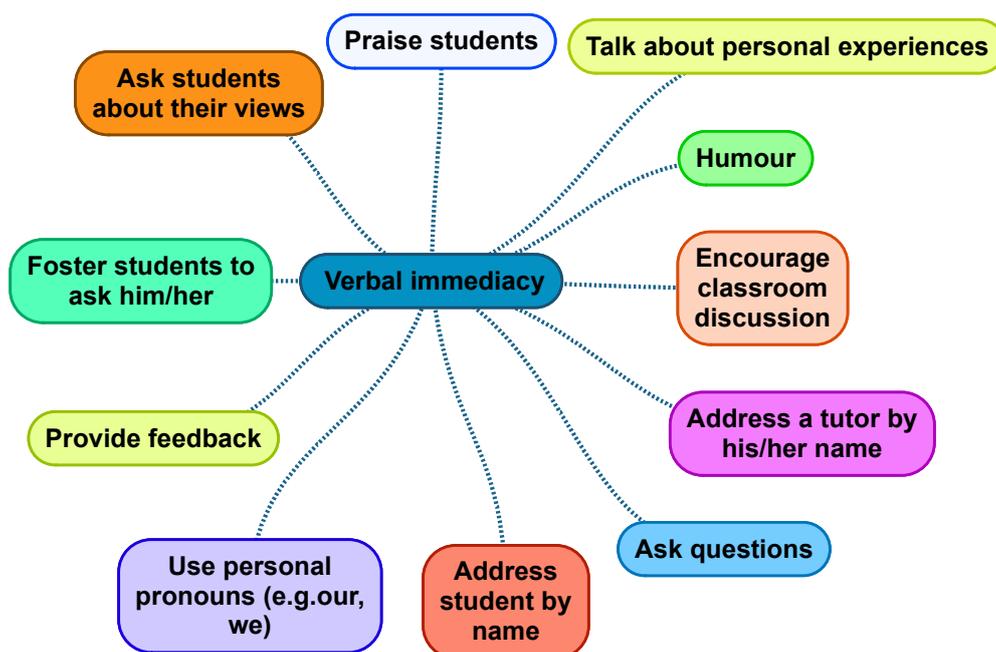


Figure 6. Tutor's verbal immediacy practices, as identified by Gorham (1988).

The previous figure shows the verbal immediacy practices that can be used by tutors in the classroom to engage student learning. The main function of verbal immediacy in Gorham's

work is to enhance students' cognitive learning by fostering students' motivation and encouraging their interaction between students and their tutors. Some studies have indicated to specific verbal immediacy as an effective practice in the classroom such as praise, humour, encourage students to talk and questioning (Chase, 2009; Scale, 2016). Chase (2009) argues that questioning, encouraging students' talk and praise can help students to link new information to prior knowledge because they engage students' communication. However, these practices may be more appropriate in classrooms where tutors use both tutor and student-centred approaches in their teaching as tutor-centred or lecturing style may not allow tutors to use these practices in classrooms.

### **3.3.3. The advantages of using immediacy practices in teaching**

This section describes the advantages of using immediacy with students inside classrooms. The literature revealed that the tutors' immediacy has important effect on students' affective learning, cognitive learning, motivation and participation (Asiri, 2013; Estep and Roberts; 2015; Rocca, 2008).

Previous research has indicated that tutors' immediacy practices increase the level of affective learning and, in the same way, the level of cognitive learning. Affective learning is the impact of students' thoughts and feelings on their learning. McCroskey, Morreals and Brooks (1994) describe affective learning as 'the positive value students attach to instructor communication in the classroom and consists of affect toward the course instructor, affect toward the course content, and affect toward the recommended course behaviours' (p. 59). Conversely, cognitive learning refers to higher mental processes, such as remembering, perceiving and paying attention (Al Ghamdi, 2017). Previous research supports the relationship between tutor immediacy practices and both affective and cognitive learning (McCroskey, Richmond & Bennett, 2006; Asiri, 2013; Mullane, 2014).

Mullane (2014) argues that immediacy can enhance cognitive learning by attracting students' attention and rendering the course content more effective. Her research findings show that tutors' verbal and nonverbal immediacy was significantly related to undergraduates' affective and cognitive learning. Similarly, Asiri (2013) reports that immediacy practices exert an influence on students' affective learning. So far, Asiri's (2013) study is the only previous research conducted in a F2F classroom in Saudi Arabia, whereby the impact of immediacy on Saudi male students' cognitive learning was examined. The results differ from Mullane's in that only verbal immediacy had a significant impact on Saudi students' cognitive learning. This could be due to differences in the cultural background and communication behaviours between the two contexts, namely Saudi Arabia (Asiri, 2013) and the US (Mullane, 2014). Asiri (2013) also suggests that nonverbal communication behaviours vary based on the culture of the participants. Therefore, any relationship observed in studies conducted in the US might not exist when other cultural participants are considered. Clearly, there are cultural differences between Saudi and US cultures and so it is to be expected that the study's results are inconsistent with those of other studies.

Motivation, as measured by students' participation in class and communication with tutors, has also been reported as a potential indicator of immediacy in F2F classes. In fact, Estep and Roberts (2015) report that tutors' immediacy practices are the best predictors of student motivation. Pogue and Ahyun (2006) also venture that immediacy has a significant relationship with student motivation; they suggest that immediacy can create an effective learning environment, which in turn enhances student motivation.

Moreover, immediacy has been found to relate to increased willingness amongst students to study and participate in discussions with their tutors and peers. Roberts and Friedman (2013) examined the relationship between tutor immediacy and student participation across disciplines, and the results of their study show that immediacy practices can influence

students' participation in the classroom. Student participation is a process of active engagement and can be grouped into five categories: preparation, contribution to conversation, group skills, communication skills and attendance (Rocca, 2008). Hrastinski (2008) also points that student participation involves activities that engage students in talking, feeling and thinking, as a means of interacting with each other and sharing their thoughts and ideas. Rocca (2008) reports a positive relationship between student participation and perceived tutor immediacy. Rocca (2008) suggests that the tutor's role can influence student participation in the classroom. For example, students are less likely to participate if their tutors do not pay attention to them. As mentioned earlier, Asiri (2013) investigated the effect of tutor immediacy on students' classroom participation in a Saudi university. The findings show that immediacy allows students to get closer to their tutors and to gain confidence in entering into and participating in classroom discussion. However, Asiri (2013) merely describes the effect of verbal and nonverbal immediacy, without specifying which immediacy practices had a significant effect on student participation. Conversely, Roberts and Friedman (2013) explain that the most effective practices for encouraging student participation consist of asking students questions, using body language, citing personal examples, using humour and making eye contact. It is these immediacy practices that potentially create a comfortable environment, thereby giving students the chance to ask questions and tutors a chance to show warmth and support successful learning experiences.

Furthermore, Fallah's (2014) study results showed that immediacy practices have a significant effect on overcoming students' shyness in ESL classes. The shyness can hinder the students to participate and interact with their tutors and to feel disconnected with their environment. The author suggests that the tutor immediacy practices can help students in those classes to make them feel encouraged and accepted. However, the positive effect of tutor immediacy practices can be influenced by the culture and gender of students or tutors.

The next section will present the major challenges that effect on implementing immediacy in classrooms.

### **3.3.4. Challenges to implementing immediacy practices in teaching**

The literature revealed that perceived immediacy might be influenced by students' responses according to their gender and culture. Kelly (2012) suggests that perceived tutor immediacy varies across contexts and individuals, because immediacy is a two-part process: the sender's (or tutor's) display of immediacy behaviours and the receivers' or students' response to their perceptions of these behaviours. The next sections present the main barriers that can affect perceptions of tutors' immediacy practices.

#### ***3.3.4.1. Students' culture***

A number of studies have investigated the effect of students' culture on their perceptions of tutors' immediacy practices. Immediacy as part of tutors' communication actions in a classroom will vary based on the students' culture and background. According to Joy and Kolb (2009), the culture has influences on individuals' perceptions and interpretations of communication meaning.

Based on Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions framework (Chapter2), communication actions, particularly nonverbal communication styles, vary depending upon the type of culture. For example, members of individualistic cultures tend to use less physical contact, while in collectivist cultures, individuals use more physical contact, eye contact, and body movements more (Aydin et al., 2013). Hall (1990) also developed a framework that concerned nonverbal communication in immediate or contact cultures compared with non-immediate or non-contact cultures. In immediate cultures, such as those of Middle Eastern countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia), individuals use touch frequently, stand close and use gestures, whereas in non-immediate cultures, such as those of Japan and China, individuals use touch

infrequently, stand further apart and are more emotionally reserved. Moreover, Western cultures have moderate immediate communication actions (Aydin et al., 2013).

Although a number of studies have examined tutors' immediacy in the classroom, using recognised measures in the US context, the findings suggest similarities as well as differences in students' perceptions of tutors' immediacy across cultures, as well as in terms of nonverbal and verbal immediacy practices that are used by tutors. Zhang & Oetzel (2006) investigated the difference between classrooms in China and the US, with reference to perceptions of communication actions as immediacy. Some tutors' immediacy practices were considered inappropriate in the Chinese classroom, such as small group discussion, the use of self-disclosure and addressing students by their first names.

Similarly, Johnson and Miller (2002) indicate that some tutors' verbal and nonverbal immediacy practices are avoided in the classroom in the Kenyan context, such as addressing students by name and making physical contact with students in class. They indicate a certain cultural status assigned to students and tutors. Therefore, tutors may be sensitive to this distinction and avoid such practices to maintain an appropriately distanced relationship, as befits their difference in status.

Furthermore, students' cognitive learning, motivation and learning experiences may be influenced by the culturally based variation in their perceptions of immediacy practices in the classroom. Sanders and Wiseman (1990) investigated the effect of immediacy on students' affective and cognitive learning. The students were from different ethnic backgrounds (White, Asian, Hispanic and Black). The findings of study observed various similarities and differences between the effect of immediacy on previous variables among the participants. However, in all cases, immediacy was found to have a positive association with students' learning in F2F classrooms.

Moreover, the differences of perceiving tutors' immediacy also relates to power distance orientation in Hofstede's framework. As discussed in Chapter 2, power distance is the extent to which individuals accept the unequal relationships and distribution of power in society (Hofstede, 2001). Pribyl, Sakamoto & Keaten (2004) posited that the effects of tutor nonverbal immediacy on learning would be less significant for Japanese students. They posited several potential explanations for this finding including a large power distance culture in Japan and the limited acceptability of nonverbal immediacy practices in Japanese classrooms.

Overall, in high power distance cultures such as Saudi Arabia, a tutor is an authoritarian in the education setting. As a result, and in contrast to western cultures, where the students can question and challenge tutors, in Saudi, the students only receive the decisions and information without making them or joining to make them and they take on a passive role in the classroom (Asiri, 2013). Thus, student-tutor interactions during class are infrequent which influence on the quality of learning (Zhang, 2006). Also, Aydin et al. (2013) point out that some immediacy practices may be inappropriate to use in the high power distance cultures, such as call the tutors by their first names or using personal examples or information. However, in such culture (e.g. Saudi Arabia), communication styles tend not to be direct, which it is important that tutors focus on using nonverbal practices through their communication such as eye contact and gestures.

In summary, the immediacy practices of tutors in F2F classrooms have been found to be different based on students' culture. Tutors consequently must be aware that immediacy are appropriate with western classrooms may be perceived as inappropriate in Eastern classrooms. Perceptions of students may also influence by the gender of students or tutors which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

#### ***3.3.4.2. Students' gender***

It is generally assumed that gender is a factor affecting teacher-student communication in the classroom. Past research on immediacy has revealed a difference between the perceptions of male and female students in terms of immediacy practices. It is therefore important to be aware of any differences in the communication styles of male and female students, in order to apply appropriate immediacy practices in the classroom.

Caspi, Chajut & Saporta's(2008) study revealed that male students are more likely than their female counterparts to use functional communication. For example, they noted that males were eight times more likely than females to ask their tutors questions about course content. Because of this, their tutors responded by giving them feedback and asking them follow-up questions in return. On the same note, Chase (2009) argues that male students speak for longer periods and make more explanatory statements than their female peers. Meanwhile, Abosede (2017) reveals that male students participated more frequently than their female peers in class discussions. Likewise, Wood (2001) observed that male students make more frequent decisions than female students about their study topics, interrupt more frequently and initiate more conversations to gain power and control in the classroom. Male students were also found to contribute more to classroom interaction. As a result, it is claimed that tutors interact more with male than with female students, due to the greater responsiveness of the former. Male students have in fact been found to be more likely to volunteer answers to questions, even if they are unsure of the right answer (Rashidi & Naderi, 2012). Conversely, Chavez (2000) reports that female students are less likely to use humour than their male counterparts and they are also more concerned with pleasing their tutor or meeting expectations.

Furthermore, female students perceived their tutors used encouragement and praise more than male students. According to Chase (2009), the female students may need more support and reassuring feedback from their tutors because sometimes the female students lack confidence of their academic performance. As a result, the praise, encouragement and positive feedback can help them to build self-esteem. Female students also typically prefer tutors who use nonverbal immediacy because such tutors seem approachable and caring (Wolfe, 2012). Wood (2001) suggests that women are better equipped to express themselves emotionally and as a result they generally use nonverbal communication behaviours such as eyes contact, gestures and body movements more than men.

Moreover, in a study investigating perceptions of individuals with humour, Grawford and Gressley (1991) found that women prefer anecdotes and stories, most men prefer hostile humour, joke telling and humour production. In the classroom, male students generally tell more jokes than female students do so more frequently (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez & Liu, 2011).

In terms of tutors' gender, there are several teaching methods that relate the gender of tutor which may effects on perceiving immediacy in the classroom. For example, female tutors are more likely to keep their questions simple, so that they can establish a connection with their students, and to follow up with more use of feedback in the classroom than is generally provided by their male counterparts (Abosedo, 2017). In addition, there is a strong tendency amongst female tutors to display empathy in the classroom by asking their students how they feel about their assignments and assessments (Caspi et al., 2008). Abosedo (2017) also indicates that females in general use more emotional, polite and supportive speech while male tutors use direct and oriented speech. The results of Rashidi and Naderi's (2012) study showed that male tutors tend to use display questions more extensively, which are questions that the tutor knows the answers and requires the students to display their knowledge for

confirmation or clarification, whereas female tutors ask more referential questions, which are questions that the tutor does not know the answers at the time of asking (e.g. what are your interests?), thus promoting more student-tutor interaction.

In Saudi context, as mentioned before, the literature on communication styles in classrooms is limited. Therefore, the only available studies in this field were conducted outside Saudi Arabia and examine the difference between international students in classes where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL classrooms). Nevertheless, the literature reveals that male Saudi students tend to ask questions and voice their thoughts (Kojima, 2012), while female Saudi students usually present themselves as quiet and work in groups (Alexander, Guta & Poole, 2014).

In conclusion, the perceptions of students about immediacy practices may influence by the gender of student or tutor. Therefore, tutors should use appropriate practices of immediacy to achieve the function of immediacy in enhancing students' learning in the classroom.

### **3.3.5. Tutors' immediacy practices in VLEs**

A review of the recent literature revealed new elements of e-immediacy in an online learning setting. E-immediacy is a concept coined by Al Ghamdi, Samarji and Watt (2016) to mean 'the adopted and employed teacher immediacy behaviours via virtual settings (online courses)' (p. 17). The prefix *e-* has been defined in several ways. Halinen (2011) interprets it as 'electronic, experiential, economical, ethereal, easy, executive, effective, eclectic, emerging and engaging' (p.13). However, Al Ghamdi et al (2016) consider *e-* simply to refer to 'electronic', which is understood from their definition of e-immediacy. Similarly, in this study, e-immediacy indicates tutors' immediacy practices displayed via VLE tools to enhance female students' learning.

Previous studies have revealed that tutors in online courses use similar immediacy practices to those adopted in the F2F classroom, such as humour, self-disclosure and asking questions, because they can replicate these practices in a text-based environment and video- or audio-conferences (Zapf, 2008; Farwell, 2011; Al Ghamdi, 2017). Meanwhile, other studies have identified further practices that have been developed to reduce physical distance in a VLE and to enhance students' interaction: for example, responsiveness, clarification of the online course objectives and the incorporation of rich media (Baker, 2004; Fahara & Castro, 2015; O'Sullivan, Hunt and Lippert, 2004; Spiker, 2014; Walkem, 2014). This section consequently presents the most commonly immediacy practices in VLEs, in a review of the education literature.

#### ***3.3.5.1. Timely response***

Prompt responses from tutors to students are clearly identified as an aspect of tutor immediacy practices (Walkem, 2014). It is indicated that a tutor is consistently present and available, thus creating a motivation environment and increasing a student-tutor communication (Al Ghamdi et al, 2016). Spiker (2014) describes responsiveness as tutors responding, reacting or replying quickly or supportively to students' questions and inquiries in a VLE. In terms of timely response, this is largely because students may feel secure in the knowledge that a tutor is on hand to provide support and answers when required (Walkem, 2014). Conversely, students' desire for easy access to tutors and prompt responses to their queries can lead to tension, because tutors usually have other responsibilities and may not always be able to respond as promptly as students hope. One possible compromise is for tutors to provide their students with instructions at the beginning of term, showing the expected response times for emails and other queries (Spiker, 2014). A realistic response time will help students to develop clear expectations. It is also important for students to be notified when this response time could be extended for any reason (Walkem, 2014). Similarly, they

can be informed of their tutor's office hours, whether in a virtual environment or F2F context (Baker, 2004). Additionally, assigning daily or weekly forum posts in response to course material is an effective method of encouraging student learning, because it will enhance social presence, with tutors remaining available and accessible in online courses (Poll, Widen & Weller, 2014). According to Haughton and Romero (2009), a weekly scheduled open chat with a tutor is an effective strategy for determining a student's level of engagement, as well as any feeling of isolation the student might feel.

### ***3.3.5.2. Asking questions***

Questions are one of the most effective immediacy practices used in F2F environments and VLEs to reduce the psychological distance between tutors and students and to foster student interaction (Ertmer, Sadaf & Ertmer, 2011). Online courses therefore need to include open-ended questions through activities or tasks that encourage critical and creative thinking amongst students (Farah & Castro, 2015). There are several types of questions that can enhance students' online learning, such as questions requesting more clarification, open-ended questions, cause-and-effect questions and summary questions (Mokoena, 2013). There are also Bloom's questions, which are classified into two types: low- and high-level thinking. These can be used to stimulate cognitive learning and understanding (Ertmer et al, 2011).

In general, researchers have found a positive relationship between tutors who ask questions and students' responses and answers in F2F classrooms (Chase, 2009). Ertmer et al's (2011) findings show that tutors' questions on discussion boards can foster students' responses and motivate higher levels of thinking. They suggest that tutors' higher-level thinking questions are able to generate more responses at the corresponding level and vice versa. Kucuk (2009) also suggests that asking questions is an immediacy practice that supports interactions between tutors and students. His study (2009) findings reveal that asking students questions

as an interactive immediacy indicator that encourages students' participation level in the text-based environment.

Generally, in F2F classes, tutors use this form of immediacy as part of their teaching process in order to invite students to think and participate, even during lectures. In the VLE, asking questions can foster students' responses and interaction, which enhances social presence (Faraha & Castro, 2015). Therefore, tutors' questions are an important aspect of immediacy that is related to students' communication and participation within VLEs.

#### ***3.3.5.3. Clarifying course goals and information***

In a VLE, comprehensive instructions, objectives, assignments and requirements must be provided to and clarified for students. These items should be posted on discussion boards and announcements or sent by email prior to student enrolment. Poll et al. (2014) suggest that a tutor who sends additional emails and announcements to students before the beginning of a course can help them prepare for it and motivate their learning. Sheridan and Kelly (2010) found that practices performed within a VLE to clarify course directions and instructions provide evidence of the tutor's online presence. As noted by Walkem (2014), ambiguous requirements cannot be easily understood by students on an online course, as they lack an immediate question-and-answer exchange.

#### ***3.3.5.4. Feedback***

Feedback is one of the main practices characterising immediacy in a VLE, whereby a strong relationship is revealed between tutors' feedback and students' perceptions of high immediacy from their tutors in F2F classes (Chase, 2009). Feedback is a tutor's response to students' work and actions (Gallien & Oomen, 2008); it becomes the bridge between what the student knows and what the student needs to know, rendering it essential for knowledge

building (Conrad & Dabbagh, 2015). Studies have shown that feedback can greatly help students to achieve their learning outcomes and that it encourages self-reflection, with students subsequently assessing their own learning (Bonnell, 2008; Baleni, 2015). According to Hattie and Timperely (2007), there are four levels of feedback provided in a classroom: feedback about the task, feedback about processing the task, feedback about self-regulation, and personal feedback about the individual, such as praise.

In F2F classes, tutors can access their students and provide feedback according to the students' questions and nonverbal communication behaviours (Conrad & Dabbagh, 2015). In contrast, providing feedback in online courses depends upon the tutor's knowledge of a delivery method (e.g. emails and discussion boards) and its purpose (Conrad & Dabbagh, 2015). Such *e-feedback* refers to the information exchange between tutors and students based on activities or assignments in a VLE (Change, 2011). E-feedback helps students to see how well they are progressing on a course and whether they need to alter their performance to achieve more successful learning (Bonnell, Ludwig & Smith, 2008). According to Conrad and Dabbagh (2015), there are several types of e-feedback that can be used by tutors within a VLE, such as corrective, affective, motivational, personalised and peer feedback. These types of e-feedback are consistent with Hattie and Timperely (2007) which corrective feedback focuses on the students progressing and performance through the course, motivational feedback consists of comments on task and inspires the student to stay motivated and affective feedback acknowledges student participation and effort support.

In a VLE, tutor feedback can also take on a variety of forms and be presented as video, audio material or written comments. However, written feedback can frequently be misunderstood or interpreted differently from how the tutor intended. Folley (2013) suggests that e-feedback may need to be more explicit and detailed to avoid misinterpretation, because the absence of nonverbal communication behaviours in an online environment may impact how feedback is

interpreted. Thus, tutors should take greater care over the clarity of their feedback to minimise misunderstanding.

In addition, lack of feedback on online courses can contribute to potential problems, such as students' attrition, failure and dissatisfaction (Conrad & Dabbagh, 2015). According to Faraha and Castro (2015) and Mustafa (2012), feedback can help build the knowledge of students because it is a dialogic (language-mediated) interaction that encourages students' learning and self-regulation. Consequently, providing feedback to students in a VLE just as in F2F classrooms would enhance students' engagement and learning. In short, feedback is an element of immediacy that can foster social presence and build a sense of community by enhancing student interaction and increasing the sense of a tutor's presence.

#### ***3.3.5.5. Responding to individual learning concerns: 'care'***

Caring involves behaviours and actions relating to an individual's needs and could be described as, for example, compassion, sensitivity or honesty (King & Chan, 2011). Owens and Ennis (2005) explain that care for other individuals is aimed at helping them care for themselves. To illustrate this, in an educational setting, the more students perceive their tutors as caring about them, the more they will care about their learning and pay attention in class. Tutors' caring behaviours encompass listening, responding to students' needs, knowing about students' experiences and backgrounds, building students' portfolios to show improvement and creating a warm classroom environment by encouraging student-tutor interaction (King & Chan, 2011). A number of studies have found that tutors' caring behaviours and emotional support promote both a sense of community and academic success amongst students (Miller, 2008; Garza, 2009; King & Chan, 2011; Mariskind, 2014).

Meanwhile, in a VLE, students who miss F2F classes or experience difficulties with their online courses can be encouraged to complete their courses through tutors' caring behaviours

(Haughton & Romero, 2009). Tutors should acknowledge students' responsibilities and maintain an awareness of the multiple aspects that their lives can have (Walkom, 2014). In fact, students usually develop a strong interpersonal relationship with tutors who take their life situations into account (Melrose & Bergeron, 2006). Consequently, previous research indicates that tutors' care and understanding of their students' problems in a VLE comprise key immediacy practices that foster students to complete their online courses (Spiker, 2014; Walkem, 2014).

#### ***3.3.5.6. Self-disclosure***

Self-disclosure is a fundamental element of immediacy practices for building interpersonal relationships. Generally, Studies have revealed that disclosing personal information to others can foster intimacy and perceived immediacy (Song, Kim & Luo, 2016). Tutor self-disclosure is defined as the sharing of personal information or experiences with students to enhance their learning and engage them (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008). Self-disclosure includes information about tutor's self, aspects of professional practice, personal view and history (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008).

According to Hosek and Thompson (2009), tutors who reveal some personal knowledge and background information to their students can be more effective in clarifying and illustrating the content of a lecture. According to Mazer, Murphy and Simonds (2007), this can also be important for facilitating students' online learning experience by increasing their feeling of comfortable, while overcoming the psychological distance between tutors and students. However, in terms of immediacy practices, relatively little research has been conducted on the role of tutor self-disclosure in VLEs.

### **3.3.5.7. Humour**

Humour is a communication behaviour that relates to effective teaching (Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszyk & Smith, 2006). It also plays an important role in nurturing an open, warm and friendly climate in the classroom, with students having more positive perceptions of what they learn from tutors who adopt a humorous approach (James, 2004). Additionally, some studies have shown that humour used in teaching can relieve students' stress, engage their attention and create an effective learning environment (Wanzer et al., 2006; Wanzer, Frymier & Irwin, 2010). Students have been noted to mention that humour makes their tutors more likeable, facilitates their understanding of course material, lowers tension, boosts their morale and increases their attentiveness (White, 2001). In a VLE, James (2004) indicates that the use of humour can be an effective online teaching method for engaging students' learning. In fact, previous research has revealed a strong relationship between tutors' humour and the enhancement of the learning process (Wanzer et al, 2010). However, according to Wanzer et al (2010), only appropriate humour can affect students' learning, such as telling amusing stories and jokes or making humorous comments.

Tutors' humour in a VLE can take various forms, such as written comments, the use of familiar phrases in email responses or the use of pictures and video clips (James, 2004). A number of studies has found that tutors' humour behaviours in online courses have a significant impact on students' motivation, satisfaction, and sense of presence and learning (Khoo, 2010; Sung & Mayer, 2012; Scarborough, 2014).

However, in some cultures, humour is not considered to be appropriate as a teaching method or behaviour, because the educational setting in those cultures is dominated by formal conversation between tutors and students, as in the case of the Saudi educational context. In such context, the dialogue and discussion between tutors and students is very formal, which

influences the communication and interaction between them (Asiri, 2013; Alamri, 2017). Scarborough (2014) suggests that a tutor should pay attention to students' background, values and attitudes, in order to avoid offending their cultural sensitivities.

#### ***3.3.5.8. Incorporating video- and audio-conferences***

The incorporation of synchronous tools can be an important pedagogical method of enhancing student interaction and learning. The use of rich media tools, such as audio- and video-conferences can increase perceived immediacy in virtual learning. Walkem (2014) reports that the use of communication tools (video- and audio-conferences) is an effective way of decreasing the perceived distance between students and their tutors. She suggests such tools may provide an opportunity for tutors to foster a sense of social presence. However, tutors may find that synchronous communication tools are difficult for some students to use, because the timing of Web conferences is not always convenient. While, tutors can resolve this problem by scheduling times that are suitable for their students' real-life situations and responsibilities (Kim & Bonk, 2010).

However, a number of studies have suggested that the use of video- and audio-conferencing allows tutors to employ more immediacy practices, particularly nonverbal immediacy, such as gesturing, posture and smiling (Kim & Bonk, 2010; Murphrey, Arnold, Foster & Degenhart, 2012).

#### ***3.3.5.9. Emoticons***

Emoticons are used in virtual environments and particularly in text-based communication environments, as a substitute for the nonverbal communication behaviours used in real life. Given the nature of virtual environments, the written messages that are sent may not be appropriately interpreted, and so it may be necessary to add more explanation or clarification.

Emoticons are graphic representations of facial expressions that are often included in electronic messages (Lo, 2008). They can be expressed as various shapes, punctuation marks or letters to indicate happiness or sadness: for example, ☺, ☹ or :/. Some researchers also include other types of emoticon, consisting of different fonts ('Great idea'), punctuation ('Great idea!!!'), capitalisation ('GREAT IDEA') or vocalisation ('Greaaaaat idea'), which help express emotions such as appreciate, surprise and anger (Zapf, 2008; Farwell, 2011; Al Ghamdi, 2017). Emoticons can therefore be used to clarify one's feelings and express emotional information to intensify the verbal components of the message (Derks, Bos & Grumbkow, 2008). In Lo's (2008) study, the findings show that emoticons express nonverbal communication behaviours and allow message receivers to understand the level and direction of the message sender's emotions and attitudes.

Moreover, a number of studies on e-immediacy in online learning environments have shown that emoticons have a similar effect to nonverbal communication behaviours on students' learning, motivation and participation (Farwell, 2011; Al Ghamdi 2017). However, Dixon, Greenwell, Stacy, Weister and Lauer's (2017) study indicates that e-tutors do not necessarily use any type of emoticon on a frequent basis, because they may lack time or consider these elements to be trivial, informal or unprofessional. Consequently, in this study, the use of emoticons was not discussed in questionnaires or interviews, because the relationship between tutors and students in the Saudi educational context is very formal, as discussed before. In particular, this study focuses on female students and their tutors, who may be either male or female; the culture to which can be difficult or sensitive when female students deal with male tutors.

Most e-immediacy forms have been found in the literature can be practised in either F2F classrooms or VLEs to reduce the sense psychological distance between tutors and students and facilitate the students' learning. These e-immediacy practices have also a significant

effect on students' online learning, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

### **3.3.6. The importance of tutors' immediacy practices in VLEs**

The existing research indicates that tutors' immediacy practices in VLEs have an important impact on students' learning progress. A number of studies have examined the impact of immediacy on students in different contexts and based on different variables, such as student interaction and participation. As a result, the importance of e-immediacy practices can be classified into the following factors: promoting student interaction, building a sense of community, fostering student participation and increasing students' satisfaction.

#### ***3.3.6.1. Promoting student interaction.***

One of the essential elements of online learning is student interaction, which can influence students' learning through the exchange of information and thoughts. Interaction is considered to fall within the broader term *communication*, which encompasses 'reciprocal events' between at least two actors and issues of language, culture and immediacy (Bernard et al., 2009). Earlier studies have reported on the influence of interaction on students' satisfaction, achievement, retention and learning outcomes (Zacharis, 2009; Nandi et al., 2012). There are in fact three ways in which students interact in VLEs, as proposed by Moore (1989): (1) student–student interaction, (2) student–tutor interaction and (3) student–content interaction (cited in Nandi et al., 2012). Student–student interaction refers to communication between students in a VLE using asynchronous or synchronous learning tools. This type of interaction can promote students' learning outcomes, as they learn from each other and exchange ideas and knowledge (Bernard et al., 2009). Student–student interaction can be accomplished in small working groups, applying a problem-based learning method (Zacharis,

2009). In contrast, student–tutor interaction refers to communication and dialogue between students and tutors, whether within or outside the classroom (Bernard et al., 2009).

In a VLE, tutors can enhance interaction between themselves and their students by asking and answering questions, displaying responsiveness, providing instant feedback and being regularly present in discussions (Nandi et al., 2012). However, student–content interaction refers to students interacting with the content and resources by searching for relevant information themselves, which can help to construct personal knowledge. According to Zacharis (2009), student–content interaction is aimed at encouraging self-study amongst students by providing activities such as multiple-choice questions, giving automatic feedback, and replaying video and audio-recordings.

It is vital to prompt student interaction on online courses, and different studies have investigated this variable, examining several factors that may help enhance students’ online interaction. One of these factors consists of tutors’ immediacy practices. Conaway et al (2005) argue that immediacy practices are recognised as a strong contributor to successful interaction, thus building a sense of community in virtual learning. Tutors’ immediacy practices can enhance student–tutor interaction and, as a result, help students to develop a greater sense of closeness and overcome any feelings of isolation (Zacharis, 2009). Furthermore, an increase in student–tutor interaction can develop students’ cognitive learning through a mutual exchange of knowledge and the construction of new meaning.

### ***3.3.6.2. Building a sense of community.***

A sense of community in a learning environment refers to the student’s feeling of connectedness and belonging to other students. McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined the sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met

through their commitment to be together” (Cited in Tayebinik & Puteh, 2012). In the F2F classes students and tutors can easily communicate with each other because they are in similar place, while in a VLE they may not be located in the same location which can influence their feelings of connectedness. That is why some researchers believe that students in the VLEs need a high sense of community in order to enhance their learning (Tayebinik & Puteh, 2012). Previous studies have revealed that the sense of community is the main predictor of student satisfaction and motivation in the VLE (Gunter, 2007; Byrd, 2016). Ni and Aust (2008) suggest that a sense of community is also a significant predictor of student satisfaction and perceived learning. Ni and Aust’s (2008) findings also show that tutors immediacy has impact on increasing the sense of online community by measure the students’ interaction as a potential indicator of a high level of tutor immediacy. According to Byrd (2016), when students communicate with each other and with their tutors in VLEs and feel a sense of belonging and connectedness, they tend to become more willing to share and support each other and are likely to feel satisfied with their learning experience, as well as responsible to that learning community.

### ***3.3.6.3. Fostering student participation.***

The success of an online learning environment will depend upon student participation, which is an important factor impacting on the quality of learning and teaching (Nandi et al., 2012). Al Ghamdi’s (2017) study found a significant association between immediacy practices and increased student participation using asynchronous communication tools, such as discussion boards. According to Kucuk (2009), the students’ participation in online courses includes posts, comments and asking or answering questions.

Meanwhile, Nandi et al (2012) emphasise that the most important role of the tutor in improving the quality of online learning experiences is to increase students’ online

participation. They also assert that skills in applying the cognitive can be improved through frequent participation in discussion boards.

#### ***3.3.6.4. Increasing student satisfaction.***

Student satisfaction is an important indicator of the quality of an online learning experience (Kuo, Walker, Belland & Schroder, 2013). Student satisfaction refers to students' perceptions of their learning experiences and the value of a course (Painter, 2015). According to Kuo et al. (2013), student satisfaction has a strong relationship with several variables in online learning, such as retention, persistence and student success. A high level of satisfaction will lead to students being more motivated, with a lower attrition rate and greater persistence on online courses. Existing research has found a significant positive relationship between immediacy practices and a high level of student satisfaction with their courses (Painter, 2015; Al Ghamdi, 2017). It is therefore argued that immediacy practices influence student interaction and dialogue with their tutors and peers, which is one of the main contributors to student satisfaction (Kuo et al., 2013). In addition, the function of immediacy practices is to reduce the sense of distance, which is likely to increase student satisfaction.

Overall, these factors have been discussed by studies in this section suggest that immediacy practices have similar benefits in a VLE. Although, immediacy practices are only part of communication actions, they provide opportunities to tutors to facilitate students' online learning and increase the level of the students' interaction, participation, satisfaction and connectedness.

### **3.4. Understanding the Term Perception**

The literature shows that students have different perceptions of their tutors' immediacy practices in VLEs (Zapf, 2008; Farwell, 2011; Al Ghamdi, 2017). A few studies have also revealed that tutors have their own perceptions of immediacy practices in VLEs (Spiker,

2014; Fahara & Castro, 2015). For the purpose of this study, the term *perception* is defined in a way consistent with relevant studies on the perceptions of tutors and female students regarding e-immediacy practices in VLEs.

