

A Change in Saudi Attitudes From Use of Euphemism to Taboo: A Sociolinguistic Study

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Abstract—For this paper, we studied the use of linguistic taboo words in Saudi Arabian society. Three main taboo topics were addressed in the current study: the use of taboo words in social contexts, the use of taboo sex words, and the use of taboo swear words. A randomly chosen sample of 253 Saudi females from two different age groups participated in the study. A closed-ended multiple-choice questionnaire was used to collect the data. The findings provided considerable insights into the behavior of Saudi society. Saudi society rarely uses taboo words. The strategy people use to avoid using taboo language is euphemism; sex topics, for instance, which may be overtly discussed in some cultures, are prohibited in Saudi culture. The findings also revealed that Saudi society is too sensitive to the use of swear words because they are culturally and religiously prohibited, though they were occasionally used by younger female participants. In general, this study showed that although the Saudi society is a conservative society, the younger generations of Saudi females are moving slowly toward making linguistic changes in society.

Index Terms—sociolinguistic, taboo, swear, social, context

I. INTRODUCTION

Language has an effective impact on the lives of individuals and societies. In everyday life, people are used to speaking about their emotions and feelings. Some of the words they use may be appropriate, and others may not be. The use of words the society considers inappropriate or offensive is known as a taboo (Chu, 2009; Gao, 2013). Yule (2014) defined taboo words as words and phrases that people in society use inappropriately. Khursheed et al. (2013) stated that a taboo is the restricted use of words due to social constraints. They are words that violate cultural beliefs and religious norms. Linguistic taboos are culturally rule governed (Chu, 2009). Therefore, words that are considered taboo in one culture may not be considered taboo in another culture. Gao (2013) indicated that in the American culture, for instance, using the word “died” to refer to a person who passed away is considered taboo; instead, they use “pass away” or the more formal “answer the call of God” (p. 2311). Most commonly, speaking about taboos on love, marriage, and sex is prohibited in some societies (Murphy, 2010) because the topics may cause anxiety, embarrassment, or shame (Wardhaugh, 2010). Thus, in this study, the researchers intended to investigate Saudi females’ use of taboo words, their attitudes, and the sociocultural factors affecting the use of those words, uncovering the differences between a younger age group and an older one. The sample we considered younger participants was aged 18–29 years, and the older participants were aged 30–59 years.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Euphemisms in Saudi Arabian Contexts

Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing great change. Naturally, this change is affecting people and their lifestyles. Studies on taboos in Saudi contexts are relatively rare. To the best of our knowledge, the paper by Alfaleh (2019) is the only one that has dealt with taboo words in Saudi society. Most studies have been conducted on euphemism and its strategies. Euphemisms are used to relieve and ease the harshness of taboo words (Gao, 2013). They are used when speakers want to make their speech more delicate and inoffensive. To do this, the speaker uses a roundabout word or expression so as not to violate social norms (Willis & Klammer, 1981). Saudis’ use of euphemisms has recently attracted the attention of many researchers (Rabab’ah & Al-Qarni, 2012).

Al-Azzam et al. (2017) investigated the semantic and pragmatic functions of euphemisms in Saudi Arabia. The study revealed that cultural and social factors affect the Saudis’ use of euphemisms in various situations that “reflect the clear structure of the values, beliefs, religion, customs, and the change of view toward certain circumstances” (Al-Azzam et al., 2017, p. 64). Moreover, Almoayidi (2018) investigated euphemisms mostly in Saudi Arabic. He examined death,

sex, body parts, and bodily functions. The Saudi participants preferred using euphemisms to avoid being impolite and too direct when talking about sensitive topics such as death, sex, body parts, and bodily functions.

Additionally, Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni (2012) investigated the use of euphemistic strategies and methods in Saudi Arabic and British English. The findings revealed differences and similarities between Arabic and English that might be caused by cultural values, customs, and religious beliefs. The Saudi participants provided numerous strategies of euphemism such as "part-for-whole, overstatement, understatement, deletion, metaphor, general-for-specific learned words, and jargons" (p. 730). The British participants employed understatement, deletion, learned words and jargon, metaphors, and general-for-specific words. The results revealed that gender did not prove to be an influential factor on the use and choice of euphemistic strategies. The Saudi and British participants were in favor of using taboo words when dealing with death and lying.

