

DO NICKNAMES CREATE THE LANDSCAPE OF A CHAT ROOM? EXPLORING NICKNAME TRENDS IN KUWAITI CHAT ROOMS

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ABSTRACT: *It is necessary for social media platforms to keep up with technological advancement to enable its users to engage in highly interactive settings. This is especially true of chat room settings where users nowadays use computer video cameras to transform virtual mixed-gender chat exchanges into more real and believable experiences. The increase in camera-based chat exchanges means that making up online identities specifically in the form of selecting 'fantasy' chat room screen names or nicknames (a common expression of identity among users in chat room communities) may no longer be possible. The present study compares changing trends linked to chat room user nicknames within two different time frames: 2009 and 2015, and in two different settings: Kuwaiti chat rooms and an international chat room. Utilizing quantitative as well as qualitative sociolinguistic methods, this comparative study demonstrates the effect of technological evolution on online chat room interaction. This study also aims to reveal how and why elements of power and status are assigned to chat room nicknames by their users.*

KEYWORDS: Chat rooms, nicknames, Kuwaiti online users, changing trends, identity.

INTRODUCTION

Once computer-mediated communication was introduced into the world it was well received by many and quickly gained popularity as the vehicle that allowed people from all around the world to chat online while remaining in the convenience of their own living rooms or offices. And that was not all. Most online chatting is free and therefore very accessible. Even more rewarding, was the idea that most online chatting platforms guaranteed anonymity. This made it easier for chat room users to embark on an era of identity exploration and experimentation within the 'safe' realm of the virtual chatting community. An idea that has keenly been explored by scholars, such as Turkle 1995: 177, 1999: 1, Cherny 1999, Crystal 2001, and Bargh et al. 2002: 33). Inevitably, however advancement in technology introduced computer cameras and with that came the challenge of transparency. In other words, the urgency that chat room users once had to create unique, original and attractive nicknames (which more often than not, concealed identity characteristics, especially physical) had been dampened by urgent requests by most chat room users to reveal oneself on camera.

Considered by many as online fantasy spaces, chat rooms and more specifically chat room interaction is gradually gaining importance in the growing body of research linked to computer-mediated communication. Some researchers, looked at chat rooms as virtual dating settings in which various issues about love and sexuality are explored without daunting sanctions being imposed by the offline world (see, for example Subrahmanyam et al. 2004, Whitty 2007, and Toma et al. 2008). Del-Taso-Craviotto (2006) who conducted a study on dating in chat rooms,

looked especially at the use of humor and playfulness as a flirting strategy (2006: 475). While Robinson (2007) presented the cyber self in her discussion on the way users project themselves in the online world (2007: 94; also see Whitty 2007).

More notably related to the present study is research carried out on the strong desire to be noticed in chat rooms through the user's nickname or online screen name (Turkle 1995, Bechar-Israeali 2002, Whitty and Buchanan 2010, Hassa 2012). And although – to my knowledge – only a number of studies related to Internet communication in mixed-sex settings have been conducted in the Middle Eastern region (see Wheeler 2000 and 2006, Kaya 2009 and Hassa 2012), research in this area remains rather limited compared with that in Western societies.

This paucity is rather odd because if anything, the conservative nature of Arab and Islamic cultures in which gender segregation is strongly manifest in public settings should prompt even more attention to Internet-related research in this part of the world. Research in this area is sure to help reveal the complex paradoxical relationship between cyber (social) freedom found on the Internet and offline conservatism enforced by society. Hassa (2012) for example, has looked at chat room nicknames as identity symbols in Morocco. And, yet, no research – to my knowledge – has explored online self-expression through nicknames in the Gulf region where gender segregation is at its strictest compared with other countries in the Middle East.

This research is a comparative study which gauges changing trends related to identity construction through strategic choice of screen names in Kuwaiti chat rooms across a period of time (a six-year time frame: 2009 and revisited in 2015). This research study also establishes a comparison between nickname trends in Kuwaiti chat rooms with those trends found in a more international chat room – known as, the International Pal chat room¹. Generally, the international chat room has a higher influx of users and is characteristically multi-cultural and more diverse than Kuwaiti chat rooms. Identity protection in the international chat room therefore, seems to be less of a priority compared with the slightly more conservative Kuwaiti chat rooms. These differences play an important role on the way users select their nicknames, which in turn constructs the landscape of each individual chat room.