Perceptions consist of the way in which we look at the world around us. Various definitions of perception have emerged from the literature, defined from physical and physiological perspectives. In this present study, the definition of perception is taken from Bowditch and Buono (1990), who define it as the way in which individuals interpret messages from their senses to give meaning to their environment.

Bowditch and Buono (1990) argue that the same situations and messages may be interpreted differently from one individual to another, because internal and external factors influence the ways in which people view the world. They assert that perceptions are also derived from past personal experiences, as well as social and cultural factors. This point of view is strongly relevant in the context of this study due to the nature of Saudi culture, as outlined in Chapter 2. It is anticipated that the findings of the present study will present immediacy practices that relate to and reflect Saudi culture. According to Thompson (1992), the perception of immediacy practices is influenced by the students' culture. She argues that culture affects how individuals perceive incoming stimuli, both by influencing attention processes and by teaching these individuals the meaning attached to the stimuli.

In contrast, a mental state in response to a stimulus, which involves emotions and a disposition towards acting in a positive or negative way, is called an *attitude* (McDonald, 2012). Attitudes have three components: cognitive, affective and behavioural. To differentiate between perceptions and attitudes, McDonald (2012) explains that while each has a cognitive and behavioural component and frames an individual understanding of a phenomenon, attitudes further involve negative and positive responses to a situation.

Consequently, perceptions lead to attitudes, which affect people's behaviour and their responses to situations. In this study, therefore, the participants' perceptions of immediacy practices in a VLE may have been influenced by physical stimuli as well as their cultural background.

#### **3.4.1. Studies of tutors' perceptions of immediacy practices in VLEs**

A few studies have investigated how tutors use and display immediacy practices in an online learning environment from only the tutors' views. This is in spite of the fact that the emphasis in the literature is on students' perceptions of tutors' immediacy practices in asynchronous and synchronous learning settings.

Spiker (2014) explored tutors' perceptions about practices in contributing to and enhancing immediacy in online environments through research conducted at a US university. The participants comprised 17 tutors from a variety of disciplines, varying in the extent of their teaching experience. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to determine immediacy practices and to discover how these immediacy actions corresponded to those performed in F2F classes. The findings from the tutors' interviews revealed that tutors in online courses used various practices to reduce the sense of psychological and physical distance between themselves and their students as a means of creating a closer learning relationship. These practices included clarification achieved by responding to students' questions and providing examples. Other practices included replying promptly, the use of humour, the use of students' first names, acknowledgment of students, monitoring the progress of the course, accessibility, ease of use, self-disclosure, encouraging students and the use of casual language. Spiker (2014) ventures that the possible reason for integrating these practices to enhance immediacy in an online learning environment may be the asynchronous nature of most online courses. Therefore, the tutor has a greater responsibility to such practices to enhance immediacy.

In support of this, Fahara and Castro (2015) examined tutors' perceptions about practices and strategies that promote immediacy via Blackboard in a Mexican higher education institution. The authors used semi-structured interviews and observations with 13 tutors. The research findings showed three main themes emerging from the data: (1) instructional design; (2) forms of communication, such as timely responses and encouragement of communication and interaction; and (3) teaching strategies to promote immediacy in online learning settings, such as giving feedback and encouraging student conversations.

### **3.4.2. Studies of Female students' perceptions of tutors' immediacy practices in VLEs**

The review of the literature on education revealed that no study has hitherto examined the views of female students regarding immediacy practices in online learning environments. In general, studies have investigated the impact of immediacy actions on male and female students and explained the effect of gender on perceptions. The following studies have examined both male and female students' experiences of tutors' immediacy practices in online courses. In presenting these studies, only the findings for female students' perceptions are reported.

For example, Zapf (2008) attempted to find the relationship between perceived tutors' immediacy practices and academic engagement in online courses. The study took place in the US, using a sample comprising 195 undergraduate students enrolled in at least one online course. Of these, 83 per cent were female. An instrument of verbal and nonverbal immediacy in F2F classes was used to measure students' perceptions of tutor immediacy in online courses. These measures were set by Gorham (1988) and Richmond, McCroskey and Johnson (2003). Zapf (2008) found that female students demonstrated a greater correlation between tutor immediacy and academic engagement compared to their male peers. He therefore suggests that tutors who are aware of students' characteristics in online courses may be

especially well-placed to implement immediacy practices, whether with male or female students and as a means of enhancing student engagement.

In a study conducted in the US by Murphrey et al. (2012), a sample consisting of 63 undergraduate and graduate students was selected for participation, of which 70 per cent of the respondents were female students taking online courses in agriculture. They participated in an online survey to determine the role of verbal immediacy practices in determining student satisfaction with video- and audio-conferencing. The above-mentioned students perceived a higher level of immediacy from their tutors than was reported for their male peers. In addition, they were more likely than their male counterparts to communicate with their tutors. Murphrey et al. (2012) argue that video- and audio-conferences meet students' needs and enhance their learning and satisfaction.

Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, Al Ghamdi et al. (2016) investigated the relationship between perceived immediacy practices, online participation and satisfaction with communication using exclusively text-based communication tools, such as discussion boards and email. The participants in the above study were undergraduate students enrolled in blended courses. A survey was conducted, which included a scale of verbal and nonverbal practices to measure the perceptions of male and female students. The resulting findings revealed that the female students were more satisfied with their communication with tutors, which related to their perceptions of tutors' immediacy practices on the corresponding online courses.

A further study by Al Ghamdi (2017) examined the influence of immediacy on effective and cognitive learning in online courses. The surveyed sample comprised 296 female and 117 male respondents. The results derived from the quantitative data showed that the female students perceived more verbal than nonverbal immediacy from their tutors in a text-based environment. However, Al Ghamdi (2017) argues that the difference between male and

female students in this instance may have been due to the Saudi cultural effect. In terms of the students' gender, there were differences in their technology awareness, social norms and interaction.

Nevertheless, as can be seen from the above sections, most studies in this area have been conducted in the West. Moreover, previous research has consisted exclusively of qualitative methods of examining tutors' perceptions of immediacy in online learning, with no quantitative data being generated. Additionally, no study has examined the difference between tutors' and students' perceptions of e-immediacy practices and also explored the female students' perceptions toward e-immediacy practices in general and in Saudi context in particular.

### **3.5. The Theoretical Framework**

This section highlights the importance of understanding specific theories that underpin tutors' immediacy practices in VLEs. It provides justification for the investigation of tutors' immediacy practices and explains the importance of these practices to the study. A number of theories in VLEs are identified in the literature, but for the purpose of this study, the theories considered for discussion are sociocultural, social presence and transactional distance theories.

#### **3.5.1. Sociocultural theory**

Sociocultural theory is based on the social constructivist paradigm, which considers that human development occurs through interaction and communication between individuals (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Sociocultural theory is one of the most common learning theories to examine the role of an individual's interaction with the surrounding environment as a means of constructing their knowledge. In an educational context, students are influenced by the environment around them, which includes tutors and peers.

Further, Can (2009) asserts that an individual's learning cannot be understood in isolation from the social and cultural context. Vygotsky (1978) similarly argued that learning was external and occurred in a social context before it took place internally, which means that any function in an individual's cultural development appears on two 'planes': it first appears socially on an 'intermental' level and only later manifests within the individual, or 'intramentally' (Oguz, 2007). In other words, on the intermental plane, students learn skills and new knowledge with the help of tutors or other students, through tools such as language and computers. On an intramental plane, however, students internalise and understand skills and knowledge independently (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

The intermental process led Vygotsky to develop the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev & Miller, 2003). Vygotsky defined ZPD as '...the distance between that actual developmental 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' (Schunk, 2012, p. 243). This definition of ZPD describes the difference between what a student can achieve independently (actual development level) and what he or she can achieve with guidance from a tutor or more knowledgeable peer in group work (potential development level). According to this framework, students learn best when they interact with more skilled tutors or students, enabling them to learn and internalise new concepts and knowledge.

The main objective of Vygotsky's theory in education is to keep students in their own ZPD by giving them tasks and activities to enhance the work that they do as members of a group. After jointly completing a task or activity, a student should be able to complete the same task and activity individually on a repeated occasion. Thus, the process increases the student's ZPD for that particular task or activity (Shabani, Khatib & Ebadi, 2010).

The consequence of this practice is that the tutor's role as a learning mediator or facilitator expands. The use of ZPD is important in teaching, because it includes all aspects of creating an effective learning environment, such as the student, the tutor, the relationship between them and their shared experiences, as well as the resources used to facilitate learning (Schunk, 2012). If a tutor facilitates the ZPD, they can establish a successful learning environment and guide students towards learning new concepts by building relationships with them and delivering effective learning materials (Shabani et al., 2010).

In a VLE, tutors should apply methods of fostering students' online interaction and participation. Freeman (2010) argues that in order to enhance student interaction, tutors need to clarify the information provided on discussion boards, offer guidance and feedback and encourage students to enter into dialogue with one another. These strategies are types of immediacy practice that encourage students to interact and participate in VLEs. Therefore, immediacy practices can help encourage student interaction and participation, thus developing their higher mental processes and enabling them to learn the information being taught in the VLE with a greater degree of effectiveness.

### **3.5.2. Social presence theory**

As discussed above in sociocultural theory, social learning can be achieved through students' interaction with their environment. The theory of social presence is possibly the most common framework that has been applied to describe and understand how to support social learning and interaction in an online course (Lowenthal, 2009).

The concept of social presence was originally developed by Short, Williams and Christie (1976) and it refers to 'the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships' (cited in Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016, p. 5). The social presence is conceptualised as the degree to which an individual perceives another

one as being salient when communicating (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). The salience refers to “the relative significance of other party in the interaction and indicates the relative strength of the relation between the parties.” (Kehrwald, 2008, p.91). Short et al. (1976) introduced social presence as interpersonal communication that can influence relationships through the medium of communication.

In previous definitions of social presence, researchers emphasised the ability of the medium to convey social information and transmit verbal and nonverbal communication behaviours between individuals (Oztok & Brett, 2011). In general, increasing interpersonal communication is achieved by two concepts intimacy and immediacy. Intimacy is a function of eye contact, physical contact and the type of conversation topic between communicators. Tu and McIssac (2002) suggest that the social presence is related to the level of intimacy and immediacy through communication. Therefore, the communication media (e.g. videos and audio) differ in perceiving the degree of social presence and that these differences affect how people communicate with each other (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017).

In VLEs, Tu and McIssac (2002) redefined social presence as the degree of students’ perceptions of, feelings about and interactions with others; consequently, social presence theory analyses the sense of interpersonal relationship that occurs through interaction. Similarly, others researchers have redefined social presence in a VLE as a ‘student’s sense of being in and belonging in a course and the ability to interact with other students and an instructor’ (Picciano, 2002, p. 22). In this respect, social presence theory emphasises the degree of an individual’s perception of closeness, rather than the actual degree of physical closeness (Al Ghamdi, 2017).

Because of the challenges in retention and engagement in a VLE, researchers have been exploring methods to enhance social presence. For example, Aragon (2003) identifies three

types of such strategies: course design strategies that encourage social interaction (such as welcome messages, the incorporation of audio- or video-communication); tutors' strategies that involve contributions to discussions, prompt responses, the provision of feedback and the sharing of personal experiences and examples; and participants' strategies, referring to the need for students and tutors to assume responsibility for creating an effective learning environment. In addition, Tu and Corry (2002) describe three dimensions of an online course that help increase social presence, namely (1) the social context: such as initiating conversation and exchanging personal messages; (2) the online communication refers to the dialogue that occurs through a course between students and tutors; and (3) interactivity: includes the activities engaged in by those who use online courses.

According to Sung and Mayer (2012), these methods of helping to enhance the sense of presence in an online environment by focusing on communication and interactive activities play an important role in facilitating students' online learning. They also indicate that a lack of social presence could lead to students feeling isolated, with a negative attitude towards their tutors' effectiveness.

Moreover, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) developed a community of inquiry (CoI) framework that embraces three aspects: social presence, teacher presence and cognitive presence. The definition of social presence in this framework is 'the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally ... through the medium of communication being used' (p. 94). This definition emphasises that students can overcome the limitations of a medium of communication through their ability to communicate as real people. Additionally, in a CoI, the potential indicators of social presence are affective (i.e., the sharing of emotions or personal opinions), interactive (i.e., frequent engagement) and cohesive (i.e., using inclusive communication that involves group discussion or such terms as 'we' and 'our' (Kelly & Claus, 2015).

A higher level of social presence can create an online learning environment that is perceived as warm, approachable and friendly (Aragon, 2003). However, when students fail to engage in timely participation or if students' discussion posts are ignored limited interaction may result and students are likely to perceive a low level of social presence (Ackaoglu & Lee, 2016). The high level of social presence also helps students to feel connected with other members of the group which reduces the feeling of physical distance. As a result, students can be satisfied and motivated to complete their online courses (Kelly & Claus, 2015).

### **3.5.3. Transactional distance theory**

The theory of transactional distance (TDT) developed by Moore (1993) refers to the transaction between tutors and students in a context where they are geographically and psychologically separated. Geographic separation may affect both the teaching and learning process, because 'there is a psychological and communication space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of tutors and those of the learner', which is transactional distance (Moore, 1993, p. 23). As a result of this transactional separation, misunderstanding and limited communication actions can lead to low-quality teaching and learning. Furthermore, Moore (1993) proposes that this is a function of three variables: dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. These variables describe how the transactional distance is increased or diminished through people's relationships with each other.

Dialogue is a major factor affecting the degree of transactional distance in online learning environments. It refers, broadly, to interaction between tutors and students in distance education (Moore, 1993). However, Moore distinguishes between dialogue and interaction, stating that 'there can be negative or neutral interaction; the term "dialogue" is reserved for positive interactions, with value placed on the synergistic nature of the relationship of the parties involved' (p. 24). Moore thus proposes that the term *dialogue* be applied solely to positive interaction, excluding the negative or neutral interaction that may also occur. Moore

(1993) provides a number of factors that can affect dialogue and transactional distance, including the number of students, personality of the tutor and learners, content, physical and emotional environment and medium of communication. Nevertheless, researchers have criticised Moore for omitting to explain what actually constitutes real dialogue and how it works or fails to work in an actual learning environment (Shearer, 2010, Al Ghamdi, 2017). This has led researchers to derive several definitions that differ from the one formulated by Moore, thus impacting the validity of the construct (Gorsky & Caspi, 2009). In particular, some researchers have recently used the concept of interaction between tutors and students rather than dialogue. The second factor is course structure, described by Moore (1993) as ‘the rigidity or flexibility of the programme’s educational objectives, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods’ (p. 26). In other words, the structural factor includes the course goals and objectives, teaching methods, assessment and strategies to address students’ needs.

Finally, student autonomy is associated with students determining their own goals, learning experiences and course evaluation. This will in turn be affected by dialogue and course design (Falloon, 2011).

These factors may affect transactional distance in an interconnected fashion, whereby an improvement in one variable may lead to proportional improvement in the others. For example, a course with an inflexible design and structure may reduce the amount of dialogue between tutors and students as well as learners’ autonomy, thereby increasing the transactional distance (Fallon, 2011). Meanwhile, Moore (1993) emphasises that dialogue is an important factor that can influence both of the others, explaining that when the level of dialogue is high and the course structure is poor, transactional distance will nevertheless be reduced. Conversely, when dialogue is low, transactional distance will be increased, notwithstanding a well-developed structure.

A number of studies have examined e-immediacy practices from the perspective of TDT (Zapf, 2008; Farwell, 2011; Al Ghamdi, 2017). The main function of immediacy practices is to encourage student interaction, whether in an F2F or VLE environment, with a concentration on increasing closeness and reducing physical and psychological distance. Therefore, TDT is closely related to the concept of immediacy in an educational context (Farwell, 2011). Thus, in this study, TDT is used as an underpinning framework and theory, along with sociocultural and social presence theories, to investigate the perceptions of female students and their tutors concerning e-immediacy in a VLE.

### **3.6. Summary**

This chapter presented the literature relating to the research. It began by clarifying the definition of a VLE and the tools included in these systems. It also outlined the pedagogical frameworks and models that can be applied, and the main challenges that students and tutors face within a VLE. The concept of immediacy was clarified and tutors' immediacy practices in F2F and VLE contexts explained, based on a review of the literature.

A limited number of studies have investigated tutors' immediacy practices in VLEs and most of these have merely examined students' perceptions of these practices. Moreover, the review mainly highlighted international research, due to a lack of relevant studies in the Arab world, especially in Saudi Arabia. In addition, all previous studies have been surveys. Nevertheless, these studies have found a correlation between immediacy practices and several variables, such as cognitive learning, satisfaction and motivation. This chapter attempted to identify the main immediacy practices to impact strongly on students' learning and the importance of these practices in VLEs. Moreover, the concept of perceptions and the factors that may influence them were discussed in detail.

The last section presented the theories relating to the study and showed the effect of tutors' immediacy methods on online teaching and learning. All the theories emerging from the perspective of social learning indicate that online learning can be accomplished through student interaction and participation. The next chapter will now give insights into the methodological design of this research, in light of the study aim.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter states the research paradigm, and justifies the design and procedures adopted for this study. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to examine the perceptions of female students and tutors as regards immediacy practices within a VLE. A description of the questionnaire as a quantitative method and guidelines for the focus groups and one-to-one interviews were followed by a section on the implementation procedures. The analysis sections describe how the quantitative and qualitative analyses were undertaken. Issues of validity and reliability were then considered, while the final section describes how the ethical conduct of the research was ensured.

### **4.2. The Research Questions**

In the study described in this thesis, as explained in Chapter 1, the main aim was to explore the perceptions of female students and their tutors concerning immediacy practices in a Saudi VLE, in order to shed light on the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions of tutors and female students concerning the use of immediacy practices in VLEs?
- How do tutors and female students perceive the importance of immediacy practices in VLEs?
- In what way do the perceptions of tutors and female students differ on the use and importance of immediacy practices in VLEs?

## **4.2. The Philosophical Assumptions**

Each researcher will bring his or her own beliefs and philosophical assumptions to a study. These will depend upon the researchers' views concerning the type of problem that they wish to investigate, the research questions that will be asked, and the way in which they go about collecting the data. As mentioned above, the aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of female students and their tutors regarding immediacy practices in a Saudi VLE, as will be explained below. This led the researcher to position the study within the pragmatic paradigm.

### **4.2.1. Ontology**

Ontology is the starting point for all research. It gives rise to epistemological assumptions that will inform the research methodology. The term 'ontology' refers to the science of being and its fundamental principles deal with the nature of being (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, ontology reflects on the question, 'what is the nature of reality?' and establishes what is real for the researcher when conducting a study (Mertens, 2009), so that they can make assumptions and adopt the appropriate positions.

The main beliefs concerning the nature of reality are described through objectivism, subjectivism and a mixture of single and multiple realities 'pragmatism' (Mertens, 2009). Objectivism assumes the reality is separate from individuals. This underpins the positivist philosophy (Bryman, 2012) and supports the notion that social facts and their consequences are external to human perceptions. Therefore, we have no choice to adopt them (Bryman, 2012). Oppong (2014) also suggests that reality exists outside of our subjective experience and the researcher should access and assess this reality by means of 'objective' data collection instruments. Conversely, subjectivism or relativism constitutes the ontological stance of interpretivist philosophy, which views reality as being socially constructed (Mertenes, 2009). Put another way, whilst objectivism argues that reality exists independently

of the individual, subjectivism is concerned with reality as interpreted and constructed by people.

Finally, there is the ontological assumption that reality is both singular and multiple. For a single reality, there may be an assumption or theory that works to examine the phenomena under investigation, while multiple realities could be ascertained that explain phenomena by gathering individuals' views. It includes objectivism and subjectivism as the third type of ontology, which underpins the philosophy of pragmatism (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Therefore, the pragmatic ontology is not committed to a single reality and does not view the world as an absolute unity (Creswell, 2014), the reality is changeable and focusing on 'what difference it makes' (Morgan, 2007, p.68).

As a researcher, the ontological assumptions underpinning the philosophy of pragmatism reflect on the question of 'What is real?' in this current study. The present researcher's belief is that truth exists out there, but also that truth can differ according to individuals' views and experiences. However, to understand and interpret the perceptions of female students and their tutors concerning immediacy practices in VLEs from their point of views, it is also necessary to know the nature of that reality by conducting an investigation, based on the participants' unique interpretation of reality. Later, in section 4.2.3, the pragmatic paradigm will be discussed in more detail and a rationale for adopting it in this study will be given.

#### **4.2.2. Epistemology**

An epistemology is a philosophical assumption that is concerned with knowledge, or the "ways of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p.3). Hence, the nature and forms of knowledge are emphasised, which means the ways in which knowledge can be created, acquired and interacted with by researchers (Cohen, Manon & Morrison, 2007).

The epistemological assumption of objectivism is that knowledge is objective and exists independently of humans (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, it is important that researchers manipulate information and make observations in an objective way (Mertens, 2009). In turn, this means that social phenomena can be explored in the same way as the natural and scientific world by objectively designing and applying research using scientific methods, such as experiments and surveys (Mertens, 2009). According to Cohen et al. (2007), researchers whose works are positioned within the positivist paradigm assume that they should detach themselves from the reality under investigation and distance themselves from what is being studied, in order to minimise bias.

In contrast to this, the subjectivist epistemological stance means that knowledge is observed and constructed by researchers when they interact and communicate with study participants, in order to derive explicit values and generate findings from these (Mertens, 2009). This epistemological assumption attempts to discover individuals' behaviours and understand the values, attitudes and beliefs behind these behaviours (Plack, 2005).

Meanwhile, the epistemology behind this current study, in terms of the way in which the researcher gains knowledge about students' and tutors' perceptions of e-immediacy practices, is the assumption of mixed single and multiple realities, which is what underpins the pragmatic paradigm. This epistemological assumption focuses on 'what works', which involves integrating different perspectives to answer research questions and achieve practical outcomes (Mertens, 2009). Put differently, the knowledge acquired is a combination of facts and meaning that is used to solve problems and address research questions.

#### **4.2.3. Research Philosophies**

According to Creswell (2014), in order to establish the paradigm or 'worldview as he sees it', the researcher needs to think through the philosophical assumptions that he or she brings to a

study. The research paradigm or research worldview is defined as a model of inquiry that underpins research, particularly in terms of “what should be studied, how research shall be done and how results should be interpreted” (Bryman, 2012, p.714). Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe the research paradigm as “the basic belief system or world view that guides the investigator” (p.714).

This study is concerned with the field of education, and research in the context of education identifies three main paradigms: the positivist or ‘scientific’ paradigm, which is dedicated to generalising study findings; the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the construction and interpretation of knowledge, and the pragmatic paradigm, which seeks to answer questions, solve the problem under study and reach to practical outcomes (Creswell, 2014). Thus, a research paradigm provides theoretical justification of the specific approaches adopted by the researcher and the relationship that these approaches have with the research findings (Cohen et al., 2007).

### ***1. The Positivist Paradigm***

The positivist worldview is a crucial paradigm in educational research. It is also called the ‘scientific method’ or ‘empirical research’ (Creswell, 2014). The positivist paradigm implies that knowledge is external to us and by observing the world carefully and objectively; we can understand it (Mertens, 2009; Creswell, 2014). The positivist paradigm is centred upon quantitative methods and statistical analysis (Mack, 2010). Therefore, positivism pays less attention to an in-depth understanding of an individual’s views and knowledge. Cohen et al. (2007) emphasise that every human being has his or her own beliefs about the world surrounding them and in turn, these beliefs shape their world.

## ***2. The Interpretivist Paradigm***

Social interpretivists believe that individuals can build multiple meanings and knowledge about an object based on an individual's past experiences and interaction with others (Creswell, 2014). In short, social phenomena can be understood from an individual's interpretations. Researchers should use appropriate qualitative methods to construct knowledge through interaction and discussion between a researcher and study participants in the form of interviews. However, there are some limitations to the interpretivist paradigm, which should be considered by the researcher. For instance, according to Crotty (1998), the researcher will not be able to understand the participants' views without visiting their context and gathering information about it. This is so that he or she can interpret from personal experience the effect of this context on those views. In addition, Mack (2010) points out another limitation of this research paradigm, which is that the findings may not be generalisable to other situations.

## ***3. The Pragmatic Paradigm***

Pragmatism is a paradigm that provides an underlying philosophical framework for mixed methods research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Historically, pragmatism can be divided into two periods: the early period, from 1860-1930, and a 'neopragmatic' period from 1960 to this current time (Mertens, 2009). In the first period, pragmatists asserted that social science inquiry was insufficient for accessing the truth about the real world through a scientific method alone. Conversely, pragmatists in the second period emphasised the importance of practical thinking and use of multiple methods (Mertens, 2009). They believed in using 'what works' and findings ways to solve a problem. They therefore considered the mixed methods approach to be a practical way of answering questions aimed at solving a research problem (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). As discussed previously, the pragmatic paradigm provides a

set of assumptions about reality, where singular and multiple realities underpin the mixed methods methodology and distinguish it from the quantitative approach, which is based on the positivist paradigm, and the qualitative approach, which is based on the interpretivist paradigm (Denscombe, 2010).

The pragmatic paradigm is defined as “a philosophical tradition that promotes the development of theory directly from practice, a process where theory is extracted from actions, and applied back to practice in an iterative process” (Christ, 2013, p.111). This definition is the core of the pragmatic philosophy, which is the view that our theories must be linked to experience or practice (Mertens, 2009). However, another definition that has emerged from the literature to confirm the pragmatic paradigm is ‘approach’. Cameron (2011) defines pragmatism as “a practical approach to a problem”, with a “strong association with mixed methods research” (p.101). Morgan (2007) also asserts that pragmatism is an approach, while Biesta (2010) argues that

although pragmatism is unable to provide the philosophical foundation for mixed methods research, it has some important things to offer, particularly in helping mixed methods researchers to ask better and more precise questions about the philosophical implications and justifications of their design. (p.114)

In other words, some previous researchers have emphasised that pragmatism is an approach that tends to employ methods from both quantitative and qualitative traditions, in order to best address the research questions (Creswell, 2014).

In this study, pragmatism is defined as a philosophical tradition that attempts to produce knowledge and gain practical outcomes by employing quantitative and qualitative approaches. Thus, as a pragmatist, the current researcher has adopted quantitative and qualitative stances based on different assumptions, as a means of addressing the research questions, and with an emphasis on the phenomena and consequences: on ‘what works’,

rather than on philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2009; Morgan, 2014). To be more specific, this study explores the existing real world phenomena of female students' and tutors' perceptions and their experience of immediacy practices in virtual learning and to how these immediacy practices are important in teaching and learning in the Saudi online education.

### **4.3. Research Methodology**

Another element that characterises various paradigms is methodology. Methodology incorporates the methods adopted in procedures to collect, analyse and interpret data (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Crotty (2003) defines methodology as “the research design that shapes our choice and use of particular methods and links them to the desired outcomes” (p.7). It is also explained by Creswell (2014) as directions for the procedures of a research undertaking, which will help a researcher to gain the knowledge that he or she needs to solve a problem or explain phenomena.

In positivist research, the methodology focuses on quantitative methods, statistical analysis, and generalisable findings (Mack, 2010). Researchers who adopt this stance work from the ‘top down’ from a theory to data for contributing to or contradicting theory (Creswell & Clark, 2007). In contrast, the methodology in research that is positioned within an interpretivist worldview works from the ‘bottom up’, using individuals’ views to build broader themes and generate theory relating to those themes (Creswell & Clark, 2007). In an interpretivist paradigm, researchers who adopt this methodology use qualitative methods, which help gain knowledge from participants’ views and build it into theories and interpretations (Mertens, 2009).

The methodology in the pragmatic paradigm mixes both qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate the phenomena under study (Creswell & Clark, 2007). As

mentioned before, the philosophical assumptions of pragmatism endorse the use of diverse approaches, taking into account both objective and subjective knowledge. Pragmatism allows researchers to combine the methods associated with both perspectives, according to what will work best in answering the research questions. In section 4.3.1, the mixed methods design applied in this study will be described in more detail. In brief, the selected research methodology is a mixed methods design for exploring the perceptions of female students and tutors as regards immediacy practices within a VLE in a Saudi university.

#### **4.3.1. Mixed methods design**

The term, ‘mixed methods’ describes research that combines more than one approach in a single study. The mixed methods approach therefore includes the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches in one study, in order to investigate a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The important feature of mixed methods designs is that they use quantitative and qualitative approaches to answer research questions and gain an understanding of a research problem, rather than a single method alone (Morgan, 2007). Various names have been “given to the mixed methods design such as ‘mixed methodology’, ‘multi-strategy research’, ‘integrated methods’, ‘multi-method research’ and ‘combined methods” (Denscombe, 2010, p.138).

Despite its limitations, the quantitative approach is commonly used in educational research (Cohen et al., 2007). Quantitative research follows a scientific strategy where numerical data is collected through the tools of questionnaires, observations and surveys. The quantitative approach focuses on statistical methods and generalising data. Also, it provides limited detail on individuals’ attitudes or behaviours so cannot show elaborate accounts of human perceptions. In contrast, the qualitative approach provides in-depth data about individuals’ views and behaviours. Although the quantitative approach places emphasis on meanings and interpretations of social phenomena, the subjectivity of this approach is often seen as a

limitation. Therefore, using a mixed methods design can help a researcher compensate for the weaknesses of each single method. According to Denscombe (2010), the combination of two methods allows the researcher to overcome the weakness and bias arising from a single method.

The limitations of both quantitative and qualitative approaches can be seen, for example, in the effect of bias. To avoid such a problem, the researcher used a triangulation where different methods can be applied to collect data from different sources (more details in section 4.6.2.4). Moreover, an inductive approach (thematic analysis) was applied, which might also reduce the bias (section 4.6.2.5).

#### **4.3.2. Types of mixed methods design**

There are over 40 different mixed methods designs reported in the literature (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Creswell (2014) has categorised these classifications into three main types, namely explanatory, exploratory and convergent.

**The explanatory design** takes place in two phases, with the researcher collecting quantitative and qualitative data sequentially. The researcher therefore begins by collecting and analysing quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data, which depend on the results of the first phase (Creswell & Clark, 2007). The main purpose of an explanatory design is to use the data gathered in the second phase via a qualitative approach to explain the quantitative results in more depth. This design therefore places an emphasis on the collection of quantitative data and analysis, in which qualitative data are used to refine and explain the results of the quantitative data (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

**The exploratory design** begins with the qualitative data and is followed by the collection of quantitative data to explore a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). This design also adopts a two-phase approach and is suitable when there is no framework or theory to guide the study

(Creswell & Clark, 2007). According to Creswell (2012), an exploratory design can be used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes, design an instrument and then test it. The qualitative approach is used in the first phase to develop or inform the design of the method applied in the second phase, which is quantitative (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

**The convergent design** is a common design of mixed methods. It is referred to as a concurrent or parallel design (Creswell & Clark, 2018). It is a one-phase design, in which researchers apply quantitative and qualitative methods in the same time period. The aim of this design is to compare and combine the results of quantitative and qualitative data analysis. It also aims “to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic”, in order to understand a research problem, validate one set of findings with another, or determine if participants respond in a similar way when quantitative and qualitative instruments are used (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p.62).

A convergent design was applied in this current study; involving two methods that occur concurrently (see Figure 7). This design was used to compare and contrast quantitative results with qualitative findings and to validate quantitative results with qualitative data. As in Figure 7, the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data were performed separately and finally integrated at the interpretation stage in Chapter 7 (the Discussion chapter), to ascertain whether the findings supported or contradicted each other.

### The Convergent Design

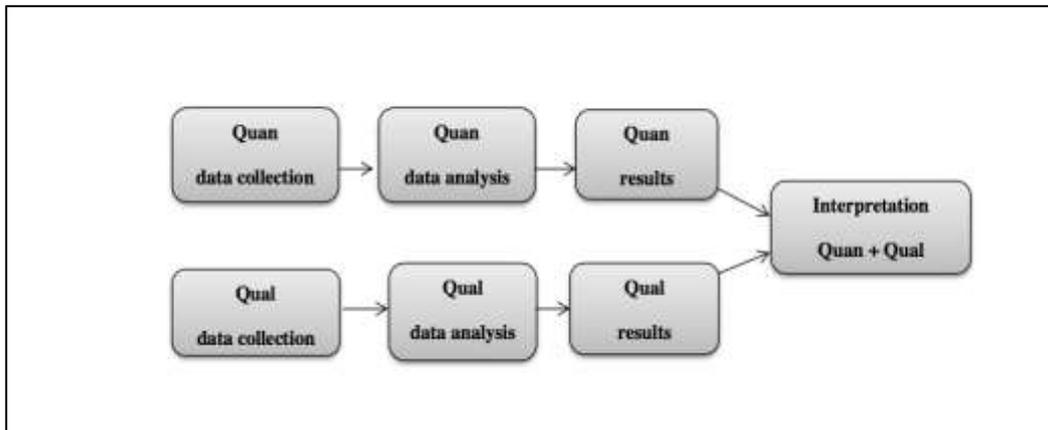


Figure 7. Procedures for the convergent mixed methods design used in this study

In this study, the rationale for using a mixed methods design was suggested by the nature of the research questions, which not only required identifying the numbers or percentages for the frequency of responses, but also to examine the participants' views in depth; presenting the participants' actual words, developing a complete overview of their perceptions, and comparing and combining the data gathered using the two approaches.

In addition, using a mixed methods approach can improve the accuracy of the findings. It can also provide an important opportunity for the researcher to check the findings from one method and compare them with those of another. According to Denscombe (2010), researchers can also increase their confidence in the accuracy of findings when using different methods to explore the same phenomena.

However, mixed methods designs have limitations that can influence their implementation and use. In current study, For example, the extensive data collected need a great deal of time to collate and process. In addressing this challenge, the researcher scheduled a period of three months to collect the data using both approaches. To avoid delay or disappointment, all arrangements were made and permission obtained before arriving at the site of the study.

Another challenge that can face the researcher when using a mixed methods design is the lack of essential skills required for applying quantitative and qualitative approaches (collecting, analysing and interpreting data). To avoid this problem, the researcher attended Graduate School Reading Researcher Development Programme (RRDP) and Institute of Education sessions provided at the University of Reading, on the topic of qualitative and quantitative approaches. This was further supported by extensive reading (for example, Creswell and Clark, 2007; Denscombe, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2012, 2014).

#### **4.3.3. The use of a case study approach**

A case study is an approach that is used to investigate single or multiple social phenomena through intensive description and analysis (Denscombe, 2010). Creswell (1998) proposes that a case study is “the exploration of a bounded system” (p.61) such as a single programme, an institution, or activity, which should be explored using in-depth data collection methods with multiple sources of evidence (Alamri, 2016). However, previous researchers have emphasised that the case study approach should be considered as a qualitative approach (Creswell, 1998). In recent research, Creswell and Clark (2018) have shown a readiness to accept that a case study can deploy mixed methods to develop enhanced description and analysis of a case or multiple cases through the use of both quantitative and qualitative data. Yin (2014) has long been in agreement with Creswell and Clark’s (2018) proposition, considering the inclusion of quantitative methods in case study research. This is significant for the current study. Therefore, the types of data source deployed will be discussed later in this chapter.

