Style Shifting on X: A Comparison of Saudi Male and Female Academics

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the phenomena of diglossia and style shifting among Saudi academics on X, with a particular focus on gender differences in these linguistic practices. The research aims to contribute to the understanding of the complex interplay between language, gender, and digital communication in the Arabic context. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses of a corpus of tweets from 80 Saudi academics (40 male and 40 female) across four Saudi universities. The data, consisting of 800 tweets, were systematically analysed to identify instances of style shifting across lexical and functional categories. The findings reveal an occasional presence of style-shifting in the digital communication of Saudi academics, with both male and female participants employing non-standard forms of Arabic in their posts. The results show that female academics have a slightly higher overall rate of style shifting, with males using more lexical shifts and females more functional shifts. The pervasive nature of style shifting across lexical and functional categories in the posts of Saudi academics underscores the need for a more dynamic approach to the study of language use and variation in the Arabic context. The findings have significant implications for Arabic linguistics, language variation theories, and language education, particularly in the context of teaching Arabic as a foreign language. The study serves as a catalyst for further research on the intersection of language, gender, and digital communication in the Arab world, contributing to ongoing efforts to promote linguistic diversity, cultural understanding, and social justice in the digital age.

Keywords: Arabic language; digital communication; gender difference; Saudi academics; style shifting

INTRODUCTION

The sociolinguistic phenomenon of diglossia, characterised by the coexistence of two or more varieties of the same language within a language community, has been a subject of scholarly inquiry since Ferguson's seminal work in 1959. In the Arabic-speaking world, this linguistic duality is distinctly evident, with Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) serving as the High variety, employed in formal and written contexts and regional Arabic dialects functioning as the Low forms, used in informal, daily conversations (Holes, 2004). Ferguson's model has been instrumental in understanding Arabic sociolinguistics. It provides a framework for analysing language variations and their societal roles, setting the stage for future analyses (Owens, 2013). Scholars believe that Arabic speakers can distinguish and realise L or H forms as they themselves are quite aware of their linguistic material's source, foretelling if grammatical patterns or vowel markers are fusha or dialectal. The level between two styles or codes is called a continuum of varieties (Alrashidi, 2022). Therefore, this theoretical framework is chosen for the current study because it accommodates style shifting and the diglossic nature of the collected data.

Giolfo and Sinatora (2016) extended Ferguson's concept by proposing a more comprehensive model that captures the broader spectrum of Arabic language use, encompassing Classical Arabic (CA), Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Formal Spoken Arabic (FSA), Colloquial

Arabic of the literate (CAL), and Colloquial Arabic of the illiterate (CAI). This expanded understanding of diglossia in the Arabic context allows researchers to appreciate the complexity of style-shifting behaviours as speakers navigate through different levels of language use depending on various sociolinguistic variables.

Style shifting, a dynamic linguistic mechanism that involves the adaptation and variation in an individual's language use or speech style contingent upon the social context and the perceived identity of the interlocutor (Bell, 1984), has been extensively studied in various contexts. Empirical research has provided substantial evidence of style shifting; Biber and Finegan (1994) demonstrate how African American youth in East Palo Alto, California, varied their use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard American English (SAE) based on context and audience. The proliferation of digital communication platforms has added new dimensions to the concept of style shifting as the nature of communication on platforms like X is intrinsically different from traditional face-to-face interactions due to the absence of physical presence and non-verbal cues, blurring of formal and informal communication boundaries (Androutsopoulos, 2013).

In the Arab world, Alhejely (2020) examines how the five Arab study-abroad students in the UK employ diverse linguistic repertoires to communicate ideas and use online identities. These students utilised a wide variety of online linguistic practices, including Fusha, Classical Arabic, and Colloquial Arabic varieties (Ammyah), as well as different English repertoires and digital affordance (emoji). The researcher also investigated participants' attitudes toward different online linguistic resources. Online ethnography was conducted, including observations and interviews. The findings of the study show that the students used a variety of linguistic varieties, including two main categories of Arabic, namely, Fusha, Colloquial Arabic (CA), as well as English and emoji. The participants used these linguistic practices to construct different macro and micro-level identities. Alhejely (2020) also argued that despite the common language ideologies that boost the employment of Standard Arabic among Arabic speakers, most of the participants utilised the local dialect, or Colloquial Arabic CA, more than any other linguistic varieties. The analysis also reveals that using English is not dominant among the five Arab X users. Finally, this study also found that mobility has less impact on students' online linguistic repertoires. Online style shifting can manifest in the variation of linguistic features, including lexical choices, syntactic patterns, and the usage of certain dialectal or standard forms, suggesting that digital platforms and their unique communicative contexts may result in distinct patterns of language use.

