Gender Differences in Affect During Online Learning: A Sentiment Analysis Approach
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Mid-career adults have increasingly turned to online degree programs to update or extend their work-related skillsets. Although there is a growing body of evidence that differentiates the learning experiences of working adults from that of adolescents, less evidence exists on whether there are systematic gender differences in working adults’ learning experiences and self-management. The current study employed sentiment analysis techniques on transcripts of structured interviews conducted with 65 adults enrolled in an online computer science graduate degree. The primary aim was to identify patterns of differences in men and women’s affective reactions to learning experiences while also managing professional (e.g., full-time work) and personal (e.g., caregiving) obligations. Participants’ comments falling within five major strategies for managing learning (e.g., regulation of time and effort) were scored for affect using the AFINN sentiment lexicon. Contrary to expectations, there were no significant gender differences in average sentiment for any of the major strategies. Homogeneity in the degree program’s population and the broad influence of COVID-19 on affect more generally are discussed as potential explanations for the findings. The potential implications of null gender effects on affect in online learning are also discussed, including the provision of directions for future research and the development of interventions to support diverse student populations.