The singular bounded system ‘case’ selected for this study is a single institution, which only offers fully online courses to female students via a VLE (Blackboard). Having selected a targeted institution, this helps me as a researcher to gain valuable and unique insights from different sources and methods about the perceptions of tutors and female students,

Furthermore, this study focuses on female students' and tutors' perceptions, where they have experience of learning and teaching via VLEs, in order to provide a complete picture of the immediacy practices that are used solely within those VLEs. According to Cohen et al. (2007), the emphasis in a case study is on 'what it is like' to be in a specific situation: to look closely at reality and the description of participants' experiences of and feelings for a situation. Yin (2014) asserts that a case study "investigates within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context may not be clearly evident" (p.16). Therefore, in this study, phenomena linked with e-immediacy practices in a female students' VLE cannot be studied without considering a Saudi cultural context in an all-female VLE. In addition, the boundaries between tutors' e-immediacy practices and the context of a female VLE are not clear. Consequently, a case study is an appropriate approach to investigation in this research.

However, the use of a case study has some potential limitations. For example, a researcher will be unable to generalise the study findings and there is the possibility of bias and subjectivity through data being manipulated by the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007). To minimise these limitations, triangulation is a factor that can strengthen the study findings. In this current study, triangulation was achieved by implementing mixed quantitative and qualitative methods and by collecting data from multiple sources (female students, male and female tutors).

#### **4.4. Site of the Study**

This study was conducted in a Saudi university that is located in the south of the country. It was established in 2006 and has two campuses, one for male and the other for female students. It includes 19 colleges for male students and 10 colleges for female students, covering subjects such as Applied Medical Sciences, Computer Science, Education, Medicine, Pharmacy and Engineering. However, the colleges only offer undergraduate

degrees in their various departments. A total of around 10,000 male and female students have studied at these colleges over the past five years.

E-learning was approved in 2011 by the targeted university in its Education and Art of Sciences institutions. It initially offered blended courses for male and female students. In addition, students who did not meet the University's requirements could join these courses to complete their degrees. Adult students who needed to complete their degrees for other reasons, such as to improve their careers were also accepted. All the blended courses were designed to deliver face-to-face lectures and all the tasks were asynchronous, so that each student could study at a suitable time and in any convenient place.

This study specifically took place at the Institute of Education in the selected Saudi university. The Institute has a number of departments, including Special Needs Education, Psychology, and Curriculum and Instruction Design. It also has an Educational Diploma Programme to develop teaching skills and methods, as well as education management for teachers. A separate branch for females contains departments that offer parallel programmes to those of the male branch.

Recently, as the University is located in a city where there are problems and fighting on the border with another country, the Saudi Ministry of Education has transferred the city schools and this university education online as distance and online learning. Therefore, all departments in the University now offer blended courses to undergraduate students and the Education school only offers fully online courses through Blackboard.

#### **4.4.1. Blackboard**

Blackboard is the virtual learning system that has been adopted by the Saudi university forming the subject of this study. Most Saudi universities use Blackboard, because it has become a complementary system for course-content delivery in both completely online and

blended learning environments (Alghamdi, 2016). In brief, Blackboard is a common platform that allows tutors to add course materials for students to access online (Mbuva, 2015). It is a simple tool that helps tutors to provide their online courses effectively using PowerPoint, video, audio- and other applications that are created outside of Blackboard and added to courses, as a means of encouraging students' learning (Mbuva, 2015). As mentioned in Chapter 3, Blackboard is a VLE that contains tools for communication, assessment and course resources.

Although Blackboard offers applications and tools, tutors in SHE institutions have limited use of them. In the context of virtual learning for female students, some tutors have focused on asynchronous learning tools, such as discussion boards, email and announcements in their lectures, but avoided using synchronous tools, like video and audio-conferencing, because of cultural and social rules (Al Ghamdi, 2017). Therefore, the participants' views may largely reflect their experience of asynchronous learning tools in Blackboard.

#### **4.5. Sampling**

A sample is an important element of a study process that helps a researcher to ensure the quality of the study findings (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). It comprises a sub-group of the whole population, which is selected to represent that population and participate in the study (Denscombe, 2010).

A sample may be selected either through probability sampling, corresponding to the quantitative approach, or through non-probability sampling, as per a qualitative research design, or using a mixture of the two in a mixed methods approach, when appropriate (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). A probability sample is aimed at representing the entire population and includes random, stratified and cluster sampling. Meanwhile, non-probability samples are units (for example, individuals, groups, institutions), selected according to

specific purposes and in order to answer research questions. These include convenience, purposive, quota, volunteer and snowball sampling (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2012).

In this study, the population being studied consist of undergraduate female students on fully online courses and their tutors in the Institute of Education at a Saudi university. The sample was selected using two sampling techniques: purposive sampling for the quantitative method and a volunteer sampling strategy as a qualitative method.

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants in the questionnaire survey. The strategy of purposive sampling refers to purposeful or qualitative sampling (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). However, Cohen et al. (2007) suggest that purposive sampling is not purely a feature of qualitative research; researchers may use this type of sample to include cases that meet their specific requirements. With purposive sampling, the researcher can obtain valuable information by selecting individuals that have experience in the phenomena under investigation (Denscombe, 2010). It can also be used to ensure that a wide selection of individuals is included in a sample. Purposive sampling implemented in this way resembles a 'representative sample', which can be "useful with small-scale surveys where random sampling might not be enough to include groups that occur in small numbers in the population" (Denscombe, 2010, p.35). However, a purposive sample will not represent the wider population, because the sample is intentionally selected and may be therefore affected by bias.

In this research, purposive sampling was used to access female students and tutors with experience and in-depth knowledge of using VLE tools on fully online courses (more details on the number of participants and their background information are given in section 4.5.1). Although the participants in this study might not represent the entire population of female students and tutors using VLEs for learning and teaching in Saudi universities, and their

responses might not be generalisable, this is not the main concern here. Instead, the emphasis is on obtaining important and in-depth data from those who are knowledgeable about immediacy practices in VLEs, the tools that are used in virtual learning, and the lectures delivered using such tools.

The second sampling strategy adopted in this study was volunteer sampling, as used in qualitative methods. Volunteer sampling is a type of non-probability sampling and with this technique, the researcher selects participants who are interested in participating in the study (Cohen et al., 2007). However, it is a technique that has some of the limitations of purposive sampling. For example, it cannot represent the entire population and does not seek to make generalisations about the wider population (Cohen et al., 2007).

#### **4.5.1. Sample size**

In this section presents the sample size in both collection data methods and criteria of choosing the participants in each method. It begins with the participants were selected in a quantitative method and then the number of participants and some background information about them in qualitative methods.

##### **1. Quantitative sample size**

**Female students:** The main criterion for sorting the students was their experience of studying on fully online courses. Even though the students participating in this study were still only in their first academic year, they had at least seven months' experience. The academic year began in August 2015 and the study was conducted between March and May 2016 at the end of their academic year.

The number of female students in the various departments of the Institute of Education totalled 230. The questionnaires were distributed to all female students studying on fully

online courses at the Institute of Education in the targeted university. This strategy was adopted, because it would help the researcher to cover a wide range of experience, while at the same time eliminating bias from the selection process. The procedures for distributing the questionnaires are presented in section 4.6.1.2.

**Tutors:** the criterion for choosing the tutors was that they taught female students in the Institute of Education, regardless of their own gender. There are a total of 53 male and female tutors at the Institute. Table 3, below, shows the number of participants and the responses to the questionnaires.

Table 3. The number of participants and responses obtained using the quantitative method

The participants	Number of participants	The respondents
Female students	230	129
Tutors	53 (13 male - 40 female)	47 (10 males– 37 female)

Table 3 presents the number of participants that were selected and who responded to the questionnaires.

## 2. Qualitative sample size

Female students and tutors were selected according to their willingness and interest in participating in the interviews. This was demonstrated by them providing their contact information in the questionnaire. Twenty-seven out of 129 female students and 13 out of 47 tutors (5 male and 8 female) provided their contact information. The aim was to choose at least three focus groups of students from different academic years, and tutors of different genders and nationalities, with diverse academic qualifications and different levels of online

teaching experience. Table 4 presents the number and characteristics of the volunteers participating in the focus groups and one-to-one interviews.

Table 4. Participants subjected to qualitative methods

<b>Participants</b>		<b>Characteristics of participants</b>
<b>Female Students</b>	<b>Focus Group 1</b>	7 students Academic year 4
	<b>Focus Group 2</b>	7 students Academic year 3
	<b>Focus Group 3</b>	5 students Academic year 2
<b>Tutors</b>	<b>Female tutor 1</b>	Saudi – Bachelor’s degree One year of online teaching experience
	<b>Female tutor 2</b>	Saudi - Master’s degree One year of online teaching experience
	<b>Female tutor 3</b>	Saudi-Bachelor’s degree Two years’ online teaching experience
	<b>Female tutor 4</b>	Egyptian-PhD Five years’ online teaching experience
	<b>Female tutor 5</b>	Sudan-PhD Three years’ online teaching experience
	<b>Male tutor 1</b>	Saudi-PhD Two years’ online teaching experience
	<b>Male tutor 2</b>	Yemen-PhD Three years’ online teaching experience
	<b>Male tutor 3</b>	Egyptian-PhD One year of online teaching experience
	<b>Male tutor 4</b>	Egyptian-PhD One year of online teaching experience

## **4.6. Data collection methods**

This section aims to present the data collection methods were used in this study to achieve the aim and answer the research questions. Quantitative data method and two qualitative methods were used to draw a comprehensive picture of the tutors and female students' perceptions about e-immediacy practices. This section includes two parts, the first part discusses the quantitative method and the second presents the qualitative methods. The two parts of this section illustrate each method definition with considering the advantages and limitations, the piloting and administrating and applying the methods. Then, analysis approach of each method is discussed and finally validity and reliability are considered.

### **4.6.1. Quantitative Data Collection**

A questionnaire is self-report instrument for collecting data about variables that are important to a study. The questionnaire is a common quantitative instrument in educational research for collecting survey information that will provide structured and numerical data at low cost and in the minimum time. It can also be distributed without the presence of the researcher being necessary (Cohen et al., 2007). According to Creswell (2012), the questionnaire can be distributed to participants in several ways such as by hand, an e-mail or postal. It can help researchers to select the suitable method of administrating the questionnaire.

There are two types of question that can be included in a questionnaire, closed- and open-ended questions. With closed questions, the participant is instructed to answer by selecting from two or more options, such as 'Yes' or 'No' responses. However, different types of closed-ended question can be used in a questionnaire; for example, dichotomous questions ('yes or no' questions); multiple-choice questions; rating scales; constant sum questions and ratio data (Cohen et al., 2007). The main advantage of closed-ended questions is that they provide answers that can be easily analysed (Denscombe, 2010). Nevertheless, these types of

question cannot reflect complex issues or feelings in a range of options (Denscombe, 2010). Therefore, open-ended questions are used to collect data that reflect the full richness and complexity of the respondents' views (Denscombe, 2010). This type of question is useful for smaller scale studies or for those sections of a questionnaire that invite personal comments from respondents, in addition to ticking numbers and boxes (Cohen et al., 2007). The limitation of using open-ended questions is that more effort is demanded of the respondents to answer them (Denscombe, 2010).

Bryman (2012) also highlights the main disadvantages of using questionnaires in general, one potential drawback being the inclusion of items and questions that are unclear or difficult to answer. Furthermore, asking respondents probing questions is another issue that can influence the effectiveness of a questionnaire, especially if it includes open-ended questions. This issue can lead to more questions remaining unanswered by the respondents, resulting in missing data.

In this study, the purpose of the questionnaire was to examine female students' and tutors' perceptions and experiences of immediacy in a VLE. Therefore, the questionnaire (see Appendices 1 and 2) enabled the researcher to collect data from female undergraduate students and their tutors, since it is an instrument that would allow the researcher to collect data from a large number of people. In addition, the researcher selected the questionnaire method in particular, because of the lack of research in the literature on students' and tutors' perceptions as regards the purpose of e-immediacy practices. Moreover, this method provides more understanding and information in terms of female students' perceptions of immediacy practices in a VLE, which is an optimal way of gathering the views of female Saudis, because it gives the students more freedom to answer the questions and feeling of privacy and anonymity.

However, the content of this study's questionnaire was considered very carefully, and as far as possible, designed to avoid these disadvantages. Firstly, the questionnaire was based upon those used in previous studies investigating e-immediacy practices in online learning, with questions and items that were appropriate for Saudi culture. Secondly, the questions were formulated to ensure their clarity and avoid complexity. Finally, only one open-ended question was included to encourage the respondents to answer the question.

In this study, two forms of questionnaire were distributed to the participants: namely, a female student version and a tutor version. These forms were largely similar, but with some differences in the background questions. The source of the questionnaire items was the previous literature on online immediacy practices (Zapf, 2008; Farwell, 2011; Spiker, 2014; Walkem; 2014; Al Ghamdi, 2017). The questionnaire consisted of five sections. The first consisted of general questions, such as the academic year of study and experience of using virtual learning tools. Meanwhile, the tutors' version consisted of five questions relating to nationality, gender, academic qualifications, number of online teaching years, and experience of using virtual learning tools.

The second section asked the participants to indicate their degree of agreement with each item. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' was selected to measure the participants' perceptions of the use of immediacy practices in a VLE. Likert scales provide a useful way for a researcher to generate numerical data, while at the same time allowing a degree of differentiation in the responses (Cohen et al., 2007). It presents a range of possible responses to a given question or statement, usually from 1-5; for example, in this research, (1: strongly disagree), (2: disagree), (3: neither agree nor disagree), (4: agree), and (5: strongly agree).

This second section included 18 items describing immediacy practices that can be used in virtual communication tools. The items used simple language, common concepts and avoided acronyms and abbreviations. The statements were also adapted to Saudi culture and traditions connected with the use of communication behaviours and styles, particularly communication behaviours that occur between students and their tutors, as described in Chapters 2 and 3. Table 5 presents the items that describe immediacy practices in a VLE.

Table 5. First questionnaire scale

E-Immediacy Practices
The tutor
1. confirms when he/she receives and reads an email or post.
2. shows appreciation for students' questions or comments.
3. is willing to message or chat with students via an email or discussion board.
4. is accessible and easy to reach when students have questions.
5. attempts to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.
6. attempts to review course topics and assignments, etc.
7. asks students if they have any questions or need additional information.
8. supports students by giving feedback on their work or posts.
9. provides guidance and direction on course assignments and activities.
10. explains how to respond to posts or emails.
11. monitors students' progress.
12. addresses students by name.
13. encourages students to interact with each other.
14. uses humour with students when delivering lectures.
15. uses and discusses personal examples and experiences.
16. communicates goals, policies and procedures for the course.
18. replies to students' emails within 24 hours.
19. responds promptly to students' comments, questions and inquiries.

The second questionnaire scale was intended to measure the importance of e-immediacy in the female students' virtual learning. This section included four items. Table 6 shows the items that explain the importance of immediacy practices in a VLE.

Table 6. The second questionnaire scale

The Importance of e-Immediacy Practices
1. Immediacy encourages me to interact with the tutor.
2. Immediacy encourages me to interact with peers.
3. Immediacy enhances my participation.
4. Immediacy is important for supporting online teaching and learning.

The fourth section included open-ended question about the two main immediacy practices used by tutors via virtual learning tools, while the last part of the questionnaire presented an option to participate in interviews. It asked the participants to give some personal details and contact information, if they agreed to participate. This contact information included their name, mobile number and email address (see Appendices 1 and 2).

#### ***4.6.1.1. Piloting***

Piloting is an important procedure in the application of quantitative approach instruments, which can reveal the weakness of an instrument and help to improve its validity. On 20<sup>th</sup> March 2016, the final Arabic version of the questionnaire was sent to five female participants by an email. The purpose of this was to check the meaning and wording of the questionnaire items. The participants were asked to make a note of any items that were unclear or which were difficult to understand, and to add any suggestions and recommendations to improve the questionnaire scales and items.

The female participants were selected from different backgrounds. Two participants were female tutors at a Saudi university and three were female undergraduate students. Following the participants' feedback, some questionnaire items were changed and some items were reworded to render them more appropriate to Saudi culture. For example, some background information of students was deleted such as the nationality and the age because all students were Saudi and their ages between 18 and 22. Also, some statements were not clear for instance 'my tutor replies to students' emails quickly' was changed after checking the literature to 'my tutor replies to students' emails within 24 hours'.

#### ***4.6.1.2. Administering the questionnaires***

Firstly, ethical approval to conduct this research was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Reading. Next, approval was granted by the targeted Saudi university to access its Institute of Education before conducting the study.

The questionnaires were distributed to female students and their tutors on April 2016. The researcher administered the questionnaires to the students in the classroom after the exams had finished and with the permission of their tutors, because at the end of term, the students only attend classes to do exams. Moreover, the researcher gave questionnaires to the tutors, who took approximately 15 minutes to complete them. In addition, the students were informed that they could withdraw at any time and without responding to the questionnaire. The online questionnaire for the male tutors was designed using 'Google Forms'. The questionnaire link was sent to the head of the Institute of Education via WhatsApp, so that it could be sent out to the male tutors who teach fully online courses to female students.

#### ***4.6.1.3. Analysis of the questionnaire data***

The questionnaires were coded with numbers and inputted into the Software Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 23.0 software. After inputting the data, the researcher deleted any

incomplete questionnaires. Creswell (2012) advises that researchers eliminate any participants with missing values from the data analysis and only include those who complete the survey instrument. However, this procedure can affect the number of participants in the sample and the data analysis. Nevertheless, in the present study, only four participants out of 133 in the student group were eliminated because of missing data scores.

The data were found to be abnormally distributed and so it was necessary to conduct non-parametric tests for example, the Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to analyse the questionnaire data. More details about this point will be discussed at the beginning of Chapter 5, outlining the quantitative results.

#### ***4.6.1.4. Validity and reliability***

Validity and reliability are essential aspects of building data collection instruments and enhancing the quality of a study. Bryman (2012) views validity and reliability as criteria for evaluating social research. Validity refers to whether the measurement instrument really measures what it is designed to measure (Bryman, 2012). It has three common and distinct aspects, namely content validity, face validity and construct validity. Content validity refers to the extent to which the instrument measures the construct that the researcher is interested in, which means that the study objectives are represented in the instrument (Bryman, 2012). Meanwhile, face validity is “established when a researcher who is an expert on the research subject reviewing the questionnaire concludes that it measures the characteristics or trait of interest” (Bolarinwa, 2015, p.196). Finally, construct validity is defined as “the degree to which an instrument measures the trait or theoretical construct that it is intended to measure” (Bolarinwa, 2015, p.196). The validity of quantitative data can also be improved through careful sampling, and the use of an appropriate instrument and data analysis (Cohen et al., 2007).

In this study, to validate the instrument, content validity, construct validity and face validity were examined. As mentioned above, in order to establish a high level of content validity for this study's instrument and to achieve its aim, the researcher reviewed the literature related to e-immediacy practices and the importance of these practices in VLEs. The questionnaire statements and questions were developed to reflect the research questions. The questionnaire was subsequently checked by the researcher's supervisor and then the questionnaire was translated into Arabic and given to two colleagues - lecturers at a Saudi university - so that they could provide feedback. These steps can also establish construct validity. Furthermore, the questionnaire's construct validity was ensured during the data collection phase in this case study. Care was thus taken to clarify the topic and aim of the study to the participants (Yin, 2014) by distributing information sheets with the questionnaires (see Appendix 3).

Regarding face validity, the questionnaire was sent by email to the author of three scholarly publications on immediacy in online learning. Expert was therefore asked to assess and make decisions concerning the extent to which the instrument represented statements about the research objectives. Generally, the experts are able to assess the clarity of the instrument statements and their appropriateness for use, as well as giving their opinions on how the validity of the questionnaire could be enhanced. Following this procedure, all comments were taken into account by the researcher and the modified questionnaire was handed to the supervisor for final amendment and approval. In addition, the questionnaire piloting phase helped to test and improve the validity of the instrument; ensuring that the questionnaire measured what it was supposed to measure and that it was free of bias (Neuman, 2014).

Reliability refers to the extent to which data collection instruments produce similar findings, if used again under equivalent conditions (Bryman, 2012). Reliability is first measured by examining stability: this "occurs when the same or similar scores are obtained with repeated testing with the same group of respondents" (Bolarinwa, 2015, p.198). A second aspect

involves examining internal consistency, which refers to the extent to which statements and questions of the instrument measure the same thing (Bryman, 2012; Bolarinwa, 2015).

In this study, SPSS software was used to test the questionnaire’s internal consistency from the Cronbach’s Alpha values. Table 7 presents the reliability statistics for the two questionnaire scales.

Table 7. Measures of the questionnaire’s reliability

No	Scale	Number of items	Cronbach’s Alpha
1	Immediacy practices	18	.915
2	The importance of immediacy	4	.861

According to Bryman (2012), the alpha value will vary between 1 (indicating perfect internal reliability) and 0 (indicating no internal reliability). Bolarinwa (2015) suggests that a reliability coefficient (alpha) of 0.70 or higher is considered acceptable and so Table 7 illustrates that the questionnaire is reliable.

#### 4.6.2. Qualitative Data Collection

Two types of qualitative method were used to collect data from the participants and these were applied in the focus groups and one-to-one interviews. Generally, interviews are conducted in education research to gather in-depth personal views of phenomena (Creswell, 2012). As Cohen et al. (2007) note, they are a flexible tool for data collection, as they allow the use of verbal and non-verbal communication, while giving space to the participants to answer questions and express their views.

The interview may be used as a research method for several purposes. For example, it can provide useful information and detailed personal data when a researcher cannot observe the

participants in person. Denscombe (2010) suggests that a researcher can use interviews to collect details and insights into aspects such as participants' views, feelings and experiences. They can also be used as a complementary method to validate other methods and gain an in-depth view of the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2012). In this study, interviews enabled an in-depth view of the participants' perceptions and experiences to be obtained, regarding immediacy as a teaching method in a VLE: something that would not have been possible using the questionnaire alone.

However, the main limitation of the interview as a data collection method is that the reliability of the data will depend on what is said by the participants (Bryman, 2012). In this respect, the questionnaire was used here to mitigate this limitation (more will be discussed about trustworthiness in section 4.6.2.4).

#### ***4.6.2.1. Types of interview conducted in this research***

The interview is considered as an optimal way to gain a deep information and investigation into the phenomena being studied. Creswell (2012) describes the interviews as a qualitative method "occurs when researchers ask one or more participants general, open-ended questions and record their answers. The researcher then transcribes and types the data into a computer file or analysis" (p.2012).

There are several types of interview, which depend upon the accessibility of the participants, cost and the amount of time available (Creswell, 2012). The literature further revealed various types of interview, according to their degree of flexibility, the place in which they were conducted and the number of interviewers. Bryman (2012) classifies interviews into three main types based on their flexibility: semi-structured, unstructured and structured interviews. The semi-structured interview is considered as an important instrument, because it is flexible when discussing issues; allowing participants to talk and probing for a deeper understanding of phenomena, while also ensuring that all the important ideas and topics in a

study are covered (Bryman, 2012). In contrast, unstructured interviews offer greater flexibility and freedom to a researcher and participants in terms of planning, applying and organising the interview questions. This type of interview may be more suitable to topics that have little knowledge and information which needs in depth investigation. Finally, structured interviews include predetermined questions and answers which is more relative to quantitative methods and data (Denscombe, 2010). In terms of the number of interviewees and the place, various types are identified by Creswell (2012), including one-to-one, focus group, telephone, and email interviews. In this study, semi-structured interviews were employed to obtain useful knowledge, whereby the researcher prepared a clear list of open-ended questions that covered the research aim and questions. Two types of semi-structured interviews were selected focus groups for female students and one-to-one for tutors. More detail about these two interviews will be discussed in next sections.

### **1. Focus groups**

The focus group is a common qualitative method used in educational research to collect shared information from several participants. Denscombe (2010) explains that the focus group is a small group of individuals who are collected together by a researcher to investigate their attitudes or perceptions about a specific problem or situation. A typical focus group consists of 6-9 members and this is regarded as the ideal size for allowing a range of views to be expressed and for this information to be effectively managed (Denscombe, 2010). The person running the focus group sessions is referred to as the moderator or facilitator (Bryman, 2012). Their role is to facilitate the group discussion and conversation, rather than lead the discussion. The facilitator should therefore be careful not to display much knowledge of the topic under discussion, in order to facilitate the emergence of data from the participants and enhance their discussion (Bryman, 2012).

Focus groups have important advantages that encourage their use in research. For example, they engage interviewees to share their ideas, thoughts and views with each other. Participants can therefore build upon their ideas and new perspectives can be introduced. The focus group is therefore a powerful method in educational research. It is also useful if the researcher has limited time or has participants who are hesitant to provide information (Creswell, 2012).

Moreover, according to Winslow, Honei and Elzubeir (2002), particularly in Middle Eastern culture, focus group interviews tend to be successful amongst Arab women, because they are interested in participating in conversations that relate to their lives, society, families and education. They are consequently willing to answer questions and express their personal views, once an initial period of shyness has been overcome. Winslow et al. (2002) assert that the focus group method is similar to patterns of socialisation in Arabic countries and it can provide valuable information, which might not be accessible in one-to-one interviews.

In this study, focus groups were conducted with female students from different academic years and departments in the Institute of Education at the university under study. It was decided to conduct focus group interviews with female students, because such interviews can encourage them to talk and express their opinions without feeling timid. Female Saudis do not usually talk openly to others when meeting them for the first time. Moreover, in general, female Saudi students prefer not to talk about sensitive topics such as religion, culture or social issues. In this regard, the researcher endeavoured to select students for each focus group from the same academic year, amongst those who provided their contact information, because they were likely to have similar ideas and thoughts to share and discuss with each other, as well as having a general overview of the research topic and researcher when they completed the questionnaire. All focus groups were held in classrooms at the Institute of Education in the end of the term in May 2016.

However, certain aspects needed to be considered when conducting the focus groups. These included controlling and managing the group discussion, the difficulties of transcribing the record of the group conversation and encouraging silent individuals through discussion. In this study, due to Saudi culture, some female students were reticent about participating and discussing their views, adopting a silent role in the focus group conversation. Despite this, the researcher tried to encourage all the students to express their views and reassured them that anything discussed would be kept completely confidential, because confidentiality is an important factor of a successful group (Winslow et al., 2002). The researcher also tried to apply immediacy behaviours (for example, non-verbal immediacy) through discussion to encourage students' self-disclosure and liking, as well as increasing intimacy between herself and the participants. In addition, the researcher used follow-up questions and phrases, such as 'Can you tell me more?' and 'Could you give me an example?' to obtain more information and encourage the participants to talk.

Another issue was revealed in the focus group piloting; when transcribing the group conversation, the researcher did not know who was speaking at any one time. To overcome this barrier, the voice-recording was transcribed immediately after the focus group interview, using notes taken in the group discussion to code the students. There was also a technical problem when transcribing conversations from the voice-recording, because of poor and unclear sound quality. To address this problem, the researcher listened to the recording many times and a software program was used to improve its quality.

## **2. One-to-one interviews**

One-to-one interviews are a common method in educational research; providing an instrument that allows a researcher to ask open-ended questions and record answers from just one participant at a time (Creswell, 2012). It was decided to conduct one-to-one interviews

with the tutors selected for this study. One-to-one interviews are a suitable method of interviewing participants who are not hesitant in expressing and discussing their views and experiences comfortably with a researcher. It is also easy to control the interview meeting and to transcribe the recorded interview, because there is only one participant at a time (Denscombe, 2010; Creswell, 2012).

In the current study, the rationale for using one-to-one interviews is that they involve flexible questions, which allow easy interaction between the researcher and each participant and also help to encourage tutors to answer the questions freely, due to their experience in teaching and lecturing in female students campus. Unfortunately, focus groups with tutors were not possible, because there were male tutors participating in the study, which would have involved mixing genders (a difficult situation in Saudi society). However, in general, some challenges may be faced when conducting these one-to-one interviews, in that they were time-consuming and costly, in terms of travelling and choosing a convenient time to meet the participants.

#### ***4.6.2.2. Piloting***

The focus groups and one-to-one interviews were piloted to help the researcher gain some experience of conducting interviews in general and focus group interviewing in particular. The focus group interviews were therefore piloted with one group of volunteers from amongst the female students, while one-to-one interviews were conducted with two female tutors. All the pilot interviews took place in the targeted university, before conducting the main study. The feedback from the participants suggested that some terms needed to be clarified and explained. This piloting was important for the researcher to acquire skills in controlling and managing discussion, especially in focus groups, and in encouraging female students to talk and express their views in an interview situation.

#### ***4.6.2.3. Interview procedures***

Based on the contact information provided by the female students in the questionnaire, the respective participants were contacted to determine a convenient time and place for the interview, according to the students' free time. However, the venue selected was the Institute of Education campus.

The focus groups and interviews were conducted in May 2016. The focus groups included three groups of 5-7 students from different academic years and with diverse experience. The sessions ranged in duration from 45-60 minutes. At the beginning of the focus group interviews, the students were welcomed and the researcher introduced herself as a researcher, not a lecturer, in order to encourage active participation. Next, the research topic and aim was presented and the importance of the participants' information was explained. The researcher considers that this introduction and clarification encouraged the participants to express authentic views.

In addition, five male and eight female tutors, who had provided their personal details in the final section of the questionnaire, were contacted to confirm their willingness to participate and to arrange the place and time of the interviews. Four male and five female tutors were interviewed. The interviews took place one-to-one, were audio-recorded and were carried out on the female students' campus, while the interviews with the male tutors were conducted by phone. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted in Arabic, because the participants did not speak English. They were also audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the participants' answers and to double-check their responses, because the recording would be essential to the transcription process and is considered critical for the reliability of data and for producing real qualitative data (Bryman, 2012).

#### ***4.6.2.4. Trustworthiness of the qualitative data***

The literature has revealed that qualitative research employs quite different criteria from those applied in quantitative research. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), qualitative researchers tend to use the terminology, ‘trustworthiness’, ‘strength’ and ‘the transferability of knowledge’, rather than reliability, validity and generalisability. They claim that it is the criteria for trustworthiness that determine the quality of qualitative research findings, rather than the instruments, as in quantitative research. Therefore, qualitative researchers have classified criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research into credibility, transferability and dependability (Bryman, 2012). However, Anney (2014) points out that quantitative researchers take reliability, validity and objectivity into consideration to ensure the trustworthiness of inquiry findings. In contrast, qualitative researchers consider dependability, credibility and transferability to be criteria for trustworthiness, thus ensuring the rigour of qualitative findings.

In this case study, credibility, dependability and transferability were established to increase the trustworthiness of the qualitative data. Credibility refers to whether the study findings reflect what actually occurs in the context and whether a researcher has correctly understood what has been expressed (Bryman, 2012). There are several methods of establishing credibility, including triangulation and member checks (Pitney, 2004). In this study, triangulation was only applied via various methods of collecting data from different sources to ensure that the findings provide full understanding of the phenomena (Anney, 2014). However, member-checking was a difficult method to use in this study because of time restrictions and the distance between the researcher and the participants, which is a factor that also prevented the researcher from giving the participants the transcription of the interviews to check.

Triangulation has been classified into four types: data triangulation, researcher triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation (Anney, 2014). In this research, two types of triangulation were applied, namely data and methodological triangulation. These were intended to ensure the quality of the qualitative data. The data were triangulated by collecting information from different participants in focus group and one-to-one interviews. Furthermore, a triangulated mixed methods design was applied in this study, because it enabled a better picture to be built up; taking into consideration several data sources. Triangulation was also the main factor ensuring the dependability of the qualitative data.

Aside from the above, dependability relates to whether the study findings are reasonable, based on the data collected (Pitney, 2004). It can equally be measured in other ways, such as through an audit trail or member checks. Audit trail refers to a description of all processes in qualitative research, such as procedures for data collection, data analysis and data interpretation (Anney, 2014). In this study, an audit trail was established as a method of increasing dependability; explicitly detailing and documenting all the steps and stages implemented when conducting this research.

Furthermore, transferability criteria can be established through the details provided by the researcher about the participants and the context of the study. These can in turn help other researchers to make judgments about the potential transferability of findings to other contexts and situations with other participants (Bryman, 2012). According to Pitney (2004), the transferability criterion is “the interpretive equivalent of generalizability” (p.277). Shenton (2004) argues “without this insight ‘thick description’, it is difficult for the reader of the final account to determine the extent to which the overall findings ‘ring true’” (p.69). Therefore, to ensure transferability, the researcher in this current study provided a thick description of the context to facilitate decision-making amongst other researchers, when ascertaining whether the study could be appropriately applied to the context that they were interested in. However,

in this case study, the transferability of the qualitative findings did not primarily relate to generalising the results to other contexts (Shenton, 2004). Nonetheless, these findings could be valuable and possibly transferrable to other cases with similar circumstances. It is also argued that generalisation can be addressed in a different way, for example, by providing thick description (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, in this study, the participants' background and the Saudi context have been described in detail to help other researchers determine its transferability. Nevertheless, any judgement about its transferability will depend upon the research context concerned.

#### **4.6.2.5. Analysis of the qualitative data**

The analysis of the interview data involved collating and summarising responses to open-ended questions. It was presented through a process of thematic analysis - which included generating and applying the codes that emerged from the data and categorising them into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 8 shows the procedures for thematic analysis that are suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Table 8. Process of thematic analysis

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Description of the Process</b>
<b>1. Familiarising oneself with the data</b>	Self-transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data; noting down initial ideas.
<b>2. Generating initial codes</b>	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set; collating data relevant to each code.
<b>3. Searching for themes</b>	Collating codes into potential themes; gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
<b>4. Reviewing the themes</b>	Checking whether the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2); generating a clear definition and names for each theme.
<b>5. Defining and naming themes</b>	Maintaining ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story told in the analysis; generating

	a clear definition and names for each theme.
<b>6. Producing the report</b>	The final opportunity for analysis; selection of vivid, compelling extract examples; final analysis; selection of extracts; relating the analysis back to the research questions and literature; producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87)

In this study, the interviews were transcribed and analysed in Arabic and then only those that would later be used in the Chapter 6 (the Qualitative findings chapter) were translated into English by the researcher and were verified by two bilingual English-Arabic speakers. (See appendix 11 for some examples of original quotations). More accurate meaning was achievable when first analysing the data in Arabic, which allowed the researcher to remain close to the original data (Liamputtong, 2008). The researcher read the interview transcripts numerous times to familiarise herself with the data.

In the second stage, codes were formulated to help organise the emerging themes and ideas. Coding means, “naming segments of data with a label that categorizes, summarizes and accounts for each piece of data” (Cohen et al., 2007). Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Robson (2002) suggest that qualitative coding directs the researcher to new areas that were not considered when the research idea was initially proposed. The researcher applied manual techniques for data analysis, such as the use of different colours to highlight different codes. During this stage, all segments of the transcripts were coded and each code was written next to the segment. See figure 8 for an example of the coding process.



Figure 8. Example of interview coding

Next, lists of codes were generated and the codes subsequently categorised into sub-themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this stage helps the researcher to re-focus on the analysis in terms of the broader themes, rather than the codes. For example, codes such as respond immediately, respond to questions and comments, and responding to students were gathered under subtheme of ‘responsiveness’. The sub-themes were then grouped under three main themes; two of these reflect the research questions, and the other emerged from the participants’ interview data.

