

Two cultures, one room: investigating language and gender in Kuwait

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**Two cultures, one room:
Investigating language and gender in Kuwait**

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ABSTRACT

Kuwait is a gender-segregated country. Its conservative cultural ideology is evident in all areas of social life, including the way people communicate. Men and women have to make conscious language choices during everyday interaction. Certain aspects of Kuwaiti conversational registers are exclusive to either men or women, which reflects not only men's and women's separate socialization as children but also separate lifestyles as adults. Kuwait's gendered context is therefore bound to be unique and of particular sociolinguistic interest, especially since mainstream language and gender literature has more often focused on English-speaking cultures. Thus, there is little knowledge of Arab gender-segregated cultures and this could possibly be due to complications that the researcher inevitably encounters when examining a sensitive issue such as gender within these constraints. The present research study investigates mixed interaction between Kuwaiti men and women in online chat rooms. In this particular online context, chat room users employ interactional strategies to negotiate the norms of heterosexual interaction which are often non-existent in offline Kuwaiti society. A combined framework of sociolinguistic, ethnographic methods is adopted to examine chat room interactional choices that enable men and women to construct gendered chat room identities as well as create a virtual online community of practice without undermining offline gender norms.

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KEY TO TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS FOR EXAMPLES
TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH

1. (f) Female user.
2. (m) Male user.
3. (s) She-male (gay) user.
4. *Italics*: Mostly for Arabic expressions, Arabic transcription, and when one user mimics another's voice and style of speaking.
5. **Bold**: For user nicknames and for emphasis on certain words or expressions that are focused on in the analysis.
6. [] explanation of happenings that are heard but not spoken, e.g. laughter, spitting sound, and so on. Also to provide extra information that will aid in understanding, (e.g. who is addressing whom?)
7. [...] to indicate that parts of the current exchange have been left out.
8. What occurs between () indicates whether an exchange is spoken chat or written chat.
9. Line numbers facilitate references to specific lines in the examples being discussed in the analysis.
10. *He he he*, and *Lol* are expressions of laughter.

INTRODUCTION

Do men and women speak differently? Can they ever really communicate with one another? Since the early 1990s extensive research in the area of interactional sociolinguistics has repeatedly visited such questions (Tannen 1990, Coates 1993, Crawford 1995 and Cameron 1995). The fact that a given society is male-dominated and that it recognizes women as *powerless* may not necessarily mean there will be patterns of interaction that (exclusively) typify men and women. Similarly, being socialised into separate same-sex groups as children may not entail these groups being divided into two (male/female) sub-cultures as adults with different speech styles, or that this leads to misunderstandings during communication. In fact, the gendered meaning of a model of interaction is now often thought of as a matter of symbolism; as a construction or performance of a chosen identity demanded by a particular context of interaction (Butler 1990, Eckert 1989, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995, McElhenny 1995, Hall 1998 and Mandoza-Denton 2008). Similarly, the present study examines interaction that is designed by its participants to suit a particular context, one that is online.

Computer-mediated communication, and more specifically chat room interaction, is favoured by some men and women worldwide due to its non-physical (virtual) and anonymous nature. Furthermore, many participants in this medium exploit its anonymity to discursively de-emphasize the notion of gender. Women especially are among those who mask their gender identity in cyberspace contexts in order to avoid encountering male-related aggression or harassment (Hall 1994, Herring *et al.* 1995, and Herring 2003). However, this is not true of some computer-related contexts in which representations of gender are, in fact, intensified. The computer-mediated interaction that occurs in the Kuwaiti chat rooms under investigation in this research essentially relies on

the variable of gender. Male and female users get together in an online safe space to engage in mixed-sex interaction as a way of avoiding gender-segregated norms imposed by offline Kuwaiti society.

Research goals

The purpose of this study is to examine Kuwaiti chat room communities in a specific Internet social network site (which I name *Chit-chat*) in order to understand more about gendered (mixed-sex) interaction in a culture where men and women have separate socialization norms. To do so, I explore the salient interactional features employed by male and female users of Kuwaiti chat rooms which permit them to socialise and interact together while simultaneously establishing an online mixed-sex emergent culture. These chat room interactional features are: *ritual exchanges*, e.g., greetings and leave-takings; *formulaic expressions*, e.g., terms of endearments; *humorous chat* that comes in the form of joking, teasing, mockery and sarcasm; and, finally, chat room *user identity symbols*, e.g., nicknames. The reason I chose to examine these specific interactional features – as opposed to more traditional language and gender areas in chat room communication, such as topic selection and topic control (Herring 1993, 2003) or turn allocation (Panyametheekul and Herring 2006) – is firstly, because I wanted to focus on actual aspects of daily interaction between male and female users that promised to reveal the dynamics of mixed-sex communication in this online setting. And, secondly, it is specifically these interactional features that I found most salient, offering the possibility of being problematised and analysed by taking into consideration the medium of interaction, the Internet. Thirdly, I found that these interactional features might be more

easily seen in relation to norms of communication used in offline Kuwaiti society. Therefore, the interactional norms and social behaviours of this chat room culture are seen in view of the offline gender-segregated cultural background to which it belongs. I therefore emphasize the wider cultural context of the chat room community throughout this study because of the significant role it plays in chat room interaction. I also emphasize the community of practice framework within this study because the chat rooms being examined display characteristics of a community of practice, more about which will be said.

This study was inspired by a paucity of research into language and gender within Arab-speaking contexts. Firstly, most previous research tends to focus on English-speaking sociolinguistic settings, and gendered patterns of language use that occur in other cultures therefore still remain understudied. Secondly, very few recent studies have been carried out examining gendered discourse within communities of practice. Thirdly, only a few studies have explored language and gender in Arabic computer-mediated communication. Finally, to my knowledge, sociolinguistic studies, especially those that adopt a discourse analysis and/or ethnographic framework in examining language and gender in Arab cultures (specifically in the Gulf region), are almost non-existent. The present research may therefore provide useful insights into areas that seem to have been overlooked by language and gender researchers.

The present study therefore contributes to the sociolinguistic understanding of the effects of separate gender socialization and segregated gender norms on mixed-sex communication. It also demonstrates new cross-cultural awareness of popular beliefs about the language of men and women as well as the construction of gendered identities

in certain sociolinguistic contexts. Furthermore, this research contributes insights into gendered norms in computer-related communication. It also reveals conclusions about the relationship between online and offline interactional norms and cultural behaviours. And last, this study could be considered an example of how the community of practice can be employed as an approach to language and gender studies.

In line with the broad aims of the present study I will address the following research questions:

1. Are male and female users able to communicate successfully given their separate socialization and the Kuwaiti society's gender segregation norms?
2. How are representations of gender manifested through chat? Are these manifestations different from ones found in the offline world in Kuwait?
3. To what extent do chat room users construct social identities through chat in Kuwait?
4. To what extent does recent research in the fields of discourse analysis, communities of practice and ethnography shed light on chat room interaction in Kuwait?

Structure of the thesis

Chapter 1 outlines the socio-cultural background of the Kuwaiti society (1.1) and introduces Kuwait's sociolinguistic situation (1.2). This chapter provides the reader with the necessary information to facilitate the understanding of issues related to Kuwait, its culture, and language.

In Chapter 2, and more specifically, in the first part of this chapter, I discuss discourse and discourses (2.1), key issues that provide interpretations and the conceptual background that is needed as a basis of contextualising the linguistic practices that are examined in this study and their meanings. Additionally, some analytical approaches to discourse are outlined in section 2.2. These are: ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics, communities of practice, and critical discourse analysis. In the second part of this chapter, an overview of research developments in the study of language and gender is presented. These are: the deficit, dominance, and difference approaches, and the performance of gender. In the final part of this chapter, I present two important notions: gendered communities of practice and gendered discourse in context, both of which help situate language and gender in this study.

Chapter 3 describes the study site as well as the methodological frameworks utilized in data collection. In order to gain well-informed insights into chat room interaction, chat discourse is analysed and then correlated with feedback from chat room informants in a series of interviews. This data is then presented in light of the wider socio-cultural situation in Kuwait through confirmatory documentation from local newspaper and magazine articles. Most of the discourse analysis of the data in this research is qualitatively descriptive but is also complemented by some quantitative findings.

Chapter 4 examines key interactional strategies that are prevalent in chat room interaction and how they compare with similar strategies used in offline settings. The first part of this chapter highlights the functions of greetings and leave-takings (with greater emphasis on greetings) as important chat room formulaic expressions. The second part

illustrates instances of chat room rapport-building expressions – terms of endearments – which are frequently used between male and female chat room users. Endearments are among important chat room strategies especially when compared with their lack of presence in offline mixed-sex interaction.

Chapter 5 deals with another salient chat room interactional strategy, namely humour. Chat room users engage in different forms of humour as a way of addressing real social issues as well as expressing chat room conflict, and aggression. Three categories of humour (teasing mockery, adversarial mockery, and attack sarcasm) are discussed, and illustrations of these categories are analysed to demonstrate the different implications that humour evokes in chat room interaction and to explore whether a specific form of humour is favoured by male or female chat room users.

Chapter 6 explores the role of user nicknames in the construction of gendered chat room identities. Nicknames are categorised according to key characteristics. A small-scale nickname test was conducted to demonstrate the popularity of some of the characteristics that enable a nickname to stand out. A further function of nicknames is also discussed here, namely their importance as a commodity that is circulated among members of the chat room culture.

Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the wider cultural implications of chat room interaction by building on the analysis of interactional strategies outlined in previous chapters. Connections are made between these online cultural implications and those existing in the broader offline context (the Kuwaiti society). The interplay between the online and offline worlds is illustrated through instances of chat room norms of

interaction, as well as perceptions from chat room informants and information from documented resources in the print media.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND OF KUWAIT

1.1 The socio-cultural background of Kuwait

Kuwait is a small state of 17,818 square kilometres located at the far northwest point of the Persian Gulf (Arabian Gulf). It is bordered by two much larger neighbouring states, in the north by Iraq and in the south by Saudi Arabia. It has a hot, dry, desert climate, which has led its population, an estimated 2,505,559, to live in the coastal capital city of Kuwait (The World Fact Book, 2007). But the importance of present-day Kuwait is far greater than its population or size might suggest. Influenced by globalization, Kuwait is quite a modern country by Middle Eastern standards. It is one of the major oil-producing countries in the world, and since it has a relatively small population, Kuwaiti citizens enjoy one of the world's highest per capita incomes (Isiorho 2002: 11). Both wealth and modernization are visible in Kuwait's highly developed infrastructure, westernised shopping centres, coffee shops and restaurants, and its sizable foreign (non-national) community, estimated at 1,291,354 (i.e., half the population of Kuwait). Thus the non-nationals in Kuwait constitute 50 percent of the country's labour force. Kuwait's wealth is also visible through its well-established welfare system, which provides Kuwaiti citizens with subsidized housing, free education and healthcare as well as many other social services (Isiorho 2002: 73)

The history of Kuwait began in the mid 18th century with the arrival of members of the Utub clan from Saudi Arabia. The *Al-Sabah* family began its rule in the 1750s. In 1899 Kuwait became a British protectorate, although it was considered an independent country (Isiorho 2002: 29). During this pre-oil era (1750s–1930s), Kuwaiti people were

renowned for their modesty, hospitality and honesty; they were drawn together by an arid desert, and Kuwait's main source of livelihood was the sea (Abdulmouti 2004: 9–10). Kuwait relied mainly on the pearling industry as well as becoming a major boat-building centre. Furthermore, due to its location on the Persian Gulf, it became a major Middle Eastern trade centre, with ships carrying valuable goods from Persia, India and Africa (Crystal 1992: 32–3). Diving for pearls and sailing on trading journeys as far as India and Africa resulted in a large proportion of the adult male population in Kuwait being away from home for five and possibly six months (May–September) at a time during the year. Naturally, women and children – as well as some merchants who preferred local trading to enduring hardships at sea – were left behind for long periods of time (Abdulmouti 2004: 76–96).

The hardships of that period imposed gender segregation for extended stretches of time. And even when men and women were united after long seasonal voyages, living arrangements, both in houses in urban areas and in tents in the desert, were influenced by conservative Kuwaiti traditions and were therefore designed to separate the genders. This is especially evident by specifying a space in the majority of Kuwaiti households exclusively to men, namely the *dywaniya*, where men gather and discuss issues regarding politics or the economy of the country. (The presence of the *dywaniya* remains a vital part of Kuwaiti men's lifestyle even now (Almughni 2001: 15–16). Thus the population of that time was largely divided into two sub-cultures, male and female (a key point discussed frequently throughout this study). This gender segregation no doubt influenced men and women's interactional norms, which had certain features of register exclusive to men and others that were exclusive to women (see section 1.2). Evidence of this is found

throughout the four volumes of the well-known *Encyclopaedia of Kuwait* (Alsuwaidan 1993) in which many profanities (including hand gestures and curses), sounds expressing surprise and shock, and expressions of praise are referred to as terms exclusively uttered by women or ‘feminine expressions’.

During men’s absence, the role of women in society was confined to household and activities associated with the bearing and rearing of children. Women developed handiwork skills that centred around home and children, such as knitting, spinning wool and weaving (Alsuwaidan 1993). Alsuwaidan (1993) points out that until the late 1940s women were almost invisible in society. They were not allowed to attend school and were considered ‘like a piece of furniture in a household’. And when a man reached the age of marriage (from fifteen years onwards) he was encouraged to marry a woman who could ‘cook his meals, clean his clothes and serve him’ rather than a wife who would become his lifelong partner (Alsuwaidan 1993: 1474).

Until the early 1960s Kuwaiti society banned women from working in public institutions. Some feminists in Kuwait considered the segregation of genders and the professional constraints placed on women to be a means of excluding women and a form of social control over them (Almughni 2001: 145). Almughni (2010) points out that even when women had to carry out domestic work outside the house, such as buying the daily supply of food from the *sug* (market) or taking the family’s clothes to the beach to be washed, they were expected to ‘drape themselves in a long black cloak, known as the *abbaya*, and veil their faces with a thick black cloth, the *boshyia*’ (2001: 45–6). According to Almughni, this ‘respectable’ feature of female dress code was yet another form of gender segregation or female seclusion (2001: 46). Nonetheless, conservative

norms and traditions with regard to women were subject to significant changes due to urbanisation, modernisation and more specifically after the discovery of oil in Kuwait.

In 1936, oil was discovered in Kuwait and was commercially exported from 1946 onwards. Kuwait gained its independence from Great Britain in 1961 (Isiorho 2002: 111). In the early 1960s, due to Kuwait's dire need for employees, a number of women were allowed to work for governmental institutions (Alsuwaidan 1993: 1474). From that period onwards the role of women in Kuwaiti society changed significantly. Women held key positions including ambassadors, university rectors, ministers and business managers. In 2005 women were granted full political rights, and in 2009 four women were elected as the first female parliamentarians in Kuwait's history (Almughni 2010: 229). Almughni (2010) argues, however, that despite such significant developments, Kuwaiti women still face discrimination in many areas of life, the most recent of which was illustrated by the mounting pressure on female ministers and parliamentarians to wear the *hijab*¹ (2010: 224).

Recent circumstances and developments experienced by Kuwait have played a key role in changing the societal landscape of the country (see also discussion in Chapter 7, section 7.4). For example, in August 1990, Kuwait was invaded by its neighbouring country, Iraq, in what was referred to as the Gulf War, and was liberated by allied forces headed by the United States and Great Britain in January 1991 (Isiorho 2002: 89–99). During the Gulf War, large masses of the Kuwaiti population departed, travelling into neighbouring Gulf and Arab countries as well as to Europe and America. This meant that many Kuwaiti men and women were exposed to foreign cultures, which may be liberal in

¹ Hijab is a headscarf worn by women to show modesty in public settings.

comparison with the conservative culture of Kuwait of the time. Furthermore, after the Gulf War, Kuwait encountered international pressure to further democratize its political system, hence the decision to grant women equal political rights (Almughni 2001: 174). In addition to political reform, there was an easing of restrictions upon the media and thus there was freedom of expression in all aspects of media representations (Abdulla 2006: 792). This led to both conservative and more liberal points of view being represented openly and democratically.

In 1994 Kuwait was the first Arab country to provide public Internet access to its people (Abdulla 2006: 729). This enabled Kuwaiti men and women to enlarge their knowledge and exposure to foreign and western cultures and behavioural norms. The media and the Internet were key entry gates that influenced a cultural transformation in Kuwait. This exposure in turn raised social concerns that ‘new’, ‘imported’, ‘western’, and ‘negative’ social behaviours were brought into the country and were affecting its traditions – notably with regard to gender segregation – via media and other modern technologies such as the Internet (Al Wattan 2007: 2; also Wheeler 2001 and 2003).

Kuwaiti society today remains partly gender-segregated, especially in many of its institutional and public spaces, such as educational institutions, governmental offices, many of its recreational places and public transportation, such as buses, where special seating is allocated for women, and taxi services that cater exclusively for female commuters. Until recently (2008) the gender segregation law linked to post-secondary private educational institutions was revised and private British and American universities were being pressured to follow Kuwait University’s example in its implementation of a gender segregation policy in 2001 (Almughni 2010: 235–6). Despite student disapproval,

Kuwait University is now also intending to implement a Sharia-compliant dress code on male and female students, forbidding them to dress immodestly at university (Alqatari 2010b: 9). And yet for Kuwaiti women, regardless of whether they have been educated in segregated contexts or not², access to education enabled them to become financially independent as well as to gain more dominant positions politically and socially, despite prevalent male hegemonies.

It is important to point out that the concept of gender segregation has not originated from a religious perspective, since men and women are united in Mecca when they go on pilgrimage. Gender segregation in Kuwait is in fact strongly linked to conservative nature of the Kuwaiti culture – in which the protection of women and their reputation is paramount. However, it is also necessary to point out that during the last decade with social changes arising from globalisation, many international coffee shops, restaurants, and hotels are not restricted by Kuwaiti gender segregation norms, and yet many Kuwaiti men and women remain apprehensive of being seen mixing with the opposite sex. With this socio-cultural overview, which explains men's and women's positions in society, and how and why they are socialized in segregated contexts, we turn to providing a background on language and gender in Kuwait.

² Public schools in Kuwait of all educational levels are gender-segregated while private English and American schools are mixed.

1.2 A view of language and gender in Kuwait

In western societies, boys and girls are socialized into separate sub-cultures or peer groups, however, unlike the West, boys and girls in Kuwait grow up to become men and women in gender-segregated environments for a lengthy period of their adulthood.

As mentioned earlier (section 1.1), gender segregation is implicit in every aspect of society in Kuwait. It is imposed on educational institutions (e.g., schools and university) and public spaces (e.g., mosques, many health clubs, all beauty salons, numerous restaurants and coffee shops). It is even embedded in the family (e.g., husband and wife usually have separate lifestyles³) as well as in the neighbourhood (e.g., girls are not allowed to venture into the streets and play with boys). And while many workplaces are mixed (e.g., banks, many ministries and petrol companies), interaction between male and female work colleagues is expected to be formal and preferably kept to a minimum. Occasionally, those who do engage in friendly banter with the opposite sex are labelled as ‘loose’ in the case of women, and ‘flirtatious’ in the case of men (Naidoo 2008: 5). Working at Kuwait University for over a decade, I was constantly aware of “watchful eyes” when interacting with Kuwaiti male colleagues. Conversing with other nationals did not appear as bad, since a Kuwaiti woman would not dare get involved romantically with an Arab national or a Westerner. Even in the (mixed) foreign private universities that have emerged in the last decade in Kuwait there has been constant pressure to implement gender segregation (also noted in Chapter 7).

Based on gender segregation norms, there is a stark division of space into “private” and “public” spheres. The private sphere does not imply the household

³ Often, the husband and wife in Kuwaiti families spend most of their leisure time separately.

parameters of family life, but rather spaces that are hidden from society's public eyes where it is easier to cross gender-mixing boundaries (see Cartoons 1.1 – 1.5). Good examples of such spaces in Kuwait are remote places, such as some coffee shops, restaurants and recreational places, as well as the much frowned-upon bachelor apartments. These private spaces are not frequented by the public and therefore give some men and women the opportunity to meet and mingle without the risk of being seen or criticised for defying social norms and traditions. A decade ago many public places, such as malls and restaurants, did not allow single men who are unaccompanied by their families to enter. Although this has changed nowadays, as many malls are not segregated anymore, gender segregation norms are embedded in society. For example, in public, eye contact between a man and a woman is possible but verbal interaction is not, as there is a constant risk – especially in the case of the women – to be seen by a relative (a cousin, an uncle, or a brother), and since the Kuwaiti society is relatively small and families usually know one another, they (families) are protective of their reputation. The cartoons below illustrate the double life that numerous people lead in terms of this Kuwaiti public/private social dichotomy (also see Chapter 7). It is important to note that family-life as shown in cartoons 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4 is considered in this specific context as a representation of public space because it abides with public societal expectations of how the relationship between husband and wife should be, namely traditional.



Cartoon 1.2



Cartoon 1.1



Cartoon 1.4



Cartoon 1.3



Cartoon 1.5

Cartoon 1.1: Wife: 'Do you know what's today dear?'

Husband: 'Thursday, it used to be a weekend day, now it's a boring Work-day.'

Cartoon 1.2: Wife: 'But what's going to happen today?'

Husband: 'What else! The parliament is going to discuss inflation, which has starved us poor citizens.'

Cartoon 1.3: Wife: 'Why don't you seem to remember that today is the 14th of Feb.'

Husband: 'Oh! You had to remind me of the day my aunt passed away!'

Cartoon 1.4: Wife: 'Hmmm! It doesn't look like you've ever heard of Valentine's!'

Husband: 'What's that you're mumbling about?! I can't hear you.'

Cartoon 1.5: Husband A (to the right) tells girlfriend: 'This is to celebrate our love.'

Husband B (to the left) tells girlfriend: 'Happy St. Valentine's my love.'

Cartoons 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 represent an example of public versus private life in Kuwaiti society (source: Al Wattan 2008:7).

Accordingly, one is led to ask whether this strict gender divide means that men and women bring their own assumptions and rules of communication and apply them whenever they are involved in mixed-sex interaction. Would we therefore expect miscommunication to occur because men and women do not understand each other's intentions? And is miscommunication between husband and wife to be blamed for the staggering divorce rates in Kuwait⁴ (Alsaleh 2009)? Additionally, do men and women actually have different speech styles owing to a separate socialization into two sub-cultures?

In fact, the sociolinguistic situation in Kuwait is quite unlike any of the mainstream settings that I have read about in the language and gender literature. As mentioned earlier in section 1.1, the Kuwaiti dialect has numerous gender-exclusive forms; for example, women in Kuwait use frequent "response cries" during mixed- or same-sex interaction (cf. Goffman 1981), which may depict them as being sensitive and emotional (e.g., *wee*, *waay*, *haaw*: all of which mean 'oh!' and express shock and surprise). Men also employ response cries, however, these cries sound much harsher phonetically and are used relatively less frequently (e.g., *ouff*, *ookh*, *affaa*: all of which also mean 'oh!' and again are used to express surprise, shock and disappointment). Undoubtedly, women know men's response cries as their brothers and fathers will have uttered them at home and the same applies to women's response cries being known to men. Additionally, the role of the media is significant in presenting stereotypical Kuwaiti male and female speech styles. Many Kuwaiti soap operas deal with real social issues

⁴ According to *The Kuwait Times*, a report from the Ministry of Planning concerning divorce rates in Kuwait revealed that these rates have increased by up to 187 percent during the last 23 years. The report stressed that in 1982 there were only 994 divorce cases, while in 2005 there were 2,860 cases per year (2007).

experienced in society and are usually enacted by stereotypical representations (including using gender exclusive language) of Kuwaiti men and women as they commonly appear in society. Therefore, such gendered response cries are understood, appropriately implemented and never transgressed. As small in significance as these monosyllabic cries may appear, they are among the key linguistic units that are exaggeratingly employed by gay men and lesbian women in Kuwait due to their gender-exclusive nature. This highlights their importance in daily interaction.

Other examples of language differences found between Kuwaiti men and women are clear in the way they swear. Women use curses that involve bodily ailments and death or doom (e.g., *ya mal il mahhi*, 'wishing the cursed person to be erased from the world'), whereas men's swearing is often directed towards one's loss of fortunes (*la barak allah feek*, 'wishing the cursed person to be deprived of God's blessings'). Men and women also use different greeting and leave-taking expressions (e.g., *fi aman illah*, 'be protected by God's safety', is a leave-taking expression used exclusively by men.)

Additionally, in Kuwait, men have a set of specific greeting rituals including those that they have to adhere to at all-male gatherings. These are different than greeting rituals followed at all-female gatherings. It is common for men to shake hands and kiss each other on the head or shoulder especially when greeting an older or influential person (such as a member of the royal family or the head of a tribe). On the other hand, among equals men often kiss one another on the cheeks or the nose⁵. Women, however, do not have such distinct rituals of greetings and they simply limit themselves to greeting one another with kisses on the cheeks.

⁵ Nose greetings are common practice in Kuwait but only among men (Naidoo 2008:5).

The sociolinguistic situation is complicated even further since the binary gender divide in Kuwait is not only manifested through language but also in other ways such as in dress styles. For example, men traditionally wear ‘white’ robes (*dishdashas*), while women cover themselves up with ‘black’ cloaks (*abbayas*). Thus dress style alone reveals gender values that are explicitly and rigidly codified as ‘black’ and ‘white’. But one cannot assume that the colour white is a sign of power or strength simply because men wear white, although, in the case of women, black is intentionally worn because it is intended to divert men’s eyes away from their (women’s) presence.

Interestingly, with so many restriction involved in gender norms, the phenomenon of flirting⁶ with members of the opposite sex is so prevalent in public spaces it is considered one of the typical male-oriented customs in Kuwait, albeit one that is frowned upon (‘flirting’ is a frequent topic in Kuwait’s local newspapers and magazines: Mohamed 2008: 12, Kazak 2010: 6, Jannat 2008: 24–5, Yulick 2008: 7, Khraiche 2008: 9; also see Chapter 7, section 7.2.1 for a discussion on flirting). Thus the gender order in Kuwait is complex and multi-faceted and numerous considerations need to be kept in mind when looking at gendered discourse.

The social change currently taking place in Kuwaiti society complicates matters even more (Jannat 2008: 24–5; see discussion on social change in Chapter 7). The expansion of the media has played an influential role in modernizing and westernizing Kuwait, which in turn led to the development of non-traditional practices⁷ and eventually

⁶ Flirting in Kuwait is a rather common male social behaviour. I have grown up believing that this male behaviour is quite normal and inevitable.

⁷ Many of the non-traditional practices in Kuwait have been imported from the West, such as celebrating New Year’s Eve, Christmas, St. Valentines and Halloween. Such celebrations (especially St. Valentines) are prime opportunities for men and women to perform gendered identity-related behaviour, usually in

the transformation of the established gender order in the society. Naturally, social structures and institutions that shape gender practices are thus confronted with paradoxes both local and imported that challenge norms and traditions threatening both the Kuwaiti heritage as well as the strict patriarchal ideologies.

This is seen explicitly in terms of dress code, where men and women, once indexed in white and black respectively, are at present both united by the 'blue jeans'. Furthermore, men and women are united in Kuwait's numerous Starbucks coffee shops (Alqatari 2008c: 4). The scene in coffee shops is quite unusual; people go to socialize with same-sex friends. And although seating arrangements are often segregated by choice, the atmosphere is clearly heterosexual in nature. While men and women do not mingle or engage in mixed conversation together, silent communication takes place through gaze or eye contact, body language, voice and laughter loudness and even via dress styles. In other words, coffee shops are meeting places, and by being part of the coffee shop culture, one can easily find out where and when to locate particular social groups on a given day. Hence, coffee shops provide opportunities for people to mingle, albeit at a distance and non-verbally. The coffee shop environments that are currently on the increase give a stark indication that the once strict gender segregation norms in Kuwait could be changing.

Institutional settings, such as governmental Arabic schools as well as Kuwait University, however, have remained strictly gender-segregated and this has led to additional gender-linked behaviour. When I attended a governmental Arabic school at the

'underground' parties in Kuwait (Alqatari 2008a: 5, Alyan 2008: 3). Governmental institutions exert great efforts to curb such celebrations, primarily through banning commercial celebratory goods from being sold in local markets (Garcia 2009: 7).

age of thirteen (1981–5) after being transferred from a (coeducational) British private school, I was constantly aware of lesbian behaviours among schoolgirls. Homosexual tendencies have now become a prevalent phenomenon in both girls' and boys' high schools (Sabri 2008: 18). Social institutions currently struggle to banish homosexual behaviour, without questioning that these behaviours are perhaps a by-product of gender segregation that is gaining momentum in certain settings in Kuwait, especially in educational institutions (Bari 2010: 4). My understanding of such phenomena centres upon the idea that boys and girls seem to want to emulate heterosexual behaviour but since that is banned, they create same-sex relationships and dating rituals similar to those in heterosexual environments. As a result, high school students construct different or multiple femininities and masculinities within the school context.

Constructing gender multiplicity is nowadays quite common especially in public spheres in Kuwaiti society. This is because gender is closely related to other social factors such as identity, religion and social status. For example, a woman can be of religious and traditional background and display this outwardly in Islamic modest clothing, behaviour and speech, while hiding sexually promiscuous tendencies and behaviours that may be expressed or exercised discreetly depending on the context and its audience (author unidentified 2008: 9).

Although aspects of social change and westernization have become part of men's and women's lives, many Kuwaitis still find it difficult to adapt to this change readily. This is why some men and women (about 10–12 percent of the population) find a safe haven in Kuwaiti, mixed-sex chat rooms on the Internet where they can experiment engaging in mixed-sex interaction without any negative repercussions (Wheeler 2001).

CHAPTER 2

DISCOURSE AND GENDER

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the literature that forms the theoretical and analytical basis for this study. It is divided into two parts: a discussion of the notion of “discourse” and a consideration of theoretical views on language and gender. In the first part, I discuss various definitions of discourse and the meaning of discourses and types of discourse (section 2.1). I then outline some analytical approaches to the study of discourse relevant to this research, namely: ethnography of communication (2.2.1), interactional sociolinguistics (2.2.2), communities of practice (2.2.3), and critical discourse analysis (2.2.4). In the second part (2.4), I review contributions from language and gender research that have directly influenced the present study and I discuss how theories, methods, and concepts from the literature have been employed in this research. I begin my discussion of language and gender with an historical account, introducing the different paradigms that have evolved over the past four decades. This historical perspective provides the sociolinguistic and ethnographic contexts within which the present study is situated. I start by presenting early (binary) essentialist approaches (the “deficit” and “dominance” frameworks) to language and gender studies (2.4.1.1) followed by the “cultural/difference” framework (2.4.1.2), which despite providing a more evolved perception of gendered discourse, still perceives gender from a binary or polarised (male/female) perspective. I then present social constructionist approaches that embrace both linguistic manifestations of the construction or “performance” of gendered identity in more contextualized settings such as “communities of practice” (2.4.1.3 and

2.4.2.1). Finally, I highlight the importance of considering context when examining interaction (2.4.2.2), and conclude with a summary of the literature's relevance to the research.

2.1 Discourse and discourses

The term “discourse” integrates various theoretical meanings depending on the subject area it is used in. For example, linguists who are engaged in discourse analysis or pragmatics use “discourse” to mean language use or, more specifically, language interaction in specific social contexts. For linguists who are concerned with morphology or phonology, the term “discourse” implies stretches of spoken or written language longer than a sentence (Wodak 1997: 4). Other ways of using the term are to refer to: ‘samples of spoken dialogue, in contrast with written texts’; ‘spoken and written language’; ‘situational context of language use’; ‘interaction between reader/writer and text’; and ‘a notion of genre (for example, newspaper discourse’ (Fairclough, 1992: 3).

Fairclough himself (1992), who has been influenced strongly by post-structuralist philosopher Foucault, views discourse as a form of action or social practice whilst also considering it as extended samples of either spoken or written language (1992: 3). Drawing from Foucault, Fairclough points to the importance of discourse in structuring knowledge and social practice by highlighting the constitutive effect of discourse on meaning-making. Not only does discourse reflect social realities, but it also constructs or shapes social realities and relations, or, to use Cameron's words ‘reality is “discursively constructed”’ (Cameron 2001: 15, emphasis in original). Additionally, based on Schiffrin's (1987) seminal work, discourse comprises three primary properties. It ‘forms

structure’, ‘conveys meaning’, and ‘accomplishes actions’ (1987: 6). The definition of discourse I use in the present study is based on Fairclough’s and Schiffrin’s assumptions and is best articulated in Gee’s (2005a) definition, which states that discourses⁸:

Crucially involve (a) situated identities; (b) ways of performing and recognizing characteristic identities and activities; (c) ways of coordinating and getting coordinated by other people, things, tools, technologies, symbol systems, places, and times; (d) characteristic ways of acting-interacting-feeling-emoting-valuing-gesturing-posturing-dressing-thinking-believing-knowing-speaking-listening (Gee 2005a: 33).

Mills (1997) also draws upon Foucault’s concept of discourse, particularly the aspect in which he identifies discourse as ‘groups of utterances which seem to be regulated in some way and which seem to have a coherence and a force to them in common’ (1997: 7). For example, one might refer to certain types of discourse such as the prevalent discourse of femininity, which often projects women as ‘nurturant, close to nature, emotional, negatively affected by their hormones, empathic, and vulnerable’ (Burr, 2003: 75). But for types of discourse to be understood as such their interpretation relies on contextual information and real-world knowledge (Mills, 1997: 7), a point relevant to this thesis.

⁸ Note that Gee (2005) is using the term discourses here in the plural to mean “discourse” with a big “D”. He defines discourse with a capital “D” as ‘ways with words, actions, beliefs, emotions, values, interactions, people, objects, tools and technologies’, which is explained elaborately in his definition of discourses (2005: 23 and 33).

Some linguists also differentiate “discourse” from “discourses”, as Gee (2005a) does above, to help isolate their functions. Fairclough (2003) argues that “discourses” reflect differing associations people have with the world based on their own positions in the world, their social identities, and their relationships with other people. Thus, according to Fairclough, ‘Discourses constitute part of the resources which people deploy in relating to one another – keeping separate from one another, cooperating, competing, dominating – and in seeking to change the ways in which they relate to one another’ (2003: 124). I use the term “discourses” for my present research to highlight the specificity of function, and “discourse” more generically in terms of interactions situated within social contexts.

Considering discourse as a form of action or social practice has various implications. In structuring knowledge and social practice, discourse of all types enables people to enact identity (De Fina *et al.* 2006), accomplish interaction tasks (Gumperz, 1982), establish cultural norms and practices (Duranti 2001), and exercise social control (Cameron, 2001: 16). This view of discourse suggests that it has communicative functions, and that it is socially and culturally structured to meet certain ends. It also suggests that these communicative functions are not linked to language alone but also include other goals (Schiffrin 1994: 31-2).

Burr (2003) points to the pivotal relationship between our knowledge and understanding of the world, the effect of that on our social practices, and how representations of power are enacted through discourse (2003: 67). Mills notes that from a feminist analytical point-of-view, various discursive and institutional structures subjugate women and as a result language show how women either resist or comply with

that (1997: 94). Sunderland (2004) makes a similar point: ‘Given a measure of *agency*, an individual can *negotiate* and *contest* what she hears and reads and can potentially *resist* discursal subject positioning and construction’ (2004: 22, emphasis in original). For example, interpreting a man’s interruptions during conversation as normal, assertive, masculine behaviour, and a woman’s interruptions as aggressive and unfeminine, depends not only on the social context in which interaction takes place, but also on ‘ideology’⁹ and the nature of gender power relations’ (Graddol and Swann 1989: 160). According to Graddol and Swann (1989):

If women are oppressed in any way by language it is not the language structure which can be held responsible but rather specific discourse which necessarily imply particular power relations and particular ideologies (Graddol and Swann 1989: 161).

Discourses therefore influence and are influenced by institutional and social practices, which affect the way we interpret events around us in daily life (Burr, 2003: 75).

The study of discourse, as well as the study of gender, also relies on notions of “performance” and “construction”. “Performance” refers to the ‘situated use of language’ or how people actively perform certain acts through language in order to achieve the desired effects (Burr, 2003: 57). Its study is supported by frameworks such as social constructionism, which explore concepts such as gender “construction” and

⁹ Ideology in the present study will be used to refer to the ‘ways in which a person’s beliefs, opinions and value-system intersect with the broader social and political structures of the society in which they live’ (Simpson and Mayr 2009: 4).

“performance” (Sunderland 2004: 23). Social constructionism, based on theoretical grounds, questions our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and interactions between people (Burr, 2003: 21), and ‘acknowledges the constructive power of language’ (Burr, 2003: 22). Drawing from Austin’s (1962) notion of performative utterances, Sunderland and Litosseliti point to the ability of gender to be performed through language (2008: 4-5). Additionally, the fact that discursive performance is often self-conscious and deliberate means that a significant degree of agency and creativity is exercised by language users (Wodak, 1997: 30, also see Judith Butler’s 1990 influential perspective on “performativity”, discussed further in section 2.4.1.3). The notion of performance is especially pertinent in the present study as will be in evidence throughout the data analysis and discussion. But first I will establish what analytical frameworks allow a focus on both linguistic analysis and the social structuring of discourse as a social practice.

2.2 Analytical approaches to discourse

In this section, I outline four analytical approaches to the analysis of discourse. In 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, I discuss “ethnography of communication” and “interactional sociolinguistics”, which form the bases of data collection and analysis in the present study (see Chapter 3 for details on methodological approaches). I then discuss “communities of practice” (2.2.3) as an analytical framework that has enabled me to demonstrate the scope within which the participants in the present study and their interactional engagements are seen. Finally, I briefly address the “critical discourse analysis” (CDA) approach (2.2.4), since

numerous aspects of the data analysis and discussion of this study are influenced by interpretations from critical discourse analysis although are not directly ascribed to it.

2.2.1 Ethnography of communication

The ethnography of communication is an approach to the study of language and community that uses a systematic method to analyze communicative patterns and context dynamics (Schiffrin, 1994: 145). Through its main methodological tools, participant observation and interviews, the ethnography of communication approach as developed by Hymes (1972) focuses on the different levels of social and cultural organization behind the structures and functions of everyday talk (Schiffrin, 1994: 142; also see Rampton *et al.* 2004). Hymes establishes a heuristic explanatory framework to analyse speech events through what he refers to as the SPEAKING grid¹⁰ (1972: 36-65), which facilitates the systemic organization of the analyst's observations (Cameron 2001: 56-7). In other words, the ethnography of communication interprets talk based on the relationship between 'utterances and their contexts' by organizing these relationships into communicative units, such as speech acts, speech events, and speech situations (Hymes 1972: 59-65). This comprehensive analytical approach prevents utterances from being isolated or separated from surrounding socio-cultural norms and beliefs of a community's ways of speaking which are important to meaning-making (Schiffrin 1994: 145). For example, when analysing the interaction of a family at dinnertime, the analyst may consider it a speech situation, but a closer look demonstrates that the family members

¹⁰ The SPEAKING grid allows the analyst to focus on different elements of the communicative exchange – setting, participants, ends or goals, act sequence of the interaction, key or tone, instrumentality or mode of delivery, norms within the community, genres that are culturally relevant (Hymes, 1972: 36-65).

engage in more than simply talking to one another. They engage in group-salient activities such as drinking, eating, serving food, making eye contact, nudging others under the table and so on, all of which are conditioned by the family's communicative repertoire.

Although quite useful as a methodological tool and the core of ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation comes with caveats. Firstly, there is the potential risk of the researcher becoming too involved with the culture under study or what is referred to as 'going native' (Bryman 2008: 405). Secondly, the researcher may inevitably take certain social practices and behaviours for granted, especially if he or she is an insider to the culture under study (Saville-Troike 2003: 88-91). In the case of my study, confirmatory interviews with participants provided the advantage of important feedback (2003: 99-103), which I discuss in Chapter 3.

Participant interviewing, another important ethnographic method of inquiry, has the advantage of drawing attention to the participants' communication and cultural repertoires and their own perceptions of how to make sense of discourse practices and behaviours. But like participant observation, interviews are not without drawbacks, some of which I have encountered during the present study, as will be noted in Chapter 3. Antaki *et al.* (2003) warn analysts of the risk of taking positions during interviews, such as showing sympathy or over-enthusiasm with regard to certain issues, which could influence interviewee responses. Furthermore, ethical issues have to be taken into account, and interviewees may not be willing to let their voices be recorded. This has been the case in the present study, and extensive and systematic notes were therefore made after each interview. (Details on ethics protocols in Chapter 3.)

According to Schiffrin (1994: 143), because ethnography of communication places important attention on “culture” and because culture ‘embraces a totality of knowledge and practices’, this approach is quite integrative when compared to other approaches to discourse, such as ‘conversational analysis’, ‘pragmatics’, ‘speech act theory’, ‘CDA’, and so on. Research within an ethnography of communication framework can therefore be complemented with other analytical approaches, for example, interactional sociolinguistics, to form a broader framework of inquiry. In fact, for the present study, I integrate both ethnography of communication and interactional sociolinguistics as analytical approaches.