Through a combined sociolinguistic and ethnographic methodology, a comparative analysis of chat room nickname typology is conducted to explore nickname trends in different online settings. Establishing a nickname typology would help pinpoint the most popular nicknames in the two different time frames being examined (2009 and 2015), and the reasons behind the popularity of certain nickname categories. The resulting theories from Kuwaiti chat rooms are then compared with nickname trends that appear in the International Pals chat room. Additionally, based on user perceptions collected from online interviews, this study also shows how nicknames gain monetary value and symbolic power as they take on the characteristics of commodities, which undergo transaction-like activities between chat room users akin to activities occurring in real-life markets. These additional nuances to a nickname are – as far as I know – rather new to research in chat room computer-mediated communication.

THE KUWAITI SOCIETY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The conservative nature of the Kuwaiti society enforces a number of cultural restrictions. Some are legal, such as censorship and gender segregation in official public places. Others are understood through cultural common knowledge. For example, it is frowned upon for a man and woman to have a romantic relationship out of wedlock.

Since its introduction to the Kuwaiti society in the early 90s, the Internet has created an opportunity for users to transcend the strict customs and traditions imposed by society into a safe virtual environment that allows them to mingle with users from the opposite sex as well as to choose their online identities – which are usually distinct from their socio-culturally conservative offline identities. Undoubtedly, the discrepancy between these identities or as Higgs (1987) refers to them, ‘the ideal self’, the attributes one aspires to have, and ‘the actual self’, the attributes one actually possess, is usually quite significant (1987: 320-1).

Also noteworthy is that in many chat rooms around the world users have a choice to keep their gender identity hidden behind a nickname, as research in this area has shown: Turkle 1995, Danet et al. 1997: 5, Cherny 1999, Bechar-Israeli 2006, Crystal 2006: 160. Masking gender identity can at best, prevent harassment or protect privacy, especially in the case of homosexual users, for example. However, according to interviewees from Kuwaiti chat rooms, male and female users strongly encourage gender transparency of nicknames because it facilitates the pursuit of online mixing and mingling with the opposite sex. At the same time, the Kuwaiti chat rooms under examination exist merely in a computer-mediate environment. These online settings are therefore quite culturally convenient for men and women who wish to interact together at a non-physical level, hence avoiding the violation of gender-segregation norms.

METHODS

The Kuwaiti chat rooms and the international chat room being examined in the present study all belong to an online social networking service known as Chit-chat. To gain an understanding over the nature of these chat rooms, I accessed the Kuwaiti chat rooms during two different periods: September 2009 and September 2015. As for the international chat room, I accessed it only once during 2015.

Once permission was granted from administrators of all chat rooms being examined here (Happy_Days_in_Kuwait, The Pearl Hunters, Fantasy World Q8 and the International_Pals), I took up the role of observer for 3 months during any given period mostly on a daily basis for approximately 2 hours per visit. My role as an observer meant that I could opt not to take part in the on-going public chat room interaction with the other users. This allowed me to pay more attention to the way users interacted with each other and how their different styles of interaction projected on nickname choices.

Once I established who my potential interviewees would be, I took the initiative to contact them each through private one-to-one online communication and asked them whether they would be interested in taking part in the present study on chat room nicknames. Influenced by Bechar-Israeli’s (2006) typology of chat room nicknames and based on the significant period of chat room observation I was able to compile a typology of nicknames which would later

enable me to gain a quantitative outlook on the most popular or attractive nickname types. Also, by using several female of nicknames (3 in the Kuwaiti chat rooms and 2 in the international chat room) for a certain period of time (30 – 45 days for each nickname), I was able to gauge the attractiveness of inferred popular female user nicknames. Comments from the interviews of 10 male users and 1 female user were analyzed qualitatively to demonstrate their perceptions on female nickname attractiveness². Moreover, the users' insights enabled me to understand whether there is more to a nickname than simply being a form of address in chat rooms.

FINDINGS

A TYPOLOGY OF NICKNAMES

In the present study I drew on Bechar-Israeli's (2006: 5) nickname categories to create a typology that allowed me to understand and situate the nicknames in Kuwaiti chat room being examined. She proposes 14 categories to create a typology of nicknames. They are, briefly:

- 1) Nicknames related to the self (e.g., shydude, baddady, handsome).
- 2) Nicknames related to flora and fauna (e.g., froggy, tulip, the tiger).
- 3) Technology or medium-related nicknames (e.g., pentium, aixy).
- 4) Nicknames that play with language and typology (e.g., whathell, Beameup, myTboy).
- 5) Reference to identity/lack of identity (e.g. me, justI, unknown).
- 6) Names of objects (e.g., cheese, BMW, M-16, mig).
- 7) Nicknames using famous names (e.g., elvis, stalin).
- 8) Nicknames from literature, TV, films, fairytales (e.g., Madhatter, rainman).
- 9) Nicknames with play on sound (e.g., tamtam, uh-uh, tototoo).
- 10) Place-related nicknames (e.g., duchguy, el-ingles, irish).
- 11) Sex-related nicknames (e.g., sexpot, sexsec, bigtoy).
- 12) Provocative nicknames (e.g., hitler, hamas, Bin-Ladin).
- 13) Age-related nicknames (e.g., oldbear, cloudkid).
- 14) Relational nicknames (e.g., EkIMslave, Bfiance).