The interplay between gender and language use is another pivotal area of interest in sociolinguistics. Pioneering scholars such as Robin Lakoff (1975) and Deborah Tannen (1990) have examined gender-related linguistic variations, encompassing aspects such as lexical choices, conversational strategies, politeness norms, and patterns of style shifting. In the context of Saudi Arabia, the role of gender in language use has taken on a renewed significance in light of recent societal transformations, particularly the ongoing empowerment of women under the Saudi Vision 2030. These changes are reflected in digital communication platforms such as X, where both male and female Saudi academics engage in discussions, share knowledge, and establish their presence. However, despite these notable changes, research exploring the influence of gender on language use, particularly in the realm of digital communication among Saudi academics, remains sparse, leaving a significant gap in the understanding of gender dynamics in online academic discourse.

The digital revolution, catalysed by the emergence of social media platforms such as X, has fundamentally transformed the landscape of human communication, giving birth to new linguistic phenomena and unprecedented patterns of language use (Zappavigna, 2014). Academic discourse, traditionally confined to formal platforms, has found a new home in the digital sphere,

with X emerging as a vibrant hub for scholarly activities (Veletsianos, 2011). However, research examining the linguistic practices of academics on this platform, particularly within a diglossic society like Saudi Arabia, is still in its infancy. Zaghouani and Charfi (2018) introduced Arap-Tweet, a sizable collection of tweets from various Arab regions and nations annotated based on age brackets, gender, and dialectal variety. Mubarak et al. (2022) investigated the gender gap in the Arabic X community, offering a method to predict gender based on user engagement, topics, and friend networks. Similarly, ElSayed and Farouk (2020) studied the ability to determine the gender of authors who post tweets in the Egyptian dialect on social media.

The present study aims to address the gaps in the literature by investigating the linguistic items used by Saudi academics during style shifting on X, examining the most frequently used items, and exploring potential gender differences in style-shifting. This research seeks to contribute to the understanding of language use in digital academic discourse and further the knowledge about the interplay of diglossia, style-shifting, and gender in the digital realm. The study has various implications for the study of Arabic linguistics and language variation.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The principal aim of this research is to explore diglossia and style shifting among Saudi academics on X, with particular attention paid to potential differences between male and female academics. This study strives to provide an in-depth understanding of the linguistic dynamics in a digital academic context within a diglossic society and shed light on the intersection of language, gender, and digital communication. To achieve this aim, the research is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To investigate the linguistic items in style-shifting.
2. To analyse the frequency of linguistic items.
3. To examine gender differences in style-shifting.

Through meeting these objectives, this research contributes to the broader understanding of sociolinguistic dynamics in digital communication, particularly within the context of a diglossic society like Saudi Arabia. It provides insights into how social factors, such as gender, can potentially influence linguistic practices on digital platforms, thereby offering valuable knowledge to shape language policies, educational practices, and the understanding of language dynamics in contemporary digital contexts.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative strategies to provide a comprehensive investigation into the linguistic practices of Saudi academics on X. The mixed-methods approach offers a balanced and nuanced perspective by integrating the strengths of both methodologies, allowing for deeper insights obtained from the qualitative analysis of naturalistic samples while also providing measurable data to support the findings (Creswell & Clark, 2017). This combination enhances the overall quality of the research and

provides a holistic understanding of the linguistic dynamics within this specific digital context. Additionally, a descriptive, cross-sectional study design was utilised to capture the current state of linguistic practices among Saudi academics on X.