Ethnography of communication establishes the foundational theoretical and methodological bases for what in the US is known as linguistic anthropology and in the UK is known as linguistic ethnography (or ethnolinguistics). While there are culturally instantiated differences in priorities in US linguistic anthropology and UK ethnolinguistics, the rationales are the same and motivated by contemporary concerns, as they were for Hymes and Gumperz in the 1960s. The two main components, ethnography and linguistics – ethnography, which ‘provides linguistics with a close reading of context not necessarily represented in some kinds of interactional analysis’ and linguistics, which ‘provides an authoritative analysis of language use not typically available through participant observation and the taking of field notes’ – are accounted for in the ethnography of communication (Creese 2010: 139; also see Rampton *et al.* 2004: 6-7).

2.2.2 Interactional sociolinguistics

Interactional sociolinguistics is an approach that is concerned with differences in language use (be it in vocabulary, pronunciation, turn-taking conventions, prosodic features, and so on) that are influenced by social and cultural differences between people as well as language variables that are used differently in different contexts (Cameron, 2001: 106-7). Key initiators of this approach are Goffman (1981) and Gumperz (1982). Goffman observes that when language is situated in specific circumstances in social life it affects the meaning and structure of language in these circumstances (Schiffrin, 1994: 99-104). And Gumperz argues that people with shared grammatical knowledge produce and interpret messages differently when they contextualise interaction differently. I will now discuss concepts and methods used in interactional sociolinguistics, which are complemented by sociological contributions from Goffman and anthropological contributions from Gumperz (Schiffrin, 1994: 99-104).

Goffman's work focuses on describing the structure of face-to-face interaction and showing how that structure is part of daily interactive tasks in life. Goffman (1967 and 1981) developed a number of notions that aim to describe and understand interaction while also showing the way in which the physical requirements and constraints of interactional settings influenced people's interaction (see Lemert and Branaman 1997: x1vi-1xxxii).

Like Hymes (discussed earlier in section 2.2.1), Goffman focuses on the properties of speech in terms of "social situations" (the environment in which talk occurs), "encounters" (the social engagements between participants), and "utterances" (including linguistic and extra-linguistic acts) (Goffman in Lemert and Branaman 1997:

230-2). Additionally, he proposes a framework of participation (or participant involvement) during talk, which he refers to as “footing” and which according to him accounts for ‘changes in alignment we take up to ourselves and others’ (Goffman, 1981: 128). Goffman argues that changes in speaker alignment during interaction is indexed through various linguistic and non-linguistic signalling devices (akin to Gumperz’s “contextualization cues”, mentioned below) (1981: 127-8). These concepts will be elaborated on in relation to the data in subsequent chapters.

One of Goffman’s (1967) key notions concerns the “self”, a (social and interactive) public construction which he relates to the concept of “face”, the positive social value of one’s self worth as seen by others during interaction. Maintaining one’s face is necessary in social interaction as it reinforces ‘the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken’ (Goffman 1967: 5). Additionally, Goffman believes that the self is constituted by a social system; it is not ‘a property of the persons to whom it is attributed, but dwells rather in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him’ (Goffman 1961: 168). He provides a range of system requirements for interactions that involve “self” and “face” – for example, “response signals” that tell the speaker that he or she has been understood by the hearer (Goffman 1981: 19-20). Another of Goffman’s key theoretical ideas with regard to social interaction and experiences is his concept of “frame”, which involves principles of organization that define the meaning and significance of social situations (Lemert and Branaman, 1997: x1vi). He argues that ‘different orders of interaction, different interaction games, are simultaneously in progress, each involving a different amalgam of linguistic and non-linguistic doings, and

yet the same stretch of words must serve' (1981: 60). Goffman's concepts of form, footing, and frame in interpersonal contexts enable people to identify the contextual presuppositions necessary to make inferences about meaning (Schiffrin 1994: 105). These concepts are complemented by Gumperz's notion of contextual presuppositions that are necessary for decoding emergent meaning in interaction, relevant to what I discuss below.

Gumperz (1982) was concerned with looking at the sociolinguistics of interpersonal communication. He views language as a 'socially and culturally constructed symbol system' that is used by social group members (Schiffrin 1994: 102). The way language is used allows us to understand social meanings on a broad (macro) level, such as group identity and differences in status, and on a more local (micro) level, speech practices and behaviours in particular interaction situations. In other words, the language that speakers use enables them to acknowledge their group-based identity as well as who they are and what message they want to convey through producing and providing continual language signals (Gumperz 1982: 154-6; the present study provides numerous examples substantiating this point). Producing and understanding these signals or "contextualization cues"¹¹, which are influenced by local contexts, is what Gumperz refers to as "speaker and hearer communicative competence" (Gumperz 1982: 131-2 and 154-6, also see Schiffrin 1994: 98-102). Furthermore, he refers to speaking as a reflexive process, in that everything said is viewed as 'either directly reacting to preceding talk,

¹¹ Some examples of contextualization cues are use of prosodic features and vowel lengthening as meaningful interactional strategies (Gumperz 1982: 131).

reflecting a set of immediate circumstances, or responding to past events, whether directly experienced or indirectly transmitted' (Gumperz 2001: 221).

2.2.3 Communities of practice

The community of practice framework is an ethnographic, activity-based approach mainly concerned with what members in a group do and the practices that determine their sense of belonging to the group (Bucholtz 1999: 204). The notion of communities of practice was originally considered within an educational context as a social process which occurs when a group has a common interest, and whose members learn jointly to achieve joint outcomes (Lave and Wenger 1991: 49-50). The framework was later developed to suit investigations in sociolinguistic settings by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464). In the sociolinguistic context, the community of practice is defined as:

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour. As a social construct, a community of practice is different from the traditional [speech] community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464).

After slight modification to the original 1991 research by Lave and Wenger, Wenger (1998) proposed that the community of practice has an identity and collective common

interests that in turn establish a commitment by its members. Wenger adds that it is the importance of learning from a shared practice that helps constitute the community and reinforce membership in that community. He also points out that the idea of “practice” encompasses more than simply *doing*. It includes both what is said explicitly and what is tacit (unsaid or assumed) and is therefore given meaning in the historical and social context where the doing occurs. Therefore, sustaining membership in the community occurs through this “doing” in which individuals negotiate local meanings with one another alongside the management of their identities (Wenger 1998: 7-8). Wenger outlines three definitive features of communities of practice: (a) mutual engagement; (b) a joint enterprise; and (c) a shared repertoire – all of which hinge on the concept of learning through practice (1998: 73). This mutual engagement does not mean agreement along all levels and therefore conflict (and hence heterogeneity) is accepted, negotiated, and can prove to be a productive aspect of the enterprise (1998: 78). Furthermore, the community of practice recognizes the participation of both peripheral (newcomers) and core members within a group, which adds to the diversity of a community’s social order (1998: 100-1, also see Lave and Wenger 1991: 37).

The community of practice framework and its various concepts with regard to shared practices and linguistic repertoire, its focus on individuals and groups, and its concern with the negotiation of social identities through practice, make it a useful research tool in sociolinguistic contexts such as the one examined in the present study. In comparing the community of practice framework with alternative methodological tools, one finds that the community of practice framework rethinks previous notions of gender, identity and community – all elements with which this study is concerned. Eckert and

McConnell-Ginet (1992) suggest adopting a community of practice framework in gender studies, since it gives precedence to numerous analytical aspects that are downplayed or neglected by other approaches. Unlike the speech community framework, for example, the community of practice approach recognizes actual social practices that are dynamic and fluid in interaction between people and hence are not constrained by fixed linguistic categories. The community of practice model also looks at the marginal members of a community rarely analysed within the speech community approach. As such, the community of practice framework considers both shared sociolinguistic norms and non-normative practices or differences in the discourse of certain individuals among a single group (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 470–74).

Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999) observe that the concept of communities of practice successfully links micro-level and macro-level analyses. The micro-level analysis refers to the ‘detailed ethnographic analysis of discourse in context – to identify significant or representative social interactions, to characterize the process of negotiating shared goals, and to describe the practices that the process of negotiating the community of practice’ (1999: 181). The macro-level analysis involves examining the characteristics and discourse features of the communities of practice in light of a broader context, thus giving it ‘meaning and distinctiveness’ (1999: 181). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 2003 and Bucholtz 1999 are good examples of how the community of practice model is adopted as an analytical approach in examining social identity among high school students. (For more recent research undertaken in communities of practice, see Moore 2006 and Gimenez 2007).

However, the analytical aspect of the community of practice has come under criticism as some researchers argue that many of its notions are vague. Some of the criticism includes the following: the community of practice approach lacks clear structural hierarchy, its membership legitimacy is claimed to create inequalities between members in a community, and its criteria of engagement within communities are not accurately defined (Meyerhoff 1999, and Davies 2005). Meyerhoff (1999) calls for a stringent definition of the community of practice model since that will allow for a more accurate understanding of whether Wenger's three criterial characteristics (mentioned above: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire) 'are important factors in determining the vectors along which linguistic change spreads through the larger speech community' (1999: 236). In her study on the use of 'sorry' by male and female speakers of Bislama, Meyerhoff argues that shared practices by a group of speakers do not necessarily mean that these speakers constitute a community of practice (1999: 235-7).

Similarly, Davies (2005) argues that the community of practice model is misleading and questions the accuracy of Wenger's three constitutive features. She speculates as to whether these features help constitute a group of people, delineate the boundaries of different sub-groups (e.g. peripheral and core members), and position individuals according to the type of power structure found within a community of practice (2005: 575-7). Davies assumes that the task of linguistic meaning-making and decision-making is assigned to the core members found at the top of the community of practice hierarchy, resulting in the downplay of the peripheral participants' legitimacy.

In reply, Eckert and Wenger (2005) highlight the fact that the notion of hierarchy (assumed by Davies to reflect inequalities in the community of practice power structure) and the concepts of practice and acceptance (i.e. legitimacy) are central features of the community of practice. These important concepts and their underpinnings should be investigated through long-term ethnographic observation rather than be assumed beforehand and thus limit the interpretation of the data by doing so (Wenger 2005: 582–9; also see comments by Gee 2005b and Meyerhoff 2005, as well as by Moore (2006) whose research refutes Davies’s critique). The Kuwaiti gender-relevant online communities in this study provide ample evidence to support Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s rationale for further research.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999) note that in examining communities of practice one should beware not to focus on detailed particularities and overlook general patterns. However, ‘a basic beginning in the search for valid generalizations with explanatory significance must be the examination of a wide variety of local communities of practice’, which should be complemented with a ‘serious consideration of apparent exceptions to candidate generalizations’ (1999: 190). Hence, my incorporation of this framework in this study.

2.2.4 Critical discourse analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an analytical approach which is concerned with the relationship between discourse and ideology (Johnstone, 2008: 45). By combining linguistic and non-linguistic features of discourse and other elements of social practices, CDA looks at implicit ways in which ideologies are enacted, imposed and resisted

through discourse (Fairclough, 2003: 9-11 and 205). By stimulating a critical awareness of language, CDA focuses on how present (naturalized) discourse conventions are a consequence of power relations and power struggle (Talbot, 2010: 117). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a method for:

Analysing social practices with particular regard to their discourse moments within the linking of the theoretical and practical concerns and public spheres just alluded to, where the ways of analysing “operationalise” – make practical – theoretical constructions of discourse in (late modern) social life and the analyses contribute to the development and elaboration of these theoretical constructions (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 16).

A good example of a social issue and social relations is, respectively, gender and gender relations (Sunderland, 2004: 10-11). Sunderland (2004) argues that CDA is ‘theoretically well placed to seek and identify gendered discourses of a “damaging kind”’ (2004: 11, emphasis in original; also see Wodak, 1997: 7). She goes on to explain that CDA analyses should not simply rely on textual cues and traces in their data that project power struggles and ideologies, but also on their informed insights concerning broader discursive and social practices (2004: 11) – this is why it is useful for the present study.

However, because CDA focuses in its analysis on categories or variables (e.g., participant’s gender) that need to be relevant explicitly in discourse (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 17), it has been criticised as an ideological interpretation and therefore

not an analyses per se (Widdowson 2004: 158). Widdowson does not question CDA's critical perspective, but its disadvantage as an approach and its 'effects on the kind of discourse analysis that is carried out' (2004: 89). CDA chooses to analyse texts that accommodate its preferred (previously established) interpretations rather than being open to competing interpretations that are arrived at in the course of analysis (Widdowson 2004: 169). Because of this interpretive partiality, CDA is not the analytical approach that is used to examine the instances of chat room discourse in the present study. However, its insights have been considered, especially in discussions of issues such as power relations between male and female chat room users and the construction of chat room social identities (see Chapter 6 and 7).

2.3 Summary

In the first part of this chapter, I discussed various understandings of the terms "discourse" and "discourses" and focused on Gee's definition of discourse as the operational one for use in the present study. It allows for analysis of men's and women's use of particular interactional features (e.g., greetings, endearments, jokes, compliments and nicknames) as strategies to achieve certain social, cultural, heterosexual, and ideological goals, as well as to construct multiple identities within this specific online context. Furthermore, I address the term "gendered discourses" as viewed by Sunderland (2004) in that participants negotiate their positioning in interaction and identity construction either by accepting or resisting normalised discourses which are related to certain social issues. This is amply illustrated in my study in the many non-normative instances of interaction that are sanctioned strictly due to the context of interaction being

“virtual”. It is therefore necessary to select a combination of analytical frameworks that offer appropriate methods and tools to examine gendered nuances and sociocultural issues embedded in chat room mixed-sex interaction between male and female users, while constantly bearing in mind that the users come from a gender-sensitive background that forbids gender mixing in offline society. Thus, a framework that integrates ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics, and communities of practice is most suitable for the sociolinguistic situation of this study. This mixed framework will take into account the analysis of salient chat room interaction patterns that are seen in relation to language norms and practices as established in an online community of practice, which takes place in a specific online context and that will inevitably involve influences infiltrating from the offline world. Adopting certain theories from CDA (especially with regard to gendered power relations and identity construction) will also help reveal potential hidden agendas between male and female users and highlight discrete power struggles which are especially relevant in the use of humour – a prominent feature in the chat room interaction being examined in the present study. In the second part of this chapter I present an overview of the different approaches to the study of language and gender in order to situate the gendered interaction examined in the present study.

2. 4 Language and Gender

The second part of this chapter addresses concepts, understandings, and approaches to the study of language and gender. The discussion in this part is divided into looking at theories of language and gender in section 2.4.1 (outlining different language and gender

models) and situating language and gender 2.4.2 (as contextualized by communities of practice and interactional contexts).

2.4.1 Theories of language and gender

2.4.1.1 Gender deficit and dominance

As a subfield of sociolinguistics, language and gender studies emerged in the English-speaking world in the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Weatherall 2002: 3–5). Previously, ideas about the variation between men’s and women’s language were influenced by folk-linguistic beliefs held by larger society (Sunderland 2006: 2–4). This was evidenced by the numerous proverbs that often referred in a negative way to what was viewed as women’s verbosity. Some of these (English) proverbs are cited in Coates (1993: 16): ‘A woman’s tongue wags like a lamb’s tail’ and ‘Many women, many words, many geese, many turds’.

Despite their visibility in cultural genre forms, there is no evidence supporting most folk-linguistic ideas that are in fact based on generalizations¹². According to Cameron (1992), early works by the linguist Otto Jespersen (1922) cultivated ‘impressionistic’ ideas that not only do men and women speak different languages or varieties but also that men’s language was considered as the ‘norm’ and women’s language as ‘deviant’. Jespersen’s influential publication, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*, and more specifically, a chapter named ‘The woman’, portrayed women’s language as having a smaller vocabulary as well as using excessive

¹² Spender (1985: 42), for example, argues that women’s talkativeness has been measured in comparison with silence rather than with men’s talk.

adjectives and adverbs and as generally incapable of producing complex sentences. Jespersen's study has been shunned by feminists because it is sexist and relies on stereotypes about women's language (Cameron 1992: 36). This norm-and-deviation notion cultivated the female "deficit approach" which influenced 1970s research in language and gender. This approach examined language from a gender-as-a-dichotomy perspective and mainly described women's language as defective and hence in need of improvement.

Early work by pioneers in the field of language and gender, namely Robin Lakoff, Dale Spender and Pamela Fishman, played a significant role in laying the foundations in this field. In Lakoff's monograph *Language and Women's Place* (1975; see also Bucholtz and Lakoff 2004), she observed differences between men's and women's language but more importantly she strongly argued that women's language mirrored their secondary position in society. Lakoff illustrated differences in speech styles of men and women by pointing out that women use a wider range colour terms (such as, *beige, lavender, fuchsia* and so on), different adjectives (*adorable, charming* and so on), 'mitigating devices' (such as, *well, y'know, and kinda*), as well as 'hyercorrect grammar' and 'superpolite forms' (1975; 2004: 43–51) By using these devices women softened the force of ideas when they expressed their personal opinion.

Lakoff also pointed out representations of women in language, such as women being referred to as *girls* no matter what age, does not apply for men as *boys*¹³, and the positive connotations that are associated with categories such as *bachelor* and *master* as opposed to the negative connotations of *mistress* and *spinster*, and so on (Lakoff 1975,

¹³ A point that is also tangible in the online chat rooms being examined in the present study.

2004: 54–64). These linguistic features placed men in society according to their social and professional status, while women were defined according to the men with whom they were associated. Additionally, ‘*power* for men was seen as different from that of *power* for women: and as acquired and manifested in different ways’ (Bucholtz and Lakoff 2004: 59).

In highlighting these linguistic differences in women’s language, Lakoff notes that both language use and the representation of women in language echo and perpetuate women’s subordinate status within society. Lakoff’s book *Language and Women’s Place* was both ground-breaking and seminal to language and gender research and while it was more focused on exposing male dominance in all its linguistic forms, it tended to represent masculinity and femininity as a gender “binary”. This might have been valid and acceptable in the academic climate of the time (for a review on Lakoff’s work see Litosseliti and Sanderland 2002). However, Lakoff’s work was critiqued in subsequent decades by researchers, for example, Spender (1985: 35–9), Crawford (1995: 35-9) and Cameron (1992: 44). More recently, Lakoff (2004) herself clarifies and expands on her previous work exploring areas that were neglected in the past such as examining the language of women other than white who are not from the middle-class as well as the study of men and of sexuality (Bucholtz and Lakoff 2004, Litosseliti 2006: 31).

After Lakoff’s publications, another framework emerged mainly represented by Spender. In her influential *Man Made Language* (1985), Spender argues that women’s language is dominated by men’s language. Unlike Lakoff’s anecdotal data, Spender’s thesis relied on records from real-life social interaction. She illustrates this by reviewing her – as well as other theorists’ – research findings that show how in mixed-sex

interaction, men often dominated the conversation, while women were being silenced by men's interruptions. Men also initiated topics of conversation and ensured that these topics were taken up. This powerful male position in interaction then corresponds to what is presently known as the "(male) dominance approach" (see Sunderland 2006: 10–22, for an introductory discussion on the deficit and dominance models; also see Speer 2005: 30–59 for a more detailed discussion).

Like Lakoff, Spender argued that sexism in the English language was a result of societal patriarchy which sees men as powerful and women as powerless and hence meaning in language use is constantly set and defined by men. Therefore, generic expressions such as 'man', 'mankind', *he/him/his* and so on reinforced a 'male as norm' ideology which rendered women as invisible (Spender 1985: 141–3).

In tandem with Spender's approach, other dominance theorists were concerned with aspects of discourse that were employed by men to control interaction, such as questions, hedges, back-channelling, interruptions, topic initiation and topic control. For example, Fishman (1983) looked at hedges such as *you know* (examined previously by Lakoff 1975) as well as questions. Unlike Lakoff, she argued that such discourse strategies were not evidence of women's insecurity and hesitancy, rather they functioned as interactional and facilitative strategies that ensured other participants were being involved in a given interaction. Fishman concluded that women's use of these facilitative techniques indicates that they are communicatively skilled, since their use of such strategies was mainly due to the pressure of having to keep the conversation going. In pointing out the amount of effort women have to exert in mixed-sex communication, Fishman stated that women are the conversational 'shitworkers' during an interaction

(Fishman 1983: 99). And while emphasizing the division of labour in interaction, Fishman argues that should women succeed in gaining control in conversation they are often criticized of being ‘abnormal’, ‘domineering’ and ‘aggressive’ (1983: 99).

West and Zimmerman (1983) are other theorists who have contributed to research into the dominance approach. In a study that analyzed mixed-sex conversations, they found that men initiated and controlled topics of conversation, which in turn asserted tacit asymmetrical rights in their favour in mixed interaction. West and Zimmerman also show that men ‘do power’ during interaction by interrupting women in an exchange much more than they would while conversing with other men (West and Zimmerman 1983).

As with the deficit approach, proposed findings by theorists from the dominance paradigm (West and Zimmerman 1983, Fishman 1983) were criticized for being rather simplistic as well as for failing to see the “bigger picture” in mixed-sex interaction. More specifically, they seem to have neglected effects of ‘conversational contexts, topic and genres, objectives, styles and rules for speaking’ (Litosseliti 2006: 37). Speaker intentions as well as hearer interpretation were also overlooked and, as with the deficit approach, the participants upon whom most language and gender studies were based tended to be about white, middle-class, heterosexual individuals (Cameron 2001).

2.4.1.2 Gender difference

Despite its virtues in showing male-centredness in interaction, the dominance framework was revised and what ensued in the late 1980s and early 1990s was the “difference” or two-culture framework whose theorists seemed to have excluded power from the language and gender equation (Tannen 1990, and Maltz and Borker 1982). Tannen is one

of the major proponents of the cultural/difference approach. Her popular book, *You Just Don't Understand* (1990), not only embraced the notion of 'gender difference' but also promoted larger cultural understanding of male/female miscommunication. Tannen's thesis outlines a description of men's and women's different communicative styles while emphasizing that they have different but equally valid ways of speaking. Her primary objective was therefore making sure not to accuse either gender of being powerful or powerless and hence by doing so, Tannen moved away from the complexity of gender-related power issues in society (see Crawford's critique of Tannen's difference framework 1995: 93 and 96; also see Uchida's 1992 critique, which I discuss below, as well as Troemel-Ploetz 1998).

Originally, the difference approach was introduced in Gumperz's (1982) work on the ethnography of communication which looks at rules of interaction as being closely linked to the speaker's culture (mentioned earlier in section 1.2.2). Therefore when different cultural groups get together the result is different, sometimes competing, rules of discourse (Gumperz 1982). Accordingly, miscommunication in inter-ethnic exchanges is mainly due to a lack of awareness in culture-specific rules of behaviour and discourse rather than speaker's intent. Drawing on Gumperz's notion of 'interethnic communication', Maltz and Borker (1982) claimed that girls and boys are socialized in different 'sociolinguistic subcultures' and that miscommunication during interaction is largely linked to growing up in two segregated subcultures. Thus Tannen (1990) – among other language and gender theorists (see for example, Coates 1996 and Holmes 1995) – built on notions by Gumperz as well as Maltz and Borker in considering men and women as members of different speech cultures.

While being both culturally sensitive and neutral to gender, the (cultural) difference approach has a number of problems (as noted by Uchida 1992, Cameron 1992 and 2007, as well as Crawford 1995). In exploring some of the shortcomings of the difference framework, Uchida (1992) points to Tannen's (1990) descriptions of cooperative discourse strategies that are practiced in same-sex interaction, 'rapport talk' by women and 'report talk' by men (1990: 74-95), and questions how such gender-specific rules can be implemented in mixed-sex interaction. Uchida argues that the cross-cultural communication framework 'seems too simplistic, mainly because no matter how much time children spend interacting with their same-sex peers, they are not completely segregated from the other sex' (1992: 556). And thus children learn same-sex interaction patterns while also being exposed to the communication dynamics of their opposite-sex peers as well as mixed-sex groups, whether real, such as that of their parents, or fictitious, as between actors in films and characters in storybooks. Moreover, Uchida suggests that the difference approach ignores 'the interaction of race, class, age, and sexual orientation with sex' (1992: 557), thus in a given interaction, one cannot simply look at gender as a constant variable or as the major single factor being manifested, since other equally significant factors may also often be at play.

Additionally, Crawford (1995) criticizes the difference approach asserting that it has 'collapsed differences of social identity into sex differences' as well as the claims that 'gender inequalities' would eventually disappear 'if only women and men learned to understand that they are fundamentally different' (Crawford 1995: 30). Cameron (1992) argued that the difference framework reified male/female discourse differences while it neglected issues of power and male dominance, both highly prevalent in society and in

mixed-sex interaction (also see Troemel-Ploetz 1998, who shares a similar perspective). She argues that understanding gender differences without questioning their values leads to perpetuation of gender stereotypes (1992). More recently, Cameron (2007) rebukes popular author John Gray's (1992) notions of men and women belonging to two subcultures calling it 'New Age psychobabble'. She writes: 'The problem is not that men and women have different communication styles, but that whatever style women use, they are liable to be judged by different standards' (2007: 180; also see Crawford's 1995 critique of pop psychology advice books).

Generally, the "difference", "deficit" and "dominance" models all played a key role in progressing sociolinguistic, feminist thinking and establishing the groundwork for new theories in language and gender to develop. However, these models have in their different ways an essentialists' understanding of gender identity. As such this polarized view sees maleness and femaleness as fixed traits that exist in all men and women respectively (Talbot 2003: 468–86). When gender is viewed as a binary opposition, it fails to see similarities (Bing and Bergvall 1996, Weatherall 2002). Also worth noting is the fact that most studies that employed these models have concentrated on a mainstream (normative) prototype of femininity and masculinity through male or female speech style. The binary gender perspective therefore ignores fundamental differences *among* men and women and not just *between* them. As a result, many studies examined speech communities or groups that were homogeneous rather than heterogeneous. The traditional frameworks have also overlooked the relationship between gender and social identities (according to Bergvall 1999, Cameron 1995, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999, 2003, and Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999), as well as other sociolinguistic variables such as

power (by the difference approach in particular), context, culture, age and ethnicity (Crawford 1995 and Cameron 2001). It was therefore necessary to revisit, re-examine and rethink early “essentialist” frameworks employed in language and gender studies.

Based on findings from the dominance and difference models, assertiveness and communication skills training work-programme were instigated in many workplaces in western societies to provide advice to women on how to adopt assertive male speech styles. Linguistic self-improvement even found its way into women’s magazines in the last ten to fifteen years (Cameron 1995, 1996). This caused Cameron to warn linguists and sociolinguists of the effects on institutions that descriptive research on gendered discourse might have in promoting ‘interventionist change’ (see Sunderland 2006: 33) or what Cameron calls ‘verbal hygiene’ (Cameron 1995, 1996: 36–9).

2.4.1.3 Beyond binary: gender as performance

The shift in focus in understanding language and gender studies from an essentialist approach to a constructionist approach (defined in Section 1.1) has led theorists to investigate men’s and women’s constitutive way of employing language to “construct” or “perform” gender (Cameron 1997: 29). Therefore, beliefs with regard to how men and women speak are separated from how men and women actually *do* speak. Many sociolinguists are increasingly concerned with emphasizing the notion of language use as an act of identity. Judith Butler (1990, 1999), a poststructuralist feminist and philosopher, played an influential role in developing the notion of “performativity” as applicable to language use. She argues that gender is something we perform, rather than something we are assigned to because of our sex as males or females, and that a repeated performance

of a certain identity with time is bound to reflect who we are and who people take us to be. Drawing from Austin (1962), Butler writes: ‘gender proves to be performative [...] gender is always a doing [...] There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results’ (1999: 33).

Cameron (1997) points to the positive aspects of the “discursive turn” in postmodernism which has led to broader explorations in the “performativity” thesis. At that point, gender in language was conceived as ‘fluid’ and therefore language users were allowed a greater degree of ‘agency and creativity’ (1997: 30), which enabled them to ‘cross previously forbidden boundaries’ (1997: 32). A good example would be Hall’s (1998) study on telephone sex workers. Cameron goes on to explain that ‘even the most mainstream and conventional kinds of gender identity can, or even must, be performed in different ways’ (1997: 30, see Kiesling’s 1997, study on heterosexual men performing masculinity). However, Cameron cautions that gender enactment through performance should never be examined separate from the particular context and activities in which it is embedded as this may obscure power relations and institutional ideologies that are relevant to the kind of performance under investigation (1997: 31).

Additionally, in a series of research work on language and gender, Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999) emphasize the communities of practice as a fruitful analytical tool in social constructionist fields of study which instead of relying on gender differences resulting from norms of early socialization, focus on actual discursive engagements of gender performance or resistance (1999: 180). Men and women therefore *perform* gender discursively through language. Interestingly, the identities that are performed can include

a range of possibilities, which may be normative or non-normative. A good example is McElhinny's work on women police officers accommodating to traditionally masculine responsibilities, (1995: 217–43). Other non-normative identities are demonstrated in 'drag queens' (see, for example, Barrett 1999), or other performativities, such as women and gay men displaying different femininities in the sex-phone line industry, mentioned earlier (see Hall 1998). Cameron (1996) maintains that 'the *performative* model [...] permits language to be described concretely in terms of specific acts and norms' (1996: 48, emphasis in original). Furthermore, the performative model lends itself well to the community of practice framework.

2.4.2 Situating language and gender

2.4.2.1 Gendered communities of practice

In their influential collection of essays, which presents new avenues in language and gender research, Bing and Bergvall (1996) encourage researchers to 'move beyond binary thinking, and away from essentialism and more towards *diversity* and a constructionist approach' (1996: 24). As more theorists have maintained this emphasis on debunking gender polarization (Bucholtz 1999, Crawford 1995, Cameron 1996, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 2003), a "discursive turn" in language and gender studies evolved (for a discussion of the discursive turn, see Weatherall 2002: 75–96). Language and gender theorists began to examine how discourse practices play a key role in producing gendered identities as opposed to employing fixed language categories to distinguish people's patterns of linguistic behaviour, as seen with typical statements such as: men speak this way and women speak that way (Cameron 1996: 44–6). Recent

research on gender asserts that as people enter new communities and encounter new situations which require varying social practices, it is necessary for them to reproduce their gendered identities and negotiate new ones (McIlhinny 1995, Cameron 1996: 45, Hall 1998 and Speer 2005: 62). As Cameron (1996) writes:

Each individual subject must constantly negotiate the norms, behaviours and discourses that define masculinity and femininity for a *particular* community at a *particular* point in history (1996: 45).

From this perspective a woman does not start or stop becoming a woman, but rather her femininity is an ongoing accomplishment that has to be examined in a specific context at a given time. This specificity allows for greater diversity and heterogeneity within a community, since not all women speak in the same way at all times.

Here, I highlight some of the works that have adopted the communities of practice framework to further argue that a binary division into men's and women's speech styles is no longer a valid perspective in examining language and gender research. For instance, Greenwood's (1996) investigation of interaction in a particular community of practice – a single group of adolescent siblings and friends having a series of conversations at dinner – shows that gender is an insignificant variable. In her study on interruption style and speaker gender, she shows that this group's norms of conversation and interruptions were generally understood to signal solidarity and in-groupness. Greenwood concludes that it is necessary to avoid generalizations and focus on paying attention to the particular

groups under investigation, within the specific circumstances the interaction is taking place (1996: 76–94).

Similarly, Bucholtz (1999) employs the communities of practice framework to investigate how a community of ‘nerd’ girls constructs identity through language. She points out that conscious choices are made by students to self-identify as nerds, which for girls in the US high school context is a particularly important symbol of individuality and intelligence as opposed to the typical hegemonic femininity that is intellectually incompatible with this (1999: 211–13). Bucholtz illustrates how such nerd identity practices are constructed and performed through language, and how this is captured by the communities of practice framework (1999: 220).

Furthermore, a sociolinguistic ethnographic study conducted in the mid-1990s by Mendoza-Denton (2008) shows how a performance model allows analysis of the cultural dynamics behind how gang-affiliated Latina girls (the Surtenas and Nortenas) in California talk, dress and interact. She looks at the daily lives of these young gang girls and how their membership markers – for example, their eyeliner, dress type and colour, hairstyle, bodily practices and most importantly their innovative use of speech – signal their gang affiliations and ideologies (2008: 133–43). Mendoza-Denton also illustrates how variation or differences are highlighted in this community of practice (for more recent research on communities of practice, see Moore 2006 and Gimenez 2007).

2.4.2.2 Gendered discourse in context

Previously, I discussed the community of practice as a model of analysis that looks at a specific group of people and their norms and language practices. The present study looks

at a virtual community of practice where mixed interaction occurs in chat rooms on the Internet. A significant aspect of this specific community, with its habits and linguistic practices, could not have existed nor could its members have engaged in interaction in a context offline, at least not in public spaces in Kuwait. The absence of the physical dimension as well as anonymity play a key part in legitimizing the dynamics of interaction between male and female participants in this virtual context. This means that, like gender, *context* is an important variable in the present study. It is therefore necessary to understand what context is, its importance to the meaning-making of interaction, and how it affects and is affected by utterances.

Gee broadly defines context as a set of (ever-growing) factors that occur with language in use (2005a: 57). As with Hymes (1972), these factors include: the participants (including gender, ethnicity, age, etc.), setting, what is said before and after a particular utterance, socio-cultural and historical factors, and so on (Gee 2005a: 57).

Upon explaining the way meaning is interpreted in specific contexts, Bernstein (1972) shows how different social class systems are manifested in (context-specific) communication during socialization of different family types. He argues that context-dependent interaction entails that ‘the socialiser cuts his meaning to the *specific* attributes/intentions of the socialized’ as well as to the particular needs of the context (Bernstein 1972: 171). Accordingly, when general information is tied to a particular context it becomes ‘individualized’ and ‘fitted to the local circumstances’ (1972: 171, also see Eckert McConnell-Ginet 1995).

Litosseliti and Sunderland (2002) maintain that the relationship between context and interaction is significant in that language is shaped by context and vice versa (2002:

15). Language usage may vary within a single community. The variation may be associated with different institutions: legal, educational, religious, particular social events, or even associated with variation in the single speech event that is taking place (Maybin 1996: 12). Maybin writes: ‘In order to understand the function and meaning of any conversational exchange, we need to know the values and expectations about language held by those speakers in that particular culture’ (1996: 12).

It is necessary to ask at this point how context can have such an important impact on interaction. Maybin (also see Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002: 15) highlights several elements included in context, making it pivotal to the meaning-making of language (Maybin 1996: 12):

- The physical surroundings.
- The relationship between speakers.
- Their past shared experience, and current conversation goals.
- The social events of which the conversation is a part.
- Broader cultural values and exceptions.

Similarly, Murachver and Janssen (2007) note that factors affecting the salience of gender in context are: ‘People’s physical location, who they are with, what they are discussing, and why they are discussing it’ (2007: 193–4). It is worth mentioning here that the absence of any of the factors that constitute context is just as important as their presence (2007: 194). Therefore, such absences could not invalidate the context in which this interaction occurs.

If language and gender are highly contextualized practices, can these practices be reiterated in different contexts? Heritage (1984) discusses the double contextual function of talk, in that the interpretation of interaction depends on both its existing context as well as how utterances shape a new context for the activity that will ensue (Heritage 1984: 242 as cited in Duranti and Goodwin 1992: 29). But Swann (2002) argues that language and gender are not ‘context bound’ as they both ‘necessarily transcend specific contexts [...] if they did not, communication, along with any form of identity construction, would be impossible’ (2002: 62). And according to Maybin (1996), utterances establish a ‘collection of contextual associations based on the history of their usage’ (1996: 12).

Malinowski (1923) brings forth two important aspects of context: firstly, the interaction that takes place in the ‘context of situation’ or in the ‘larger socio-cultural frameworks’ surrounding interaction. And secondly, ‘practical action’ – how utterances function within a certain speech event or activity, such as fishing. Malinowski further argues that:

Meaning [...] does not come [...] from contemplation of things, or analysis of occurrences, but in practical and active acquaintance with relevant situations. The real knowledge of a word comes through practice of appropriately using it within a certain situation (Malinowski 1923: 325 as cited in Duranti and Goodwin 1992: 14–5).

Litosseliti and Sunderland (2002) also report that contexts which constitute ‘*situated* or *local meanings* are created by interactants themselves within a particular context to a particular group of contextual features’ (2002: 15, emphasis in original).

Equally, different types of setting demand that participants employ certain kinds of speech styles. Austin (1962) believes that utterances gain their force and become types of action, such as making a bet or sentencing a criminal to prison, based on, among other factors, the context in which recognizable conventions occur. And hence, if conventions of interaction are not familiar to participants in a certain context, it is likely that confusion or misunderstanding will ensue. An appropriate example of shaping talk to fit a certain context is Cameron’s (2000) work on the regulation of language use in British call centres. She has found that the preferred speech style required from male and female workers was one that encourages emphasizing social networking and nurturing “feminized” style. This speech style would mostly be displayed through particular types of intonation and voice quality that reflected enthusiasm at what these employees were doing, an interest in the individual that is on the line and his or her problem. Men hoping to work in this sector were therefore expected to adopt this feminized style of interaction, at least for this particular context.

It is also worth noting that even gender salience, a key component that has a bearing on interaction, is often either present or muted depending on the context. Murachver and Janssen (2007) use a clothing analogy to substantiate the expression of gender in a particular context: ‘When women and men go out for a run, a cycle [...] they dress very much alike. In other contexts, such as a wedding [...] or dinner at a restaurant, the differences between women and men are noticeable’ (2007: 190).

2.5 Summary

In the second part of this chapter, 2.4, I discussed different approaches to language and gender to begin to situate our understanding of the way language and gender is to be viewed and considered in this study. If we consider the sociolinguistic situation in Kuwait with regard to norms of gender and interaction, it may seem to us that since men and women are socialized separately throughout most of their childhood and adulthood, they are very likely to encounter difficulties communicating with each other during mixed-sex interaction, as one might assume in a reading of Maltz and Borker 1982, and Tannen 1990. Perhaps one can speculate that even the deficit and dominance models may prove to be ideal models to adopt for the present study considering that Kuwait is a male-dominated country and since men and women do have different registers (see section 1.2), and therefore examining women's language would highlight female users in chat rooms as interactional participants who tend to establish rapport and encourage solidarity in the chat room environment. However, as I will show in the many instances of mixed-sex interaction in this study, the specific online context – in which these interactions take place and where norms of interaction are negotiated by members of this online community of practice – suggests that there is a need for interaction to succeed between men and women. This “need” is constantly maintained by the community members' shared repertoire and joint goals (both of which undergo change with time) and in combination with other goals, such as performing before the chat room audience to achieve desired effects, and the need for various actions to construct chosen identities through various performances. I therefore adopt a social constructionist orientation toward language and gender in this study, with a specific focus on chat room gendered performances and the construction of gendered identities.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed numerous understandings of the concepts of discourse and discourses and how I integrate these understandings in this study. I also outlined some analytical approaches to discourse in order to establish a framework that enables the examination and analysis of the data in the present study. The second part of the chapter dealt with various approaches to language and gender and how gendered communication is situated in communities and contexts, which then influence interpretations of meanings in interactional situations. Finally, I showed where I position the present study with regard to the different approaches to language and gender. In chapters 4, 5, and 6, I will demonstrate how these approaches allow us to best understand the salient features of chat room interaction, which are used as interactional strategies by male and female users to achieve particular jointly managed communicative goals.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine male and female members of the Kuwaiti chat rooms in a specific Internet social network site – named *Chit-chat* (a pseudonym) – to find out how gendered mixed-sex interaction occurs in cultures where men and women have separate socialization norms. It therefore aims to explore the interactional strategies that are employed by male and female members of this Internet community which enable them to communicate efficiently as well as negotiate the construction of gendered identities. Such interactional strategies and, more generally, the presence of this emergent, heterosexual, online community are ultimately considered in light of the larger segregated, offline Kuwaiti context.

In Chapter 3, the design of the study as well as the methods used for participant-observation, data collection, and analysis are discussed: firstly, by explaining the research site which is concerned with chat rooms, their dynamics, terminology, and rules (section 3.1). In section 3.2, I present the research methods that were adopted to conduct the chat room observation and data collection (section 3.2). Next, I explain the methods approached to compile qualitative data based on participant perceptions from interviews (section 3.3). This data is complemented with quantitative data from a test and an experiment that were carried out on user nicknames (section 3.4.1). Finally, numerous methodological issues are discussed in the form of the advantages and disadvantages of the methods chosen for this study (section 3.5).

3.1 What is a chat room?

A chat room is a virtual room located within a particular Internet site, where interested chat groups have continuous discussions on a particular topic (Crystal 2006: 11). According to Crystal, a user enters a chat room and joins an ongoing conversation in real time, sending named contributions which are inserted into a permanently scrolling screen along with contributions from other participants (2006:12). Depending on the type of chat room services provided by the website operators, the conversations online may be limited to written-only or to written and spoken chat. Furthermore, some chat groups receive contributions from any geographical location and are therefore global, others are more local and are restricted to a particular region or country (2006:12). Whether local or global, user identities, especially in terms of gender, are hidden behind a nickname that each chat room user chooses for himself or herself. A user nickname is therefore an ideal shield for masking gender identities for various reasons, as research in this area has shown (Turkle 1995, Crystal 2006: 160, Danet *et al.* 2006: 5, and Bechar-Israeli 2006). This is particularly the case in chat rooms where users are limited to written chat. However, this by no means rules out opportunities for the many users who are capable of imitating voices of users from the opposite sex in chat rooms which allow spoken chat.