Consequently, the interview analysis produced several recurring general themes along with various sub-themes, which will be presented in the following chapter. The themes discussed are supported with interview quotes that are most representative of the overall views; giving consideration to all viewpoints. This was to ensure neutrality and avoid any bias. It should be noted that some of the interviewees are quoted more than once throughout the chapter.

#### **4.7. Ethical Considerations**

When undertaking a research project, the researcher should be alert and consider carefully ethical issues that can arise in relation to aspects such as the nature of the research, the context, and the data collection methods (Cohen et al., 2007).

Permission for this research and ethical approval were sought and granted through the University of Reading Ethics Committee and assurance on such matters as the consent form, confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity of the questionnaire respondents and interview participants was formally stated (see Appendix 9). The researcher then obtained approval and permission from the targeted university to enter the female campus of the Institute of Education and conduct this study.

In order to meet the ethical requirements, an information sheet about the study and the researcher were issued, which also explained how the participants' privacy would be ensured (see Appendices 3 and 4). A consent form was attached to each questionnaire and both the students' and tutors' versions were designed and distributed in a way that confirmed the participants' anonymity and confidentiality, and provided reassurance that consent was completely voluntary.

Anonymity is an ethical issue relating to qualitative data collection, which is the responsibility of the researcher. The participants were therefore assured that their identities would not be revealed and that no one else would have access to their data. For the students and tutors interviewed, a consent form was provided. The researcher then gave an oral explanation of the study. The participants were subsequently informed that they were free to withdraw from the interview at any stage and could omit to answer any question that they did not wish to address. In addition, they were told that the goals and results of the study could be published in conference papers or journals.

With respect to the online questionnaire, a link to it was provided for the male tutors via the WhatsApp social network. This was due to the fact that it was very difficult for the researcher to access them, because they were in a segregated campus, which excluded women. Furthermore, it is prohibited and unacceptable in Saudi religion and culture for female researchers to meet male tutors in a public place. Therefore, to confirm consent to participate, the online questionnaire option only allowed the participants to complete it after they had confirmed that they had read the description and purpose of the study presented to them, before they could access the questionnaire. This procedure helped ensure that the participants had access to the same information that they would receive before completing a paper-based questionnaire. It also conforms to an approved ethical procedure for conducting online surveys (Roberts & Allen, 2015).

Moreover, the researcher was an insider researcher, that is, a member of faculty in the Institute of Education. The advantage of being an insider researcher includes having experience and knowledge of the culture and practices of tutors and college. However, there are some ethical dilemmas that might arise from this position, too, including a potential influence on the participants' views and responses and the information obtained, as well as bias arising when analysing the data. To avoid such problems, a confidential questionnaire was used to facilitate honesty in the responses, and the researcher distributed the questionnaires to tutors and students with the minimum communication necessary for the task and sometimes left the room until the participants had completed their questionnaires. In this way, she kept a distance between herself and them. Furthermore, in the interviews, the researcher assured the participants that her presence was only required to complete the study.

#### **4.8. Summary**

This chapter has explained why a mixed methods design was chosen; justifying the adoption of a pragmatic paradigm, as opposed to positivist or interpretivist paradigms. A mixed methods case study design was considered appropriate for addressing the research questions in this current study. This chapter has discussed the study context and the reasons why a purposive sample of female students and tutors was chosen. The application of a questionnaire as the quantitative method of data collection was also considered. The chapter describes its piloting and how validity and reliability were ensured, as well as explaining how the questionnaire data were analysed. It reviews types of interview, defining which were selected for this study, and discussing the analysis and trustworthiness of the interview data. Finally, the ethical issues relating to this study were examined. The next chapter will now present the quantitative results.

## **Chapter 5: The Quantitative Results**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the results of the quantitative data, followed by the qualitative data in Chapter 6. The first part of this Chapter 5 examines the distribution of the quantitative data, with a view to assessing its normality. The second part of the chapter analyses the descriptive statistics for the female students' data, beginning with data on the students' background. This is then followed by their views on the use and importance of immediacy practices in a VLE, ending with a descriptive analysis of their perceptions. The third part of this chapter follows the same structure to outline the tutors' descriptive analysis. The subsequent section then examines the differences between the perceptions of the female students and tutors. Finally, the last part includes two sections that discuss the effect of background information on the participants' views, one focusing on the female students and the other, on the tutors.

In this next section, the distribution of the data is examined. It also provides an overview of the method applied to seek normal distributions within the quantitative data.

### **5.2 Distribution of Data**

Researchers should be aware of the data distribution before describing and analysing it, because this distribution will influence the way in which research findings are interpreted (Sainani, 2012). For example, abnormal data “may lack symmetry, may have extreme values or may have a flatter or steeper dome than a typical bell” (Sainani, 2012, p.1001). There are several types of methods and tests for examining data distribution, such as the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, the examination of skewness and kurtosis values, and the Shapiro-Wilk Test.

In this study, the data distribution was examined using the items' skewness and kurtosis scores, whereby histograms constituted the graphical technique for illustrating these values, as suggested by Field (2009). Skewness is a measure of the degree of symmetry in a distribution. A normal distribution will have a skewness of around zero. A Negative or positive skewed distribution is identified when “the most frequent scores are clustered at one end at the scale” (Field, 2009, p.19), as in Figure 9, while the typical pattern of skewness is the tendency for the scores to be more frequent around the high or low ends on the x-axis of the histogram (Field, 2009). Meanwhile, kurtosis refers to “the degree to which scores cluster at the ends of the distribution (known as the tails) and how pointy a distribution is” (Field, 2009, p.19). The value of kurtosis in normal distribution is equal to zero (Field, 2009).

The following example is a histogram of item 14 from the female students' data, chosen as it represents the skewness and kurtosis scores (Garth, 2008; Field, 2009).

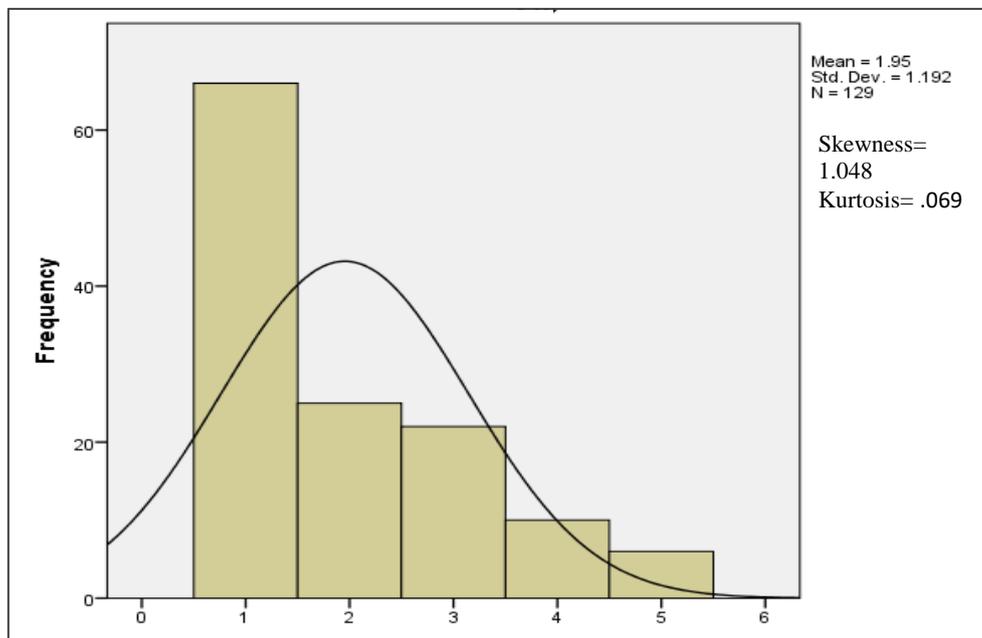


Figure 9. Data distribution for item 14 in scale 1 (the female students' data)

As explained earlier, the score for skewness or kurtosis in a normal distribution of data is zero, while scores above or below zero indicate abnormal data distribution. Figure 9, above, shows that the values are piled as low scores (at the left-hand side of the graph), because the skewness for item 14 from the first scale ('uses humour when delivering a lecture and communicating with students'), derived from the female students' data, is positively skewed at a value of 1.048. The kurtosis value is therefore .069, which is a dimensionless metric that shows how fat the tails (i.e. the extremities) of the distribution are, compared to normality. Meanwhile, positive kurtosis demonstrates that the data distribution has a 'high peak', whereas if the distribution is a 'flat-topped curve', the kurtosis is negative (Kim, 2013, p.53). Figure 9 illustrates a positive kurtosis of 0.069 in the distribution. Put differently, the female students strongly disagreed with this item, which produced a more positive kurtosis value. More examples of skewness and kurtosis values for the female students' and tutors' data are presented in Appendix 12.

An examination revealed that none of the histograms of any of the items for either the students' or tutors' data were normally distributed. Therefore, non-parametric statistical tests were applied to analyse the questionnaire data. Cohen et al. (2007) state that "non-parametric tests make few or no assumptions about the distribution of the population (the parameters of the scores) or the characteristics of the population" (p.415).

In the following sections, the students' and tutors' perceptions of immediacy practices in a VLE will be presented.

### **5.3. The Perceptions of Female Students and Tutors**

This section presents students' and tutors' background information and their perceptions of the use and importance of immediacy in a VLE. It includes two parts; each presenting a

descriptive analysis of the participants' data; beginning with data on their background and followed by a presentation of their views of the use of immediacy practices and their importance, concluding with a summary.

In presenting the female students' and tutors' results in the Table, the frequency of response (%), median (Mdn) scores and interquartile range (IQR) values were included, because these values summarised the central tendencies in the data. The median is a measure of central tendency and the interquartile range is a measure of the spread from the centre, which means that the median and interquartile range relate to each other in a similar way to the mean and standard deviation (Field, 2009). Furthermore, in the following presentation of the results, the mean and standard deviation have been added to refine the description of the findings, based on a scale ranging from highest to lowest agreement, because the median scores are always the same crude values of 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5. Here, the mean is not used as a measure of the central tendency in the data, but rather adds precision in ascertaining any differences that might exist between the same medians.

#### **5.4. Descriptive Results for the Female Students**

This section provides background information on the female students and a description of their perceptions. It begins with their background information and then presents a descriptive analysis of both scales of the questionnaire. Finally, the results are summarised.

##### **5.4.1. Female students' background information**

Table 9 presents background information on the female students, with regard to their academic year and experience of using VLE tools.

Table 9. Female students' background information

<b>Background information</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Count (n)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
		<b>129</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Academic year</b>	Year 1	35	27.1%
	Year 2	23	17.8%
	Year 3	16	12.4%
	Year 4	55	42.0%
<b>Experience of using VLE tools</b>	Beginner	25	19.4%
	Moderate	93	72.1%
	Experienced	11	8.5%

As shown in Table 9, most of the female undergraduate students sampled (42%) were studying in Year 4, whereas 27.1% were studying in Year 1, and 17.8% and 12.4% were studying in Years 2 and 3, respectively. Of the students, 72.1% had moderate experience in using VLE tools (Blackboard), 19.4% were beginners, and 8.5% were experienced. Most of the students therefore had moderate experience of using VLE tools and were familiar with them.

As may be noted in the above Table, 93 out of 129 students had moderate knowledge and experience of using VLE tools and these were likely to be in their fourth year of academic study, because most of the participants were in that year. To clarify, the researcher used 'Crosstabulation' analysis in SPSS, which is a way of demonstrating the presence or absence of a relationship between variables, such as academic year and experience of using VLE tools in this dimension of the findings, before identifying which group characterised by academic year was more experienced than the others. Table 10 presents the percentages for the results of crosstabulating academic year with level of experience.

Table 10. Cross-tabulation analysis of academic year with experience of using VLE tools

Academic Year	Experience of Using VLE Tools		
	Beginner	Moderate	Experienced
First	58%	20%	18%
Second	8%	20%	0%
Third	16%	10%	18%
Fourth	16%	46%	63%
Total	100%	100%	100%

The above Table shows that students in their fourth academic year were most likely to have a moderate or experienced level of using VLE tools. This could be due to the fact that most of these participants had acquired enough experience in their previous three years to deal effectively with VLE tools, such as discussion boards and email. In the next section, an overview of the female students' perceptions is presented.

#### 5.4.2. Female students' perceptions

##### 5.4.2.1. Female students' perceptions of the use of immediacy practices

Table 11 presents the central tendency relating to female students' perceptions of immediacy practices in a VLE, as represented by the median (Mdn), interquartile range (IQR), and mean and standard deviation. Also included are the most and least frequent immediacy practices used by tutors in a VLE.

Table 11. Female students' perceptions of the use of immediacy practices

Items	SD (1) (100%)	D (2) (100%)	N (3) (100%)	A (4) (100%)	SA (5) (100%)	Mean (SD)	Mdn (IQR)
16. My tutor communicates the course goals, policies and procedures.	10.9%	14.7%	19.4%	28.7%	26.4%	3.45 (1.317)	4.0 (3)
5. My tutor attempts to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	10.1%	15.5%	23.3%	21.7%	28.7%	3.41 (1.356)	4.0 (3)
2. My tutor shows appreciation for students' questions or comments.	7.8%	20.2%	25.6%	27.9%	18.6%	3.29 (1.208)	3.0 (2)
12. My tutor addresses students by name.	29.5%	15.5%	23.3%	16.3%	13.2%	2.63 (1.426)	3.0 (3)
15. My tutor uses and discusses personal examples and experiences.	32.6%	25.6%	20.9%	10.9%	7.8%	2.33 (1.270)	2.0 (2)
14. My tutor uses humour with students when delivering lectures.	48.8%	19.4%	17.1%	7.8%	4.7%	1.95 (1.201)	1.0 (2)

Asked about their perceptions of tutor immediacy practices in a VLE, 55% of the female students agreed/strongly agreed that their tutors communicated the course goals, policies and procedures and 50% agreed/strongly agreed that their tutors attempted to answer questions and inquiries about course content. A similar proportion (47%) agreed/strongly agreed that their tutors showed appreciation for students' questions as an immediacy action in a VLE. These results reveal moderate percentages for the students' responses, which means that

nearly half the students agreed/strongly agreed in their perceptions of the above-mentioned practices. These practices probably help them to understand their learning process and what they need, in order to be able to deal with online courses. It could also be that students in the Saudi education context are highly dependent on their tutors in class (the tutor-centred approach). Therefore, these immediacy practices help students to avoid worrying about missing important points on their courses.

Several findings indicated that the tutors tended to maintain a formal relationship with the female students. For example, 49% of the students strongly disagreed with the statement that their tutor used humour, while only 12% agreed/strongly agreed with this statement. Furthermore, as many as 58% disagreed/strongly disagreed that their tutor used 'a tutor uses and discusses personal examples'. In addition, 45% disagreed/strongly disagreed that their tutor addressed students by name. The use of humour and self-disclosure were therefore perceived as a less frequent form of immediacy used by tutors. This may be because Saudi culture encourages tutors to keep their relationship with students formal and maintain a distance between them. Another possible reason is that the tutors did not trust in the technology sufficiently to discuss their personal experiences with their students via these channels. Moreover, the sharing of personal experiences could become an obstacle for a student when attempting to understand or explore certain points of a lecture, although tutors can tell stories to help clarify the content of a lecture.

#### ***5.4.2.2. Female students' perceptions of the importance of immediacy practices***

The following Table presents the female students' perceptions of the importance of tutor immediacy practices in a VLE.

Table 12. Female students' perceptions of the importance of immediacy practices

Items	SD (1) (100%)	D (2) (100%)	N (3) (100%)	A (4) (100%)	SA (5) (100%)	Mean (SD)	Mdn (IQR)
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	7.0%	14.0%	12.4%	32.6%	34.1	3.73 (1.261)	4.0 (2)
3. Immediacy practices enhance my participation.	14%	10.1%	20.9%	30.2%	24.8%	3.42 (1.339)	4.0 (2)
2. Immediacy practices encourage me to interact with peers.	7.8%	23.3%	17.1%	26.4%	25.6%	3.39 (1.301)	4.0 (3)
1. Immediacy practices encourage me to interact with the tutor.	16.3%	14.0%	25.6%	24.8%	19.4%	3.17 (1.341)	3.0 (2)

It is apparent from Table 12 that 67% of the female students agreed/strongly agreed with the following statement: ‘immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning’. Furthermore, 55% agreed/strongly agreed that immediacy practices enhanced their participation, and 52% agreed/strongly agreed that tutor immediacy encouraged them to interact with their classmates. Meanwhile, around 43% of the students agreed/strongly agreed that immediacy practices encouraged student-tutor interaction; referring to the dialogue between students and tutors in a conversation. From the perspective of the female students, the perception of student-tutor interaction was the item with the least agreement/strong agreement. This suggests that the relationship between tutors and students in Blackboard is formal and the role of the student in the Saudi face-to-face classroom, namely as a listener and follower, has transferred to online courses.

Overall, half the students perceived the importance of immediacy practices in a VLE. They believed that these practices enhanced their participation, interaction and learning. It would seem that those students' tutors were knowledgeable about implementing immediacy practices in their teaching via Blackboard tools. Meanwhile, in the case of other students, who agreed less with the importance of immediacy practices in their questionnaire responses, their tutors may have failed to use these practices in online courses or lacked experience and skill in using Blackboard tools.

#### **5.4.3. Summary of Results for the Female Students' Perceptions**

This section has presented the various views of female students as regards tutor immediacy practices in a VLE. Around half the students agreed on the presence of three immediacy practices: (1) the tutor communicates the course goals, policies and procedures; (2) the tutor attempts to answer the students' questions and inquiries, and (3) the tutor shows appreciation for the students' questions or comments. However, around half the students strongly disagreed that their tutor used humour as an immediacy action in a VLE. Regarding the importance of immediacy practices, between 43% and 67% of the students perceived immediacy practices to be important in a VLE. These practices included supporting online teaching and learning, enhancing the students' participation, and encouraging students to interact with their peers and tutors.

#### **5.5. Descriptive Results for the Tutors**

This section on the tutors' descriptive results follows the same structure as the above, with the presentation of the tutors' background information, followed by the tutors' perceptions of immediacy practices in a VLE. It concludes by outlining the tutors' views on the importance of these practices. Finally, a summary of the above is provided.

### 5.5.1. Tutors' background information

Table 13 presents the tutors' background information, with details of their nationality, gender, academic qualifications, online teaching experience in years and experience of using VLE tools.

Table 13. Tutors' background information

Background information	Value	Count (47)	Percentage (100%)
<b>Nationality</b>	Saudi tutors	15	31.9%
	Other Arabic-speaking tutors	32	68.1%
<b>Gender</b>	Female	37	78.7%
	Male	10	19.1%
<b>Academic qualification</b>	Bachelor's	5	10.6%
	Master's	8	17.0%
	PhD	34	72.3%
<b>Online teaching experience</b>	0-5 years	37	78.7%
	6-10 years	2	4.3%
	More than 10 years	8	17.0%
<b>Experience of using VLE tools</b>	Beginner	4	8.5%
	Moderate	32	68.1%
	Experienced	11	23.4%

As shown in Table 13, most of the tutors were from Arab countries other than Saudi Arabia, such as the Sudan or Jordan, whereas 40% were Saudi. Out of these tutors, 79% were women. This might be due to Saudi Arabia's gender-segregated universities, or the fact that most tutors on women's campuses are female, except in some subjects or departments with a scarcity of female tutors, where it is necessary to deploy male lecturers to teach female

students. The majority of the tutors 72% held a PhD, and 17% held a Master's degree, whereas 11% held a Bachelor's degree. This could be due to the preference amongst Saudi universities to employ lecturers with PhD degrees in Education departments.

According to the tutors' online teaching experience at the time of the data collection, most of the tutors (79%) had taught online for 0-5 years, while 17% had taught online for more than 10 years, and only 4% for 6-10 years. This could be because the University (the context of this study) is new, having only been built in 2006, with an e-learning system being introduced in 2011.

Of the tutors surveyed, 68% had moderate experience of using VLE tools, 23% were experienced, and 9% were beginners. However, most of the tutors had adequate experience of using VLE tools, perhaps because they had attended sessions to improve their technology skills and knowledge in general, or in Blackboard tools in particular.

## **5.5.2. Tutors' perceptions**

### ***5.5.2.1. Tutors' perceptions of the use of immediacy practices***

Table 14 provides the descriptive results for tutors' perceptions of the use of immediacy practices in a VLE. The median scores and 'interquartile range' values are included to show the central tendency and spread of the data, and as mentioned before, the mean and standard deviation are only presented to refine the results. Therefore, the items are presented based on their mean value.

Table 14. Tutors' perceptions of the use of immediacy practices

Items	SD (1) 100%	D (2) 100%	N (3) 100%	A (4) 100%	SA (5) 100%	Mean (SD)	Mdn (IQR)
7. I ask students if they have any questions or need additional information.	12.8	0.0	8.5	12.8	66.0	4.19 (1.377)	5.0 (1)
5. I attempt to answer students' questions or inquiries about course content.	14.9	2.1	6.4	12.8	63.8	4.09 (1.472)	5.0 (1)
8. I support students by giving feedback on their work or posts.	14.9	0.0	6.4	19.1	59.6	4.09 (1.427)	5.0 (1)
12. I address students by name.	10.6	6.4	21.3	23.4	38.3	3.72 (1.330)	4.0 (2)
14. I use humour with students.	19.1	8.5	27.7	34.0	10.6	3.09 (1.282)	3.0 (2)
15. I use and discuss personal examples and experiences	23.4	19.1	23.4	19.1	14.9	2.83 (1.388)	3.0 (2)

Table 14 reveals that the tutors tended to strongly agree with most items of the first scale, for example 66% agreeing strongly with 'ask students if they have any questions or need additional information' and 64% with 'attempt to answer questions or inquiries about the course'. Moreover, 60% of the tutors strongly agreed that 'providing feedback' was the most common immediacy practice applied within a VLE. The above items that were strongly agreed with by the tutors resembled the students' results. The tutors appear to be aware of their role as facilitators in Blackboard, where they answer questions, clarify information and

provide feedback, which can help to enhance students' learning. With regard to the rest of the items, nearly half of the tutors agreed with using these practices in a VLE.

### 5.5.2.2. Tutors' perceptions of the importance of immediacy practices

Table 15 shows tutors' perceptions of the importance of immediacy practices when using VLE tools.

Table 15. Tutors' perceptions of the importance of immediacy practices

Items	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean (SD)	Mdn (IQR)
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	0.0	2.1	6.3	27.1	62.5	4.53 (.717)	5.0 (1)
1. Immediacy practices support my interaction with students.	2.1	2.1	8.3	33.3	52.1	4.34 (.891)	5.0 (1)
2. Immediacy practices encourage my students to interact with their peers.	0.0	2.1	20.8	39.6	36.2	4.10 (.813)	4.0 (1)
3. Immediacy practices enhance my students' participation.	0.0	8.3	18.8	33.3	37.5	4.02 (.966)	4.0 (2)

Table 15 indicates that the tutors generally agreed that immediacy practices were important, with around 89% agreeing/strongly agreeing with their importance for supporting online teaching and learning. When comparing the tutors' mean of 4.53 with the mean of 3.73 for the female students, it would appear that the tutors viewed immediacy practices as being even more important than was the case amongst the students. The tutors believed that the female

students needed to engage in and enhance their learning within the VLE. They may therefore understand that immediacy practices have an important impact on students' interaction, participation and learning in this context.

A high proportion (85%) of the tutors agreed/strongly agreed that immediacy practices supported their interaction with students, which suggests that tutor immediacy practices can encourage Saudi female students to communicate and interact with their tutors. There was slightly less agreement with items 2 and 3, as 76% agreed/strongly agreed that immediacy practices encouraged their students to interact with their peers and 71% agreed/strongly agreed that they encouraged their students' participation.

The tutors may have realised that their pedagogical approach should be modified to include approaches that are more appropriate for online learning. However, it is clear that there is a difference between tutors' and students' perceptions of the importance of e-immediacy practices. In section 5.6, this difference will be presented using appropriate statistical tests.

### **5.5.3. Summary of Results for Tutors' Perceptions**

Overall, from the results of the tutors' perceptions in the two scales, it would appear that the tutors agreed/strongly agreed with the existence and importance of e-immediacy practices. The scale relating to the use of immediacy practices showed strong agreement with some items, such as 'asking students if they have questions or need additional information', 'attempting to answer questions' and 'providing feedback'. Meanwhile, there was less agreement amongst tutors with statements relating to practices involving the use of humour or personal examples, perhaps because of the position of the tutor in Saudi culture, with tutors tending to prefer teaching in a very formal setting. It could also be due to the fact that some of the participating tutors were male and so they dealt with women in a very formal

way, according to Saudi culture and traditions. In terms of perception of the importance of immediacy practices in a VLE, the tutors generally agreed/strongly agreed. In fact, for the importance of tutors' immediacy practices in online teaching and learning, and the encouragement of student-tutor interaction, tutor agreement was the strongest.

## **5.6. Differences between the Perceptions of Female Students and Tutors**

This section will compare and contrast the perceptions of female students and tutors as regards immediacy practices in a VLE. The differences were examined using non-parametric tests, because of the abnormal distribution. The most appropriate statistical test for this comparison was found to be the Mann-Whitney U-Test, which is valid for testing the difference between two sets of abnormally distributed data (Field, 2009). This section will further examine effect size 'r', which is "to quantify the strength of the difference between two means or two variables" (Creswell, 2012, p.195). This Test is calculated using the formula,  $r = \frac{z}{\sqrt{N}}$ , with "the z score divided by the square root of the total sample size" (Boduszek, 2011). Cohen et al. (2007) make some suggestions for classifying effect size values, namely ".10 for a small effect size, .30 for a medium effect size, and .50 for a large effect size". This test was also designed for small samples (Field, 2009) and so it is appropriate for the study data.

Table 16 reveals the findings that emerged from the Mann-Whitney U (M-W) Test that compared students' and tutors' perceptions of the use and importance of immediacy practices in a VLE. All the items were tested individually and those revealing significant differences are presented in this Table, which includes the following values: Mdn, M-W Test, Z score (z), P-value (p), and effect size' (r).

Table 16. The difference between students' and tutors' perceptions

Items	Mdn (mean rank)				(M-W)	(Z)	(p)	(r)
	N	Students	N	Tutors				
Scale 1: The use of immediacy practices in a VLE								
1. Receives and reads emails and posts.	129	3.0 (79.66)	47	4.0 (112.78)	1890.50	-3.910	.000*	0.29^^
2. Shows appreciation for students' questions or comments.	129	3.0 (80.24)	47	5.0 (111.18)	1965.50	-3.659	.000*	0.27^^
3. Is accessible and easy to reach when students have questions.	129	3.0 (76.86)	47	5.0 (119.23)	1591.50	-4.932	.000*	0.37^^
6. Attempts to review course topics and assignments, etc.	129	3.0 (76.85)	47	5.0 (119.27)	1558.50	-4.944	.000*	0.37^^
7. Asks students if they have any questions or need additional information.	129	3.0 (79.07)	47	5.0 (113.04)	1862.00	-4.047	.000*	0.30^^
8. Supports students by giving feedback on their work or posts.	129	3.0 (77.73)	47	5.0 (116.80)	1673.00	-4.660	.000*	0.35^^
9. Provides guidance and direction on course assignments and activities.	129	3.0 (78.45)	47	5.0 (114.11)	11863.00	-4.012	.000*	0.30^^
10. Explains how to respond to posts or emails.	129	3.0 (76.70)	47	4.0 (119.68)	1608.50	-4.864	.000*	0.36^^

11. Monitors students' progress.	129	3.0 (79.26)	47	5.0 (112.52)	1863.00	-3.761	.000*	0.28^^
12. Addresses students by name.	129	3.0 (78.45)	47	4.0 (114.77)	1853.50	-4.028	.000*	0.30^^
13. Encourages students to interact with each other.	129	3.0 (77.74)	47	4.0 (116.78)	1792.00	-4.456	.000*	0.33^^
14. Uses humour with students when delivering lectures	129	1.0 (77.28)	47	3.0 (118.08)	1678.50	-4.736	.000*	0.35^^
17. Replies to students' emails within 24 hours.	129	3.0 (78.14)	47	4.0 (115.64)	1716.50	-4.502	.000*	0.33^^
18. Responds promptly to students' comments and questions.	129	3.0 (78.12)	47	4.0 (115.71)	1805.50	-4.186	.000*	0.31^^
<b>Scale 2: Importance of immediacy practices in a VLE</b>								
1. Immediacy practices encourage student-tutor interaction.	129	3.0 (76.45)	47	5.0 (121.56)	1477.50	-5.346	.000*	0.40^^
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	129	4.0 (79.55)	47	5.0 (113.07)	1876.00	-4.085	.000*	0.30^^

N=number of students and tutors; \*=significant difference; ^^ = medium effect size

The findings in Table 16 can be summarised simply: the tutors were significantly more likely than the students to believe that the use and importance of immediacy practices in a VLE enhances students' learning. That is to say, the tutors believed more powerfully than their students in the potential of these practices. The differences between most of the items in both scales showed a medium effect size. For example, item 1 in the second scale, 'immediacy

practices encourage student-tutor interaction', was favoured by the tutors (Mdn=5.00) over the students (Mdn=3.00),  $U=1477$ ,  $z=-5.346$ ,  $p<0.001$ , with a medium-sized difference between the students' and tutors' views ( $r= .40$ ). It is therefore evident that the tutors were aware of immediacy practices and their importance in VLE tools.

To address the reason for the differences between the students' and tutors' perceptions, the next section (section 5.7) will present the effect of background characteristics. These background factors may have had an impact on the participants' perceptions of the use and importance of e-immediacy practices in enhancing female students' learning.

### **5.7. Factors Affecting Female Students' Perceptions**

This section presents the relationship between female students' background characteristics and their perceptions of tutors' immediacy practices in a VLE. There are two factors that relate to the female students' background, namely academic year and experience of using VLE tools. Mann-Whitney U (M-W) and Kruskal-Wallis (K-W) Tests were applied to show statistically significant differences between groups, based on academic year and experience of using VLE tools, as expressed in the students' perceptions.

The M-W Test was applied to show significant differences between the two groups. Conversely, the K-W Test can reveal significant differences between more than two groups (Field, 2009).

#### **Academic Year**

In this section, it will be ascertained whether there is a significant difference between the groups based on academic year, in terms of the students' perceptions of the use and importance of immediacy practices in a VLE. Table 17 shows the findings of the K-W Test,

which was implemented to examine whether there was a significant difference in the female students' views of the items, based on academic year: Year 1 (n=35), Year 2 (n=23), Year 3 (n=16) and Year 4 (n=55). The Table only includes statements that show a significant difference across the groups (see Appendix 13). Meanwhile, the following Table presents the K-W Test results and includes the median scores, K-W Test values, degrees of freedom (df), and p-value (p).

Table 17. K-W test results for differences between female students by academic year

Items	Academic year (median value)				K-W	df	P
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4			
Scale 1: The use of immediacy practices							
1. My tutor confirms when he/she receives and reads a message or posting.	4	3	3	3	15.28	3	.002*
2. My tutor shows appreciation for students' questions or contributions.	4	4	4	3	14.83	3	.002*
3. My tutor is willing to message or chat with students (via email or discussion boards).	3	4	3	3	9.311	3	.025*
4. My tutor is accessible and easy to reach when students have any questions.	3	3	3	3	8.27	3	.014*
5. My tutor attempts to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	4	4	4	3	11.77	3	.008*
9. My tutor provides guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.	4	4	4	3	10.52	3	.015*
10. My tutor explains how to	3	3	3	2	8.32	3	.040*

respond to messages or emails.							
11. My tutor monitors students' progress.	4	4	3.50	3	14.21	3	.003*
13. My tutor encourages students to interact with each other.	3	3	3	2	11.08	3	.011*
17. My tutor replies to students' emails within 24 hours.	3	3	3	2	10.42	3	.015*
18. My tutor responds promptly to students' comments and questions.	3	3	3	2	9.585	3	.022*
Scale 2: The importance of immediacy practices							
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	5	4	4	4	9.339	3	.025*

\*The significant difference

The above Table shows a significant difference between groups in responding to the use of e-immediacy practice items; for example, in item 1 (.002,  $p < .05$ ), item 2 (.002,  $p < .05$ ) and item 11 (.003,  $p < .50$ ). This difference may have occurred between the groups due to their tutors' efforts in using immediacy practices, which seemed to change from year to year, because the students needed more communication practices from their tutors in a new environment, in order to reduce the physical distance between them. However, the K-W Test does not reveal which groups display a significant difference. Therefore, sets of M-W test were conducted post-hoc to identify the differences between the groups for each item, as presented in Table 18.

Table 18. M-W Test results for differences between female students by academic year

Items	Academic year		M-W	z	p	r
	(Median)					
	Year 1	Year 3				
15. My tutor uses and discusses personal examples and experiences.	2.0	2.50	173.00	-2.245	.025	0.19 <sup>^</sup>
	Year 1	Year 4				
1. My tutor confirms when she/he receives and reads emails and posts.	4.0	3.0	519.50	-3.774	.000	0.33 <sup>^^</sup>
2. My tutor shows appreciation for student's questions or comments.	4.0	3.0	617.50	-2.926	.003	0.25 <sup>^</sup>
4. My tutor is accessible and easy to reach when students have any questions.	5.0	4.0	620.50	-2.382	.003	0.20 <sup>^</sup>
5. My tutor attempts to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	4.0	3.0	617.00	-2.937	.003	0.25 <sup>^</sup>
9. My tutor provides guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.	4.0	3.0	652.50	-2.625	.009	0.23 <sup>^</sup>
11. My tutor monitors students' progress.	4.0	3.0	675.50	-2.424	.015	0.12 <sup>^</sup>
13. My tutor encourages students to interact with each other.	3.0	2.0	703.00	-2.213	.027	0.19 <sup>^</sup>
17. My tutor replies to students' emails within 24 hours.	3.0	2.0	622.50	-2.886	.004	0.25 <sup>^</sup>
18. My tutor responds promptly to students' comments and questions.	3.0	2.0	641.00	-2.727	.006	0.24 <sup>^</sup>
4. Immediacy practices are important	5.0	4.0	620.50	-2.947	.003	0.25 <sup>^</sup>

for supporting online teaching and learning.						
	Year 2	Year 4				
2. My tutor shows appreciation for student's questions or comments.	4.0	3.0	375.00	-2.895	.004	0.25^
5. My tutor attempts to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	4.0	3.0	425.50	-2.320	.020	0.20^
9. My tutor provides guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.	4.0	3.0	409.50	-2.499	.012	0.22^
11. My tutor monitors students' progress.	4.0	3.0	308.00	-3.657	.000	0.32^^
13. My tutor encourages students to interact with each other.	3.0	2.0	400.50	-2.619	.009	0.23^
	Year 3	Year 4				
2. My tutor shows appreciation for students' questions or comments.	4.0	3.0	257.50	-2.599	.009	0.22^
3. My tutor is Willing to message or chat with students (via email or discussion boards).	3.0 (47.56)	3.0 (32.64)	255.00	-2.618	.009	0.23^
4. My tutor is accessible and easy to reach when students have any questions.	3.0 (45.72)	3.0 (33.17)	284.50	-2.206	.027	0.19^
10. My tutor explains how to respond to and send messages.	3.0	2.0	258.00	-2.586	.010	0.22^
13. My tutor encourages students to interact with each other.	3.0	2.0	263.50	-2.508	.012	0.22^

After using the M-W Test as a post-hoc test to find significant difference, comparisons were made for each item across all the groups; for example, responses to item (1) were compared across the first, second, third and fourth academic years, while the second year was compared with the third and fourth, and finally, comparisons were made between the third and fourth years.