(Source: Bechar-Israeli 2006: 5)

Bechar-Israeli adds two separate groups of nicknames to her typology, namely, nicknames that use people's real names and ones that have no specific category (2006: 5).

While I adopt several of her categories with modifications to suit the purpose of this study, I produce some of my own categories that are more culture-specific to the Kuwaiti online setting.

See list in Table 1.1, below.

	Examples of nicknames
1. Real-life names as nicknames	- Azoz_Wahsh (Azoz the monster), Borashed, Ali 747, Dr. Faisal , Saroona_28, Noura_il_Hilwa
2. National and culture-related nicknames	- Dana Q8, Mr. Q8, Ahmad-Q8 .
3. Appearance & personality nicknames	- Q8iya_3asal_22 (cute Kuwaiti girl), <i>green-eyes</i> , Mamlouha (a cute girl).
4. Humorous nicknames	- User Bas mitnakir (user incognito), JNiece_Q8i (ghost), Bo kersha (man with a fat belly), HaramyBanat (kidnapper of girls).
5. Sentimental nicknames	- MHTAGA HOBAK (in need of your love), Al Magrooha (the wounded girl), Masha'er Ou Ihsees (feelings and emotions).
6. Gendered & sexual orientation nicknames	- Ms ALKON (Ms Universe), Bnt Q8iya (Kuwaiti girl), Om_il_Dala'a (the spoilt girl), Sinyorita Nathyia_4Ever (forever a female), Q8tiya_Sexyia (a sexy Kuwaiti girl).

Table 1.1: An illustration of the 6 different categories used to classify nicknames. (NB: Male nicknames are in bold face.)

For the purposes of the present study I decided to focus only on the 6 most popular nickname categories noted upon observing Kuwaiti chat rooms. Although other nicknames categories have been observed and are just as valid but considering that they appear more randomly and in fewer numbers than the more popular categories, I decided not to include them in this study. Many nicknames are in fact a combination of two categories at once. For example, some nicknames combine flirtatious language in Arabic and/or English such as, *Nathya_4Ever* (forever a female), *Q8iya-Sexyia* (a sexy Kuwait girl) (see Table 1.1, Number 6). Some users combine their real-life names with the appearance and personality category (see Table 1.1, no. 3), for example *Azoz_Wahsh* (Azoz the monster or beast, which figuratively indicates great physical strength) and *Noura_il_Hilwa* (beautiful Noura, see Table 1.1, no.1). I categorized the combined nicknames exemplified above under the most appropriate category following notions inferred upon chat room observation.

As is clear from Table 1.1, the categories chosen to classify the nicknames used in Kuwaiti chat rooms reflect shared cultural knowledge and interests. Note, for example some nicknames have the affix *-Q8iya* (for Kuwaiti female users), *-Q8i* (for Kuwaiti male users) and *-Q8* attached at the end of nicknames indicates the short form for the word 'Kuwait' (see Table 1.1).

Given that the nature of the setting in the chat rooms being examined is one where mixed sex interaction is involved, many female users tend to choose nicknames that emphasise their femininity. This is achieved by using terms such as *Bnt* (girl), *Om* (mother of), or (the girl with) and *Ms/Miss* as part of the nickname (see Table 1.1, Number 6). Note that *Om* is used for a woman who wishes to be addressed after her first son or daughter, for example *Om Ahmed*

or *Om Sara* (mother of Ahmed) or (mother of Sara), respectively. The term *Om* is also used to indicate a female's ownership of a certain physical characteristic or object, for example, *Om Sha'er* (the girl with the big hair.) Similarly, the use of *-iya* as in a nickname such as *Q8iya Amar* (a beautiful Kuwaiti girl) indicates the morphological feminine placed at the end of nouns. According to male users I interviewed, feminine symbols that are affixed to nicknames immediately identify the user's gender and are as one user put it: 'A welcoming symbol signalling hyper femininity making the nickname seem even more attractive.'