As will be demonstrated by the instances of chat examined in this study as well as responses from chat room interviewees, gender transparency is, by and large, characteristic of Kuwaiti chat rooms because users are keen to create a context in which they are free to pursue their heterosexual goals. But careful consideration has to be made by the analyst when encountering exceptional cases, as I will note.

3.1.1 Kuwaiti chat rooms

In the initial stage of my language and gender research, before deciding to focus on chat rooms, I explored the suitability of different research sites. There were cultural factors I had to take into account in conducting language-and-gender research in Kuwait: the gender-segregated, conservative culture and the private nature of Kuwaiti people (as discussed in Chapter 1) could create a major impediment when approaching people to participate in a study. These factors create methodological challenges but also provide a unique gender context likely to be a rich source of insight for the language and gender field. I knew that finding a research site that would include both men and women would be challenging. It was therefore necessary to find a semi-public research site, which permits mixed interaction without cultural complications. The most appropriate location was the Kuwaiti chat rooms found in social networks on the Internet.

The fact that the Kuwaiti chat rooms under examination are *virtual* makes them quite convenient culturally, as men and women who interact together in chat rooms are not (physically) violating gender-segregation norms. The chat rooms are also convenient as a research site because the dynamics of interaction between men and women are visible, although not as straightforward as face-to-face interaction, since visual features of communication such as gaze, facial expressions and body language are absent from chat room spoken interaction, as are features of voice tone and intonation from textual interaction. The chat room context is, in general, a safer option for both researcher and researched. According to interviewees, approximately 10–12 percent of the Kuwaiti population communicates in chat rooms. (No other published statistics are available.)

I gained access to the Kuwaiti chat rooms under examination through a routine procedure of subscribing to become a member in a chat group in the Internet site, Chit-chat. In fact, any individual who owns an email address is allowed to subscribe and access Chit-chat. Therefore, gaining access to this research site did not pose difficulties nor did gaining access to the Kuwaiti chat rooms in this study (see section 3.2.2 for the list of specific chat rooms).

One final, yet important, point to remember when looking at Kuwaiti chat rooms: they are considered as one community of practice as opposed to various communities of practice despite the fact there are various different chat room types. The different chat rooms being examined for this study are all considered under the umbrella of a chat room community of practice, with different chat sub-groups existing in each chat room. These chat rooms have a joint enterprise, shared goals, and a common repertoire, relevant to that which defines a community of practice (as noted in Chapter 2).

3.1.2 Chat room dynamics

Unlike the dynamics of face-to-face interaction, the interaction within the chat room in Chit-chat takes place using two media: written text and spoken chat. The language used is predominantly Arabic, and occasionally represented through Romanised Arabic or ‘The Internet Arabic Writing System’ (see section 6.1). As mentioned earlier, groups of chat room users engage in text-type interaction and the text discourse by each user is posted in list-form in a rapid succession of chat contributions (see Chapter 5, Example 5.2 b). Spoken chat, on the other hand, takes place one user at a time following a queue system which is signalled by the user’s hand being raised on the screen for permission to speak

on the microphone (see section 3.1.3). The user is chosen by the administrator and given permission to speak on the microphone, usually on a “first come, first serve” basis.

In the chat rooms being examined, any man or woman is allowed to access the social network website by virtue of an email account and is given a password which he or she uses to access the chat rooms. All chat room users have online names (nicknames) used as terms of address during spoken and text interaction in chat rooms (see section 3.1.3). Participation structures between users in online contexts routinely consist of one-to-one (e.g., two users alone interact in a “private” chat room), one-to-many (e.g., one user speaking on the microphone addresses the audience – the members in a given chat room) and many-to-many (e.g., a group of chat room users interacting together via written text in a chat room) (also see Herring’s participation categories 2007: 622).

Another salient aspect of chat room dynamics are the different daily chat activities or chat genres that occur between users. These include chat room *discussions* (based on a topic that is either chosen by the chat room administrator or a group of users), reciting *poetry*, listening to *music*, engaging in *games*, such as quizzes and personality analysis, or simply taking part in idle chatting with no specific topic in mind.

3.1.3 Chat room terminology

It is necessary to clarify some of the key terminology in order to prevent confusion and ambiguity when these terms are used. It is also worth noting that the English pronunciation of these terms (except for *flood* and *lurker*) is built into online Arabic spoken and text chat, and these terms are “Arabized”, e.g., ‘female administrators’ become *adminiyaat*. These chat room terms are as follows:

- **User** is the male or female individual who accesses chat rooms. It is used as an address form during chat room interaction.
- **Microphone**, usually nicknamed **mic** or **mike** (as well as other names, see section 7.3), is the icon users utilize when wishing to participate in spoken chat that is heard by all in the chat room.
- **Camera**, also referred to as **cam**, is the device used by some users to display video images of themselves.
- **Hand-up** is a term (translated by users into Arabic *irfa'a eedik*) which means the users' *virtual* hand that is raised in order to indicate a desire to take one's turn in the verbal chat participation queue and speak on the microphone.
- **Nickname**, usually known as **nick**, is the user's name while participating in chat rooms (see Chapter 6). All nicknames that appear in examples and excerpts will be presented in bold font and those that appear within the discussions will be presented in italics font to facilitate identification.
- **Lurker** is a label which refers to users whose nicknames are visible in a chat room but whose owners do not participate in chat with other users (see section 7.2.2 for a detailed description of lurkers).
- **Administrator**, also known as **admin**, is the user who is responsible for controlling order in chat rooms as well as administering turn-taking on the microphone.
- **Bounce** is the term used when a user is expelled from of the chat room for behaving inappropriately (see section 3.1.4 for chat room rules).

- **Red dot** is the term used when the red sign (⊖) is placed in front of a users' nickname. This sign indicates that a given user's nickname is allowed to be visible in a room but he or she is prevented from participating in chat.
- **Jump** is when users do not wish to respect the chat room turn-taking system (see section 3.1.2) and decide to jump ahead of users who have their hands raised waiting for their turn to speak. This usually occurs by pressing the microphone icon before a user whose turn it is to speak.
- **Flood** is when users send long and continuous written texts, blocking other users from sending their own written text chats and sometimes causing an overall transmission delay in a given chat room.
- **Lag** is a common term employed by chat room users to indicate a delay in electronic transmission whether via text or spoken chat.
- **Private room**, also known as **Private** among users, is the chat room that is accessed for one-to-one interaction between two users.
- **Whisper** is when a user wishes to make a short and quick private comment to another user without necessarily having to go to a private room, since no one in the chat room audience is able to see the *whispered* comment.
- **'Girls'** is a term of address used by male and female users to address or refer to both women and girls regardless of their social status or age¹⁴.

¹⁴ This address term may sound odd outside the chat room contexts because it is not usually employed for a married woman offline. In the chat rooms being examined, however, all female users who access this "heterosexual world" are considered flirt targets by men, regardless whether they are married or not. In comparison, it is important to point out that male users in this context are referred to as either "men".

3.1.4 Chat room rules

Chat room rules are normally clearly visible in writing to users who enter a chat room. The administrator or the owner of the chat room establishes the rules based on what he or she sees fit for their chat room. Most chat rooms share similar rules with a few distinctions that are particular to a given room. Common chat room rules are as follows:

- Please respect the time limit (10 minutes per speaker) when speaking on the microphone.
- No jumping or flooding.
- No cams.¹⁵
- Any user who swears or uses verbal aggression is immediately bounced out of the chat room.

Similarly, there are rules that are placed by the Chit-chat Internet network service itself that are explained to a user upon subscribing as a member of the network. Users have the ability to create and moderate their own chat rooms; however Chit-chat employs more than 650 trained administrators who help in implementing chat room rules. Some of the rules placed by the network service ensure that the language being used during chat is appropriate and does not violate the Chit-chat terms of service, and prohibit the display of nudity in user profiles. Other rules are relative to particular chat rooms and are more guidance-oriented rules (www.al-padeel.com/or 2008). For example, users are told that ‘G-rated’ rooms can be accessed by users of all ages, while “adult rooms” are restricted

¹⁵ Meaning cameras, see section 3.1.3 above.

to adult users (only over 18 years) and many of these rooms have limited access to members via a pin code. Other restricted chat rooms are also secured by a secret pin code by their owners. These are usually Kuwaiti chat rooms that accommodate a private group of users, such as chat groups of gay or lesbian users.

3.2 Multiple research methods

3.2.1 Participant-observation

A pilot study was conducted (during one year – starting June 2007) to enable me to gain an understanding of chat room norms of interaction and terminology. During this period I accessed chat rooms on a daily basis for an average of an hour at different times in the day and night (specifically between 11 am – 9 pm). I did not participate in chat room interaction and therefore I accessed the chat rooms under examination simply as a lurker (see section 3.1.3 above for a definition). Deciding not to take part in this initial observational phase permitted me to pay close attention to chat room events and interaction dynamics, to gauge the relationships between male and female users, and to look for related patterns of chat room discourse. At this initial stage, I was very grateful that “lurking”, in general, was possible and acceptable as it solved the fieldworker’s usual dilemma of the “observer’s paradox” (Labov 1972: 209–10).

Following this initial stage in chat room observation and after having gained a tremendous amount of knowledge about norms of interaction in this particular setting, my observation became more systematic. In other words, I had already formed an idea of which rooms to attend and which to avoid. For example, I avoided rooms which permitted salacious behaviour and language as I was uninterested in the nature of

interaction that occurred there and preferred to focus on the numerous chat rooms which are more representative of the Kuwaiti chat room culture being examined. I also tended to favour certain days of the week. For example, I noticed that most participants prefer attending chat rooms on weekends and holidays. During these specific days the number of users increased significantly and users' participation periods also increased. In retrospect, if I was not able to lurk at such an early stage I would have had to participate in chat room interaction and let everyone know of my presence which I thought was not very convenient at the time.

3.2.2 Data collection

After observing and learning about chat room culture I was ready to begin recording the necessary data I needed for the present study. I had already noticed a number of salient patterns of chat room interaction. These patterns are what I refer to as 'chat room interactional strategies', the most salient of which are: greetings, leave-takings, and terms of endearment (see Chapter 4). Another common feature of chat room interaction that I focus on is humour, which is employed by users in various forms (see Chapter 5). And finally, despite the fact that they are not considered as actual interactional exchanges, user nicknames are closely examined in the present study because they are a versatile tool of communication as well as a means of identity representation (see Chapter 6).

Samples of spoken chat from different Kuwaiti chat rooms in the Chit-chat network were recorded using a digital recorder. Text chat was saved in coded files according to topic of discussion. During a period of one year (February 2008 – February 2009) a corpus of 29 text chat extracts (on average 30 minutes) that were saved with their

corresponding 29 spoken chats was compiled. In addition, 20 spoken chats during the initial stage of data collection were recorded without their corresponding text chats. I therefore had 49 recorded spoken chats in total. From the spoken and written corpus compiled, 17 spoken chat excerpts and 15 written chat excerpts were used as examples of data for the present study. This data was coded by date, time, and topic of discussion. For the purposes of illustration and discussion I use either written or spoken chat, as well as stretches of both written and spoken chats combined in order to show how all the users in the chat room are interacting in a given speech event. I collected most of the data from five specific rooms (all pseudonyms):

- The_Seafarers
- Kuwait_Love_2009
- Happy_Days
- Fun_N_Kuwait
- Fantasy_World

These five rooms were chosen for this study for a number of reasons: firstly, they were among the highly populated chat rooms. Secondly, they are representative of the majority of Kuwaiti chatrooms (a few of the other highly populated chat rooms had chat groups involved in activities such as nudity and possible inappropriate interaction through the function of web cameras, but these rooms are not representative of the majority of Kuwaiti chat rooms, as mentioned in section 3.2.1, which is why I have not included them in this study). Thirdly, the administrators of the chat rooms I chose to examine

allowed me to observe, record, and analyse the chat groups that existed in their rooms, and in this way they facilitated my selection of chat rooms to examine.

Chat room administrators were informed of my presence and my data collection purposes and were assured that users' personal identities would be protected by keeping recorded spoken and text chats from public access. With regard to the rest of the users, they usually enter chat rooms and exit them quite frequently and in large numbers, and it is quite difficult to keep track of who is aware or unaware of my research purposes. My data collection procedures were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Queen Mary, University of London (QMREC2009/37).

3.2.3 Data discourse analysis

I favoured a mostly qualitative method of discourse analysis over quantitative methods to explore how users interact and why they tend to choose certain interactional strategies over others, and to examine users' particular chat room-related identities. This is achieved by describing chat room discourse on a macro level as a social practice. I therefore do not look at the segmental, linguistic structure of the language being used during chat. Neither do I look at specific details of talk structure: for example, pauses, hedges, or discourse markers in spoken chat. Instead, I focus on the ways in which recurring interactional patterns and discourse features are used as strategies to shape chat room users' gender performances and their construction of gendered identities during their daily, leisure chat room communicative activities. The data is transcribed accordingly.

The data in the present study was transcribed in three different versions. The first version is the original Arabic spoken chat transcribed into written Arabic script. The second version is the italicised Romanised Arabic of the original spoken and text chats (for readers of Arabic). The third version is the English translation. These versions are presented when I quote chat room examples in the main body of the thesis (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6). In Chapter 4 the Romanised Arabic script is included in italics within the English translated examples themselves to help readers identify the specific expressions and interactional patterns being analysed in that chapter. It is worth emphasising here that both text and spoken chat were sometimes transcribed and translated using slang or informal English in order to preserve the original sense in which many of the chat patterns occurred. Also, translating poetry was particularly challenging, as care was needed to capture the literary meaning of a poem.

Once a clear image was formed of related patterns and recurring chat room interactional features, I conducted interviews to elicit responses and perceptions from chat room participants themselves, as an appropriate complementary method to chat room discourse analysis (see section 3.3).

3.3 Interviews

3.3.1 Pilot interviews

After the chat room observation period I was able to establish which features of chat room interaction to investigate. To address these interactional features, questions were formulated to be asked of both male and female chat room users about their daily chats. For the two months following February 2009, five male and two female chat room users

were interviewed online. The male users were asked to take part in an online interview after *they* had initiated an exchange in a private chat room, possibly with the intention to flirt¹⁶ with me to begin with. However, after I explained the purpose of my presence in chat rooms and asked if they were willing to participate, all five male users agreed to provide me with the information I needed for my study. With regard to female chat room interviewees, I initially approached fifteen female users asking them to take part in the study. Only two female users responded and their participation in the end was limited. All online written-text interviews were held in private chat rooms to allow a one-to-one type of real-time interaction.

The pilot interviews were of great importance because they clarified numerous practical issues. Firstly, and most importantly, the female users adamantly refused to take part in the online interviews, mostly under the pretext that they were ‘simply not interested!’ Female users doubted my intentions, even after I presented them with the online consent forms (see Appendices C and D). Secondly, it was quite time-consuming to ask more than two questions in online interviews since I frequently risked losing the attention and interest of male users, who, in contrast to women, were rather too happy to take part in my interviews. Male and female interviewees informed me that the gender of the researcher plays a major role in eliciting information from chat room users. Thirdly, the male users who agreed to participate misunderstood my intentions in light of the heterosexual nature of the online environment, despite being shown the online consent forms. These online interviews uncovered other issues relating to the format of the questions themselves. To remedy these issues, it was necessary to have a well-devised

¹⁶ Chat room flirting is a routine interactional activity, especially by male users.

plan of how to approach interviewees and modify the interview questions, which I subsequently did (see sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3).

3.3.2 Offline interviews

Following the pilot phase, two sets of interviews were conducted within the same period (from April 2009 – October 2009). The first set of interviews involved participants from the Kuwaiti (offline) society, while the second set of interviews involved chat room users. Both sets of interviews were held in offline contexts (more on this point in section 3.3.4).

After addressing the practical issues encountered during the pilot phase, I was able to conduct successful interviews. To begin with, conducting the interviews with chat room users in offline settings eliminated many of the shortcomings encountered in online interviews due to the complexities of the particular medium of interaction – the Internet. All interviews with chat room users were therefore conducted offline. Informants consisted of 3 female and 8 male chat room users. Female interviewees were found with great difficulty through a network of female friends. The male interviewees were more easily approached through establishing familiarity via online chat. Furthermore, male users were first approached through a friendly, informal chat via telephone and then made aware that our public meeting offline would be strictly for research reasons and nothing else. The wording of the questions was modified and other questions added (see section 3.3.3). Consent forms were printed and given out to interviewees at the beginning of each interview (see Appendices C and D).

In tandem with interviews conducted with chat room users, a second set of (seven) interviews was carried out with people from (offline) Kuwaiti society (3 male and 4 female interviewees, all of whom are personal friends). The purpose of these interviews was to cross-check some of the cultural interactional patterns (for example, greeting patterns) that are employed in chat rooms against those that are used in offline public settings (see Appendix B for the questions used). It is worth noting that the set of interviews that was carried out with interviewees from (offline) Kuwaiti society has not been given greater emphasis in this study as these interviews were mainly conducted to provide background information and clarification of certain norms of interaction used in the Kuwaiti culture, especially ones that form the focus of this study.

3.3.3 Interview design

The interviews that were designed for chat room users consisted of five parts relating to the research areas which form the focus of the present study. They also took into account the routine interview sequence of ‘warm-up’, main body, and ‘cool-off’ phases (see Robson 2002: 277). These questions were presented in the following format:

Interview questions

1. Warm-up

1.1 Why do you like logging into Kuwaiti chat rooms?

1.2 Why do you think other users like to log into Kuwaiti chat rooms?

2. Main body

a. *Nicknames*

2.1 What do you think of these nicknames? [Show list of nicknames used in experiment, see Table 6.5]

2.2 What important features should a nickname have in order to stand out?

b. *Chat room interactional strategies*

2.3 Why do users greet one another upon entering a chat room?

2.4 Why do some users justify themselves upon exiting a chat room?

2.5 Why are these terms often used between same and opposite sex users? [Show list of endearment terms, see Table 4.3]

2.6 What are the language features that users employ to create a playful atmosphere in the chat room?

2.7 Do users employ frequent sarcastic mockery and teasing when interacting with one another? If so, why?

c. *Gendered identity*

2.8 What are the speech-style characteristics of a popular user?

2.9 Which of the following types of user do you see yourself as embodying? [Clarify identity features to users]

- To male users: Do you identify yourself as a “Muscle Flexor” or a “Public Speaker”?

- To female users: Do you identify yourself as a “Sweet Talker” or a “Natural Femininity”?

2.10 Are the above chat room user identity types representative of the users that attend the Kuwaiti chat rooms in Chit-chat?

3. Cool-off

3.1 Have you had any unusual or interesting chat room experience that you would like to contribute?

3.3.4 Interview locale

All interviews took place in the neutral and friendly atmosphere of coffee shops, more specifically, in different branches of Starbucks coffee shops. It is worth mentioning here that gender mixing in Starbucks is not perceived as a breach of gender norms in Kuwait (see Chapter 1). Moreover, the coffee shop setting permitted transparent, face-to-face contact with the interviewees compared with the pilot online interviews (see section 3.3.1). Additionally, meeting offline was more time-efficient since it eliminated lag (the delay in communication), which is inevitable in online communication.

The interviews were semi-structured, and while I initiated the conversation and used appropriate questions to obtain research-relevant information about chat room discourse, the interviews that were conducted with male users were, in general, not as straightforward and consistent as those conducted with female users. This is mainly due to the fact that male users wished to use the opportunity to “mingle” with a person from the opposite sex (me). I was therefore constantly repeating the phrase ‘well, to get back to the questions of this interview’ in a friendly, but business-like manner. Generally however, interviews with male users were just as fruitful and insightful as those conducted with female users; they simply consumed more time and required more patience on my part.

The interviews were semi-structured in that the questions not only initiated responses but also resulted in the provision of information that derived as extensions of

the original questions. For example, question 2.2 (What important features should a nickname have in order to stand out?) permitted a male interviewee (*Ali*) to elaborate on the issue of how nicknames are used as commodities in the chat room culture (see Chapter 6).

One of the interviews with online users was held in a group form (somewhat like a focus group). Two female users and one male user agreed to participate in a group interview in order to exchange ideas on the chat room culture. This specific interview lasted 45 minutes compared with all other one-to-one interviews, which lasted on average from one to two hours. The group interview was not as fruitful as the one-to-one interviews, possibly because the interviewees did not know one another and were therefore self-conscious at being put in a face-to-face mixed-sex interactional situation, one which they may have not been accustomed to.

3.4 A quantitative angle

Quantitative research typically entails ‘the collection of numerical data, as exhibiting a view of the relationship between theory and research as deductive and a predilection for a natural science approach [...], and as having an objectivist conception of social reality’ (Bryman 2008: 140). Quantitative research is preoccupied with measuring a concept for three main reasons: to delineate fine distinctions between people based on the characteristics being examined, to provide a consistent instrument for gauging such distinctions, and to produce more accurate estimates of how concepts are related (2008: 144). Swan (2002) points to the role of quantitative research in interpreting language and gender data, which provides ‘systematic comparison between types of female/male

speakers'¹⁷ (2002: 50). More specifically, according to Dubois and Sankoff (2001: 282), 'the purpose of the quantitative method is to highlight the socio-cultural meaning of linguistic variation and the nature of the relationships among the linguistic aspects in probabilistic terms'. Cameron (2001) argues that conducting questionnaires is an effective way of yielding a statistical digest of participants' responses when engaging in sociolinguistic quantitative research. But she adds that face-to-face interviews in which a researcher takes part in in-depth discussions with a sample of people he or she is interested in is equally effective for qualitatively exploring recurring themes in sociolinguistics (2001: 14). However, she warns that both approaches have accuracy risks because 'whether in face-to-face interviews or by compiling a written form' participants may be 'telling the researcher what they think s/he wants to hear or what they would like her/him to believe' (2001: 14, also see Johnstone 2000).

In the present study two sets of quantitative measurements were carried out. The purpose of the first measurement was to gauge the reoccurrence of the interactional features *greetings* and *endearments* during chat room communication in order to point out their salience and to determine whether male users employ these features more than female users, or vice versa. This was done by recording the number of times that greeting or endearment expressions were used in a given chat room during a designated time and date. The purpose of the second set of measurement was to form an idea of the tendency of chat room users to favour certain nickname categories over others; this was done by carrying out a test and an experiment. The test involved recording the number of different

¹⁷ Often quantitative methods have been linked to variationist studies, see for example Labov 1966, Macaulay 1978, and Newbrook 1982.

chat room nicknames that appeared in 5 specific chat rooms (The_Seafarers, Kuwait_Love_2009, Happy_Days, Fun_N_Kuwait, and Fantasy_World) on a designated time and date. The second test involved a small-scale experiment given to interviewees to illustrate the desirability of certain nickname categories over others (see section 3.4.1). All quantitative analysis was complemented with qualitative analysis compiled from instances of chat room interaction and observation over the one-year period, and in-person feedback from chat room interviewees (18 in all).

3.4.1 Nickname experiment

A small-scale experiment was carried out to identify features of popular chat room nicknames. The purpose of this experiment was mainly to cross-check features of gendered chat room identity as determined by analysis of the discourse against user perceptions of nickname characteristics that were elicited during interviews. The experiment consisted of 7 female nicknames and 1 male nickname that were devised based on nickname characteristics elicited during chat room pilot observation. These nickname characteristics were classified and a typology of nicknames created building on Bechar-Israeli's nickname typology (2006: 5, also see section 6.2). Most of the nicknames were also presented with a corresponding picture¹⁸, apart from one nickname, which appeared with no image (see Table 6.5 in Chapter 6). One of the significant nicknames (Nathya_Woow) was tested with three variables: twice with different pictures and once without a picture. Eleven nicknames were tested in total.

¹⁸ Each chat room user has a personal profile in which he or she can provide information and pictures about themselves. The user may decide if he or she wants other users to access their profile by either banning public access to it or leaving it open to the public.

The pictures that appeared with the female nicknames represented women either in provocative images, and more neutral (gender-free) images (see Table 6.5 in Chapter 6). The male nickname (also tested in this experiment), on the other hand, appeared with the image of a man symbolising “machismo”. The idea behind the choices of these images was formulated during the pilot observational period in which I became aware that images may affect the nature of interaction between two users from the opposite sex. The reason behind testing only 1 male nickname in comparison with 10 female nicknames was that based on my pilot observation of chat rooms, I noted that female users very rarely initiated interaction with male users and hence testing more than 1 male nickname would have been pointless. And indeed, the male nickname did not attract any female user attention during the experiment (see section 6.4).

On 11 consecutive days at the same time (7 pm) I simultaneously accessed the same three chat rooms (The_Seafarers, Kuwait_Love_2009, and Happy_Days) for 2 hours with a different nickname and its corresponding picture. The idea was to investigate how many male nicknames would invite me (a female user with a female nickname) to a private room for one-to-one interaction (see Chapter 6, Table 6.5). During the one-to-one interaction with male users in private chat rooms, and after having informed them of my research intentions, I would ask them about their perception of the chosen nickname. This experiment therefore enabled me to investigate nickname popularity directly as well as understand the characteristics involved in the choice of the gendered identity that is being constructed.

3.5 Methodological and cultural issues

Some of the challenges encountered while carrying out this research study are discussed in this section, but firstly, it is worth noting some of the positive outcomes. The fact that the data in this study present both spoken and written online chat rather than simply written chat is a relatively new feature of data collected from online settings (see Cameron 2001: 27, Herring 1993, and Herring 2001). Furthermore, it is doubtful whether data from naturally occurring interaction between Kuwaiti men and women can be collected from any other mixed-sex setting in Kuwait.

Generally the Internet remains a fairly new medium of interaction and although it provides a rich potential resource in terms of data, it is problematic and not straightforward when it comes to privacy (see Cameron 2001: 26). The present research has been approved by the Ethics Committee of my academic institution (QMREC2009/37), and yet one may continue to debate the ethics of online data collection. In my case, I would argue that although chat room users were often unaware that their spoken and text chats were being recorded, neither their privacy nor any personal information related to them has been compromised for the following reasons:

- The Internet's network name, the chat room names, and the chat room user nicknames have all been replaced by pseudonyms.
- The spoken examples in this study are transcribed in written form and therefore chat room user voices have been kept away from public view.
- The administrators of the chat rooms were informed and therefore were aware of my presence and the fact that I was collecting data for the present study.
- Interviewees were informed of the research purpose and given consent forms.

- Given that users constantly enter and exit rooms, often in large numbers at any given moment in time, it is difficult to inform all users of my presence and of my research intentions.
- Finally, and most importantly, the Kuwaiti chat rooms under investigation are to a large extent a public sphere, since anyone is permitted to access this Internet space and, moreover, chat room users have numerous methods of transforming chat room interaction into a private exchange, either by using the “whisper” option, using a private chat room, or by locking a given chat room and hence allowing access only via a secret pin code.

My role during the chat room interactions I investigated could be criticized because it was mainly passive. Ideally, I would have taken a more active part in chat room participation by joining a chat group and becoming a regular and trusted chat pal while also fulfilling my role as a researcher. However, I was concerned that my participation in chat room interaction would somehow sway the direction of this interaction towards my research goals or personal intentions and thus result in biased data.

To overcome the lack of female interviewees it may have been advisable to enlist help from a male research assistant who could approach chat room female users. But even then, female users may have only agreed to participate in online interviews, which would not have been as effective as offline meeting.

A final point is that most of the cultural information about Kuwaiti society presented here, as well as the current process of social change in Kuwait, was taken from print media, such as newspaper and magazine articles – and occasionally cartoons. Relying on such documentary sources as data, in comparison to data from more empirical

research-based academic sources, is due to a paucity in the literature that addresses issues about Kuwait's more recent social landscape.

3.6 Conclusion

Chapter 3 constitutes an important component in the understanding of the present study since not only does it describe the methods that were utilized but also the unique sociolinguistic setting in which computer-mediated communication occurs. The setting, the interaction between participants, and the communicative features that I examine in this study are different from interactional norms that occur in the more common face-to-face discourse that forms the focus of mainstream sociolinguistic research (and therefore the background information that this chapter provides is essential to understanding the cultural contexts of this research).

The following chapters (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) illustrate the different chat room interactional strategies that are salient features of the chat room community being investigated. Also of interest is how these strategies interplay with core chat room norms and goals, such as experimenting with and performing gendered identities, gaining chat room popularity, and establishing solidarity and maintaining ties between community members.

CHAPTER 4

ONLINE INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES

4.0 Introduction

Chat room interaction among friends is similar in many ways to real-life interaction in Kuwait. When friends greet each other in daily exchanges offline, they use elaborate formulaic expressions (see examples given throughout this chapter) as well as diminutives and nicknames of one another's names as symbols of endearment. Similarly, in chat rooms, users employ such interactional strategies for the same interactional purposes. The difference is that in chat rooms, users tend to intensify greeting formulae and use more endearments than in real life. For this reason, chat room interaction should be seen as context-dependent in nature and needs to be examined with that in mind (as discussed in Chapter 2).

In order to interpret the meaning of an exchange, one has to realize that often the same expressions used online in mixed interaction cannot be used offline due to gender segregation norms in Kuwaiti society. It is also of note that online interaction relies heavily on common cultural norms and shared background knowledge and practices among users, including those practices that are chat room-oriented in and of themselves. Therefore, expressions and exchanges must be seen within the chat room context. Furthermore, interactional features such as greetings, leave-takings, and endearments in this computer-mediated communication modality are used as strategies to achieve important shared goals among male and female users.

In this chapter, I focus on formulaic expressions (4.1), greetings as well as leave-takings, and examine the use of terms of endearments between chat room users (4.2).

These two interactional features are quantified to highlight their salience in chat room interaction as well as to distinguish gendered preferences of usage.

4.1 Formulaic expressions in greetings, leave-takings and endearments

Kuwait, like many countries in the Gulf region (also in Mediterranean countries such as Turkey and Greece; see Tannen 1989), takes pride in its large register of formulaic expressions. Frequent use has prevented these culture-bound, formulaic words and phrases from dying. Indeed, in some contexts, such expressions are used more than usual; one such case is the Internet chat environment being examined. Upon entering the Kuwaiti chat rooms in Chit-chat initially, I was fascinated by the array of formulaic greetings (e.g., *sabah il asal* ‘a morning of honey’) and expressions of endearment that were freely used among and between male and female users – the latter (endearments) being a language feature that is not common in the social conventions of mixed-sex interaction offline. For example, in the case of endearments, it is not uncommon for men offline to address each other as *habibi*, ‘my love’, or *habib albi*, ‘love of my heart’, nor is this interactional style uncommon among women (Alfuzai 2008: 7). But it is considered taboo in offline settings if used between a man and woman who are not married or related to one another. And yet, here in this online setting, expressions of endearment are used in abundance between male and female users (see section 4.3.2). Like other traditional expressions such as greetings and leave-takings, endearments are one of the integral norms of the interaction in this chat room community.

Generally, all formulaic expressions such as greetings, leave-takings, and terms of endearment that are used in chat rooms are meant to suggest a harmonious flow of

solidarity, intimacy, and more importantly, politeness (which will be elaborated on in 4.3.1, drawing from Brown and Levinson's notion of "positive politeness"¹⁹ (1978: 101)). Given that, as the principle of politeness in Kuwait is closely intertwined with socio-cultural norms, it is implicitly understood as a "cultural obligation" among Kuwaitis. Like other traditional practices, politeness needs to adhere to gender norms. Both men and women are obliged to be polite and show respect within their segregated, social circles of interaction. This is not an option or a choice. Furthermore, many ritualized routines and their corresponding formulaic responses are situational as well as highly gendered and context-dependent. Failing to respond to a traditional formulaic expression with the appropriate reply is a critical violation of interactional "responsibility" towards a hearer (cf. Tannen 1989: 38–44). In 4.2, I discuss greetings and leave-takings as norms of interaction; however, since leave-takings are not as significant as greetings within chat room interaction, relatively more emphasis is placed on greetings than on leave-takings.

4.2 Greetings (and leave-takings)

4.2.1 Identifying greetings

With the establishment of the importance of greeting rituals both religiously and culturally for Kuwaiti society, some of the linguistic literature on greetings, starting with the definition of a greeting, will be explored in order to identify chat room greeting formulae and their functions. Goffman (1967) defines greetings as presenting 'a way of

¹⁹ According to Brown and Levinson, positive politeness is the expression of solidarity represented through 'normal linguistic behavior between intimates, where interest and approval of each other's personality, presuppositions indicating shared wants and shared knowledge, implicit claims to reciprocity of obligations or to reflexivity of wants, etc. are routinely exchanged' (1978:101).

showing that a relationship is still what it was at the termination of the previous co-participation' (1967: 41). He adds that greetings are considered a 'characteristic obligation' that are part of the 'face work' in many social relationships. By supporting the addressee's face, the speaker prevents the breakdown of a relationship and hence guarantees that the addressee will show support to his or her face in return (1967: 42). Greetings are therefore not just about maintaining encounters for the sake of the 'others' and how the speaker intends to treat them, but equally about how the 'self' is positively presented in front of an audience or an addressee. It is what Goffman calls 'good demeanour' (1967: 77). Goffman's strategies of face maintenance depict, very well, the way in which the meaning of utterances in an interaction emerges. The meaning that takes place in a greeting exchange thus creates what Schiffrin (1994) identifies as the 'self/other chain of reciprocity', in which an utterance in an exchange 'receives part of its meaning from what another person offered before, and gives part of its meaning back to that other person to use in what comes next' (1994: 352, also see Duranti 1997: 245). Furthermore, greetings are considered an expressive type of speech act 'aimed at the courteous indication of recognition of the other party' (Searle and Vanderveken 1985: 216, as cited in Duranti 2001: 210).

Greetings occur between friends and relatives as well as between acquaintances and strangers. In Youssouf *et al's* (2007) work on greetings in the desert, they identify the different participants that take part in three different encounters: 'those with familiars, those with persons we know of but whom we have not met, and those with unknown strangers' (1976: 800). They also point to the different spaces in which these encounters occur 'on our territory, on the other's territory, or on *neutral* territory' (1976: 800). In the

segments of chat room interaction examined, it will be shown that greetings do indeed take place with users who are familiar to one another, users who are known to members of a given chat room but rarely participate (i.e., lurkers, see Chapters 3 and 7), and users who have recently entered the chat room for the first time, either wanting to participate with room members or simply as lurkers.

Another feature that plays a key role in identifying greeting formulae is their function. Duranti (1997) proposes that unlike what has been claimed in the literature on greetings, they are not just ritual expressions whose social function is to acknowledge another person's presence. That is to say, greetings are not simply expressions that lack 'propositional content' or 'referential value'. He argues that researchers should pay attention to the content of greetings and listen to 'what people talk about during greetings' (1997: 66). After reviewing sociolinguistic and ethnographic-oriented literature on greetings (Firth 1972, Goffman 1972, Searle and Vanderveken 1985, Schegloff and Sacks 1973 and Goody 1972, among others), Duranti sums up six recurring characteristics to be used as criteria for identifying greetings in a speech community. He then uses these criteria in his work on Samoan greetings, not simply to identify the different types of salutation but to prove that not all greetings are predictable or devoid of denotational value. These criteria are (1997: 68–71):

1. Greetings usually occur at the beginning of a social encounter.
2. Greetings are expressed immediately after the greeter visually recognises the greetee, or in the case of users in chat rooms, as soon as a user sights the nickname of another user in a given room.

3. Most greetings have a sequential format, that is, they occur in the form of an adjacency pair or a greeting and its response.
4. Greeting expressions can be formulaic, predictable, and therefore usually carry little propositional content or convey any new information (a point that Duranti attempts to disprove).
5. In most cases a greeting represents a spatio-temporal unit. It will have reference factors that are specific to time (morning/afternoon/evening; as in ‘good morning’, for instance) or the type of speech event depending on the place it occurs in (formal/informal).
6. In uttering a greeting the speaker conveys to the recipient that he or she is a person worth his or her (the speaker’s) recognition, as opposed to a person whom the speaker avoids or ignores.

I will now begin my discussion of greeting and leave-taking rituals in Kuwaiti offline settings and then shift my attention to greetings and leave-takings as ritual chat room practices to which I will attempt to apply Duranti’s greeting criteria.

4.2.2 Greetings and leave-takings in Kuwait (offline)

‘If someone greets you, either return the greeting or greet him better, for God takes everything into account.’ (Surah IV, verse 86)

Kuwaiti Arabic has a sizable number of greetings and response formulae, most of which have both a religious and cultural dimension. As suggested above, in a verse of the Holy Quran, Muslims are required to respond to a greeting either with a similar form or with a more intense (i.e., warmer) greeting. In his work on Syrian politeness formulae, Ferguson (1976) explains that many greeting exchanges in Arabic follow this simple principle of ‘the same or more so’ (1976: 143). He uses an example of the informal *marhaba* ‘hello’ used in Syrian Arabic, and also in many other Arabic dialects including Kuwaiti Arabic, to which the response is *marhabtain*, ‘two hellos’, or *marahib*, ‘hellos’, or even *meet marhaba*, ‘a hundred hellos’ (1976: 143).

In addition, in Kuwaiti Arabic a simple greeting such as ‘good morning’ can come in many variations: the universally Islamic greeting *salalmu alaimkum* (‘peace be upon you’), the common Arabic greeting *sabah il khair* (‘good morning’), the Kuwaiti traditional greeting *sabahkom allah bil khair* (‘may God grant you a good morning’), or the humorous or friendly *sabah il assal* (‘a morning of honey’) or *sabah il ward* (‘a morning of flowers’), and finally, the Western greeting ‘Hi’. These different types of greeting are reciprocated by an appropriate response formula. How and what is said during a greeting ritual presupposes and entails a particular approach to the rest of the social encounter. In other words, very often the type of greeting uttered identifies a person as being religious, traditional or modern, or even Western. Depending on the initial greeting expression the appropriate response is expected to follow, which is why greeting-greeting patterns are referred to as ‘adjacency pairs’ (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Leave-taking also occurs in the form of an adjacency pair with the second part indicating

an acknowledgement that the exchange has come to an end and the participants will depart each other's company.

Schegloff and Sacks define adjacency pairs as consisting of sequences that have the following features:

1. The utterance length.
2. Adjacency positioning of component utterances.
3. Different speakers producing each utterance.
4. Relative ordering of parts (i.e., first pair part precedes the second pair part).
5. Discriminative relations (i.e., the pair type of which a first pair part as a member is relevant to the selection among second pair parts). (Schegloff and Sacks 1973, extracted from Jaworski and Coupland 2006: 264)

The following types of greetings and their appropriate responses illustrate instances of adjacency pairs:

- Religious greetings – *asalamu alaikum* ('peace be upon you') => *alaikum alsalam* ('peace be upon you too').
- Traditional greetings – *massakum Allah bil khair* ('may God grant you with a good evening') => *massakum Allah bil nour* ('may God grant you an evening of light').
- Humorous and affectionate greetings – *massaa il ward* ('an evening of flowers') => *massaa il ful* ('an evening of jasmine').
- Modern (informal) greetings – hi => hello, or hi.

Greetings are not simply routine expressions. A greeting tends to reflect characteristics of the greeter's identity, but equally important, often the greeting variation used in a given exchange will depend on the recipient to whom it is said, as well as on the setting in which it occurs (cf. Hymes 1972). For example, in Kuwaiti society if a woman enters a female tea gathering she would use either the religious or traditional greeting (see above). But if she is meeting her girlfriend in a coffee shop then she is more likely to use the modern, informal 'hi' greeting or the humorous greeting (see above). Upon entering a female funeral, however, only the religious greeting is appropriate. *Who* the participants involved are, *where* the exchange is taking place, and the *purpose* of the greeting are key variables that have a bearing on the choice of greeting in a given speech event or situation.

In addition to a greeting expression requiring its appropriate response, the response should equal the initial greeting in its intensity, as perceived by the interactants and as expressed both by verbal and gestural cues. In other words, if the greeter elongates the final vowel in a traditional greeting such as, *halla* 'hi' into *hallaaa*, or gives the greetee a warm handshake or embrace with one kiss on each cheek, or a rub of noses while greeting, then the 'greetee' has to reciprocate with the same vowel elongation or warmth of handshake or embrace. This realization by the greetee has to happen within a matter of seconds after the initiator of the greeting starts the greeting ritual. Furthermore, a proper or common way of greeting does not stop at the initial greeting and its response. It usually takes the form of a chain of adjacency pairs or formulaic exchanges between two participants in an interaction (Schiffrin 1994: 352), as in Example 4.2.

A final point about offline greetings is that it is considered a grave social transgression in Kuwaiti society not to greet people. It is worth noting that a hand wave, a nod, a smile or a flash of eyebrows are gestures that do not substitute for appropriate verbal greetings in Kuwait. In fact, if a person should enter a public or private setting without a verbal greeting expression, those present would immediately reprimand the newcomer with a traditional expression *ilsalam lallah*, meaning ‘if it is not us you wish to greet, at least greet God’. This expression also applies if a person enters a place and his or her greeting is reciprocated with silence, in which case he or she would utter the same expression to display discontent.

