

Examining Language and Gender

Shahad Alshammari

Sociolinguist , Reetah Educational Institution, Kuwait

ABSTRACT: *Due to the country's gender-segregation rules and conservative culture, females and males in Kuwait have separate socialization norms. This study strives to examine online and offline linguistic practices by analyzing WhatsApp conversations of mixed-gender and female single-gender interactions. Results reveal that males and females construct and perform their gender identity by employing interactional strategies that are exclusive to the virtual context of WhatsApp and do not exist in the offline Kuwaiti society. The study refers the identity construction and performance to communicate successfully and achieve shared goals of establishing relationships and friendships as members of the WhatsApp community of practice. Furthermore, context of interaction is a significant variable that influences communication between genders given that Kuwait is a gender-segregated country.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Language and gender is considered a subfield of sociolinguistics. It is an interdisciplinary field, which covers various disciplines such as communication, linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology and sociolinguistics (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). Early studies in this field appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s on English-speaking communities (Weatherall, 2002). Subsequently, several studies emerged that attempt to discover how language use reflects gender. In particular, researchers strived to answer two main questions: do men and women use language differently. In addition, what is the appropriate approach to explain those differences.

In an attempt to answer both questions, researchers have followed three approaches; namely, the dominance approach (Lakoff, 1975; West & Zimmerman, 1983); the two cultures 'difference' approach (Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990); and the social constructionist approach (Stanback, 1988).

Mainstream studies in the field of language and gender concentrated mainly on white, middle-class speakers in English-speaking countries. In the Arab world and in particular, in Kuwait, less attention has been devoted to examining interaction between genders, explore gender discourse in social network applications and investigate women's discourse. One of the main reasons might be the gender segregation norms that exist in the Arab world which makes it challenging to research. Consequently, studies explaining the differences between men and women's talk in the Arab world will propose different perspectives from the mainstream studies.

This research scrutinizes online interactions on WhatsApp between Kuwaiti females and males in order to explore any differences between mixed-gender and female single-gender interactions, as an integral part of sociolinguistics. Hence, a comparison is made between the usage of interactional linguistic strategies; namely greetings and terms of endearment online on WhatsApp and offline face-to-face. Males and females in mixed-gender and female single-gender interactions employ these interactional strategies to communicate successfully and accomplish shared goals in the WhatsApp community of practice. This research aims predominantly to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the differences between female single-gender and mixed-gender interactions in Kuwait?
- 2- How does context influence the interaction between mixed-genders?
- 3- What are the effects of gender-segregation in Kuwait on mixed-gender interactions?

This research is sought to offer useful contributions and insights to the field of language and gender, women's discourse and mixed-gender interactions in a gender-segregated country. It is imperative to present a cultural background of Kuwait and explain the sociolinguistic situation in terms of language and gender in order to streamline an understanding of the background of the study.

II. CULTURAL RESONANCE OF KUWAIT

Kuwait is a small state of 17,818 square kilometers that is located at the northwest of the Arabian Gulf. The population of Kuwait is estimated as a total of 1.2 million (Gulf News, 2014). Kuwait is one of the main countries in the world for producing oil. The country's wealth is manifested through its welfare system; Kuwaiti citizens enjoy funded housing and free healthcare and education (Algharabali, 2010). Affected by globalization, today, Kuwait is considered a modern country with many westernized and huge shopping malls, restaurants and coffee shops. Furthermore, recent social change in the country, modernization and the growth of media and technology have brought non-traditional and western practices and resulted in some Kuwaitis becoming more liberal and abandoning social norms and traditions to some extent.