Table 18 shows that in general, there was a significant difference between the students in the first, second and third academic years, compared with the fourth year, for most items of the first scale of the questionnaire, which referred to perceptions of the use of immediacy practices in a VLE. In addition, there was a significant difference across the first and third academic year groups, which was only revealed in item 15 “my tutor uses personal examples” within the first scale. There was also a significant difference for item 4 in the second scale: ‘Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning’, which was revealed between students in the first and fourth academic years. However, the effect size for most of the items was small; indicating that this difference is neither significant nor strong.

The results suggest that in this present study, students in their early academic years at the University perceived the above items as the most common e-immediacy practices used by tutors. This could be due to tutors taking more responsibility for new female students in their online learning. Meanwhile, female students in the fourth year seemed to have developed more independence in their learning over the course of the four years of study; making the perception of immediacy practices less important over time.

## Experience of Using VLE Tools

This section examines the impact of experience in using VLE tools on female students' perceptions of the use and importance of immediacy practices. Knowledge of the use of VLE tools, such as a discussion board, email or video conferencing can influence students' learning, potentially leading them to feel anxious or dissatisfied. Therefore, it was necessary to explore this factor, in order to find out if there was any effect on the female students' perceptions. However, the results of the K-W Test displayed a significant difference for item 13. Table 19 presents the results of this Test, comparing each of the items according to the three levels of experience, ranging from beginner to experienced (see Appendix 14).

Table 19. K-W Test results for differences between female students  
(experience of using VLE tools)

Items	Experience of using VLE tools			K-W	df	p
	Beginner	Moderate	Experienced			
Scale 1: Use of immediacy practices						
18. My tutor responds promptly to students' posts, inquiries, comments and questions.	3	3	1	7.229	2	.027*

\*The significant difference

Table 19 reveals a significant difference for item 18 (.027,  $p < .05$ ) across the groups in the post-hoc test, using the M-W Test, which was applied to explore the significant difference across the groups.

Table 20. M-W Test results for differences between students (experience of using VLE tools)

Item	Experience of using VLE tools		M-W	Z	P	R
	Beginner	Experienced				
My tutor responds promptly to students' posts, inquiries, comments and questions.	3	1	71.500	-2.342	.019	0.20^
	Moderate	Experienced	267.00	-2.650	.008	0.23^
	3	1				

In Table 20, it is illustrated that the M-W Test revealed how students with a beginner or moderate level of experience displayed more agreement with item 19 (Mdn=3). The effect size of the difference between the beginner and experienced groups was 0.20, representing a small effect. Similarly, the significant difference between the moderate and experienced groups was  $r=0.23$ , also representing a small effect. This shows that the difference between the beginner, moderate and experienced groups was small. It would appear from these findings that students with a low level of experience have a stronger perception that tutors respond in a timely manner, as an e-immediacy practice used in a VLE. This could be due to the tutors' prompt responses to the students' lack of knowledge in using VLE tools. Tutors may understand that students who lack skills need more support and as a result, respond to their questions or emails immediately.

### 5.7.1. Summary of the Effect of Students' Factors on their Perceptions

This section has examined the impact of academic year and experience in using VLE tools on female students' perceptions of the use and importance of immediacy practices. The findings show a significant difference across the academic year groups for items 1, 2 and 11. The post-hoc test then revealed a difference between the first and fourth academic year groups for items 1 and 2, while the significant difference for item 11 was evident between the second

and fourth years. Moreover, for the amount of experience of using VLE tools, there was only a significant difference between the groups for item 19 and this was with small effect for the moderate and beginner groups.

## **5.8. Factors Affecting Tutors' Perceptions**

This section reports the effect of background information on tutors' perceptions of the use and importance of immediacy practices and their significance to a VLE. In this regard, the factors investigated were nationality, gender, academic qualifications, years of online teaching experience, and experience of using VLE tools.

### **Nationality of the Tutors**

The M-W Test was applied to explore the effect of the tutors' nationalities on their views of the use and importance of e-immediacy practices. As stated in the previous chapter, all the participants were Arabic-speaking, with 15 being Saudi and 32 coming from other Arabic-speaking countries, such as Egypt, Jordan and the Sudan.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Saudi culture is the most conservative in the Arab world and differs from that of other Arab countries. Generally, however, the culture across Arab countries is similar, whether in daily life or in communication behaviours. However, in the education context, in most Arabic countries (for example Egypt and Jordan), there is no gender segregation in universities, as male and female students all study on the same campus. In this study, most of the participating tutors came from a background that differed from that of the Saudi tutors. Aside from this, the Arabic-speaking tutors could communicate easily with the female students, particularly the male tutors. Moreover, female Arabic tutors can use video/audio-conferences in their teaching. Therefore, examining the effect of nationality may

be important for exploring and identifying significant differences between the groups. Table 21 presents the findings of the M-W Test, whereby only item 3 in the second scale revealed any difference (see Appendix 15).

Table 21. M-W Test results for differences between tutors by nationality

Items	Tutors' nationality (median score)		M-W	z	P	r
	Saudi	Other countries				
Scale 2: The importance of immediacy practices						
3. Immediacy practices enhance my students' participation.	5	4	137.00	-2.482	.013*	0.28^^

\*The significant difference, ^^medium effect size

The M-W Test values, as shown in Table 21, illustrate a significant difference in item 3 of the second scale: 'immediacy enhances my students' participation'. The Saudi tutors (Mdn=5) were more in agreement with this item than were the other Arabic tutors (Mdn=4), and this significant difference was of a medium effect size ( $r=0.28$ ). The findings here show that the Saudi tutors believed immediacy practices to be capable of increasing female students' participation and contributions in a VLE which may help them to overcome the feeling of shy or increase the sense of tutor presence.

## Gender

The effect of the gender factor on the tutors' views is examined. The M-W Test was applied to examine the difference between the male and female tutors, comprising 37 females and 10 males. The results of the M-W Test showed that no significant difference emerged across the gender groups (see appendix 16). Therefore, all the tutors appeared to believe that immediacy practices were important in the context of the female students. This indicates that in the

present study, the tutors' gender had no effect on their views of immediacy practices in VLEs.

### **Academic Qualification**

The effect of a teaching qualification on tutors' perceptions of the use and importance of e-immediacy practices was examined using the K-W Test (see Appendix 17). The results of this Test revealed that an academic qualification such as a Bachelor's or Master's degree had no effect on the tutors' perceptions of immediacy practices in a VLE.

### **Online Teaching Experience**

To examine the effect of the factor of online teaching experience on tutors' views, the M-W Test was applied to examine whether there was a significant difference between tutors with varying amounts of online teaching experience, as regards their perceptions of online immediacy practices. The tutors were categorised into three groups, according to their online teaching experience: tutors with 0-5 years of experience (37); tutors with 6-10 years of experience (2), and tutors with over 10 years' experience (8).

There were fewer than five participants in the group with 6-10 years of online teaching experience and therefore, the K-W Test could not be applied to examine the three groups.

The M-W Test was consequently used after regrouping the sample into two categories:

- Tutors with 5 or fewer years of online teaching experience (n=37)
- Tutors with 6 or more years of online teaching experience (n=10).

However, a significant difference only emerged between the groups for item 15 (see Appendix 18).

Table 22. M-W Test results for differences between tutors by years of online teaching experience

Items	Online teaching experience (medians)		M-W	z	P	r
	≤5	≥6				
Scale 1: Tutor immediacy practices						
15. I use and discuss personal examples and experiences.	2	4	101.00	-2.231	.026*	0.32^^

\*Significant difference. ^^ Medium effect

Table 22 reveals that the amount of online teaching experience tutors had was of no effect on the items relating to the use and importance of immediacy practices in VLEs, except for item 15 which is a tutor discloses information about him/herself that relates to the course. In item 15, the significant difference was examined between two groups by years of online teaching experience. Tutors with 6 or more years of experience in online teaching indicated more agreement with the use of personal examples and information that relate to a lecture. This result suggests that tutors with this high level of knowledge and experience in online teaching may find that it helps them to build trust in advanced technology with a view to sharing their ideas or personal examples with their students.

### Experience of Using VLE Tools

The M-W Test was applied to examine whether there were any significant differences between the tutors' level of experience in using VLE tools and their perceptions of online immediacy practices. The tutors were consequently classified into three groups, according to their level of experience: beginner tutors (4); moderate tutors (32) and experienced tutors (11).

As explained in the previous background factor, there were fewer than five participants in the beginner group and therefore, the K-W Test could not be used to explore significant differences between the three groups. The M-W Test was therefore applied after regrouping the tutors into two categories:

- Tutors with a low level of experience (n=36)
- Tutors with a high level of experience (n=11).

However, no significant difference was revealed by the results of this Test (see Appendix 19).

### **5.8.1. Summary of the Effect of Tutors' Factors on Their Perceptions**

The above section investigated the impact of tutors' background characteristics on their perceptions of the use and importance of immediacy practices in a VLE. These included nationality, gender, years of online teaching experience and experience of using VLE tools. Overall, no significant difference was found regarding the tutors' background factors, except for item 3 of the second scale: 'immediacy practices enhance students' participation'. Here, a difference was found between tutors based on nationality. The Saudi tutors were more in agreement with this item than were the other Arab tutors. The second item to indicate a significant difference between the groups was item 15: 'I use and discuss personal examples and experiences', with 6 or more tutors agreeing with this.

## **5.9. Summary**

This chapter has presented the quantitative findings of the study. It began by ascertaining that these data were not normally distributed, and hence required non-parametric tests. It then provided some background information about the female students and tutors sampled; describing and analysing their perceptions of immediacy practices and their importance in a VLE. The differences between these perceptions amongst the students and tutors were

subsequently examined. Interestingly, it was found that for every difference identified, the tutors expressed a stronger agreement than the students with items that had a positive association with immediacy practices, suggesting that the tutors were more aware than their students of the use and benefits of immediacy practices. The final part of the chapter examined factors that could possibly have an effect on students' and tutors' views of immediacy practices in a VLE. The next chapter will now present the qualitative data.

## Chapter 6: The Qualitative Findings

### 6.1. Introduction

The chapter consists of an analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the students' focus groups and tutors' interviews. As detailed in the Methodology Chapter, interview data were collected from three student focus groups (FG, S) and nine one-to-one interviews, conducted with four male tutors (MT) and five female tutors (FT).

Three main themes emerged by the end of the data analysis process explained in Chapter 4 (the Methodology). Two related to the research questions, namely the tutors' e-immediacy practices and the importance of these in VLEs. The third emerged from the students' and tutors' views of specific challenges affecting the use of immediacy, and their perceptions of e-immediacy practices in VLEs. Figure 10 shows the themes that emerged from the qualitative data.

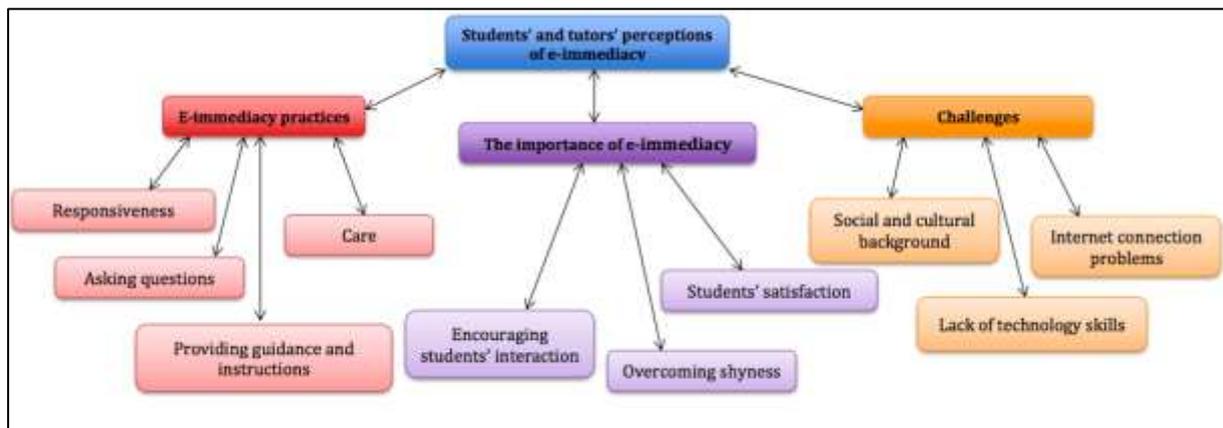


Figure 10. Final themes and sub-themes based on female students' and tutors' perceptions of e-immediacy practices

After defining the themes, they were interpreted, and the quotations included were translated as accurately as possible. When translating the quotes, the intention was to remain faithful to the source. Moreover, each theme was discussed separately to make it easier to follow the

presentation of the results. In addition, sub-themes were derived from each theme, which was summarised. Finally, each sub-theme was interpreted under three sub-headings: 1) the female students' perceptions, 2) the tutors' perceptions, and 3) the summary of the sub-theme, which included a comparison of the students' and tutors' views.

## **6.2. Themes**

### **6.2.1. Theme 1: Tutor immediacy practices in a VLE**

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of female students and their tutors regarding the use of e-immediacy practices. It was noted that immediacy practices in VLEs are an important teaching method that can enhance students' interaction, motivation and learning.

This theme is concerned with the perceptions of female students and their tutors regarding Blackboard immediacy practices at the University selected for this study. The four sub-themes that emerged from the students' focus groups and tutors' interview data were: 'responsiveness', 'asking questions', 'providing guidance and instructions' and 'care'. These sub-themes will be presented here in order of their importance, according to the number of times that they were mentioned by the participants.

#### ***6.2.1.1. Sub-theme: Responsiveness***

The students and tutors frequently mentioned 'responsiveness' as a form of immediacy adopted during the VLE teaching and learning process. The form of this responsiveness varied from one tutor to another, based on the tool applied to respond immediately or to communicate with the students (such as a discussion board or email) and on the tutor's gender.

- Students

The female students indicated tutors' responsiveness as the most frequently occurring form of immediacy in a VLE. This meant that the tutors responded to the students' questions, comments, posts and inquiries in a timely manner.

*If I send a question or inquiry to my tutor, he responds to me immediately, whether by email or in the discussion board. (FG1, S1)*

*In my group, tutors only focus on discussion boards to respond to students' questions and comments. (FG1, S2)*

In another group, the students mentioned ways in which their tutors responded via Blackboard:

*Most of the tutors respond to students' comments and questions through the discussion boards. (FG3, S1)*

*Yes, female tutors try to answer all the students' questions in my class. (FG3, S2)*

The students emphasised that their tutors responded to emails and comments in the discussion boards, and it was clear that the tutors responded immediately to emails and posts seeking further information about the course. FG1, S1 specifically mentioned "questions and inquiries" as the content that elicited a direct response from tutors. Conversely, some students complained about their tutors failing to respond to questions and emails, which they found irritating, due to having to wait for a response.

One student expressed such frustration:

*I have not had prompt responses from my tutor. I think it would be good if tutors established a specific time period for answering and responding to emails, because sometimes I feel frustrated. (FG3, S3)*

It would appear that ‘responsiveness’ had a significant impact on the students’ feelings when using a VLE, particularly where email or a discussion board was the only way of making contact with the tutor. This caused the students a great deal of frustration. For example, FG3, S3, cited above, suggested that tutors should specify dates and times for students to receive responses to their inquiries or questions about the course and that these responses should be immediate. In addition, based on the following comment, differences were perceived in the responsiveness of male and female tutors and the tool implemented to respond to students. One student consequently commented:

*I see there are differences between male and female tutors, in terms of responses, particularly to students’ questions on the discussion board. (FG1, S4)*

*It may be that the responsibilities of females toward their families are the reason... (FG1, S2)*

From the above comments, there was clearly a difference in the rate of response between male and female tutors via Blackboard. This could relate to the additional family responsibilities borne by women, which one student mentioned as a potential influence on the immediacy of tutors’ communication with their students. The students’ reference to “responsibilities toward their families” relates to this female stereotype in Saudi society, where the traditional role of a woman is to look after her children and spend most of her time with her family. However, another reason for this lower immediacy on the part of female tutors could have been the fact that they were able to meet their students face-to-face on campus during office hours. Therefore, they saw no need to answer students’ online questions. In contrast, the male tutors used social networks to communicate with their female students and answer their questions or inquiries.

*I have a male tutor who uses WhatsApp to answer students’ questions. (FG2, S7)*

Similarly, a student from another group mentioned that:

*My male tutor only communicates via WhatsApp. (FG1, S3)*

The students described how some male tutors only responded to their questions and inquiries via the 'WhatsApp' mobile phone app. These comments show that not all the male tutors used discussion boards or email to communicate with their students. However, WhatsApp clearly appeared to be a tool that many tutors found accessible for this purpose. It could also indicate a lack of ICT skills among some of the tutors, leading them to use social networks, instead of the learning platform provided by the University concerned. This will be discussed in more detail in section 6.2.3.2.

- Tutors

The tutors perceived 'responsiveness' as a form of immediacy that could be used to enhance learning and interaction among female students. Nearly half the tutors talked about responding to students' emails and discussion board comments by answering students' questions, replying to their emails and commenting on their posts.

One female tutor indicated responsiveness as her most commonly applied form of immediacy:

*Responding to students is the most common action I perform in Blackboard and sometimes, I respond to their emails immediately. (FT.1)*

Another female tutor specified how she responded to her students via the discussion board:

*On discussion boards, I only answer questions related to theoretical lectures.*

(FT.3)

These comments confirm that the most common form of immediacy adopted by the tutors for use in a VLE was responding to students. FT.1 asserted that she responded to her students via

Blackboard and answered their emails immediately, while FT.3, as a lecturer in Curriculum and Instruction Design, used Blackboard to highlight the types of question that could be answered. She stated a preference for responding to students' questions and inquiries about theoretical aspects of the curriculum, because her course included both theoretical and practical topics. The practical aspect of her lectures consisted of topics relating to the use of ICT in the classroom, such as in the form of applications or programmes. However, she found it difficult to answer students' questions or provide clarification via video-conferencing, because she only used asynchronous learning, as she explained.

Nevertheless, it was not only the female tutors who prioritised responsiveness in their communication with students via a VLE; one male tutor also agreed that a timely response to students was an important aspect of teaching in such an environment, noting that:

*Responding to emails has become easier with smartphones; I can reply to emails and respond to my students any time and immediately. (MT.4)*

The above tutor asserted that timely response was facilitated and accelerated by smartphone applications, which helped him answer students' emails promptly and at any time. It was apparent that advancements in technology played an important role in reducing the sense of distance between students and their tutors. This had taken place due to the application of immediacy practices in an online learning context, thus permitting greater flexibility when dealing with students. From MT.4's comment, it is clear that timely responses had helped him build positive relationships with his students, because he used the words, 'any time' and 'immediately', indicating an absence of boundaries and formality in communication, specifically through the use of smartphones.

- Summary of the sub-theme, ‘responsiveness’

Both the female students and their tutors highlighted responsiveness as a common immediacy practice in the use of Blackboard communication tools. However, tutor response appeared to vary according to the tutor’s gender and the type of communication tool used. Interestingly, the students mainly focused on the differences between male and female tutors; indicating that some of the female tutors did not respond immediately to their comments or questions. In contrast, the male tutors tended to respond in a timely manner, using a discussion board. Although responsiveness was a sub-theme mentioned by both students and tutors, the tutors seemed to pay more attention to the way in which they responded to female students, whereas the students focused on differences in the timeliness of response, based on the tutor’s gender and the tool of communication used. In short, the students’ and tutors’ views generally highlighted responsiveness as a form of immediacy.

#### ***6.2.1.2. Sub-theme: Asking Questions***

Aside from the above, the students and tutors frequently referred to ‘asking questions’ as an immediacy practice implemented in Blackboard. This sub-theme included two codes, namely questions related to checking students’ understanding and open questions to promote discussion.

- Students

When they were asked about tutor immediacy practices in a VLE, the female students mentioned ‘tutors’ questions’, referring to questions about courses and related to their retention, or to ensure their understanding of a lecture that had been delivered.

*Asking students questions in relation to a lecture. (FG3, S1)*

*Asking questions is the main practice that my tutors always use. (FG3, S2)*

*A tutor will ask questions about a lecture, but also other questions that relate to the experience or knowledge that we have gained from that lecture. (FG3, S5)*

Another female student explained the types of question posed by her tutor using VLE tools, stating:

*...questions about the course and the most important of these is whether there is anything that has not been understood. (FG2, S3)*

Based on the above comments, it would appear that there were two types of question. The first of these related to the content and curriculum, while the second included closed questions for checking students' understanding or retention. However, there was no mention of the advantages or results ensuing from the tutors' questions.

- Tutors

Most of the tutors mentioned 'asking questions' as an important immediacy practice used with students in a VLE. One tutor confirmed that she employed this approach with students:

*Yes, to set questions for students and sometimes... to make sure they still understand the topic of a lecture. (FT.5)*

Meanwhile, another female tutor added:

*Sometimes I ask questions about the content to encourage my students to get involved and participate in a discussion board. (FT.4)*

She indicated that 'asking questions' relating to the course content can encourage students to interact with each other.

- Summary of the sub-theme, ‘asking questions’

Both the students and tutors perceived ‘asking questions’ to be a form of immediacy for the VLE teaching and learning process. The students and tutors had similar views about this practice; specifying the types of question used, namely questions relating to the course materials and lectures, questions to check the students’ understanding, and questions to verify whether the students required more clarification. One tutor suggested that questions related to content could promote students’ participation and communication with tutors and peers.

### ***6.2.1.3. Sub-theme: Providing Guidance and Instructions***

The provision of guidance and instructions was identified as an immediacy practice adopted by tutors when using Blackboard communication tools. Here, the students and tutors reported setting objectives and directions for lectures, assignments and assessments, aimed at orienting and informing the students’ learning.

- Students

The students perceived this action as an immediacy that could reduce the distance between tutors and students. They mentioned this in their responses to an open-ended question in the questionnaire. One student commented:

*My tutor identifies the objectives of courses and assessments and the way that assignments should be completed. (S.29)*

Another student, who took part in the focus group, claimed:

*Tutors use announcements to explain the information and goals of the course, and for sharing their contact details. (FG3, S3)*

The students valued the fact that the tutors provided instructions, directions and clear information. Their comments particularly related to the objectives set for the courses, instructions for completing assignments, and contact details.

- Tutors

The tutors also mentioned the provision of information and instructions using various Blackboard tools.

*I frequently use the Announcements tool to present objectives, instructions for assignments and the schedule for tests. (FT.1)*

FT.1 specified which tool was used and why. For instance, the Announcements tool is an important feature of Blackboard, because it enables tutors to post critical information about courses, such as the dates for submitting assignments, tests, and course goals and objectives. FT.1 described the function of this tool as enabling her to announce course objectives, instructions for assignments, and exam schedules. She was aware of the need to provide important information about the course to her students, in order to support and help them in the learning process.

Similarly, another female tutor mentioned:

*The tools that I use most in Blackboard are email, discussion boards and Announcements, in order to communicate with my students and ensure their understanding. (FT.3)*

The above quote indicates that the tutor used a range of tools for communication and concept checking with her students. This meant that she attempted to remain accessible and approachable. She also tried to provide any information that her students required, which was clear from her comment, “ensure their understanding”.

Likewise, one male tutor stated:

*I tried to explain to my female students how they should communicate with me and how to study using that environment. (MT.2)*

In the above comments, the tutors clarified what information was provided for the students and which tool helped them present it. They asserted that instructions for course materials were frequently provided for the students and these were also clarified. This can be helpful for avoiding ambiguity in instructions and to keep students on track in the VLE learning process. It promotes clarity on an online course, confirming what the students are doing in class and what they are supposed to learn.

- Summary of the sub-theme, ‘providing guidance and instructions’

The students and tutors mentioned ‘providing guidance and instructions’ as an immediacy practice, especially e-immediacy and ways of employing it via Blackboard features. They also reported frequent use of the Announcements tool to present objectives, goals, directions and instructions for courses. However, it was only the tutors who indicated using other means of providing guidance and information to students.

#### **6.2.1.4. Sub-theme: ‘Care’**

This sub-theme only emerged from the tutors’ interview data. It described tutors’ understanding and awareness of students’ situations and problems regarding their personal lives and female responsibilities.

Some of the tutors reported that most of the students’ problems related to family restrictions and rules surrounding the use of Blackboard and the Internet in general. Some students’ parents

even prevented them from using discussion boards to communicate with tutors, and there were certain families who restricted their daughters' Internet use. For example, FT.1 declared:

*I had one student refusing to participate in a discussion board, because of her fear of her family ... she only communicated with me via email.*

It appeared that the students' families had a critical impact on their online learning. One female tutor acknowledged the situation; stating that she only communicated with her students via email, because her students would not necessarily have used other tools to communicate with her, or even to participate in class. The tutor was aware of her students' situation and tried to overcome this problem by only using email as a communication tool with them. It is clear that email can take on the role of the discussion board to deliver content and materials, ask questions, and respond to students' questions and inquires. However, only one female tutor mentioned an instance of a student being prevented from using a discussion board, which is in contrast to the following quote by a male tutor, who indicated that family restrictions can affect the way in which tutors communicate with, or deliver course materials to female students.

*I have only used discussion boards with females for [the sake of] privacy and because of the traditions of our society. I think this society is very closed and conservative and it has a difficult culture, therefore, the discussion board helps me to communicate with [my students] easily. (MT.2)*

Therefore, the above tutor understood his students' situation and only used a discussion board to communicate with them. What he might have meant by "only discussion boards" was that the course content and materials and a lecture were delivered using a text-based communication tool, without audio- or video-conferencing, because he mentioned these tools during his interview:

*...video-conferencing is the greatest tool in distance education, but in our university few tutors use this tool.*

However, another male tutor pointed out:

*I use audio-conferencing with female students, because they prefer it to asynchronous tools. It also saves them having to come to the campus, because of borders problems. (MT. 1)*

Another male tutor also stated that:

*Generally, audio-conference is more appropriate for female students at the moment, because many live far from this city. (MT. 4)*

These comments from tutors show understanding and concern for their students when using audio- or video-conferencing. They indicate that the students preferred using these tools to text-based communication. This could be due to students living in different cities, whereby the VLE meant that they could attend virtual classes, without restrictions or obstacles being imposed by their parents.

- Summary of the sub-theme, 'care'

Some of the tutors perceived that being a caring tutor and attempting to understand their students helped to facilitate their online learning and convey the positive emotion towards their issues. This caring behaviour included the selection of an appropriate communication tool for the students' circumstances. It is clear that it is important for a tutor to show care. This is an important practice, which could be implemented in the context of Saudi education, because of the cultural norms and rules imposed by the parents of female students.

## **6.2.2. Theme 2: The importance of tutor immediacy practices in a VLE**

This theme relates to the second research question, which aims to investigate the female students' and their tutors' perceptions of the importance of immediacy practices in a Saudi VLE. This theme includes three sub-themes: 'encouraging student interaction', 'overcoming female students' shyness' and 'student satisfaction', which explain the importance of immediacy practices in a VLE. 'Encouraging students' interaction' and 'overcoming female students' shyness' are two sub-themes that emerged from the students' and tutors' interview data, while 'student satisfaction' only emerged from the students' interview data.

### ***6.2.2.1. Sub-theme: Encouraging Student Interaction***

During the interviews, the students and tutors mentioned 'interaction' on several different occasions. They also talked about the importance of immediacy practices in encouraging students to interact via VLE tools.

- Students

The students talked about building a positive relationship with their tutors and encouraging interaction, when asked about the importance of immediacy in a Blackboard environment. The students consequently commented:

*Immediacy actions build strong relationships with the tutor. (FG3, S5)*

*Building a discussion between students through topics that relate to a lecture promotes our interaction with each other, such as writing comments or searching for information. (FG3, S4)*

The students considered that tutors' immediacy practices were associated with building a positive relationship between students and tutors. This relationship can be a function of

interaction in online learning. The interaction may be considered as a potential criterion of the student and tutor relationship, within a text-based environment; for instance, social networks. The other student cited above also mentioned peer-to-peer interaction in a VLE, which refers to communication between students, and working together on activities and assignments. She highlighted specific tutor practices that encouraged student-student interaction, whereby conversation was initiated by making points and outlining topics relating to the lecture.

- Tutors

The tutors also talked about social conversations and interaction between students as a benefit of immediacy actions, particularly in a discussion board. One female tutor explained:

*Sometimes, when students ask questions, I prefer to leave space for other students to answer and if the answer needs improvement, I will edit it. I then thank the student that answered the question to encourage others to interact and participate through discussion. (FT.5)*

It would appear that the tutor cited above used praise to encourage student interaction in the form of making comments to peers or answering their questions. She realised the importance of this practice to enhance student interaction and foster their participation.

Another female tutor stated:

*In a discussion board, I usually ask students questions and I find this method encourages their interaction, whether with me or with their peers. (FT.4)*

FT.4 asserted that the practice of ‘asking questions’ was a form of immediacy that was associated with student interaction; achieved when students answered questions.

- Summary of the sub-theme, ‘encouraging student interaction’

Both the students and tutors believed that immediacy practices encouraged student interaction, particularly on a discussion board. They indicated different practices that may be effective for promoting student interaction, such as praise, asking questions, and initiating discussion threads. All these practices were utilised on the discussion board, thus giving the students and tutors time to communicate with each other.

#### **6.2.2.2. Sub-theme: Overcoming Students’ Shyness**

This sub-theme indicates the importance of tutors’ immediacy practices, particularly with female Saudi students in learning environments. As detailed in Chapter 2 on the study context, female students in the classroom are expected to listen to lecturers without asking any questions, engaging in any discussion, or providing any information. As a result, they can feel shy about contacting or communicating with their tutors. Moreover, Saudi culture reinforces shyness amongst female students, as they are required to become obedient and to keep their voices low. This sub-theme shows the importance of immediacy practices in a Saudi female students’ virtual learning context. The tutors asserted that immediacy practices could help female students overcome their shyness, in order to be able to contact their tutors using Blackboard features.

Two of the tutors discussed how immediacy practices in Blackboard communication tools could be applied in a bid to reduce shyness amongst female students, with one commenting:

*It is an indirect approach that works well in overcoming students’ shyness, especially with our less open culture. (MT.2)*

Meanwhile, one female tutor stated:

*I see my students communicate and participate in class, without the shyness observed in face-to-face (F2F) classes. (FT.4)*

In the above comments, the tutors asserted that immediacy practices could help overcome shyness amongst female students in the online learning context. As discussed in this section, immediacy practices encourage student interaction, which also helps them to overcome their shyness when communicating with tutors during the learning process.

- Summary of the sub-theme, ‘overcoming female students’ shyness’

Overall, the tutors highlighted the importance of immediacy practices in a VLE for overcoming students’ feelings of shyness. These actions can encourage students to participate in a discussion board.

### **6.2.2.3. Sub-theme: Student Satisfaction**

This sub-theme only emerged from the female students’ interview data. Many students indicated that a feeling of satisfaction came from tutors’ immediacy practices. Meanwhile, e-immediacy was found to increase their positive feelings towards the learning environment and tutors. In this regard, one student remarked:

*I feel excited about my course when my tutor communicates with me. (FG1, S6)*

*I feel interested when my tutor answers my questions and discusses with us.  
(FG1, S1)*

Nevertheless, a student from another group also noted:

*I feel satisfied if the tutor responds to my emails or questions, but waiting for his responses is frustrating. (FG3, S1)*

The above quote illustrates how tutors' immediacy actions influenced student satisfaction. The students expressed their feelings about tutor immediacy, using vocabulary such as 'interested', 'excited' and 'satisfied'. It is clear that immediacy was important to them and helped them to feel satisfied with their courses and tutors.

- Summary of the sub-theme, 'student satisfaction'

The students agreed that immediacy practices enhanced their feeling of satisfaction. Student satisfaction was increased by some of the practices mentioned by the students, such as 'communicates with me', 'responsiveness', 'answers questions' and 'initiating discussion'. These forms of immediacy were found to foster students' satisfaction with their courses and tutors, thus also enhancing their learning in the VLE.

### **6.2.3. Theme 3: Challenges to perceptions and use of immediacy practices in a VLE**

This theme emerged from the participants' interview data. It identified the issues faced by the students and tutors, which affected perceptions of immediacy in a VLE and in the implementation of e-immediacy practices. It included three sub-themes: 'social culture', 'lack of technology skills' and 'Internet connection problems'.

#### ***6.2.3.1. Sub-theme: Social and Cultural Background***

Saudi culture appeared to have a fundamental impact on the interviewees' beliefs and behaviour, which affected their perceptions and awareness of aspects of teaching and learning. This sub-theme shows how a society's culture and traditions can dominate the education system and prevent improvements being made to teaching and learning environments, especially in the context of female education. Both the students and tutors referred to social and cultural rules, which influenced the use of appropriate practices for enhancing their learning and affected their choice of VLE tool. This sub-theme relates to section 6.2.1.4 'Care'; relating to female students

at the University under study, who live in a rural area with a very closed and conservative society. These are environments where girls and women are not permitted to do anything, even learn, without the permission of a male guardian.

- Students

The students talked about the barriers that could influence their communication with tutors and their increased perception of effective learning in a VLE. Two stated:

*Sometimes, it is difficult when I study on Blackboard and follow my tutor, because my family prevents me from using it. (FG2, S2)*

*I prefer studying via video and audio-conferences, but I know my family won't allow me to use them. (FG2, S3)*

The above quotes indicate the restrictions imposed on the students by their families, with regard to the use of VLE tools. It was evident that the students' families had the power to prevent their daughters from accessing Blackboard and pursuing their studies.

- Tutors

One male tutor and three of the female tutors considered social and cultural rules to be a challenge, which could influence the implementation of appropriate and effective immediacy practices for enhancing students' learning in the Blackboard environment. This quote has already been cited previously in section 6.2.1.4:

*I think this society is very closed and conservative and it has a difficult culture; therefore, the discussion board helps me to communicate with them [the students].*  
(MT.2)

The above tutor acknowledged that Saudi society is complex and quite unique. He therefore used Blackboard tools to ease communication with female students and make himself more approachable and accessible as a tutor. One female tutor also emphasised that Saudi cultural rules have a major impact. In this regard, she expressed the view that:

*Some parents do not allow their female relatives [students] to use the Internet.*

(FM.5)

The above remark made by FT.1 and cited in section 6.2.1.4 was also echoed by FM.1, as follows:

*I believe that the social culture greatly affects students' communication and learning. I had one student refusing to participate in a discussion board, because of her fear of her family. Her family thinks of a discussion board as a chat room on the Internet, which is open for males and females to chat with each other. She only communicates with me via email.* (FM.1)

She was talking about her experience of one student, who was forbidden by her family to use the discussion board. It would appear that the culture of the students' parents in Saudi Arabia had a major impact on the female students' virtual learning.