With regard to leave-taking, it is associated more with the structural organization of an exchange than it is considered a social ritual (such as greetings). Leave-taking usually indicates the closure of an exchange, and although it is important in an exchange, it does not have to be as elaborate or intense as a greeting. Additionally, unlike greetings, leave-takings will at times be accompanied by a justification for parting, especially when interacting with close ones. Justifications for leaving are especially interesting during interaction between participants in a network of friends or a chat room group. This is mainly because one member from the group or more will try to discourage the person who is leaving from parting with them.

4.2.3 Chat room greetings

In this section, I examine a chat room which I refer to as ‘The_Seafarers’. This chat room comprises 101 male users, only 50 of whom participated in text chat, and 44 female users, only 27 of whom were active participants (i.e., the rest of the users were lurkers).

A two-hour and fifteen-minute chat room verbal interaction segment was recorded and its equivalent (written) text was saved on file for analysis. Therefore, the data being examined for the analysis of greetings are represented in both verbal and written chat room interaction sequences.

For the examination of greeting rituals in Kuwaiti chat rooms, I draw upon Duranti's six greeting-identification criteria. Identifying greetings enables one to grasp who is greeting whom among chat room participants, how users greet one another, and why they greet one another in a certain manner. Greeting norms in different settings both online and offline in Kuwait are occasionally compared in order to establish whether there are differences in socio-cultural norms between online and offline greetings.

After transcribing and examining the data of written and spoken chat from the chat room 'The_Seafarer', the greetings in the chat exchanges were grouped into three different types of greeting:

1. Religious greetings, which are variations of, or more accurately, different lengths of the formal Islamic greeting universally used in the Arab world: *asalamu aliakum wa rahmatu allahi wa barakatuh* (long version) 'peace and Allah's mercy and blessings be upon you', *asalamu aliakum wa rahmatu allahi* (shorter version) 'peace and Allah's mercy be upon you', *asalamu aliakum* (even shorter version) 'peace be upon you', and *salam* (the shortest version of all four greetings) 'peace'.

2. Traditional greetings are more culture-specific to Kuwait. These may also include the name of God in the form of blessings as well as reference factors such as the time of the day (see Nydell 2006: 199–201, for greeting rituals among Arabs). These greetings can also vary in terms of the intensity in which they are uttered, mostly through the elongation of the final vowel as in *Halaaa*, as well as repetition of the greeting expression, as in *Hala hala hala* (as mentioned above). The data also show that certain greeting types may identify the social distance between speaker and addressee. For example, *massakum allah bil khair* ('may God grant you a good evening') can be shortened to *allah bil khair* ('may God grant you goodness'), which is more informal than the longer version and hence appropriately used among close friends. Additionally, the repetition of greeting expressions such as, *Hallaaa*, *halla walla*, *halla ou ghalla* ('Hellooo', 'really hello' and 'hello o dear one'), are all uttered in the same greeting sequence in order to intensify a greeting (recall Ferguson's 'same or more principle' mentioned earlier).

3. Chat room greetings are more specific to the context of computer-mediated communication. In other words, such greetings make use of actual chat room terminology that is used universally. For example, the English word 'welcome' is also used in Arabic (pronounced *wailkam*) and commonly used to greet users upon logging into chat rooms. In tandem with intensifying greetings, the word 'welcome' is converted to suit Arabic grammar structure and phonology. In order to change it into the Arabic plural verb, a suffix is added to it and it becomes

walaakim meaning ‘welcomes’. Another type of greeting can also be included under this category, namely, ‘hi’, which is considered not only informal but also modern or western and may even be offensive or cause ridicule when uttered in certain (cultural) settings offline. ‘Hi’ was not placed in a category on its own because it is an uncommon type of greeting in the examples I looked at.

To gauge the importance of greetings in Kuwaiti chat rooms, I analysed a stretch of written and spoken chat from the chat room ‘The_Seafarers’. I had permission to introduce three topics as chat room discussions: 1) What would you do if you won a million dinars?, 2) What would you do if you learnt you had one month to live?, and 3) Who are better speakers on the microphone, male or female users? These topics were introduced to initiate naturally occurring discussion, which would allow me to examine greetings during the exchanges. To introduce a topic, the administrators usually ask users in the audience what they want to talk about, which often takes a long time before users decide whether they all like the introduced topic. Even when users agree on a topic of discussion, a short while after it is introduced some users may complain that the topic is boring or unsuitable. Therefore, when the administrator accepted my request and took on the task of introducing these three general (neutral) topics, users seemed satisfied and the discussion lasted over two hours and fifteen minutes. I used this stretch of chat to record the number of times greetings were used between male and female user.

Based on the types of greeting observed in this stretch of written and spoken chat, the frequency of greetings was quantified to find out whether or not there were preferences for certain types of greeting and whether these preferences were gender-

oriented. It was also necessary to establish whether male users greeted more than female users or vice versa. Shedding light on these aspects of greeting practices will identify differences between stereotypical male and female behaviour in offline society and whether there are representations of such behaviour in chat rooms online. Finally, greetings need to be situated as one of the important interactional features in maintaining social relations and establishing rapport among chat room users. For this last point, it was necessary to examine what was actually being said in greeting exchanges. In the next part of my discussion, I present data from the recorded sample of both text and spoken exchanges.

Table 4.1 shows the number of occurrences for each type of greeting. The number of male and female users who were active in this segment, as opposed to the idle users or lurkers, were 50 active male users out of 101 (i.e., half were idle) and 27 active female users out of 44.

	(50) Male Users	(27) Female Users	Total Greetings by Type
Religious Greetings	106	105	211
Traditional Greetings	174	108	282
Chat Room Greetings	249	107	356
Total Greetings by Gender	529	320	849

Table 4.1 The frequency of three types of greeting during text chat in The_Seafarers

The greeting repetitions shown in Table 4.1 demonstrate that the total text exchange greetings were 849, which, considering the number of users involved in text chat (77 in

total), is quite substantial for a two-hour and fifteen-minute segment. Figure 4.1 shows higher greeting repetitions by female users especially in terms of religious and cultural greetings. On the other hand, male users employed more chat room-specific greetings than female users, but this could partly be because during that particular sample of chat room interaction, a designated male administrator was responsible for greeting and welcoming all newcomers into the room by mainly using the chat room greeting token. Figure 4.1 illustrates the distribution of greetings in correlation with the number of male and female users.

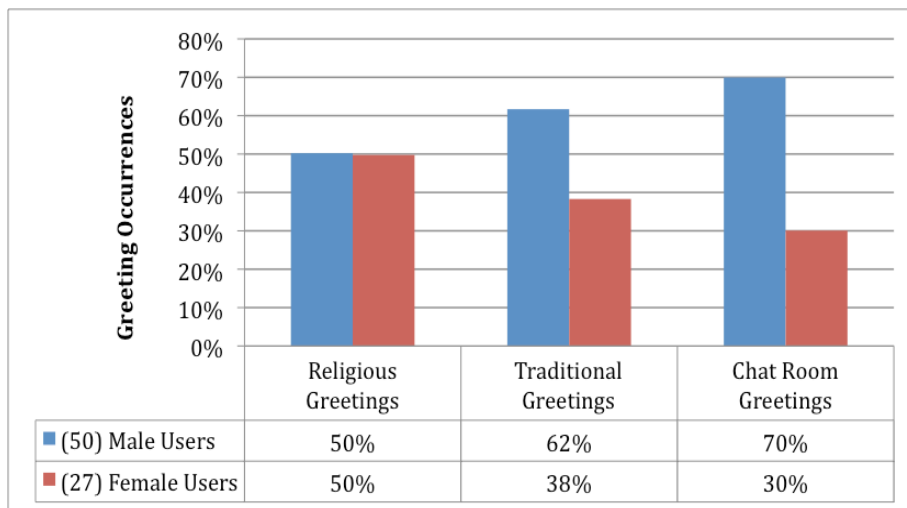


Figure 4.1 The distribution of greeting occurrences during text chat in The_Seafarers.

In comparison, however, when examining the greeting repetitions in the *spoken* segment, female users tended to have different greeting practices (see Table 4.2). As shown in Table 4.2, during this spoken exchange there were only 3 female speakers compared to 12 male speakers. The female users spoke for a total of 28 minutes each on the microphone out of the two hours and fifteen minutes.

	12 Male Users	3 Female Users	15 Total Users
Religious Greetings	17	9	26
Traditional Greetings	66	8	74
Chat Room Greetings	68	7	75
Total Greetings	151	24	175

Table 4.2 Greeting occurrences during spoken chat in The_Seafarers

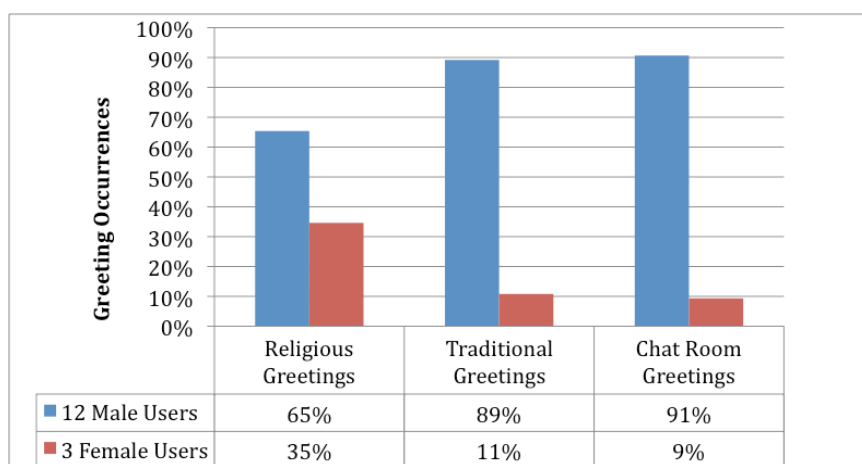


Figure 4.2 The distribution of greeting occurrences during spoken chat in The_Seafarers

Table 4.2 and Figure 4.2 clearly show that the male speakers use more greeting repetitions than the female speakers during spoken chat, even though all users were involved in the ongoing topic discussions while greeting newcomers into the room. This may be due to female users feeling more confident in greeting users in text chat rather than on the microphone (compare Figures 4.1 and 4.2). But a cultural factor needs to be considered, as well. Based on greeting patterns exercised between men in offline settings as well as feedback from male interviewees, men's greetings and their intensity are rather elaborate because in all-male public gatherings greetings are traditionally representative

of one's self-image. Therefore, the more a man wishes to build his self-image the more emphasis he places on his greeting during spoken interaction in public.

Female users tend to favour religious greetings in both text and spoken chat, perhaps because women, based on cultural convention, do not feel as confident as men when addressing a large audience and as such prefer a modest greeting (also see Excerpt 4.1). Generally, it is clear by the number of greetings that circulate in one chat room during a given period of time that greetings are an important feature of chat room discourse (see Table 4.1). However, to really understand how the greeting formulae in this sample of spoken and text chat discourse are used, an examination of what is actually said during these greetings is necessary.

What is first noticeable about chat room greetings in the particular room 'The_Seafarers' is the different variations used during text and spoken chat. Another aspect is the length and intensity of greetings (see discussion on greeting intensity earlier in 4.2.2). For text greetings, the length of the greeting was written by repeating certain vowels between three and eight times. For example, the expression 'welcome' would first be changed into Arabic (chat room) phonology *wailkamo*, then the last vowel 'o' would be elongated to produce *wailkamooooo*, which is written in Arabic text or script. Also, as mentioned earlier, the expression 'welcome' can be changed using the plural Arabic grammatical structure into *walakim*, meaning 'welcomes'. If lengthened it would be *walaaaaakim*. Similar instances include 'hi' which is lengthened into *hayaaaat* meaning 'Hi's', and in the case of leaving-taking 'bye' into *bayaaaat* meaning 'byes' (see section 4.2.4). Note that such phonological changes in greeting expressions have been established by chat room users and are usually exclusive to chat room language only and therefore do

not apply to real-life greeting instances. It is nonetheless based on the cultural norm of intensification.

As far as greetings that occur in spoken chat, these seem to have a different set of talk features from written expressions. Similar to lengthening of greetings discussed above, prosody plays an interesting and an important role in how a greeting expression is uttered by the speaker at the microphone. And like text greeting formulae, there are aspects of lengthening and repetition in how a greeting expression is uttered. For example, male speakers at the microphone usually express lively greetings to their male and female friends either by lengthening the final vowel or exaggerating the intonation contour of the greeting expression. This is clear in *halaaaa Ali* ('helloooo Ali') or by repeating the greeting several times, *hala hala hala* ('hello, hello, hello'). At times, even a user's nickname is intensified in a greeting by lengthening either the middle or the final vowel of the (actual) nickname (see Example 4.2). This particular feature of greetings is often exclusive to men and the illustrations used for this type of greeting support this (see Examples 4.1 and 4.2). In comparison, female users often prefer to convey less marked and more discreet greetings, that is, greetings without vowel lengthening, exaggerated prosody and repetition, as in Example 4.1 (although note that this has not been proved quantitatively). However, occasionally there are some confident and outspoken female speakers that do use this feature of intensifying greetings. Despite it being a male-related type of greeting, with time female users in chat rooms are becoming more proficient at making use of more intense greetings by adding prosody and final vowel lengthening to the greeting expression. This is quite acceptable in chat rooms nowadays, yet some female users (especially the female participants in the segments examined) still prefer to

sound more modest and use more formal religious greetings. According to interviewed female informants, some female users feel that using male-related, intensified greetings is unfeminine and bold as well as exhibiting cultural traits that are not favoured for women (see Excerpt 4.1). Interview Excerpt 4.1 is part of an offline interview with two female chat room users²⁰:

Excerpt 4.1

Zainab I always greet everyone when entering a chat room.

Nora Yeah, me too, even if none of my friends were there.

Zainab And I don't mind saying *Salam* ('peace') on the microphone.

But some of the girls that speak on the mic like to show off.

Nada How do they show off?

Zainab I hear them use men's ways of greeting the audience, they're like
Halaaaaa ('Hiiiiii'). Just coz they think it sounds cool.

Nora Yeah, actually to me they sound bold and masculine.

It is important to ask at this point why men greet differently to women. Greeting features such as changing intonation contours and final vowel lengthening are intentionally used by men to indicate their addressee's worth. Therefore, the more intense a greeting is, the more worthy the addressee is of the speaker's attention and friendship (see Number 6 of Duranti's (1997) greeting criteria, in section 4.2.2). These greeting characteristics must be made as audible as possible, which is why they are not commonly employed by

²⁰ Note also that a male user was present in this interview but he was silent during this excerpt.

women, who are expected to behave discreetly and with modesty in public spaces (see Chapter 1).

Using prosodic features and vowel lengthening as meaningful interactional strategies are what Gumperz (1982) refers to as ‘contextualization cues’. Gumperz explains that contextualization cues are habitual prompts that enable speakers to signal ‘contextual presuppositions’ and for listeners to acknowledge, via shared background knowledge, the meaning of the speech activity that is taking place. They indicate how word meaning is to be interpreted and how sentences equate to preceding or following ones (Gumperz 1982: 131). In other words, these cues are conversational signals that steer an interaction towards an intended direction. They enable participants to interpret the various “frames” (Goffman 1974) that are embedded in a context allowing addressees to realize if a verbal message is meant as a joke, an insult, an apology, and so on. This is done either through prosodic signals such as a change in intonation contours – as in the case of the greetings being discussed here – or tone of voice or even body language such as a smile or a wink.

A final but significant feature of verbal greetings is the use of a chain of adjacency pairs in both male and female greetings. Again, in this case, male users tend to use a longer chain of adjacency pairs than female users. Three examples (by male and female users) from spoken and text chat are provided to illustrate this point²¹:

²¹ Note that in these examples 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 there are no distinctions drawn between text and verbal chat however the examples have to be identified as ‘verbal and text chat combined’ to clarify to readers that the interaction includes a combination of simultaneous spoken and written communication.

Example 4.1 (Verbal and text chat combined)

- Latifa** (f) [user addressing the audience] *asalamu aliakum wa rahmatu allahi wa barakatuh* ‘may peace and Allah’s, mercy and blessings be upon you’
- 2
- Audience** [response by a number of male and female users via text] *wa aliakum il salam wa rahmatu allahi wa barakatuh* ‘and Allah’s mercy and blessings be upon you’
- 4
- Latifa** [does not wait for the audience’s response, and carries on immediately after her initial greeting] *massakum allah bil khair* ‘may God grant you a good evening’
- 6
- Audience** [responds to the second greeting] *massatsh allah bil noor* ‘may God grant you an evening of light’
- 8
- Latifa** [again carries on from her second greeting] *ya hala ou ya marhaba feekom* ‘hello and welcome to you all’.
- 10

Example 4.2 (Verbal and text chat combined)

- Fahad** [Male speaker sees that his male friend’s nickname – Ali – has just entered the chat room and says] *halaaaaa fik Ali, hala bil habib* ‘helloooo Ali, hello my love’
- 2
- Ali** [Responds to Fahad’s greeting via text] *hala ow ghalla* ‘hello o precious one’
- 4
- Fahad** [Greets Ali a second time] *Ali ishlonik shakhbarik?* ‘How are you Ali and what is your news?’
- 6
- Ali** [Ali responds to Fahad’s second greeting] *zain alhamdulillah* ‘Good, thank God’
- 8
- Fahad** [Carries on the greeting] *wain hal ghaibeh ya Ali, ya hala ow ya marhaba Ali* ‘Where have you been all this time Ali, hello and welcome Ali’
- 10
- Ali** [Responds] *maoujood bhadinya, inta shlonik, a’ash min shafik Fahad* ‘I’m right here in this world, but how are you, it’s good to see you Fahad’
- 12

Fahad [Carries on greeting] *imnawir ya galbi, a'ashat ayamik ya galbi Ali* 'you
 14 have brought light upon entering the room, my heart. I wish you longevity, my heart
 Ali' (meaning 'good to see you too')
 16 **Ali** [Responds] *il noor noorik habib galbi* 'the light in the room is actually your
 light, love of my heart Fahad'
 18 **Fahad** [Bringing the greeting to an end] *wainik, wallah sarli zamaan mou*
shayfik, hayak allah ya Ali, ilsaaeh ilimbarkeh 'where have you been, I haven't
 20 seen you for a while, may God welcome you, seeing you was a blessed moment
Ali [Acknowledging the end of the greeting and responding] *Allah iyhayeek, saatik*
 22 *il abrak habibi* 'may God welcome you too, my love seeing you was a blessing
 to me too my love'

Example 4.3 (Verbal and text chat combined)

Dana [Female user greets everyone upon entering the room via text] *asalamu*
 2 *alikum* 'peace be upon you'
Faisal [A male user, is among the audience and sees the nickname of his female friend,
 4 Dana, who just entered the room after having left it for a couple of hours, he
 responds via text] *Danaaaaaa, welkam back, ahleen ou sahlain Dana, wain hal*
 6 *ghaibeh, ya hala ou ya marhaba, hayatsh allah* 'Danaaaaaa, welcome back, hello
 Dana, where have you been all this time, may God welcome you'
 8 **Dana** [Responds to her friend Faisal] *halaaaaaa Faisal* 'heloooooooo Faisal'
Faisal [Responds to Dana's initial greeting] *hayash alllah, wa'alikum il salam*
 10 'May God welcome you, and peace be upon you too'

If I were to pinpoint the most salient features in all the greetings that are presented in
 Examples 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3, it would be their "elaborateness" (see in particular Example

4.2). But instead of the term “elaborateness” I prefer to use “intensity”, as this was the term used by interviewees when asked how they described their greetings. It appears that the “intensity” of a greeting depends on a number of factors and reflects several other factors simultaneously. In other words, these greetings are not just predictable formulaic expressions that occur at the beginning of an encounter or an exchange; they are dynamic and multi-dimensional expressions. Not only do they have a tendency to affect social relations, they also decide the path that an interaction will take after the greeting has been expressed. This will be discussed further but first it is necessary to illustrate initially how these greetings were identified.

Drawing once more on Duranti’s (1997) greeting criteria, it is clear that all greetings in the examples presented above occur at the beginning of ‘an interactional boundary’ (see Duranti’s Criterion 1, 1997: 68). The greeting in Example 4.1 was expressed by the user as soon as she spoke on the microphone to start her turn in chat room interaction. The greetings in Examples 4.2 and 4.3 occurred when the users in the room had spotted the nicknames of their friends upon entering the room (thus fulfilling Criterion 2). All the greetings have a sequential format. Indeed, not only do they occur in the form of adjacency pairs, but also in a chain of adjacency pairs in which some are longer than others, Example 4.2 being the longest here (see Criterion 3). One greeting was referential of time (see Example 4.1, lines 6 and 7), but all the greetings in the examples above are relatively informal in nature since the greeting exchange takes place between friends in a single setting, namely, a particular chat room (see Criterion 5). And clearly all the greetings identify the greetees as users worthy of being acknowledged and hence greeted (see Criterion 6).

But are all the greetings predictable in their formulaic structure or indeed in the intensity in which they are expressed (see Criterion 4)? And are they devoid of denotational value as the early literature on greeting rituals claims (see Duranti 1997: 64–7)? In his work on Samoan greetings, Duranti argues that not all greetings have to fit all six criteria. Also, these criteria do not provide universal insight into universal greeting rituals. But most importantly, he emphasises that some types of greeting do, in fact, add new information (regarding ‘a person’s identity or whereabouts’, as he has found for Samoan greetings), rather than simply being ‘*phatic* expressions that are merely aimed at establishing or maintaining *contact*’ (Duranti 1997: 89 and 66 respectively). Similarly, Youssouf *et al.* (2007) have found that in the Sahara, Tuareg nomads are not only obliged to acknowledge one another as they pass through the desert and hence stop to greet each other, but also that the greetings themselves, as much as they are ritualized and formulaic, are critically important since they usually convey information necessary for survival such as ‘where to camp or where water can be found’ (2007: 803).

In the case of the chat room greetings in the present data, a great deal of a greeting’s meaning relies on the fact that it is context-specific. For it is highly unlikely for men and women to exchange such types of greeting in settings offline. Indeed, the context in which a greeting occurs plays a number of roles in how intense a greeting is and how the meaning of a greeting is interpreted. Firstly, given that the context is a virtual sphere as opposed to a real-life setting, a female user can publicly greet her audience (an audience which is more than half male) with utmost confidence using traditional greetings and not limit herself to the formal, religious greeting ‘*asalamu a’alaikum*’ (see Example 4.1, lines 1 and 2 and Example 4.3, lines 1 and 2). Secondly, for

In-group members are a network of users that are regular participants in a given chat room, most of whom attend on a daily basis, and especially during weekends (see Chapter 7). These core members are therefore familiar with one another as well as with peripheral members whether newcomers or lurkers, and as such merit elaborate and intense greetings from their friends, while at the same time extending their own elaborate greetings to familiars (in this chat room community of practice). Newcomers on the other hand are users that enter a given room for the first or second time and are therefore fairly new members or unknown to regular, core members of the room; as such they are greeted formally and are themselves not confident enough to give intense greetings to the regular members (see Figure 4.3). However, according to a chat room informant: ‘it doesn’t take much to become a regular user. It’s easy to remember an attractive nickname that appears a number of consecutive times, initially making interesting contributions on the microphone but also via text’. In sum, the greeting continuum shows that the closer the users are to one another the more they need to show solidarity and “in-groupness” and hence the more a greeting is expressed in a creative and intense manner (see Figure 4.3).

These may be universal greeting behaviours across speech communities, however it has to be noted that in this case the gender variable somehow marks a difference, especially if one was to compare greeting behaviour that occurs in an online setting with those in an offline setting. The two main differences between Example 4.2, in which a male user greets his male friend, and Example 4.3, in which a male user greets his female friend, is that in the former both male users employ a number of terms of endearment and the greeting exchange is longer with multiple adjacency pairs. In Example 4.3 there are no terms of endearment accompanying the greeting and it is relatively shorter. This is not

to say that male and female users do not exchange endearments between one another in chat rooms generally. Indeed, in the present chat room as well as in many others, I have observed terms of endearment are freely exchanged between male and female users. But in some chat rooms, specifically the one being examined ('The_Seafarers'), users are careful how to use these terms and with whom. Such judicious usage of endearments is warranted by the fear of misunderstanding the endearment expression as a flirting tool, more about which will be said.

In most societies and cultures, greetings are routine formulaic expressions; in Kuwait, whether they occur in online or offline settings, at the workplace or in public settings, these formulaic expressions are expressed in a variety of ways. The way in which these rituals are carried out, and more specifically, the type of intonation that one employs during a greeting, as well as the length of the greeting (see Examples 4.2 and 4.3) and whether it is accompanied by physical contact or peppered with terms of endearment (see Example 4.2), says quite a lot about the function, meaning, and interpretation of a greeting. The function and meaning of a greeting is usually negotiated among participants in an exchange in which an intense greeting is met with an intense greeting response (see Example 4.2). Aspects of a greeting become even more significant when considered in terms of other variables co-occurring with the speech event that determine the situations within which the use of a certain greeting ritual is appropriate, such as the setting, the participants in the event, norms of appropriateness in speech behaviour, and so on. For example, using a rise-fall intonation contour with the expression *halaaa* (hellooo) as a cue to express this specific type of greeting (see Examples 4.2 and 4.3) is suggestive of positive attitudes – to be exact, surprise mixed

with happiness – and is reserved for close friends. While men conventionally limit these greetings to close male friends in everyday exchanges in offline settings, in chat rooms, these forms of greeting are being used among men as well as women as appropriate ways of greeting one another. Thus, new forms of greeting that represent an in-group's social practices are being established and negotiated by members of this community of practice. Newcomers to this community have to learn these greeting norms, since they are different from offline norms of greeting that occur in gender-segregated settings.

With such an array of greetings and such intensity in the way they are expressed, ignoring a greeting, intentionally or unintentionally, seldom goes unnoticed. During the spoken and text chats presented here there were three instances in which greetings were assumed to have been “ignored”. The offended users clearly complained that they had been ignored and hence a justification and an apology²² were given by the administrators of the room to try to remedy the situation (also see section 4.2.2 offline greetings). The importance of greetings in this virtual setting is as much about being acknowledged, respected, and included in a community as it is about establishing new friendships and maintaining old ones. In sum, greetings formulae create a sense of harmony and social closeness among users in chat rooms, bearing in mind that “gender” is not seen as forming an obstacle, as is the case in offline Kuwaiti society.

Finally, greetings are not always used as politeness formulae; they can at times have sarcastic implications, much like the remark ‘Helllooo’ in English to criticise someone's lack of attention. For example, in a recorded spoken chat segment, a female speaker warns a male user to stop flirting and making passes at her by using the greeting

²² Apologies over minor and major mishaps are common practice among male and female users in Chit-chat.

expression *Ahmed! Allah bil khair!!* ('May God grant you goodness Ahmed'). Usually, this expression is uttered in a greeting exchange, but in this case given the context of the exchange and the fact that it was uttered in the middle of the exchange, it is understood as a warning to the male user to stop his inappropriate behaviour. Obviously, a response to this expression is not expected since it does not function as a greeting.

4.2.4 Chat room leave-takings

Leave-takings are also formulaic expressions and, like greetings, some of these expressions are limited to chat room use, such as 'brb', which means 'be right back', to which the appropriate response would be 'tyt', meaning 'take your time'. Other forms of leave-taking are more traditional or similar to those used in the real world offline such as, 'ok bye everyone', 'see you later guys', or 'I've got to go'. However, unlike greetings, leave-takings are not perceived as a social obligation in online spheres, in the sense that a user is not reprimanded if he or she exits the chat room without mentioning something about parting from a group of users. Nevertheless, between members of a chat *group*, who usually amount to up to 50 percent of a given chat room, not only is an expression of leave-taking necessary, but also a justification for parting from the chat group and is expected. Furthermore, in offline situations, it is required etiquette by the host to delay the leave-taking of a guest, even if simply as a matter of expression. Similarly, between friends in chat rooms online, the person who is departing is often asked why he or she is leaving and told to return to the chat group soon. But generally, leave-takings do not occur as often as greetings, and since they are not expressions that should be used between all users, they are not given the equivalent attention as greetings.

Chat room leave-takings nonetheless are quite complex in that they also signal in-group/out-group chat room social relations between users. They are therefore special chat room interactional strategies that merit being investigated in their own right. Example 4.4 illustrates the complexity of leave-takings in chat rooms:

Example 4.4 (Verbal and text chat combined)

- Diver** (m) Ok, loves of my heart, I'll see you in 2 hours.
- 2 **Diver** Bye bye.
- Bo-Sara** (m) Diver, Where are you going?
- 4 **Carrera** (m) [the male user speaking on the microphone at the time] No Diver, it's still early, where are you going?
- 6 **Diver** Well Bo-Sara, I have to go down to our *Dywanyia*.
 Some visitors are coming to see my father.
- 8 **Diver** I'll come back to you all in a little while.
- Carrera** Are you sure you'll be back in little while?
- 10 **Diver** Yes, I'm sure.
- Diver** Brb.
- 12 **King** (m) Tyt Diver.
- Bella** (f) Tyt.
- 14 **Bo-Sara** Tyt.

(Original Arabic)

- Diver** (m) *Yalleh hhabayb gallbi, inshufkum ba'ad sa'atain.*
- Diver** (m) *Ma'asalaeh.*
- Bo-Sara**(m) *Diver wain bitrouhh?*
- Carrera** (m) *La wain Diver? Imbatshir.*

Diver *Bo-Sara banzil tahhat il dywanyia, fi zouwaar beyoun isalmoun a'ala oubouy.*

Diver *Ishway ou arja'alokum.*

Carrera *Akeed ishway ou btirja'a?*

Diver *Akeed.*

King (m) *Tyt Diver.*

Bella (f) *Tyt.*

Bo-Sara (m) *Tyt.*

What is clear from Example 4.4 is that it reflects a close friendship between *Carrera*, *Bo-Sara*, and *Diver* (see lines 3, 4 and 9). The male and female users in this example are members of a chat group and while there were many more users (25) taking part in the discussion that occurred at the time, only *Diver*'s close friends engage in this leave-taking episode. It seems that the other users in the chat room did not feel obliged to get involved. Also of note here is how *Diver* was asked by his friends not to leave and to come back quickly, while *Diver* himself felt inclined to give an explanation for his departure and a promise to come back (see lines 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8). This is why leave-takings are considered expressions that establish rapport and solidarity as well as maintain friendships among users, much like greetings.

Before focus is shifted to "terms of endearment", it is necessary here to describe the connection between greeting formulae and terms of endearment since they are often used together. Greetings and endearments in Kuwaiti interaction are closely related, which is why I link them in my discussion on formulaic expressions. Both greetings and endearments are interactional features that are seen as politeness formulae and very often endearments are tagged to the end of a greeting expression in order to intensify the greeting ritual (see Example 4.2). This is not to say, however, that a greeting would

sound cold or distant without terms of endearment. Endearments are actually favourable accessories used in greetings, as is discussed in the following section.

4.3 Endearments

4.3.1 Endearments in Kuwait

Like greetings, terms of endearment function as tokens of positive politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson 1978), solidarity, and friendliness. Much like the intensity and types of greeting discussed section 4.2, endearments are context-dependent and context-creating as well as dependent upon the relationship between speaker and hearer.

Sprinkled throughout interaction, endearments can often be signals that identify participants as belonging to a particular friendship group within a community. They are an essential component in extended greetings both online and offline (see Example 4.2). Not only do they add more intensity to a greeting and hence show the recipient how worthy they are of the speaker's attention, endearments also signal symmetry between participants in an interaction. Terms of endearment are unlikely to be employed during an interaction with superiors (of different age and/or political status) in Kuwaiti society. Online, however, since all users consider themselves of equal status – no matter who they are offline – endearment formulae are a friendship necessity. And yet, they do need to be interpreted in terms of the goals they seek to achieve.

To understand how formulaic endearments function, who uses them, and with whom, it was necessary to divide the different terms into three types of endearment: religious, traditional, and affectionate endearments. Firstly, *religious endearments* are actually prayers or blessings that are conveyed to the recipient as attention-getters and

tokens of courtesy. Also, the use of religious expressions in Kuwait is often a sign of showing good intentions, intentions that are essentially free of any coveting or jealousy²³. Secondly, *traditional endearments* are by and large formulaic address terms, some of which are traditionally used to mark status in Kuwaiti society. One such term is *tal o'umrik* ('may you be blessed with longevity') which is used by men when addressing male political superiors and royalty, although currently this term has a broader usage and is a common humorous expression among male friends. Thirdly, affectionate endearments are expressions commonly used between lovers or intimates but are also used generously among all-male and all-female social groups, especially among friends in both offline and online spheres. One of the most common terms is *habibi* (for men) and *habibti* (for women), meaning 'my love' or 'my darling'. In chat rooms, affectionate endearments are by far the most widely used type of endearment, especially among male users (see Example 4.2). They are multi-dimensional terms since they may be used with negative implications just as they would positive ones. For example, Kuwaiti women often use endearments between each other in situations of conflict in offline settings (see discussion in final part of section 4.3.2).

4.3.2 Chat room endearments

Like section 4.2.3 on chat room greetings, the same data (i.e., the same stretches of verbal and written chat, number of participants, period of interaction, and chat room – The_Seafarers) have been used to analyse the use of endearments in chat rooms.

²³ Coveting and jealousy are widespread behaviours in Kuwaiti society and are also resented.

By dividing endearments into three types, it was possible to establish how often they occurred during the two hours and fifteen minutes of the text-exchange segment, and whether their usage was gendered. This would in turn shed light on the various functions of endearments in the chat room ‘The_Seafarers’ as well as the negotiated intentions behind their usage or lack thereof. Table 4.3 and Figure 4.4 illustrate the number of endearment repetitions by male and female users during the entire text-exchange segment.

	(50) Male Users	(27) Female Users	Total Users
Religious Endearments	7	3	10
Traditional Endearments	47	17	64
Affectionate Endearments	96	11	107
Total Endearments	150	31	181

Table 4.3 Endearment occurrences during text chat in The_Seafarers

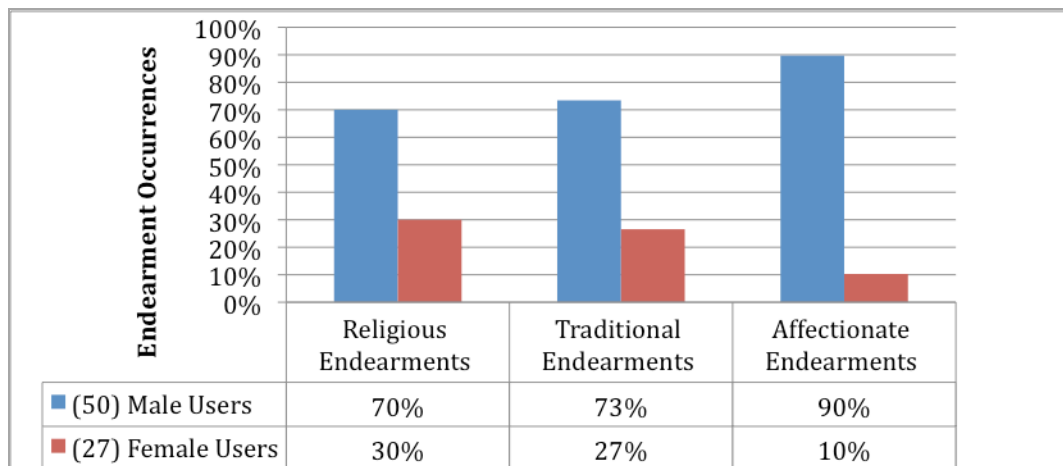


Figure 4.4 The distribution of endearment occurrences during text chat in The_Seafarers.

From Table 4.3 and Figure 4.4, it emerges that male users are more comfortable in using terms of endearment. This is understandable considering the number of male users taking part in this segment is much higher than that of female users. In relative terms, however, the use of terms of endearment by women in this chat room context is significantly lower than use by men (by a ratio of 1:3). According to two female chat room users I interviewed, not using endearments as often as male users was not a question of confidence as much as it was intended to 'avoid sending out wrong signals to men in the chat room'. In other words, the female users usually 'play it safe' by using traditional endearments which have no way of being misunderstood as immodest or flirtatious (as is illustrated in both Table 4.3 and Figure 4.4).

In general, the total number of endearments in the text chat in this particular segment was a staggering 181, and more than half (105) of these endearments co-occurred with greeting rituals. This illustrates the important role that endearments have in relation to greeting expressions. In addition, the fact that so many terms of endearment were used in this mixed-sex setting naturally set the scene for a heterosexual environment, even though most of them were conveyed to same-sex recipients. Male informants I have interviewed believe that the purpose of affectionate endearments in chat rooms is mostly as expressions of intimacy, but that with time they may be negotiated so that they lose enough of their intimate literal meaning to be used more freely among men and women. Their usage would therefore shift from terms used intimately among lovers to ones that are employed only for maintaining good social relationships among friends within this chat room community.

Interestingly in this case, it is the gendered usage of endearments represented by the ratio of male-to-female usage as opposed to female-to-male usage that is worth considering. As shown in Table 4.4 occurrences of male-to-female endearment are relatively higher (28 endearments) than those by female-to-male (only 4 endearments). In comparison, female-to-male endearments were mostly of the traditional type (see Table 4.4).

	Male-to-female (50 participants)	Female-to-male (27 participants)
Religious Endearments	2	2
Traditional Endearments	2	11
Affectionate Endearments	28	4

Table 4.4 Gendered endearment occurrences during text chat in The_Seafarers

It is important to point out that male and female users in this particular room ‘The_Seafarers’ are somewhat conservative in comparison to users in other rooms observed (compare with chat room Love_Kuwait_2009, see Examples 4.6 and 4.7). Additionally, the type of male-to-female and female-to-male endearments being employed here were not purely affectionate, rather they were “ambiguous” or what I refer to as “neutral terms” but still under the category of affectionate endearments. For example, affectionate endearments such as *habibi* (‘my love’), *habib galbi* (‘love of my heart’), *baad oumri* (‘my life’), and so on, are intimate terms that are usually used between lovers and intimates, but are used here between same-sex users, which is

appropriate according to offline tradition. However, a closer look at endearments that are addressed to female users by male users reveals that the terms being used are in fact not quite of an “affectionate” type, rather they are “semi-affectionate”; in other words, terms of endearment in which the affectionate meaning is toned down. A good example of such expressions are *haboubah* (‘love’), a diminutive of the term *habibti* (‘my love’), a term that is often used between women or traditionally addressed to a female child. *Haboubah* is not as emotionally charged as *habibti* (‘my love’), which is usually said to a woman by a loved one. Another ambiguous term of endearment that was often used by male users to female users in this segment was *il ghalieh* (‘o dear one’), a term that carries lighter emotional implications than ‘my love’ (*habibti*). Furthermore, other plural terms were used frequently, and equally do not have intimate meanings. Interestingly, these terms *habayebi* (‘my loved ones’) and *habayeb galbi* (‘loves of my heart’), see Example 4.4, are often employed to address the entire audience in the chat room, female users included; as such they are less personal. All these neutral terms employed in mixed-sex interaction seem to have similar purposes to affectionate endearments that are employed between same-sex users. However, the former terms are indeed much safer and more appropriate when addressing users of the opposite sex. Figure 4.5 below, illustrates this point schematically.

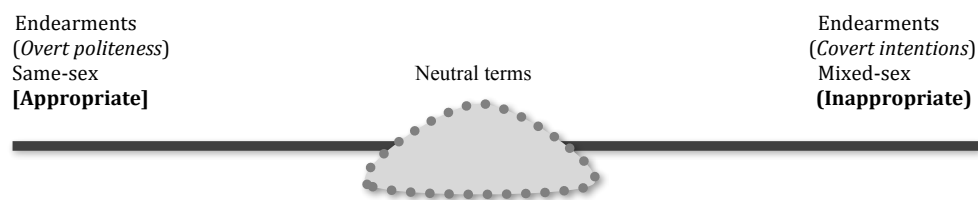


Figure 4.5 A continuum indicating usage of endearments

The continuum of endearments in Figure 4.5 demonstrates how terms of endearment can be employed appropriately between chat room users and how they may be considered inappropriate if one misuses them with recipients from the opposite sex. Yet, the line between appropriate and inappropriate usage is not always clear, especially since users often have mixed motives. For example, a male user might genuinely want to create and maintain a friendship with a female user. He could emphasise this by using neutral terms (see the gray area in the middle of the continuum in Figure 4.5) such as *haboubah* ('love') and *il ghalyeh* ('o dear one'), which may or may not be received well by this female user depending on how conservative she is. Simultaneously, the male user may also secretly be hoping that by repeating a neutral endearment enough times when addressing a certain female user he will eventually be able to woo her into a private chat room (see examples discussed later this section). This point was raised during an interview with a male user (*Hamad*) who expressed his views with regard to why men use endearments when addressing women in chat rooms:

Endearments have now become "gray words", they're neither insults nor proper expressions of romance. A guy may use them with an open-minded girl and hope for the best, but he will never use them with a conservative girl unless he wishes to risk being reprimanded or worse bounced out of the room. (male chat room interviewee)

Mills (2003) points out that it is not merely a speaker's conscious mind that constructs utterances, but his or her unconscious motives also play a significant part in this process

(2003: 18). She emphasises that ‘the surface politeness of the utterance may be masking an underlying message, which the hearer has to infer’ (2003: 83–4, also see Mills 2002). As mentioned earlier, an endearment term functions as a marker of “positive politeness” (discussed in section 4.1). Brown and Levinson (1978) consider terms of endearment as a technique of positive-politeness that acts as a ‘social accelerator, where S [Speaker], in using them, indicates that he wants to “come closer” to H [Hearer]’ (1978: 103). But even that function can become inappropriate when used with exaggeration when addressing a recipient from the opposite sex. I will now illustrate an endearment instance by male users, which is met by challenges from its recipient, a female user.