B. Topics of Linguistic Taboos

Societies encourage their members to follow certain procedures to encourage people to behave in acceptable ways. Rules established to direct and protect a society's values govern the way its people behave. Deviation from and violation of normal values may be considered taboo. Some taboo topics are common and shared among all societies; these are social, religious, and cultural taboos (Gao, 2013). Some taboo topics, such as swearing and sex, are related to specific cultures. Swearing is considered taboo in certain social contexts (Fägersten, 2012). Swearing or cursing is "using the bad language to express anger or disappointment and direct it to a certain person who is the object of anger" (Jay, 2000, p. 87). Swearing is being used more frequently to express anger and frustration (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008, p. 267). Using swear words might cause a person to be classified as an impolite. However, Peckham and Crystal (1986) said, "Swearing, whether mild or strong, makes an excellent relief mechanism. It actually helps to turn on the inanimate object that has hurt you and berate it verbally" (p. 34). Speaking about sex, for instance, using dirty words such as "shit," was most taboo in England 50 years ago. Nowadays, topics concerning death have become great taboos (Allan & Burridge, 2006); similar to this are words related to animals' names such as "cow" (Leech, 1966). Moreover, asking a woman her age is impolite in American culture; in contrast, talking about age and salary is permissible in Chinese culture (Gao, 2013).

Linguistically, the use of taboo words may have either positive or negative effects depending on the way it is employed. Psychologically, human beings tend to form their identities through their speech, and using taboo language is the most powerful and helpful way for them to reach this goal. People express themselves by manipulating language negatively, often using taboo words to hurt, embarrass, punish, or cause anxiety to other people. However, if it leads to a desirable consequence such as humor or relaxation, it may cause a kind of excitement (Jay, 2000). Social factors such as age, gender, religion, education, and class determine the acceptance of a word or its prohibition as taboo. Teenagers are believed to use swear words more than elderly people (Qanbar, 2011). Abdul Aziz et al. (2020) found that on the internet, swear words were used mostly in jokes by younger people to illustrate their sense of humor. To show gender differences in the use of taboo words, Lakoff (2004, p. 80) stated that men are creative in telling dirty jokes without caring about using euphemisms of language, whereas women are "experts at euphemism". Al-Abbas and Mohammed (2020, p. 405) reported that topics such as "religion, death, health, naming and addressing human body parts, swearing, and aging are stated as taboo in Arabic". The Arabic culture prohibits talking overtly about some body parts, because it is considered socially taboo.

C. Linguistic Taboos in Arab Countries

Linguistic taboos have been investigated only rarely in Arabic countries, by Arabic scholars as Al-Khatib (1995), Qanbar (2011), and Al Dilaimy and Omar (2018). Before the new millennium, studying taboos was considered an unhealthy job. It was done by Arabic researchers who studied in Europe and the United States and they brought the influence of Western culture back with them. When they returned to their home countries, they wrote on some serious topics concerning taboos to cope with the new developments in this world.

Al-Khatib (1995) studied the influence of sociocultural factors such as age, education, topic, and setting on the use of taboo words in Jordanian society. He explained the strategies of taboo words; how they are determined, what they are produced and developed for, how speakers can avoid taboo words, and how speakers use replacements for linguistic taboos. Al Dilaimy and Omar (2018) examined the use of taboo words in Iraqi Arabic. They found Iraqi males use taboo words extensively. They attributed the use of taboo words to different factors such as "the context of situation, educational and social status of speakers, age and sex of participants" (p. 10).

Qanbar (2011) studied how taboo words are used contextually in the Yemeni society. She classified them into two main categories: context-specific and general. In the context-specific category, she included words and expressions that become taboos in particular contexts but otherwise are not, for example, "cow," "pig," and "dog." In the general category, she classified taboo words into two subcategories: mentionable and unmentionable general. The mentionable general subcategory refers to words that have been euphemized in a polite setting. It includes "words and phrases that are considered taboos and shocking if mentioned unaccompanied with certain fixed conventional phrases" (Qanbar, 2011, p. 94). It includes words referring to unclean objects and places, metaphysical things, and admiration for things. The unmentionable general subcategory contains "absolute forbidden taboo words" (Qanbar, 2011, p. 92) and words prohibited religiously and socially, such as words that refer to private parts of the human body, words that refer to

political and historical symbols, the mention of a female person’s first name in front of strangers or in public, and words that are used to condemn religious beliefs and symbols. The study concluded that Yemeni people avoid using taboo words and instead replace them with euphemistic expressions.

To the best of our knowledge, the only paper that has investigated taboo words in the Saudi community is of Alfaleh (2019). She provided a description of different expressions considered taboos linguistically, socially, and religiously that affect the beliefs and values of Saudi society. Alfaleh’s data were based on her observations of the use of taboo words in Saudi society. Some of the topics discussed in this study included the “role of women gender [*sic*] in public activities including playing sports in public, driving in public or shaking a woman hand” (p. 10). Alfaleh concluded that the Saudis “are aligned with their religious and cultural beliefs that are responsible for contributing to taboo behavior and various expressions” (2019, p. 15–16).