Kuwait is a gender-segregated country. Males and females have separate socialization norms. Prior to moving on to the next point, it is essential to clarify that gender segregation norms in the country do not stem from a religious perspective but a conservative traditional one. This is because females and males are united when they perform pilgrimage in Mecca (Algharabali, 2010). Additionally, such conservative traditions are prevalent in most Arab countries in order to protect the woman's image and her family's honor and reputation (Nydell, 2006). Consequently, males and females in Kuwait are taught from an early age about the social norms and conservative traditions of the country that requires men and women not to engage in interactions with each other. This also includes friendships and relations with relatives and cousins. The Kuwaiti society is relatively small and almost all families know one another, therefore, families are constantly trying to protect their reputation and present themselves appropriately in the public eye (Algharabali, 2010). Furthermore, the binary division between genders is manifested through behavior, dress style and language. For example, women are expected from their families and society to behave and dress modestly by wearing *Abaya* (black dress) and covering their hair with *Hijab* (head scarf) and lowering their voices in public spheres. However, it is worth noting that because of recent social change and modernization, not all families in Kuwait obligate their daughters to cover their hair and wear *Abaya*.

Gender segregation in the country is also imposed on educational institutions such as universities as well as government schools and in public spaces such as mosques, most health clubs and all beauty salons (Algharabali, 2010). Subsequently, it is embedded in the family as brothers and sisters and husbands and wives live separate lifestyles and perform their daily activities with friends from the same gender. On the other hand, although most workplaces are mixed such as banks, companies and ministries, interaction with the opposite-gender is kept formal and minimal. Interestingly enough, and given the country's conservative culture and gender-segregation norms, flirting with the opposite-gender in public is considered a typical male-oriented social practice in Kuwait even though it is frowned upon (Algharabali, 2010).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, researchers have followed three approaches to examine the linguistic differences between men and women's discourse. The first approach is the dominance approach which views men's language as the standard norm of language whereas women's language deviates from this norm (Shibamoto, 1985). The dominance approach stresses the idea that societies give power and dominance to men which is manifested in the positions and jobs they occupy and therefore their language is considered the more powerful and their language dominates women's language (West & Zimmerman, 1983, 1987). The earliest and most significant research in language and gender using this approach was carried out by pioneers of the field such as Robin Lakoff (1975), Dale Spender (1980), and Pamela Fishman (1980).

The dominance approach has been criticized for a number of reasons. The most important of these is not having a clear definition of power and status (Crawford, 1995). Also, the dominance approach has focused mainly on the issue of power and dominance while neglecting other variables such as gender, age, social status and ethnicity. Moreover, the dominance approach has ignored the concept of context in which the interaction occurs. Additionally, most of the studies using this approach have been done on Western English-speaking, white and middle-class individuals; what can be said true in a specific community might not necessarily be true in another. Consequently, this research is cautious in that the dominance approach does not meet the requirements to answer the research questions primarily because it abandons the notion of context in which interaction occurs and context is a significant aspect in this study. Moreover, the approach neglects the possibility of other explanations as the only explanation it offers is the explanation of men's dominance and women's submission in society. This might have been true back in the 70's, however, as women today have been granted an almost equal position in society as males, hence, possibilities and explanations have changed.

The second approach is the difference (two cultures) approach which clarified the differences between men and women's speech due to cultural differences (Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990). The biggest contributor to this framework is Tannen with her celebrated book *You Just Don't Understand* (1990) in which she stated that men and women come from two different cultures. Also, any miscommunication that takes place between genders is attributed to the cultural differences and early childhood socialization of the two genders.

The difference (two cultures) approach has been criticized by a number of researchers. Cameron (1992) state that the difference (two cultures) framework attributes gender differences in conversations only to cultural differences while excluding the notion of power and other variables that exists in mixed-gender interaction. Moreover, Uchida (1992) claims that the difference approach does not reflect reality in which children interact with their friends of the same sex and opposite sex. Accordingly, children acquire the rules of discourse and patterns in single-sex and mixed-sex interactions. Consequently, the difference or two cultures approach doesn't fulfill the requirements of answering the study questions because it attributes all differences in mixed-gender interactions to cultural differences between men and women. Also, considering the socio-cultural situation in Kuwait, one might say that since it's a gender-segregated society, then this is the appropriate approach to follow. However, it is not entirely accurate, as children in Kuwait socialize together and within most families' cousins tend to socialize together freely without any restrictions. Additionally, this approach only focuses on cultural differences while abandoning other variables that could prove to be significant such as context which is what this paper struggle to answer in the study second question.