DATA COLLECTION

The data for this study were collected from the X platform, focusing on the contributions of 80 Saudi academics. 40 male and 40 female university professors were randomly selected from four Saudi universities: King Saud University, Imam Muhammad Bin Saud Islamic University, King Abdulaziz University, and Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University. The choice of X as the primary platform for data analysis was influenced by several factors, including its global popularity and its ranking as one of the most frequently utilised applications in Saudi Arabia (Almanie et al., 2018). X's controversial status within the region underscores its significance, as it offers an open platform where individuals, including university professors, can freely express their beliefs and opinions, promoting user interaction. The data collection process spanned a period of four months, with the selected posts published over a ten-month period from January 1st to October 31st, 2023. The Saudi professors discussed various topics through their posts, the majority of which are considered formal. However, the present study examined and analysed the shifting from formality to informality among these posts following specific methods outlined in the subsequent sections.

SAMPLE

The sample for this study comprised 800 posts collected from the accounts of 80 Saudi academics, evenly divided between 40 male and 40 female university professors. The selection process involved retrieving the ten most recent posts from each professor's account, focusing on four universities: King Saud University, Imam Muhammad Bin Saud Islamic University, King Abdulaziz University, and Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University. To ensure representativeness and reduce potential bias, a systematic sampling method was employed to select posts from a diverse range of academic disciplines and institutions across Saudi Arabia. The posts were published over a ten-month period (from January 1st to October 31st, 2023), and the selection process occurred over a four-month period. The selection process was conducted randomly, and the Saudi professors discussed a variety of topics, most of which were considered formal (fusha). However, shifts from formality to informality within these posts were examined and analysed using the specific methods outlined in this study.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process was designed to fulfil three primary objectives, employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The first objective, identifying the linguistic items utilised by Saudi academics during style shifting on X, was addressed using a qualitative approach. All non-standard linguistic items employed by the academics were systematically identified and documented, then categorised into two primary groups—lexical and functional. The standard form of each linguistic item was determined using "A Reference Grammar of Modern Standard Arabic" by Ryding (2005) as the key reference throughout the analysis. The second objective, identifying the frequency of linguistic item use among male and female academics while style shifting, was

approached using a quantitative method. All non-standard (NST) linguistic items were quantified and organised into two distinct charts based on gender usage, with each NST linguistic item matched to its standard (ST) equivalent. Microsoft Excel facilitated the effective analysis of each component, identifying the most and least used NST linguistic items among Saudi academics while style shifting on X. The third objective, comparing the use of style shifting between genders to ascertain which tends to employ style shifting more frequently, also employed a quantitative approach. After quantifying the NST linguistic items for both genders, separate charts were created to document the frequency of linguistic items used in style-shifting by male and female academics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a theoretical framework that integrates insights from various linguistic disciplines, including sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and syntax, to investigate the phenomena of diglossia and style shifting among Saudi academics on Twitter. The framework is grounded in the concept of diglossia, as proposed by Ferguson (1959), and the notion of style shifting, which refers to the alternation between different linguistic varieties or styles within the same conversation or discourse (Eckert & Rickford, 2001).

Ferguson's (1959) seminal work on diglossia describes a sociolinguistic situation characterised by the coexistence of two distinct varieties of the same language, each with its own set of functions and contexts of use. In the Arabic context, this manifests as the coexistence of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the formal and written variety, and various regional dialects, which are used in everyday informal communication. The present study examines how Saudi academics navigate between these two varieties in their digital discourse on X and how their linguistic choices are influenced by factors such as gender, audience, and communicative purpose.

To analyse the linguistic features and patterns of style shifting in the posts of Saudi academics, the study employs a classification scheme that distinguishes between lexical and functional elements. This classification draws upon the theoretical framework proposed by Ryding (2005) in "A Reference Grammar of Modern Standard Arabic," which provides a comprehensive description of the grammatical structures and categories of MSA. Ryding's work offers a solid foundation for understanding the lexical and functional components of Arabic, enabling a more nuanced analysis of style-shifting in the digital communication of Saudi academics.

Furthermore, the study incorporates insights from Crystal's (2011) work on language and the internet, which highlights the unique linguistic features and communicative strategies employed by users in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Crystal argues that the internet has given rise to new varieties of language, characterised by a blend of written and spoken features, as well as the use of non-standard forms and creative expressions. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study, as it helps to situate the analysis of style shifting within the broader context of digital discourse and online communication.