It is also worth pointing out here that in Bechar-Israeli's nickname typology real-life names, as nicknames were perhaps not given as much attention as other categories in her list. They were considered rather plain or perhaps lacking online identity projection (2006: 5-6). In contrast, in the present study, real-life names as nicknames (see Table 1.1, no.1) are considered a focal point, especially considering the popularity of this category and keeping in mind user perceptions toward real-life names as nicknames (see Section 2.2).

NICKNAME POPULARITY

Often the meaning of a nickname is an essential component in popularising it. Equally, several other factors such as, its length³ and its colour⁴ play an important role in how quickly a nickname becomes popular. The legibility of a nickname may not seem like an obvious factor, but indeed, it is. During my observation of the chat rooms under examination, I was aware that nicknames that were hard to pronounce or type were not addressed as frequently during public spoken and text chat as simpler ones. In fact, it is very common that difficult nicknames are either simplified or if a nickname is a compound (consisting of two parts) then users address its owner by the first part of his/her nickname. For example, *HaramyBanat* (a kidnapper of girls) is shortened to *Haramy* (kidnapper). Yet, nicknames that are shortened or simplified do not usually lose the effects they are designed to have on the audience, such as humour, attractiveness and popularity.

Another important point to highlight in terms of nickname popularity is that once a nickname type becomes popular it is recycled or shared by other users who then find it necessary to modify the original nickname with slight additions or changes. For example, repeated letters may be added or circles, or numbers: *0-o Angel o-0*, *Johnn*, *1Ahmed1*, and *Mohamed_222*. When a nickname is legible, it is quickly understood noticed, recycled and popularized. A common phenomenon that has been noted upon observation both in Kuwait's chat rooms and the international chat room is that creative nicknames attract more attention than plain ones (also noted in Whitty and Buchanan 2010: 5-6).

Kuwaiti, male, chat room interviewees from the first period (2009) of this study perceived female nicknames that indicate sexual-orientation, physical appearance and femininity to be the most popular and attractive chat room nicknames during that period of time. This was confirmed by the number of female users who opted to create nicknames within these categories (see below, Table 1.2, no. 3 and 6). Note, in contrast, male nicknames gravitated more towards humorous nicknames and real-life names as nicknames (see below, Table 1.2, no.1 and 4). Male interviewees have stated that the more creatively attractive or flirtatious a female nickname was, the more it was popularized within the chat room community and the more it drew male users towards it and as such the more they were likely to contact the female

owners of these nicknames (as Panyametheekul and Herring 2006: 13, and Whitty and Buchanan 2010 have found in their studies, too).

Nickname Categories	Female	Male
1. Real-life names	2	23
2. National & cultural	2	9
3. Appearance & personality	10	7
4. Humorous	2	24
5. Sentimental & romantic	3	6
6. Gendered & sexual orientation	11	0

Table 1.2: Nickname popularity in Kuwaiti chat rooms in 2009. Total number of users represented is 99 in 6 categories out of 129. 79.

Nickname Categories	Female	Male
1. Real-life names	11	13
2. National & cultural	4	5
3. Appearance & personality	7	3
4. Humorous	3	10
5. Sentimental & romantic	3	2
6. Gendered & sexual orientation	3	1

Table 1.3: Nicknames popularity chat rooms in 2015. Total number represented is 71 out of a total of

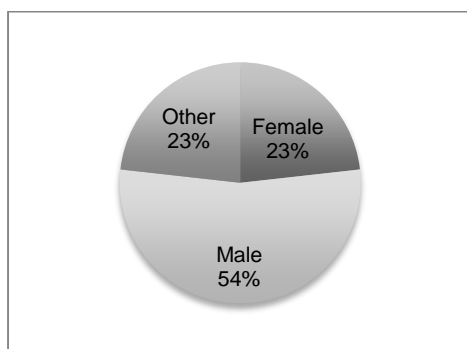


Chart 1.1: Kuwaiti chat room nicknames 2009

The total number of chat room users = 129⁵.
users = 79.

The figures recorded in 2009 in Table 1.2 represent a corpus of 99 user nicknames taken from a total of 129 nicknames. These nicknames were recoded from the three Kuwaiti chat rooms being examined in this study. The 99 nicknames were collected on a given time and day for a period of 15 – 20 minutes per chat room. Similarly, the figures in table 1.3 recoded in 2015

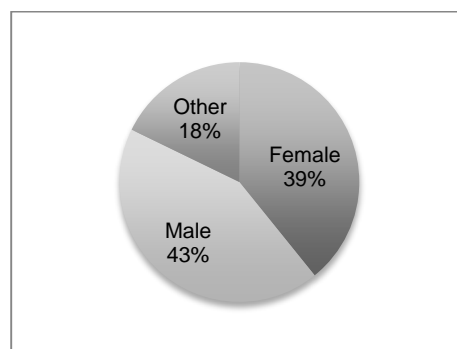


Chart 1.2: Kuwaiti chat room

The total number of chat room

illustrate the 71 most popular nicknames which fall into the 6 categories out of a total of 79 user nicknames. The remaining nicknames from both periods of time are randomly scattered in other nickname categories (e.g. nicknames related to flora and fauna, technology-related nicknames, and so on, see Bechar-Israeli 2006: 5, where these categories have been recognized).