The third approach is the social constructionist approach, which researchers have implemented because it enabled them with a broader perspective to examine the relationship between language and gender. In this approach, researchers have abandoned the previous notions of how men and women are assumed to speak and instead are looking at the ways men and women construct and perform gender by using language (Cameron, 1997). West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that gender is not defined on one's biological nature but it is performed and constructed by individuals when they engage in interactional activities with others. This notion of gender performativity was developed by Judith Butler (1990, 1999) who claimed that gender is a notion that is performed by individuals and not defined by them simply because they are females or males. This approach and framework has allowed researchers to be more diverse and explore new areas in the field of language and gender. Furthermore, Cameron (1997) argued that researchers should pay attention not only to gender performance but also to the context within that performance.

There have been few studies that have compared between mixed-gender and single-gender interactions. One of those studies was done by Lee (2003) who tried to find out whether men and women communicate in a different way on the Internet than in real life. In doing so, Lee focused on the differences between genders in their online usage. In order to find out, Lee collected 50 pairs of exchanges of instant messaging for college students, then she divided those pairs into three categories: male-male, female-female, and male-female. Later, she looked at three characteristics in same-gender instant messaging exchanges which are content of the exchange, greetings, and tone. Lee's data showed that male-male exchanges mainly consisted of topics revolving around sports, computers or cars, whereas female-female exchanges were mainly emotional in their nature and revolved around shared interests between the two females. On the other hand, male-female conversations topics were consisted of common interests between the two as well as movies, school, and books. Regarding greetings, she found that between female's greetings are more common than between males and the tone of the conversation between females was less rough than between males; females used less expletives than males. Moreover, Lee's results revealed that differences in real life between genders in all three categories do indeed exist in instant messaging. However, because of the private and virtual nature of instant messaging, those differences aren't significant between mixed gender's interaction offline.

There are not many studies on language and gender in the Arab world in general and more specifically studies using this approach, as most mainstream studies in the field have focused on western societies and mostly on white middle-class individuals and contexts. The only was done by Algharabali (2010). She aimed to examine mixed-gender interactions but because of the separate-socialization norms and gender-segregation in Kuwait, it was difficult to examine mixed-gender interactions, hence, Algharabali had investigated mixed-gender interactions in online Kuwaiti chat rooms in a certain website on the Internet in which a group of Kuwait females and males would chat about shared and common interests. Back then, chat rooms were popular in Kuwait, the gulf region and the world and their usage was common between most Kuwaitis especially mixed-genders as they wanted to escape the gender-segregation norms in the offline society and resort to virtual online chat rooms that allow all users to be anonymous. She also considered those chat rooms as a community of practice since they presented the same characteristics of a community of practice. In the process, she looked at similar patterns and interactional strategies and features used by Kuwait females and males as a way to perform and construct gender. She found out that the most salient ones were the usage of greetings, leave-takings, terms of endearment and humour in the form of joking, teasing, mockery and sarcasm. She examined those features with the aid of interactional sociolinguistics which is an analytical approach that focuses on the differences in language use and the relationship between those differences and cultural differences between people (Cameron, 2001). Finally, she explored the way Kuwaiti females and males expressed their gender identity by investigating the nicknames they have used online and she did so with the help of critical discourse analysis which is another analytical approach that explores the relationship between discourse (linguistic and non-linguistic features of it) and the ideologies that are imposed via discourse (Johnstone, 2008). Furthermore, and

as a complementary method, she has interviewed some of the participants of the chat rooms. Her study was mainly a qualitative and descriptive study in which she described what are the interactional features and strategies used by a group of Kuwaiti females and males and how they used them to construct and perform their gender identity as members of a community of practice.