Little has been published investigating the phenomenon of linguistic taboos in Saudi society in particular and by other scholars in Arab countries in general. This study shed light on a complicated issue in the conservative Saudi society. Because most of the previous studies were written on euphemism and its strategies, this study uncovered the linguistic behaviors of people toward the use of taboo words. Therefore, this study might contribute to an understanding of the sociocultural and linguistic behavior of Saudi society, and it will fill the gap in the literature on this topic.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper is aimed at providing a sociolinguistic analysis of taboo words as they are used in Saudi society. We investigated the linguistic taboos Saudis commonly use regarding their relationship to the social–cultural context. Additionally, due to the recent societal changes and the new technology to which people have been exposed (e.g., media, social networking), we investigated the attitudes and behaviors of Saudi society toward the use of taboo words, shedding lights on people’s reasons for using them. By analyzing them, we attempted to construct a framework defining the Saudi identity as a conservative society from women’s points of view on using taboo words because women are considered the leaders of change in any society. Thus, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Do Saudi females use linguistic taboos? If yes, what are they?
2. What are their attitudes and behaviors toward the use of linguistic taboos?
3. Are the linguistic taboos younger females (18–29) use the same as those older females (30–59) use?

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

A sample of 253 Saudi females participated in this study. The participants were chosen randomly from King Khalid University (KKU) and comprised two age groups: younger (18–29) and older (30–59). They lived in the Southern part of Saudi Arabia, mainly in Abha and Khamis Mushayt. The participants had different educational backgrounds, such as BA, Master of Arts, and PhD students, employees, and teaching staff of KKU. The participants took part in this study voluntarily. They were clearly notified of the study’s title, and a definition of the term “taboo” was provided in the questionnaire. Table 1 shows their age distribution.

TABLE 1
AGE DISTRIBUTION

Participants	Age Range	No. of Participants	Percentage
Younger Group	18–29 years old	191	75.5%
Older Group	30–59 years old	62	24.5%
		253	100%

B. Instruments and Procedure

Researchers use questionnaires to measure participants’ attitudes in a way that provides valid results. To collect quantitative data, an online questionnaire was designed using Google Forms. It was written in English and Arabic to ensure the participants’ full comprehension of each item on the questionnaire. Each item was a closed-ended multiple-choice question, and the questionnaire consisted of 30 items in addition to demographic data. The statements were designed to investigate the participants’ use of taboo words with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*) to obtain various responses. To determine the questionnaire’s validity and reliability, we used Cronbach’s alpha. The 30 items were shown to be consistent at ($\alpha = 0.73$).

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part was designed to collect demographic data. The participants were asked to provide information about their ages and occupations. The second part was designed to collect data about the participants’ use of taboo words in their social daily interactions. The 30 items of the second part were divided as follows: 18 items explored the participants’ use of taboo words socially, four items involved sex and taboo expressions, and eight items concerned swear words. We developed the items on the participants’ social use of taboo words. Items 1, 2, and 5 on swearing were adopted (with some modifications to match the statements on the questionnaire) from Kapoor (2016, p. 272), and we developed the other four items on sex (see Appendix A). We shared a link to the questionnaire

with the participants via email and WhatsApp and posted the link on the university's Blackboard platform. The participants spent about 10–15 min completing the questionnaire.

C. Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data, we used the descriptive–analytical approach. It is an effective method frequently utilized to collect and analyze data (Borg & Gall, 1989). The results were explained statistically using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 24) to calculate frequencies and percentages for easy interpretation of the attitudinal differences between the two age groups—younger and older—regarding their use of taboo words. The data were analyzed at three levels: (a) taboo words used by the female participants in their everyday social lives, (b) taboo words related to sex, and (c) the use of taboo swear words. In accordance with the study's aim and research questions, we intended to identify the types of linguistic taboos most commonly used by Saudi society and the Saudi females' attitudes.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Use of Taboo Words in the Saudi Females' Social Lives

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of the younger and older groups' use of taboo words in their social lives. The younger and older participants' responses, generally speaking, to the statements showed that a large number of them deviated from using taboo words in their social lives.