During the interaction in both the recorded spoken and text-exchange segments, there were two incidents where two male users had started an exchange with the same female user who was speaking at the microphone. The male users complimented the female user’s voice: *fidaite hal saowt* (‘I’d die for your voice’, see line 1, Example 4.5). The first part of the expression *fidaite* (‘to kill oneself for someone or something’) is a common endearment in Kuwaiti chat rooms and is often employed for people as well as for their voices, or anything that the speaker wishes to glorify. The two male users were attempting to flirt with the female user by complimenting her voice through an affectionate endearment with ambiguous motives (see Example 4.5, which demonstrates the initial part of an exchange between two male users and a female user).

Example 4.5 (Text and verbal chat combined)

Sultan_22 (m) *Fidate hal saowtt* ‘I’d die for your voice’.

2 **Zaineh** (f) *Shukran Sultan* ‘Thank you Sultan’.

[...]

- Ferrari_Man** (m) *Oufish hal saowtt il hhilou* ‘Wow, what a nice voice’.
- 4 **Zaineh** (f) *Shukran Ferrari* ‘Thank you Ferrari’.
- Sultan_22** (m) *Soawtish thawabni mithl galaxy* ‘Your voice has rendered me like
- 6 melted chocolate’.
- Zaineh** (f) *Ou baadain!* ‘Now you’ve gone too far!’
- 8 **Ferrari_Man** (m) *Zaineh, habit soawtish, tizawjainy?* ‘Zaineh, I like your voice, will you marry me?’

The motives behind an endearment, whether appropriate, ambiguous, or inappropriate, are often determined by the recipient, who negotiates what meaning to give the term. This is done either by reciprocating an endearment in kind or accepting it by saying ‘thank you’, which is how the female user in this case responded the first time she was complimented on her voice (see lines 2 and 4, Example 4.5). Alternatively, a user may be berated for employing a term of endearment with a recipient from the opposite sex, which is what eventually happened in this incident. Therefore, what seemed like an appropriate positive politeness strategy at first later developed into an obvious flirtatious exchange with one of the male users publicly asking the female user to marry him (line 8), while the other user chose to elaborate his endearment technique by employing expressions of flattery such as, ‘your voice has rendered me like melted chocolate!’ (see lines 5 and 6). Both male users were ultimately bounced out of the chat room by the male administrator for inappropriate behaviour. Overall, the male and female users in this chat room ‘The_Seafarer’ avoided using affectionate endearments with users from the opposite sex, limiting themselves instead to a judicious use of neutral terms of endearment. However, it has to be emphasised that these neutral terms (see Figure 4.5) are strictly avoided with the

opposite sex in offline settings as they are considered offensive and may imply flirtatious messages.

Interpreting the meaning of an endearment term depends on three major factors: firstly, the relationship between participants in an exchange, whether close or distant. Secondly, the participant's characteristics, e.g., whether he or she is considered reserved, religious, open-minded, or western. And thirdly, the linguistic context within which the exchange occurs: whether the speech event was framed as a joke, a flirtatious signal, a token of friendship, or an insult. Any discussion of the function of endearments, especially in mixed interaction where the "gender" variable assumes a critical nature, necessitates a close examination of the situated meaning and intended meaning of these endearments. The interplay between these factors determines the meaning of an endearment as well as how it is understood by recipients in an interaction. For example, if a given chat room is characterized as one of the less serious, light-hearted chat rooms, it follows that its users are likely to interact with open-mindedness, treating each other in a friendly manner while using intimate as well as jocular styles of chat. It is therefore expected that these users are likely to use affectionate endearments with users of the opposite sex without hesitation or reservation. In this case, such terms are interpreted as nothing more than tokens of solidarity and friendship, and I have attended many chat rooms like this. However, if the chat room is similar to the one from which the present data is taken 'The_Seafarers', then, given the more conservative ambience of this room, male and female users will treat one another with apprehension while also maintaining a sense of solidarity and friendship. Special attention is thus placed on the types of endearment employed and with whom they are articulated. Moreover, as Example 4.5

illustrates, inappropriate use of male-to-female endearment is considered a transgression in this particular chat room.

Two examples presenting types of endearment that are employed in a non-conservative or more open-minded chat room are illustrated in Examples 4.6 and 4.7, taken from chat room 'Happy_Days':

Example 4.6 (Text exchange)

Grey (m): *Fidaititch* Bonita 'I'd kill myself for you Bonita'

Bonita (f): *Mashkuor Gray* 'thank you Grey'

Example 4.7 (Text exchange)

Fatima (f): *Halla Pirate, ishlonik?* 'Hi Pirate, how are you?'

Pirate (m): *Iysalmitch, Fatima galbo* 'bless you Fatima, my heart'

The affectionate endearment terms in Examples 4.6 and 4.7 are usually reserved for intimates or used between same-sex participants in offline Kuwaiti society. And yet here two male users (*Grey* in Example 4.6 and *Pirate* in Example 4.7) employ such terms more as a positive politeness strategy in order to sound friendly. Two examples of affectionate endearments by male users toward female users (and not vice versa) were chosen as it is not common practice for a female user to call a male user *galib* ('my heart') before the chat room audience, for example. This was mentioned earlier: male users feel more at ease employing affectionate endearments or neutral terms with female users than the other way around. Indeed, the only affectionate endearment, *habibi* ('my love'), observed in 'The_Seafarers' chat room, was employed during an argument

between *Apple_pie* (a female user) and *Tarek* (a male user). In this argument *Tarek* was criticizing *Apple_pie*'s workplace. In this instance, in Example 4.8, the term 'my love' in line 18 was anything but an endearment.

Example 4.8 (Text exchange)

- 2 **Apple_pie** (f) [addressing a question to the person speaking on
the microphone – Youssif] *Youssif, ma howlik wahed iykhaleeni
ala kaiffee?* 'Youssif, do you have a potential suitor for me, one
4 who would accept to marry me and allow me the freedom to do
whatever I like?'
- 6 **Tarek** (m) [imposes himself even though *Apple_pie* was not
addressing him, and writes a sarcastic remark] *Apple-pie,
8 ikhtheelitch banghali tara ikhaleetsh ala kaifitch, allah ma kather
il a'amaleh bil Kuwait* 'Apple-pie, marry a Bengali labourer, he'll
10 allow you the freedom you want, there's an abundance
of labourers in Kuwait'
- 12 **Apple_pie** (f) *Tarek, intou laish fahamtouny ghalat, qassdi ina ma
itali'ini min dwami* 'Tarek, why do you people misunderstand me, I
14 meant, a man who would not put an end to my working career
once he marries me'
- 16 **Tarek** (m) *tishtaghlain bi wazarah* 'Do you work in a ministry?'
- 18 **Apple_pie**: *la waia, shinu wazara, habibi ana min fatayat il qitaa
il khaass* 'Eeww! In the ministry, no way! I, my **love**, am a private
sector girl'

The expression ‘my love’ in Example 4.8, line 18 is clearly not an endearment term; it is intended to express irritation and conflict. In fact, such usages of endearments are quite common in settings offline, too. A columnist, Alfuzai (2008), in a popular newspaper (*The Kuwait Times*), wrote about the negative functions of endearments in Kuwait:

Kuwaiti people use many terms of endearment that don’t reflect any actual affection... You may notice someone using this term (*habibi* ‘my love’) while trying to explain his ideas, but when he fails to do so, he will use the word in an assertive manner to underline his point ...and if repeated, to convey the message ‘you donkey, pay attention to me’ (Alfuzai 2008: 7).

Alfuzai goes on to say that the expression is even more bizarre when it is used between women who are involved in an aggressive fight with ‘each one screaming *habibti* ‘my love’ in the other’s face!’ She concludes that it is very odd to be ‘using an endearment that’s only meant to be utilized among best friends, in a fight!’ (2008: 7).

One final aspect of endearment used as an interactional strategy, as observed in the present sample, is when an endearment appears in the form of a diminutive of a nickname. Altering nicknames into their diminutives or changing the structure of a nickname so that it sounds more melodic is a common endearment feature of chat communication among friends; for example, changing the nickname *Bambushka* into *Bambi* or altering a nickname such as *Itwy* into *Itaiwy*. As important as this endearment strategy is, it is not explored within the frame of this study for two reasons: when

enquiring about this strategy of endearment from chat room interviewees, I was told firstly that nicknames are sometimes shortened not only as a gesture of endearment but also for typing convenience, and secondly, that at times nicknames appear to have different alphabet structures due to typing errors and not intention.

In sum then, endearments are expressions that evoke positive, negative, and neutral meanings, and although they are a common interactional strategy among male and female users in ‘The_Seafarers’ chat room and in other Kuwaiti chat rooms as a whole, care is taken as to which type of endearment is used, with whom, and how many times endearments are repeated in an exchange. In some chat rooms (e.g., ‘Happy_Days’), different sets of rules may be negotiated in terms of affectionate endearments – as opposed to the use of religious and traditional endearments that are much *safer* when used with the opposite sex in chat room settings like ‘The_Seafarer’. Yet, whether affectionate endearments are sanctioned in mixed interaction or not depends essentially on the chat room users themselves more than it does on the chat room as a community. According to Duranti and Goodwin: ‘as strategic actors, individual participants can actively attempt to shape context in ways that further their own interests’ (1992: 6). Clearly then, it is necessary not only to focus on this chat room community’s goals and norms concerning endearments, but also to consider what message the individual user wishes to convey when using an endearment and in turn what the recipient wishes to do with this message: accept, ignore, or reject it.

4.4 Conclusion

Greetings are necessary features of chat room communication due to their importance in offline society. In Kuwait (as perhaps in much of the Arab world), greeting formulae can be intensified either through vowel lengthening in the greeting expression, using the plural form of a greeting expression, or increasing the chain of adjacency pairs used during a greeting exchange. This feature of greetings is used to convey closeness between participants as well as to gauge the value of the relationship between participants. Therefore, greetings do not only express recognition between participants during a greeting exchange, as pointed out in Duranti's six criteria, but the intensity of a greeting formulae also reflects the nature of the relationship between greeter and greetee both to the participants in a given exchange and the audience present during that exchange. In a chat room setting, which relies on the presence of an audience to witness and differentiate types of relationship between male and female users, employing varying degrees of greeting intensity is essential. Furthermore, when concurrent with terms of endearment, greetings can separate in-group members from chat room newcomers. Members of the chat room community of practice use varying greeting expressions to identify core members of a network of friends and differentiate them from users who are newcomers to their community. Not only will newcomers have to learn innovative ways to greet female users – since mixed-sex interaction is restricted in offline settings – they will also have to learn new ways of using terms of endearment in this online mixed-sex environment. However, in the case of endearments, judicious use of these terms is necessary, since the chat room's ambience is of a heterosexual nature and the users all share a “gender-sensitive” social background. Employing intimate endearments or using endearments too

frequently during exchanges with the opposite sex may therefore flout chat room social norms and therefore may be misunderstood as flirtatious discourse. In Chapter 5, a different chat room interactional strategy, humour, is explored. Like the formulaic expressions previously discussed, humour is equally important and just as prevalent during chat room communication.

CHAPTER 5

THE ROLE OF HUMOUR IN CHAT ROOMS

5.0 Introduction

If greetings and endearments can be considered examples of positive politeness among users in chat rooms, then should ridicule, mockery, and sarcasm be viewed as examples of impoliteness because they subject participants in an exchange to face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1978: 65–6), or worse, create conflict, which politeness conventions seek to mitigate? Typically, this would mean that politeness and impoliteness are considered in opposition to each other. But it is not necessarily the case with the Kuwaiti chat room discourse. Like greetings and endearments, humour in the form of mockery and sarcasm is a salient interactional feature in Kuwaiti chat rooms. Even though forms of humour cannot be compared to greetings, leave-takings, and endearments, as they function differently, they share with these formulaic expressions a key purpose: strengthening the in-group bonds in the chat room community under examination. Jokes, mockery, and sarcasm are therefore not considered as opposing social behaviours with respect to endearments and greeting courtesies, but simply as different mechanisms of interaction. This perspective is supported by Mills (2003), who proposes that “impoliteness” needs to be examined in its own right. She points out that ‘impoliteness is attributed to a speaker on the basis of assessments of their intentions and motivations’ and hence should not be considered in opposition to politeness (2003: 122).

It is important to stress at this point that what is meant by “impoliteness” in the chat room context is not rudeness. The jokes, mockery, and sarcasm that occur in chat room interaction are not intended to be rude or offensive, or at least not as a general goal.

Although arguments and conflict can get out of hand at times, because of the female presence and the fact that all chat rooms have administrators (see Chapter 3 on the role of administrator), matters are usually kept under discursive control.

5.1 About humour

Humour is defined as a ‘performative pragmatic accomplishment’ which involves various communication skills, such as language, gestures, the presentation of visual imagery, and situation management in order to create ‘a concrete feeling of enjoyment for an audience’ usually displayed in ‘smiles and laughter’ (Beeman 2001: 98). According to Beeman, the success of humour relies on the ‘equal cooperative participation of actor and audience’ (2001:98). The audience have to demonstrate that they “get” the joke by distinguishing between the different ‘cognitive frames presented by the actor and following the process of the creation of humour’ (2001:98).

In a study on conversational joking in two speech communities (in North America and South America), Boxer and Cortes-Conde (1997) have shown that jocular verbal play not only permits participants to display their identities but also helps ‘affirm and reaffirm’ relationships between participants through such identity displays (1997: 276). According to them, ‘teasing [that] can bite’ as opposed to engaging in jokes during conversation or using self-denigrating jokes, both of which act as strategies that display the intimacy of participants’ identities as friends or family members, facilitates bonding (1997: 279).

Similarly, very often humour can ‘build group cohesion and solidarity by mocking and criticising *outside* groups or individuals through ethnic, sexist and religious jokes’

(Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001: 141). In a study of how humour operates in task-oriented group discussions, Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001) suggest an image of joking as a gender- and status-related activity (2001: 123). The claim is that such types of joke, named “differentiating humour”, are used more as a hierarchy-building strategy by high status individuals, and often seem to be associated with ‘men and high participators’ (2001: 142). This may not be the case for the present study in which humour tends to be neither gender- nor status-related, as I will show in the numerous examples on chat room humour presented in this chapter.

Two necessary questions are worth asking: (1) since jokes and ironic remarks are ambiguous in nature, how can the recipient of such a remark understand whether it is meant as a snide comment or light-hearted joke; and (2), how is the speaker able to achieve a particular meaning depending on whether he or she wants to convey to his or her hearer friendly or hostile feelings? It is sometimes difficult to interpret a statement that may have multiple meanings, but generally, recipients rely on whatever contextual cues a speaker provides in such a situation. Often, it is the speaker’s tone of voice that signals the frame of a joke or sarcastic intentions (Gibbs 1986: 13), but it could very possibly be through a smile or a wink (Hancock 2004: 448). Hancock (2004) classifies signalling cues on three levels: verbal markers, paralinguistic signs, and contextual cues. He explains that the ‘discrepancies between the utterance and the circumstances in which it is uttered, such as “lovely weather” said during a downpour’ conveys to the hearer through contextual cues that the remark is ironic (2004: 448). With regard to the verbal markers, these include adverbs and adjectives that tend to amplify an evaluation in an ironic comment, for example, ‘nice try!’ uttered when the hearer has executed a task in a

“slobbish” manner. Finally, employing paralinguistic signs, in the sense that using a mocking tone of voice (as mentioned above) or a certain intonation contour while uttering sarcasm, can indicate the speaker’s intent (Hancock 2004: 448–9).

The recipients also have to send out response cues indirectly that they have recognized the irony or joke and that they wish to accept it. This may be displayed through laughter and perhaps even contribute in the continuation of the irony exchange (Clift 1999: 538). On the other hand, the recipients may not laugh. This can mean that they have either not understood the joke or ironic remark, or worse, have understood it but are offended and annoyed by it. Simpson and Mayr point out that ‘irony cannot work without some perception of it’ (2009: 78). But what happens if cues that signal jokes and ironic comments are not clear in an exchange?

In a study that tests the importance of irony signals in interaction, Hancock (2004) questions whether misunderstandings are likely to occur between participants in situations where the usual irony cues are absent, as in computer-mediated communication. He argues that despite not having the same physical space and paralinguistic cues available in face-to-face interaction, the communicative setting of Internet text-based chat can provide a range of computer-adaptive cues, for example, typing ‘ha ha ha’ to signal laughter (as will be illustrated in some of the presented examples), ‘amplifiers, ellipsis, punctuation (e.g., “!!!” or *lovely*), and emoticons [e.g., “☺”]’ (2004: 453). Such cues routinely index irony and jokes in computer communication. Hancock concludes that although fewer cues are available to Internet chat users, irony during chat interaction neither decreases nor is it difficult to comprehend. He does, however, point out that addressees in computer interaction

‘provided less feedback (positive or negative)’ in response to ironic remarks (Hancock 2004: 447, 460–1).

5.2 Chat room humour

In the case here, humour will be examined in terms of “positive” and “negative” speaker intent. Teasing and joking are often employed as a strategy to establish stronger in-group ties as well as solidarity in chat rooms (positive intent), but sometimes humour may be employed to indirectly disparage and insult, especially through irony and criticism (negative intent). For the latter types of negative humour, and specifically irony, the meaning of an utterance is usually intended as the opposite of what is asserted. As I will describe, often both irony and criticism are employed between chat room users with the purpose of intentionally or unintentionally evoking power.

With regard to the data in the present sample, humour in the form of irony, mockery, and jocular exchanges seems to be a key element in chat room interaction. Even a serious chat room, where users usually have conservative styles of interaction, is likely to allow some form of light humour, as I will show. In section 5.2, the interactional goals of the members of the chat room community employing humour as a strategy are explored.

Three types of humour that typically occur in the chat rooms are examined: “teasing mockery”, “adversarial mockery”, and “attack sarcasm”. I have categorized them based on the functions that serve the group in the chat room community being analyzed. The different types of humour illustrated in numerous exchanges also demonstrate how humorous interactional strategies are negotiated (cf. Simpson and Mayr

2009: 78) between male and female users, how far these users go with jokes and mockery, and how far recipients accept the outcomes of such forms of humour.

Among the three types of humour mentioned, the most common, by far, is *teasing mockery*, especially between male and female users. The other types of humour are used more frequently by male users, as the data will illustrate. In the following subsection, the first type of humour, teasing mockery, is discussed.

5.2.1 Teasing mockery

Two different segments of data are illustrated: the first presents humour between male and female users during the discussion of a topic on gender stereotypes, while the second is a poem presented in the form of a dialogue between a man and his wife on the topic of aging.

In the first segment, the name of the chat room is 'Fantasy_World', and it had approximately 33 participants (9 female users and 24 male users) during the one-hour segment of both spoken and text chat that was recorded. It is of note that most of the users (male and female) who participated in this segment are members of a specified network of chat room friends. The topic that was being discussed at the time was divided by the interlocutors into two parts: (a) If Kuwaiti women are irresponsible spoilt brats, how are they ever going to become good housewives and mothers? And, (b) if men are irresponsible and selfish, how will they be good husbands? The topics of discussion chosen by users are the type of topics which could by their nature provoke mockery. Based on the context, the intended meaning in instances of irony and criticism is not likely to be misunderstood, so to illustrate this and to gain a clearer insight into the

dynamics of the mockery being used it is necessary to examine some examples of mockery in detail to determine what is being said in these instances, why is it being said, and how the addressees react to it. Also, given that the nature of the topic is gender-linked (see above for exact topic contents), the question of ‘who mocks whom?’ in these instances is significant and worth investigating.

Example 5.1 (a) (Spoken chat)

- Pretty_Lady:** (f) I just wanted to respond to Ahmed’s
- 2 (male user) remarks. Even Kuwaiti men are ugly. All they care about is going to the barbershop to style their hair into a silly cockscomb.
- 4 Or how about, the man who no sooner does he find a job, he gets a loan and buys a new car so he can go around and flirt with the girls.
- 6 Or the one that joins the gym and builds up his body and, of course, injects himself with horrible animal hormones, just so that his body
- 8 gets all pumped up. Then he goes and forces himself into this really tight T-shirt, so tight that if he’d lift up his arm it would tear.
- 10 All this, just so that his body appears muscular. Then he goes to the beach in the summer time to flirt with the girls. What on earth is all this?
- 12 I mean whatever, you know. Explain to me, how can a guy like this build a family and become a responsible individual?

(Original Arabic)

Pretty_Lady (f) Rahh arid a’ala ta’aleekat Ahmed. Hhata shabab il kwait jeeyaker, mou haamhom ila il sallon a’ashan iysouwoun tasreehhat a’aro’our il deetch. Wala ili tawa ma sadag ou ishtighal, tshan yaakhith karthh ou itlli’i sayareh yedeedeh a’ashan iygiz ou iyghazil il banat. Wala ili iyrouhh il nady ou iyghaziz rouha behal ibar ou hormonaat il haywanaat a’ashan yanfish

a'athlateh, ou ba'adain iyrouhh iyghullghis o'oumra bi hal teeshirt il thayjeh ili a'asa ma rifa'a eedeh inshagat. ga'aidly a'ala il bahar iyghazil il banat, laish? Ya'ani ballah wahhid mithil hatha goulouli ishloon biytawaj ou yitehhamal masouliyah bait.

During the time that the female speaker was criticising Kuwaiti men, the rest of the audience were responding to *Pretty_Lady* in text chat to express their points of view (see Example 5.1 b).

Example 5.1 (b) (Text exchange)

- Snoopy** (f) Yeah, but not all men are ugly, you know.
- 2 **Ahmed** (m) Kuwaiti girls have no clue what the world is about.
- Gina** (f) All a man wants is that his wife pampers him.
- 4 **Ali** (m) *Pretty_L.*, are you saying that I'm ugly?
- Don Juan** (m) He he he he, has a cockscomb.
- 6 **Mo** (m) A cockscomb?!?!?! He he he, what's that?
- Rosy** (f) Yeah, you're right, men are aimless.
- 8 **Salem** (m) You know, men are fed up with you women; they don't know what to do anymore to make you happy.
- 10 **Ali** (m) It's all these silly love-story soap operas everyone's watching. They're putting ideas in men's and women's heads.
- 12 **Don Juan** (m) You just wait, *Pretty_Lady*, I'm gonna come on the microphone next and respond to all your criticisms!

(Original Arabic)

- Snoopy** (f) *Ei bas mou kilhum jiyaker.*
- Ahmed** (m) *Banat il kwait ma yadroun allah wain gathum.*

Gina (f) *Il rayyal yabi ili itdale'eh .*

Ali (m) *Pretty_L. ya'ani aneh jaikar?*

Don Juan (m) *Hhhhh, i'indeh A'aro'our deetch.*

Mo (m) *A'aro'our deetch ?!?!?! hhhhhh shinu hatha?*

Rosy (f) *Ei saje, il reyayeel rahheen feeha.*

Salem (m) *Tara il rayaeel mallaow minkum ya il hareem, ma yadroun ishbisawoun a'ashan tirthhoon.*

Ali (m) *Killa min il mousalsalaat ili ittalli'iha il a'alem, yizrao'oun afkar bi o'ougoul il reyayeel ou il hareem.*

Don Juan (m) *Nitray Pretty_L, Rahh arid a'alaitsh.*

As illustrated in Example 5.1 a, *Pretty_Lady* presents a series of bad behaviour (see lines 3, 5, 7, 8 and 11) that she feels are typically associated with men in Kuwait. She concludes by ruling out hope of them being able to 'build a family' and become 'responsible individuals' (line 13, Example 5.1 a). Her criticisms are based on stereotypical male behaviours in Kuwaiti society, although she does point out later that she was not referring to 'all' men in Kuwait but 'most'. Also note that most of her criticisms are quite direct. Such criticisms are clear on two occasions of humorous mockery, the parts regarding the cockscomb hairstyle in line 13 and the tight t-shirt in line 9 (see Example 5.1 a).

The only humorous criticism that triggered laughter among the audience from a male user was the cockscomb hairstyle instance (see line 5, Example 5.1 b), while another male user seemed to pretend not to know what a cockscomb was in order to tease *Pretty_Lady* (line 6, Example 5.1 b). Although her criticisms were direct, in the sense that they lacked irony or ambiguity, they do not target a specific male user in the room, but rather the majority of the male population in Kuwait. This point will be of significance later when compared to male users' criticism of women in Kuwait. The audience's

comments end with a male user *Don Juan* vowing to respond to *Pretty_Lady*'s criticisms with further criticism (see line 12 and 13, Example 5.1 b). On a general level it is necessary for the users involved in this discussion to have a shared socio-cultural schema as well as gendered common grounds in order to understand the points of criticisms in the exchanges in examples 5.1 (a) and (b). Examples 5.2 (a) and (b) display the male users' views which provide the counter-argument in this discussion about gender and behaviour in Kuwait.

Example 5.2 (a) (Spoken chat)

Don Juan (m) *Pretty_Lady*, I will respond to all your
2 remarks with the same sarcastic tone you have used to criticise us (men).
Actually I was hoping to keep 'sarcasm' as a weapon of last resort, but
4 you brought it on to yourself, *Pretty_Lady*. So you said [mimics *Pretty_Lady*'s
voice in mockery] 'guys style their hair into a cockscomb'. Are
6 you happy with yourself? Are you? Carrying that big fat belly of yours
everywhere, with that wide belt you wear on your waist. You try
8 hard to pull your back so straight that you end up looking like a capital
'D'. Are you happy with yourself? Eventually, people would have to
10 push you around like a suitcase, coz your legs won't carry you.
They'd have to fix you up with wheels. [He reads a comment with a
12 low voice by a male user about Kuwaiti women being fat, and
continues], Yeah, I tell you man, you have to go to the fat people's
14 restaurant 'Friday's'. Go in there and you'll see, apparently, one girl
sits on two chairs, it's no wonder you never find places there,
16 there's nowhere to sit!

(Original Arabic)

Don Juan (m) *Pretty_Lady rahh arid a'ala kil ta'aleekatitsh ou bi nafs isloubitsh il sakhir ili a'ayabtay fee a'alaineh, ma'a ini hhabait akhalli hatha il isloub ka silahh akheer.*

Giltay 'Intow ya il reyayeel itsawoun tasreehhat a'aro'our il deetch'. Intay mistanseh a'ala rouhhitsh tshithee? Ha? Mistanseh? Ou intay hhamleh karshitsh hatha, ou hil hhizam ili labsiteh a'ala khasritsh ou shaadeh il thhaheer, tigoul hharf 'D'. Mistanseh a'ala rouhhitsh? Aakhir shay birakbounlitsh a'ajalaat ou byirrounitsh yar mithl jinaatt il safar.

Agoulik wallah low itrouhh matta'am il imtan 'Friday's' tikhayal tabee kirsy, maku krasay kil whhadeh ga'adeh a'ala kirsyain.

Don Juan's mockery gives us the impression that he has seen *Pretty_Lady* in person and is criticising her appearance based on what he has seen. In actual fact, he has never seen her and most likely does not know what she looks like (see Example 5.2 b, line 5), but, as *Pretty_Lady* herself did (see Example 5.1 a), he relies on common female stereotypes in Kuwait to build his argument with satirical images of what he imagines *Pretty_Lady* looks like. Some of the audience seem to find these images funny (see Example 5.2 b).

Example 5.2 (b) (Text exchange)

Haya (f) Be careful Don Juan, don't criticise *Pretty_Lady*, coz I'm
2 setting up a front to defend her.

Candy (f) Yeah Don Juan, I agree with every word you said, you're so
4 right.

Pretty_Lady (f) But you haven't seen me to say all that.

6 **Ahmed** (m) He he he he he he he he he.

Ali (m) He he he he he he he.

8 **Mo** (m) Yeah he he he he he he, yeah, they (Kuwaiti women) have a

belly in front and they even have bellies on each elbow.

10 **Snoopy** (f) Don't you guys have anything better to talk about.

Nina (f) He he he he he he he he he.

12 **Gina** (f) Eeeuw, Mo that's disgusting!

Snoopy (f) Honestly, is that all you can do: criticise girls.

14 **Mo** (m) He he he he he he he he he.

Ali (m) Yeah Don Juan, you're right, they're all short and fat.

16 **Ahmed** (m) He he he he he he, the only pretty girls I've seen in this country are the Lebanese girls; they're a heart-throb.

(Original Arabic)

Haya (f) *Dir balik Don Juan, la ita'ayib a'ala Pretty_Lady, tara aneh bahhittleha jabha difa'a.*

Candy (f) *Ei Don Juan, saj, walla kalamik ssahheehh.*

Pretty_Lady (f) *Bas inta ma shiftni a'ashan tigoul tchithee.*

Ahmed (m) *Hhhhhhhhhhh.*

Ali (m) *Hhhhhhhhh.*

Mo (m) *Ssahh hhhhh I'indehum karsheh djidam ou karsheh bil kou'u.*

Snoopy (f) *Ya'ani ballah intaw ya shabab ma i'indekum shay thani itgoulouneh?!*

Nina (f) *Hhhhhhh.*

Gina (f) *Wia'a Mo!*

Snoopy (f) *Ssij wallah bas taboun ita'ayboun a'ala il banat, maku shighul!*

Mo (m) *Hhhhhhhhh.*

Ali (m) *Hhhhhhh ssahh Don Juan, kilehum imtan ou igssar.*

Ahmed (m) *Hhhhhhhhhhhhh ssarahheh aneh ma shift bilkwait hhlwat ila il libnaniyat ia'awroun il galb.*

Unlike Example 5.1 (a), the instances of humour in the spoken part of Example 5.2 (a) are more intense and heavy with sarcastic implications of poor body image, which seem

to invite a lot of laughter especially from the male users (see Example 5.2 b, lines 6, 7, 8 and 13). In fact, *Mo* in line 8 (Example 5.2 b) contributes another satirical image, one of women having bellies even on their elbows. As if that is not enough, *Ahmed* in lines 16 and 17 (Example 5.2 b) completely disregards Kuwaiti women and expresses his preference for Lebanese women, because according to him they are prettier. Interestingly, in both parts of Example 5.2 (a) and (b), the actual word ‘fat’ only appears towards the end of the interaction – line 12 in Example 5.2 (a) and line 15 in Example 5.2 (b). In other words, one has to keep track of this critical theme in order to understand that they are all referring to obesity through different instances of body-image mockery before reaching the actual word “fat”. Again this shows that the users, both male and female, are able to comprehend the criticism and mockery based on shared experiences and backgrounds. It is very likely that if a user entered the chat room in the middle of this ongoing discussion he or she would be able to understand easily the theme of this discussion, since it is a common topic in Kuwaiti society offline, too.

Note here that the female users are not all in opposition to the male users’ group, as one would have expected. They are divided into a female user *Candy*, who agrees with *Don Juan*’s criticisms (see lines 3 and 4, Example 5.2 b), another female user *Nina*, who finds the mockery funny (see line 11, Example 5.2 b), and the rest of the female users, *Haya*, *Gina* and *Snoopy*, all of whom seem annoyed with the sarcasm aimed at Kuwaiti women (see lines 1, 2, 10 and 13, Example 5.2 b). The next and final Example (5.3 a and b) presents a female user *Rosy*, who speaks over the microphone, discussing with the audience aspects of her appearance with utmost indifference while she reads the audience’s disparaging, scornful text chats that are mainly written by male users. *Rosy*

herself takes the whole matter light-heartedly. This is signalled by the intonation pattern of her utterances and the constant laughter while talking over the microphone (see Example 5.3 a and b).

Example 5.3 (a) (Spoken chat)

Rosy (f) No we don't all pile tonnes of makeup on our faces. I
2 don't agree with you on that one. I, for one, go to work without
makeup. Actually, I can't be bothered to wear so much makeup on
4 my face so early in the morning. Besides, I like being natural, you
know, ehmm maybe just some lip-gloss. He he, he no we're not all fat
6 [uttered in a melodic intonation and a laughing tone of voice]. No
Don Juan, he he he, don't, he he he. My height is 163 (cm) and my
8 weight is 185 (kg). He he he he he he he, yes my weight is 185 (kg),
he he he he he he. No Ahmed, we're not all fat, you know he he he he,
10 163 (cm). [A child is being heard crying in the background.] I
think I should probably wrap this up. Ali thanks for offering me your
12 turn. Thank you. But seriously guys, I'd change the subject, coz it's
pointless. We're always gonna argue about this and we'll never reach
14 an agreement on anything. So, I dunno know, lets talk about music,
for example.

(Original Arabic)

Rosy (f) *La mou kilina inlattikh mikyaj a'ala iwyouna. Hatha mou ssahhih. aneh wahhdeh arouhh il dawam min ghair mikyaj. Mali khillg aga'ad alattikh mikyaj min il ssubhh. Ahhib akoun ttabeey'yah bas ahhitt ishwya jlos aala shifayfee, hhhhhhhh. La mou kilina imtan, la Don Juan, hhhhhh ana ttouli 163 ou wazni 185 hhhhhhh. La Ahmed mou killina imtan, ana 163 hhhh ou wazni 185*

[ssott yahel yabtshi]. Inzain khalass ana bamshi. Ali mashkour aattaintni dorik, mashkour. Bas jad wallah ya jima'ah anssahhkum itghayroun il mawthou'u, ma rah towssloun hhal, khal nitkalim a'an il mouseseqeh mathalan.

Example 5.3 (b) illustrates text chat responses to Rosy's verbal contribution.

Example 5.3 (b) (Text exchange)

- Don Juan** (m) Are you kidding, Kuwaiti girls wear so much makeup,
2 they look like clowns.
- Ali** (m) They even sleep with their makeup on.
- 4 **Pretty_Lady** (f) Makeup enhances a woman's beauty, otherwise she'd look like a
man.
- 6 **Ali** (m) Then the next day they apply a fresh coat over the last one.
- Mho'd** (m) Loooooooooooooooool.
- 8 **Sugarcane** (f) He he he, yeah some girls do wear tonnes of makeup.
- Ali** (m) They keep wearing coat after coat until it becomes so thick
10 they have to break it off with a chisel, looooool.
- Candy** (f) Actually that's right, he he he he.
- 12 **Gina** (f) I like wearing makeup for weddings.
- Don Juan** (m) Rosy, without makeup you probably look like a seal,
14 he he he he he.
- Ahmed** (m) Rosy, please can I ask you, if you don't mind, how tall
16 are you and how much do you weigh?
- Ahmed** (m) I'm only asking to use you as an example for
18 the rest of the girls in Kuwait.
- Don Juan** (m) See, I told you they're all fat.
- 20 **Sniper** (m) She sounds like a midget.

- Ahmed** (m) So you're a barrel.
- 22 **Gina** (f) Wait how much did you say you weighed?
- Tank** (m) Now that's fat!
- 24 **Sara** (f) He he he he he he he.
- Don Juan** (m) In other words, she's a smaller version of an African seal.
- 26 **Nora** (f) How tall are you?
- Ali** (m) Ahha, now that's the ideal weight, looooool.
- 28 **Don Juan** (m) He he he he he.
- Nora** (f) I'm as tall as you are.
- 30 **Ahmed** (m) As you can see guys, we've chosen a random example
and she turned out to be a cannibal.
- 32 **Dark_Chocolate** (m) I can hear a baby crying, you might have
sat on it by accident, I would check underneath you if I were you,
- 34 Rosy.
- Don Juan** (m) If we had to put Rosy and Pretty_Lady together,
36 we can actually open up an aquarium in this room.
- Ahmed** (m) He he he he he he he, yeah.
- 38 **Don Juan** (m) He he he he he he he.

(Original Arabic)

Don_Juan (m) *Min ssijitsh intay, banat il kwait min kithir ma lattkhoun bhal mikyaj tshinhum muharrijeen.*

Ali (m) *Assllan iynamoun bmikyajhum.*

Pretty_Lady (f) *Il makyaj zeeneh hhag il marah, a'ayil shinu tabeeha mithl il rayyal.*

Ali (m) *Wil youm il thani iyhhittoun ttabaqah yideedeh foog il qadeemeh.*

Mho'd (m) *Looooool.*

Suger_Cane (f) *Hhhhhh ei ssahh fii banat iylattkhoun wayed.*

Ali (m) *Ou ttabaqah foog ttabaqah ilaiman iysseer ssakhar iyksrouneh bidarnafees.*

Candy (f) *Ei ssahh ssaj.*

Gina (f) *Aneh ahhatt mikyaj laman arouhh i'irs.*

Don_Juan (m) *Rosy min ghair maik ub tishbeheen faras il nahir hhhhh.*

Ahmed (m) *Aneh qa'aid asaal a'ashan itkouneen mithaal libanat il kwait.*

Don_Juan (m) *Gitlik kilhum imtan.*

Sniper (m) *Ahhiseha qazameh.*

Ahmed (m) *Ya'ani intay silinder.*

Gina (f) *Tsham giltay waznitsh?*

Tank (m) *Oufhathy miteeneh.*

Sara (f) *Hhhhhhh.*

Don-Juan (m) *Ya'ani bil a'arabi mujasam min faras il nahar al ifreeqi.*

Nora (f) *Tsham ttoulitsh?*

Ali (m) *Ya'ani hatha namouthadj bidoun qassd ikhtarnah likum ou itithhahh ineh min aakily louhhoum il bashar.*

Dark_Chocolate (m) *Asma'a ssoott yahil yabtshee, akhaf qa'atay a'alaih ya Rosy, shufay il walad la iymout.*

Don_Juan (m) *Ya'ani law nijma'a Rosy ou Pretty_Lady ma'a ba'ath insawee akwairyum bil roum.*

Ahmed (m) *Hhhhhhhh ssahh.*

Don_Juan (m) *Hhhhhhhh.*

In Example 5.3 (b), the mockery and sarcastic remarks clearly become excessively disparaging and directed towards two female users, *Rosy* and *Pretty_Lady*. This mainly occurs because *Rosy* shares personal information about her appearance which automatically exposes her to evaluation and judgement (lines 7 and 8, Example 5.3 a). Furthermore, by sharing this sensitive information (most women do not like to share details about their appearance in front of a mixed-sex audience), *Rosy* shows both male and female users that she is indifferent to this exposure. Finally, both her laughter (lines

7, 8 and 9, Example 5 a) and her tone of voice while sharing this information signal a ‘play frame’ (Boxer and Cortes-conde 1997: 277). Such cues give her audience permission to judge her.

Although such judgements are extreme, for example, calling *Rosy* ‘a midget’ (see line 20, Example 5.3 b), ‘a barrel’ (line 21, Example 5.3 b), ‘an African seal’ (lines 13 and 25, Example 5.3 b), and ‘a cannibal’ (line 30, Example 5.3 b), the fact that they are exaggerated descriptions somehow mitigates them as untruthful values, or more precisely transforms them into laughing matter. And more importantly, as Boxer and Cortes-Conde (1997) point out, this type of joking and teasing is ‘situational humour’ (1997: 275). Indeed, the context-dependent nature of such humour and the fact that it ‘depends heavily on shared schema’ or shared background cultural knowledge (1997: 279) is what prevents conflict and misunderstandings from occurring among users in this chat room community.

Furthermore, when sarcastic humour is presented in literary forms of language, such as poetry, the biting edge of humour is reduced and at times creates a more humorous effect to a chat room contribution. Example 5.4 is a poem that takes the form of a dialogue between a husband and his wife who talk about a common social trend that is taking place recently in Kuwait, namely fighting back the process of aging.

Example 5.4 (Spoken chat)

[Male poet addresses female users]

King_F_Kings (m) At your fifties, you seem old and vulnerable.

You firm up those cheeks trying to erase the years.

The beauty clinics have frozen your face into a wax sculpture.

You hide your neck, concealing all evidence of age.

At your 50s, you compete with girls in their 20s.

You worry needlessly of being envied over your so-called youth.

You say to your husband:

‘Darling don’t let your eyes wander at other women.’

‘Look at me, don’t I look prettier than movie stars?’

‘Why do you stare and ogle at all these other women?!’

‘Look at me, feast your eyes.’

‘I am now beautiful with blonde hair and blue eyes²⁴.’

‘Remember my big potato-like nose?’

‘Look at it now, it’s small and demure.’

The husband laughs and says to his wife:

‘Wise up woman, don’t let the mirror trick you.’