Before comparing the nicknames trends of both periods of time, it is important to point out that the number of users in the Kuwaiti chat rooms of both periods have changed dramatically. The total number of users in the second period 2015 has decreased to almost half that found in Kuwaiti chat rooms in 2009. When asked about this significant decrease in numbers, male users interviewees linked it to a change in perspective toward online social networking platforms. Many male users nowadays prefer to access adult chat rooms where explicit sexual language and nudity on cameras are both permitted by the social network site Chit-chat, resulting in interaction between male and female users that is almost always sexual in nature⁶. However, the interviewees were quick to add that access to these rooms is granted only to users with coloured nicknames (explained later) who have paid a monthly or yearly subscription fee for extra chat room privileges. Another point worth highlighting is that the gender demographic in Kuwaiti chat rooms has changed significantly, too. Today, female user presence makes almost half the chat room, whereas in 2009 their presence represented about one third of the chat room. With these points in mind, I will move on to draw a comparison between user nickname trends within the two periods of time, as well as show the current user nickname trends of the international chat room to find out whether or not there may be links between this room and Kuwaiti chat room.

NICKNAME TRENDS

As indicated from Charts 1.1 and 1.2, nickname selection trends have changed quite a bit between the two periods of time. In terms of female users, apart from the fact that a much larger female presence is apparent in 2015, there appears to be a move away from nicknames related to the category: gendered and sexual-orientation and more toward another nickname category, namely real-life names as nicknames (see below, Table 1.4 and 1.5). With relation to male nickname trends in both periods, 2009 and 2015, nicknames that are based on one's own real-life name still remain the most popular nickname category. But so do nicknames that have a comedic effect (see below, Table 1.4 and 1.5).

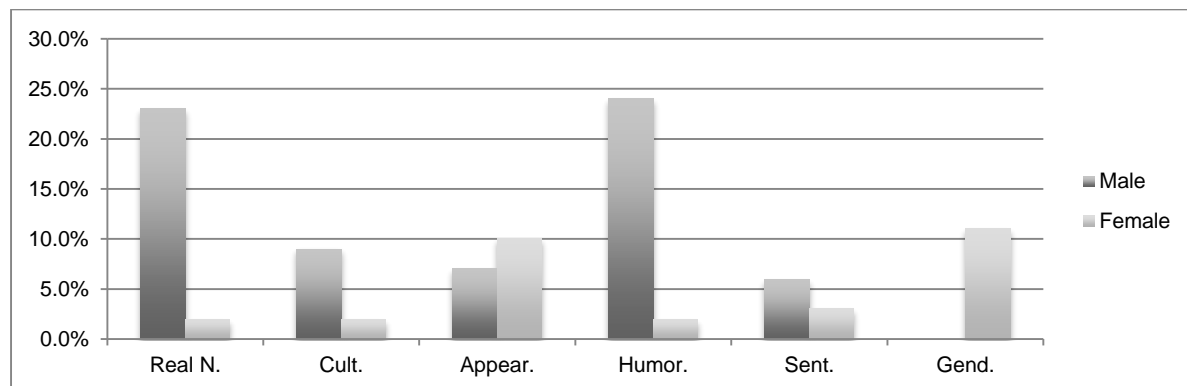


Table 1.4: The distribution of 99 nicknames taken from Kuwaiti chat rooms in 2009.

Note the 6 categories are abbreviated.

