

The Twitter Age: Communication across genders in the Arabian Gulf

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Abstract: During the last decade, different platforms of social media have become the most crucial vehicles for communication, especially among teenagers. The rapid changes and enhancements in technology have gone hand in hand with a major shift in young people's language and communication. Studies conducted in this field have highlighted gender differences in terms of each gender's participation in social media, whether in quality or quantity. They have also proved that women's participation still mirrors what is happening in their daily social lives; and regardless of the culture in which the communication is taking place, social media is yet another male-dominated arena. This paper will highlight the differences between genders in their computer-mediated communication (social media) in the Arabian Gulf. It will focus on the discourse management skills and politeness strategies used by both genders. The paper will use critical discourse analysis as the method of analysis, since the negotiation between genders can also be seen as a negotiation of power. It will analyze Arabic data taken from Twitter, one of the most commonly used social media platforms, with the aim of locating the language used by the Arabian Gulf youth and seeing whether it fits the international paradigm or has its own distinct characteristics. The main hypothesis is that women's language in the Gulf actually mirrors the unique status of women there, in such a way that power features, the so-called men's language features, are more commonly used by women than men.

Key words: Social media, discourse analysis, gender, critical discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

The study of language and gender is marked by Lakoff's article, "Language and Woman's Place" (1975) and the theory of dominance in which she argued "that women have a different way of speaking from men- that is a way of speaking that both reflects and gives rise to a subordinate position in society" (Perovic 2012:42-43). This theory made researchers look for characteristics that commonly differentiate men's speech from women's in different settings (e.g. workplace, court, classroom...). This led them to agree that in most of these settings, men's talk seemed more competitive and argumentative, voiced stronger views, and was usually longer than their female counterparts'; further, men "... are most comfortable with referential or information-oriented talk" (Holmes 1992:132). In contrast, the primary function of women's contributions is 'interpersonal and social,' or facilitative; and women also generally contribute less in formal and public discussions (Holmes 1992: 131-133).

The creation of Facebook in 2004, followed by Twitter and many other forms of social media, marked an expansion of the so-called public sphere. Twitter "experienced explosive growth between 2007 and 2009 and [has] grown exponentially since then" (Junco & Chickering 2010: 13). The difference between Twitter and other social media platforms is the number of features that allow its users to form various communities revolving around a 'tweet' rather than a person or a network (Brock, 2012: 530). Indeed, the use of "@" "enabled direct conversations by reinforcing addressivity" (Brock 2012: 531) and made users "more likely to provide information for others, and more likely to exhort others to do something" (Honeycutt & Herring 2009 in Brock 2012: 530). In addition, Twitter has the ability to capture current events through trending topics and the use of the hashtag, which was intended to create 'topical coherence' (Brock 2012: 538).

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In this paper, the goal is to investigate Arabic language use on Twitter and its reflections of gender in the Arabian Gulf area, particularly communication across genders in Twitter and their use of discourse markers especially while debating socially sensitive issues. The paper will also shed light on computer-mediated discourse in the area, in order to investigate whether there are any special communication characteristics that might be more associated with Twitter users in the Gulf in comparison to the rest of the world. The main hypothesis is that women's language in the Gulf actually mirrors the unique status of women there in such a way that power features, or the so-called men's language features, are more commonly used by women than men.

The main questions that this research attempts to answer are:

- 1) What are the characteristics of men's and women's language use in the Gulf?
- 2) Are the language features referred to in international research applicable to communication across genders in the Arabian Gulf countries? Also, are there any features that are specifically used by Arabian Gulf tweeters?
- 3) How is the negotiation of power in language use manifested in the region's computer-mediated discourse (CMD)?

2. Literature review

2.1 CMD as a public sphere

Computer-mediated communication is defined as the "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers" (Herring 1996 in Murray 2000: 398-399). Meanwhile, computer-mediated discourse is defined as text-based communication which is "produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers" (Herring 2004: 216).

Both computer-mediated communication and more specifically the use of social media have changed the norms of communication internationally, creating an increasing interest in this field of study. This is true for a number of reasons. The first reason was stated clearly by Herring; according to her, "computer-mediated text is not only observable, it is persistent and self-preserving, an ideal medium in which to mine language for the insights it can provide into social structures and mental states" (Herring 2004: 216). Van Deursen et al. confirm that "...what people do online increasingly reflects traditional media in society and known economic, social, and cultural relationships that exist offline, including inequalities" (Van Deursen et al., 2015: 259). Research has proved that online activities might also reflect socio-demographic variables and individual differences such as gender, age, and education (Van Deursen et al. 2015: 261).

Another reason for this increased study of CMD is the fact that it raised many debates about the issue of 'anonymity' or 'pseudonymity'. Researchers believe that CMD grants its users a certain degree of anonymity, since it does not provide any "audio-visual cues to a person's identity" (Talbot 2007: 117). This anonymity includes anonymity in gender, age, ethnicity, and social class (Herring 2004: 216). Consequently, CMD allows speakers to communicate more freely and share opinions they may not feel comfortable sharing in face-to-face communication. Furthermore, it lets researchers predict that this invisibility would "...encourage anti-normative, aggressive, uninhibited behavior termed 'flaming' through a corresponding reduction in self-focus" (Joinson 2001: 177).

The virtual anonymity granted through computer-mediated communication has given rise to a number of phenomena – which will be discussed later in more detail - through which communicators

exercised, or not, their power. Among these phenomena is the rise of online aggression. According to McClintock, “the opportunity for anonymity online can encourage people to believe that there are fewer consequences for their actions... (This) lack of accountability can foster criminal behavior online, as well as instances of deceptive self-presentation” (McClintock 2015: 45). In addition, communicators may opt for lurking (depending on whether the virtual conversation was monitored by a moderator or not), the use of silence in discussions, and flaming in different forms (Talbot 2007: 119-124).

Research has identified other negative consequences of online anonymity; these are the concepts of ‘flaming’, ‘trolling’ and ‘doxing’. According to Van der Nagel,

flaming refers to hostile comments that often involve profanity and personal attacks... trolling involves posting content designed to incite an emotional reaction in its audience... (whereas) doxing involves groups of anonymous or pseudonymous users researching an individual and then publishing identifiable facts about that person (Van der Nagel 2015).

Another theme that may intersect with these concepts is politeness. According to Herring:

Women are more likely to thank, appreciate, and apologize, and to be upset by violations of politeness; they more often challenge offenders who violate on-line rules of conduct... In contrast, men generally appear to be less concerned with politeness; they issue bald face-threatening acts such as unmitigated criticisms and insults, violate on-line rules of conduct, tolerate or even enjoy “flaming,” and tend to be more concerned about threats to freedom of expression than with attending to others’ social “face” (Herring 2005:207-208).

Despite that, some researchers, like Linda McDowell, believe “...that while public spaces are often coded as dangerous for women, they have also ‘paradoxically...been significant locations on women’s escape from male domination’” (Maher & Hoon 2008: 205-206).

2.2 *The negotiation of power across genders*

The importance of language features and gender was highlighted in Lakoff’s (1975) article “Language and Woman’s Place”. The article claims that men use language features that indicate their power and reflect their naturally-acquired social status in comparison to women’s. This hierarchy can be seen through women’s use of “...hedges, qualifiers, intensifiers, tag questions and polite forms” (Guiller & Durndell 2006: 369) which reflect women’s “absence of power springing from a negative attitude that women have about themselves” (Perovic 2012: 43). The repetitive use of these features makes women sound more hesitant, less confident, and, consequently, less powerful.