‘Wise up, now, you’re at your 50s’,

‘you can’t erase the years no matter what you do.’

The wife responds with a smirk:

‘Well! Madonna isn’t any better than me.’

‘How come she gets away with everything?!’

‘Damn you silly men!’

‘You cover your bald heads with hair implants.’

‘And no sooner than you spot a white hair,’

‘you zap it jet black.’

‘I shall look younger if I wish, and I shall enjoy doing it.’

‘I shall enjoy myself, and like YOU, I shall fight age.’

²⁴ Many Arab women aspire to become fair and look like Europeans.

‘Don’t think I haven’t seen you sit hours upon hours at the young men’s barber,’
‘fighting age and trying hard to reverse time.’
‘And here you are,’
‘shamelessly condemning me simply for doing as you do.’

(Original Arabic)

King_F_Kings (m) *Ssakeh il khamseen,*
il kibir shain ou il marah dayem tattlibeh.
Shadeh il khadain ma khalat ma 'ahad tajmeel,
ou il wayeh min il shad ssar ikhshibeh
Ou khasheh il rugubeh, khasheh il tjae'ed il isneen.
Ssakeh il khamseen ou tabi itnafes banat il i'ishreen.
Itgool hhasweh fi a'ain il hhassideen.
Ou itgool raylee zowjee hhabeeb,
la itzough i'iyounik shimal ou yameen.
Shoufnee jidamik ahkla min hayfa ou nansy ou ihkla min liblibeh.
A'alamik i'younik imbagigeh a'ala il hhareem imbahhliqeh.
Shufnee temagall bi hhsni ou jamali,
shufni ssirt shagreh ou zarqaa il a'ainain.
Ou khashmi il imafaltuhh il awally,
shufeh ishlon ba'ad ma kan battattah,
shuf ishlon zawayeh ssarat imhhedideh.
Dthhek il zoj ou gal:
I'igllay ya marah, la tithhak a'alaitsh il manthereh.
I'igllay ya marah, ssakeh il khamseen ou il o'oumer ma yirja'a wara
mahama itsaween.
Galetleh laish ihhsan mini ssabahh il muttribeh?
Kahee mitshabibeh ou ssakeh il tise'een.
Mallet a'alikum intuw y ail ryaayeel.
Il ssala'eah mazroua'eah ou il sha'areh il baitheh ma yamdeeh tittlla'a
ila ibloon il aswad il fahhem imsabegheh.
Wallah, bshabib rouhhy ou astanis.

*Ou astanis mithl ma hhathritik mitshabib bi hhayatik
Ashoufik bi ssaloonat il shabab bil sa'at ga'aed itrasem hhawajbik.
Alhheen hhasidny aneh ili ma tistihhee a'ala wayhik.*

Using poetry to convey teasing and mocking remarks is yet another creative way of employing language to fulfil a chat room user's goals. Once again, the themes addressed in this poem are based on gender stereotypes witnessed in Kuwaiti society. While this poem was being recited on the microphone by its author (a male user by the nickname King_F_Kings), the audience, a mixture of male and female users, reacted by sending many smiley-face and laughter emoticons. If there was any disapproval of the poem it may have been tacit, as there was no visible indications of negative responses within the text chats that were posted on the screen as the poem was being recited.

Indeed, laughter, both oral and during text chat, is an important indication that users understand the frame presented in the humorous exchange. Also, as members of a community of practice, chat room users engage – during humorous exchanges – in a process of negotiating appropriate types of humour and establishing boundaries in order to prevent unacceptable insulting or humiliating chat. This is seen by the positive or negative way they react to jokes, teasing, or sarcastic comments. The subsequent bouncing of a user out of a chat room for disrespecting interactional boundaries (see Examples 5.8 and 5.10 b) informs the core members of the community of practice that norms are being maintained, and demonstrates to newcomers or peripheral members that rules must be respected as well as what they are.

Two questions need to be considered: 1) What is the primary purpose of this humour in chat rooms? And, 2) does gender play a significant role in the type of humour

being used? Clearly there is more to this humour than simply being a means of bonding. One might suggest it is perhaps be a way of exercising power relations, or it could be a means of subtle flirting. To a certain extent, we cannot argue in favour of the former because both male and female users are given equal opportunity to judge and criticize one another, even though as noted in Example 5.1 (a), the female user was less personal in her criticisms, focusing on Kuwaiti men in general rather than a particular man in the chat room, compared with *Don Juan* in Example 5.2 (a). Also, if female users did perceive the male users' humour as being over the limit or as "doing" power (cf. Herring 2003) and hence subjugating women, they would have let that be known by exiting the chat room and thus bringing the discussion to an end. I therefore argue in favour of the latter option (i.e., humour as a means of flirting). Flirting may not be the goal behind this humour, however it is a by-product of these exchanges. These examples therefore demonstrate that humour as an interactional strategy has achieved more than merely allowing members of the chat room community to bond.

When members of this community of practice use humour during interaction they are in fact negotiating the meanings which are to be associated with this humour based on the purpose they would like it to achieve, whether flirting or other purposes. At this point, one can already establish that gender is not necessarily a significant variable in chat room humour. The use of humour during chat room interaction depends more on the type of topic being discussed, the network of friends engaging in chat (whether they are close or distant), and the type of chat room in which the humorous chat is taking place. Whether it is a conservative type of chat room or a liberal one is mainly determined by the style of

chat interaction between users. This point will be reinforced in the discussion in section 5.2.2.

5.2.2 Adversarial mockery

What follows in examples 5.5, 5.6, 5.7 and 5.8 are a series of exchanges that took place in a particular room, ‘Fun_N_Kuwait’, between a group of friends and a newcomer – a gay male user whose name is *Citrusy*. Like the previous sample of data, this sample is comprised of two 45-minute segments: spoken and text chats. Unlike the previous sample, however, this one includes three genders: heterosexual male and female users as well as a gay male user (although, it is of note that users exhibiting gay speech styles are usually not allowed to participate in heterosexual chat rooms). The presence of the gay user in this particular room establishes the theme of discussion among users. The first of the exchanges in this sample (Example 5.5) is a contribution by a male speaker *Ali* in response to *Citrusy*’s earlier exchange. *Citrusy*’s homosexuality becomes clear to everyone mainly through his effeminate voice and speech style. This creates a male uproar in the room. *Citrusy*’s voice is actually somewhere between a man’s and a woman’s voice in pitch. In Kuwaiti pop-culture, *Citrusy*’s voice is unmistakably that of a transvestite, better known in Kuwaiti Arabic as a *she-male*. And since she-males are quite a large community in Kuwait, their voices, dress styles, and behaviours have become easily recognizable to heterosexual Kuwaitis. *Ali* (a male user) speaks with a rough, manly “Bedouin” accent and patronizingly instructs *Citrusy* to behave like a man (see Example 5.5).

Example 5.5 (Spoken chat)

- Ali (m) [Raises his voice and speaks with authority] Hey Citrusy, be a
2 man, will you bro.
Be a man please.
4 You know, masculinity is a good thing.
[He mimics Citrusy's feminine voice and effeminate talk]
6 You guys go to the Avenues²⁵ to see the young men,
why, why don't you talk to the young men.
8 [Back to normal voice, speaks in a Bedouin accent] Be a man I tell you.
A man's integrity is in his speech, when he talks, everyone listens.
10 Don't be all soft and girlie on the microphone!
If I had met you earlier I would have straightened you up!
12 This is shameful, very shameful.
Did your father not teach you how to sit among real men in a *Majlis*²⁶
14 and talk like a man.

(Original Arabic)

Ali (m) *Citrusy, khalik rayyal ya khouy, khalik rayyal, tara il roujouleh shay zain. [iyqalid ssott uzir jins, Citrusy] 'ita'arfoun il shabab ili iyrouhhoun il Avinues'.*

Agoulik, khlik rayyal. Il rayyal yhhtarmooneh min kalameh. Laman itkalim il kil iysma'aleh. La tiga'ad timaiya'a ou itedala'a, khalik tharb. Law a'arfik min awal tshan sana'atik.

Shay ifashil, wallah fashleh, oubouk ma a'alemik tiga'ad ma'a il reyayeel bil majlis ou itkalim mithl reyayeel?!'

²⁵ A shopping mall.

²⁶ *Majlis*, also known as *Diwaniya*, is a place where men gather and socialize (defined in Chapter 1).

In Example 5.5, *Ali* asserts his masculinity and superiority by chastising *Citrusy* and instructs him on how to behave: ‘be a man’ (lines 1 and 2). Being heterosexual, we assume, *Ali* positions himself in a superior status and claims membership to heterosexuality by mocking and mimicking *Citrusy*’s speech style. This mock mimicry (in lines 5 and 6) is later repeated in spoken chat by two other users and in text chat by three other users (Example 5.6 a). *Ali*’s mock representation of *Citrusy*’s voice is even more offensive than his accusations that he is not ‘being a man’. The characterization or the *marking* of *Citrusy*’s speech style through ‘affecting his voice and mannerisms’ (see discussion on marking in Mitchell-Kernan 1986: 176–7), is a direct attack on his person or *self* (cf. Goffman 1967). Example 5.5 clearly articulates *Ali*’s homophobic attitude. *Citrusy* picks up on *Ali*’s mockery and responds in Example 5.6 (a).

Example 5.6 (a) (Spoken chat)

Citrusy (s²⁷) Hello everyone,
2 first, let me tell you Ali bro,
Bedouins, may God protect them.
4 Let me tell you something, some of them have taste,
and they can be elegant and fashionable.
6 But there are some that are not very nice people,
you know the ones that have all these anti-governmental gatherings,
8 and do all that other nasty stuff.
Imagine, the other day I went to *Ahmedi*²⁸

²⁷ ‘S’ refers to she-male.

²⁸ An area in the suburbs of Kuwait predominantly populated by Bedouins.

- 10 They were having a celebration there.
Imagine, I saw a Bedouin guy who had long hair all the way up to
12 his waist and he was wearing a *Bisht*²⁹.
The two really don't fit together at all.

(Original Arabic)

Citrusy (s) *Hala, ishlonkum shakhbarkum. Awalan khalin agoulik oukouy Ali ineh il badou, allah iykhaleehum, khalnagoulik ba'athhum ssarahheh a'andeh thooq bil libs, bas ba'athhum kilish rayhheen feeheh khasseh maloot il fari'iyat. Ou ba'athhum iysawi ashaya kilish mou zaineh. Tikhayelow thak il youm rihht il Ahhmedi ou kanow ga'aed iyhhtafloon, Tikhayelow shift bidwi mttawil sha'areh lai khasseh ou labis bisht, ishloon ssarahheh ma iyloug.*

In defence of *Ali*'s direct criticisms, *Citrusy* turns the situation around by being cynical about Bedouins (in Example 5.6 (a), line 6). Interestingly, instead of revealing his true emotions and showing anger at being insulted, *Citrusy* masks his vehemence and uses indirect criticism to condemn all Bedouins. In other words, *Citrusy* could have done what comes easily to men in Kuwait: swear loudly at the offender. Instead, he reminds *Ali* of Bedouin people's unfavourable political status in Kuwait³⁰ (line 7, Example 5.6 a). *Citrusy* uses common knowledge about Bedouins to his advantage and proceeds to use an example – a man with ambiguous gender orientation because of his 'long hair', (line 11) – from the Bedouin community as a target of his criticism. The man with the long hair

²⁹ Men's traditional cloak that goes over the robe and is worn in special occasions.

³⁰ Many Bedouins have in recent years (since 2008) taken up a position against governmental policies, which is quite unusual since they are a community that is quite reserved. Historically, Bedouins have always been a target of cynicism by other urban communities in Kuwait due to their outdated, strict, nomadic lifestyles.

wearing a *Bisht*, mentioned by *Citrusy* (in lines 11 and 12, Example 5.6 a), can either be seen as an accusation that Bedouin men have a bad sense of taste in fashion or that they, too, have homosexual behaviour, because Kuwaiti men usually do not grow their hair. Bedouin men are expected to be more macho than other men due to their historical lifestyle of surviving under harsh conditions in the desert, and hence it is not culturally believable that a Bedouin would grow his hair or be effeminate. Additionally, as noted, *Citrusy* had used indirect criticism to insult *Ali*. This is achieved by ridiculing other members of *Ali*'s community rather than criticising him as a person. Since the Bedouin community is markedly tribal, insulting an individual means insulting the whole community. This makes *Citrusy*'s mockery of Bedouins rather pointed. But *Citrusy*'s triumph is short-lived, because no sooner is his soft voice heard through the microphone as he ridicules Bedouins, he is attacked by a series of text criticisms by the users in the chat room. The hearers react to his speech style by writing negative text comments while *Citrusy* talks at the microphone (see Example 5.6 b).

Example 5.6 (b) illustrates the text comments that occurred simultaneously with *Citrusy*'s verbal criticisms of Bedouins. These are comments by a group of (mostly male) friends in the room who display clear signs of surprise when they hear *Citrusy*'s voice for the first time.

Example 5.6 (b) (Text exchange)

Pirate (m) Oh my God, he's gay!

- 2 **Ali** (m) Hey guys, guess who this is? It's Haleema³¹.
- Pirate** (m) No this is a faggot's imitation of Haleema.
- 4 **Jojo** (m) Citrusy is a loser of a faggot, though.
- Pirate** (m) This guy Citrusy speaks like Jojo and has his
- 6 style too ☺.
- Hamoud** (m) Yeah, you're right except Jojo's voice is a bit rougher.
- 8 **Strawberry** (f) [to Jojo] Darling, who said
- your voice is soft Jojo? There's nothing's wrong with your voice,
- 10 it's masculine, it's very nice.
- Jojo** (m) Hamoud you idiot, are you saying I'm a faggot?!

(Original Arabic)

- Pirate** (m) *Ouf ttila 'a jins.*
- Ali** (m) *Goulou min ttila 'a, Hhaleemeh Boland.*
- Pirate** (m) *Iykhaseh hatha jins imsawi Hhaleemeh.*
- Jojo** (m) *La bas Citrusy Jins bas fashel ssarraheh.*
- Pirate** (m) *Hatha tshineh iythhatsheh mithl Jojo, nafs il stayl [☺]*
- Hamoud** (m) *Ei ssahh bas ssott Jojo ishway akhshan.*
- Strawberry** (f) *Ya ba'ad tshabdi, min gal ssott Jojo nae'em? Ma fi shay ssotik, tshineh il bakhat³².*
- Jojo** (m) *Hamoud, ya shagoul, aneh jins?!*

As Example 5.6 (b) demonstrates, the text remarks written by the users against *Citrusy* are quite pointed. Indeed, *Citrusy* becomes the target of mockery and sarcasm mainly by male users (Example 5.6 b, lines 1, 2, 3 and 4). These users' homophobic attitudes are

³¹ Haleema is an iconic female TV presenter who wears a lot of makeup and has a speech style that is very soft, feminine and according to a large part of male viewers "very sexy". Young women are very keen on mimicking her speech style, especially in Chit-chat.

³² An expression used exclusively by women to compliment something or someone.

blatant and their mocking reactions toward the gay user are predictable. In Example 5.6 (c)³³, *Citrusy* continues his ironic style of mockery, this time by specifying one of the users, *Jojo*, who ridiculed him in Example 5.6 (b). *Jojo* had started to insult *Citrusy* by writing in his text that ‘*Citrusy* is a loser of a faggot’ (Example 5.6 b, line 4). In fact, it later becomes clear from the series of attacks between *Citrusy* and *Jojo* that the former’s presence in the room was intended to attack *Jojo*. *Jojo* is a male user whose masculinity is also questioned by users present in the room at the time (see Example 5.6 b, lines 4 and 5). This room, like most Kuwaiti public chat rooms, is heterosexual. This means that men and women who display homosexual behaviours are often banned from entering a given room³⁴. This instance, in which *Citrusy* was allowed to remain in the chat room and interact with the users, may have been one of the few exceptions. However, by allowing *Citrusy* to interact with a chat group does not mean that this user is accepted into the group.

Jojo is a popular male user among his friends in this particular room. His voice is not as rough in vocal quality as some of the other male users but it is masculine nonetheless. By the end of this interaction, it becomes clear that both *Jojo* and *Citrusy* had previous confrontations in other chat rooms where they engaged in an exchange of strong language and profanity. Examples 5.6 (b), 5.6 (c), 5.7 and 5.8, show the two users revisiting the tension between them.

³³ Example 5.6 (a) and 5.6 (c) are actually part of one exchange. I have divided them to allow the reader to follow the development and shift in the sarcastic exchanges.

³⁴ This is mostly because some gay men, mostly ‘she-males’ or transvestites, enter chat rooms in order to swear and cause shock and hostility by articulating erotic and kissing sounds. This happened a few times during my observation of the chat rooms. This behaviour is also common in public places offline. Transvestites represent a large majority of the gay community in Kuwait and they are severely stigmatized due to their clear effeminate appearance. In order to retaliate against society’s sanction, they behave in a shocking manner in public.

The episodes of sarcasm and mockery continue in Example 5.6 (c), this time with *Citrusy* cleverly attacking *Jojo* who has previously accused him of being ‘a loser of a faggot’ (Example 5.6 b, line 4). In a witty but sarcastic episode, *Citrusy* accuses *Jojo* of being gay, too. *Citrusy* uses indirect criticism by aligning himself on equal grounds with *Jojo* as though they were good friends who spend time together: ‘*Jojo* and I’, ‘we’ and ‘us’ (see Example 5.6 c, lines 1, 2 and 3).

Example 5.6 (c) (Spoken chat)

[This was uttered by *Citrusy* as he read *Jojo*’s text comments]

- 2 **Citrusy** (s) Like when *Jojo* and I grow our hair,
 we wear lipstick and wax our arms and legs.
- 4 It actually suits us, you know,
 cause we’re so open-minded and we like to be fashionable.

(Original Arabic)

Citrusy (s) *Ei ya’ani aneh ou Jojo laman intawil sha’arneh ou inihitt hhumrat
shifayef ou insheel sheereh, iyloug a’alaineh, lianeh ihhneh thoq ou mitfathheen.*

In Example 5.6 (c), *Citrusy* makes his criticisms against *Jojo* even more intense, referencing *Jojo*’s purported homosexuality by claiming to engage with *Jojo* in female activities such as ‘wearing lipstick’ and ‘waxing arms and legs’ (Example 5.6 c, line 3). This sends signals to some of the other users in the room not familiar with *Jojo* (like myself) that *Jojo*, too, may be gay. To defend himself from this accusation, *Jojo* strikes back at *Citrusy* by attacking his homosexual orientation, which seems even more critical than mocking him for being gay (see Example 5.7). The intense verbal duel between *Jojo*

and *Citrusy* clearly shifts from including all the users in the room to gradually focusing on the two of them.

Example 5.7 (Spoken chat)

- Jojo** (m) [speaks with a tense and annoyed tone of voice]
- 2 Citrusy I just want to tell you
that I'm not your sort at all, thank God for that.
- 4 I have hair under my arms and I have a moustache.
No no, really I'm far away from being your type.
- 6 But my voice might be soft, a bit like yours [brief pause] that's all
[...]
- 8 I wouldn't call a faggot like you into a private room!
God damn you!
- 10 Even if you had to swear by the Koran, no one would believe you.
All my friends here in the room, already know me.
- 12 Why would I want to become like you!
Thank God I'm not like you!
- 14 If you want me to become like you,
Come over here and let me show you who's man among us!
- 16 Come over here and I'll prove it to you!

(Original Arabic)

Jojo (m) *Citrusy, khalni agoulik ineh aneh wa lillah il hhamd mou mithlik. I'indi sha'ar tahht abatti ou i'indi shwarib. La la ssij, aneh bae'dn kil il bi'id min ashkalik. Bas ssotti na'aem ishwayeh, mithl ssofik, hathi hi. [...]*

*Aneh adkhel a'alaik brayvit?! Allah iyakhtik!! Hhateh law ithhalif bil quraan,
ma hhed rahh iyssaddgik. Il kil bil roum rabi'i ou ia'arfouni.
Ishhegeh asseer mithlik!! Il hhamdilah aneh mou mithlik. Itha tabeeni asseer
mithlik, ta'al ihni ou aneh araweek minu il rayyal feeneh, ta'al ou aneh
athbittlik!*

Surprisingly, although *Jojo* is by now clearly angry (his voice has risen and his tone is angry), he does not deny being gay as would have been expected. His response seems ambiguous: 'I'm not your sort' (Example 5.7, line 3). *Jojo* insults and curses *Citrusy* and gains superiority over him by emphasising that he has the support of his 'friends here in the room' (Example 5.7, line 13). *Jojo* also challenges *Citrusy* with an aggressive 'macho' threat: 'come here and I'll show you who's man among us' (Example 5.7, line 13). The threat, although hostile, is ambiguous in meaning. Interestingly, this metaphorical threat merges the virtual with the real-life, in the sense that *Jojo* asks *Citrusy* 'to come here' (see line 13), knowing full well that this request is impossible to fulfil online. However, simply using a threat that is usually made in real-life conflict situations gives this online threat an added impact of interactional power, making it seem real in the context. Finally, Example 5.8 is a continuation of the verbal duel between *Citrusy* and *Jojo*. It illustrates the text comments typed by *Citrusy* responding to *Jojo*'s criticisms and threats in Example 5.7.

Example 5.8 (Text exchange)

- Citrusy** (s) Yeah right, go on, cover-up for yourself, [laughs] he he
2 he you crook.
You were the first (of the men) to invite me for a private chat.
4 Really *Jojo*, I'm so impressed with your sense of humour.

[Talking to Jojo in the feminine i.e., using feminine pronouns]

- 6 You should come with me to Restaurant Street,
and then to my apartment, we'll have lots of fun! He he he
- 8 I'm sure my friends will like you! [Citrusy is bounced out of the room.]

(Original Arabic)

Citrusy (s) *Ei, ei ragi'i hhag nafsik ya il kalakji. Awel min dikhall a'alay brayvit inthe.*

Ssij Jojo ta'ajibni khifeh damik. [Iykalim Jojo tshineh wahhdeh] ta'alay ma'ay share'e il mattai'in ou ba'adain inrouhh i'indi a'ala il shaqeh, rahh nistanis siwa hhhhhhh. Akeed rabi' ibihhibounitsh.

Once again, *Citrusy* seems to maintain his calm and uses witty text comments to reply to most of *Jojo*'s insults. He trivializes *Jojo*'s anger by complimenting him on his 'sense of humour' (Example 5.8, line 4). And even when he calls *Jojo* a 'crook' (line 2), he does not sound angry – this is clear by his laughter. *Citrusy* also tells *Jojo* to come with him to *sharee el mataem* 'Restaurant Street' (line 6) – a long road lined with take-away restaurants, frequented late at night by male troublemakers, prostitutes, and gay men, and renowned for its "dodgy goings-on". But instead of writing the name of the street in Arabic with an 'm' he intentionally misspells it and types it with an 'n', *sharee el mataen*, thus changing the word's meaning from 'Restaurant Street' to 'Slaughter Street'. This unusual but interesting pun is laden with negative attitudes expressed by *Citrusy* to display intense contempt for *Jojo*. It implies that *Citrusy* wants to take *Jojo* to a street to be stabbed or slaughtered.

Another interesting feature in *Citrusy*'s speech style is his switch into the feminine gender structure while addressing *Jojo*. When *Citrusy* says, 'you should come with me to

Restaurant Street' (Example 5.8, line 6), he changes the pronoun 'you' and the verb 'come' into the feminine; since Arabic structure is governed by gender, *Citrusy* sounds as though he is talking to a female user. Talking to a man in the Arab world (as perhaps anywhere else around the world) as if he were a woman is meant to be intimidating and to be taken as an insult.

This quarrel between *Citrusy* and *Jojo* comes to an end when the former is dismissed from the room by the administrator who realizes that *Citrusy* had violated chat room norms. The administrator, who happens to be a 'male user', is *Jojo*'s friend and in defending *Jojo* with this dismissal he put an end to *Citrusy*'s sarcastic mockery (Example 5.8, line 8). Based on my observation of these chat rooms, I would not have expected *Citrusy* to be dismissed from the room if the room administrator was female, since women are less hostile toward gay men than are straight men, according to my observation of Kuwaiti chat rooms. I contend that dismissing *Citrusy* was therefore primarily a socially sanctioned homophobic act, as well as an act in defence of *Jojo*.

These episodes of adversarial mockery (in Examples 5.5, 5.6 a, b, c, 5.7 and 5.8) show typical patterns of male users' defiance and competition for power and perhaps status in chat rooms. This is also illustrated in Cameron's (1997) work on male talk which demonstrates that during conversation men use humour as a competitive strategy as well as use verbal duelling with other male members, thus creating a hierarchy in the conversation. Male users frame their quarrels in different ways, some overt (e.g., accusations of being gay as in Example 5.6 (a) as well as cursing in Example 5.7, line 9), some "petty" as in instructions on how to behave (Example 5.5), and other more covert instances of clever sarcastic mockery (mostly exercised by *Citrusy* in Examples 5.6 (c)

and 5.8). From the examples illustrated thus far, it is interesting to note that male users usually practice negative forms of humour or biting mockery (see Examples 5.5, 5.6, 5.7 and 5.8) as well as direct insults (see Examples 5.4 and 5.7) because they perceive themselves as the dominant or powerful group. Moreover, it is generally the less powerful group, such as female and gay users, who are at the receiving end of adversarial discourse practices that occur in the Kuwaiti chat rooms being examined, although, this is not always the case, as I will show in section 5.2.3.

Some of the episodes of conflict that take place in these chat rooms can be more hostile than those illustrated in the above examples, and use much more offensive language. I refer to these chat room conflict situations as episodes of “attack sarcasm”. In general, there are more examples of male users displaying masculinity traits embedded in attack sarcasm or adversarial mockery than of female users flaunting their femininity through teasing mockery. But this could primarily be due to the fact that in most chat rooms, male users are larger in number than female users.

Generally, male users are constantly reminded to minimize insults and profanity, as they can easily risk being expelled from a room if they breach the ban on bad language. One way around this is to employ discreet interactional strategies to conceal verbal abuse through *singing profanity*, for example (see Example 5.9). The next section will illustrate how a different chat genre is employed by a user to express a level of conflict that some chat room users find hard to accept.

5.2.3 Attack sarcasm

In this section, two different examples of sarcastic humour are explored. The first one is taken from a chat room (*Love_Kuwait_2009*) in which two men verbally attack one another (Example 5.9). The second example is taken from the same room (albeit on a different day) in which a group of male and female friends take part in sarcastic mockery against an Egyptian female user. This second example (Example 5.10) is noteworthy since it illustrates how even female users can employ forms of negative humour when necessary.

Example 5.9 presents the following scenario: *Hunter* is the name of a popular male user who was insulted via text chat by a newcomer to the room. *Hunter's* mother's name was dishonoured by a male user – a typical form of insult used by Arab men (see Dundes *et al.* 1989: 135). In response, *Hunter* equally insults the offender by dishonouring his mother's name. *Hunter* speaks on the microphone and his offensive language is hostile, vulgar, and loud. At that point, *Hunter* is immediately warned by the administrator (a female user) to stop offensive language otherwise he risks being dismissed from the room. Ironically, *Hunter* makes a long and humorous apology to his friends in the chat room for having used offensive language. But he realizes that he has not taken his revenge yet. In other words, he does not claim back his mother's honour, so to speak – again, a typical behaviour by Arab men. So he chooses another form of humiliation to get back at the male user who insulted his mother's name. *Hunter* conceals profanity against his offender in the lyrics of a song which he sings as he plays the guitar. It is through this method that *Hunter* claims back his honour and makes profanity seem acceptable under the guise of a song (see Example 5.9). This type of sarcasm is considered to be the most

scornful and insulting of all the types presented thus far, because it includes profanity (Example 5.9, lines 2, 3, 4, and 5) as well as spitting (see lines 6 and 7).

Example 5.9 (Spoken chat)

- Hunter** (m) [sings while playing the guitar] O camel *ya nageh*, give me your milk.
- 2 I saw the camel walking, she looked pretty.
Go and eat your hay and shut up.
- 4 May God damn you and your Iraqi mother.
O camel, o camel son of the Iraqi³⁵ mother.
- 6 I will spend the whole night spitting in your face [does long loud spitting sounds].

(Original Arabic)

Hunter (m) *Ou ya nageh a'atteeni hhaleebitsh.*
Shift il nageh il hhilweh ou ihyeh temshi.
Tshabay ou rouhhay iklay il shei'ir.
Malet a'alaitsh intay ou oumitsh.
Ya nageh, ya nageh, ya wild il i'iragye.
Batif a'alaitsh ttoull ill lail [tifffffff a'alaitsh ou a'ala wayhitsh].

The word camel in Arabic *ya nageh* (Example 5.9, line 1) being used here is actually the female gender of a camel. Although the form for the male camel actually exists and is referred to as the *bae'er*, *Hunter* intensifies the power of his insult by transgressing gender using the female camel as a form of address toward his opponent (this strategy of address was previously used in Example 5.8). This inevitably means that all the pronouns

³⁵ A racist insult used often in Kuwait, to mean a person who comes from poor roots.

being used with the noun – female camel – are employed in the feminine form. This type of humiliation is the ultimate insult to an individual’s manhood in the Arab world.

Also, like most patterns of sarcasm and profanity exhibited in Kuwaiti chat rooms, this form of negative humour gains momentum and intensity towards the end of an exchange, at which point it is very common for male users to be dismissed from chat rooms (see Chapter 3 for rules on chat room expulsion). In this case, *Hunter*’s song ends with him spitting at his offender. Spitting is considered a primary method of insult among men in the Arab world. The spitting is not achieved simply by literally expelling saliva on to the recipient’s face, rather the insult is embedded in the metaphorical meaning of the actual sound that is made when spitting at someone.

Example 5.9 above demonstrates an instance of *attack mockery* by a male user. One would imagine that this form of humour is usually exclusively exploited by male users, since the more hostile the mockery, the less likely we are to see female users being involved in it. However, there are instances in chat room interaction when female users are actually backed up by support from male users especially during intense conflict situations. Example 5.10 (b) shows an example in which a group of male and female users engage in an insulting attack against a female Egyptian user *Tamara*. The interaction starts with male and female users making small talk with no particular theme in mind. The episode of mockery begins when *Tamara* challenges two male users to admit Egypt’s favours towards Kuwait during the Iraq War.

Example 5.10 (a) (Text-exchange)

- Tamara** (f) Yo Kuwaiti people, we (the Egyptians) just want you
2 guys to acknowledge our great favours in liberating your country during

the Iraq War.

4 **Fahad** (m) Yeah right!

Q8 (m) This was done with our money Tamara, our money!

(Original Arabic)

Tamara (f) *Ya kawaytah, ihnah mush a'ayzeen minoko hhagah. Ihhnah a'awzeen i'itiraf faqatt bi fathhil masser a'alaiko fi il tahhreer.*

Fahad (m) *Wathhehh.*

Q8 (m) *Tamara, bi flousneh, bi flousneh!*

Gradually, more users start to pay attention to *Tamara's* defiant remarks about the Iraq War. The number of users involved in this interaction gradually rises from two male users to 10 male users and 5 female users. The conflict in these episodes of mockery escalates, culminating in an intense chat room fight (see Example 5.10 b).

Example 5.10 (b) (Text exchange)

Hassan (m) Hey people, who can fight the Egyptian girl?

2 **Tamara** (f) You people are undeserving of what we've done for your country.

4 **Bu_Ali** (m) Do you realize Tamara, that you're about 70 million people in Egypt. You probably all piss (urinate) in the Nile, and then
6 drink from it.

Tamara (f) Who taught you how to read and write? The Egyptian teachers!

8 **Khalid** (m) Egyptians constitute Kuwait's cheap labour. You're always after the money, you're cheapos, he he he.

10 **Hadi** (m) If Egyptians knew how to teach, Egypt wouldn't have suffered famine due to ignorance!

12 **Latifa** (f) Oh look, she stopped speaking. I hope you get an itch in your -----.
[the final word in this curse is omitted but the term private parts
14 is implied].

Tareq (m) Tamara can I borrow you ‘ass’ *makwa* (the Egyptian term for iron
16 but the same word also means ‘buttocks’ in Kuwaiti Arabic), I want to iron.

Q8 (m) Why don’t you go eat your famous beans until your stomach
18 is filled with gas, he he he.

Moh’d (m) Their famous dish is stuffed chicken.
20 Chicken stuffed with shit, he he he he. [Moh’d is bounced out of
the chat room for using profanity.]

22 **Talal** (m) He he he, yes lovely Sheba³⁶, you go girl, go get her!!!

Tamara (f) I’m really angry [Tamara sends angry faces at
24 the audience] ☹ ☹ ☹.

Shark (m) He he he, you’re doing really well Sheba, carry on girl.

26 **Lolita** (f) Hand me the microphone Sheba, and let me have a go at
her!!!

28 **Tamara** (f) When I entered the room there were only 8 users, look
now, there’s 28 users, this confirms the greatness of the Egyptians.

30 **Pink** (f) Egyptians are like Persian carpets, the more you step on
them, the better they become.

32 **Tamara** (f) Question: what was the speed on Kuwaiti cars as they
escaped Kuwait during the Iraq War. Answer: 200 light years per hour.

34 **Sheba** (f) [after speaking on the microphone, writes] Where’s the administrator
of the room, to throw this Egyptian thing out! [At this point Tamara

³⁶ *Sheba* is a female user who is verbally attacking *Tamara* on the microphone while the other users attack *Tamara* via text.

36 decides to leave the room before she is bounced out.]

(Original Arabic)

Hassan (m) *Minu ygdar a'ala il massriyeh?*

Tamara (f) *Intu ma btistahlush ili a'amallah a'alashan baladko.*

Bu_Ali (m) *Intaw 7 malyoon itbouloun bil neel ou itshirboun mineh.*

Tamara *Meen ili a'alamak tiira ou tikteb, mush il massri?*

Khalid (m) *Il massryeen iyshakloun a'amalleh il kwait il rakheesseh, liineh irkhass.*

Hadi (m) *Il mouderis il massri law iya'arf iya'alim ma kan i'indikum maja'aat min il jahl.*

Latifa (f) *Ttalli'i iskitat, ya malitsh il hhteshe bi hathak.*

Tareq (m) *Tamara, mumkin astae'er il makwa maltitsh, bathhrib outi?*

Q8 (m) *Rouhhay iklay fool ou tta'amyeh ou kabray il makwa, ya'ani il outi min il fool ou il tta'amyeh.*

Hadi (m) *La mou tta'amyeh, i'indehum akleh diyay mahhshi isimheh, zegazeeg.*

Mho'd (m) *Aklethum il mufathhleh mahhshi zag. [Q8 has bounced Mho'd from the chat room.]*

Talal (m) *Ei Sheba il latteefeh, namay feeheh.*

Tamara *Ana a'assebt ☹ ☹ ☹.*

Shark (m) *Hhhhhh kafou, zain itsween feeheh Sheba.*

Lolita (f) *Sheba, a'atteeni il mayk, khal anam feeheh.*

Tamara *Lama dakhalt il roum makansh feeha ila 8 dilwaati baetow 28, deh daleel a'ala a'athhmet il massryeen.*

Pink (f) *Il massri nafs il sijad il ieerani, kither ma ynidas ytia'adel.*

Tamara *Soual: kam kanet soura'at il kouwaityeen lama harabu min il kwait? Il jawab: 200 saneh thhawiyah fil sa'aeh.*

Sheba (f) *Wain il admin ytrid hathy il massriyeh?*

Note that Example 5.10 (b) includes only part of a series of mocking remarks that occurred during this chat room episode. While the text comments were being exchanged

among users, a female speaker (*Sheba*) was engaging in verbal mockery on the microphone. These series of attacks took place after a male user asked the audience whether anyone in the room ‘can fight³⁷ the Egyptian girl’ (Example 5.10 b, lines 1 and 2). This male user appeared as though he was addressing the female users in the room, otherwise he would have taken the challenge himself. However, users I have interviewed informed me that since the user being attacked is female, usually, the tactful arrangement would then be to encourage another female user to carry out the fight on the microphone. Interestingly, while *Sheba* – the female user who eventually took up the task – was insulting the Egyptian girl *Tamara* on the microphone, she was constantly encouraged by the male users in the room via text chat: ‘Yeah *Sheba*, you go girl’, ‘go get her’, and ‘you’re doing really well *Sheba* carry on girl’ (Example 5.10 b, lines 22 and 25). This, of course is in addition to the abundance of laughter by numerous other users in the chat room (see Example 5.10 b, lines 9, 18, 22, and 25). *Tamara* in fact gets progressively annoyed with the pressure of the mockery and racist insults against her. This is signalled by her utterance ‘I am angry’ and the few angry face emoticons she types (see Example 5.10 b, lines 23 and 24). Finally, she exits the room after realizing that she risks being kicked out by the other users in the room (Example 5.10 b, line 36).

As mentioned earlier, the sarcasm in this episode gradually escalates, as shown in lines 6, 7, 13, 20, 28 and 29 in Example 5.10 (b), in comparison with lines 4 and 5 toward the beginning of the interaction in Example 5.10 (a). Since almost everyone in the room is involved in the mockery either by adding more sarcastic remarks or by laughing at what is being said or written against *Tamara*, most of the mockery seems acceptable to

³⁷ Meaning a verbal fight on the microphone.

the administrators of the room. However, toward the end, *Tamara* appears overwhelmed by the extent of mockery carried out against her, which in a way is to be expected. After all, this is a Kuwaiti chat room with a majority of Kuwaiti users. And thus to direct disparaging remarks about the users' national identity and their country was perhaps unwise of *Tamara*. Interestingly, *Tamara* was not the only user to leave the room during this episode. One of the male users had breached the ban on profanity (Example 5.10 b, line 20) and was therefore also expelled. Thus, ironically, although the common goal was to mock *Tamara* with as many sarcastic remarks as well as racist insults as possible, Chit-chat's "no swearing" policy was nevertheless respected (see Chapter 3).

5.3 Conclusion

Initially, three types of humour were identified based on the intensity of sarcasm occurring in each type. Since "teasing mockery" was considered the least intense, I assumed this type of humorous chat to be associated mostly with female users. I base this on the perceptions of chat room interviewees. A few of their comments follow:

Excerpt 5.1

Ali (m) Girls are soft when it comes to chat room humour. I don't think they are capable of engaging in competitive types of jokes and mockery.

Zainab (f) It's not feminine for a girl to use aggressive humour. But the guys are good at fighting with words under the pretence of joking with one another.

The various examples of chat room humour demonstrated, however, that engaging in different types of humour is not gender-related, but determined by other factors that influence the type of humour used, such as: the type of topic being discussed, the relationship between users in a chat group, and whether a given chat room's sociolinguistic environment allows for teasing humour or more intense sarcastic humour. Norms of chat room humour are, in fact, negotiated over time among members of the chat room community of practice. Limits are set to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable forms of humour. Variations of these norms are also determined based on the different network of friends in each chat room. Interestingly and most importantly, the case of female users resisting female stereotypes, and choosing to adopt forms of adversarial mockery that are traditionally associated with men in offline settings, portrays female users as (conscious) agents who choose language practices to perform "new" femininities. Furthermore, use of adversarial mockery and attack sarcasm by female users reveals that these linguistic choices have not only been accepted by male hegemonies but, as shown by the data, also encouraged (Example 5.10 b).

The interactional patterns of teasing, mockery, and sarcasm are mostly used as a strategy to convey indirect messages. Indirectness in this case may range from concealing profanity in a song, to criticisms embedded in jokes, poetry, and puns, to addressing a male user with feminine gender form, or to subtle flirting through teasing. However, such forms of indirectness do not always have to evoke negative implications or result in cynical offensive attacks. On the contrary, indirectness can sometimes address positive goals and thus it may simply be a technique that saves participants' face from appearing clumsy or embarrassing. Tannen (2005) contends that indirectness is used for two

reasons, firstly 'to save face' especially if the interlocutor's 'opinions or wants are not favourably received', and secondly 'to achieve the sense of rapport that comes from being understood without saying what one means' (2005: 197).

Furthermore, use of mockery and teasing, as the numerous examples presented have shown, often creates and elicits amusement in chat rooms, especially if they are masked with wit and humorous contextual cues such as laughter and, in the case of text exchanges, smiley-face emoticons. In that way, humour is used because it creates interactive fun in a mixed-sex setting, which to users is the primary purpose for being part of this chat room community. Admittedly, I, along with many in the room, was rather amused at the series of exchanges that took place between *Citrusy* and *Jojo* (Examples 5.6 a, b, c, 5.7 and 5.8), even though the conflict did escalate towards the end.

Ultimately, as far as male users are concerned, humour, whether employed positively or negatively, is a strategy used to affirm masculinity or a way to impress female users, a discursive way of "flexing muscles" – according to male and female users I have interviewed. However, female users are sometimes encouraged by male users to employ adversarial types of humour (see Example 5.10 a and b), biting sarcasm, and insulting mockery. Although interviewees have informed me that when tactfully employed, mockery is a typical ploy to display machismo, some male users I have observed in chat rooms prefer to avoid conflict and are quite apprehensive of mockery, sarcasm, and profanity, and therefore use these chat room practices judiciously and only as a last resort.