Since female's discourse between each other is an integral part in this research, a brief account on female's discourse is presented. The most influential work in women's speech comes from Coates and her famous book *Women Talk* in 1996 in which she tape-recorded informal and private gatherings and meetings of a group of her female friends. Most of those women were British and came from the middle-class and their ages ranged between 12-50s. In her research, Coates mainly looked at features that have been attributed to women's speech especially by Lakoff (1975) which include tag questions, questions, repetitions, minimal responses and hedges. She argued that women do indeed use those features; however, they must be reinterpreted to uncover their purposes. For example, she maintained that women's use of minimal responses in a conversation signalled support and as a way to display that they were actively listening. Moreover, she claimed that women's use of hedges doesn't necessarily imply their weakness and tentativeness as Lakoff (1975) argued, but their use of hedges was a means to be polite and sensitive to the face of the listener. Overall, Coates stated those women's speech and use of formal features signals cooperation and collaboration between them. This means that, in their conversations, women tend to be supportive of the whole group and collaborate. Regarding topic choice, Coates found that in women's talk, topics change according to the context and age. Topics in women's talk are mostly concerned on aspects of home and family.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

This study employs two types of data. The first is a collection of female single-gender and mixed-gender Kuwaiti WhatsApp conversations. The second is from four interviews that are conducted. From all the approaches that were reviewed, this study uses the social constructionist approach in order to see how females in single-gender interactions and how females and males in mixed-gender interactions construct and perform gender. This is carried out for reasons such as this approach does not view gender as a fixed variable and considers context, which is an important aspect in this study. Also, as Cameron (1996) argued, this approach does not impose fixed categories to males and female's speech patterns, instead it observes the way their discourse strategies shape and construct their gendered identity. This means that narrow perspectives and statements such as "women use these patterns in their speech because they're women and men use these patterns in their speech because they're men" will be abandoned which allows researchers and me to explore beyond this binary vision. Moreover, not all females and males use the same speech patterns; and what is studied and proved in a certain community and context might not be true in another community or context. Finally, the social constructionist approach has been used effectively in conjunction with the community of practice model in many studies in the area of language and gender.

Since context is a significant aspect in the present study and the social constructionist approach mainly focuses on the socio-cultural context of the interaction, it is beneficial to define it before proceeding any further. Context is defined as a set of factors such as participants, setting and socio-cultural factors that occur with language use (Gee, 2005a). In a certain community, speakers may have differences in their language use; these differences could be a reflection of religious, social or educational backgrounds (Maybin, 1996). Furthermore, Van Dijk (2006) argued that in a given situation, speakers may use language in different ways. In the current study, context of the interaction is referred to as WhatsApp which is the research site in which male and female participants engage in interactions with each other.

Why WhatsApp?

There are plentiful of reasons behind the decision to choose WhatsApp as a research site. First and foremost, a large proportion of Kuwait's population uses WhatsApp regularly as a means for chatting, calling, catching up, checking on others and in this way it plays a significant role as a social function in Kuwait. It can be assumed that Kuwaiti users of WhatsApp reflect and represent Kuwaiti non-users of WhatsApp. Therefore, it is an excellent research site to investigate into. Although it's a challenging task to get an approval to view people's own WhatsApp conversations, this makes WhatsApp conversations a unique and rich source full of interesting data that could contribute to the field of language and gender. Moreover, because of the availability of privacy in WhatsApp conversations, people tend to talk naturally with no limits. This makes their interactions and discourse spontaneous and natural which is the aim of sociolinguistics studies examining discourse; to overcome the 'observer's paradox' (Labov 1972). In addition, in a gender-segregated country like Kuwait, it can be troublesome to examine mixed-gender interactions as females and males don't normally meet in public as it is considered taboo. Add to this, the conservative culture in Kuwait and the private nature of most Kuwaitis (Algharabali, 2010). On the other hand, mixed-gender interactions in Kuwait occur naturally without any restrictions on WhatsApp. Thus, WhatsApp is considered a safe and appropriate research site for both the

researcher and the participants. Finally, one might argue that online interaction on WhatsApp excludes the paralinguistic features of face-to-face interaction such as gesture, body language and tone which most mainstream sociolinguistic studies are based on. First of all, this was not an option; to investigate face-to-face mixed-gender interactions due to gender segregation norms in Kuwait. Also, considering that technology is rapidly occupying every aspect in our life, more people are depending on it and using social networking applications on a day-to-day basis, hence, current sociolinguistic research is being directed towards online internet-mediated research as it offers fruitful and rich sources in terms of data (Alharbi, 2016, McGlashan, & Hardaker, 2015, Ishizaki, Herring, Hattori, & Takishima, 2015).