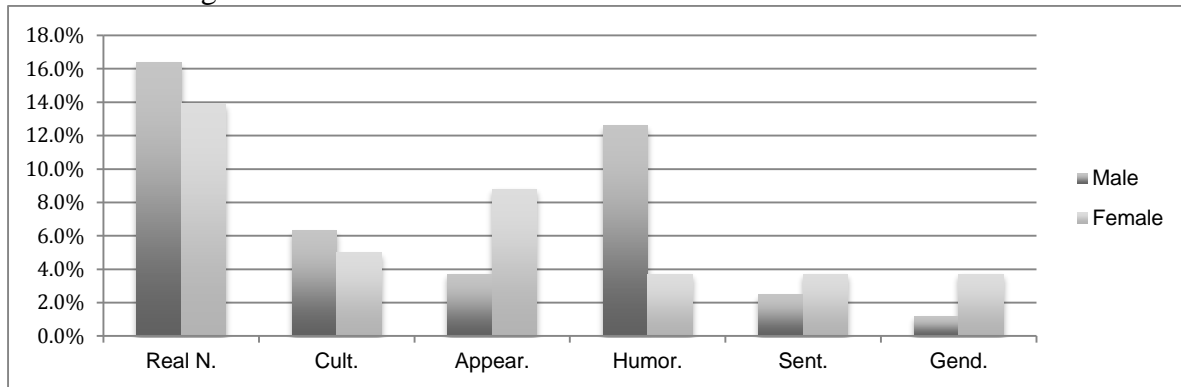


Table 1.5: The distribution of 71 nicknames taken from Kuwaiti chat rooms in 2015⁷.

As shown in Table 1.4 and 1.5, the most significant trend in nickname selection by male and female users is that of the category real-life names as chat room nicknames, which male users seem to have maintained across the years. Also worth noting, the significant focus on the categories real names as nicknames in the international chat room. At 31%, the percentage of this category is equivocal to 30.3% noted in Kuwaiti chat rooms; see below, Chart 1.3 and Table 1.5. In questioning the possible reasons for this recent preference especially by female users in Kuwaiti chat rooms, I was able to establish a few pointers from a female interviewee. (Note that, interviewees’ feedback from the international chat room confirmed her views and completed the picture further more.) According to the user’s perceptions a wave of change appears to have taken place since 2009. For one thing, the growing use of cameras in chat rooms between users means that some female users can no longer pretend to be some one other than who they really are by using nicknames, such as Green_Eyes, BeautifulBlonde, and Sexy_Lady_123. Also many male users nowadays want to be able to put a nickname to a real, visual reference and thus refusing to show one’s self on camera (by giving whatever excuse, such as ‘the camera is not working’ or ‘this laptop has no built-in camera’, and so on), immediately introduces an element of deception to the initial online interaction between male and female users. As a researcher, I was able to confirm my female interviewees’ feedback during my observation of the international chat room in which I promptly concluded that there are incessant requests by male users to view female users through their cameras. If these requests are not met; interaction may very well cease by the male users who initiated it.

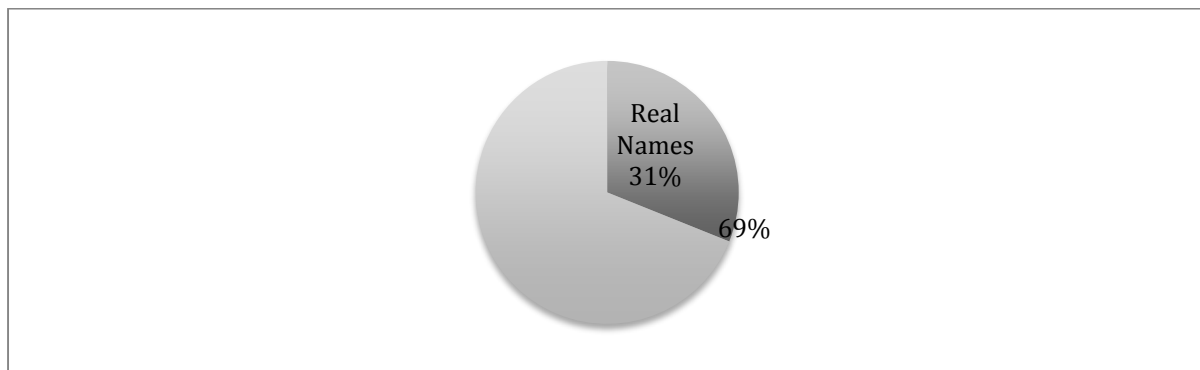


Chart 1.3: The percentage of real name as nicknames in the international chat room in 2015.

As shown in Chart 1.3, nickname trends in the international chat room reveal that there, too, up to about one third of the chat room male and female users have preferences for using their real names as nicknames. In fact, in the international chat room, users add other personal information, such as their family name, e.g. James_John and Jasmine_Richerdson; and even their age, gender or nationality, e.g. andrew_34_UK, Beth_29_F (F= female). Sharing information publicly in this specific chat room seems quite alright considering the vastness and diversity of this online setting compared with the Kuwaiti chat rooms examined here. Because of the significant lower user presence in the latter chat rooms, users have to be more careful about revealing their family names. This kind of information can easily be traced to the tightly knit Kuwaiti society offline.