- Summary of the sub-theme, 'social and cultural background'

The female students and the tutors agreed that Saudi culture and traditions affected the use of immediacy practices. Based on these views, the Internet may generally be seen as a potential problem area for some Saudi female students, together with the features of Blackboard, such as the discussion board and audio- and video-conferencing. Meanwhile, in section 6.2.1.4, the tutors mentioned that they used audio-conferencing when communicating with female students, but also indicated that these students lived away from the city where the targeted University

was located. What therefore emerged was that the female students' perceptions differed, depending on where they lived. It is an issue that influences the use of immediacy practices and therefore, the students' learning, by reducing the distance between tutors and students in the VLE.

#### **6.2.3.2. Sub-theme: Lack of Technology Skills**

Both the students and tutors reported on the challenge posed by a lack of technology skills, which additionally affected the implementation and perception of immediacy in a VLE.

- Students

Six of the students admitted that their 'lack of technology skills' affected their communication and learning in a VLE, for example:

*I cannot communicate with my tutor, because I do not have the essential skills for using communication tools in Blackboard. (FG1, S3)*

*Some tutors may not have the skills to use VLE tools. (FG1, S1)*

Other students in another group made similar comments:

*I think some tutors lack the skills to respond using Blackboard tools, because sometimes I don't get any response from my tutor. For example, when I asked her about my file, she told me that she could not open the file or upload it. (FG3, S2)*

*Most students in my group lack sufficient experience in using Blackboard tools. Sometimes, students ask for help from other groups of students with more experience. (FG3, S3)*

*There are no training sessions to help them gain the basic skills for using Blackboard tools. (FG3, S4)*

*My knowledge of using Blackboard tools is poor and I don't have any guide for using them properly, or the fundamental skills for using them. (FG3, S5)*

Overall, the students emphasised that they did not have the necessary skills to communicate with their tutors using Blackboard tools. They also mentioned that their tutors lacked basic skills in using these communication tools, such as opening files or uploading them using features of Blackboard. As a result, immediacy practices may not have been accessible to the students and the important effect of enhancing female students' learning in a VLE may have been lost.

- Tutors

The tutors asserted that the lack of technology skills influenced their use of Blackboard tools and the implementation of immediacy practices. For example, one female tutor believed that:

*The key issue is the lack of tutors' experience in using VLE tools effectively with students. (FT.4)*

Similarly, one male tutor pointed out that

*...faculty members need continuous technical support to resolve problems, as well as extensive training workshops. (MT.3)*

The lack of skills for using technology, such as Blackboard features, would often lead tutors to use social networks to communicate with their students and to deliver course materials. The following quote from the interview with FT.5 is an illustration of this:

*Tutors lack the skills and online teaching methods to engage students' learning, which leads some of them to use social networks. I think that tutors need to*

*acquire these skills and knowledge for online teaching methods through training sessions.*

It may be observed from these quotes that the tutors lacked skills in using technology and experience in using VLE tools. This issue forced some of the tutors to resort to social networks, rather than Blackboard, because they found that these social networks facilitated communication with students and permitted an immediate response.

- Summary of the sub-theme, ‘lack of technology skills’

This result shows that the skills deficit in using VLEs should be given more consideration, thus presenting a challenge for implementing immediacy practices amongst female Saudi students and their tutors. The interview data revealed that many of the students and tutors did not have basic Blackboard skills. The failure to use VLE tools therefore led to some tutors using social networks for teaching and learning.

#### ***6.2.3.3. Sub-theme: Internet Connection Problems***

Generally, the lack of Internet access, or else slow and poor Internet connections, affected Internet usage and as a result, the teaching and learning process in a VLE. Students and tutors could have lost flexibility in using features of a VLE for various tasks, such as downloading materials or submitting assignments. The participants considered that the frequently poor quality of the Internet connection had a negative impact on implementing different forms of immediacy.

- Students

*F2F classes are better than Blackboard tools, because there is usually a problem with Internet access. (FG2, S1)*

*The big challenge facing me is Internet access; it is always down, because I live in a remote area that does not have a good Internet infrastructure. (FG3, S1)*

These students' comments indicate that their Internet connectivity was often limited, which did not help them in their studies. One of the above comments revealed that the problem of a poor Internet connection was common in villages and other areas that lacked a proper Internet infrastructure.

- Tutors

The tutors also reported that the lack of Internet access had an effect on their online teaching, as illustrated in the following comments:

*The lack of a strong Internet infrastructure may have negatively impacted on the use of Blackboard tools. (FT.5)*

*Some students who live in remote villages have a poor Internet network, which impacts on their online learning and the use of Blackboard tools. (MT.3)*

The above quotes show that the tutors experienced poor Internet connectivity and this affected female students' access to Blackboard tools. Limited access to VLE tools could in turn have seriously affected the students' perceptions of their tutors' immediacy practices.

- Summary of the sub-theme, 'Internet connection problems'

As noted in this chapter, the students and tutors participating in this study faced Internet connectivity problems in online learning and teaching. In fact, the lack of Internet access led students and their tutors to revert to face-to-face classes. Although Saudi Arabia is a wealthy country with a strong economy, there are still many remote areas that lack Internet access, such as those in which many of the students taking part in this study lived. Therefore, it was

observed how a poor Internet connection in a rural area could hinder online learning, with students being unable to access their classes.

### **6.3. Summary**

Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data; two being related to the research questions, namely ‘tutors’ immediacy practices in the VLE’ and ‘the importance of immediacy practices in the VLE’. The third theme emerged from the female students’ and tutors’ interview data: ‘barriers to implementing immediacy practices in VLE tools’. The qualitative data also revealed that the female students and tutors held similar views concerning the three themes and their sub-themes, with differences only emerging over the three sub-themes. One of these consisted of ‘student satisfaction’, which was derived from the female students’ data. The others were ‘care’ and ‘overcome female students’ shyness’, which were derived from the tutors’ data. The findings relating to the perceptions of female students and tutors of immediacy practices in the VLE, based on quantitative and qualitative data, have been presented in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively. They will now be integrated in Chapter 7 and discussed in depth.

## **Chapter 7: Discussion**

### **7.1. Introduction**

This case study investigates the perceptions of tutors and female students regarding the use and importance of immediacy practices in VLEs, on an all-female campus in Saudi Arabia. This enquiry was carried out using a convergent mixed-methods case-study design. In order to gain holistic understanding and provide additional insight into the phenomena being studied, the current discussion outlines in detail the integration of the quantitative and qualitative data that were collected using questionnaires and three focus groups consisting of female Saudi students and nine one-to-one interviews with tutors.

The objective of this chapter is to integrate the two methods findings, in order to tell the complete story of the investigation described in the introduction of this research. This Discussion Chapter will be organised based upon the order of the research questions. Therefore, the data relating to the first questions will be discussed in the first part of the chapter, which highlights the perceptions of female students and tutors regarding the use of immediacy practices within a Saudi VLE. The second part of the chapter will then answer the second research question, which is an inquiry into the participants' perceptions of the importance of immediacy practices in Saudi virtual learning. Comparisons between these perceptions of students and tutors with regard to the use and importance of immediacy practices will subsequently be made in both parts of the chapter.

## **7.2. The Perceptions of Tutors and Female Students with Regard to the Use of Immediacy Practices in a VLE**

The main purpose of the first research question was the investigation of female students' and their tutors' perceptions, regarding the use of immediacy practices in a Saudi VLE. The discussion of these perceptions will present the forms of immediacy that are most commonly used by tutors in VLEs in the Saudi context, based on the participants' perceptions gathered using quantitative and qualitative methods. Also discussed will be the factors that inhibit their perceptions of the use e-immediacy practices in a Saudi virtual learning context.

- ***Responsiveness***

The findings from the quantitative and qualitative data show that tutors and female students agreed on the perception that responsiveness is the most frequently applied form of immediacy amongst tutors using VLE tools, such as a discussion board or email. Responsiveness refers to tutors' actions that are displayed in an online course, such as replying promptly to emails and students' questions or inquiries, and making weekly or daily posts (Poll et al., 2014; Spiker, 2014).

This type of immediacy gains relevance in online teaching and learning, where tutors cannot use nonverbal behaviours to demonstrate their interest and intention. This absence and the perceived distance between tutors and students encourage tutors to use practices such as responsiveness in order to create a feeling of presence and a sense that the tutor is accessible and immediate in this environment (Walkem, 2014). Therefore, tutor responsiveness in VLEs can enhance students' learning by producing a favourable emotional effect in students (Baker, 2004).

From the quantitative data, students and tutors agreed with all the responsiveness indicators, which were ‘A tutor replies to students’ emails within 24 hours’, ‘A tutor responds to students’ comments, questions and inquiries promptly’, ‘A tutor confirms that she/he has received and read a message or posting’, ‘A tutor attempts to answer questions or inquiries from students about course contents’, ‘A tutor is accessible and easy to reach’ and ‘A tutor is willing to message and chat with students’. This result is consistent with previous studies, which have explored how tutors’ responses to students’ questions and inquiries can help to enhance students’ learning in online courses, whether these responses are given in a timely manner, or merely to answer students’ questions and communicate with them (Spiker, 2014; Walkem, 2014). Qualitative findings from focus groups and one-to-one interviews align with the quantitative results, reflecting this sub-theme that responsiveness is the frequently displayed form of immediacy in Blackboard.

Expectations and sharing a consensus of the expected time scale for tutors’ response was considered in the focus groups where students mainly focused on the different rates of responsiveness of male and female tutors when replying to students’ emails, comments or questions. The female students interviewed indicated that male tutors responded to them in timely manner; while some female tutors took more time to respond or were sometimes absent from the VLE communication tools. This contradicts the literature on tutors’ immediacy practices, which finds that female tutors are generally more immediate in F2F classrooms than male tutors (Rashidi & Naderi, 2012; Wolfe, 2012).

A potential interpretation for this finding, suggested by Al Alhareth (2014), is that a woman’s primary responsibility, particularly in Saudi society, is to look after her family and children, which comes before her work. One student in (FG1) also mentioned:

*It may be that the responsibilities of females toward their families are the reason.*

Another explanation for this point may be that female tutors lack the digital skills that would facilitate their responding to students' questions or e-mails. This will be discussed in Section 7.2.1. Relatedly, Student 7 in (FG 2) noted

*I have a male tutor who uses WhatsApp to answer students' questions*

This quote might explain why male tutors responded to students in immediate way, as social networks can help tutors to be accessible and flexible when communicating with their students.

The quantitative data also showed that students in early academic years and with beginner and moderate experience of using VLE tools were more likely to agree with items relating to responsiveness, namely 'A tutor confirms that she/he has received and read emails or posts', 'A tutor is accessible to reach', 'A tutor promptly responds to students' and 'A tutor replies to emails within 24 hours'. This aligns with Murphrey et al.'s (2012) finding that undergraduate students perceive more immediacy in online learning than graduate students. Conversely, in Zapf's (2008) study, students who had completed more than seven terms and had more online course experience had more positive perceptions of tutors' immediacy practices than those who had completed just three or four terms. In this study, the findings suggest that tutors may exert greater effort to apply various forms of immediacy with students in their initial years of study, due to those students' generally limited experience with VLE tools. Additionally, students in their fourth academic year and with experience in using VLE tools may also have a decreased need for engagement in online courses (Murphy et al., 2012).

In spite of comments around female tutors' responsiveness Saudi female students have positive attitudes toward distance education in general. A number of studies have shown that distance education and online courses are appropriate teaching and learning environments for women because of their responsibilities in daily life or family restrictions if she needs to

travel for study (Al Alhareth, 2014). There seems to be lack of consensus around the time scale of tutors' online responses which can be perceived as 'poor responsiveness' at times. In order to resolve possible challenges in expectations around communication and response time an institutional-wide approach can be adopted to support tutors and students. For instance, tutors can provide their contact hours and virtual office hours to students at the beginning of term. As Walkem (2014) notes, 'a realistic response time helps create a clear expectation for students' (p. 183).

As discussed in Chapter 3, responsiveness in general and timely response in particular can create a feeling of social presence in online courses because it conveys a sense of goodwill, warmth, friendly (Sung & Mayer, 2012). The online learning has a high level of social presence could make students feel satisfied which effects in their learning and complete their courses. Consequently, this increased sense of social presence encourages student dialogue, which may in turn reduce transactional distance (Zapf, 2008).

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that tutors use responsiveness as an immediacy practice to enhance students' learning. Their responses to female students' questions or inquiries and willingness to communicate with their students establishes their presence, which help to reduce the sense of the physical distance between the tutors and students and to overcome feelings of isolation by fostering interaction and communication.

- ***Clarification: providing guidance and instructions***

This provision of clear guidance and instructions includes those actions taken by tutors to ensure the course, assignments and lectures are clearly communicated and accurately understood by the students (Walkem, 2014), and through which the tutor can 'stimulate the desired meaning of course content and processes in the minds of students' (Spiker, 2014, p.

43). It is an important factor within online courses that can minimise students' confusion, build students' confidence about their progress and foster tutors' presence.

In this study, the quantitative and qualitative data show that both students and tutors perceived the provision of guidance and instructions to be an immediacy practice that was used within the VLE. In particular, the tutors indicated their awareness of the importance of this practice to students' learning, reflecting a Vygotskian understanding of the tutor as a facilitator that guides students through their ZPD and helps them to learn independently.

This finding is in line with those of previous studies (e.g., Al Ghamdi, 2017; Spiker, 2014; Walkem, 2014), which have found that providing guidance and directions increases students' perceptions of tutor immediacy as well as students' successful engagement with their courses.

The quantitative findings of this study go on to provide further detail about the provision of guidance and instructions, suggesting that it also involves asking students if they have questions or need additional information and explaining how to respond to posts or emails. Therefore, tutors should use tools that can help to provide relevant instructions, directions and information (Poll et al., 2014).

The findings of the current study reveal that tutors used various communication tools of the VLE to share objectives, directions and their contact information with students. In interviews data, students and tutors identified 'Announcements' as a popular VLE tool for providing critical information about courses. This is in agreement with the tutor immediacy literature, in which Poll et al. (2014) and Spiker (2014) suggest that tutors send additional emails and announcements to students to help them prepare for their courses and encourage their continued learning progress.

Furthermore, because the majority of online teaching and learning in a VLE occurs via asynchronous tools, such as discussion boards and blogs – as is the case in the present study – tutors must clarify their objectives, goals and course materials and provide additional information to clarify and explain their inquiries (Spiker, 2014). Ambiguity in the structure or objectives of a course may confuse students, because they lack access to direct questions and answers and a F2F meeting (Walkem, 2014). Students need to be able to understand their course materials and what is expected from them by the end of the course as this will put them at ease and reduce the anxiety associated with online learning.

The quantitative findings show that students in their first, second and third academic years were more likely to perceive clarification-related immediacy practices, such as ‘My tutor provides guidance and direction for assignments and course activities’ and ‘My tutor explains how to respond to posts and emails’. As was the case with responsiveness, tutors may use these practices with students in early academic years because those students may lack experience in using VLE tools or engaging in online courses without instructions or directions. This finding is in line with Walkem’s (2014) conclusion that tutors who clarify course materials are perceived by students to be more immediate.

A key conclusion drawn here may be that tutors need to consider clarification as an immediacy practice that helps to support Saudi students in general and female students’ online learning in particular. Assuming that the use of clarification did in fact overcome transactional distance and increase the sense of social presence, this supports the opinion of Spiker (2014) that the clarification of content and definition of expectations are important practices for fostering students’ interaction and dialogue. A similar finding was also reported by Al Ghamdi (2017).

- **Feedback**

Feedback is a tutor's response to students' work and actions (Gallien & Omen, 2008); it becomes the bridge between what the student knows and what the student needs to know, which is essential for building students' knowledge (Conrad & Dabbagh, 2015). From quantitative findings, nearly half of the students agreed with the item 'A tutor shows appreciation' as an immediacy practice in a VLE. Tutors also perceived 'Supporting students by giving feedback on [their] work and posting' as a form of immediacy. This is consistent with previous studies that feedback increases the perceptions of immediacy in online courses (Murphrey et al, 2014; Spiker, 2014; Walkem, 2014).

Showing appreciation and providing feedback on students' work and contributions are related to affective feedback, which not only informs students of their learning performance but also triggers an emotional response that keeps students engaged (Conrad & Dabbagh, 2015). In F2F classrooms, tutors can use nonverbal immediacy (e.g. body movements, eye contact, smiling) to deliver affective and motivational feedback to students (Gallien & Oomen, 2008), while in online courses tutors put more efforts to deliver feedback that can encourage students' learning for example, the channel type that is used by tutors to provide feedback: written, by email, audio or video, real time.

In addition, in qualitative data, one tutor mentioned that using praise and thanks can help to encourage students' participation in a discussion board.

*Sometimes, when students ask questions, I prefer to leave space for other students to answer and if the answer needs improvement, I will edit it. I then thank the student that answered the question to encourage others to interact and participate through discussion. (FT.5)*

Praise is a behaviour that can be produced by a tutor as a statement or verbal expression to students during a lecture, such as ‘good job’ or ‘nice work’ (Haydon & Musti-Rao, 2011). This finding support Hattie and Timperely’s (2007) assertion that a targeted praise and ability feedback have a significant effect on students while the general or non-targeted praise may not have sufficient impact on students’ engagement and commitment to learning.

Kucuk (2009) observed that feedback is one of the immediacy practices that increase students’ online participation. He suggests that immediate feedback enhances tutor presence, which influences students’ communication and participation. Similarly, Walkem (2014) reports that providing prompt feedback to students on their comments or assessment items can help them stay on track. However, Kucuk (2009) and Walkem (2014) have not mentioned the timeliness of feedback that can help enhancing students’ online participation or increasing the immediacy.

Moreover, in the present study, the importance of feedback was reported by students and tutors. It was provided by tutors to students when they participated by answering their peers’ questions or posting comments. Gallien (2008) reported that students perform better and are more satisfied with their online courses when they receive personalised feedback from their tutor. In this respect, according to the findings of this study, this form of immediacy had an important effect on encouraging female students to participate in the VLE tools.

Furthermore, by praising students, tutors acknowledge and show their appreciation for students’ comments, posts or questions. This supports students in their participation and encourages them to interact more freely, with less timidity and more self-confidence (Al Ghamdi, 2017). It is also consistent with Dweck’s (1999) study, which suggested that tutors should praise students’ effort regardless of their performance, as high performance may be viewed as an attribute beyond their ability to attain. Dweck (1999) points out that praise is a

powerful tool that can help a student understand the value of effort. Burnett (2002) research shows that female students prefer praise in the classroom more than their male counterparts do. Burnett (2002) study found that 90% of female students have a preference for praise compared to 78% of male students. Female students may respond positively to tutors' praise, leading the tutors to praise female students more (Burnett, 2002). This may be in line with the findings of the current study about female students' perceptions of 'tutors showing appreciation in their contributions or questions' as the common practice of immediacy that was used in the VLE.

To summarise, participants in this study reported a belief that feedback is an important feature of immediacy within the VLE tools and can enhance female students' learning. Thus, according to these perceptions, it is recommended that tutors give feedback when teaching female students in Saudi online education.

- *Asking students questions*

The importance of asking students' questions emerged from the qualitative data only. Interviews participants, both students and tutors, mentioned tutors asking questions about the course as the most frequently used form of immediacy in the VLE. This is compatible with the findings of previous studies (Faraha & Castro, 2015; Kim & Bonk, 2010; Kucuk, 2009; Spiker, 2014), which revealed that students are provided with an opportunity to participate and interact in online courses when tutors ask questions. This is illustrated in one of the tutors' explanation of why she used this form of immediacy:

*Sometimes I ask questions about the content to encourage my students to get involved and participate in a discussion board' (FT.4.).*

According to the findings of the qualitative data, two types of questions were used by tutors in the VLE tools, namely (divergent) questions relating to the course content and questions to

check the students' understanding. The first type was used by tutors to prompt students' responses and facilitate learning, which confirms the work of Ertmer et al. (2011), who observed that divergent questions (e.g., open-ended questions, seeking a variety of responses) are more likely to obtain responses at the medium and higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy than questions that seek one or two specific answers, such as the second type of questions mentioned above. Furthermore, tutors' questions can help students to gain information and a new knowledge particularly in online courses because information sources are available which associate with constructing their knowledge and achieving their learning experiences.

Asking students questions – and obtaining answers – can also increase the dialogue between tutors and students. Increased dialogue in a VLE may reduce perceived distance between the tutor and student, thus enhancing students' learning and increasing the sense of social presence. In this respect, asking questions appears to be a form of Moore's (1997) dialogue, which can increase a student-tutor communication when the student is encouraged to answer questions of the tutor. Thus, it leads to promote social interaction and overcome transactional distance.

In summary, asking questions may prompt students to answer those questions, which lead to their increased participation and contribution to discussion forums or any tool of VLEs. Increasing the interaction and motivation of female students in virtual environments therefore decrease the transactional distance. Tutors should focus on questions that encourage students' participation in the VLE tools such as open-ended questions.

- *Care*

In this case study, the interviews with tutors gave rise to a sub-theme, namely 'care'. The majority of tutors' comments under this sub-theme demonstrated a high level of care for students' needs and circumstances during their learning via Blackboard. Tutor caring

behaviours show understanding and acknowledgment of students' needs and issues. They include listening, responding and knowing about the students' experiences, abilities, background and learning performance. The tutors demonstrated care for their female students by acknowledging the situations they face in their home life, including parental restrictions.

This is in agreement with the literature on students' perceptions about immediacy, where Alamri (2016), Spiker (2014) and Walkem (2014) indicate that caring behaviours and the display of empathy are teaching practices that encourage psychological closeness and comfortable feeling between the tutor and student and so enhance students' learning. According to Owens and Ennis (2005), the more students perceive their tutors as caring, the more they will care about their learning. Walkem (2014) finds that tutors who are aware of, and responsive to, students' needs and situations lead students to feel a closer interpersonal connection with these tutors. Similarly, Melrose and Bergeron (2006) report that tutors who use this type of behaviour in online teaching may be perceived as 'likeable and friendly'. Also, a tutor who is caring and shows empathy is perceived as a genuine person with a real social presence in a VLE (Schutt et al., 2009), which encourages students' learning (Spiker, 2014). Caring as an immediacy practice is more relevant in a VLE than in F2F learning because of the difficulties of technology, asynchronicity and perceived distance. The lack of immediate and prompt communication may also be the challenges that lead tutors to show care and understanding.

In F2F classrooms, tutors' caring behaviours include practices of immediacy such as nonverbal communication, responsiveness, feedback and answering students' questions. According to Teven and McCroskey (1997), tutors' responsiveness and nonverbal immediacy likely to lead students to perceive their tutors as caring. They also observed that 'if a teacher cares deeply, but does not communicate that attribute, he or she might as well not care at all' (p. 1).

In the Saudi cultural context of this study, both male and female tutors tended to idealise their interpersonal actions as highly caring and empathic as they were delivered some lectures in a specific VLE tool such as a discussion board or email which is an appropriate communication tool for some students' circumstances. For example (MT.2) mentioned:

*I have only used discussion boards with females for [the sake of] privacy and because of the traditions of our society. I think this society is very closed and conservative and it has a difficult culture, therefore, the discussion board helps me to communicate with [my students] easily.*

They were also aware of the cultural challenges that women face in general and female students in particular when accessing the Internet and using VLE tools for learning. Tutors' caring behaviours appear to be strong and more apparent than in prior research (Faraha & Castro, 2015; Spiker, 2014). The findings confirm those of Alamri's (2016), who found that Saudi female tutors and students both perceived caring behaviours to be an important teaching method that can build a strong relationship between tutors and students in a classroom setting.

In this study, tutors showed their caring and understanding when selecting appropriate VLE communication tools to communicate with female students. Some female students are unable to use certain Blackboard tools for learning or communicating with their tutors because of their families' restrictions.

### **7.2.1. Challenges to perceptions and use of immediacy practices in a VLE**

The immediacy practices previously implemented by tutors may have been influenced by the challenges that prevent tutors from using them and female students from perceiving them as a method of online teaching. These barriers emerged from the focus groups and one-to-one

interviews data gathered from the students and tutors, and included social culture, a lack of technology skills, and Internet connectivity problems. However, these findings are inconsistent with the literature as previous studies have not reported any barriers to the use of immediacy practices in online courses. For instance, no study has indicated that students' and tutors' perceptions of immediacy in a VLE can change. In the present study, this could be due to the context, which has a direct impact on female students' and tutors' views of forms of e-immediacy. This may also explain the low rating of students toward the use of e-immediacy practices shown by the quantitative findings.

- ***Social and cultural background***

Some tutors in this study mentioned that they feel dissatisfied because of Saudi cultural restrictions, and described their fight against tradition and its impact on learning amongst female students. Social culture is the main problem Saudi female students and their tutors face in a VLE. However, this is not a new factor described in the literature as potentially influencing students' and tutors' attitudes and perceptions in a Saudi educational context. Several studies have mentioned that Saudi culture, society and traditions can significantly influence students' and tutors' perceptions of technology in general and tutors' roles with regard to this technology in particular (Alamri, 2016; Al Lily, 2011; Almegren & Yassin, 2013; Al Alhareth, 2014; Madini & Nooy, 2016). Cultural norms and their impact on peoples' views play a major role in changing and influencing the views of tutors and female students and, therefore, their awareness of e-immediacy practices (Alrashidi, 2014).

The female students' and tutors' perceptions show that social and cultural factors affect the freedom of female students to unreservedly access and use VLE tools, which limits the use of immediacy practices. For example, FM.1 mentioned that:

*I believe that the social culture greatly affects students' communication and learning. I had one student refusing to participate in a discussion board, because of her fear of her family. Her family thinks of a discussion board as a chat room on the Internet, which is open for males and females to chat with each other. She only communicates with me via email.*

As can be seen, female students' families may view any type of online learning as a threat to their daughters.

Furthermore, some families monitor their daughters while they use VLE tools, which can make it difficult for female students to study and communicate with tutors and peers. This in turn influences their perceptions of e-immediacy. Al Alhareth (2014) states that women's use of online course tools can be affected by lack of privacy, because a male family member may supervise it.

From the quantitative data, the results show that 'humour' and 'using personal examples and experiences' were least frequently used. This is consistent with the finding of Al Ghamdi (2017), that tutors rarely use any humour or personal examples and experiences in online classes, as reported by Saudi male and female students. Similarly, Kucuk (2009) showed that humour and self-disclosure are rarely used by Turkey tutors in a text-based environment.

A potential explanation for this was investigated by Asiri (2013) and seems relevant to this case. According to Asiri (2013), in the Saudi education context, tutors tend to be more formal during their teaching and communication in classrooms, which influences their use of humour behaviours. This reflects the impact of societal culture on tutors' perspectives on the use of teaching practices such as humour and self-disclosure.

Moreover, sharing information about oneself or discussing personal experiences with strangers can be difficult in the Saudi context because of a desire for privacy (Al-Saggaf, 2011). A tutor could share information and personal experiences with students in a more informal manner, but it can be difficult for male tutors to disclose detailed information about themselves, even their educational experiences, to female students. This is due to traditional Islamic practice, where women are discouraged from any unnecessary communication with men to whom they are not closely related and vice versa. This undoubtedly has a huge impact on communication between male tutors and female students in an educational context. However, female tutors may also be disinclined to share personal information with students as examples on discussion boards or via the Internet in general because they may not trust the technology. Al-Saggaf (2011) asserts that Saudi women fear that their personal information, if shared on the Internet or social media, could fall into the wrong hands, resulting in serious damage to the reputation of their families.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Saudi Arabia and its culture are very conservative. The impact of this can extend to education and influence teaching and learning processes. This is particularly true of rural areas, where the tribal nature of Saudi society and its male dominance lead to the subordination of women, as in this study.

- ***Lack of technology skills***

A lack of skill in using technology was another issue discussed by students and tutors in interviews. This problem is a common obstacle students and tutors face in the online learning literature in general and the Saudi literature in particular (for example, Mirza & Al-Abdulkareem, 2011; Al Ghamdi & Samarji, 2016). The lack of basic IT skills can diminish students' and tutors' ability to communicate in VLEs and create a sense of presence, which may result in disengaged students or withdrawal from online courses. This is consistent with

Hung et al.'s (2010) observation that a lack of IT skills affects students' readiness for online learning.

Some of the female students in the present study observed that their tutors could not send or download files in an email or on a discussion board:

*I think some tutors lack the skills to respond using Blackboard tools, because sometimes I don't get any response from my tutor. For example, when I asked her about my file, she told me that she could not open the file or upload it. (FG3, S2)*

Moreover, it was mentioned that tutors did not have enough experience using communication tools in a VLE: '*The key issue is the lack of tutors' experience in using VLE tools effectively with students*' (FT.4). The tutors agreed that this problem had a serious impact on their online teaching.

This supports Al Ghamdi and Samarji's (2016) study, which reported that a lack of technology skills is one of the top four barriers tutors face with regard to online teaching and the use of e-learning in Saudi universities. High-quality online teaching and learning depends on social interaction and communication (Nandi et al., 2012). Both the students and tutors in the present study mentioned that they needed training courses at the beginning of the term in order to become familiar with using VLE tools. This problem had even led female students to ask their female tutors for face-to-face lectures on the university campus. The findings also suggest that tutors prefer to use social networks (e.g., WhatsApp) with their students because they are easier and more flexible to use than VLE tools.

- ***Internet connectivity problems***

This study also found that Internet connectivity problems represent a further challenge for tutors and female students in accessing and using VLE tools. In this study, the tutors and female students highlighted poor Internet speed and coverage, which affected their

communication with each other. This is also in line with the results of Kadi's (2015) study, which asserted that Internet connectivity problems can influence student-tutor communication in the context of Saudi education. It is in fact a common obstacle in Saudi Arabia, particularly in rural areas and the smaller cities, such as the one in which the present study was conducted. A poor Internet connection can fail during lectures and while downloading, sending or receiving materials. This represents serious problems for both tutors and students in a VLE (Al Ghamdi and Samarji, 2016).

In summary, tutors and female students reported that there are some challenges that may influence their perceptions or use of e-immediacy practices, which affects students' learning in VLEs. Consequently, university administrators should consider these problems and attempt to solve them to facilitate female students' learning.

### **7.3. The Perceptions of Tutors and Female Students of the Importance of Immediacy Practices in a VLE**

The female students' and tutors perceptions' corresponded with each other strongly in terms of the importance of immediacy practices in a VLE, with both appearing to value them highly. They believed that e-immediacy could support online learning and teaching, encourage student participation and interaction, increase satisfaction and overcome students' shyness. These findings are in line with previous studies that confirm the potential of immediacy practices to support online teaching and learning (Baker, 2004), enhance online student participation (Al Ghamdi et al., 2016), improve the quality of online interaction (Faraha & Castro, 2016; Nandi et al., 2012), increase students' satisfaction (Painter, 2015) and overcome students' shyness (Fallah, 2014).

In the Saudi education context, the most common pedagogical method is tutor-centred (Asiri, 2014; Alamri, 2016). However, after gathering the students' and tutors' perceptions of e-

immediacy practices, it becomes clear that a shift towards a student- and tutor-centred approach has occurred. Both pedagogical styles are appropriate for use within a VLE as a means of enhancing and facilitating students' learning. Nandi et al. (2012) suggest that online course design can benefit from combining tutor- and student-centred approaches, where both students and tutors assume responsibility for constructing and sharing their knowledge.

- *Fostering student interaction*

The findings from quantitative and qualitative data show that student interaction is a significant predictor of immediacy within VLE tools. The perceptions of female students and their tutors strongly agreed that immediacy practices foster student interaction. This result corresponds closely with those of other researchers (Conaway et al., 2005; Nandi et al., 2012; Zacharias, 2009) who found that tutors' immediacy practices promote student interaction in online courses. Interactivity is an important element of virtual environments that facilitates social presence and reduces transactional distance. According to Faraha and Castro (2015), interactivity is not an inherent characteristic of VLE tools but rather a condition that needs to be developed by students and tutors.

The findings of this study also reveal that both tutor–student and student–student interactions were commonly fostered by immediacy practices. These types of interactions can support online learning environments (Bernard et al., 2009), and build a sense of community (Conaway et al., 2005). Therefore, these practices can enhance social presence because students will feel that their learning community is real, in that the main factors of learning are provided. They will also create social presence through one of the main theoretical dimensions, which is interactivity (Tu & McIsaac, 2002).

Tu and McIsaac (2002) suggest that communication strategies (e.g., praising, asking questions and initiating conversation) have an impact on interaction in an online learning

environment and elicit friendliness and warmth in students. This predictor of immediacy can also overcome the sense of distance between students and tutors by enhancing the closeness and dialogue in online learning environments. Moore's theory (1993) suggests that dialogue as the two way interaction via VLE communication tools reduces transactional distance and perceptions of separation.

Furthermore, based on sociocultural theory, interaction in a VLE can then lead to students creating new knowledge and skills, whereby learning becomes a process of sharing between tutors and students. From a sociocultural perspective, the tutor's role will consequently move from one of delivering information to that of a facilitator or moderator. This is precisely what learning in a VLE requires.

In conclusion, immediacy practices have an important impact on student–tutor and student–student interaction within VLE tools, which are associated with the promotion of social presence, overcoming of transactional distance and construction of knowledge. Consequently, tutors should consider the importance of immediacy as fostering female students' interaction, which will help them to select the practices that have greatest effect.

- ***Encouraging student participation***

The quantitative findings show that immediacy practices have an important effect on student participation; that is, the activities performed by the students using the VLE tools, such as communication and interaction with their tutors or peers and sharing thoughts and ideas through discussion and postings. The tutors and female students strongly believed that e-immediacy practices can encourage students to comment, discuss and answer the tutors' questions. This result is consistent with Al Ghamdi (2017), Kucuk (2009) and Ni and Aust (2008), who argued that implementing immediacy practices within VLEs encourages student participation; another previous study revealed a 60% increase in student participation in

online courses when the tutor practised immediacy, compared to those who did not (Melrose & Bergeron, 2006).

Immediacy practices promote students willingness to comment, contribute and answer questions which female students have a greater opportunity of engaging in virtual environments. It is believed that immediacy in the classroom helps students form a positive perception and attitude towards the tutor's competence and credibility which in turn encourage their participants in the class (Asiri, 2013).

As discussed in the previous section, consequently, interaction is achieved through tutors' immediacy practices, suggesting that interaction and participation are related to each other in the learning environment. Consequently, student participation and contribution to discussions can facilitate social presence in a VLE (Aragon, 2003). Then, sharing thoughts and ideas through participation can support the development of students' knowledge, which reflects Vygotsky's sociocultural theory.

Surprisingly, a significant difference emerged between tutors of Saudi nationality and tutors from other Arabic countries, in that Saudi tutors are more likely to see immediacy practices as important because these practices promoting student participation in a VLE. Saudi tutors may believe that immediacy practices have an important impact on enhancing female students' ability to improve their understanding of topic and content, which in turn increase their confidence to participate. This is consistent with Al Ghamdi's (2017) finding that tutors' use of immediacy practices in a text-based environment tended to increase the students' participation in a Saudi context.

In summary, it can be suggested that tutors who use immediacy practices within VLE tools can promote student contribution and information sharing, which helps students to construct

new knowledge. An increase in student participation reflects a learning environment that has become more affective for achieving the learning experiences of students.