WhatsApp Data

Participants who wished to volunteer were asked to sign a consent form sent to them by email and send their conversations by email. Additionally, participants were asked not to send their conversations with their close family members because such conversations won't reveal the true dynamics of mixed-gender and female single-gender interactions. Ultimately, a total of two hundred and thirty-two conversations from ten participants; three males and seven females were obtained. After examining the conversations repeatedly, only one hundred and sixty-two of them were utilized as the others either didn't contain any of the interactional strategies that are being explored nor they included any interesting discourse or interactional features that can be concluded. Participants are given pseudonyms in this research to protect their personal identity.

The interactional strategies focused on in this study are greetings and terms of endearment for several motives. First, they are present in abundance in the conversations collected. Second, Algharabali (2010) have examined Kuwait chat rooms online and noticed that the most salient recurring interactional patterns and discourse strategies were greetings, leave-takings, terms of endearment and humor in its many forms. She argued that these strategies are used by Kuwaiti males and females as a means of constructing their gender identity in chat rooms. Therefore, it is argued in this study that these interactional strategies reveal the dynamics of Kuwaiti mixed-gender and female single-gender interactions.

Interviews

In order to corroborate the results, four interviews are also conducted to acquire further data, clarify some ideas obtained from conversations and elicit additional answers. This research employs interviews as a second method of collecting data instead of other methods such as a questionnaire for causes such as, as Cameron (2001) claimed that face-to-face interviews that involve discussions with participants are effective for conducting qualitative sociolinguistic research.

V. RESULTS

Greetings in Kuwait

Greetings are considered an essential feature in any exchange or interaction in Arabic-speaking countries. They hold a significant position culturally and religiously in the Arab world. They are constantly uttered whether between family members, friends and even strangers.

Greetings in Mixed-gender WhatsApp Conversations

WhatsApp conversations gathered, and interviews conducted revealed that greetings constitute an essential feature in mixed-gender interactions in Kuwait. Furthermore, the choice of the greeting type depends primarily on the type of relationship between the greeter and the recipient who's receiving the greeting. Examples, covered by the analysis, from WhatsApp conversations demonstrate on the type of greetings used in mixed-gender interactions reveal the following sociolinguistic patterns:

- One type of greeting identified (a conversation between two acquaintances) was that a greeting can also be in the form of a question
- Another example shows that in a male's response, the male tries to flirt with the female. Once more, this does not happen in face-to-face interactions in Kuwait, yet it is acceptable here because it is in accordance with the context, the norms of WhatsApp interaction and the shared goals between the two
- In a conversation, the greeter intensifies his greeting by repeating the greeting and the vowels in the greeting as a way of showing the recipient her worth to the him. Of course, intensifying greetings in this way is exclusive to the online context of WhatsApp
- Based on mixed-gender interviews conducted, greetings offline are similar to greetings on WhatsApp between mixed-genders in Kuwait. They depend primarily on the type of relationship between the greeter and the recipient
- within greetings between females, the addressee's response to the greeting is more intense and affectionate than the speaker's greeting
- In the first instance from a WhatsApp conversation, an affectionate greeting is used between two friends. In response to the greeting by female 1, the addressee (female 2), uttered a more affectionate greeting than the speaker's greeting