Since that original publication, a number of studies have been published which examine gender, language, and computer-mediated discourse as a public sphere that may reflect the negotiation of power across genders. Despite the claim that computer-mediated discourse provided its users a level of anonymity which potentially “neutralizes distinctions of gender” (Herring 1994: 1), studies have showcased a clear distinction between the two genders in terms of their styles of communication. The literature indicates that female postings displayed

...features of attenuation, such as hedging, apologizing, asking questions and a personal

orientation, revealing thoughts and feelings and interacting with and supporting others... (whereas) male postings were longer and/or more frequent and the male style was described as adversarial, with language features such as strong assertions, self-promotion, humor, rhetorical questions, sarcasm and flaming (Herring 1993 in Guiller & Durndell 2006: 369).

Meanwhile, Savicki and Kelley confirmed in their findings that male-only groups "...used less individually oriented language and more coarse language directed towards the content of the task. In contrast, the female-only groups used the most individually oriented language and used no coarse language" (Savicki & Kelley 2000: 821). Female-only groups used the self-disclosing first person ('I', 'me', 'my') significantly more than male groups or mixed groups. The researchers also looked into encouraging high communication style (HCS) which includes high opinion and high coalition with others in the group and low flaming. They concluded that "women appeared flexible enough to adopt a computer-mediated communication pattern not necessarily consistent with their usual style of communication while men were unable or unwilling to adopt the HCS style" (Savicki & Kelley 2000: 823) which they attributed to the men's inability to comply with the instructions given to them (Savicki & Kelley 2000: 823-824).

The literature also indicates that men's speech and writing seems to have common characteristics. These include that men "... speak (or write) more often, speak for longer turns, interrupt more, are more hostile in tone, are more likely to be responded to, are more likely to be responded to respectfully, and are more likely to respond to women in a challenging way" (Polletta & Chen 2013: 294).

Other researchers take different stances when it comes to notions of power and gender. Among them is Tannen who

...argued that girls and boys live in different subcultures analogue to the distinct subcultures associated with those from different class or ethnic backgrounds... (and) that men are indeed dominant, but that is not their intention, only the communicative goals and their realizations are different: men seek status, women seek rapport and relationships (Perovic 2012: 45).

According to her, communication between men and women can be viewed as cross-cultural communication. Beyond all this, Thorne, Kramarae and Henley (1983) urged researchers "...to take into consideration the context in which the differences emerged- who was talking to whom, for what purposes, and in what setting" (Thorne, Kramarae & Henley 1983 in Perovic 2012: 45).

The study of language and gender and, more specifically, power across genders in the Gulf region is an area that has remained unresearched. This emphasizes how pertinent this current research is in terms of understanding the linguistic behavior of the society. Another challenge, which the researcher faced, is the difference between the Gulf dialect and social structure compared to the Egyptian and Moroccan dialects which have been, relatively speaking, more explored.

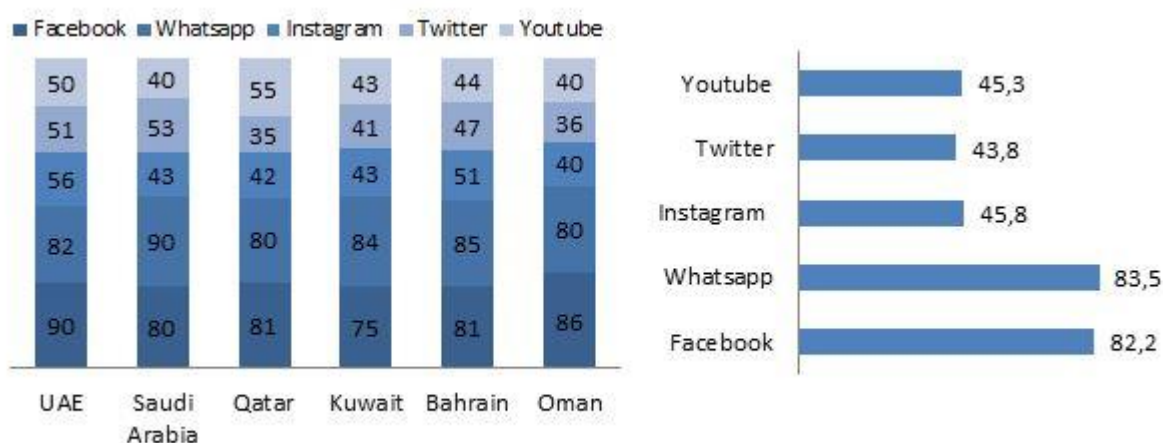
2.3 Computer-mediated discourse and gender: the case of the Arabian Gulf

The Gulf area has witnessed a major shift in the mediums and norms of communication over the last decade, especially since the Arab Spring. According to Internet World Stats, there are an estimated 123,172,132 internet users in the Middle East, and the six Gulf countries represent 29.5% of the overall internet usage in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia 17.9%, UAE 7.2%, Kuwait 2.6%, Oman 2.1%, Qatar, 1.6% and Bahrain 1.1%).²

² Statistics according to <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>, as of November 2016.

Whatsapp and Facebook are the most used social media channels in the Gulf countries (Arab Social Media Report 2015:21), followed by Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. Saudi Arabia (53%) and the UAE (51%) seem to have the strongest preference for using Twitter versus other channels of social media. All six Gulf countries are among the top eight Arab countries in terms of current Twitter subscription rates, with the UAE (53%) and Saudi Arabia (51%) as the highest of all (Arab Social Media Report 2015:34).

Figure 1: The Use of Social Media across the Arabian Gulf Countries (Arab Social Media Report 2015).



This region uses social media as the new public sphere. According to El-Sayed et al., “social media usage shifted from social to political and recently, it has evolved to become mother of modification of businesses, social set ups, civil and political” [sic] (El-Sayed et al 2015: 429).

Another factor that may have impacted the public sphere is women’s accelerated participation in the workforce. The Gulf area has experienced a top-down movement to empower women to move “into the public sphere... (which) has contributed to their politicization and mobilization” (DeVriese 2013: 122), thus placing women at the front lines of decision-making and leadership roles in these countries. A good example of this movement is what is happening in the United Arab Emirates. According to the report published in 2012 on “Emirati Women Perspectives on Work and Political Participation”,

The status of Emirati women in the workforce has witnessed a significant increase, and currently their participation reached a 66% of the government’s workforce [sic], 30% being in senior positions, 15% in technical jobs (medicine, nursing and pharmacy) and the rest in armed forces, customs and police, additionally they now account for 37.5% of the banking sector (Emirati Women Perspectives on Work and Political Participation 2012: 4).

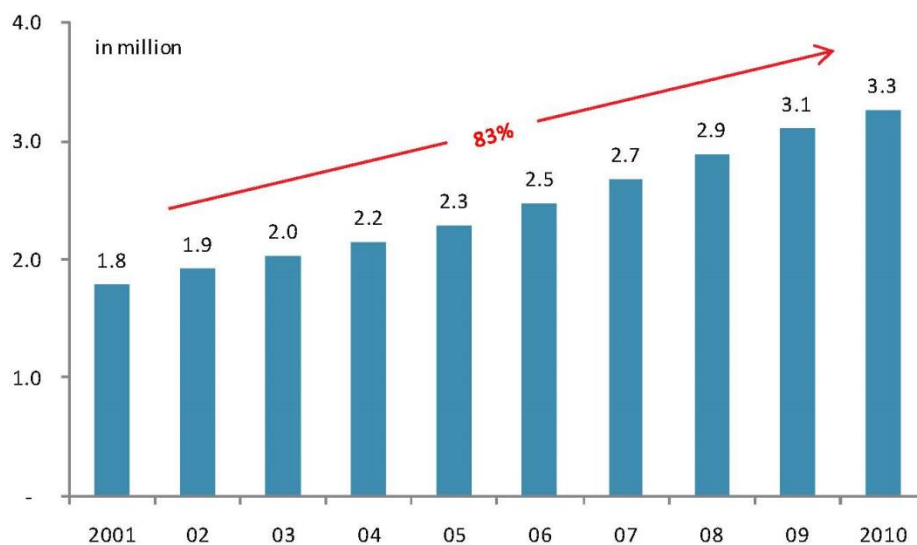
This has been complemented by the twenty-nine women in the UAE’s foreign diplomatic delegations (MOFA Brief 2016: 4), women holding judicial and ministerial positions in the cabinet, and partially-elected female representatives on the Federal National Council. According to El-Sayed et al.:

...Emirate empowerment of women is visible through (the) UAE Federal National

Council as there is (a) significantly higher number of women participants in every year of (the) council's election. When the council was established it included 8 women only, but currently, the number has risen to 85 out of 469 (El-Sayed et al. 2015: 430).