TABLE 2
 FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF THE USE OF TABOO WORDS IN SAUDI YOUNGER AND OLDER GROUPS' SOCIAL LIVES

Item	Frequency and percentage	Strongly agree/agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree/disagree	
		Younger group	Older group	Younger group	Older group	Younger group	Older group
1. I use taboo words a lot in public.	<i>f</i>	7	4	17	2	167	56
	%	4	7	9	3	87	90
2. I use taboo words with my friends and family members.	<i>f</i>	20	4	29	11	142	47
	%	11	6	15	18	74	76
3. I feel embarrassed when my mother's name is mentioned in front of others.	<i>f</i>	3	4	4	1	184	57
	%	2	6	2	2	96	92
4. I feel embarrassed when my name is mentioned in front of men.	<i>f</i>	14	8	17	4	160	50
	%	7	13	9	6	84	81
5. I call my friend names such as "dog" or "donkey" while joking.	<i>f</i>	61	8	43	13	87	41
	%	32	13	23	21	45	68
6. I refer to my husband as "he" or "him" in front of others.	<i>f</i>	33	13	68	14	90	35
	%	17	21	36	23	47	56
7. I do not feel embarrassed when I talk to others about my husband.	<i>f</i>	102	29	64	13	25	20
	%	53	47	34	21	13	32
8. It irritates me when someone asks me about my income.	<i>f</i>	90	43	54	10	47	9
	%	47	70	28	16	25	15
9. It is acceptable to call a divorced woman <i>mutalagah</i> .	<i>f</i>	37	7	34	12	120	43
	%	20	11	18	19	62	70
10. I feel embarrassed to refer to a single woman as a spinster.	<i>f</i>	114	41	24	3	53	18
	%	60	66	13	5	28	29
11. It is acceptable to call my maid <i>shagala</i> instead of "housekeeper."	<i>f</i>	43	23	47	13	101	26
	%	23	37	24	21	53	42
12. It is acceptable to call the lady who is cleaning in the college <i>farasha</i> instead of <i>khala</i> [aunt].	<i>f</i>	12	5	10	9	169	48
	%	6	8	5	15	89	77
13. It is acceptable to call someone who is overweight <i>matin</i> or <i>samiin</i> .	<i>f</i>	25	5	20	4	146	53
	%	13	8	10	6	77	86
14. When you have diarrhea, you express it explicitly to others.	<i>f</i>	26	7	33	13	132	42
	%	14	11	17	21	69	68
15. When you need to urinate, you express it explicitly.	<i>f</i>	59	5	29	13	103	44
	%	31	8	15	21	54	71
16. Opening the window is better than telling my friend that she smells bad.	<i>f</i>	138	55	39	4	14	3
	%	73	89	20	6	7	5
17. I prefer to use the expression <i>khabith</i> instead of "cancer."	<i>f</i>	33	14	69	17	89	31
	%	17	23	36	27	47	50
18. It embarrasses me to use the term "mentally retarded" in front of a disabled person.	<i>F</i>	148	46	18	3	24	13
	%	78	74	9	5	13	21

For Items 1 and 2, the younger and older participants were clear and direct in defining their attitudes toward the use of taboo words in public and with their families and friends. In Item 1, the majority of the younger participants (87%) and the older participants (90%) did not agree with using taboo words in public. Similar attitudes were obtained for Item 2: The majority of the younger participants (74%) and the older participants (76%) did not agree with using taboo words with their friends and family members.

Using females' names is considered taboo in Saudi society, and men feel embarrassed to mention the names of females in front of others. For Items 3 and 4, the younger and older participants were clear in showing their feelings about their mothers' names being mentioned in front of others or their own names being mentioned in front of men: 84% of the younger group and 81% of the older group expressed that they did not feel embarrassed when their names were mentioned in front of men, and 96% of the younger participants and 92% of the older participants did not feel embarrassed when their mothers' names were mentioned in front of others. These results were quite interesting and unexpected, showing that these usages were not considered taboo among the Saudi females. This result does not support

Qanbar's (2011) research in which the Yemeni participants considered the use of female names a major taboo in their society.

Saudi society prohibits calling a friend a "dog" or a "donkey," even while joking. The majority of participants, 45% of the younger group and 68% of the older group, expressed their refusal to call their friends animal names. However, 32% agreed they call their friends animal names, and 23% were neutral. This suggests using these taboo words is not common or accepted in Saudi society. Similar results were obtained with the older group, showing that 13% of them agreed they did this and 21% were neutral.

Saudi females are deeply conservative about their personal lives; they do not refer to their husbands by using the expression "my husband" in front of others but instead prefer to refer to their husbands as "he" or "him." This might be attributable to the separation between males and females in this society. However, for Item 6, 47% of the younger group and 56% of the older group disagreed with referring to their husbands as "he" or "him" in front of others. This shows that there has been a change in the society, and it is no longer considered a taboo, although 17% of the younger group and 21% of the older group agreed with referring to their husbands with the pronouns "he" and "him." However, 36% of the younger group and 23% of the older group were neutral. This suggests that a small number of the Saudi females were conservative. For Item (7), the majority of the younger group (53%) and the older group (47%) overtly expressed feelings of embarrassment when talking about their husbands to others. However, 34% and 21% of the two groups agreed that they talk about their husbands to others, and 13% and 32% were neutral. This again suggests that the Saudi society is still conservative and the younger generations are moving slowly toward change in this society.