- Between two friends, the greeter greets the speaker in the form of a question and incorporates a term of endearment within the greeting. The addressee responds with a more affectionate and intense greeting. Consequently, the speaker responds with another affectionate greeting and intensifies the greeting by lengthening the vowels of the words
- Greetings uttered offline between females are less intense than greetings uttered online. However, greetings offline have a greater importance than greetings online. Also, body gestures such as a handshake or hug are included offline
- No instances of terms of endearment have been found in conversations between work colleagues where the relationship between the two is a formal one
- In another example, the speaker uses another religious term of endearment with his addressee and she responds with its corresponding religious term of endearment
- Terms of endearment offline are avoided especially by females with the opposite-gender because of the conservative traditions and norms Kuwaiti females were raised on
- In an example between two work colleagues, the speaker asks for help from her addressee who responds with a traditional endearment. Instead of thanking the addressee, the speaker follows this by responding with an affectionate endearment. The addressee continues the conversation by answering with another affectionate term of endearment. It must be noted that by using the affectionate term of endearment, the speaker does not necessarily mean what the expression indicates, but it is uttered here as a way of thanking the addressee by showing her intense love
- In an instance between two friends, the speaker informs the addressee of registering her courses at the university. Instead of responding with a simple 'thank you', the addressee responds with an affectionate term of endearment
- Unlike WhatsApp, terms of endearment are less intense when used between females offline. The reason for this is that in the virtual context of WhatsApp and as members of the WhatsApp community of practice, females act in accordance with the interactional norms of the WhatsApp community of practice, which allows them to use terms of endearments with each other in abundance and intensely
- According to one of the females interviewed, the kinds of topics discussed in a mixed-gender interaction depend on the relationship between the speaker and the addressee
- In a mixed-gender interaction in terms of a conversation between a male secretary and his boss (female engineer), the whole conversation revolves around work only
- In a female single-gender interactions, when asked about what type of topics are discussed between females, one of the females interviewed answered that a very informal dialog will be initiated about different matters in life (i.e. makeup and fashion: *I think in general, we girls always find support by talking to each other because we listen to each other and understand each other better*)
- In another example, the speaker texts the addressee early morning to ask if she would go out for breakfast before going to work. However, the addressee was sleeping and wakes up late irritated that her friend has been texting her all morning non-stop. The speaker responds with 'Shut up' which is normally considered impolite and rude. However, its usage here suggests the strong and close relationship between the two.
- When females and males interviewed were asked whether interactions between males and female occur more on WhatsApp than real life, the answer was a "yes". This is because girls in Kuwait whether they're interacting with a guy from their workplace or a male friend are usually shy and this is because of the conservative traditions and norms we were raised on

VI. DISCUSSION

Differences between female single-gender and mixed gender interactions

Online and offline greetings between mixed-genders Vs. between females

Female and male users express their membership to the WhatsApp community of practice by using them. Furthermore, greetings between mixed-genders and females are similar in that the choice of the greeting type is determined primarily on the type of relationship between the speaker and the addressee.

On the other hand, affectionate greetings between mixed-genders are normally expressed by the male. The reason for this is that most Kuwaiti females are generally shy as they were raised in a conservative culture. Also, most girls avoid using affectionate greetings with the opposite-gender out of fear of appearing immodest. This is because the virtual context of WhatsApp permits their usage as they are in accordance with the interactional norms of WhatsApp and by a mutual agreement between the male and female who are members of the WhatsApp community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Offline greetings between females are considered a must and they involve body gestures such as a handshake or a hug. In contrast, offline greetings between mixed-genders are rarely uttered in the public eye. And if they were uttered, then only religious type of greetings would be used because religious greetings do not signal any flirtatious messages (Algharabali, 2010).

Online and offline terms of endearment between mixed-genders Vs. between females

Similarly, with greetings, terms of endearments in mixed-gender and female single-gender WhatsApp conversations are considered a common practice by female and male members of the WhatsApp community of practice. The frequent use of terms of endearment between members of the WhatsApp community of practice has diluted their true meaning. To illustrate further, terms of endearment between mixed-genders and females are similar in that in both interactions they do not have their literal meaning; their usage does not indicate affection and love. They have different purposes and meanings in both interactions. For instance, they are used between genders and in particular mostly by males, as a means to accomplish shared goals between the two, which are mostly to establish a romantic relationship or create friendship. Conversely, they are used between females as a means to express good intentions and kindness. Furthermore, terms of endearments are used between genders online and not offline because the virtual context of WhatsApp permits their usage and they are uttered by a mutual agreement between the male and female who are members of the WhatsApp community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Algharabali (2010) has also stated the same result in her data; that in mixed-gender interactions, males use more terms of endearment than females as females do not intend to send wrong messages of being flirtatious to males and therefore they favor traditional endearments.