TESTING FEMALE NICKNAMES

For research purposes, I have used 3 nicknames in the Kuwaiti chat rooms and 2 in the international chat room to find out whether certain popular nickname types are perceived by male users to be more attractive than others. In the period 2009, while observing Kuwaiti chat rooms, I used the following nicknames, *Maryoom123* (a nickname for the name Miryiam), *Nathyia_Waw* (a ‘wow’ female – the word ‘Nathyia’ in Kuwaiti chat room language has sexual implications), *Oo_il mamlouha_o0* (the pretty one). And for comparative purposes, during 2015, I used the same 3 nicknames with slight variations because the original nicknames were already taken. For the first period, I found that the nickname related to sexual orientation, *Nathyia_Waw*, was by far the most attractive nickname judging by the amount of male users that contacted me (as *Nathyia_Waw*) and initiated private one-to-one interaction. The nicknames, *Oo_il mamlouha_o0* and *Maryoom123* didn’t seem to attract much attention. These findings correspond directly to previous findings linked to the most popular female chat room nicknames (see Table 1.2, above).

For the second period (2015), I found there to be much less interactive interest by male users toward the 3 female nicknames used. Indeed, apart from the few times (specifically 4 times) that the nickname *Maryoom123* was contacted, there was hardly any contact worth noting for the other two nicknames. This may largely be linked to the decrease in male user presence in G rated chat rooms (as previously stated).

In the international chat room, the use of the 2 nicknames: *Superwoman_Sara* and *Sugar_N_Spice* were a different experience altogether. In fact, male users utilized these nicknames as communication starters. For example, they would initiate contact and would then begin by passing comments, such as: ‘Superwoman_Sara, can you fly?’ ‘Superwoman_Sara can I be your Superman?’ and ‘Sugar_N_spice and everything nice’ (an expression usually said together as an idiom). But in this case the nickname *Superwoman_Sara* attracted much more attention in the international chat room than *Sugar_N_Spice*, as one male user aptly put it:

‘A nickname like *Superwoman_Sara* is very attractive for two reasons, the word *superwoman* reflects a strong, confident female user who is aware of her positive qualities. But more importantly the fact that her real name is ‘Sara’ makes these qualities even more believable and thus more appealing to a male user. Bottom line, it’s a “hot” nickname!’

From this discussion on nicknames, one can conclude the following: it appears that, just as the types of building, landmarks, highways and roads create a city's landscape, the array of chosen nickname types seem to shape the landscape of a chat room at a given point in time. This virtual landscape is constructed by the dynamic nickname trends, which are directly linked to chat room users' goals. These goals are constantly re-assigned and are expressed using highly creative naming strategies.

WHAT ELSE IS IN A NICKNAME?

Another dimension to chat room landscapes is also determined by another obscure side to a nickname that is not quite as superficial as the meaning its owner intends it to project. In fact, a nickname may become a symbol of power. In this final section, I introduce the symbolic novelty that nicknames have acquired in the social network platform being examined. Many of the nicknames in the Kuwaiti chat rooms appear to have another dimension to them, a more commercial dimension. The commercial value of many nicknames comes in the form of nickname colouring – as opposed to plain black nicknames. Also, nicknames that appear in a different language, such as Arabic are considered unique – since most nicknames appear in Roman letters. Additionally, nicknames have added bits or components indicating chat room status. That is to say, if a user has an administrative role in the chat room, his/her nickname takes on the symbol '@', for example @Ahmed_the_Great. This symbol entitles its user to exercise administrative duties and be granted privileges, such as banning unruly behaviour in a chat room by 'bouncing' or expelling the troublemaking user outside the chat room. Exercising law and order in a chat room as such becomes a privilege experienced exclusively by this one user. Thus the symbol @, in a way, becomes a symbol of power.

In terms of adding colour (blue, green and purple) to a nickname, it is an option provided by the Chit-chat online networking service in return for a certain amount of money paid by the users who wish to have additional online privileges (e.g. unlimited access to all chat rooms in this social network service, including 'R' rated chat rooms, which allow pornography and profanity unlike 'G' rated rooms which do not, as well as unlimited and enhanced chat room audio and video access and services). As for Arabic script nicknames, very few users have been able to subscribe for these nicknames and I have only noted this type of nickname in the first period of chat room observation in 2009. According to the few users with Arabic nicknames I interviewed, subscribing for such nicknames is quite expensive and are therefore perceived by other users as financial status symbols.