Asking about someone's financial status is a topic that needs to be addressed. Thus, for Item 8, the percentages were high in both the younger and older groups (47% and 70%, respectively), demonstrating that they felt irritated when someone asked them about their incomes. Clearly, this is considered taboo in Saudi society.

A person's social status is an indicator of their position in a society. Using a title with a person's name in normal discourse puts them on the right social footing, depending on the culture. Referring to a woman as divorced, a spinster, an aunt, or a houseworker in a general context may be considered appropriate and may indicate a positive sense. However, when these words are used in specific contexts, they become taboo words. They may hurt the feelings of those people because they are meant to undermine and even ridicule them. Referring to a woman as *mutalagah* [divorced] in front of others or to a single woman as a spinster or calling a woman who works in houses *shagala* [housekeeper] or the lady who cleans in the college *farasha* [cleaner] instead of *khala* [aunt] underestimates their social status. Because people do so, the words have lost their general sense and have become taboo. It is a noticeable sign of devaluing and criticizing a person's social position.

For Items 9–12, the participants' responses were ultimately negative. For Item 9, 62% of the younger group and 70% of the older group refused to use "divorced" in front of the person to whom they were referring. However, 20% and 11% of the two groups agreed with its usage. Similarly, for Items 10 and 11, the majority of the two groups' responses—77% and 89%, respectively—did not agree with calling the woman working in the college "farasha" in Item 12 or the woman is working at a house "shagala" in Item 11. Instead, it seemed they preferred to call them "khala" [aunt] and "housekeeper," respectively. Using the word "spinster" to refer to a single woman in Saudi society seems to be increasingly less common. The participants showed embarrassment about using such a word. For Item 10, 60% of the younger group and 66% of the older group overtly displayed their feelings as being anxious and embarrassed about using taboo words in their social interactions with other people. This was in line with the work of Whaduragh (2010), who found that any topic that devalues the feelings of others might cause anxiety and embarrassment. In addition, the participants' attitudes toward the taboo word mentioned above provided some insights into Saudi female behaviors. It shows that Saudis' attitudes are in alignment with general social competence. They prefer to be more polite and sensitive. Their behaviors are a mirror of the sociocultural performance of the society in which they live. The results showed above were in line with our expectations. They indicated the participants had a positive attitude in relation to cultural values and their culture has a strong influence on their attitudes.

For Item 13, 77% of the younger group and 86% of the older group believed it was not acceptable to use the words *matin* [fat] or *samiin* [obese] to refer to an overweight person. Thus, the Saudi females believed it was taboo to use the words "matin" [fat] or "samiin" [obese] to refer to an overweight person. They avoided using words that caused pain to others, especially overweight people. As shown for Item 14, 69% of the younger group believed that it was taboo to express overtly to others that they had diarrhea, whereas 14% did not feel embarrassed to discuss such an issue with others, and 17% were neutral. In the older group, 68% thought that it was inappropriate to express overtly that they had diarrhea, whereas 21% were neutral, and 11% showed that they could express it overtly. The findings for this item show that the Saudi females regarded overtly discussing diarrhea with others as taboo. This finding supports the work of Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni (2012), who found that the Saudi and British participants in their study rarely used taboo words related to bodily functions such as the process of bodily excretion; thus, it is regarded as taboo.

A similar finding was obtained for Item 15, 54% of the younger group and 71% of the older group considered overtly expressing the need to urinate impolite and hence taboo. This result aligns with Enab's (2020) findings that the Egyptians used different expressions, specifically euphemistic phrases such as *θawānī wi gayy* [I will be right back].

Interestingly enough, for Item 16, the majority of both groups, 73% of the younger group and 89% of the older group, preferred to open a window rather than telling a friend that they smelled bad. The Saudi females considered it taboo to

express their discomfort to others.