All of those positions of influence allow women to actively use "...social media to advocate for and push controversial issues on the public agenda" (DeVriese 2013: 122).

Figure 2: Female Labor Force in the GCC (2001-10)
(GCC Women: Challenging the Status Quo 2012:7)



This phenomenon is not limited to the UAE and has been seen across all the Gulf countries. According to a report titled "GCC Women: Challenging the Status Quo", "Approximately 1.5 million women in the GCC joined the labor force during 2001–10" (2012: 7) (See Fig. 2). This can be considered a substantial shift in women's roles and contributions despite the challenges that may still exist.

3. Data collection and methodology

The data for this study revolved around six hashtags and twelve tweets in Arabic. The dialect used by the tweeters indicate that they are all from the Arabian Gulf region. The hashtags were selected from topics considered to be controversial in the Gulf area which could have led to a debate or argument depending on the participants' nationalities, genders, or economic statuses. The topics are: 1. Women, 2. Women's employment, 3. Education, 4. Sponsored scholarship students abroad, 5. Marrying at an old age (gender unspecified) and 6. Spinsters. The researcher noted each tweet, the apparent gender of the tweet's initiator³, the hashtag used in each tweet, and the apparent gender of all those who responded to it. The researcher did not verify the identity of the participants as that was not within the scope of the research, instead relying on the name and display picture used by each tweeter.⁴

Overall 195 responses were recorded totaling 2300 words in Arabic.⁵ Both the transcription and the translation of the tweets and all responses quoted in this research were done by the researcher.

The analysis was conducted manually at three different levels: First was a quantitative analysis

³ Gender was determined based on the nickname and/or the display image used for the account. None of the tweeters' identities were verified.

⁴ Nicknames in Arabic.

⁵ The word count is based on the Arabic data set.

that considered the gender of the tweeters in both the main tweet and the responses. Whether the choice of topic and the gender of the tweeter had any impact on the overall participation across genders was also considered.

Second, a qualitative pragmatic analysis was performed to investigate the discourse markers used by each gender. The choice of these features was based on the literature and what have been identified as common language uses across both genders (Savicki & Kelley 2000:820) and Lakoff (2004: 49, 79, 189, 257). The researcher was also interested in analyzing the hashtag topic choices in relation to gender and the participants' responses, as well as features that reflected discourse management and conflict management strategies that were used by the participants (see Table 1). All these markers were manually identified in the Arabic data due to the nature of the Arabic language and the fact that the data is in Gulf Arabic rather than standard Arabic.

Table 1: Discourse markers
(* Adopted from Savicki & Kelley (2000: 820) and Lakoff (2004: 49, 79, 189, 257))

DISCOURSE MARKERS		
Marker	Definition*	Example in Arabic (if any) ⁵
Topic/Hashtag Choice	Gender of the main tweeter in relation to the topic	--
Participation/Membership	Number of respondents per hashtag (#)	--
Self-disclosure	Use of 'I', 'my'	أبي، أثناء رأيي
Length of Turns	Length of the post	--
Super Polite Forms	Extremely polite language forms	أشكرك
Tag/Rhetorical Questions	Stating a claim, midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question	إذا هو البحث عن الأضعف والتطبيق عليه
Hedges	Expressing extreme uncertainty (i.e. I think, I guess, I might...)	ربما، أتوقع، قد، أحس
Intensifiers	The use of the intensive 'so' or any equivalent form	--
Coalition	The degree of agreement or disagreement with a person or a statement (NA, mild, strong)	فعلا، صحيح، أمين، عندك حق، صدقت
Flames	Argumentativeness (positive, neutral, hostile), the use of coarse/abusive language and/or tension	غصين عليكم، والله لثيقين على الحال، المنافقين، المتخلفين
Ridicule of Others	Using sarcastic language or making fun	يا متعلمة يا بتاعت الثقافة المصيبة أنك ماخذ في نفسك مقلب، اكتشفت أنك بزر
Apologies	Implied or direct apology	
Challenges	The presence of a challenge or dare	أقول الحب غيرها لو انت صادق، انت تضحك على نفسك
Facilitative Language	Facilitate the conversation	طيب.. ما هو مقترحك

The third section containing the results sheds light on the overall behavior of both genders considering both the above-mentioned markers and the frequency of their use.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Tweets vs. gender

Out of the twelve tweets, 85% of them were initiated by male tweeters and not more than 15% by female tweeters. The responses, however, were distributed nearly equally between female tweeters (44%) and male tweeters (56%) (see Fig. 3 & 4). This might indicate that male tweeters are more comfortable raising or flagging an issue or observation than women, while also indicating that women are as comfortable as men in responding to and vocalizing their opinions and points of view on a subject. Although men dominated the responses, female participation seemed to occur qualitatively in very close proximity to the males' tweets which might be attributed to what has been described as 'virtual anonymity' (Talbot 2007: 119-124) or to the sociocultural changes that the Gulf region has been experiencing.