These added adornments to a nickname therefore mean extra online privileges for its owner and inevitably add a commercial value to a nickname where by a plain black (coloured) nickname can no longer be perceived as equal to one that is blue and has the symbol '@' attached to it, for example. Indeed, then, a nickname may have the added dimension of conveying the user's financial status or even, as Bourdieu (1991) views it, it can gain symbolic power. By the same token, when a nickname possesses more than just the meaning that a user assigns to it (e.g. monetary value and power), it is transformed into more than a simple nickname. Users that I have interviewed pointed out to the numerous setbacks involved in being part of the 'nickname maintenance community', a community in itself within the chat room community.

Two male users and a female user I interviewed unanimously agreed that:

‘There’s constant peer pressure by other users pushing for nickname maintenance. This is usually masked behind encouragement to colour one’s nickname in order to conform to the chat room community’.

Below, is an example of an extract from chat room interaction between users demonstrating the importance of nickname colouring:

Example 1.1 (Text chat)

Muscular_Omar (m) Jasmine **congratulations on the painted nick**⁸ darling.

Il_Sultan@ (m) **Nice colour, congratulations.**

Jasmine_45 (f) Thank you all. I hope those of you **with black nicks will get their nicks painted** too one day.

Bronzya (f) **Congratulations, I’m hoping to get mine painted purple** soon too.

Another important setback to the commercial effect of nicknames according to interviewees is nickname theft. Incidents of theft occur often, especially when users share their password access code with others who then use this code either directly or indirectly (by passing it over to another user) to forcefully take a nickname from its rightful owner.

Moreover, a nickname’s commercial value also means that a nickname can be bought or sold akin to a commodity in a market. One of the male users I interviewed (Zaid), a member in Chit-chat for 10 years, informed me that he had three old nicknames which he no longer needed and therefore sold for around £3000 in all, because they were quite popular. And yet, the question that begs itself here is, why would a user want to buy someone else’s nickname and as a result also receive whatever identity characteristics or individual popularity that would – no doubt – come with the nickname. *Zaid* explained that some male users access chat rooms with hardly any confidence in terms of online, mixed-sex communication and therefore may never get noticed by the female users. These types of users need a popular nickname to help them get over the initial struggle of becoming popular in a chat room.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

A meaningful nickname is the first step that is most likely to prompt an exchange between a male and female user in a chat room. This suggests that an interesting or attractive female nickname could positively encourage a male user to approach the female user, and vice versa. In light of the examination of chat room nicknames during two different points in time and in two different socio-cultural online venues and based on interview feedback from chat room users it was revealed that nicknames do not simply represent a chosen online image or what Goffman’s (1959) considers to be a personal front. Indeed, the process of nickname selection is much deeper than choosing or constructing an online identity, as was widely believed. Although some users may strategically select a nickname that indicates someone with an attractive physical appearance or a humorous character, others, want to simply be more practical and project their ‘actual selves’ (Higgs 1987: 320-21). And why not; after all, they are going to turn on their cameras and reveal their physical “self”. As one male user stated: ‘I’d rather be “me” and use my name as a nickname (*Friendly_Faisal*), than call myself: *Muscle_Man*.’ And he added, ‘Perhaps a nickname can hide reality, but the camera never lies.’

Chat room nicknames seem to therefore gravitated away from constructing aspired physical and personality traits – a trend, which was common when chat rooms were the vogue in the early 90's computer-mediated communication – and more toward projecting genuine identities symbolized by one's real-life name as a nickname. In sum, the changeable nickname trends are what determine the popularity of certain nickname types. These types in turn, create the dynamic virtual landscape found in chat rooms from all around the online world.

This study, along with similar studies, proves that more research in computer-mediated communication is never enough. For one thing, the goings-on in virtual communities are often a reflection of, or a reaction to current trends and realities offline. For another, in this particular case, exploring online social media networks creates a convenient window into understanding Middle Eastern gender-segregated societies. However, it has to be added that appropriate resources have to be deployed when examining issues, such as gender and/or identity in virtual communities. In the case of the present study employing the help of a male fieldwork researcher would have meant involving more female interviews and thus objectifying the data further.

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Notes

¹ All chat room names and nicknames in the present study have been converted to pseudonyms to protect online communities and chat room users' privacies.

² It could be argued that focusing largely on female nicknames in the present study is subjective and therefore needs to be addressed in future research.

³ The shorter the nickname the easier it is to remember it.

⁴ Nicknames represented in coloured font as opposed to plain black ink.

⁵ The word "other" in Charts 1.1 and 1.2, refer to other categories of male and female nicknames that exist but that are not included in this study.

⁶ These chat room types were not examined here, as they do not fall within the scope of this study.

⁷ The combined percentage of male and female users that use real-life names as nicknames in Kuwaiti chat rooms in 2015 is 30.3%.

⁸ The word 'nick' is chat room lingo short for nickname.