For Item 17, 17% of the younger group agreed that they preferred to use the expression *khabith* [malignant] instead of the word “cancer,” whereas 47% preferred to use the word “cancer,” and 36% showed that to them it was neutral. However, 23% of the older group preferred to use the expression “*khabith*” instead of the word “cancer,” whereas 50% preferred to use the word “cancer,” and 27% showed it was neutral to them. The results of this item showed that the Saudi females preferred to use the exact scientific term directly rather than its euphemistic equivalent. Therefore, the Saudi participants did not consider the word “cancer” taboo, which was an interesting and unexpected finding. This result differs from that of Qanbar’s (2011) study, showing people in Yemeni society introduce phrases such as *afana Allah* [May God cure us all] when they talk about serious diseases such as cancer. Thus, Yemeni people euphemize the word “cancer,” but Saudis use the word directly because it is not classified as a taboo word in their culture. Our finding also differs from that of Enab’s (2020) study, showing people who speak Egyptian Arabic avoid using the word “cancer” and euphemize it with expressions such as *ʔil-maraD (ʔ)il-wiHiʔ* [the bad disease].

For Item 18, 78% of the younger group thought it was impolite to use the term “mentally retarded” in front of a disabled person, whereas 13% could use it, and 9% showed it was neutral to them. As for the older group, 74% believed it was difficult to use such a term in front of a disabled person, 21% did not mind using it, and 5% were neutral. Thus, the Saudi females believed it was taboo to use the term “mentally retarded” in front of a disabled person. They avoided such a term because it caused psychological pain for the other person. This result goes along with that of Enab’s (2020, p. 67–68) study, showing Egyptians use euphemistic expressions such as *ʔanduh Zurif* [He has some issues] when referring to the mentally impaired.

B. The Use of Taboo Sex Words and the Saudi Females’ Attitudes

The Saudi society is still a conservative society guided by religious norms and rituals. Hence, Islamic rituals greatly influence the use of social taboos. Table 3 summarizes the frequency and percentage of the use of taboo sex words among the two groups.

TABLE 3
THE FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF THE USE OF TABOO SEX WORDS IN SAUDI YOUNGER AND OLDER GROUPS

Item	Frequency and percentage	Strongly agree/agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree/disagree	
		Younger group	Older Group	Younger group	Older group	Younger group	Older group
1. You feel embarrassed when you talk about sensitive parts of your body.	<i>F</i>	107	47	49	10	35	5
	%	56	76	25	16	18	8
2. You feel embarrassed when someone else talks about sensitive parts of your body.	<i>F</i>	143	54	29	4	19	4
	%	75	88	15	6	10	6
3. It is normal to use dirty words such as “fuck” or “ass.”	<i>F</i>	28	6	28	6	135	50
	%	14	10	14	10	72	80
4. It is normal to speak about sex among friends.	<i>f</i>	35	2	35	12	121	48
	%	18	3	18	19	64	78

As shown in Table 3, the participants’ responses to the statements were high in percentage. For Item 1, the female participants were clear in expressing their attitudes. They positively agreed that they felt embarrassed when talking about sensitive parts of their body among themselves or in front of the others. In Saudi society, it is taboo to talk about females’ body parts. Of the younger group, 56% agreed that they felt anxious about such a thing, whereas 18% disagreed, and 25% showed it was neutral to them. In contrast, the older group firmly made their feelings clear. To them, it was taboo to deal with this topic: 76% agreed it was definitely prohibited, 8% disagreed, and 16% were neutral. This goes along with the findings of Qanbar’s (2011) study, which showed it is taboo to talk about sensitive parts of one’s body, and with Wardhaugh’s (2010) findings that taboo sex words may cause anxiety, embarrassment, or shame.

Similarly, for Item 2, the participants were asked whether they felt embarrassed when someone else talked about sensitive parts of their bodies. The majority of the two groups agreed. For Item 3, the participants’ responses were high in percentage. Both the younger and the older female groups responded negatively: 72% and 80%, respectively, showed their disagreement. For Item 4, the participants’ responses to this item were high in percentage. The agreement between both groups showed that there was cause for not appreciating the use of taboo sex words in their daily interactions: 64% of the younger Saudi female participants disagreed, and 78% of the older group responded negatively about using taboo sex words with their friends.

Based on the above results, there are two ways of analyzing linguistic sex taboos in Saudi culture; the first is general, and the second is specific. The general taboos are related to topics that are forbidden socially and their usage is absolutely prohibited. The participants were asked general attitudinal questions about taboo sex words to determine their reactions to using these words. The participants’ responses showed that they refused to use sex words in their speech, specifically, “ass” or “fuck,” which ultimately are not part of their culture; their responses showed that they

responded negatively to the use of these two terms. We introduced these two words to explore the reactions of the two groups and whether the participants had been affected by the new lifestyle of the Saudis nowadays. Their responses revealed that their sociocultural background affected their attitudes. People with different cultural backgrounds previously would not deal with the same issue in exactly the same way (Gao, 2013). To the Saudi female participants, talking about sex among friends was forbidden, and that was shown in their responses. Talking about sexual intercourse is regarded rude in public (Al-Azzam et al., 2017). Because talking about sex overtly was prohibited according to their societal beliefs and values, the Saudi female participants avoided using sex words and expressions. This indicated they were socially conservative because of the cultural values and religious norms governing their lives. This aligns with the results indicated by Gao (2013), who asserted that talking about “sexual intercourse is to be avoided in polite conversation” (p. 2311).