Figure 3: Tweeters' Gender

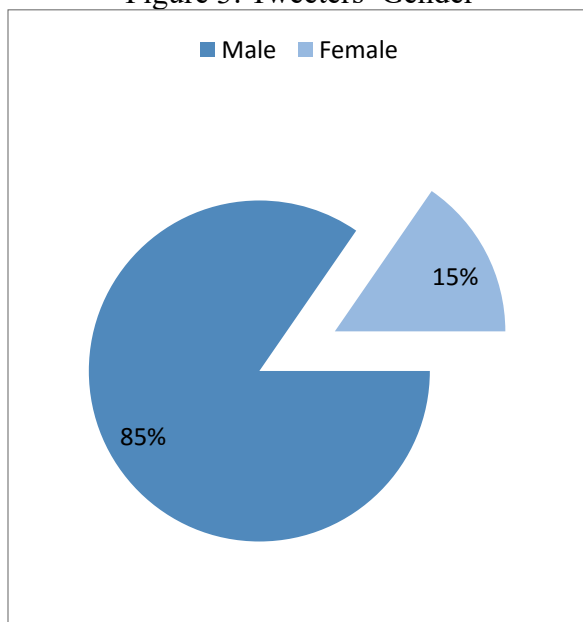
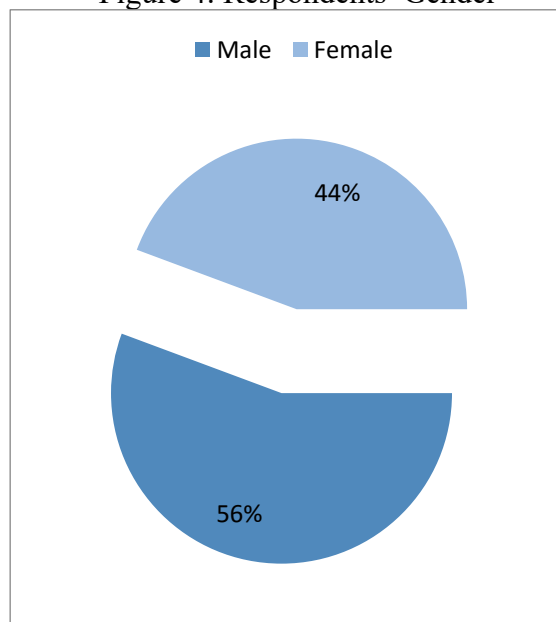
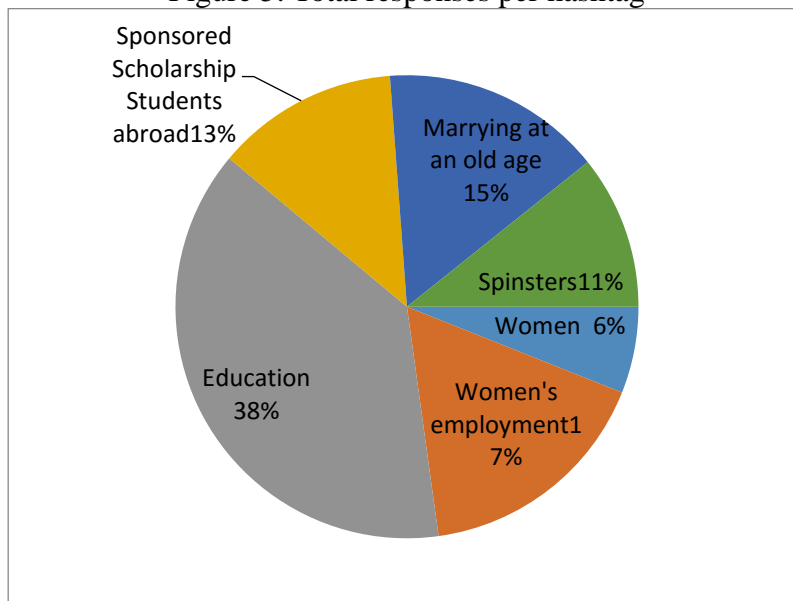


Figure 4: Respondents' Gender



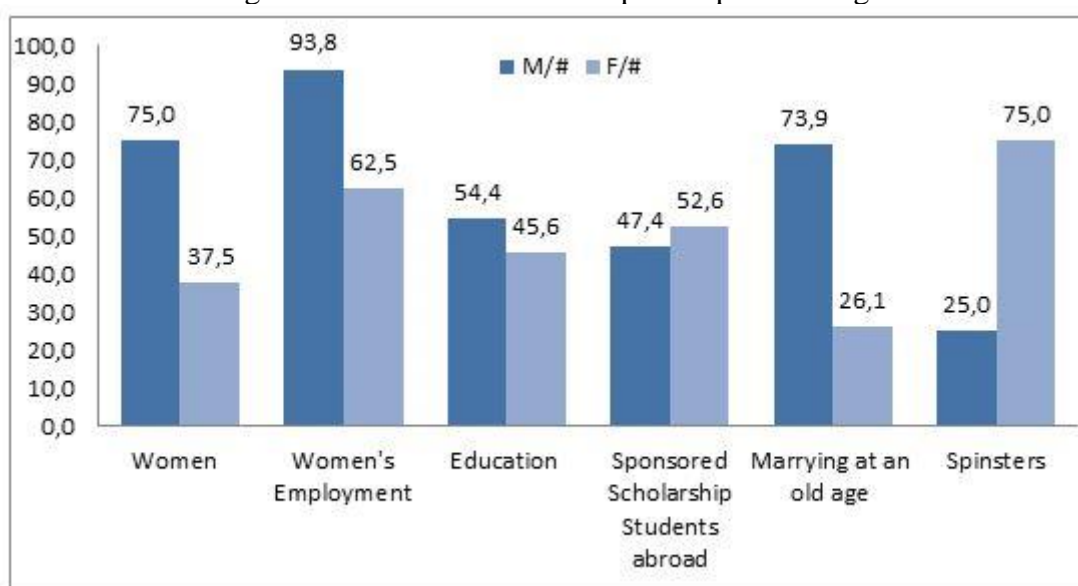
Looking closely at the hashtags included in this data, it can be observed that 38% of the responses were posted in response to the 'Education' hashtag, while 'Women's employment' came second (17%), third 'Marrying at an old age' (15%), fourth the hashtag 'Sponsored scholarship students abroad' (13%), fifth 'Spinsters' (11%), and finally 'Women' (6%) (see Fig. 5).

Figure 5: Total responses per hashtag



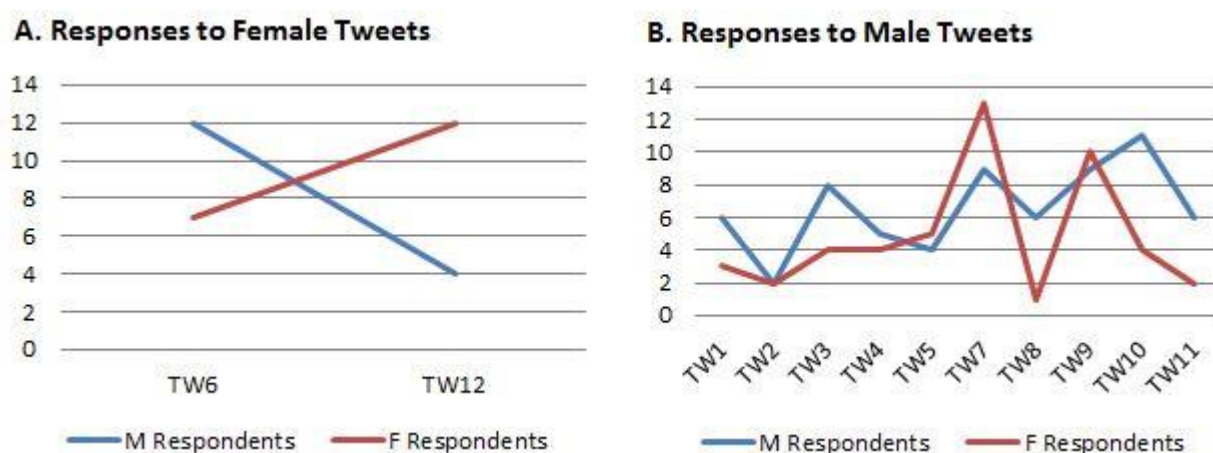
As per the results, the hashtags that more often captured the interest of male tweeters were ‘women’s employment’ (93.8%), ‘women’ (75%) and ‘marrying at an old age’ (73.9%), while the least interesting to men were ‘spinsters’ (25%) and ‘sponsored scholarship students abroad’ (47.4%). Meanwhile, the female respondents were most interested in ‘spinsters’ (75%), ‘women’s employment’ (62.5%), and ‘sponsored scholarship students’ (52.6%). For women, the least interesting topics from this group of hashtags were ‘marrying at an old age’ (26.1%) and ‘women’ (37.5%) (see Fig. 6). Although most of the hashtags chosen were related to women, women’s employment was the only topic that was appealing to both genders which corresponds with the earlier literature. Although a dramatic rise in women’s employment has occurred in many of the Gulf countries, it is still considered a pressing issue in certain countries such as Saudi Arabia. This might explain the tweeters’ interest in the topic.