Offline terms of endearment between females are uttered with less intensity than online. Because in the virtual context of WhatsApp, females act as members of a community of practice and in accordance with the interactional norms of the WhatsApp community of practice, which allows them to use terms of endearments with each other in abundance and intensely.

Topics discussed between mixed-genders Vs. females

Females are more comfortable sharing their common interests with other females than with males. In this regard, Lee (2003) also found that topics discussed between females mostly circulate around common interests between them. Furthermore, because males and females in Kuwait live separate life styles, they rarely have shared common interests between them. The topics discussed between genders in mixed-gender conversations on WhatsApp depend mainly on the type of relationship between the speaker and addressee, which results in either a formal or informal interaction.

Context of interaction

As stated earlier, the social constructionist approach takes context into account and does not treat gender as a fixed independent variable that is always salient in the interaction. Also, Cameron (1997) urged researchers to focus not only on gender performance but also on the context of the performance. Therefore, in the second research question, context is explored and whether it influences the interaction between mixed-genders. The results demonstrated that context does influence the interaction between mixed-genders, taking into account that Kuwait is a gender-segregated country. Hence, communication and interaction between mixed-genders in Kuwait depends on the context. In other words, because of the gender-segregation norms in the country and the conservative culture and traditions, genders resort to private contexts such as WhatsApp that permits interaction between mixed-genders in order to communicate freely without the complications and constraints that occur in offline contexts. Consequently, interaction between genders in offline contexts and settings such as the workplace is limited and restricted, however, in online contexts such as WhatsApp, male and female users are able to interact freely and successfully and achieve shared goals among them.

Effects of gender-segregation in Kuwait

Regarding the third research question of exposing the effects of gender-segregation on mixed-gender interaction, the results have indicated that because of gender-segregation norms and the conservative culture in the country, interactions between mixed-genders are either strictly formal or strictly informal and nothing in between. In other words, gender-segregation norms in the country have caused males and females to view each other solely according to their gender identity and not take into account for example, their personality. If a male and female are for instance, work colleagues then they will establish a formal relationship that revolves around work matters only. On the other hand, and in most cases, males and females will only attempt to familiarize with each other to escape the gender-segregation norms in the country which they believe are suppressing their freedoms in communicating with the opposite-gender freely and in the aim of establishing a romantic relationship that may or may not end in marriage.

VII. CONCLUSION

In the present study, differences between mixed-gender interactions and female single-gender interactions on WhatsApp were explored. To do so, their usage of greetings and terms of endearment online on WhatsApp and offline face-to face were analyzed qualitatively by conducting interviews while offering explanations from the social constructionist approach and under the community of practice framework. Interactions on WhatsApp exhibit a community of practice in which its members created interactional and cultural norms, communication patterns and established shared goals which do not exist in the offline Kuwaiti society. In other words, most of the interactional strategies that are used in WhatsApp interactions are exclusive to the context of WhatsApp. For example, terms of endearments and in particular affectionate ones are used in abundance between mixed-genders and females on WhatsApp, yet in the offline society, they are avoided between mixed-genders and used less between females. Furthermore, illustrations in results revealed that males and females express their gender identity by employing these interactional strategies on WhatsApp to communicate successfully, fulfil shared goals between them such as establishing romantic relationships and friendships, construct and perform their gender identity as members of the virtual WhatsApp community of practice. The social constructionist approach used in this study has allowed the examination of context and whether it influences the interaction between genders in Kuwait given that it is a gender-segregated country. Evidently, because of the conservative culture and gender-segregation norms in Kuwait, males and females escape reality and resort to private contexts such as WhatsApp which enables them to interact safely and without complications. Moreover, the results demonstrated the effects of gender-segregation on mixed-gender interactions which resulted in interactions between the two being either strictly formal or informal and nothing in between. Females and males will mostly engage in a conversation with each other, only for the purpose of establishing a romantic relationship that some of them hope would end in marriage. In addition, the concept of having a friend from the opposite-gender isn't relevant in Kuwait as males and females have separate socialization norms and perform their activities with their same-gender friends.

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