The study also draws upon recent research on CMC and digital discourse, which has highlighted the ways in which social media platforms such as X have created new spaces for language use and identity construction (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). Androutsopoulos (2014) argues that the linguistic practices of users on social media are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including the affordances of the platform, the users' communicative goals, and their social identities. This perspective is crucial for understanding the motivations and strategies behind style shifting among Saudi academics on Twitter.

Moreover, the study considers the role of gender in shaping linguistic practices and style shifting in digital communication. Previous research has shown that men and women may exhibit different patterns of language use in both offline and online contexts (Bamman et al., 2014; S. C. Herring & Stoerger, 2014). S. C. Herring and Stoerger (2014) argue that gender differences in CMC can be attributed to a range of factors, including socialisation, identity performance, and the norms and expectations associated with particular online communities. The present study aims to contribute to this growing body of research by examining the potential gender differences in style-shifting among Saudi academics on X.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of this study integrates insights from sociolinguistics, pragmatics, syntax, and CMC research to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of diglossia and style shifting among Saudi academics on Twitter. The framework draws upon the works of Ferguson (1959), Ryding (2005), Crystal (2011), and Androutsopoulos (2014), among others, to situate the analysis within the broader context of Arabic linguistics, digital discourse, and gender and language research. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a more holistic and contextually grounded investigation of the linguistic practices and strategies employed by Saudi academics in their digital communication.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF STYLE SHIFTING PATTERNS

The quantitative analysis of the dataset, comprising 800 tweets from 80 Saudi academics (40 male and 40 female), reveals distinct patterns of style shifting across gender and linguistic categories. Table 1 presents a summary of the dataset, highlighting the number of participants, posts analysed, and instances of style-shifting.

TABLE 1. Summary of the Dataset

Category	Male Data	Female Data	Total
Number of Participants	40	40	80
Posts Analysed	400	400	800
Posts with Style Shifting (Lexical and Functional)	31	37	68
Lexical Style Shifting Instances	45	32	77
Functional Style Shifting Instances	36	42	78

To compare the prevalence of style shifting between male and female academics, the rate of style shifting was calculated by dividing the number of Posts containing style shifting by the total number of Posts analysed for each gender and multiplying the result by 100. Table 2 presents the style-shifting rates by gender, revealing that female academics exhibit a slightly higher overall rate of style-shifting compared to their male counterparts.

TABLE 2. Style Shifting Rates by Gender

Category	Male (%)	Female (%)
Lexical/Functional Style Shifting	7.75	9.25
Lexical Style Shifting	11.25	8.00
Functional Style Shifting	9.00	10.50

The following figure visually represents the aggregate data for style-shifting rates among males and females.
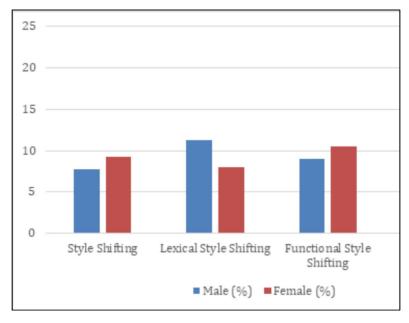

FIGURE 1. Comparison of Style Shifting between Male and Female Participants

The first pair of bars depicts the overall style shifting rates, indicating that females (represented by the red bar) exhibit a higher rate compared to males (represented by the blue bar). The second pair of bars illustrate the lexical style shifting rates, with males showing a slightly higher rate than females. The third pair of bars represents the functional style shifting rates, where females once again demonstrate a higher rate compared to males. This graph aggregates the data from all universities and presents a clear comparison between male and female participants across the different categories of style-shifting.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LEXICAL AND FUNCTIONAL STYLE SHIFTING

The qualitative analysis of the tweets by Saudi academics reveals a rich tapestry of style shifting across various lexical and functional categories. Lexical style-shifting is observed in the use of non-standard forms of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, while functional style-shifting is evident in the use of non-standard relative pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, future markers, negation markers, conjunctions, prepositions, interrogative lexicon, and existential forms.

LEXICAL STYLE SHIFTING

Table 3 presents examples of lexical style shifting in the tweets of Saudi academics, showcasing the use of non-standard forms across various parts of speech.