Figure 6: Male and Female Responses per Hashtag



The gender of the original tweeter was also examined to see whether it could be a factor in determining the number of respondents. The data proves both that there is no correlation between the gender of the initial tweeter and the genders of the respondents, and that all respondents were actually reacting to the hashtag or the tweet in isolation from any other variable (see Fig. 7). Both tweets represented in Figure 7A were posted by female tweeters, and the responses to each tweet varied across genders. The same can be said about Figure 7B which represents male tweets: each gender had its peaks and valleys. This might be an indication that Twitter as a form of computer-mediated public sphere was a space that allowed both genders to share their opinions and to be unintimidated despite whatever support or hostility they received from other tweeters.

Figure 7:



4.2 Qualitative analysis

In this section, the communication patterns across genders were scrutinized for each hashtag, highlighting their use according to the parameters set forth in Table 1.

1) # Women:

Under this hashtag, the selected data included only one tweet. The hashtag, which was tweeted by a male tweeter, states:

TW1:

#المرأة وهي صائمه تبدأ من الظهر بتحضير ما لذ وطاب، تتحمل درجة حرارة الصيف وحرارة الفرن وهي لا تفكر إلا في ملء كرشة الهيس الأربد.

A #woman starts by noon, prepares the best dishes while fasting, handles the heat of the summer, and the heat of the stove, not thinking about anything other than filling the lazy lion's stomach.⁶

Although the hashtag might have social value and can be considered an attempt to shed light on the role of women taking care of their families, it also maintains men's status and power within the household in its reference to the 'lion.' Men's participation in this hashtag represented around 66% of the overall participation. Their participation varied from ridiculing the original tweet by questioning the tweeter's word usage, to questioning women's contributions, or even writing sarcastic

comments that defended men's contributions or diminished women's contributions as simply part of nature. Two other male contributions displayed mild to full agreement with the tweet using theological/religious references to highlight the virtues of women's deeds when it comes to supporting their families stating:

...فلها اجر تفتير الصائم...

"She will receive the reward from God for providing food to a fasting person,"

and

ومع هذا ان شاء الله مأجورة

"By God's will, she will be rewarded."

Meanwhile, other tweeters diminished the woman's role or considered her work as part of her natural role, and they added a statement that questioned the motive behind the posting of this tweet and considered it an attempt to provoke women against their husbands as in the following examples:

MT5:

لا تخببوا النساء على أزواجهم

Don't steer women against their husbands.

MT6:

كل من الطرفين يأخذ نصيبه... التخشيش بين الطرفين ماله داعي

Each one of them takes his share, there is no need to steer things between them.

Female responses also varied. One of them also ridiculed the tweeter's reference to the 'lazy lion'; the second agreed and stated that 'regardless of a woman's efforts, women will continue to receive negative comments'. The third female response made the only facilitative contribution, adding to the positive image of women represented in the tweet and ending with a reference to the religious value of this contribution as she states:

FT3:

هي تعد سفرة لعائلتها بكل حب وتنتظر منهم فقط تقديرا لهذا الجهد بشكر باللسان ونظرة امتنان بالعين وهي في ذلك بمنزلة المجاهدين

She prepares a meal for her family with love and does not expect more than a 'thank you' or a happy look of gratitude in return for this effort, and in doing that she is equivalent to someone who fights under the name of God.

Although it is unclear whether or not the original tweeter was conscious of his support for men's power in this tweet,⁶ none of the respondents actually referred to that power. What they focused on

⁶ This might be questioned, as the popular meaning of this expression does not have a positive connotation. However, the researcher cannot be sure whether the tweeter knew the actual meaning of the expression or was using it as a sarcastic expression.

instead was showing the naturalness of women's contributions versus men's contributions, or commenting on the expression used since it is uncommon and might have a negative connotation.

Another uncommon use of language was the references that were made by both genders to religion providing women with emotional support through referring to their good deeds and the rewards they will receive from God. Based on researchers' observations, such references are something that might be expected in women's discourse more than in men's (Herring 1993 in Guiller and Durndell 2006).

2) # Women's Employment

There were three tweets under this hashtag; all were posted by male tweeters, as follows:

TW2:

من تريد العيش بكرامة، تكون امرأة كفو ربه بيت يعتمد عليها وقتها زوجها حيثمسك فيها وما رح يطلقها

Whoever wants to live in dignity have to be a reliable housewife; only then would her husband hold on to her and not divorce her.

TW3:

ما الذي حدث عندنا وتطلب توظيف المرأة في أعمال الرجال؟ هل عانينا نقصا في الأيدي العاملة كما حدث في أوروبا؟ لم يحدث، نصف شبابنا عاطلون

What is happening? And how come women are being employed in men's positions? Are we short of manpower just like Europe? I don't think so, half of our men are unemployed.

TW4:

قيادة المرأة للسيارة حرام لئلا يتحرش بها الرجل. عمل المرأة حرام لئلا يتحرش بها الرجل، ووو... دائما المشكلة في الرجل والذي يعاقب هو المرأة!

For a woman to drive is forbidden (in religion) so that men won't harass her. For a woman to work is forbidden (in religion) so that men won't harass her, etc. The problem is always in men, and women end up being punished for it!

The statements made through these tweets vary in their positions towards women's employment. Whereas the first two are clearly opposing the idea, the third is actively defending it. Beyond that, while the last two tweets are drawn from social realities or perceptions of these realities, the first seems to be a personal opinion or perception presented as a generalized fact. This might align with the findings of Holmes, who states that "men... are most comfortable with referential or information-oriented talk..." (Holmes 1992: 132).

In response, a couple of male respondents disagreed with the generalization made in the first tweet; one of them described the tweeter as 'ignorant' for making such a generalization. However, both agreed with the principle idea of the tweet. Meanwhile, the last tweeter agreed with the tweet and supported his argument using hostile language:

MT1:

كلامك صحيح الأسباب قد تختلف، أوقات يكون الرجل حقير وأوقات تكون البنت واطية

What you are saying is true, but the reasons might vary. Sometimes the man might be a bastard, and other times the woman might be a slut.

Meanwhile, the female respondents opted for defending the position of women. One of them attacked the tweeter's argument and the fact that he puts the blame on women 'as the sole party responsible for all divorce cases.' Another one shed light on the circumstances that may surround women. Both contributions were phrased in a way that would solicit an extended debate.

FT1:

انت بكذا حطيت الزوجة هي سبب الطلاق!!

By saying so, you are considering the wife as the reason behind the divorce!!

FT2:

ربما تكون المرأة كفو ولكن تحدث ظروف لا نعلمها لا تعمي عزيزتي

The woman might be a good person, but there might be circumstances which we might not know, so do not generalize, my dear.

They were also polite in presenting their opposition to the tweeter's views, focusing on logical arguments and using politeness markers such as the usage of the word 'dear' to refer to a male tweeter. This communication behavior supports the findings in the literature (Herrings 2005; Herring 1993 in Guiller and Durndell).

Most of the responses to the second tweet evolved very similarly, with the exception of the first one. The first response ridiculed men's future in the labor market, which the tweeter suggested might shift to professions in housekeeping, in babysitting or even as hair dressers, while the rest, whether in support of or opposition to the tweet, discussed the issue from an ideological point of view (i.e. as an example of a Western mindset or an imitation of the West). They used hostile language to describe those from the Gulf community who adopt such an ideology and described them as 'hypocrites المنافقين', 'the liberal dogs الكلاب الليبرالية', 'those with an ill heart قلوب مريضة', 'detached from our societies المنسلخين عن مجتمعا', and 'callers for sins يدعوون إلى الرذيلة'. Most of these descriptions came in response to a moderate male tweeter who stated:

MT4:

مراقبة الأسواق في زمن عمر بن الخطاب كانت امرأة وتكلم الرجال ولم ينكر أحد على سيدنا عمر... ماذا تغير الآن

The job of a market watchman was given to a woman during Umar ibn al-Khattab's⁸ time, and she used to speak to men, and no one objected or condemned it at the time... so what has changed now?