While humour has been divided into three categories to represent three forms of humour in this chapter, the instances often overlap during chat room interaction. Notice,

for example, that numerous instances of mockery illustrated in section 5.2.2 on “adversarial mockery” could very well be considered as instances of “attack sarcasm”, especially toward the end of the episodes where conflict had become more intense. Therefore, the boundaries between the three types of humour displayed are at times rather fuzzy.

One aspect of chat room interaction remains clear and common knowledge to all users: profanity is no laughing matter and is thus unacceptable. Chat room administrators clearly delineate the distinction between swearing and forms of humour. In theory, many instances of mockery illustrated in the present chapter could very well result in a series of swearing duels, but since that is not possible according to the chat rooms’ code of conduct, users compensate for such restraint by resorting to a range of other more acceptable and creative interactional strategies. Generally, according to my observations and to insights from both male and female chat room interviewees, teasing mockery is the most common type of humour used among chat room users, followed by adversarial mockery, and finally, attack sarcasm (see Figure 5.1 for a visual representation of the proportion of types of humour).

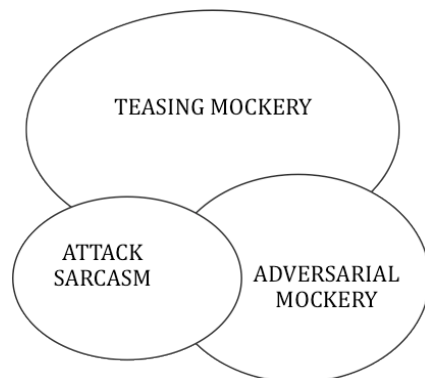


Figure 5.1 The interplay between three types of chat room humour.

In summary, the types of humour that occur in the Kuwaiti chat rooms being examined here are common interactional strategies among male and female users. At one end, they are necessary devices that create a sense of “playfulness” among users; at the other, they can become a (chat) mockery battle.

CHAPTER 6

EXPLORING CHAT ROOM NICKNAMES: GENDERED IDENTITIES

When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass. This reconstruction is our cultural work in progress (Turkle 1995: 177).

6.0 Introduction

The manner in which participants in Kuwaiti chat rooms employ features of chat room interaction and use shared practices to establish a virtual community of practice was discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Despite having escaped from offline rigid social norms into a virtual realm that allows mixed-sex interaction, male and female users are keen to transport their Kuwaiti traditions into this emerging “virtual” community of practice. In this virtual culture and more specifically in this community, Arab and Islamic hegemonies, which expect women to behave with modesty by being silent and avoiding contact with foreign³⁸ men, are both unavailable and irrelevant contextually. It is in this newly created social space that male and female users feel free to experiment with and negotiate new boundaries and practices of mixed-sex interaction (cf. Turkle 1995: 177). These boundaries often reach beyond the limits of casual interaction among friends and enter another level of heterosexual social interaction, namely romantic relationships. With a shared heterosexual purpose in mind, discourse norms between many users of the

³⁸ Non-family members.

Kuwaiti chat rooms under investigation revolve around the principle, “flirting through chatting”. In other words, chat room participants employ interactional strategies in mixed-sex interaction that are usually forbidden offline, for example, women greeting men in a very friendly manner, men using endearments when addressing women, and male and female users engaging in teasing and humorous mockery with one another (see Chapters 4 and 5). In fact, according to chat room interviewees, 95 percent of Kuwaiti chat room users share several reasons for accessing Chit-chat: to pass time, to have fun mostly by flirting with the opposite sex, and to look for a potential partner from the opposite sex. Thus, chat room interactional strategies are by and large employed to fulfil these common goals.

Although such goals are indeed known to and shared by users, tact is exercised in both direct and indirect forms of flirtatious interaction as well as other chat room discourse. The safest way to achieve this culturally and intellectually is to make sure discourse practices reflect a sense of ‘playfulness’ during mixed-sex interaction. In a study conducted on dating chats, Del-Teso-Craviotto (2006) argues that users flirt and express attraction to one another in a playful manner using the ‘I was just kidding’ strategy as a safety net in case the flirting is deemed inappropriate (2006: 475). Such a strategy is not merely a face-saving device, but rather more than that. During chat room interaction playfulness requires creativity, which in turn results in performative (linguistic) expressions of identity either consciously or unconsciously. Users therefore present characteristics of their identity in the hope that they will impress the audience in a given chat room. This display of identity traits is revealed to the audience through

numerous avenues, one of which is the users' nicknames, an identity symbol that exists even before they embark on chatting.

In her study on nicknames of IRC participants, Bechar-Israeli (2006: 1) argues that 'a person's existence and identity must be condensed textually into a single line which states his or her nickname' (2006). Essentially, nicknames are screen names that have meanings and information that a person wishes to convey to his or her audience. Yet, this 'presentation of self' (cf. Goffman 1959) through nicknames has to be implemented carefully. Numerous male and female interviewees have told me that 'a lot of thought goes into choosing a chat room nickname'. They argue that if a user prefers to remain anonymous or lurk their nickname and whatever implications it may carry becomes their only identity. Additionally, Bechar-Israeli points to the representation of elements that are embedded in a nickname and explains that they are quite important since choosing 'an original nick will tempt other participants to strike up a conversation' (2006: 1).

Most male and female users I have interviewed seem to believe that users choose nicknames that compensate for traits that are lacking in a person. Another way to state this is that a user selects a nickname that expresses characteristics he or she aspires to have. For example, an overweight user might choose *Sexy Lolita* or *Bootylicious* and a plain-looking user might create a nickname such as *Beautiful_Eyes*, *Luscious_Lips*, or *Ms Universe*. It should be noted that most of the examples refer to female nicknames, since as Turkle (1995) points out, it is often the females who are keen on appearing better than they are in real life (1995: 184). On the other hand, often male users are more concerned about pretending to own high-priced possessions. For example, a user may choose the

nickname *Ferrari* rather than *Toyota*, the latter being his actual car in real life. This point will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

Having an original nickname is therefore quite important to men not only for chat room purposes but also on other social network websites, such as ‘MySpace’ and as a form of address which they can Bluetooth to women while flirting with them on the streets or in malls (see forms of flirting in Chapter 7). Below are two examples of satirical comment made about stereotypical characteristics of Kuwaiti men regarding nicknames. These comments are taken from a blog on the Internet by the name of ‘Idiots in Kuwait’:

Top 10 Ways to Meet Women in Kuwait:

– MySpace:

To impress a girl on MySpace, you must come up with a kick ass nickname. *Q8istud*, *q8lover*, *myheart4you*, are all great examples. Write in really bad English, and use literal translations of Arabic poetry. Then wait for a reply. But don't hold your breath.

– Bluetooth:

Switch your Bluetooth on as soon as you leave the house. Make sure your nickname is appealing (a7ebbech ‘I love you’ and *kuwaitsexyman* are good examples). Once you find a girl, send her pornography (Gemineye 2008).

Danet *et al.* (2006) equate nicknames used in chat rooms with ‘*masks and costumes* at carnival time in real life’ (2006: 1, also see Turkle 1995: 177). This *carnavalesque* feature of nicknames enables users to mask traits that they wish to keep hidden and highlight others that they aspire to have. Danet *et al.* (2006) argue that nicknames do not simply function as textual masks that ‘disguise real-life identities but as a form of online *plumage*’ (2006: 6). Indeed, virtual reality allows users to completely redefine themselves (Turkle 1995: 184).

Another feature of nicknames is the freedom it grants users to discreetly experiment with choices of gender and social identity (Turkle 1995: 177). In order to understand the impact cyber fantasy has on society and people’s beliefs, one has to simply notice Kuwaiti magazine cartoon humour with respect to this subject. A well-known cartoon in America about Internet anonymity published in *The New Yorker* in July 1993 reads: ‘on the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog’ (cited in Herring 2003: 205). Similarly, a cartoon picture published in a Kuwaiti family and lifestyle magazine shows a man and a woman who communicate over the Internet and both seem to have positive aspirations or high hopes of what the other will look like in real life (see Cartoon 6.1).



Cartoon 6.1: Dating over the Internet (Sayed 2009: 9).

The discrepancy between an online virtual description of a given user and his or her actual real-life appearance is a significant issue in chat rooms and is a common controversial topic among users. Even though 30% of men and women in Kuwaiti chat rooms do interact through speech (speaking to the audience over the microphone), as many as 70% of chat room participants prefer to limit themselves to textual interaction. It is only when a participant decides to speak over the microphone that his or her gender, ethnicity, and possibly social class can be revealed to the audience in a chat room. Furthermore, although it was mentioned earlier that nicknames allow users to swap genders due to anonymity (Turkle 1995: 177), the opposite is true in the Kuwaiti chat rooms where male and female users prefer to reveal their genders through their nicknames. This is understandable since gender transparency plays an essential role in the heterosexual interaction witnessed in the Kuwaiti chat rooms being examined.

Bechar-Israeli has also found that many users keep hold of one nickname for a long period of time (2006: 1). Indeed, a user's nickname is his or her "trademark", according to Baym (1998: 54). She argues that the starting point for online identity construction is choosing a nickname which later enables users to distinguish their friends from their enemies (1998: 54). This trademark becomes a user's tool for gaining popularity and thus an element of power, along with other entailments such as respect, being granted the status of "chat room administrator", and being revered as a source of knowledge by other members in this community of practice. Indeed, this user trademark is synonymous with trademarks found in other communities of practice, such as various ways of applying eyeliner by gang-affiliated Latina girls (the Surtenas and Nortenas) in

Mendoza-Denton's (2008) study, and the different dress-codes of the jocks and burnouts among high-school students in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1995) study.

Moreover, with respect to nicknames being seen as masks (noted earlier), Danet *et al.* (2006) write:

Masks are meant not only to hide a player's real identity but also to call attention to the person and to the mask, its expressive power, imaginativeness, capacity to instil fear, evoke humour, and so on (2006: 6).

A nickname therefore has to be outstanding to gain popularity. It has to become quite popular in order to evoke power (see section 6.5). Of course, technically, it is the user's personality, presence and speech style that play a major role in the acquisition of popularity and power (see discussion on "Public Speakers" in Chapter 7). However, it has to be said that a user's nickname is the initial "spark" that facilitates identity construction and performance to occur in this virtual community of practice.

One may ask at this point, why are nicknames important to users and to the chat room community as a whole? To answer this question, it is necessary to be aware of the different varieties of nicknames and their significance, which is explored in sections 6.1 and 6.2. Furthermore, theories and arguments from these two sections will be put to the test in section 6.3, where I conduct a small-scale experiment on nicknames to illustrate further the significance of nicknames in the chat rooms under investigation.

6.1 A typology of nicknames

In her study on virtual nicknames, Bechar-Israeli (2006: 5) proposes 14 categories that comprise a typology of nicknames, 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, my Tboy).
- 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, Bfiancee).

(Source: Bechar-Israeli 2006: 5)

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

For the purpose of this chapter I draw on Bechar-Israeli's nickname categories in creating a typology that is suited to the Kuwaiti chat room being examined. Some of her categories are adopted with modifications and I produce some of my own categories. See the list in Table 6.1 (see also Tables 6.2 and 6.3 to facilitate nickname legibility).

Category	Examples of nicknames
1. Real-life names.	- Azoz , Borashed , Ali 747 , Dr. Faisal , <i>Saroona_28</i> .
2. Kuwait-related nicknames.	- <i>Dana Q8</i> , Mr. Q8 , Ahmad-Q8 .
3. Appearance-related nicknames.	- <i>q8ya_3asal_22</i> (cute Kuwaiti girl), <i>green-eyes</i> , <i>Mamlo7a</i> (the pretty girl).
4. Humorous nicknames.	- User bas mitnakir (user incognito), JNicc (ghost), Bo kersha (man with a fat belly).
5. Sentimental nicknames.	- <i>M7TAGA 7OBK</i> (in need of your love), <i>Al Magroo7a</i> (the wounded girl), Mash3er ou I7sas (feelings and emotions).
6. Feminine (gendered) nicknames.	- <i>Ms ALKON</i> (Ms Universe), <i>Bnt Q8</i> (Kuwaiti girl), <i>Om il dala3</i> (the spoilt girl), <i>Sinyorita</i> (senhorita: Portuguese for 'miss').
7. Masculine nicknames associated with profession, cars, hobbies, football teams.	- Ferrari , Gana6 (Hunter), The Director , Barceloni (a Barcelona fan).
8. Characters in fairytales, films, plays.	- القويصر (Caesar), Al_Sultan (the Sultan), el Joker (the joker), Fer3on (the Pharaoh), Tom Cruz .
9. Nicknames that play with sounds, language and typography.	- MMoonn_3 , <i>Kooko lo lo</i> , llrllldllwlll , sLwoJl pJ7 (night dream), p-o-5Jl (the uncle).
10. Technology-related nicknames.	- <i>Iphoneya</i> (the Iphone girl), wir3d (wired), ات (@) .
11. Western (English) nicknames.	- The vision, Chocolate girl, TAKEOVER , Thes is truth ³⁹ .
12. Sex-related and provocative.	- <i>Q8ya_Sexya</i> (a sexy Kuwaiti girl), <i>Nathy_4Ever</i> (a female forever), Bawag Banat (kidnaper of girls), <i>Call Girl In Kuwait</i> , <i>Pussy_cat</i> , <i>Miss_Zigara</i> (Miss Cigarette).
NB: Male nicknames are in bold face and female nicknames in italics.	

Table 6.1 An illustration of the 12 different categories used to classify nicknames

To facilitate the legibility and comprehension of nicknames presented I adopt Palfreyman and Al Khalil's (2007) representation of The Internet Arabic Writing System which substitutes several sounds that do not exist in English with numerals. These numerals are

³⁹ This nickname is originally spelt incorrectly by its owner and is most probably a direct translation from Arabic, hence it is also grammatically incorrect.

seen by Arabs from the Gulf region as visually resembling and hence corresponding to Arabic letters (2007: 53–4). Tables 6.2 and 6.3 illustrate The Internet Arabic Writing System.

Sound	Arabic letter	ASCII* representation	Example (English translation)
/h/ (a heavy /h/-type sound)	<ح>	<7>	<wa7ed> (one)
/ʕ/ (a tightening of the throat resembling a light gargle)	<ع>	<3>	<ba3ad> (after)
/tʔ/ (the emphatic version of /t/)	<ط>	<6>	<6arrash> (he sent)
/sʔ/ (the emphatic version of /s/)	<ص>	<9>	<a9lan> (actually)
/ʔ/ (glottal stop)	<ء>	<2>	<so2al> (question)

Table 6.2 Numerals used to represent Arabic sounds

Sound	Arabic letter	ASCII* representation	Example (English translation)
/x/ (final sound in Scots “loch”)	<خ>	‘7	<’7ebar> (news)
/ɣ/ (voiced version of above)	<غ>	‘3	<’3ada> (lunch)
/tʔ/ (the emphatic version of /ð/, the first sound in English “that”)	<ظ>	‘6	<’6ahry> (my back)
/dʔ/ (the emphatic version of /d/)	<ض>	‘9	<man3ara’9> (not shown)

* ASCII: American Standard Code for Information Interchange (Palfreyman and Al Khalil 2007: 54)

Table 6.3 Numerals used with apostrophe

Chat room users employ the Internet Arabic Writing System as part of the chat room register either for nicknames or during text chat. This is a strong indication of a presence of a community of practice. The members of this community of practice are united by this “shared repertoire” (namely, the Internet Arabic Writing System), (Wenger 1998: 82-4), which is learned through participation within the chat room’s social practice, that is to

say, 'learning-in-practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 56). The importance of this writing system is especially visible and significant for creating a variety of nicknames (see Table 6.1).

Many nicknames are in fact a combination of two categories at once. For example, some nicknames combine flirtatious languages (Arabic and/or English) such as, *Nathya_4Ever*, *Q8ya-Sexya* (see Table 6.1, number 12). Some users create a nickname that combines appearance characteristics with English words or English and Arabic words such as, *Green_Eyes* and *Ms Alkon*, *Ms* being the English part of the nickname and *Alkon* being the Arabic word for Universe, (see Table 6.1, number 3). Such nicknames are generally harder to categorize, since they fall within more than one category. According to users I interviewed, such mixed-type nicknames are not straightforward and are more original than plain nicknames that represent a user's real-life name (e.g. *Ahmed-25*, see Table 6.1, number 1). Additionally, such nicknames are viewed based on the overall effect they have on the audience. For example, if a user wants an English nickname⁴⁰ to become popular or desirable, he or she needs to use elements associated with appearance to make the nickname appear appealing (e.g. *Beautiful_Eyes*; see Table 6.1, number 11). Moreover, like Bechar-Israeli (2006), I have separated a group of nicknames that have no specific category or meaning, for example, *supcall*, *B_*, and *Tuffy*.

As is clear from Table 6.1, the categories chosen to classify the nicknames used in Kuwaiti chat rooms reflect shared cultural knowledge and interests, but some are nevertheless similar to a number of Bechar-Israeli's nickname categories. For example,

⁴⁰ English nicknames (e.g. *Angel*, see Table 6.1, Number 11) tend to be unattractive to chat room users, as will be shown later when testing nicknames.

nicknames have been classified according to their functions as humorous nicknames (see Table 6.1, number 4) and as sentimental nicknames (see Table 6.1, number 5).

Given the heterosexual ambience of the Kuwaiti chat rooms being examined, many female users tend to choose nicknames that emphasise their gender, or to be more specific, nicknames that index a user's 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 6.1, 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 ownership of a certain physical characteristic or object, for example, *Om Shaar* 'the girl with the big hair' or *Om il Abbaya* 'the woman with the black cloak'. An example of a chat room nickname using *Om* is *Om 3angousain*, meaning 'the girl with the two ponytails'. Similarly, this form of address can be used for men with *Bu*, as in *Bu Karsha* (see Table 6.1, number 4), meaning 'the man with the big belly' (this type of address form is discussed in Chapter 7). In contrast to the feminine characteristics of nickname Category 6, in Table 6.1, is Category 7, which classifies nicknames as being associated with cars, hobbies, football teams, and professions. These are interests that are selected in the main by male users.

Since most of the users in the chat rooms I examine are (Kuwaiti) Arabic speaking, I found the idea of using English terminology to create English-sounding nicknames quite interesting and hence decided to classify such nicknames in a category of their own (see Table 6.1, number 11). Finally, the first category in Table 6.1, *real-life names*, is similar to that of Bechar-Israeli's category of people's real names mentioned

separately from the rest of her nickname typology. But in this case these nicknames are used with a different purpose in mind. If a user calls himself *Ali* in a chat room, his name is most probably not *Ali* in real life (see section 6.2), and hence many real life names are in effect not *real*.

6.2 Nickname popularity and “legibility”

The explicit or implicit meaning of a nickname is an essential component in popularising it. Equally, several factors such as the category that a nickname belongs to, its length⁴¹, its colour⁴², and whether it appears in Roman or Arabic script⁴³, play an important role in how quickly a nickname becomes popular. The legibility of a nickname may not seem like an obvious factor to consider, but it actually 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 spoken and text chat as ones that were more legible. For example, when entering a room, a given user is automatically welcomed by other users who recognize him or her as a friend. More importantly, the speaker who happens to be on the microphone also welcomes the newcomer by nickname. This is where nickname legibility becomes significant (see Example 6.1).

I have attended many rooms where speakers have stumbled while pronouncing a newcomer’s difficult nickname, which can affect how this user is perceived by others (e.g., users may avoid uttering a nickname that is difficult to pronounce and this may

⁴¹ The shorter the nickname the better.

³⁴ Nicknames represented in coloured font as opposed to plain black-ink.

⁴³ Only a few nicknames are written in Arabic.

hinder the nickname's owner from becoming a popular user sooner). Moreover, some users tend to believe that nicknames that do not make sense probably belong to “weird” users. According to responses given to interview question 2.2 (‘what important features should a nickname have in order to stand out?’ – see section 3.3.3), many users ensure that they select an original nickname as well as one that is easily pronounced and understood, since it will be regularly enunciated before the audience over the microphone, especially during greetings and farewells (see Chapter 4).

In Example 6.1, the speaker, a male user, stumbles while pronouncing my nickname *Bassbooussaa* (originally ‘*Basbousa*’, a type of Arabic sweet or dessert).

Example 6.1 (Verbal chat)

Kalood-11@ (m) Hi Bas .. Bas .. [hesitating] what's this? Ahhh *Bassbooussaa*, oh God, how many letters do you have to repeat, this is such a long nickname. Anyway, welcome back.

(Original Arabic)

Kalood-11@ (m) *Bas bas shinu, shinu? Aaaa basbousah, oulleh, sham hharf ma'ayood ishhal nick il ttuweel, a'al oumoum wilkam bak.*

The nickname *Bassbooussaa* was actually one of the first nicknames I used during my pilot study in Chit-chat. And because I had used this nickname several times at different periods, I kept adding one or two letters each time so that it would be accepted as a new nickname by the Chit-chat network. Nicknames that are popular are shared by more than one user, and are therefore adapted from the original nickname by adding extra letters, circles (e.g., *0-o Angel o-0, Johnn* or *Jaak*), or numbers (e.g., *Ms Sweety_26*). When a

nickname is legible, it is quickly understood and if it happens to be outstanding, too, as is the case with the nickname *Basbousa*, then it is likely to trigger comments from users (see below). A nickname associated with features such as a dessert, a humorous element, physical attractiveness, and so on, can very often be used as a tool to “break the ice” or strike up a conversation in the form of a “chat-up-line”.

There were numerous occasions when I accessed a given chat room with *Basbousa*, and the nickname would immediately be recognised as attractive giving the speaker on the microphone something to talk about: ‘Mmmm yummy, *Basbousa*, that’s exactly what I’d like to have right now’, or ‘Hey *Basbousa*, are you sweet as your nickname?’ Comments such as these are also made via text chat among the audience as soon as the nickname is spotted. Technically, these may sound like flirtatious comments, especially when initiated by men towards a female user, however, I maintain they are simply compliments that are used to establish rapport through small talk. In this case, the legibility and originality of the nickname are facilitating factors that help achieve this goal promptly. In general, attractive female nicknames can also be the targets of male user “flirtations”. For example, during the period when I used the nickname *Basbousa*, I often received salacious private messages from male users that began with: ‘Is your nickname an invitation for me to eat you?’ or ‘I bet you must be tasty’.

Additionally, nicknames are popularized based on how attractive they are heterosexually. This is especially true in the case of female nicknames. Male and female users I interviewed have told me that a mere nickname determines whether a given user is likely to be flirted with or avoided. This applies especially to female users’ nicknames since it is the women who are pursued by men in the Kuwaiti chat rooms being examined

and not the other way around (also see Panyametheekul and Herring 2006: 13). Naturally, the more attractive or provocative a nickname is the more flirtatious bargaining power it will have, which in turn leads such a nickname to become popular with time. For example, certain types of gendered nicknames that indicate feminine sexuality (see Table 6.1, number 12) are especially favoured among male users as flirting targets. Increasingly these female nickname types then become a popular choice among other female users who want to be pursued and flirted with by men in chat rooms.

Table 6.4, illustrates the popularity of nickname categories among male and female users.

Nickname Categories	Female	Male	Lurker
1. Real-life names	4	24	0
2. National & cultural	3	9	1
3. Appearance characteristics	18	8	1
4. Humorous expressions	5	25	0
5. Sentimental & romantic	5	16	1
6. Gendered	13	1	0
7. Hobbies, football teams, cars, profession-related	1	14	0
8. Characters in stories and films	1	13	1
9. Repeated sounds & language play	3	8	2
10. Technical terms	1	10	1
11. English words and expressions	1	9	2
12. Provocative & flirtatious	15	5	2

Table 6.4 Nickname popularity among chat room users.

The figures in Table 6.4 represent a corpus of 231 user nicknames. These nicknames have been taken from 5 of the Kuwaiti chat rooms under examination (see Chapter 3, for chat room names). From these nicknames eleven were categorised as lurkers, and since they did not participate in chat room interaction via speech or text, it was impossible to determine their gender through linguistic means. These nicknames have therefore not been included. Another group of users not included among the categories of nicknames are ones with meanings that do not make sense. In total, there are five nicknames, all

belonging to male users⁴⁴: *Jaaak_80, Askeean_5, B_, Supcall* and *MY*. The total number of nicknames used for the purpose of analysing the most popular categories of nicknames among male and female users is therefore 215 nicknames, 145 of which were identified as masculine and 70 as feminine. These nicknames were collected on a designated time and day for a period of 15 minutes per chat room (out of the five chat rooms). Figure 6.1 illustrates the most popular and the least popular categories of nicknames among male and female users.

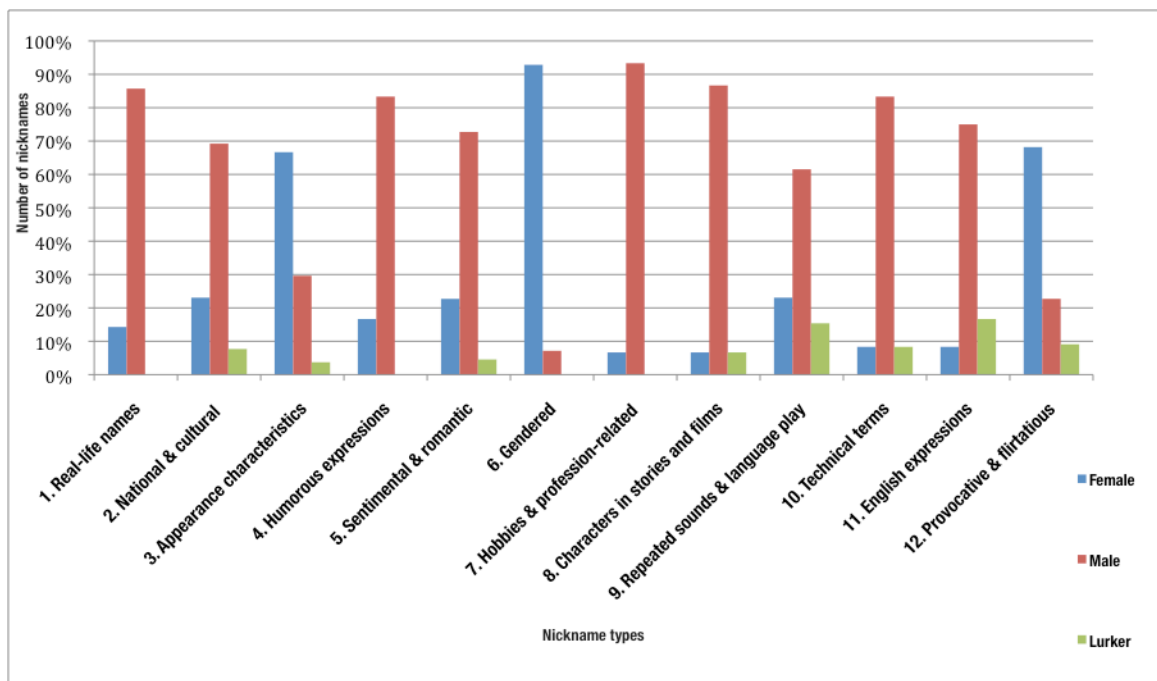


Figure 6.1 An illustration of nickname popularity.

Figure 6.1 demonstrates that male participants prefer using their real-life names as well as nicknames that are humorous. Male informants from the Kuwaiti chat rooms believe that

⁴⁴ Their gender was identified through their text comments during interaction.

many of the men who use real-life names actually have different offline names from the ones used in chat rooms. According to male interviewees, such users will often have old-fashioned real-life names owing to their origins as Bedouins⁴⁵. They therefore adopt common urban names such as *Mohamed, Ahmed, Youssif*, and so on. An urban real-life name used as a nickname will therefore enable such male users to appear sophisticated and trendy which in turn improves their chances of being noticed by many female users.

The popularity of choosing funny or humorous nicknames among male users correlates significantly with men's common tendency to use playful mockery and teasing in chat rooms (see Chapter 5). Thus nicknames also contribute to the creation of humour and a playful atmosphere in chat rooms. In general, male and female informants see funny nicknames as less threatening, trendy, non-serious, teasing, and playful, for example: *3twey* 'black cat', *s7t* 'ugly', *JNnee* 'ghost', *Dash Athy3 Wakty* 'I'm in here to waste time'. Such nicknames may not seem humorous in chat rooms from other cultures (e.g., American or European chat rooms), but for Kuwaiti users *JNnee* 'ghost', for instance, means someone who is witty, cunning, and agile. Also, a male user who calls himself 'ugly' transforms self-deprecation into a laughing matter.

Using sentimental or romantic expressions is also widely adopted in nicknames among male users. Interestingly, male users can include sentimental or emotional values in nicknames without the risk of being seen as unmanly. Often, it is romantic men or men in love who use nicknames such as *3athabny_dgJl* 'tortured by longing', *WLHAN_Q8* 'A person who longs for his loved one', *e7sas wa masha3er* 'feelings and emotions', although this category of nicknames is by no means exclusive to male users. Some girls

⁴⁵ Bedouins tend to choose macho-sounding names for their male children. Such names are seen as "uncultured" or clumsy by urban Kuwaitis.

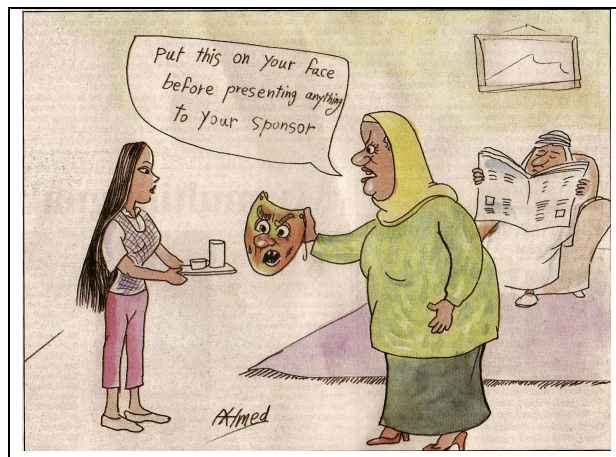
do not hesitate in revealing their romantic side also by telling everyone that they are in love (see Figure 6.1, the sentimental category).

Male users also appear to use nicknames associated with professions, cars, hobbies, and football teams (see Table 6.1, number 7), as well as nicknames using characters in fairytales, films, and plays (see Table 6.1, number 8). These two categories both have masculine implications, that is, male users who use nicknames from these two categories want to be perceived as masculine. According to female interviewees, female users are usually uninterested in displaying information related to their professions, hobbies, or the cars they drive, believing that this type of information about a girl is not necessarily appealing to men; hence the reason for labelling category number 7 in Table 6.1 as masculine. Furthermore, the choice of nicknames related to movie characters or historical figures, according to some male users I interviewed, are nicknames that are connected to the past and are reminiscent of greatness and glory as well as imply a certain masculine charm. Examples of such nicknames are *Caesar*, *Amir il Gharam* ‘prince of romance’ (note these two nicknames are presented in Arabic script in the chat room they were taken from), *Fer3on* ‘Pharaoh’, and *Al_Sultan* ‘the Sultan’ (see Table 6.1, number 8).

According to male and female interviewees, nicknames are usually chosen in line with a user’s interests but more importantly they are selected according to the user’s purpose of being in chat rooms in the first place, or at least this is the case in Kuwaiti chat rooms. It is therefore understandable that a nickname should accommodate its owner’s goals. Whether consciously or unconsciously, female users in chat rooms often keep in mind heterosexual preferences when selecting their nicknames. Female interviewees

explained to me that men in Kuwait are fixated on female beauty. Not surprisingly, the issue of female beauty online mirrors the importance and attention it is given in offline private and public spheres. Housewives, for example, always ensure they hire female housemaids or housekeepers (usually from eastern Asia) that are less attractive in appearance than they are, an issue commonly discussed in newspapers and magazines (Khalid 2008: 4; see Cartoon 6.2). Furthermore, Kuwaiti women's preoccupation with beauty is visible mostly through the large amounts of money spent on beauty products as well as long hours in beauty parlours in order to enhance their appearance (as illustrated in Cartoon 6.3).

Cartoons 6.2 and 6.3: Illustrations of beauty anxiety among women in Kuwait (*The Kuwait Times* 2008).



Cartoon 6.2



Cartoon 6.3 (* K.D. 4000 is equivalent to £ 8000 and 225 fils to 50 pence.)

In general, women in public places are pursued, stalked, and flirted with mainly based on their appearance. The fact that society is gender segregated inevitably prevents men and women from discovering each other's personality traits through interaction, and thus appearances are men's and women's only method of evaluating one another. A woman's physical appearance therefore gives her rite of passage into the heterosexual market of Kuwaiti society. Naturally, given that Kuwait is a patriarchal society, less pressure is placed on men's physical appearance since in their case providing financial security is granted precedence.

Online, issues of beauty and physical appearance are given significant attention during chat discussions. Topics relating to women's makeup in Kuwait, women's headscarves and sense of fashion, and women's obesity are frequently discussed (see Chapters 5 and 7). Such topics, usually brought up by male users in chat rooms, appear in the form of direct criticism or teasing mockery with respect to female users' physical appearances (see Chapter 5). This is the main reason girls in Kuwaiti chat rooms pay special attention to prioritising physical appearance in their nicknames, believing that this

may enhance their chances of being noticed by male users who could become potential partners. According to male interviewees, seeing a nickname that implies a pretty girl or a beautiful woman gives them hope and pleasure, even though the promise of being beautiful may very well be untrue and unreliable, as Del-Teso-Craviotto (2006: 475) has also found in her work on dating in chat rooms.

Figure 6.1 illustrates that nicknames that are associated with physical appearance are female users' first choice among other nickname categories. Women in chat rooms tend to emphasise general beauty or cuteness in nicknames such as *al mmamlo7a_2* 'the pretty one', *Ms Pretty Girl*, and *Miss Alkon* 'Miss universe', (as Turkle has also found, 1995: 211). Additionally, they tend to highlight certain facial features positively, as in nicknames such as *Green_Eyes* or *Om sha3r 7reer*, a female nickname meaning 'the one with the silky hair' (see Figure 6.1, category 3).

Male interviewees have informed me that usually it is the girls that are not so pretty who choose nicknames emphasising beauty. Male users seem to believe that with regard to female nicknames, they are often misleading and imply the opposite of real-life characteristics. However, male users insist that there may always be a glimmer of hope that the girl they are chatting with is indeed pretty and desirable. This hope creates a sense of enjoyment for male users.

The second most chosen category among female users is promiscuous, provocative, or flirtatious nicknames (see Figure 6.1, category 12). This category is very similar to the two nickname categories presented by Bechar-Israeli (2006: 5) namely, 'sex-related nicknames' and 'provocative nicknames'. According to her examples of the provocative category ('Hitler', ' Hamas', and 'Bin Ladin'), this category is seen more as

‘bold’ and ‘defiant’ while sex-related nicknames tend to convey a user’s sexual orientation. In my typology, these two categories have been collapsed, based on knowledge of Kuwait’s strict gender norms and on nickname perceptions from interviewees, and named *sex-related and provocative* (see Table 6.1, number 12). A good example of a nickname from this category is *Nathya_4Ever* meaning ‘female forever’. Such a nickname typically portrays a woman as one who is flirtatious and defiant of norms of female modesty. Indeed, according to male and female interviewees a female user with a nickname that has *nathya* or *ontha*, meaning ‘female’ or ‘feminine’, tagged to it makes a clear statement to men that she wishes to be noticed and flirted with. Nicknames that begin with *Ontha* or *Nathya* are especially provocative because men believe that they are rather salacious as well as encourage flirting and thus allow them to emphasise their masculinity. Consequently, such nicknames are much sought after by many female users. Other nicknames in this category such as *0o Barbie o0*⁴⁶ and *Q8tya-Sexya* are often, but not always, accompanied by user profile pictures of a woman in lingerie or lying provocatively on the beach wearing a bathing suit.

Many male and female users supplement their nicknames with pictures in the personal profile section of their Chit-chat account. Sometimes, a nickname is closely linked to the selected picture and its meaning. It follows that if a male user selects the nickname *Ferrari*, he is likely to display a picture of the car in his profile. However, many users intentionally or neglectfully leave their profile empty with no pictures. For example, a girl with a nickname such as *Q80_Nathya*, meaning ‘Kuwaiti female’, does

⁴⁶ It is not uncommon to see two or three versions of a nickname such as Barbie in a given chat room, for example, *barby*, *Barbie*, *Barbie_24* and *Barbiya* (an ‘Arabised’ version with the added feminine inflection *iya* at the end of the nickname).

not necessarily have to post a flirtatious picture in her profile as the nickname speaks for itself (see section 6.3). Furthermore, some of the female users who select promiscuous nicknames very often select a service in Chit-chat that blocks unknown users from accessing their profiles and, as such, even private messages by users are denied.

The third category of nicknames chosen by female users is one indicating their gender. Such nicknames typically have tags such as *Bnt* ‘girl’, *Miss*, *Om* ‘the one (female) with the...’ or ‘mother of’ (see Table 6.1, number 6). Such feminine indicators can also include *Ontha* and *Nathya*, both meaning ‘feminine’ which although considered flirtatious, also index female user gender. Examples of such nicknames are *Om 3ango6ain* ‘the one with the two ponytails’, *Bnt Dalou3a* ‘a spoilt girl’, and a somewhat different type of nickname but equally gendered *Sinyorita* ‘Miss in Portuguese’ (see Table 6.1, number 6). Female users choose such nicknames with the purpose of letting the users in the chat room know that they are women, albeit not necessarily of the promiscuous type.

6.3 Testing nicknames

To determine the importance of nicknames in the Kuwaiti chat rooms under examination as well as the implications of the different nickname categories, a small-scale experiment was conducted to attempt to establish the amount of “pull” some nickname categories may generate. In order to do so, nine different nicknames, 8 of which were female and 1 male, were tested simultaneously in the following chat rooms: *The_Seafarers*, *Kuwait_Love_2009*, and *Happy_Days* (see Chapter 3 for details on experiment methods). The eight types of female nickname chosen for this experiment represent six nickname

categories, namely, three provocative and flirtatious nicknames; and four other nickname types each indicating physical appearance, sentiments and romance, real-life names and humour (see Table 6.1). In addition, one of the nicknames was chosen to be English sounding, *0-o Angel o-0* (see Table 6.1). It is worth noting that one of the popular nicknames *Nathya_Woow* appears once along with two different profile pictures and a third time without a picture (see Chapter 3 for details on experiment methods). Finally, a male nickname was tested to establish a holistic overview of male and female nicknames. Undoubtedly, however, the male nickname would hardly trigger female interest, since – as mentioned earlier – female users are usually pursued and seldom pursue male users in the chat rooms being examined. For a more realistic representation of nicknames, each nickname was supplemented with a picture that was placed in the user’s profile⁴⁷ except for one nickname (see Table 6.5, number 10). The pictures were either cartoon type or real-life pictures of gendered versus gender-free orientation (see Table 6.5).

⁴⁷ A section that is part of the Chit-chat user’s account which allows him or her to include pictures and any personal information he or she wishes to share with other users.











Nickname	Nickname type	Picture appearing with nickname	Desirability ⁴⁸
1. Nathya_Woow I (A Woow Female)	Provocative & flirtatious		11
2. Mil7 El Dinyia (Cuteness)	Indicating appearance		2
3. 0o Cakeh o0 (A Cake)	Edible dessert flirtatious		6
4. Wag3a F7ubak (Falling in love with you)	Sentimental & romantic		3
5. Maryoom_77 (Miriam)	Real-life name (feminine)		5
6. 0-o Angel o-0	English		1
7. Bint 3am Hitler (Hitler's cousin)	Provocative & humorous		9
8. Umbaih Ay Shay (Whatever!)	Humorous		5
9. Nathya_Woow II (a Woow female)	Provocative & flirtatious		9
10. Nathya_Woow III (a Woow female)	Provocative & flirtatious	NO PICTURE	10
11. Ahmad-34	Real-life name (masculine)		0

Table 6.5 Nicknames tested with pictures

⁴⁸ Desirability is measured by the number of private messages from users triggered by a given nickname.

Many of the pictures used correlate with the implications of the different nickname they appear with, with the exception of one nickname, *Nathya_Woow*, a provocative and flirtatious nickname, which was introduced three times, once at the beginning of the experiment and twice at the end. *Nathya_Woow* was employed as a nickname for the first time with a provocative picture, the second time with a neutral or gender-free picture, and the third time with no picture (see Table 6.5, numbers 1, 9 and 10). The reason for this arrangement was that this particular nickname (*Nathya_Woow*) attracted the highest number of private messages from male users to begin with. It was established therefore that *Nathya_Woow* is the most popular nickname among all the nicknames that were chosen for this experiment. Thus towards the end of the experiment it was retested with different variables (i.e., a gender-free picture and no picture). This was to discover whether using a provocative picture in the first instance increased the chances of this nickname attracting male users. As shown in Table 6.5, number 9, the nickname attracted a little less male attention the second time around, but still with nine private messages, the amount of desirability was significant in comparison to other nicknames. In the third instance, the nickname *Nathya_Woow* was tested with no picture and once again it attracted ten private messages (see Table 6.5, number 10), proving that the nickname itself possessed the underlying qualities and not the picture.