TABLE 3. Examples of Lexical Style Shifting

Lexical Category	Non-Standard Form	Standard Form
Noun	tˤaqtˤaqah	tahak:um
Adjective	ka:jid	sˤaʕb
Verb	tabi:	turi:du
Adverb	ʃwaj	qali:l

Lexical shifting is further examined in the collected data, and different parts of speech undergoing style shifting are identified. The following table presents examples of nouns with style shifting from the collected data.

TABLE 4. Examples of Noun Style Shifting

Noun shifting	Non-Standard Form	Standard Form
essence	ʔlzibdah	ʔlxula:sˤah
thing	ħa:dʒah	ʃajʔ
silliness	ʔsama:dʒah	ʔls:uxf
sarcasm	tˤaqtˤaqah	tahak:um
alone	liħa:lj	liwaħdj
expectations	haqa:wjk	twaq:uʕa:tik
work	dawa:m	ʕamal

Style shifting also occurred to verbs, as illustrated in the following table:

TABLE 5. Examples of verb Style Shifting

Noun shifting	Non-Standard Form	Standard Form
you want	tabi:	turi:du
you bring	tidʒi:b	tuħdˤir
he endures	jasˤmil	jasˤbir
it happens	jsˤi:r	jaħduθ
I finished	xal:asˤt	intahajt

These tables showcase how different parts of speech shift lexically between non-standard and standard forms, highlighting common linguistic variations in tweets or informal communications among Saudi academics. The use of non-standard lexical forms in the posts of Saudi academics reflects the influence of regional dialects and the informal nature of digital communication. These lexical choices contribute to establishing a more casual and relatable tone, aligning the discourse with the norms and expectations of social media platforms like X.

FUNCTIONAL STYLE SHIFTING

Table 6 presents examples of functional style shifting in the Posts of Saudi academics, illustrating the use of non-standard forms across various grammatical categories.

TABLE 6. Examples of Functional Style Shifting

Functional Category	Non-Standard Form	Standard Form
Relative Pronoun	ʔlli:	ʔllaði:
Demonstrative Pronoun	haðj	haðihi
Future Marker	b-	s- or sawfa
Negation Marker	ma:	lam
Conjunction	bas	la:kin
Preposition	fi:ha:	biha:
Interrogative Lexicon	wajn	ʔajna
Existential	fi:h	huna:k

One example of functional style-shifting is style shifting when using the negation marker, as shown in the following table:

TABLE 7. Examples of negation marker Style Shifting

Negation marker	Non-Standard Form	Standard Form
not	mu:	lajsa
not	ma:hu	lajsa

The analysis also shows that functional style shifting occurs in the interrogative lexicon (Table 8):

TABLE 8. Examples of interrogative lexicon style shifting

Interrogative Lexicon	Non-Standard Form	Standard Form
what	ʔajʃ	ma:ða:
why	lajʃ	lima:ða:

The prevalence of functional style shifting in the Posts of Saudi academics underscores the influence of regional dialects and the tendency to use informal language in digital communication. The choice to employ colloquial or dialectal variations in grammatical elements may serve various purposes, such as establishing a more casual and relatable tone, connecting with a wider audience, or expressing regional identity. The qualitative analysis of lexical and functional style shifting addresses the third research question, which aims to examine gender differences in style-shifting. The results suggest that while both male and female academics engage in style-shifting, there are notable differences in the frequency and types of linguistic items used across genders. This finding aligns with previous research that has highlighted gender differences in language use and style shifting in both offline and online contexts.

DISCUSSION

STYLE SHIFTING AMONG SAUDI ACADEMICS ON X

The present study aimed to investigate the phenomenon of diglossia and style shifting among Saudi academics on X, with a particular focus on potential differences between male and female academics. The analysis of the collected data revealed an occasional presence of style-shifting in the digital communication of Saudi academics, with both male and female participants employing non-standard forms of Arabic in their tweets. This finding aligns with previous research that has documented the widespread use of colloquial and dialectal variations in digital communication, particularly on social media platforms (Albirini, 2016; Eldin, 2014; Kosoff, 2014). The 'occasional' occurrence of style shifting among academics can be explained in terms of Labov's (2001) concept of audience adaptation; the current study supports Labov's (2001) assertion that style-shifting involves both adapting to different audiences and varying levels of self-monitoring during communication.