Surprisingly, the female tweeters, representing only four respondents, also supported the tweet. Two contributed to the argument, asking rhetorical questions that questioned the motives behind such decisions, while the other two expressed their opinions by using self-disclosure. One of these two expressed strong disagreement with women's employment stating 'anti-feminist' views that led the researcher to question the actual gender of the tweeter as she states:

FT4:

لم أجد فتاة جادة في العمل إلا من رحم ربي، إما أن تتبادل أطراف الحديث مع زميلها أو تستعرض عيناها
المليئة بالكحل أو تضع رجليها عالمكتب

I have not seen a serious woman in the workplace -except for the very few chosen by God- they are either chatting with their male co-workers, or showing off their eyes with heavy eyeliner, or putting their feet on the desk.

In the third tweet under this hashtag, only one male speaker replied using factual knowledge to support the tweet, stating:

MT1:

محمود سعود لم يفتي بأنه حرام والألباني رحمه الله أجازها وضحك على من يمنعها ولا يجوز لأحد أن يحرمها
Mahmood Saood did not rule (in religion) opposing driving for women, and Al-Albani⁹ – may his soul rest in peace- stated that it is accepted in religion (halal) and in fact laughed at those who said otherwise, therefore no one has the right to say that it is forbidden in Islamic law.

Two of the respondents asked rhetorical questions, with one being sarcastic while the other drew the conclusion, “*So they are looking for the weakest and applying their rules to them.* إذا هو البحث عن الأضعف والتطبيق عليه”. The last two tweeters used a more hostile approach to address the issue, by attacking each other personally, stating:

MT4:

مافيه قانون يمنع المرأة من القيادة ولكن هل تقبل انت ان زوجتك ولا اختك تطلع بدون محرم لها؟
There is no law that forbids women from driving, but would you accept your wife or your sister's going out without a guardian?

MT5:

بالنسبة للمرأة في المجتمع السعودي تعمل ويمكن تكون زوجتك هي اللي تصرف عليك عشان كذا صار
عندك فراغ كبير.
As for women in the Saudi community, many are working women; and, in fact, it might be that your wife is working to spend her salary on you - that's why you have a lot of free time on your hands.

Although the tweeters' responses had initially started with facts and information that could have led to a solid argument, both tweeters decided to escalate this argument and make it personal despite the observation the researcher made about the tweeters' distancing themselves by avoiding the use of 'I'. In this instance, the use of 'you' and the reference to the recipient's 'wife/sister' indirectly forced the recipient of this message to respond and to make it equally personal.⁷

On the other hand, all the comments that were posted by women were in favor of the tweet and

⁷ In Middle Eastern culture, particularly in tribal communities, references to one's mother, wife, or sister in public is considered a reference to a man's honor. Despite the fact that this mindset might have started to disappear, in this context, mentioning them was done deliberately; culturally, it can be considered an example of flaming.

gave their opinions of men, using expressions such as, 'bad manners, سوء خلق', 'called for a war of favoritism, يخوضون حرب احتساب', 'sick souls of some males that are not real men المريضة النفوس في الخلل في الرجال', 'من الذكور وليس الرجال', or of the status of women by saying things like, "sometimes I feel that there are no women except in Saudi. إلا بالسعودية". Only one of the respondents contributed with advice for men to work on developing themselves as individuals. This instance can be seen as another attempt to show solidarity and give emotional support, something that was referred to previously from the literature. Another observation that can be made is that men in this tweet concentrated on the religious/legal aspect of the issue, while the female respondents concentrated on men versus women, their mentalities, and their perceptions of what they do or should do within the community.

3) # Education

In this data, four tweets that came under the 'Education' hashtag were analyzed. The number of male and female responses to the tweets under this hashtag were almost equally distributed (55.44% M, 44.6% F).

TW5:

بيل جيتس: "القضاء على شلل الأطفال، أسهل من إصلاح التعليم الأمريكي

Bill Gates: Eradicating polio is easier than fixing American education.

Although the original tweet, Bill Gates' statement, was ridiculing the American educational system using self-disclosure to express his opinion, all the comments posted by male tweeters reflected their agreement, facilitating or contributing to the discussion. On the other hand, female tweeters were divided equally between those who made fun of their own educational systems and those who contributed to the discussion with a plan that would solve the problem.

TW6:

4000 طلب تقاعد لوزارة التعليم

4000 retirement applications received by the Ministry of Education

The second tweet (TW6) got very strong reactions from both male and female tweeters. Of the male tweeters, 50% used sarcastic language, mostly to ridicule the female participants, but also to ridicule each other and even the status of educational employment. Their sarcastic comments varied in their hostility but were elevated when referring to the other gender, as in the following examples:

MT4:

الله وأكبر، المتردية والنطيحة يتحدثون في أمور العامة

God help us, the bottom of the society is discussing the public's issues.¹¹

MT5:

تكفين لا تتهورين وتناقشين ههههههههه

Please don't be reckless and discuss this issue [laugh]

MT12:

أنت أكبر قطعة شحم فاسدة ومهترئة لذلك لا تتكلمين عن العفن وأنت أساسه

You are a big, rotten chunk of fat, please don't talk about mold while you are the source of it.

Conversely, the other male tweeters contributed with comments that would encourage others to continue the discussion. Some of them were in agreement, and some in disagreement, while one remained neutral and did not specify his position. Similar reactions were seen among the female tweeters who all ridiculed each other or the status quo. Even those who participated in the discussion with facilitative statements were sarcastic or even challenging at times, as in the examples below:

FT6:

يا متعلمة يا بتاعت الثقافة

Miss, educated and a know-it-all...

FT1:

والله انك انتي اللي مهترنة أخلاقيا

I swear you are the one whose morals are shabby.

FT2:

...تعبنا من تسلط الوجوه الكاحلة

... we are tired of those ugly faces trying to force their opinions.

TW7:

الزبي المدرسي المعتمد للطالبات في جميع المراحل الدراسية اعتبارا من العام الدراسي القادم

The newly approved school uniform for the next academic year

TW7 also received different reactions across genders. Two of the male tweeters ridiculed the decision of the Ministry of Education, while four posted facilitative statements that could contribute to and expand the discussion. However, these statements were used for various purposes; some were informative, while others criticized or attacked either the decision to change school uniforms or the design of the new uniforms. The concept of East versus West was also mentioned by the male tweeters. Finally, one tweeter decided to change the subject, and another one challenged a third one.

Disagreements with the decision about school uniforms were expressed directly by the female tweeters. The six female tweeters of the thirteen participants disagreed openly with either the decision or the designs, with some of them using sarcastic or hostile language to express their disagreement, as in, 'Rotten and ugly cloths, معفن ولبس خايس', 'Instead of focusing on the interest of the students, they are worrying about their uniforms, may the Ministry perish. تاركين مصلحة الطلاب وشابيلين هم لبسه، أمحق. وزارة'. The other female tweeters used facilitative language either to inform or to solicit more information.

TW8:

نحن في عصر وزمن إن أردنا العزة بحق فعلينا أن نستثمر في #التعليم أضعاف ما نستثمر في السلام، #التعليم الممتاز يبني

In order to achieve glory in this era, we have to invest in education multiple times more than what we invest in weapons; a good education builds...

In the fourth tweet (TW8), the tweeters varied in their responses. Two tweeters expressed their agreement; one totally disagreed with the tweet in non-hostile language, while the last two male tweeters, in addition to the only female tweeter who participated, changed the subject. The male tweeters discussed the usefulness of learning languages, and the female tweeter spoke about 'respect for teachers'.