- ***Increasing student satisfaction***

According to Kuo et al. (2013), student satisfaction is a significant indicator of the quality of online learning experiences. In this study, the qualitative data revealed that tutors' immediacy practices increased the female students' satisfaction with online courses. The immediacy practices that increased satisfaction were communicating with the student, responsiveness, answering questions and initiating discussion. The students indicated their satisfaction with comments such as 'I feel excited', 'I feel interested' and 'I feel satisfied'.

This finding is consistent with studies that examined the relationship between immediacy and student satisfaction in VLEs, finding immediacy practices to be a significant predictor of student satisfaction (Al Ghamdi et al., 2016; Painter, 2015). By using e-immediacy practices, tutors provide an opportunity for students to participate by sharing their ideas and discussing points aired by their tutors, which enhances social presence and overcomes transactional distance. Moreover, some researchers have indicated that students' satisfaction lead to improve students' learning experiences and outcomes (Asiri, 2013; Kuo et al., 2013). Also, it is important to indicate that the e-immediacy practices have a significant effect on female students' satisfaction in virtual environments despite the dominant style of teaching is tutor-centred in Saudi education.

In conclusion, it appears from the students' views that immediacy practices help them feel satisfied with their online courses and learning via the VLE. Hence, tutors in SHE should strive to increase female students' satisfaction using those practices to enhance their online learning.

- *Overcoming female students' shyness*

In the present study, the tutors mentioned that e-immediacy practices could overcome students' shyness and encourage them to talk to their tutors. This finding is consistent with Fallah's (2014) study findings where was conducted in F2F classrooms. The finding of the study has showed that tutor immediacy practises overcome students' shyness in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom and motivate them to participate and interact with their tutors and peers.

However, the result in current study may be due to the context of the study, namely a conservative culture that requires women to be shy, reserved and modest. Moreover, as detailed in Chapter 2, female students in F2F classrooms are expected to listen without participating or engaging in discussion, which may increase the feeling of shyness.

Immediacy practices may help female students overcome shyness, encourage them to talk to their tutors and promote interaction via VLE tools. The tutors in this current study emphasised that the use of e-immediacy practices had increased students' self-confidence to join in with conversations:

*It is an indirect approach that works well in overcoming students' shyness, especially with our less open culture. (MT.2)*

*I see my students communicate and participate in class, without the shyness observed in F2F classes. (FT.4)*

In the above comments, the tutors asserted that immediacy practices could help overcome shyness amongst female students when using the VLE tools. Hence, this influenced their satisfaction as students on an online course, causing them to benefit from the learning experience.

Overall, data from mixed methods in this case study indicate that there is a potential for e-immediacy practices to affect female students' learning. Participants seem to assign

importance to immediacy practices within a Saudi virtual learning. Therefore, tutors need support to use these practices in an effective way with female students via VLE tools.

#### **7.4. Summary**

This chapter has discussed the results of this mixed-methods case study. First, it was found that the most effective immediacy practices for female Saudi students in a VLE included responsiveness, clarification, asking questions, providing feedback and care. Secondly, immediacy practices were found to be important for female Saudi students in a VLE, because they were a method of encouraging student interaction, promoting students' participation, satisfaction, and overcoming students' shyness. The effect of Saudi culture on students' and tutors' perceptions of immediacy practices in a VLE also clearly emerged from the data.

The next and final chapter will highlight the main findings, consider the study's implications and limitations and suggest some lines of future research.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

### **8.1. Introduction**

This Conclusion chapter presents a summary of the study and provides answers to the research questions. Following this is a discussion of some of the theoretical implications for practice, based on the study findings. The limitations of this study will then be outlined, with recommendations for future research.

### **8.2. Summary of the Findings**

This study has investigated the perceptions of tutors and Saudi female students regarding the use and importance of immediacy practices in VLEs at a Saudi university. The thesis was guided by the following questions:

- What are the perceptions of tutors and female students concerning the use of immediacy practices in VLEs?
- How do tutors and female students perceive the importance of immediacy practices in VLEs?
- In what way do the perceptions of tutors and female students differ on the use and importance of immediacy practices in VLEs?

A mixed methods case study design was used to answer the research questions and to compare and contrast the findings derived from the results of the quantitative and qualitative research methods. This was to ascertain the differences between the views of the female students and their tutors with regard to e-immediacy. This research design also helped the researcher to gain a more holistic understanding and additional insights into the phenomena

being studied. The immediacy survey results, the students' focus group, and the tutors' one-to-one interview findings provided a general picture of e-immediacy practices implemented in a VLE and the importance of these practices to online teaching and learning, as a means of enhancing female students' learning in the Saudi context.

The research findings show that immediacy practices were being used in VLEs in Saudi Arabia and that female students and their tutors were aware of the importance of these practices. The e-immediacy practices identified by the participants were applied in most of the communication tools in Blackboard (for example, discussion boards, email, announcements) to enhance students' learning. The findings of this study are in line with other research examining immediacy practices in online learning environments across different contexts, such as Faraha and Castro (2015) in Mexico; Melrose and Bergeron (2006) in Canada; Spiker (2014) in the US and Walkem (2014) in Australia. The following sections present the main findings to answer each research question.

### **8.2.1. Answer to Research Question One**

#### **What are the perceptions of tutors and female students concerning the use of immediacy practices in VLEs?**

A mixed method approach was adopted to answer this question and examine the participants' views. The female students and tutors mentioned some of the immediacy practices that were frequently used in their VLEs. The findings show that 'responsiveness', 'providing guidance and instructions', 'feedback', 'asking questions' and 'care' were the most common practices applied by tutors in Saudi female students' virtual learning. The findings of this investigation show that tutors are aware of immediacy practices and they believe in using them in female students' virtual learning. They also understand that these practices can associate with

facilitating the students' learning and achieving online courses objectives. This was also where the tutors appeared to understand and acknowledge the issues encountered by female students in their culture to influence on implementing immediacy practices. These issues emerged as a theme from the participants' qualitative data.

These challenges influence students' and tutors' perceptions of the use of immediacy practices. Culture, a lack of IT skills, and Internet connection problems were found to be the main barriers inhibiting tutors from adopting immediacy practices or supporting students' learning. Social culture was also a major problem mentioned by tutors and female students in the interviews, with reference to its capacity to significantly influence general perceptions of technology.

### **8.2.2. Answer to Research Question Two**

#### **How do tutors and female students perceive the importance of immediacy practices in VLEs?**

It is evident from this study that tutors' immediacy practices have an important influence on teaching and learning experiences in virtual learning. The perceptions of female students and their tutors were similar in terms of the importance of immediacy practices for supporting online teaching and learning, and promoting student interaction, participation and satisfaction. Their perceptions also showed the effect of immediacy practices to overcome female students' shyness and encourage them to communicate and participate in the VLE. This confirmed the importance of tutor immediacy practices in Saudi female students' virtual learning, especially with reference to minimising any communication or interaction gap that could hinder such learning. The findings suggest the importance of tutors' immediacy practices to female students, represented in interaction, participation, satisfaction and overcoming shyness.

Female students' virtual learning is thus rendered more effective by immediacy practices, where these help reduce the feeling of physical distance and encourage their learning. An interactive environment is the core of online courses, where students experience a similar atmosphere to that of a face-to-face classroom, which leads them to being satisfied with their courses. Furthermore, the findings suggest that tutors' immediacy practices can also help female students overcome their shyness and encourages them to communicate with their tutors in a VLE. Therefore, the e-immediacy function has been successfully introduced into Saudi virtual learning by supporting the students' learning experiences and outcomes. It was also shown that tutors appear to understand their role in VLE as a facilitator who guides female students in achieving their online learning goals.

### **8.2.3. Answer to Research Question Three**

#### **In what way do the perceptions of tutors and female students differ on the use and importance of immediacy practices in VLEs?**

The findings derived using a quantitative method revealed that all the tutors tended to 'agree' with the use of these practices when implementing VLE tools. In contrast, only half the students 'agreed' with the use of these practices in VLE communication, such as via discussion boards and email. However, all the participants strongly believed that immediacy was an important teaching method for enhancing students' learning and supporting teaching in VLEs. With regard to the findings from the qualitative method, the perceptions of the female students and their tutors were similar across most of the themes related to the use and importance of immediacy, except for 'care' as a common practice adopted in female students' virtual learning. In fact, care was only classed as an immediacy practice by the tutors. The female students' and tutors' perceptions were also similar regarding the importance of immediacy for fostering students' interaction and participation. Meanwhile, increased

satisfaction only emerged from the students' perceptions, but overcoming students' shyness emerged from the tutors' perceptions.

### **8.3. Original contributions**

The study makes three particular contributions to knowledge:

1. It provides a clear understanding of the importance of immediacy practices to female students in their virtual learning environment and how these practices help them to enhance their online learning by increasing their interaction and satisfaction.
2. In terms of methodology, this is the first study to adopt a mixed methods design to investigate the perceptions of female students and their tutors about the use and importance of immediacy practices in the virtual learning environment. In this research, the mixed methods design helped the researcher to offer a complete picture of the participants' views from two approaches (quantitative and qualitative), to understand how they perceived immediacy and its importance in online learning and teaching.
3. A further original contribution can be identified in the female student voice. This study gave female students an opportunity to voice their opinions on online teaching practices in an open and supportive way. In Saudi education context, there is a shortage of female tutors and students' views about the education improvements, issues and reforms in general. Therefore, this study provides in-depth insights into female students' perceptions of online teaching practices in general and the practices that they feel are appropriate for them and for their background.

#### **8.4. Theoretical Implications**

The theories used to guide this study were Sociocultural Theory, Social Presence Theory and Transactional Distance Theory; all of which focus on enhancing students' learning. In general, online learning can be enhanced by fostering students' interaction, participation and satisfaction. Previous studies have confirmed that implementing immediacy as a teaching practice within online courses can increase these important factors (interaction, participation and satisfaction); in order to produce learning experiences (Kucuk, 2009; Painter, 2015; Al Ghamdi, 2017).

This study has shown that immediacy influences interactivity, which is an important element of the Sociocultural, Transactional Distance and Social Presence theories. Although the background of the female students is conservative, due to the culture in which they live, and this affects their communication and interaction on the Internet, immediacy practices engaged them in interaction with their tutors and peers to support their learning.

In Saudi virtual learning, tutors can encourage interaction amongst and with female students by using immediacy practices, such as asking questions, demonstrating care, giving clarification and displaying responsiveness. The enhancement of students' participation and dialogue through immediacy practices was associated with them overcoming the transactional distance between themselves and their tutors and peers, as well as with increasing tutors' presence. The function of immediacy in communication studies to reduce the sense of psychological and physical distance between people and increase comfortable feeling when they communicate with each other. It also encourages the communicator partner to talk and interact which can therefore be applied to virtual environments, where tutors adopt immediacy in their practice.

Immediacy can also enhance the perception of closeness between communicators, which is more important than physical closeness. In the virtual environment, it is essential to foster a learning environment that is rich in social presence, where students perceive their tutors as real people. Social presence can thereby reflect empathy and interpersonal warmth which in turn reduce students' feelings of isolation or a sense of separation. Therefore, it is necessary to design a course and use strategies that will create social presence in virtual environments.

Furthermore, in a VLE, tutors need to design their courses with activities and tasks that provide two-way communication in VLE tools, because this can lead to meaningful online learning and achieve high levels of cognitive learning. Sociocultural Theory pays attention to an individual's embedded sociocultural factors and the way in which every-day social interaction with the outside world is associated with cognitive development. Consequently, the components for students' knowledge development need to include tutor-student or students-student interaction. Therefore, in a Saudi virtual environment, tutors should integrate immediacy practices into their roles and strategy, because immediacy has a positive impact on encouraging interaction amongst and with female students, as well as on their participation, as exhibited in the current findings. Moreover, female students' learning is fostered by the creation of a supportive and effective environment. Again, tutors should engage in e-immediacy practices that can draw the female students' attention and interest to complete their courses.

A further implication is that reducing the transactional distance can be achieved by developing positive relationships between tutors and students. As in the current study, such relationships have the potential to overcome females' shyness and encourage their communication with their tutors. Also, those relationships may improve the awareness of tutors toward dialogue and conversation skills into Saudi education and online education practices.

## 8.5. Implications for Tutors

The implications for tutors refer to tutors who teach female students online in the Saudi context but they can be applicable to all tutors support online courses. The study findings suggest that tutors in higher education institutions need to be aware of female students' perceptions of the way in which important immediacy practices enhance female students' learning and foster their communication and interaction in virtual environments. Based on the findings of this study, several implications may be identified for tutors seeking to improve their immediacy practices in a VLE:

1. Tutors need to be aware of the needs of female students in a VLE, in order to be able to promote students' communication and connectedness. For example, they should apply practices that encourage students to ask questions and give them an opportunity to give their opinions without fear.
2. Tutors should ask female students about the practices that are most helpful for them in achieving their desired learning outcomes and maintaining connected with their tutors or other students.
3. Tutors should offer their students guidelines for online communication, in order to notify them of suitable times and means of contacting them, aside from transmitting their contact information. This will help students avoid feelings of frustration or isolation.
4. According to the study findings, tutors need to emphasise the use of the immediacy practices that were most commonly perceived as positive by their female students such as feedback and questioning; consequently improving these practices to facilitate students' online learning and create an interactive learning environment.
5. Female students' culture and family restrictions need to be taken into consideration when using the VLE tools and practicing e-immediacy. There is a variation in Saudi

culture between its urban and rural areas. This then affects students' perceptions and attitudes to tutors' immediacy practices in VLEs. The study findings show the importance of taking such cultural factors into account when implementing e-immediacy practices. It can encourage tutors to use effective immediacy practices (e.g. caring behaviours) that will reduce perceptions of distance and enhance female students' learning.

## **8.6. Implications for Policy-makers**

The implications for policy-makers consist of the following:

1. Improving tutors' online teaching skills and knowledge through training. This can be accomplished and improved by introducing the idea of learning for social interaction and social reasons, instead of focusing solely on delivering content via VLE tools. Tutors' training should include a wide range of approaches to help them design an effective online learning environment, with teaching methods that will engage female students in learning, such as fostering sociable learning environments, while at the same time taking into account the restrictions and sensitivities of Saudi culture.
2. Encouraging tutors to use different communication tools in a VLE: the findings of this study reveal that the tools most commonly used by tutors are asynchronous communication tools, such as discussion boards. The use of synchronous tools (for example, video and audio-conferencing) will help tutors to improve their immediacy practices within female students' virtual environments.
3. Providing training courses for tutors will help them to understand effective 'netiquette' styles and behaviours, appropriate for use with female students in a VLE, according to the cultural lens.

4. Policy-makers need to be aware of the important impact of the Saudi context on female students' learning. They should focus on educating students' parents about the importance of online learning for their daughters and how it can facilitate female students' learning experiences. They should therefore encourage families in general and men in particular, especially in rural areas and in the smaller provincial cities, to loosen some of their restrictions on women's access and use of VLEs for their studies. This could take place at government level, with regulations to help grant female students the right to study using a VLE, thus prohibiting parents from preventing their daughters from pursuing an education in this way.
5. The findings reveal that students and tutors lack IT skills and experience of using VLE tools. These skills have a negative influence on tutors' effective use of immediacy practices during online teaching. Consequently, training programmes for tutors should pay attention to the way in which VLE tools are used and provide a means for tutors to acquire important IT and online teaching skills.

## **8.7. Limitations of the Study**

Some limitations of this study need to be acknowledged in this section.

### **1. *Generalisation of the Findings***

The investigation conducted in this study is limited in the application of its findings to other contexts. The research design consisted of a mixed methods case study and the participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which influences the generalisation of the findings. Furthermore, the participants were female students and their tutors from a single higher education institution in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, these findings might not represent the views of students and tutors in other contexts. However, it could be possible to extend these

results to other societies, where female students study in segregated schools, such as other countries in the Arabian Gulf, because of their similar circumstances and cultural restrictions.

## ***2. The Study Sample***

This research included a survey and two types of interview to collect data from both students and tutors, but using a sample from just one institution, namely the researcher's institution. This is also the only institution in a targeted university that currently provides fully online courses for female students in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, there were some limitations in accessing a wider sample, especially regarding permission from other universities that offer fully online courses to female students. Despite this limitation, the researcher believes that the study findings have a high degree of accuracy, given that all the participants who responded to the survey or volunteered to participate in the interviews had experience of immediacy practices in VLEs.

## ***3. Selecting the Data Collection Method***

The female tutors only used asynchronous tools, such as an email, discussion board and announcement to deliver their content materials, but avoided using video or audio-conferencing tools. Therefore, a content analysis method was required to explore immediacy practices in detail on courses taught by female tutors.

## **8.8. Recommendations for Future Study**

1. It could be valuable to investigate the policies that relate to the current status of women in Saudi society because the role of women and their needs have changed as they have become more knowledgeable about their rights.

2. A future study might investigate policy makers' views about factors hindering the improvement of tutors' online practices in higher education institutions.
3. The role of female students' families and their awareness of online learning, particularly in rural areas, is another area that is worthy of research.
4. It would be useful to conduct a study that investigates the difference between tutors' immediacy practices in face-to-face and VLE settings in Saudi Arabia, from the perspective of male and female students.
5. Future research could explore the correlation between immediacy practices and the quality of students' interaction and participation in VLEs.
6. A suggestion for future research would be to examine the effect of tutors' immediacy practices on different disciplines that require more social interaction and communication, such as science and health disciplines in different universities across Saudi Arabia.
7. Further research is required to explore the impact of Saudi culture on attitudes amongst female students and tutors, as regards VLE tools, such as video/audio-conferences.
8. Future research should explore female tutors nonverbal immediacy practices in female students' online courses and the effect of these practices in enhancing students' learning.
9. On a theoretical level, for better understanding of immediacy practices in Saudi virtual learning, it is important to conduct longitudinal research; exploring tutors' practices that can enhance immediacy by increasing closeness and reducing the physical and psychological distance in a VLE. Studies of this nature would facilitate understanding of the most appropriate practices for Saudi culture and for female students in segregated campuses.

## **8.9. Summary**

This study has investigated the perceptions of female students and their tutors concerning the use and importance of e-immediacy practices at a Saudi university. In exploring the participants' perceptions in this context, a summary of the effective e-immediacy practices and the benefits of using these practices have been outlined. Although this study has some limitations, it has derived significant findings relating to the Saudi online education field. It has also highlighted the implications of the study's theoretical framework and the implications for tutors and policy-makers when endeavouring to overcome the challenges of implementing online teaching methods in general and e-immediacy practices in particular. Furthermore, recommendations for further research have been presented.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Student Questionnaire

#### Student Questionnaire

##### Part 1: Background Information

**Instructions:** Please provide the following information by ticking (✓) the appropriate box.

1- **Undergraduate year:**  First year  Second year  Third year  Fourth year

2- **Rate your expertise in using virtual learning tools:**

Beginner  Moderate  Experienced

##### Part 2: Tutors' Immediacy Practices

Please indicate each practice used by our tutors in a virtual learning environment (VLE), by entering a tick (✓) in the appropriate box. **1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree**

My tutor		1	2	3	4	5
1.	Confirms that he/she receives and reads a message or posting.					
2.	Shows appreciation for a learner's questions or contribution.					
3.	Is willing to message or chat with students (via email or discussion boards).					
4.	Is accessible and easy to reach when students have questions.					
5.	Attempts to answer questions or inquiries from students about content.					
6.	Attempts to review course topics and assignments, etc.					
7.	Asks students if they have any questions or need additional information.					
8.	Supports students by giving feedback on their work and postings.					
9.	Provides guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.					
10.	Explains how to respond to posts, messages or emails.					
11.	Monitors students' progress.					
12.	Addresses students by name.					
13.	Encourages students to interact with each other.					
14.	Uses humour when delivering lectures and communicating with students.					
15.	Uses and discusses personal examples and experiences relating to courses.					
16.	Communicates course goals, policies and procedures.					
17.	Replies to students' emails within 24 hours.					
18.	Promptly responds to students' posts, comments, questions or inquiries.					

**Part 3: Your Views on Tutors' Online Immediacy Practices**

**Instructions:** Please indicate how far you agree with each of the statements below by entering a tick (✓) in the appropriate box. **1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree.**

The importance of immediacy practices		1	2	3	4	5
1.	Immediacy practices support me in interacting more with tutors via a VLE.					
2.	Immediacy practices encourage me to interact with peers via a VLE.					
4.	Immediacy practices enhance my participation.					
5.	Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.					

6. What are the most effective immediacy practices that your tutors have used?  
List up to two types:

- 1- .....
- 2- .....
- 3- .....

**Part 4: Future Interview**

You are invited to participate in a more in-depth interview. If you are willing to participate in this interview, please provide the following information.

Name: ..... Mobile number: .....

Email: .....

## Appendix 2: Tutors' Questionnaire

### Tutor Questionnaire

#### Part 1: Background Information

**Instructions:** Please provide the following information by ticking (✓) the appropriate box.

**1- Gender:**

- Male             Female

**2- Nationality:**

- Saudi             Other Arabic speaker

**3- Academic degree:**

- Bachelor's     Master's     Doctorate

**4- Online teaching experience:**

- 0-5 years     6-10 years     More than 10 years

**5- Rate your expertise in using virtual learning tools:**

- Beginner     Moderate     Experienced

#### Part 2: Tutors' Immediacy Practices

Please select each practice that you use in a VLE by entering a tick (✓) in the appropriate box.

**1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree**

The use of immediacy practices		1	2	3	4	5
1.	I confirm when I receive and read a message or posting.					
2.	I show appreciation for a student's questions or contribution.					
3.	I'm willing to message or chat with students (via email or discussion boards).					
4.	I'm accessible and easy to reach when students have any questions.					
5.	I attempt to answer questions or inquiries from students about content.					
6.	I attempt to review course topics and assignments, etc.					
7.	I ask students if they have any questions or need additional information.					
8.	I support students by giving feedback on their work and postings.					
9.	I provide guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.					
10.	I explain how to respond to posts and messages.					
11.	I monitor students' progress.					
12.	I address students by name.					
13.	I encourage students to interact with each other.					
14.	I use humour when delivering lectures and interacting with students.					
15.	I use and discuss personal examples and experiences relating to the courses.					
16.	I communicate course goals, policies and procedures.					

17.	I reply to students' emails within 24 hours.					
18.	I promptly respond to students' posts, comments, questions or inquiries.					

**Part 3: Your Views and Experiences of the Importance of Online Immediacy Practices**

**Instructions:** Please indicate how far you agree with each of the statements below by ticking (✓) the appropriate box. **1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree.**

The importance of immediacy practices		1	2	3	4	5
1.	Immediacy practices support students in their interaction with me via a virtual learning environment (VLE).					
2.	Immediacy practices encourage students to interact with peers via a VLE.					
4.	Immediacy practices enhance students' participation in a VLE.					
5.	Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.					

6- What are the most effective immediacy practices that you have experienced?

List up to two types:

- 1- .....
- 2- .....
- 3- .....

**Part 4: Future Interview**

You are invited to participate in a more in-depth interview. If you are willing to participate in this interview, please provide the following information.

Name: ..... Mobile number: .....

Email: .....

## **Appendix 3: Research Information Sheet**

### **Student Information Sheet**

#### **Title of the Study:**

Immediacy Practices in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE): Perceptions of Tutors and Female Students at a Saudi University.

#### **Dear Participant,**

I am a Ph.D. student at the Institute of Education in the University of Reading. I am inviting you to participate in this research study, which examines the experiences of female students and their tutors with regard to immediacy practices, as encountered in your university's virtual environment. This involves the ways in which tutors support interaction with students and, as a result, enhance online teaching and learning processes, e.g. by addressing students by name and providing feedback and timely responses when communicating.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being carried out and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

This study aims to examine and understand the views of female students and their tutors concerning their experience of immediacy practices, as they occur in a VLE and to what extent these approaches enhance online learning and teaching. A mixed methods design is adopted for this research, which will include the use of questionnaires and interviews (one-to-one and a focus group), as a means of exploring students' and tutors' views on immediacy practices.

#### **Why have I been chosen to take part?**

You have been invited to take part in this study, because you are a student at the University and, as such, your views will be invaluable for the proposed research.

#### **What will happen if I take part?**

Initially, you will be invited to complete a short questionnaire. If you are willing to support the study further, you can choose to take part in a focus group interview. The questionnaire will take a maximum of 20 minutes to complete, at your own convenience. Regarding the interview, it will take place face-to-face at a mutually convenient date and time. With your agreement, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

You should understand that your participation is voluntary and so it is entirely your decision whether or not you take part. If you do decide to take part, however, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. Moreover, you will still be free to withdraw at any time and without giving any reason, by contacting me via email at: [s.alharbi@pgr.reading.ac.uk](mailto:s.alharbi@pgr.reading.ac.uk)

### **What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of taking part?**

Participants will benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their learning and share their ideas, which will help tutors to enhance their online teaching methods and communication skills.

### **Will what I say be kept confidential and what will happen to the results of the research?**

Any data collected will be held in the strictest confidence and no real names will be used in this study, or in any subsequent publications. The completed questionnaires and the interview records for this study will be kept private. However, the data collected for this study will provide the basis for my Ph.D. thesis. This thesis will be published in hard copy and electronic format and will be housed at the Institute of Education in the University of Reading. The data and the analysis of that data will also be used to produce articles, books and conference papers, as well as being presented in conferences and lectures. However, if the research is presented in any of these formats, I assure you that your identity and anonymity will be protected. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations) and in order to protect the anonymity of each participant, pseudonyms will be used to ensure that no participant can be identified. All electronic data will be held securely in password-protected files on a non-shared PC and all paper documentation will be held in locked cabinets, within a locked office.

In line with University policy, all data generated in this study will be kept securely in paper or electronic form for a period of five years after the completion of the research project. It will then be securely destroyed.

### **Who has reviewed the ethics of this study?**

The application for approval to conduct this research has been reviewed by the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee and approval has been granted. The University has appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

### **What happens if I change my mind?**

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. During the course of the research, you can stop completing the activities whenever you wish. If you change your mind after the data collection has ended, we will discard your data.

### **What happens if something goes wrong?**

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact the researcher's academic supervisor, Dr. Yota Dimitriadi at the University of Reading; Tel.: +44 (0)1183782688, email: [y.dimitriadi@reading.ac.uk](mailto:y.dimitriadi@reading.ac.uk)

**Thank you for your time**

## Appendix 4: Research Participant Consent Forms

### Consent Form

**Title of the study:**

Immediacy practices in a virtual learning environment (VLE): Perceptions of tutors and female students at a Saudi university.

- I agree to take part in the above study
- I have read the project in the Information Sheet, which I have received a copy of, along with a copy of this Consent Form.
- I know and understand the purpose of this project and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 5: Interviews and Focus Group Questions**

- How would you describe tutor immediacy practices in a virtual learning environment?
- Are immediacy practices important for online teaching and learning? Why?
- To what extent does tutors' online immediacy engage you in your learning?
- What are the main differences between immediacy in virtual learning and traditional classrooms?
- Which type of tutor immediacy practices do you most prefer in VLEs?
- Do you think immediacy practices affect your interaction with your tutors and peers?
- Do you think that tutors' immediacy practices affect your achievement and results?
- How can your tutors improve their immediacy practices in VLEs?
- Is there anything else about your experience of immediacy in virtual learning that you would like to discuss or comment on?

## Appendix 6: Arabic Version of the Participation Information Sheet

### حول البحث معلومات للطالبة والأكاديمي/ة

#### عنوان الدراسة:

تصورات الطالبات والأكاديميين عن السلوكيات الأنوية في بيئة التعلم الإلكتروني في الجامعات السعودية

#### عزيزي المشترك:

أنا طالبة في مرحلة الدراسات العليا للحصول على درجة الدكتوراه في كلية التربية بجامعة ريدينغ. , أنتم مدعون للاشتراك في هذا البحث الذي يركز على تجربة الطالبات و المحاضرين الأكاديميين حول السلوكيات الأنوية من خلال بيئة التعلم الإلكترونية و التي يمكن أن تعزز التعليم عبر الإنترنت و عملية التعلم في جامعات المملكة العربية السعودية. و تشير السلوكيات الأنوية إلى سلوكيات تواصل المدرسين مع الطلاب و التي تقلل البعد النفسي في التفاعل بين المدرسين و الطلاب مثلا التوجه للطلاب بالحديث باستخدام اسمه، واستخدام العواطف أثناء التواصل. وقبل أن تقرر فيما لو كنت ستشارك في هذا البحث أم لا من المهم لك أن تتفهم لماذا يتم عمل هذا البحث وما الذي يدور حوله. أرجو منك أن تأخذ وقتك في قراءة المعلومات التالية بعناية.

#### ما هو هدف الدراسة؟

تهدف هذه الدراسة لمعرفة وجهة النظر الخاصة بالطالبات وأعضاء هيئة التدريس تجاه السلوكيات والممارسات الأنوية كاحدى طرق التدريس الفعالة في بيئات التعلم الإلكتروني. وسوف نقوم باستخدام اداتين وهي الاستبيان والمقابلة لتحقيق هدف الدراسة و الإجابة على أسئلة البحث, و لفهم آراء الطالبات والأكاديميين حول هذه الممارسات .

#### لماذا اخترت الاشتراك؟

أنت مدعو للمساهمة في هذه الدراسة لأنك كطالب في مرحلة ما قبل التخرج في الجامعة, و رأيك سيكون ذا قيمة في هذه الدراسة.

#### ما الذي سوف يحصل عند اشتراكك في هذه الدراسة ؟

سيكون المطلوب منك أن تقوم بالإجابة على أسئلة مدرجة في استبيان قصير كما يمكن أن تكون مشتركا في مقابلة وجها لوجه للتركيز على وجهة نظرك حول طريقة التدريس هذه. سيتطلب الاستبيان وقتا حده الأعلى 15 دقيقة لإنجازه وفقا لما يلائمك. وفيما يتعلق بالمقابلات سوف تكون وجها لوجه أو من خلال الهاتف أو من خلال تطبيقات التواصل في وقت وتاريخ يناسبك. سيتم تسجيل المقابلة بشكل صوتي ومن ثم تفرغها على الورق. ثم سيتم عرض هذه المقابلات المكتوبة عليك للتحقق من دقتها و للتأكد من أنك لازلتي راضيا باستخدامها في هذا البحث.

#### هل يجب علي الاشتراك؟

يجب أن تعي أن اشتراكك طوعي و الأمر عائد إليك لتقرر فيما لو كنت تريد الاشتراك أم لا. ولن يكون للاشتراك أي تأثير على العلامات التي ستحصل عليها في دراستك. كما أنه لن يتم مشاركة المعلومات مع المحاضرين. و إذا قررت الاشتراك سوف يتم إعطائك صفحة المعلومات لتحتفظ بها كما سيكون عليك التوقيع على استمارة موافقة. علما أنه ستكون لديك الحرية في الانسحاب وقتما تشاء.

#### الحفاظ على سرية ما أقوله وما الذي سوف يحدث بنتائج البحث؟

سيتم معاملة كافة البيانات التي سيتم جمعها بسرية تامة ولن يتم استخدام أي أسماء حقيقية في هذه الدراسة أو أي منشورات لاحقة. أما بالنسبة للاستبيانات المكتملة والمقابلات المسجلة سيتم الاحتفاظ بسريتها. إن البيانات التي سيتم جمعها سيتم استخدامها كأساس لموضوع رسالتك, و سيتم نشر الموضوع على شكل نسخة ورقية بالإضافة إلى نسخة إلكترونية سيتم الاحتفاظ بها في مكتبة المعهد التربوي في جامعة ريدينغ. كما أنه سيتم استخدام هذه البيانات وتحليلها في عمل مقالات وكتب و أوراق عمل كما أنه سيتم تقديمها في المؤتمرات و المحاضرات. مهما كان الشكل الذي سوف تستخدم فيه هذه البيانات أعود لأؤكد على أن هوية المشتركين لن يتم الكشف عنها و أنها ستكون محمية بكل الأحوال. كافة المعلومات التي تم جمعها سيتم الحفاظ عليها بسرية تامة ومشددة (وستكون خاضعة للحدود القانونية) وبهدف الحرص على عدم كشف هوية المشترك ولجميع المشتركين, سيتم استخدام أسماء مستعارة لضمان عدم التعريف عن المشتركين. كافة البيانات الإلكترونية سيتم حفظها بأمان في ملفات محمية بكلمات مرور على جهاز كمبيوتر شخصي لا يوجد عليه أي مشاركة وكافة الوثائق الورقية سيتم حفظها ضمن خزائن مغلقة ضمن مكتب مقل. وتمشيا مع سياسة

الجامعة فإن البيانات الناتجة من الدراسة سيتم الحفاظ عليها بأمان بشكل ورقي أو إلكتروني لمدة خمس سنوات بعد اكتمال مشروع البحث.

#### من سيقوم بمراجعة الدراسة؟

تمت مراجعة هذا التطبيق من قبل لجنة أخلاقيات البحث في جامعة ريدينغ وقد منحت الموافقة الأخلاقية المواتية لسلوكيات البحث. يتوفر لدى الجامعة التأمينات المكانية اللازمة.

#### ماذا يحدث إن غيرت رأيي؟

بإمكانك تغيير رأيك في أي وقت بدون أي تداعيات. خلال البحث يمكنك التوقف عن التجاوب أو الحضور في أي وقت. إذا غيرت رأيك بعد جمع البيانات اللازمة سنقوم بإهمال بياناتك.

#### ماذا سيحدث لو حصل خطأ ما؟

في حال القلق الغير محتمل أو وجود أي شكوى يمكنك الاتصال بالمشرف على الباحث الدكتورة يونا ديميترياتي جامعة أرجو منكم الموافقة على الاشتراك في [y.dimitriadi@reading.ac.uk](mailto:y.dimitriadi@reading.ac.uk), email: +44(0)1183782688 ريدينغ الدراسة إذا وافقتم أرجو منكم إكمال استمارة الموافقة المرفقة.

عرض هذا البحث على لجنة أخلاقيات البحث في جامعة ريدينغ و التي تم إعطاءها حق و صلاحيات إبداء الرأي.

شكرا لوقتكم

## Appendix 7: Arabic Version of the Participant Consent Form

### استمارة موافقة الطالبة والأكاديمي/ة

عنوان الدراسة: تصورات الطلاب عن السلوكيات الأنية للأكاديمين في بيئة التعلم الالكترونية في الجامعات السعودية. لقد قرأت صفحة المعلومات عن المشروع وتلقيت نسخة منها, وإنني أفهم و بشكل كامل هدف هذه الدراسة وما هو مطلوب مني وقد قمت بالإجابة على كافة الأسئلة.

اسم المشترك: .....

- 1- أؤكد أنني قمت بقراءة و فهم صفحة المعلومات عن الدراسة السابقة (نعم  / لا  )
- 2- تم منحي الفرصة لطرح الأسئلة (وجها لوجه عبر الهاتف أو الإيميل) (نعم  / لا  )
- 3- أوافق على المساهمة في المقابلات المسجلة صوتيا (نعم  / لا  )
- 4- أفهم بشكل جيد أن الاشتراك طوعي وأنه بإمكانني الانسحاب في أي وقت بدون إبداء أسباب(نعم  / لا  )
- 5- أوافق على الاشتراك في الدراسة المذكورة أعلاه (نعم  / لا  )

التوقيع: .....

التاريخ: .....