The presence of style shifting among Saudi academics on X underscores the importance of understanding language variation and its implications in digital communication. As noted by Androutsopoulos (2013), digital platforms have given rise to unique linguistic phenomena and

unprecedented patterns of language use. The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of research on computer-mediated discourse and the ways in which language is reshaped and adapted in digital spaces (S. Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). The use of non-standard forms by some Saudi academics, who are typically associated with formal and standard language use, highlights the complex interplay between language, identity, and the norms of digital communication.

LEXICAL AND FUNCTIONAL STYLE SHIFTING

The analysis of the posts by Saudi academics revealed occasional style shifting across various lexical and functional categories. This use of style-shifting to non-standard form occurred on the lexical level in nouns such as liħaːlj (alone) and verbs such as tabi: (you want), and also on the functional level as in interrogative lexicons such as ʔajʃ (what). Lexical style shifting was observed in the use of non-standard forms of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, while functional style shifting was evident in the use of non-standard relative pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, future markers, negation markers, conjunctions, prepositions, interrogative lexicon, and existential forms. These findings align with previous research that has documented the occurrence of style-shifting in both lexical and functional categories in Arabic (Albirini, 2016; Al-Haj Eid, 2019).

The pervasive nature of style shifting across lexical and functional categories highlights the complex interplay between standard and non-standard forms of Arabic in the digital sphere, where the boundaries between formal and informal language use are often blurred. The use of colloquial and dialectal variations by some Saudi academics on X suggests that they are actively adapting their language use to the norms and expectations of the platform, even in the context of a professional academic identity. This finding challenges traditional notions of diglossia, which often assume a strict separation between standard and non-standard forms of Arabic based on context and genre (Ferguson, 1959).

Moreover, the use of non-standard forms across lexical and functional categories by Saudi academics on X may serve various social and identity-related functions, such as expressing regional identity, establishing a more personal and engaging connection with the audience, and adapting the language to the informal tone of social media communication. These findings align with previous research that has highlighted the role of language variation in the construction and negotiation of identity in digital spaces (Alhejely, 2020; Androutsopoulos, 2013) and in building academic relations via humour (Omar & Jan, 2013).

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN STYLE-SHIFTING

The analysis of the posts by Saudi academics revealed intriguing differences in the prevalence and patterns of style shifting between male and female participants. While both genders exhibited a moderate degree of style-shifting in their digital communication, the results indicated that female academics had a slightly higher overall rate of style-shifting compared to their male counterparts, as illustrated in Figure 1 above. This finding is in line with previous research that has documented gender differences in language use and style shifting, particularly in the context of Arabic (Bassiouney, 2006).

The gender-based analysis of style shifting rates revealed that the rate of Posts with style shifting among female participants (9.25%) was slightly higher than that of male participants (7.75%). Additionally, the data showed that male academics had a higher rate of lexical style

shifting (11.25%) compared to female academics (8.00%), while female academics had a higher rate of functional style shifting (10.50%) compared to male academics (9.00%).

These findings suggest that male and female Saudi academics may have different linguistic preferences and styles when it comes to style shifting in digital communication. The higher rate of lexical style shifting among male academics could be seen as a reflection of their greater tendency to use colloquial and dialectal variations of content words, such as nouns and verbs, as a means of expressing regional identity and adapting to the informal tone of social media communication. On the other hand, the higher rate of functional style shifting among female Saudi academics could be attributed to their greater sensitivity to the social and interpersonal aspects of communication, as suggested by Lakoff's (1973) work on language and gender.

The results of this study support the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) which suggests that people adjust their speaking style to get closer to or distance themselves from their conversation partners, a common behaviour in online communication. The findings reveal that even highly educated individuals, who are typically expected to use formal language, sometimes opt for informal or local language variations to appear friendlier and more approachable, which helps them connect better with a broader audience on digital platforms.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings of this study have important implications for our understanding of language use in digital communication, particularly in the context of Arabic diglossia. The pervasive nature of style shifting across lexical and functional categories highlights the complex and dynamic nature of language use in digital spaces, even among highly educated individuals such as academics.