4) # Sponsored Scholarship Students abroad

The only tweet found under this hashtag is:

TW9:

ربي ارزقني قدرة #المبتعثين و#المبتعثات السعوديين في التأقلم بين البيئتين والتغيير اللحظي حال وصولهم لبلدهم
God grant me the ability of male and female scholarship-sponsored students abroad to instantly adjust to change and to the different environment as they get back to their home country.

Most of the male tweeters took the opportunity to magnify the different mentalities they see within the country and to shed light on the fact that the speaker is feeling this way because he is ‘open minded,’ unlike many others. The overall tone used by this category of people was neutral to mild in terms of hostility, as some of them used words like ‘un-shamed people,’ ‘الناس مفاصيخ وقلّة حياء,’ ‘Whether you like it or not,’ ‘غصين عليهم,’ and ‘their mental and psychological issues.’ ‘عقدهم النفسية والعصبية.’ One of the tweeters contributed to the discussion, saying, “I expect that if the companions in the cave⁸ were among us, and God took their souls and brought them back to life again, they wouldn’t see any difference.” “أتوقع لو أن أهل الكهف منا فأماتهم الله ثم بعثهم فينا من جديد لما لاحظوا اختلافا.” This was the only self-disclosure statement that might be seen as a sarcastic criticism of the situation within the community.

Two of the male tweeters responded to the female tweeters. One of them limited his response to a laugh and a ‘thank you’ in French, while the other ridiculed the female tweeter’s comments and the experience she may have had.

FT3:

يارجال ليا اربع ايام في السعودية... شربط يتكرر كل يوم
you know what, this is my fourth day in Saudi and it feels like a broken record

MT5:

إذا انت اربع ايام وتعيش نفس الشربط، أعرفلك كوري يدور له سعودية، بس بيغاهها مطوعة عشان توه اسلم
you have been here for just four days and it’s a broken record?! You know what, I know a Korean guy looking for a bride, but he wants her to be religious as he has just converted.

The argument raised here is unrelated to the topic discussed, and it makes several presuppositions. First, it assumes that the female tweeter is not married; second, that she could not find a husband; and third, that she is not culturally attuned and would accept marrying a non-Saudi. The speaker also made sure that he maintains face in his comment by mentioning the Korean’s religion, since making such a suggestion might lead others to shame him or even attack him for not showing respect to his religion or culture.

About six out of the ten female tweeters supported the tweet and the person who posted it, by either praying for him, telling him that they were happy to share their experiences, or telling him that they were experiencing the same issue. Only two female tweeters responded to a male’s comment under the same tweet. The first was aggressive in her response to a male tweeter saying, “*as long as you are alive, may God get me out of here sooner rather than later.*” Meanwhile, the other asked

⁸ The reference made here is to story of the companions in the cave in Surat Al Kahf in the Quran (Griffith 2008: 109-38).

another female tweeter a rhetorical question that sounded like a potential attempt to ridicule her.

There was also one tweet from each gender's exchange, in which the tweeter used self-disclosure to express feelings of longing towards their home country.

5) # *Marrying at an old age*:

The responses to this hashtag were mostly from men (73.9%) while female hashtags represented 26.1%. The data encompassed two tweets that used this hashtag; both were posted by male tweeters.

TW10:

ياخي ادفع كل هالفلوس كني أنا بستانس لحالي هي بعد بستانس بيصير عندها زوج وعيال وبيت وبتركب قدام بالسيارة
ليه ما تدفع مثلي

I should pay all this money as if I am the only one who'll enjoy marriage, she will also enjoy having a husband, kids, home and will get to sit in the front seat of my car, why doesn't she pay like me?

The males' responses to this first tweet (TW10) varied in their position. One agreed with the tweet; the second ridiculed the tweeter and used hostile words that questioned the tweeter's manhood or described him as being childish, while the third asked a rhetorical question, "What if someone does not have money, what should he do?" The fourth responded with, "they should not get married." Most of the female tweeters responded with laughter or words that expressed disbelief, while one female tweeter responded with a direct hostile attack on men, stating:

FT2:

مالت عليكم عاد انتم لو تدفعون ملايين بيومين تطلعونها من عيونها صحتها وناستها وكل شي يتغير عندها كل
وحدة متزوجة تصير نفسية

May God give you bad luck,¹³ even if you paid millions you are going to force women to pay it back from their health, joy, and change every aspect of their lives. All married women become psychologically disturbed.

This comment aggravated the male participants; most of their comments included self-disclosure and a comparison between themselves as individuals or their environment and what they assumed was the female tweeter's environment, opposing her generalization. These responses varied in their hostility; however, they could all be considered personal attacks. These included:

MT9:

بكل ردودك وانتي تسبيني وساكت وجالس اتناقش معك بس الظاهر انك بزر متعودة عالشات ارجعي للشات يا شاطرة بهالعقلية ما راح تنجحين هنا

You have been bad-mouthing me in all your responses while I'm quiet and trying to have a real discussion, but it seems that you are a child who is used to chatrooms. Sweetie, I think you should return to the chatroom; I don't think you will survive here.

MT8:

مدري محسستني انك عايشة معي ههههه نصيحة أخيرة بس خودي أحد من برا عايلتكم لأن الظاهر عنكم الزوجة تنضرب للحين

For some reason, you made me feel like you are living with me, [laugh], one last piece of advice, take it from me, don't marry anyone from your family, it seems that your women are still being abused.

MT6:

والله انا أقبيسه على اللي اعرف، مبسوطات وعايشات أعلى عيشة. يمكن مجتمعك اللي حولك يحتقرون الزوجة بس ماهو كل السعودية مثلهم بالتأكيد

My opinion is based on what I know, women are happy and living a good life here, but it might be your environment or community that looks down on women. Not all Saudi families are like this.

MT11:

طيب لا تسولفين سؤالف الكبار الا إذا كبرت هههههه

Then don't talk with adults until you grow up. [laugh]

TW11:

البطالة كيف بي اتزوج وانا لا أملك ما يكفيني كفرد اولا ثم المهور ثم المنزل ثم المعيشة ثم الفساد ثم نحن ثقافتنا التي لم تتغير

How am I going to get married if I cannot survive as an individual, in addition to the dowry then the house then our expenditures and then the corruption and finally our culture that would never change

In the second hashtag (TW11), men's responses were divided into two groups. The first was a group that used self-disclosure and described the tweeter's feelings and what he was going through, while others were asking him to cheer up. The other group, however, were challenging each other, redirecting the conversation to discuss what they perceived as a social reality. In their discussion, they used rhetorical questions, information-seeking questions, and elaborative statements, which were all in agreement with the tweet but varied in their levels of hostility. The examples below show that most of the male tweeters focused on the subject discussed:

MT5:

أكون واقعي بإيش عفو...! ممكن

Excuse me!! If you don't mind telling me, what would you like me to be realistic about?!

MT6:

محد بطلب غير حقه

No one is asking for more than their rights...

MT4:

طيب أشكرك لكن بوريك صورة وأبي وش كان كلامك هنا هل هو مجرد كلام وللا إيش...

Ok, thank you. But I would like to show you a picture to see whether what you are saying is a bluff or not...

On the other hand, while only two female tweeters responded to this tweet, they both gave the tweeter of the post constructive advice. In other words, whereas the male tweeters concentrated on discussing the subject matter, the female tweeters concentrated on solutions. This might be seen as evidence that women's participation revealed feelings and showed support (Herring 1993 in Guiller and Durndell 2006: 369), while men's was "referential or information-oriented" (Holmes 1992: 132).

FT1:

لو بتنتظر ما راح تتزوج وينتهي عسرك ع لا شي

If you will wait, then you will waste your life for nothing.