## Appendix 8: Arabic Version of the Student Questionnaire

### استبيان الطالبة

#### الجزء الأول: معلومات شخصية

التوجيهات: نرجو تقديم المعلومات التالية بتعليم الصندوق أو كتابة الإجابة في الفراغ

- 1- السنة الدراسية:  السنة الأولى  السنة الثانية  السنة الثالثة  السنة الرابعة
- 2- ماهي خبرتك في استخدام ادوات التعلم الالكتروني:  مبتدئ  متواضع  خبير

#### القسم الثاني : سلوكيات الأكاديميين الآنية في بيئة التعلم الالكترونية:

يرجى استخدام السلوك الذي يتم استخدامه من قبل مدرسك في بيئة التعليم الإلكتروني بتعليم المكان المناسب :

- 1- أوافق جدا 2- أوافق 3- غير متأكد 4- لا أوافق 5- لا أوافق جدا

5	4	3	2	1	الأستاذة/ة في بيئة التعلم الافتراضية
					1 يؤكد على أنه يتلقى و يقرأ الرسائل و التنويهات
					2 يظهر الاهتمام بأسئلة الطلاب و المتعلمين ومشاركاتهم
					3 قادر على التراسل أو الدردشة (عبر الإيميل و لوحة المناقشة) مع المتعلمين
					4 يمكن الوصول إليه بسهولة عند وجود أي أسئلة لدى الطلاب
					5 يحاول أن يقوم بشرح و توضيح التساؤلات الواردة من الطلاب حول مضمون المحاضرة
					6 يحاول تقليص الارتباك لدى الطلاب من خلال مراجعة مواضيع الدرس و الفروض إلخ....
					7 يسأل الطلاب إذا كانت لديهم أسئلة أو أنهم بحاجة لمعلومات اضافية
					8 يدعم الطلاب من خلال تقديم تغذية راجعة لعلهم و التنويهات التي يرسلونها
					9 يقدم التوجيه والإرشاد حول نشاطات المنهج و الواجبات
					10 يشرح كيفية تجاوبه مع التنويهات و الرسائل
					11 يراقب عمل الطلاب
					12 يخاطب الطلاب بأسمائهم
					13 يشجع الطلاب على التفاعل مع بعضهم
					14 يستخدم الدعابة عند التواصل مع الطلاب
					15 يتحدث عن نفسه مع الطلاب
					16 يتواصل مع الطلاب بشأن الأهداف و الإجراءات المرتبطة بالمنهاج

						يجيب بسرعة على أسئلة الطلاب و تنوياتهم	17
						يستجيب/تستجيب في الوقت المناسب للطلاب	18
<b>القسم الثالث: وجهة نظرك عن أهمية السلوكيات الأنية للمحاضر/ة</b>							
<p><b>التوجيهات:</b> يرجى توضيح مدى اتفاقك مع كل من العبارات المدرجة أدناه بتعليم الصندوق المناسب</p> <p>1= لا أوافق بشدة 2= لا أوافق 3= غير متأكد 4= أوافق 5= أوافق بشدة</p>							
						العبارات	
						1 السلوكيات الأنية تعزز تفاعلي بشكل أكبر مع المحاضر/ة في بيئة التعلم الإلكترونية	
						2 السلوكيات الأنية تشجعي على التفاعل مع الطالبات الأخريات في بيئة التعلم الإلكترونية	
						3 السلوكيات الأنية تشجعي على المشاركة	
						4 السلوكيات الأنية مهمة لدعم التعليم و التعلم عبر الإنترنت	

أي السلوكيات التي يستخدمها المحاضر/ة وتعتبر أكثر فاعلية من وجهة نظرك ؟

أذكرني مثالين :

..... ١

..... ٢

**القسم 4: مقابلة مستقبلية:**

أنت مدعو للمشاركة في إجراء مقابلة. إذا كانت لديك الرغبة في الاشتراك في المقابلة نرجو كتابة المعلومات التالية ليتم التواصل معك:

الإسم:..... رقم الهاتف:..... البريد الإلكتروني:.....

## Appendix 9: Ethical Approval Form A

University of Reading  
Institute of Education  
Ethical Approval Form A (version May 2015)



Tick one:

Staff project:  PhD  EdD

Name of applicant (s): Sumar Alharbi

Title of project: Learners' Perceptions of Tutor Immediacy Behaviours in an E-learning Environment at a Saudi University

Name of supervisor (for student projects): Dr. Yota Dimitriadi & Dr. Karsten Oster Lundqvist

Please complete the form below including relevant sections overleaf.

	YES	NO	
<b>Have you prepared an Information Sheet for participants and/or their parents/carers that:</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
a) explains the purpose(s) of the project	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
b) explains how they have been selected as potential participants	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
c) gives a full, fair and clear account of what will be asked of them and how the information that they provide will be used	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
d) makes clear that participation in the project is voluntary	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
e) explains the arrangements to allow participants to withdraw at any stage if they wish	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
f) explains the arrangements to ensure the confidentiality of any material collected during the project, including secure arrangements for its storage, retention and disposal	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
g) explains the arrangements for publishing the research results and, if confidentiality might be affected, for obtaining written consent for this	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
h) explains the arrangements for providing participants with the research results if they wish to have them	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
i) gives the name and designation of the member of staff with responsibility for the project together with contact details, including email. If any of the project investigators are students at the IoE, then this information must be included and their name provided	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
k) explains, where applicable, the arrangements for expenses and other payments to be made to the participants	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
j) includes a standard statement indicating the process of ethical review at the University undergone by the project, as follows: "This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct".	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
k) includes a standard statement regarding insurance: "The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request".	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Please answer the following questions</b>			
1) Will you provide participants involved in your research with all the information necessary to ensure that they are fully informed and not in any way deceived or misled as to the purpose(s) and nature of the research? (Please use the subheadings used in the example information sheets on blackboard to ensure this).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2) Will you seek written or other formal consent from all participants, if they are able to provide it, in addition to (1)?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3) Is there any risk that participants may experience physical or psychological distress in taking part in your research?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
4) Have you taken the online training modules in data protection and information security (which can be found here: <a href="http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/Staffpages/imps-training.aspx">http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/Staffpages/imps-training.aspx</a> )?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5) Have you read the Health and Safety booklet (available on Blackboard) and completed a Risk Assessment Form to be included with this ethics application?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6) Does your research comply with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	YES	NO	N.A.
7) If your research is taking place in a school, have you prepared an information sheet and consent form to gain the permission in writing of the head teacher or other relevant supervisory professional?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8) Has the data collector obtained satisfactory DBS clearance?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9) If your research involves working with children under the age of 16 (or those whose special educational needs mean they are unable to give informed consent), have you prepared an information sheet and consent form for parents/carers to seek permission in writing, or to give parents/carers the opportunity to decline consent?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

10) If your research involves processing sensitive personal data <sup>1</sup> , or if it involves audio/video recordings, have you obtained the explicit consent of participants/parents?	✓		
11) If you are using a data processor to subcontract any part of your research, have you got a written contract with that contractor which (a) specifies that the contractor is required to act only on your instructions, and (b) provides for appropriate technical and organisational security measures to protect the data?			✓
12a) Does your research involve data collection outside the UK?	✓		
12b) If the answer to question 12a is "yes", does your research comply with the legal and ethical requirements for doing research in that country?	✓		
13a) Does your research involve collecting data in a language other than English?	✓		
13b) If the answer to question 13a is "yes", please confirm that information sheets, consent forms, and research instruments, where appropriate, have been directly translated from the English versions submitted with this application.	✓		
14a. Does the proposed research involve children under the age of 5?			✓
14b. If the answer to question 14a is "yes": My Head of School (or authorised Head of Department) has given details of the proposed research to the University's insurance officer, and the research will not proceed until I have confirmation that insurance cover is in place.			
If you have answered YES to Question 3, please complete Section B below			

Please complete either Section A or Section B and provide the details required in support of your application. Sign the form (Section C) then submit it with all relevant attachments (e.g. information sheets, consent forms, tests, questionnaires, interview schedules) to the Institute's Ethics Committee for consideration. Any missing information will result in the form being returned to you.

A: My research goes beyond the 'accepted custom and practice of teaching' but I consider that this project has no significant ethical implications. (Please tick the box.)	
Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc.	
It is expected that a total of participants around (150) in this study. That will include 120 female undergraduate students, and 30 female and male lecturers. 120 students (questionnaire) 30 lecturer (questionnaire) 12 minimum female undergraduate students (focus group) 10 female and male lecturers (interviews)	
Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words noting: The main research aim is to explore learners and tutors views and experiences about immediacy behaviours to enhance online teaching and effective learning, to more understand will be focused on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify the main immediacy behaviours used by tutors in the university e-learning environment.</li> <li>- Investigate tutors' experiences to demonstrate immediacy behaviours through a range of e-learning communication tools.</li> <li>- Examine the impact of tutor immediacy behaviours on learners' online interactions.</li> </ul> In order to achieve the study goals, the researcher has chosen a mixed methods approach by using questionnaires and semi structured individual and focus group interviews which are supported the research. The paper-based questionnaires and interviews (focus group and one-on-one) will include participants from a Saudi University. The questionnaires will be distributed to lecturers and students (about 150). The target participants will be lecturers (female and male) who teach female students, and undergraduate female students who study in this university. The questionnaire will be emailed to male lecturers after taking permission of Scientific Research office in the university. For female lecturers and female students, I will give copies to the Female Student Affairs Office and Female Academic Staff Office in the university of distribution. The questionnaire will ask participant if they are willing to participate or chosen, and if they accepted, they will be asked about the convenient time to them. Male lecturers will be interviewed by phone or video conferences tools e.g. hangout, skype. This is due to the cultural background in Saudi where it is harder for me as a female lecturer to interview male lecturers face to face. The questionnaire and interview documentations will be translated into Arabic as it is the spoken language of the participants. After completing the data collection, transcripts will be translated into English and verified by a bilingual speaker for consequent analysis. When starting the data analysis, the identity of the participants in interviews will be protected by employing pseudonyms in all references I make to them in the thesis. Storage of the questionnaires data will be secured in which they can send their answers directly to my email and to my address using an envelope will give to them with my address written on it or they can return it back to the previous offices. As per Saudi Arabian research protocol,	

<sup>1</sup> Sensitive personal data consists of information relating to the racial or ethnic origin of a data subject, their political opinions, religious beliefs, trade union membership, sexual life, physical or mental health or condition, or criminal offences or record.

access to the Saudi Electronic University will be facilitated by the Saudi Government Education System. The start date for data collection will be on 15-3-16, and the period will be approximately 10 weeks.

**B:** I consider that this project may have ethical implications that should be brought before the Institute's Ethics Committee.

Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc.

Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words.

1. title of project
2. purpose of project and its academic rationale
3. brief description of methods and measurements
4. participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria
5. consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary)
6. a clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them.
7. estimated start date and duration of project

**C: SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT:**

**Note:** a signature is required. Typed names are not acceptable.

I have declared all relevant information regarding my proposed project and confirm that ethical good practice will be followed within the project.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Print Name: Samar Alharbi Date: 14-1-16

**STATEMENT OF ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE ETHICS COMMITTEE**

This project has been considered using agreed Institute procedures and is now approved.

Signed: ... (IoE Rep) \_\_\_\_\_ Print Name....Andy Kempe... (representative)\* Date.....3.3.16

\* A decision to allow a project to proceed is not an expert assessment of its content or of the possible risks involved in the investigation, nor does it detract in any way from the ultimate responsibility which students/investigators must themselves have for these matters. Approval is granted on the basis of the information declared by the applicant.

## Appendix 10: Risk Assessment Form for Research Activities

University of Reading  
Institute of Education  
Risk Assessment Form for Research Activities February 2014



Select one:

Staff project:  PGR project:  MA/UG project:

Name of applicant (s): Samar Alharbi

Title of project:

(Learners' Perceptions of Tutor Immediacy Behaviours in an E-learning Environment at a Saudi University)

Name of supervisor (for student projects): Dr. Yota Dimitriadi & Dr. Karsten Oster Lundqvist

**A: Please complete the form below**

Brief outline of Work/activity:	The primary goal of this study is to explore the perceptions of Saudi female learners and the experience of lecturers about online immediacy behaviours in the e-learning environment in undergraduate courses in one higher education institution. A paper-based questionnaire will be distributed to participants (students and lecturers), making notes during the interviews are using. While the one-to-one and focus group interviews will be audio recorded.	
Where will data be collected?	The Saudi Electronic University.	
Significant hazards:	None identified. The university its self has a duty to maintain a safe area of work.	
Who might be exposed to hazards?	N/A	
Existing control measures:	The departments' rooms and premises fall within the university's Health & Safety committee responsibilities.	
Are risks adequately controlled:	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
If NO, list additional controls and actions required:	Additional controls	Action by:

**B: SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT:**

I have read the Health and Safety booklet posted on Blackboard, and the guidelines overleaf.  
I have declared all relevant information regarding my proposed project and confirm risks have been adequately assessed and will be minimized as far as possible during the course of the project.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Print Name: Samar Alharbi Date: 14-01-2016

STATEMENT OF APPROVAL TO BE COMPLETED BY SUPERVISOR (FOR UG AND MA STUDENTS) OR BY IOE ETHICS COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVE (FOR PGR AND STAFF RESEARCH).

This project has been considered using agreed Institute procedures and is now approved.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: Andy Kempe Date: 3.3.16

\* A decision to allow a project to proceed is not an expert assessment of its content or of the possible risks involved in the investigation, nor does it detract in any way from the ultimate responsibility which students/investigators must themselves have for these matters. Approval is granted on the basis of the information declared by the applicant.

## Appendix 11: Examples of original quotations

إذا لدي اي استفسار أو سؤال اجد الاستاذ يرد مباشرة على استفساري سواء على الايميل او منتديات النقاش

*If I send a question or inquiry to my tutor, he responds to me immediately, whether by email or in the discussion board. (FG1, S1)*

في كلاسني يركزون علي منتديات النقاش لطرح الاسئلة والتجاوب مع الطالبات

*In my group, tutors only focus on discussion boards to respond to students' questions and comments. (FG1, S2)*

أرى هناك فرق كبير بين الرجال والنساء فالرجال تواصلهم اسرع واكبر مع الطالبات في منتديات النقاش

*I see there are differences between male and female tutors, in terms of responses, particularly to students' questions on the discussion board. (FG1, S4)*

ربما مسؤوليات المرأة تجاه عائلتها هي السبب في تأخرها في الرد أو التواصل بشكل فعال

*It may be that the responsibilities of females toward their families are the reason... (FG1, S2)*

أكثر مهارة استخدمها هي الاستجابة للطالبات على البلاك بورد وأحيانا ارد بسرعة على ايميلاتهم

*Responding to students is the most common action I perform in Blackboard and sometimes, I respond to their emails immediately. (FT.1)*

المناقشة مع الطالبات والرد على استفساراتهم في الجزأ النظري للمادة

*On discussion boards, I only answer questions related to theoretical lectures. (FT.3)*

اتوقع بعض الدكتورات ما عندهم خبرة أو المهارات اللازمة في الرد والتجاوب مع الطالبات في التعلم الالكتروني لأنه  
أحيانا لا أجد رد منها رغم حاجتي أحيانا لقرب تسليم الواجب أو الاختبار وهي تقول أحيانا أنني لم أستطع فتح الملف عبر  
البلاك بورد

*I think some tutors lack the skills to respond using Blackboard tools, because  
sometimes I don't get any response from my tutor. For example, when I asked her  
about my file, she told me that she could not open the file or upload it. (FG3, S2)*

اعتقد البيئة لها دور في تواصل الطالبات بشكل فعال عبر التعلم الالكتروني وثقافة المجتمع حتى أن وحدة  
من الطالبات رفضت المشاركة في منتديات النقاش على البلاك بورد لخوفها من أهلها وباعتباره كغرف  
الدرشة العامة لذلك اكتفت بالتواصل معي عبر الايميل فقط وكذلك خجلهم من التواصل معي

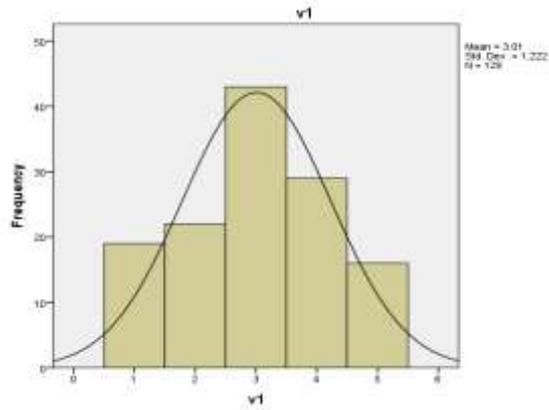
*I believe that the social culture greatly affects students' communication and  
learning. I had one student refusing to participate in a discussion board, because  
of her fear of her family. Her family thinks of a discussion board as a chat room  
on the Internet, which is open for males and females to chat with each other. She  
only communicates with me via email. (FM.1)*

أحيانا عند طرح الطالبة سؤال يخص المادة العلمية اترك الطالبات الاخرى الاجابة عليه وإذا يحتاج إلى  
تعديل في الاجابة أو اضافة أقوم بالرد عليه والطالبة التي تتجاوب مع سؤال صديقتها أشكرها على ذلك  
أمام صديقتها مما يآثر على باقي الطالبات في التجاوب والرد والاجابة.

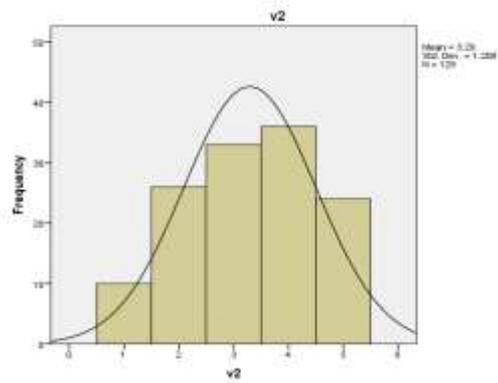
*Sometimes, when students ask questions, I prefer to leave space for other students  
to answer and if the answer needs improvement, I will edit it. I then thank the  
student that answered the question to encourage others to interact and participate  
through discussion. (FT.5)*

## Appendix 12: Examples of the Skewness and Kurtosis Values of Some of the Items

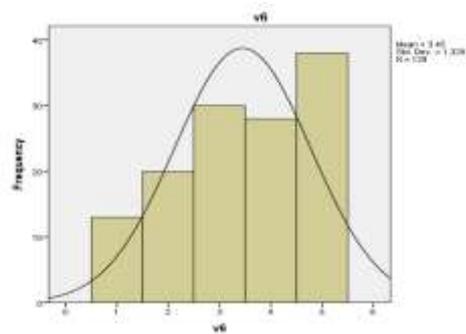
### Students' data:



**(Sk= -.093, Ku= -.823)**

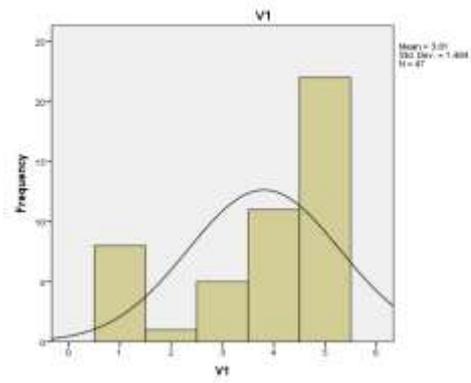


**(Sk= -.209, Ku= -1.022)**

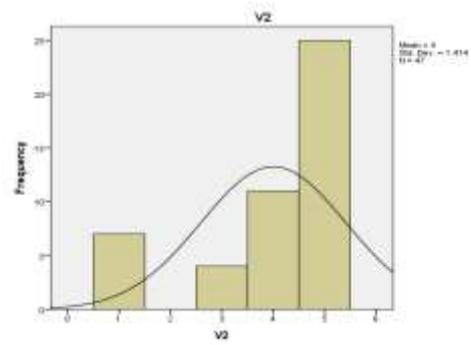


**(Sk= -.367, Ku= -1.022)**

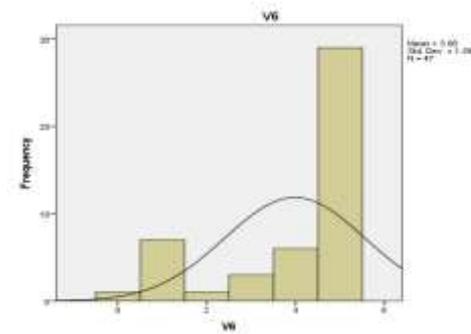
### Tutors' data:



**(Sk=-1.032, Ku=-.370)**



**(Sk= -1.349, Ku=.485)**



**(Sk= -1.308, Ku=.169)**

**Appendix 13: Kruskal-Wallis Test Results for Differences between Female Students by Academic Year**

Items	Academic Year (Median value)				K-W	df	P-value
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4			
Scale 1: The use of immediacy practices							
1. My tutor confirms when he/she receives and reads a message or posting.	4	3	3	3	15.28	3	.002*
2. My tutor shows appreciation for students' questions or contributions.	4	4	4	3	14.83	3	.002*
3. My tutor is willing to message or chat with students (via email or discussion boards).	3	4	3	3	9.311	3	.025*
4. My tutor is accessible and easy to reach when learners have questions.	3	3	3	3	8.27	3	.014*
5. My tutor attempts to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	4	4	4	3	11.77	3	.008*
6. My tutor attempts to review course topics and assignments, etc.	4	2	3	3	3.47	3	.324
7. My tutor asks students if they have any questions or need additional information.	4	3	3	3	4.74	3	.191
8. My tutor supports students by giving feedback on their work and postings.	4	3	3	3	3.44	3	.327
9. My tutor provides guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.	4	4	4	3	10.52	3	.015*
10. My tutor explains how to respond to posts and messages.	3	3	3	2	8.32	3	.040
11. My tutor monitors students' progress.	4	4	3.50	3	14.21	3	.003*
12. My tutor addresses students by name.	2	3	3	2	1.82	3	.609

13. My tutor encourages students to interact with each other.	3	3	3	2	11.08	3	.011*
14. My tutor uses humour when delivering lectures and interacting with students.	1	1	2.50	2	4.96	3	.175
15. My tutor uses and discusses personal examples and experiences.	2	2	2	2	4.95	3	.175
16. My tutor communicates course goals, policies, and procedures.	4	4	4	3	1.98	3	.576
17. My tutor replies to students' emails within 24 hours.	3	3	3	2	10.42	3	.015*
18. My tutor promptly responds to students' comments, questions or inquiries.	3	3	3	2	9.585	3	.022*
<b>Scale 2: The importance of immediacy practices</b>							
1. Immediacy practices support students in interacting with me in a virtual learning environment (VLE).	3	3	3	3	2.874	3	.412
2. Immediacy practices encourage students to interact with their peers in a VLE.	4	4	3.50	3	7.396	3	.060
3. Immediacy practices enhance students' participation in a VLE.	4	4	4	3	7.211	3	.065
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	5	4	4	4	9.339	3	.025*

**Appendix 14: Kruskal-Wallis Test Results for Differences between Female Students in Their Experiences of Using VLE Tools**

Items	Experience of using VLE tools			K-W	Df	p-value
	Beginner	Moderate	Experienced			
Scale 1: The use of immediacy practices						
1. My tutor confirms when he/she receives and reads a message or posting.	3	3	3	.013	2	.993
2. My tutor shows appreciation for students' questions or contributions.	3	3	3	1.942	2	.379
3. My tutor is willing to message or chat with students (via email or discussion boards).	3	3	4	2.875	2	.237
4. My tutor is accessible and easy to reach when learners have questions.	3	3	3	.397	2	.820
5. My tutor attempts to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	4	4	3	.321	2	.852
6. My tutor attempts to review course topics and assignments, etc.	3	3	2	1.485	2	.476
7. My tutor asks students if they have any questions or need additional information.	3	3	3	.846	2	.655
8. My tutor supports students by giving feedback on their work and postings.	3	3	2	2.008	2	.366
9. My tutor provides guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.	3	3	3	.007	2	.996
10. My tutor explains how to respond to posts and messages.	3	3	3	.284	2	.868
11. My tutor monitors	3	3	3	3.167	2	.205

students' progress.						
12. My tutor addresses students by name.	2	3	2	1.916	2	.384
13. My tutor encourages students to interact with each other.	3	3	3	.380	2	.827
14. My tutor uses humour when delivering lectures and interacting with students.	2	1	1	1.758	2	.415
15. My tutor uses and discusses personal examples and experiences	2	2	2	1.789	2	.409
16. My tutor communicates course goals, policies, and procedures.	3	3	3	1.789	2	.799
17. My tutor replies to students' emails within 24 hours.	3	3	3	1.401	2	.469
18. My tutor responds promptly to students' comments and questions.	3	3	1	7.229	2	.027*
Scale 2: The importance of immediacy practices						
1. Immediacy practices support me in interacting more with tutors in a virtual learning environment (VLE).	3	3	4	1.321	2	.516
2. Immediacy practices encourage me to interact with my peers in a VLE.	3	4	4	1.857	2	.395
3. Immediacy practices enhance my participation in a VLE.	4	4	4	.721	2	.697
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	4	4	4	.144	2	.931

**Appendix 15: Mann-Whitney Test Results for Differences between Tutors by Nationality**

Items	Tutors' nationality		M-W U	z score	P-value	Effect size
	Saudi	Other countries				
<b>Scale 1: The use of immediacy practices</b>						
1. I confirm when I receive and read a message or posting.	4	5	176.50	-1.546	.122	
2. I show appreciation for student's questions or contributions.	4	5	214.50	-.638	.524	
3. I am willing to message or chat to students (via email or discussion boards).	5	4	237.00	-.073	.942	
4. I am accessible and easy to reach when students have questions.	5	5	200.00	-1.084	.278	
5. I attempt to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	4	5	167.00	1.911	.056	
6. I attempt to review course topics and assignments, etc.	4	5	201.00	-.997	.319	
7. I ask students if they have any questions or need additional information.	5	5	214.00	.705	.481	
8. I support students by giving them feedback on their work and postings.	4	5	177.00	1.630	.103	
9. I provide guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.	4	5	204.00	-.912	.362	
10. I explain how to respond to posts and messages.	4	4	182.50	-1.408	.159	
11. I monitor students' progress.	4	5	165.00	-1.940	.052	
12. I address students by name.	3	4	190.50	-1.178	.239	
13. I encourage students to interact with each other.	4	5	177.50	-1.531	.126	
14. I use humour when delivering lectures and interacting with students.	2	3	181.00	1.396	.163	
15. I use and discuss personal examples and experiences.	2	3	216.00	.560	.576	
16. I communicate course goals, policies, and	4	5	161.50	-1.956	.050	

procedures.						
17. I reply to students' emails within 24 hours.	4	4	210.00	-.732	.464	
18. I respond promptly to students' comments and questions.	4	4	203.00	-.894	.372	
Scale 2: The importance of immediacy practices						
1. Immediacy practices support my interaction with students in a virtual learning environment (VLE).	5	4	187.50	-1.331	.183	
2. Immediacy practices encourage my students to interact with their peers in a VLE.	4	4	237.00	-.073	.942	
3. Immediacy practices enhance my students' participation in VLEs.	5	4	137.00	-2.482	.013**	0.28^^
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	5	5	177.00	-1.696	.090	

### Appendix 16: Mann-Whitney Test Results for Differences between Tutors by Gender

Items	Tutor gender (medians)		M-W U	z score	P- value
	Female	Male			
Scale 1: The use of immediacy practices					
1. I confirm when I receive and read a message or posting.	5	4	136.00	-.898	.369
2. I show appreciation for students' questions or contributions.	5	4	117.00	-1.495	.135
3. I am willing to message or chat to students (via email or discussion boards).	5	4	141.50	-.734	.463
4. I am accessible and easy to reach when students have questions.	5	5	140.00	-.866	.387
5. I attempt to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	5	5	162.00	.142	.887
6. I attempt to review course topics and assignments, etc.	5	5	152.00	-.453	.651
7. I ask students if they have any questions or need additional information.	5	5	159.50	.229	.819
8. I support students by giving feedback on their work and postings.	5	5	163.00	.109	.913
9. I provide guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.	5	5	157.00	-.291	.771
10. I explain how to respond to posts and messages.	4	5	142.00	-.726	.468
11. I monitor students' progress.	5	5	162.50	-.125	.901
12. I address students by name.	4	5	130.50	-1.037	.300
13. I encourage students to interact with each other.	4	5	158.00	-.253	.800
14. I use humour when delivering lectures and interacting with students.	3	4	156.00	.302	.800
15. I use and discuss personal examples and experiences.	3	3	139.50	.764	.445
16. I communicate course goals, policies, and procedures.	5	5	155.00	-.350	.727
17. I reply to students' emails within 24 hours.	5	5	160.00	-.192	.848

18. I respond promptly to students' questions and comments.	5	5	142.50	-.701	.483
Scale 2: The importance of immediacy practices					
1. Immediacy practices support my interaction with students in a virtual learning environment (VLE).	5	5	141.50	.772	.440
2. Immediacy practices encourage my students to interact with their peers in a VLE.	4	4	137.50	.856	.392
3. Immediacy practices enhance my students' participation in VLEs.	5	5	118.50	1.403	.161
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	5	5	161.00	.179	.858

### Appendix 17: Kruskal-Wallis Test Results for Differences between Tutors by Academic Qualification

Items	Academic qualification (median)			K-W	df	p-value
	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD			
Scale 1: The use of immediacy practices						
1. I confirm when I receive and read a message or posting.	4	4	4.50	1.748	2	.417
2. I show appreciation for students' questions or contributions.	5	5	4.50	.263	2	.877
3. I am willing to message or chat to students (via email or discussion boards).	3	5	4	.671	2	.715
4. I am accessible and easy to reach when students have questions.	5	5	5	.404	2	.817
5. I attempt to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	4	5	5	.594	2	.743
6. I attempt to review course topics and assignments, etc.	4	5	5	1.254	2	.435
7. I ask students if they have any questions or need additional information.	5	5	5	.367	2	.832
8. I support students by giving feedback on their work and postings.	4	5	5	.589	2	.745
9. I provide guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.	5	4	5	.500	2	.779
10. I explain how to respond to posts and messages.	4	4	4	.564	2	.754
11. I monitor students' progress.	4	5	5	3.236	2	.198
12. I address students by name.	3	4	4	1.576	2	.455
13. I encourage students to interact with each other.	3	4	5	1.207	2	.547
14. I use humour when delivering lectures and interacting with students.	2	3	3	1.120	2	.571

15. I use and discuss personal examples and experiences.	2	3.50	3	.052	2	.974
16. I communicate course goals, policies, and procedures.	3	4.50	5	2.572	2	.276
17. I reply to students' emails within 24 hours.	4	5	4	1.554	2	.460
18. I respond promptly to students' comments and questions.	4	4	4.50	.498	2	.780
Scale 2: The importance of immediacy practices						
1. Immediacy practices support students in interacting with me in a virtual learning environment (VLE).	5	5	4	2.337	2	.311
2. Immediacy practices encourage students to interact with peers in a VLE.	4	5	4	.928	2	.629
3. Immediacy practices enhance students' participation in a VLE.	5	4	4	3.647	2	.161
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	5	5	5	1.691	2	.429

**Appendix 18: Mann-Whitney Test Results for Differences between Tutors by Years of Online Teaching Experience**

Items	Online teaching experience (medians)		M-W U	z score	P-value	Effect size
	≤5	≥6				
Scale 1: Tutor immediacy practices						
1. I confirm when I receive and read a message or posting.	4	5	140.50	-1.234	.217	
2. I show appreciation for students' questions or contributions.	4	5	155.00	-.854	.393	
3. I am willing to message or chat (via email or discussion boards) with students.	4	4.50	176.50	-.235	.814	
4. I am accessible and easy to reach when students have questions.	5	5	161.00	-.741	.459	
5. I attempt to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	5	5	168.50	-.492	.623	
6. I attempt to review course topics and assignments, etc.	5	5	163.50	-.626	.531	
7. I ask students if they have any questions or need additional information.	5	5	157.00	-.865	.387	
8. I support students by giving feedback on their work or posts.	5	5	149.00	-1.061	.289	
9. I provide guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.	5	5	179.00	-.173	.863	
10. I explain how to respond to posts and messages.	4	4	152.00	-.921	.357	
11. I monitor students' progress.			167.50	-.516	.606	
12. I address students by name.	4	4	175.50	-.257	.797	
13. I encourage students to interact with each other.	4	5	155.50	-.823	.411	
14. I use humour with students.	3	4	128.00	-1.536	.125	
15. I use and discuss personal examples and experiences.	2	4	101.00	-2.231	.026*	0.32^^
16. I communicate course goals, policies, and	5	4.50	178.00	-.199	.843	

procedures.						
17. I reply to students' emails within 24 hours.	4	4.50	176.00	-.250	.803	
18. I respond promptly to students' comments and questions.	4	4	176.50	-.234	.815	
Scale 2: The importance of immediacy practices						
1. Immediacy practices support my interaction with students in a virtual learning environment (VLE).	5	4	172.00	-.376	.707	
2. Immediacy practices encourage my students to interact with their peers in a VLE.	4	4	175.50	-.264	.792	
3. Immediacy practices enhance my students' participation in VLEs.	4	4	162.50	-.617	.537	
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	5	4	133.00	-1.594	.111	

**Appendix 19: Mann-Whitney Test Results for Differences between Tutors in Their Experience of Using VLE Tools**

Items	Experience of using VLE tools (medians)		M-W U	z score	P-value
	Low Experience	High Experience			
<b>Scale 1: The use of immediacy practices</b>					
1. I confirm when I receive and read a message or posting.	4	4	178.50	-.523	.601
2. I show appreciation for students' questions or contributions.	5	5	188.00	-.275	.783
3. I am willing to message or chat to students (via email or discussion boards).	4	5	197.00	-.275	.979
4. I am accessible and easy to reach when students have questions.	5	5	170.50	-.821	.412
5. I attempt to answer students' questions or inquiries about content.	5	4	160.00	-1.095	.273
6. I attempt to review course topics and assignments, etc.	5	5	186.00	-.338	.736
7. I ask students if they have any questions or need additional information.	5	5	163.50	1.030	.303
8. I support students by giving feedback on their work or posts.	5	5	182.00	.456	.649
9. I provide guidance and direction on assignments and course activities.	5	4	150.50	-1.325	.185
10. I explain how to respond to posts and messages.	4	4	195.00	-.081	.936
11. I monitor students' progress.	5	5	188.00	-.285	.776
12. I address students by name.	4	4	193.00	.131	.896
13 I encourage students to interact with each other.	4	4	173.50	-.661	.509
14. I use humour with students.	3	3	154.00	-1.146	.252
15. I use and discuss personal examples and experiences.	3	3	172.00	-.668	.504

16. I communicate course goals, policies, and procedures.	4	5	185.50	-.343	.732
17. I reply to students' emails within 24 hours.	4	4	184.50	-.362	.717
18. I respond promptly to students' comments and questions.	4	4	169.50	-.758	.449
Scale 2: The importance of immediacy practices					
1. Immediacy practices support my interaction with students in a virtual learning environment (VLE).	4	5	182.50	.433	.665
2. Immediacy practices encourage my students to interact with their peers in a VLE.	4	4	161.00	.993	.321
3. Immediacy practices enhance my students' participation in VLEs.	4	4	191.00	.186	.853
4. Immediacy practices are important for supporting online teaching and learning.	5	5	179.00	.563	.573