C. The Use of Taboo Swear Words and the Saudi Females' Attitudes

Swear words are considered taboo language (Fägersten, 2012). The severity of the swear words differs from one society to another. As stated above, swearing is used mostly to express anger, frustration, and disappointment (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). The Saudi society is conservative and is committed to Islamic rules. Thus, Islamic rituals greatly influence the use of taboo swear words. Table 4 shows the Saudi female participants' attitudes toward using swear words.

TABLE 4
THE FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF USING SWEAR WORDS IN SAUDI YOUNGER AND OLDER GROUPS

	Frequency and percentage	Strongly agree/agree		Neutral		Strongly disagree/disagree	
		Younger group	Older Group	Younger group	Older group	Younger group	Older group
1. While drinking some soup with my friend, I feel embarrassed to say, “Oh, fuck! I burnt my tongue!”	<i>f</i> %	41 21	7 11	38 20	7 11	112 59	48 78
2. I feel embarrassed to say to my colleague, “I think this is bullshit. You will have to redo the report.”	<i>f</i> %	65 34	21 34	50 26	17 27	76 40	24 39
3. I feel embarrassed to say to my colleague, “Who is the idiot who ate my sandwich?”	<i>f</i> %	65 34	29 47	47 25	4 6	79 41	29 47
4. It is normal to say to a friend, who made a suggestion, “Come on; don't be stupid. How can I possibly quit my job?”	<i>f</i> %	64 33	10 16	51 27	10 16	76 40	42 68
5. I feel embarrassed to say to my friend—while talking about another friend—“Shit! I've forgotten to phone her.”	<i>f</i> %	66 35	27 43	48 25	11 18	77 40	24 39
6. I always swear to make others believe me.	<i>f</i> %	23 12	7 11	34 18	17 27	134 70	38 62
7. I swear when I want to express strong feelings.	<i>f</i> %	104 54	39 63	51 27	11 18	36 19	12 19
8. I would say it is generally frowned upon to swear at work.	<i>f</i> %	39 20	26 42	55 29	18 29	97 51	18 29

As shown for Item 1, 21% of the younger group used the swear word “fuck” with their friends, whereas 59% did not use it, and 20% showed it was neutral to them. As for the older group, only 11% used the swear word “fuck” with their friends, 78% did not, and 11% were neutral. This result indicated that the Saudi females did not use the swear word “fuck” with friends, and they were firm in making it clear that to swear using such a word was taboo. The cultural and religious norms of their society may condition this belief. This result differs from that of Kapoor's (2016) study, which manipulated a moderate swear (“Oh, fuck”) in a casual context.

For Item 2, 34% of the younger group felt embarrassed to use the swear word “bullshit” with their colleagues, whereas 40% did not (they could use it), and 26% showed it was neutral to them. As for the older group, 34% felt embarrassed to use the swear word “bullshit” with their colleagues, 39% did not (they could use it), and 27% were neutral. The percentages of those who avoided using it were identical for both age groups (34%) and almost identical for those who could use it (40% of the younger group and 39% of the older group). The results for this item indicated that the Saudi female participants—to some extent—use the swear word “bullshit” with their colleagues.

For Item 3, 34% of the younger group felt embarrassed to use the swear word “idiot,” whereas 41% did not, and 25% showed it was neutral to them. As for the older group, 47% felt embarrassed to swear using such an expression with colleagues, whereas 47% did not—an identical percentage; however, 6% showed it was neutral to them. The result for this item was not clear-cut. There was no significant difference between those who used the word “idiot” and those who

did not among the older group, but the younger group used it a little more. In this case, we inferred that they used it to some extent. For Item 4, 33% of the younger group used the swear word “stupid” with their friends, whereas 40% did not, and 27% showed it was neutral to them. As for the older group, only 16% used the swear word “stupid” with their friends, 68% did not, and 16% were neutral. The result of this item indicated that the Saudi females did not use the swear word “stupid” with their friends, specifically the older group, who indicated it strongly (68%). This means the usage of such a word is taboo in Saudi society, specifically among older people.