FT2:

اسأل اقرب انسان ناجح من اي جنسية وشوف سر نجاحه عدم الكسل وانتظار الحكومة وانسى كلمة أغنى بلد وبلد البترول حتشوف سر النجاح

Ask the nearest successful person, regardless of their nationality and see what is the secret behind his success: not to be lazy and wait for the government and forget that. it's a rich country or an oil country... then you will see the secret behind anyone's success.

6) # Spinsters

The last hashtag in this analysis discussed the existence of spinsters as a phenomenon. Of all the topics, it received the highest response rate from female tweeters (75%) in comparison to male tweeters (25%).

TW12:

العنوسة هي مشكلة مفتعلة والحل بالسماح للفتيات بالزواج دون تقييد ذلك بالجنسية او اللون او القبيلة وغيرها وغيرها من الامور المنافية لتعاليم #الاسلام

The existence of spinsters as a phenomenon is an artificial problem; the solution is to allow women to get married without any restrictions on the husband's nationality, color, tribe, or any other conditions that contradict the Islamic instructions.

Again, the female tweeters varied in their responses to this tweet; about four female tweeters agreed

with the tweet while criticizing the society or the status of women within the family structure, and they all varied in their level of hostility. Two participants expressed their agreement without adding a comment. One contributor changed the subject while three others wrote sarcastic comments, as in:

FT9:

في شي أفضل، نخليها غامضة ولكن وحدة سنارة ياتحصل هامور يا سمك قرش يا سردينه يا ضفدع الله كريم
There is a better option, why don't we make it even more mysterious, and give each girl a fishing rod, and each would either catch a hamour,¹⁴ a shark, a sardine or a frog – may God help us here.

FT10:

أبي سلمون، أسهل لما اقتله وأطبخه ههههههه
I will go for a salmon, it's easier to kill and cook [laugh],

Finally, a single participant asked the tweeter not to generalize, and another expressed emotional support to the tweeter, praying for him to find happiness.

4.3 Overall male-female computer-mediated discourse

Both genders' overall self-disclosure, represented in their use of 'I' or 'my' as in 'in my opinion,' 'I like,' or 'I want,' was not as frequent as the researcher anticipated (only 11 instances). Along with this, gender did not have any effect on the individual's self-disclosure (45.5% male tweeters, 54.5% female tweeters). In the researcher's opinion, this could be attributed to the fact that speakers in the Arab world and more specifically the Gulf tend to detach themselves as individuals from the topic discussed, so that they will not disclose or give any hints of their identities or socioeconomic circumstances. Thus, they would avoid using 'I', 'my,' and 'you,' preferring to use 'one' or 'someone,' or even to present their points of view in the form of statements rather than opinions except when the speaker is deliberately trying to make it personal. Normally, using the first or second person would appear to be if the speaker were trying to shame the other person or shed light on financial or intellectual differences or even differences in mentalities between them.

One super-polite tweet also came from each gender. Unlike what was indicated in the literature, they were both used to making sarcastic or challenging comments, as in the following example: "Excuse me!! If you don't mind telling me, what would you like me to be realistic about?!"

Most previous studies referred to the use of tag questions; although tag questions (statement + isn't it) are commonly used by Arab speakers, specifically by female Arab speakers, it is rare to find them in a written format. However, using statements as questions is something that is observable in the data; many of the tweets were rhetorical questions of various sorts. In a very few cases, other tweeters responded to these questions trying to show emotional support or offer advice, as in the following example:

MT: *Ok, and for those who cannot find a single woman*

MT: *... if you were serious you would have found one.*

FT: *May God grant you the best woman who fills your heart and life with love and happiness...*

This form was more commonly used by the male tweeters (80%) than the female tweeters (20%).

Table 2: Frequency of usage in the data

DISCOURSE MARKERS	Male Tweeters	Female Tweeters	Male Tweeters %	Female Tweeters %
Self-disclosure	5	6	45.5	54.5
Super Polite Forms	2	1	66.7	33.3
Tag/ Rhetorical Questions	7	2	77.8	22.8
Hedges	4	2	66.7	33.3
Intensifiers	0	0	0	0
Coalition (agreement)	18	14	56.3	43.8
(disagreement)	16	9	64	36
Flames	19	12	61.3	38.7
Ridicule of Others	26	18	59.1	40.9
Apologies	0	0	0	0
Challenges	9	3	75	25
Facilitative Language	27	21	56.3	43.8

Some of the language features that were mentioned in the literature, such as the use of intensifiers, were not used at all. On the other hand, a number of hedges such as '*mumkin*' or '*qad*'⁹ were present.

Expressing agreement and disagreement is another form that was highlighted by previous researchers, as they demonstrated that men show less support for others than women and are more willing to disagree badly. In this data, it has been found that, generally speaking, the men tended to express their opinions more than women whether they agreed or disagreed with the other person. Their agreements comprised 56.3% of all agreements in comparison to the female tweeters' (43.8%). The men also expressed their disagreement more frequently (64%) than the women (36%). This might be an indication that the female tweeters felt relatively less comfortable sharing their opinions regardless of their stance. That argument might be supported by the frequency with which the male tweeters used flaming (61.3%), ridiculing others (59.1%), and challenging others' opinions (75%), which were all higher than their female counterparts' rates (see Table 2). However, it is worth pointing out that although flaming and ridiculing others have been attributed to men in the literature, we have seen significant examples of female flaming and ridiculing others in the data, which was not anticipated.

Also, the use of facilitative language, such as helping others to elaborate, expanding the discussion, eliciting additional information, or even offering advice or emotional support, was observed from both genders. Although the literature proves that this is a characteristic that generally appears more among women than men, male tweeters used these facilitative features more (56.3%) than their female counterparts (43.8%) in these instances.

5. Conclusion

Both male and female tweeters in the Gulf were interested in participating in and voicing their opinions through social media. In fact, virtual anonymity might have worked in favor of the female

⁹ According to *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (1976: 918, 744) the word '*mumkin*' means "possible, thinkable and conceivable", while '*qad*' means "may or might".

tweeters who are part of conservative societies and might not otherwise choose to participate, or who would be reluctant to take part in any other form of public communication. Significantly, in this data, more men initiating discussions/tweets was observed, along with a good distribution in terms of participation in these discussions between genders.

When it comes to language features used by each gender, it would be difficult to draw a clear line between them in terms of the discourse markers used. However, certain trends do appear in the data, among them women's use of emotional language, showing support, and being driven towards offering solutions rather than discussing the issue itself. In some instances, they asked rhetorical questions that can be considered facilitative and might have elicited more information or expanded the discussion.

On the other hand, men's participation reflected their stance towards the topic. They also focused on offering new factual information or challenging others, which could have led to the revelation of new information. Their disagreements were more hostile than the women's; however, they were more cautious in their disagreements with women to maintain their 'face' socially.

Although sarcasm and humor are features that are commonly seen in men's discourse, both men and women in this data used each feature. However, the intensity in the use of the features might vary across genders, which could be investigated further in future research.

Overall, features that appeared in the data and may be considered special characteristics of communication in the Gulf include the following. 1) Most speakers tried to distance themselves by not using the first person and instead using words like 'one' or 'someone' even if they were referring directly to themselves or their personal lives. This was apparent when tweeters defended controversial opinions or were disclosing information about their personal lives. 2) One of the recurring themes that appeared is the comparison between the Gulf and the West ideologically and socially. This constant comparison created a clear distinction or even a gap between the different sectors of society in terms of their educational background, beliefs, and perceptions.

This research is an attempt to analyze communication across genders in the Gulf; in order to reach solid conclusions, other mediums of communication will also need to be investigated. Additionally, one of the weaknesses of this research was the fact that most of the participants seemed to be from Saudi Arabia. This means that it might not represent the entire Gulf area as such but might simply give a snapshot of the communication in the region.

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