The results of this study challenge traditional notions of diglossia and underscore the need for further research on the intersection of language, identity, and technology in the Arabic context. The implications of these findings extend beyond the specific context of Saudi academics on X, as they contribute to our broader understanding of how language is adapted and reshaped in digital spaces.

Furthermore, the findings of this study have important implications for language education and pedagogy, particularly in the context of Arabic language teaching. The prevalence of style shifting and the use of non-standard forms in the digital communication of Saudi academics suggest that language learners need to be exposed to a wide range of linguistic forms and variations, including both standard and non-standard forms of Arabic. This exposure can help language learners develop a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic diversity of the Arabic-speaking world and prepare them for effective communication in digital spaces.

Finally, future research could explore the motivations and attitudes behind style shifting among Saudi academics on X. Additionally, future studies could investigate the relationship between style shifting and other sociolinguistic variables, such as age, education level, and regional background, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence language use in digital communication.

CONCLUSION

The present study has made significant contributions to our understanding of diglossia, style-shifting, and gender differences in digital communication within the Arabic context. The analysis of the linguistic practices and strategies employed by Saudi academics on X has highlighted the complex and dynamic nature of language use and variation in digital spaces, as well as the ways in which these practices are influenced by social, cultural, and technological factors. One of the key findings of this study is the occasional occurrence of style shifting across lexical and functional categories in the posts belonging to Saudi academics, regardless of their gender. These findings challenge traditional notions of diglossia and the Arabic linguistic situation, which often assume a strict separation between standard and colloquial varieties of Arabic based on context and genre. The results indicate that both male and female academics engage in a wide range of linguistic practices and variations, adapting their language use to the affordances and constraints of X.

Another important finding of this study concerns the gender differences in the prevalence and patterns of style shifting across lexical and functional categories. While both male and female academics engaged in style-shifting, the analysis revealed that female academics had a slightly higher overall rate of style shifting compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, male academics exhibited a higher rate of lexical style shifting, particularly in the use of nouns and verbs, while female academics demonstrated a higher rate of functional style shifting, especially in the use of relative pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, and negation markers.

The findings of this study have significant implications for the study of Arabic linguistics, language variation and style shifting theories, and gender and language use theories. The presence of style shifting across lexical and functional categories in the posts of Saudi academics highlights the need for a more dynamic and flexible approach to the study of language use and variation in the Arabic context. Furthermore, the gender differences in the prevalence and patterns of style shifting emphasise the importance of considering the social and interpersonal dimensions of language use and variation as well as the role of individual agency and creativity in shaping linguistic practices and strategies.

The results of this study also have practical implications for language education and pedagogy, particularly in the context of teaching Arabic as a foreign language. The findings suggest that language learners should be exposed to a wide range of linguistic forms and variations, including both standard and colloquial varieties of Arabic, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the language and its use in various contexts, including digital spaces. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of fostering learners' sociolinguistic competence and their ability to adapt their language use to different communicative situations and audiences.

While this study has made significant contributions to our understanding of diglossia, style-shifting, and gender differences in digital communication within the Arabic context, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The focus on a specific population of Saudi academics on X may limit the generalisability of the findings to other populations and contexts in the Arab world. Additionally, the reliance on a single social media platform, X, as the source of linguistic data may not be representative of the full range of linguistic practices and variations that occur in digital spaces in the Arab world.

Future research could address these limitations by examining the relationship between style shifting and other sociolinguistic variables, such as age, education, and social class, across different populations and contexts in the Arab world. Longitudinal and ethnographic methods could also be employed to investigate the ways in which linguistic practices and strategies evolve

and change over time in digital spaces. Furthermore, future research could explore the potential applications of the findings of this study in the fields of natural language processing and computational linguistics, particularly in the development of more sophisticated and nuanced approaches to the analysis and processing of Arabic language data in digital spaces. This study serves as a catalyst for further research contributing to ongoing efforts to promote linguistic diversity, cultural understanding, and social justice in the digital age. As we continue to navigate the complex and ever-changing landscape of digital communication, it is crucial to remain committed to the values of openness, creativity, and respect for diversity and to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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