For Item 5, 35% of the younger group felt embarrassed to use the swear word “shit” with their friends, whereas 40% did not, and, 25% showed it was neutral to them. As for the older group, 43% felt embarrassed to use the swear word “shit” with their friends, 39% did not, and 18% were neutral. The result of this item indicated that there was no significant difference between those who used the word “shit” and those who did not, but the younger group used it a little more. This differs from Baudin and Paramasivam’s (2014) results, which showed that Malaysian female teenagers swear regularly, using their favorite swear words “shit,” “damn,” and “hell” followed by “bitch,” “fuck,” and “bullshit.” For Item 6, only 12% of the younger group said they swear to make others believe them, whereas 70% did not, and 18% showed it was neutral to them. As for the older group, only 11% said they swear to make others believe them, 62% did not, and 27% were neutral. The result of this item showed that the Saudi females did not swear to make others believe them. Both the younger and older groups announced this firmly (70% and 62% respectively). An interesting result was that the percentage of the younger females—who did not swear—was higher than that of the older females, which was unexpected.

For Item 7, 54% of the younger group could swear to express strong feelings, whereas 19% did not, and 27% showed it was neutral to them. As for the older group, 63% could swear to express strong feelings, 19% did not, and 18% were neutral. This result indicated that the Saudi females could swear to express strong feelings. It may be connected with formal situations to finalize critical issues. Finally, for Item 8, 20% of the younger group felt embarrassed to swear at work, whereas 51% did not, and 29% showed it was neutral to them. As for the older group, 42% felt embarrassed to swear at work, 29% did not (they could swear at work), and 29% were neutral. This result indicated that the older Saudi females believed swearing at work was taboo, but the younger females could swear at work.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study essentially uncovers the concept of taboo words in the Saudi society. As shown, Saudis are in favor of using euphemisms rather than taboo words, a strategy speakers use when they adjust their words and expressions to articulate unpleasant, uncomfortable, or embarrassing emotions or ideas. The degree of using taboo words differs from one group to another, revealing the social and cultural attitudes of Saudi society as a whole. The responses show complete disagreement among Saudis on the use of sex words in their daily interactions. Swearing also is culturally and religiously prohibited.

APPENDIX

Dear participants,

The researchers are conducting a research paper on “A Sociolinguistic Study of the Linguistic Taboos in Saudi Arabia”. So, you are kindly requested to respond to the items of the questionnaire.

Taboo language means the words and expressions that people avoid to use because they are not acceptable religiously, socially and morally.

Part 1. Demographic information (Required)

Age (18–29) (30–59)

Occupation

Part 2

Please respond to the questionnaire items by choosing one of the alternatives:

Strongly agree = 1 Agree = 2 Neutral = 3 Disagree = 4 Strongly disagree = 5

Item
I use taboo words a lot in public.
I use taboo words with my friend and family members.
I feel embarrassed when my mother's name is mentioned in front of others.
I feel embarrassed when my name is mentioned in front of men.
I call my friend names such as "dog" or "donkey" while joking.
I refer to my husband as "he" or "him" in front of others.
I do not feel embarrassed when I talk to others about my husband.
It irritates me when someone asks me about my income.
It is acceptable to call a divorced woman <i>mutalagah</i> .
I feel embarrassed to refer to a single woman as a spinster.
It is acceptable to call my maid <i>shagala</i> instead of "housekeeper."
It is acceptable to call the lady who is cleaning in the college <i>farasha</i> instead of <i>khala</i> [aunt].
It is acceptable to call someone who is overweight <i>matin</i> or <i>samiin</i> .
When you have diarrhea, you express it explicitly to others.
When you need to urinate, you express it explicitly.
Opening the window is better than telling my friend that she smells bad.
I prefer to use the expression <i>khabith</i> instead of "cancer."
It embarrasses me to use the term "mentally retarded" in front of a disabled person.
You feel embarrassed when you talk about sensitive parts of your body.
You feel embarrassed when someone else talks about sensitive parts of your body.
It is normal to use dirty words such as "fuck" or "ass."
It is normal to speak about sex among friends.
While drinking some soup with my friend, I feel embarrassed to say, "Oh, fuck! I burnt my tongue!"
I feel embarrassed to say to my colleague, "I think this is bullshit. You will have to redo the report."
I feel embarrassed to say to my colleague, "Who is the idiot who ate my sandwich?"
It is normal to say to a friend, who made a suggestion, "Come on; don't be stupid. How can I possibly quit my job?"
I feel embarrassed to say to my friend—while talking about another friend—"Shit! I've forgotten to phone her."
I always swear to make others believe me.
I swear when I want to express strong feelings.
I would say it is generally frowned upon to swear at work.

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