Another nickname that male users seemed quite drawn to is *Bnt 3am Hitler* ‘Hitler’s (female) cousin’ (see Table 6.5, number 7). This nickname was also introduced with a salacious cartoon image of a girl lying provocatively on the beach wearing a bathing suit (see Table 6.5, number 7). The rest of the nicknames received relatively fewer private messages from male users, even though one of these nicknames, *Wag3a*

F7ubak ‘falling in love with you’, was included with a salacious picture of a lady in a lingerie outfit (see Table 6.5, number 4). The least attractive nickname was the English sounding nickname, *0-o Angel o-0*, which according to male interviewees ‘is not Arabic and therefore uninteresting or unattractive’ (see Table 6.5, number 6). The real-life female nickname (see Table 6.5, number 5) and the humorous nickname (see Table 6.5, number 3) are among the second best chosen nicknames by male users. Figure 6.2 illustrates a graphic representation of the nickname experiment.

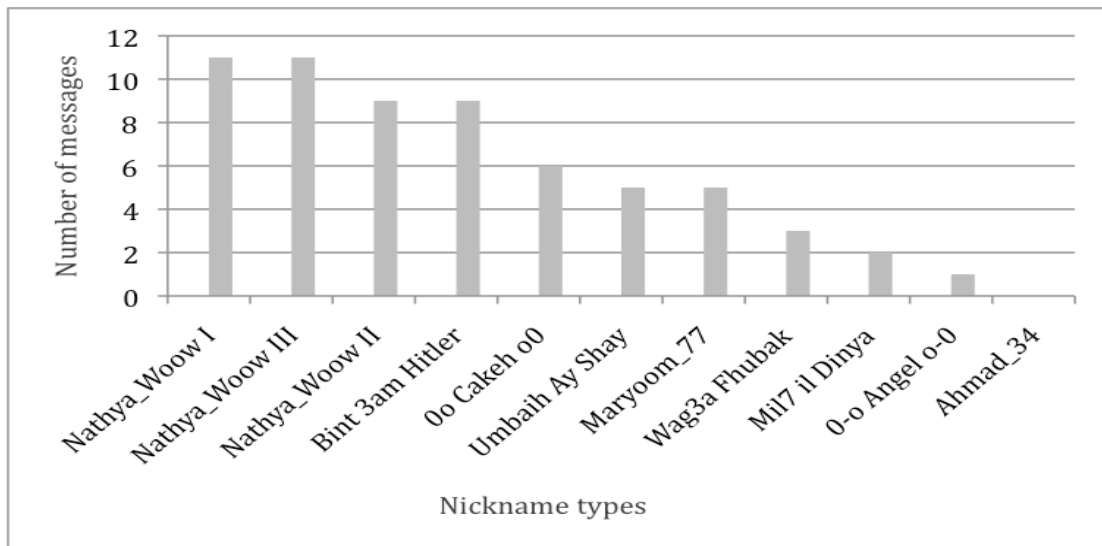


Figure 6.2 An illustration of nickname desirability.

According to accounts from male and female users, a nickname has to be attractive and original enough to be noticed in a chat room. If nicknames can be placed on a continuum of desirability ranging from what some male users call “most boring” to “most provocative and flirtatious”, then many female nicknames would fall somewhere in the middle between two extremes of the continuum (see Figure 6.3).

goal must be firstly and most importantly to choose a nickname with a significant meaning and one that was original enough to stand out among other nicknames. At a later stage, it was realized that users wanted the nickname to represent a chosen personal identity that is suited to this particular chat room environment. As such, some users wanted to be known by their virtual friends as jokers, sentimental people, or serious professionals. Others wanted to reveal characteristics about their appearance, the type of hobbies they like, and the car models they have or pretend to have. And others still wanted to index traits about their sexuality (e.g., the nickname, *Bawag Banat* ‘kidnapper of girls’ and *Nathya_4Ever* ‘female forever’ (see Table 6.1, number 12)).

Nicknames have another facet to them: a materialistic facet that resonates with power and status. In order to understand the value behind nicknames, attention is shifted away from the linguistic meaning of these address labels to the symbolic representation of their outer characteristics (e.g., the nickname’s length, colour and language). In this context, Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of linguistic capital is drawn upon. Bourdieu points out: ‘utterances are not only signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also *signs of wealth*, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and *signs of authority*, intended to be believed and obeyed’ (1991: 66). In other words, according to Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power, a nickname may very well represent more than just a term of address and be more than a descriptive symbol of one’s chosen identity. Indeed, the chat room users I have interviewed explained to me that a nickname is a complex discourse marker that is multi-faceted and that one of its most important aspects is the fact that it reflects a user’s financial or influential status in the chat room culture.

All chat room users in Chit-chat's network service initially have plain black-ink nicknames. For about £25, however, users may choose to subscribe to have their nicknames painted a different font colour. According to Padeel, the network that manages Chit-chat's administrative and financial affairs, such a subscription for a nickname painting entitles its user to features such as access to the Ultimate Rooms⁴⁹, a clearer sound quality for microphone usage, and a moving camera for enhanced video quality (Padeel 2008).

A nickname painted green indicates that its users can enjoy more privileges. Furthermore, *VIP* tagged to a nickname means even more privileges, and so on. Subscriptions to these special privileges and services can reach up to £718 per month. Nicknames therefore fit into a materialistic, hierarchical system that is part of this chat room community's dynamics. Room administrators are users with '@' tagged to their nicknames. They are more powerful than regular users as they are responsible for law and order in a chat room. Hence, if in a given room there are no nicknames with '@' attached to them, it is understood that there is no administrator in the room and therefore unruly behaviour may occur. This usually takes place during quiet hours of the day or night when administrators leave the chat room. The administration duties are routinely passed on to a trusted user when the original administrator wishes to leave his or her post in a given chat room. The symbol '@' is therefore attached to users whose nickname status allows '@' to be tagged to it. It follows that being able to become an administrator is another privilege that comes with a painted nickname and one that cannot be enjoyed by

⁴⁹ These are R-rated rooms also known as Adult Rooms among users. These are rooms in which pornography may occur.

regular black-ink nicknames. Equally, nicknames that use Arabic script⁵⁰ or ones that use less than five characters are also of higher status, with numerous privileges for their users to enjoy. But usually, the highest-ranking users are the chat room owners, who often have several nicknames. Some such nicknames are plain black-ink, which room owners use to hide behind inconspicuously in order to supervise chat room events as well as user behaviour in their chat rooms.

6.5 Nickname perspectives

Ali, a male interviewee from the Kuwaiti chat rooms, explained to me the meaning of power behind many of the nicknames that we usually see, as well as how the less powerful nicknames are perceived. *Ali* has been a user in Chit-chat since 2001 during which time he logs on to chat rooms continuously (24 hours a day every day of the week). In 2005, due to his nickname being online for long hours, the Chit-chat network service granted him a free upgraded subscription which entitled his nickname to be tagged with the symbol *VIP* as well as the numerous privileges that came with the symbol (mentioned in section 6.4). *Ali* also explained to me that regular users usually buy the symbol *VIP*, because other than the privileges it offers, it evokes power in terms of financial status. In his case this symbol of superiority was earned by a longer membership period to the chat room culture. *Salem* (a male user) and *Inass* (a female user), both of whom have also been members since 2000 and 2001 respectively, agree with *Ali*'s perspective that nicknames grant their owners status as well as earn them respect among

⁵⁰ It is rather rare to see a nickname with Arabic script, usually because they are very expensive to subscribe for.

users. Furthermore, they have all adamantly held on to their nicknames through long years of membership in Chit-chat and thus would never change or trade them.

The users I interviewed, like many other users in Chit-chat, believe that the more time and money are invested in a nickname the more power and popularity it is likely to bring its owner. However, this general perspective with regard to nicknames and the power they evoke may be partial mainly to male users. The male interviewees *Ali* and *Salem* claim that many female “powerful” nicknames that are tagged with symbols (e.g., @ for administrator, or VIP) and painted (e.g., purple, blue, or green) have in many cases been acquired in return for female-to-male user sexual favours. The female interviewee *Inass*, partially agrees with their point but adds that many other girls actually spend a large amount of money through personal means on “nickname accessories”. *Inass* also said that some female users have more important goals, such as establishing long-lasting romantic relationships with a male partner offline, rather than merely focusing on online nickname-related gains. Another female user, *Nora*, who has been a member in Chit-chat since 2003, agrees with *Inass*’ contribution and adds that many female users search for male nicknames that appear powerful (both in status and financially) as well as popular, and follow closely the interaction of their male owners in order to determine whether these male users could become potential partners or not.

An important question worth asking here is: how are the plain black-ink nicknames of more than half of Chit-chat’s users perceived by those users with more influential painted nicknames. According to many users I interviewed with regard to this point, regular non-painted and non-tagged nicknames usually suggest that their owners are not committed to chat room culture membership and are thus considered “passers-

by”. That is to say that these users have joined the chat rooms only temporarily and as such do not wish to invest much time or money on a nickname.

In this online community of practice, nicknames therefore become membership symbols. Core members who are more committed to this community (mainly indexed through painted nicknames) feel it is their responsibility to encourage black-ink nicknamed users (who may sometimes be peripheral members) to become more dedicated members in this community of practice. In a sense, therefore, aiming to standardize the process of painting nicknames is a clear indication that these members have a mutual engagement and a joint enterprise. This is often practiced through favourable acknowledgment of nicknames that have recently been painted (see Example 6.2, below). Another method to promote nickname paints is to grant them randomly as gifts to certain users (also see Examples 6.3 and 6.4).

Example 6.2 (Text chat)

Porche_66 (m) Jasmine **congratulations on the painted nick** dear.

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 pink** soon too.

(Original Arabic)

Porche_66 (m) *Jassmin mabruk il ssabgheh haboubah.*

Il_Sultan@ (m) *Khosh ssabgheh, mabruk.*

Jasmine_45 (f) *Shukran il jamee'e. Inshalleh a'aqbal kil ili nikatthum sodah.*

Bronzya (f) *Mabruk, ana bassbigh niki foushi ba'ad sham yoom.*

Example 6.3 (Verbal chat)

EL_Capitano@ (m) Come on people I want you all to put up your hands.

Let me tell you all again.

If the room reaches 100 users, **35 users will get their nicknames painted**. Common, let's see your hands.

Don't you guys want your nicknames painted.

Common let's inspire this room to reach 100 users.

(Original Arabic)

EL_Capitano@ (m) *Yalleh abee il kil yirfa'a eedeh, marah thanyeh, itha wissall a'adid il roum 100, bassbig nik 35 uzir, yalleh khalni ashouf idainkum, yalleh ili yabi ssabgheh yirfa'a eedeh, yalleh abee a'adid il roum youssall 100 uzir.*

Example 6.4 (Verbal chat)

Cookie (f) Come on everyone pay attention.

The first one to answer this question right **gets his or her nick painted**.

What do astronauts eat when they are in space?

[Reading the answer from one of the chat comments] Yes, mainly dried food. Good girl *Bella_33*.

Congratulations, **you've just won a nick colour**.

(Original Arabic)

Cookie (f) *Yalleh il jamee'e yintibh. Awal wahhid iyjawib sahh iyhhssill sabgheh. Shinu yakloun rouwad il fathaa? Sahh, il akl il nashif. Bravo a'alaitsh ya Bella_33, ou mabruk il ssabgheh il ydeedeh.*

Nicknames receive their value in relation to chat room norms and user beliefs and since enhancing nickname value involves money, it is not surprising that they lead to power struggles among users. This struggle comes in the form of nickname theft and trickery. It is not uncommon in the Kuwaiti chat room under examination that user nicknames are stolen, or borrowed and not returned. This happens when the user of a given nickname reveals his or her secret password. However, trickery occurs with nickname paints, usually by male users who pretend to be female and hence coax another male user through flirting with him and asking for their nicknames to be painted. Of course, since the Internet is an anonymous medium (in this specific case both visually and verbally), this form of deception is rather expected.

Furthermore, popularity plays such an important role in the value of nicknames that they become commodities that are bought and sold. *Zyaad* is a male user who has been a member in Chit-chat since 2000. He tells me during an interview that he had three old (powerful) nicknames which he had sold for around £3000 because they were very popular. He adds that had he known that these nicknames would become valuable he would have gotten involved in nickname trade since the beginning of his membership in the chat room culture. The question now becomes why would a user want to buy someone else's nickname and hence also inherit with it the user's identity, the identity that popularised this nickname originally. According to *Zyaad*, some male users access chat rooms with no confidence in terms of mixed-sex communication and are hardly known or noticed by the female users and thus they need a powerful nickname to help them overcome these initial shortcomings and become popular sooner. Whether this nickname strategy is a successful method for a user to gain popularity among chat room

users or not is questionable – and as yet unstudied. The point is that the strategy and belief about it is robust within the Chit-chat community.

6.6 Conclusion

A meaningful nickname is the first step to an exchange between a male and female user in the sense that an interesting or attractive female nickname may be the reason behind encouraging a male user to approach a female user. Furthermore, chat room users recognize their friends as well as their enemies through their nicknames. Nicknames also identify turns and who said what with respect to the text chats that are posted during a group discussion in a chat room. But there is more to nicknames than merely these social and functional aspects. Nicknames are the identity symbols of members of this chat room community of practice who are brought together in part through membership icons. The more a member embellishes his or her nickname, the more they demonstrate loyalty to the community. Also, correct use of the Arabic Internet Writing System, which members of this community share as a repertoire both for creating nicknames and written chat room interaction, is another of membership marker in this community.

Nicknames may become symbols of power. Not only do they enable users to construct gendered identities through different nickname types (see Table 6.1), but nicknames can reveal whether a user is wealthy, a senior member in Chit-chat, possesses authority (as in the case of administrators with the @ sign tagged to their nickname), or whether they are committed to the chat room culture or are simply joining it temporarily. Generally, many users place a lot of thought into selecting an original and meaningful nickname and some even invest large amounts of money into buying nicknames or

nickname ornaments. And yet with time both nickname meanings and the various nickname ornaments may be subject to negotiation and can therefore change according to the norms of the chat room culture (see Bourdieu 1991: 71, for a discussion on how symbolic power is negotiated).

Finally, given that users' engagements in chat rooms are virtual, and therefore non-real, or fantasy-like, some users enter this sphere with playful intentions; wishing to experiment with different gendered identities allows users to select their nicknames accordingly. These nicknames become like masks that users wear to chat room masquerades (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2006: 473; Danet *et al.* 2006: 6; Danet 1998: 137 and Herring 2003: 210). In fact, associating a nickname with the user's online identity is analogous with evaluating people's identities based on their clothes or dress styles in the real world. As mentioned previously (see also Chapter 1), in Kuwait an individual's appearance, including his or her attire, hair, the car he or she drives, all symbolise his or her social status and identity just as features of nicknames do for users in this online chat room culture. Thus, metaphorically, wearing *masks* is very much part of both the offline and online worlds in Kuwait (Moussa 2008: 6).

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION: TWO CULTURES, ONE ROOM

7.0 Introduction

Many of the chat room norms of interaction and practices being explored in the present study are sanctioned by two key factors: firstly, the virtual context in which they occur; and, secondly, the existence of an emerging virtual community that creates and negotiates these norms. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, various illustrations of chat room interactional norms and practices were presented. Many were determined by several components, namely users' shared socio-cultural background, their relationships with one another, their individual purposes for accessing chat rooms, the choice of topic being addressed during chat, and, more importantly, the chat rooms' gender hegemonies and heterosexual goals.

In Chapter 7, the aim is to discuss how male and female users exploit certain interactional features as strategies to achieve specific goals, to negotiate stances, and to construct various chat room identities. The aim of this chapter is also to bring the discussion of chat room interactional strategies full circle by comparing these strategies with interactional features from the Kuwaiti offline society (this is done throughout the chapter) and to shed light on how gendered performances in the Kuwaiti chat rooms under investigation are expressive forms of identity exploration and construction, processes which are seen in light of the segregation of sexes in public spaces offline. Such gendered performances are manifested not only through playful and distinctive forms of chat but are also embedded in users' (virtual) identity masks: their nicknames

(section 7.2). In section 7.3, I demonstrate how certain offline cultural norms and meanings are negotiated and validated online using chat room cultural interactional resources, and how users import chat room experiences into their own offline worlds. Finally, in section 7.4, I discuss some aspects of social change in Kuwait and how this affects communication in general. The discussion is largely based on perceptions elicited from male and female interviewees from both online and offline spheres as well as on my ethnographic observations of chat room interaction between male and female users over a period of twenty-four months.

7.1 Learning how to interact in a community of practice

7.1.1 Criticisms versus compliments

Chapter 5 explored how gender stereotypes are brought to the surface and challenged while masked behind humour. Forms of humour such as teasing, sarcastic mockery, and criticisms are employed by male and female chat room users to playfully hint at some real social issues; see for example, Examples 5.3 a and b, and 5.4, which illustrate mockery episodes about gender stereotypes. Additionally, Chapter 6 demonstrated how users' nicknames are employed as linguistic devices for self-promotion (or self-derogation) through the selection of humorous nicknames. Long-term chat room observation (see section 3.2.1) shows that chat room users have an abundance of negative as well as positive ideas and beliefs that they are keen to express through the virtual medium of the Internet. These are articulated by the large amount of criticisms and compliments that tend to circulate among chat room users. Furthermore, the fact that these interactional practices are central to the chat room setting indicates a lack of

opportunity for self-expression in other settings. Clearly the intentions behind the use of compliments or criticisms are important to users and the practices of such interactional features themselves are facilitated through this virtual medium.

7.1.1.1 ‘Are you flattering me or flirting with me?’

Holmes (2003) points out that when compliments are used between people of different status they underline patterns of power play, whereas when used among friends and equals they express solidarity and are examples of positive politeness (Holmes 2003: 184–93). The question in the chat room context is: When compliments are expressed too frequently by male users towards female users however, are they in fact compliments or flirting strategies?

The way in which a compliment is addressed by a male user towards a female user and the context in which it is expressed says a great deal about the male user’s intentions. If, for example, a male user straightforwardly compliments a girl in front of others on her voice being beautiful, then that is within the appropriate limits of chat room etiquette. However, if he goes beyond that and metaphorically compares her voice to melted chocolate, then he will have crossed the line into inappropriate chat room flirting (see Example 4.5 in Chapter 4). In this case he is labelled by other male users in the audience as a *kharoof*, meaning ‘a sheep’, a term used among male users to mean a man who is easily swayed by women.

Men in the chat rooms under examination frequently criticize other men for being disempowered by female users. According to 3 male interviewees, ‘men flirting with women in Kuwait is not considered inappropriate behaviour so long as it’s done

discreetly and with dignity. Thus men should not appear desperate for women's attention, even if they actually are'. Therefore, flirting before the audience should be exercised tactfully without compromising one's manhood (compare inappropriate ways of flirting in chat rooms, Chapter 4). For example, an acceptable compliment should be uttered only once, otherwise, in the words of one male interviewee 'flattery, like flirting, especially between male and female users, should take place in a "private" chat room where a man will not risk making a spectacle of himself over a girl.'

The context of a chat event in which a compliment is made greatly affects its interpretation. For example, it is acceptable for a female user to publicly compliment a male user for answering a quiz question, or for possessing a "cool" nickname, but when a compliment is expressed by a female user about a male user's shirtless photo displayed privately in his user profile⁵¹, it is considered brazen behaviour regardless of gender.

Another relevant feature of compliments is sincerity. When compliments are expressed too frequently in a Kuwaiti mixed-sex environment such as this, one questions the intentions of such compliments. For example, there have been two instances in which it was not clear whether or not sincere compliments were conveyed. On both occasions the compliments were about nicknames that I had intended to use (for myself) for the nickname experiment (see Chapter 6). One of the nicknames was *Mr. Billionaire* and the other *Ambaih Ay Shay*, a female nickname meaning 'whatever'. The former nickname (*Mr. Billionaire*) was used initially as part of the nickname experiment presented in Chapter 6 in order to test whether female users are attracted to certain male nicknames. Upon seeing my nickname appear in a chat room a male user speaking on the microphone

⁵¹ Although the information displayed in the user's profile is personal, it is available for public access.

said: ‘Damn that nickname, why didn’t I think of it!’ The latter nickname, *Ambaih Ay Shay* (also discussed in Chapter 6), was used as an example of a humorous female nickname. When I entered one of the chat rooms, the female speaker at the microphone immediately said: ‘Well that’s a new nick, let me guess, you have a Blackberry⁵², don’t you?!’

With the first nickname *Mr. Billionaire* the male-to-male compliment sounded insincere, because it was typically accompanied by the expletive ‘Damn’, even though it was not uttered as an insult; it was more a reaction of rivalry towards a nickname. Nevertheless, what is implied from the comment is that the nickname is appealing. In the case of the second nickname, the expression *Ambaih Ay Shay* (‘whatever’) is a stereotypical female expression used by a certain social group in offline society labelled *McChickens* – a group of westernised (Kuwaiti) men and women who make an effort to appear different to traditional Kuwaitis (Wadha 2009). Upon seeing the nickname, the female speaker at the microphone passes a compliment about the originality of the nickname with sarcastic undertones: ‘let me guess, you have a Blackberry, don’t you?!’ Blackberry phones are one of the symbolic possessions typically owned by a McChicken girl (see Wadha 2009: 9), and the female speaker combines these two elements (the nickname expression and the mobile phone) to emphasise the cliché. Thus not all compliments fulfil positive ends (see discussion on compliments in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 145–90 and Holmes 2003: 177–193).

There is a thin line between compliments and insincere flattery: during the experiment with nicknames, some female nicknames were popular and heterosexually

⁵² A type of mobile phone that is popular among a certain social group of young men and women in Kuwait.

attractive, the most favoured of which was *Nathya_Woow* (see Chapter 6). Using such a nickname regularly attracted male attention, and on many occasions male users would invite me (the nickname owner) to a private room where communication could be carried out with relative ease and thus minimal interactional policing from the chat room audience. During such instances it was noted that the types of compliment that were addressed to me by male users leaned more toward flattery than sincere praise.

During interviews carried out with chat room users, 3 of my interviewees discussed compliments and the intentions behind them. One female informant, *Nora*, believes these types of compliments are not sincere and are part of a strategy to ‘get girls’. Such compliments can thus be seen as face-threatening because they assume unwarranted intimacy or presuppose a certain familiarity while at the same time clashing with cultural norms (Holmes 2003: 180). *Nora* often directs the following question to the male user who is complimenting her: ‘Are you flattering me or flirting with me?’ This question, it seems, encourages a male user to be more frank during private chat room interaction. Yet it has to be noted that not all female users shy away from male flattery. *Zainab*, another female user, expresses more positive attitudes regarding male user compliments. She points out that she and most of her female friends in chat rooms do not care whether a compliment is sincere or not, and that they enjoy being praised by men (see Holmes 2003: 178–85, for a discussion on gender and compliments). *Zainab* explains that in offline situations, women generally do not have an opportunity to receive compliments other than inappropriate, sexist, street remarks⁵³. Men’s flattery during

⁵³ Comments that men shout out to women while stalking them in public places. This is common behaviour in Kuwait.

private interaction in a chat room is, therefore, in her words ‘a major boost to one’s confidence as well as to one’s femininity’. She affirms that since chat rooms allow for anonymity, and interaction is, therefore, risk-free, she often compliments male users in return. *Zainab* also says that exchanging compliments is part of the virtual courtship that naturally occurs between a male and female user who develop an online attraction toward each other. According to many male interviewees, complimenting is a case of “testing the waters” especially during private interaction. In the words of a male interviewee, *Omar*: ‘the more a female user happily plays along with a compliment the more she is likely to receive them.’ Based on my experience of private interaction with the opposite sex, and based on that of male and female interviewees, it is quite common for compliments to eventually escalate into more direct flirty language.

On a more general level, exchanging compliments between friends during public interaction in chat rooms produces good feelings, strengthens solidarity, and creates a sense of community among chat room friends. Furthermore, use of compliments in chat rooms is not limited to core members in this community; they are interactional practices that are used as a bonding strategy by all chat room users. Interestingly, humour during chat room communication has similar effects, in that it is also used to enhance bonds between chat room users. However in the case of humour, it is worth asking to what extent does jocular mockery (one of the forms of humour used regularly in chat rooms) help promote good feelings among chat room users, a question answered in section 7.1.1.2. After having discussed a few key ideas about compliments, I now turn my attention to a more controversial facet of chat room interaction, namely, criticism.

7.1.1.2 Where is the humour in sarcasm?

The first interactional features that a person is aware of upon accessing the chat rooms is the prevalence of biting wit, playful mockery, and teasing sarcasm. Such salient forms of humour come as no surprise, since humour of this type is also prevalent in offline settings in Kuwaiti society.

In Chapter 5, these chat room language features were referred to as “teasing mockery”, “adversarial mockery”, and “attack sarcasm” to facilitate the identification of the different instances of humour. Playful language is central to interaction in the chat rooms being examined. Ritual-insult-like teasing shown in the numerous examples of humour presented in Chapter 5 could be interpreted as verbal play that reveals more serious social issues, such as gender conflicts about gender stereotypes and social change (see Examples 5.3 and 5.4), homophobia (see Examples 5.5, 5.6, 5.7, and 5.8), as well as racism and national identity (see Example 5.10). Moreover, these examples of humour can also be interpreted as signalling the users’ interactive negotiation of different social, ethnic, and gender stances, as well as the different identities which are constructed in this chat room community whose members wish to establish equal membership rights. The users’ ability to “get along” and communicate successfully is demonstrated in the way users often manage to remain within a playful frame and refrain from taking each other’s claims seriously, as this would move a dispute closer to a real conflict (see Example 5.10). Almost all these instances involve language play by masking criticisms through puns, metaphors, or use of irony. During my observations of humour, most of the audience in the chat room often reacted with laughter emoticons, amusement expressions such as *he he ...* or *ha ha ...*, and the chat room acronym *LOL* or *lol*, meaning ‘laughing

out loud', as well as the smiley emoticon (☺). All these expressions are indications that the comments, whether made by the user who is mocking or the addressee who is reacting to mockery, are in fact not taken seriously and are understood as instances of fun and playfulness. Users choose to engage in chat room humour to accomplish a diverse range of social action, such as promoting a recreational atmosphere for the audience, causing annoyance to the target user in a teasing instance, and avoiding more direct and serious-toned criticisms, which could escalate into public disputes and hence ruin the chat room's atmosphere of fun. Furthermore, episodes of biting humour are deliberately exercised before the audience in order to include chat room users in whatever discussion is taking place, and to mitigate the tension between users who could instead simply disperse into numerous private chat rooms and get involved in chat disputes, ultimately putting an end to the current chat room community.

An equally important factor in the promotion of chat room humour is the role of user popularity. The more an audience perceives a user as witty, the more popular he or she becomes. Indeed, numerous male and female interviewees have reiterated to me the importance of popularity in chat rooms. Users generally believe that it is more favourable to be seen as funny than it is to be shunned as aggressive – which is how users who engage in serious episodes of conflict are perceived. Interestingly, even male users who wish to adopt the identity of a macho, tough user, as in the “Muscle-Flexor”⁵⁴ identity, by employing a more adversarial type of mockery realize that overdoing their male-related aggression may cause them to be bounced out of the room (see rules on chat room expulsion, sections 3.1.3 and 3.3.4).

⁵⁴ The Muscle-Flexor identity is discussed in section 7.2.2.

Another reason for an increased use of humour in chat room interaction is that it often involves whole groups of users as opposed to user-to-user types of mocking episodes. (The latter usage tends to be more personal and serious, and therefore more likely to escalate into a chat room dispute between two users.) When groups are involved in mocking each other – as when male and female stereotypes are criticised (see Chapter 5) – the conflict is mitigated by the distribution of agency across a whole group of people rather than onto one person, who would naturally be more directly accountable. And in cases where a user is performing the mockery individually, criticisms are usually directed to the user(s) in a tactful and judicious manner. In this case, the antagonist may not come across as malicious.

It is worth pointing out that what triggers teasing and mockery in chat rooms is the role that humour serves in chat rooms (see Excerpt 7.1 which is part of an interview I had with a female chat room user).

Excerpt 7.1

Nore As much as users try to be neutral to one another, they can't.

Men and women can't help criticising and mocking each other.

Nada Why is that?

Nore My friends and I think that part of the problem is the type of topics that are raised for discussion. It's always about what Kuwaiti men and women like, their life-styles, what they do and wear, etc.

Nada Why do you think these types of topics are often chosen?

Note Because men think that by mentioning women's faults, miraculously, somehow, women will change, and the same applies to why women articulate men's faults.

The choice of topic therefore plays a significant role in "stirring up" mockery between users in the chat rooms being examined. Interestingly, the users who often select topics of discussion are the core members in the chat room community of practice. But this is normally because when the chat room administrators repeatedly asks the whole audience the question: 'what shall we talk about?' peripheral members (including newcomers) generally choose not to respond to this question, leaving the choice of topic to core members who are usually more experienced in selecting interesting topics of discussion.

One last point to note about humour is that as the numerous examples in Chapter 5 have shown, the boundaries between the different types of criticisms can be fuzzy. Although "teasing mockery", "adversarial mockery", and "attack sarcasm" are hierarchical in theory, with the last type being the highest on the continuum of conflict, in practice they often overlap. The interplay between the three types of humour may easily be confirmed in jocular instances where teasing may lead to more intense forms of mockery and vice versa, see Figure 5.1.

In sum, whether compliments or criticisms are being utilized at any given point, for whatever reason or on whatever topic, the fact that there is a surplus of positive and negative attitudes increasingly emphasises the need for male and female users to play with new forms of expressive mixed-sex communication. Furthermore, since intentions behind compliments and criticisms are in a way unknowable, users mostly guess at these

on the basis of other known factors, such as common background culture and users' purposes for logging into chat rooms.

7.1.2 Face work: greetings, leave-takings and endearments

Having pointed out the complexity of communicating compliments and criticisms, I will proceed to discuss the more clear-cut aspects of routine features of interaction in chat rooms, namely greetings, leave-takings, and endearments. In general, all these routine expressions play a significant role in chat room communication, and yet if placed on a continuum of most necessary to least necessary for chat room etiquette – or what Goffman (1967) refers to as “face work” – greetings would be placed at the most necessary end, with leave-takings being in the middle, followed by endearments (based on qualitative findings from Chapter 4). Users see these routine expressions as cultural resources that are directly transported from the offline world; they become validated through usage and over time are enriched with new social meanings and usages.

Greetings between chat room users are among the most significant tokens of positive politeness in chat room communication. When wishing to exit a chat room, however, a user is encouraged but is not obliged to express leave-taking, especially if the user is not a core member of the chat room's community of practice.

As far as endearments are concerned, and despite the fact that they are routine expressions, they are an altogether different feature of chat room interaction, since their use is based upon personal choice and thus not a social obligation. In offline interaction, people usually use kinship terms rather than endearments, especially with strangers of the opposite sex. So, for example, men and women address each other as ‘sister’ and

'brother' or by their usual labels if they are married, that is an address term linked to the name of the first-born (son or daughter), e.g., *Oum Ahmed* 'mother of Ahmed', *Abu Ahmed* 'father of Ahmed'. Online, however, users prefer to address each other with nicknames or terms of endearment.

In general, terms of endearments have lost the power to evoke intimacy when used publicly. People both online and offline use endearments to establish closeness and as part of friendship talk. Additionally, they are often used as forms of courtesy and symmetry rather than being employed in a romantic sense. In other words, men and women employ these terms to express to each other the following sentiment: I like you and appreciate being your friend and your equal. Furthermore, it seems that terms of endearment are used with such frequency nowadays that they have become like habitual fillers during interaction. Endearments are therefore no longer limited to the expression of intimacy and passion.

Female interviewees pointed to the common use of endearments by male users towards female users as a means of friendship talk or prompting a friendship to evolve into a romantic relationship offline. This trend can be described as follows: initially male users convey a few terms of endearment to female users during public chat room interaction, and then watch closely for the female users' reactions. In turn, female recipients may react to endearments in different ways; either by ignoring them, reprimanding the male initiator for using intimate expressions, reciprocating with their own term of endearment, or shifting the interaction to a private chat room.

Additionally, terms of endearment reveal users' attitudes and choices, that is, conservative or religious users may neither convey these terms nor receive them, while

users who employ them liberally mostly aim to emphasise their open-mindedness. Thus, exchanging expressions of endearment not only signals participants' personal choices as well as the sense with which the speaker/initiator means them and how the hearer/recipient understands them, but is also reflective of the context in which these expressions occur. Furthermore, the line between an endearment being understood as a friendship term or an expression of intimacy can be vague (see Figure 4.5). One can never be sure what is intended behind an endearment, but, as with understanding compliments and criticisms, certain factors during a speech event may facilitate meaning-making, such as context, the relationship between users, the type of topic being discussed, the type of frame associated with a given endearment, and how frequently endearments are used in a given exchange (see Chapter 4).

With regard to greetings and leave-takings, however, there is not much to misunderstand. Greetings (and at times leave-takings) are necessary to the positive face of the user or chat room audience. It follows that these two features of interaction are seen through a more binary lens, in that they are either present or absent during communication and hence less likely to be subject to ambiguity than endearments. Yet it is the manner in which greetings and leave-takings are expressed that makes these routine terms interesting features of chat room communication.

When a man greets a female acquaintance in a public setting in Kuwaiti offline society both are faced with similar greeting dilemmas: should they shake hands, or follow the tacit opposite-sex hand-shake avoidance policy? Should the man address the woman

in the plural when greeting her out of respect, as in, *shlonokum*⁵⁵ meaning ‘how are you?’ (the 2nd person plural form of address rather than singular *shlonitch*). And finally, should the woman typically address the man by his first name or that of his first-born, for example, *shlonik bu Ahmed* (‘How are you father of Ahmed?’) It is noteworthy here that if one of these two interlocutors is accompanied by his or her spouse, eye-contact would be intentionally avoided and thus the greeting event would not occur. The complications that may occur with offline routine greeting rituals between men and women would rarely be encountered during online interaction where male and female users not only greet one another freely, but also as members in the chat room community create and negotiate new greeting practices (see examples in Chapter 4).

In sum, the abundance of instances of positive politeness, whether in terms of elaborate greetings, giving justifications for leaving in leave-takings (see Chapter 4), or the use of endearments with both same-sex or opposite sex participants, are key aspects that reflect user solidarity and a sense of community in chat rooms. According to interviewees, on a more individual level, many users who increasingly employ politeness expressions in front of the audience believe that the more they present themselves courteously, the more they are likely to become popular among a chat group. Furthermore, during private chat room interaction, users (especially men) hope that being polite and courteous will be an asset that enables them to appear more attractive to users of the opposite sex. Yet the question that poses itself here is: if this virtual sphere is anonymous and if most users are not familiar with one another outside the chat room

⁵⁵ *Shlonkum* is a common type of plural greeting used by most Kuwaiti men when addressing women. It literally sounds as though one is greeting a group of people. The idea behind this greeting is that the plural form mitigates addressing a woman by employing a less personal speech style as a form of respect.

world, why is the omnipresence of elaborate courtesy and politeness expressions of such importance?

Many of the male and female users I have interviewed agree on two reasons why politeness routines are important and thus widely used: firstly, only a minority of people in Kuwait access these chat rooms (about 10–12 percent, see Chapter 3). Those who have chosen to be part of this Internet culture are usually quite serious about creating a sense of belonging to a chat group as well as a sense of unity and solidarity that helps create a chat room community. In other words, there is a mutual agreement between members of the chat room community of practice on what constitutes chat room politeness routines, and, therefore, engaging in such practices means using these as “markers of membership” to this community (Wenger, 1998: 13). Secondly, users who are part of this chat room culture strive to promote themselves positively in the hope that they will become popular users. Thus, a suitable way to achieve self-promotion is through frequent use of positive politeness expressions. As noted in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, self-promotion is accomplished using a number of methods, namely possessing an attractive nickname, being polite and courteous, and, most importantly, being an eloquent public speaker with a sense of humour. To what extent does being polite and courteous help promote chat room popularity is discussed and an elaboration on some of the other characteristics, which enable users to become popular will follow. In order to conceptualize the discussion, current developments in the heterosexual nature of the Kuwaiti offline society and how aspects of this are reflected in online linguistic practices, behaviours, and attitudes are frequently touched upon.

7.2 The sociolinguistics of heterosexual identity: aspects of chat room culture

7.2.1 Performing gender in chat rooms

One of the key interactional features of performing gender among chat room users is undeniably the activity of flirting. The absence of the face-to-face aspect within this virtual medium allows various flirting strategies to be practiced during chat room interaction, and these differ from offline flirting behaviours (see section 7.4). But like the tacit acceptance of flirting as a concept in the offline world, flirting is accepted as one of the main practices in the chat room community of practice. Moreover, new flirting strategies are constantly created and with time become embedded as routine behaviour between members of this community.

Some chat room flirterers (also referred to as “flirtish lurkers”), are male users who persistently engage in flirtatious interactional strategies to achieve their goals with relatively little to lose in comparison with offline flirterers, who are more at risk of losing face in public. Consequently, many of these male users relentlessly pursue a potential female partner and will use various linguistic and communicative patterns to ensure she engages in private chat room mingling with them. For example, as men are aware that women like flowers, some male users will send a female user a flower emoticon as an initial “opening expression” in the hope that it will lead to an exchange between them.

Furthermore, much like the “chat-up line” used in offline heterosexual spheres, opening expressions that precede a flirting exchange need to be original, attractive, and interesting to the recipient. Based on observations of the Kuwaiti chat rooms, I – as a female user – have typically experienced a variety of opening strategies used by men in flirting exchanges. If I use a promiscuous female nickname (e.g., *Nathya_Woow*, ‘a wow

female' or *Cakeh*, 'cake'), male users tend to utilize characteristics of a given nickname to start up an exchange (e.g., 'Hi *Cakeh*, are you as delicious as your nickname?' see Chapter 6 for more examples). Other male users would simply start with a greeting either in Arabic (*Mass ail khair* 'Good evening', *Gouwah* 'Hello') or in English ('Hi') but rarely with the common religious greeting *Salamu alikum* 'peace be upon you', since such a greeting does little to promote flirting. Others would send a smiley face emoticon, which is a neutral opening expression that allows the recipient to control the direction of the exchange.

Generally, male users with whom I have engaged in private chat room exchanges tended to ask if I would agree to shift our communication to another Internet network such as *Messenger*, or if I would accept their (offline) mobile phone number and thus shift our exchange from an online to an offline context. It is of note that *Messenger*, which requires exchanging e-mail addresses, allows for clearer and quicker video and audio communication than Chit-chat. Exchanging mobile numbers or email addresses are strategies that prompt chat room interactions to become more personal and thus less anonymous. Ultimately, all online romantic interactions that begin successfully between male and female users are hoped to transcend into a real-life romantic relationship (Alqatari 2010a).

Flirting that takes place publicly before the chat room audience may take the form of subtle techniques such as jocular teasing (see Chapter 5). Yet however subtle these techniques may be, as members of a community of practice most male and female users are familiar with chat room "flirting repertoire", and as such the act of flirting creates a context for the negotiation of meaning, which is mostly based on shared offline

backgrounds as well as online goals. Some male users are careful how they interact with female users so as not be labelled *kharoof* ('sheep'), that is, followers of women (previously discussed in section 7.1.1.1). Others are indifferent with regard to their "chat-room reputation" and express attraction to a girl or compliment her voice more audibly in front of the audience (see Chapter 4).

According to the female users interviewed, engaging in teasing or using humour as a flirting strategy is far more sophisticated and original than direct forms of flirting, and thus more likely to attract users from the opposite sex. For example, during my attendance in one of the chat rooms (The_Seafarers) there was a discussion between some male and female members of a chat group and a very popular male user, *Mastermind*, who was speaking on the microphone at the time. During this discussion *Mastermind* was asked by his friends in the audience to display his mobile number in text chat in order to gauge his popularity among female users and find out how many of them would actually call him. Despite the fact that in Kuwait giving out one's mobile number is perceived as a direct form of flirting, in this case the gesture was aimed to encourage a sense of chat room playfulness. To create a playful atmosphere⁵⁶, *Mastermind* displayed his number and was, in fact, heard through the microphone speaking to one of the female users in an offline phone call. It is worth emphasising here that the promotion of *Mastermind*'s popularity was carried out by the chat group, his friends. I therefore agree with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (2003) principle of developing desire in the heterosexual market, which argues that we cannot accomplish gender on our own, rather

⁵⁶ This is marked by lots of laughter and smiley emoticons by both the audience and the speaker on the microphone.

that ‘gender is a collaborative affair that connects the individual to the social order’ (2003: 31).

Interestingly, when flirting is practiced by core (popular) members in the chat room community of practice, users from the opposite sex are much more likely to receive the flirting initiative positively as expressed by one of the female interviewees (*Nora*): ‘who does the flirting, makes a huge difference. I’d rather be flirted with by one of the popular users than by a lurker – whom I usually ignore anyway’. Additionally, core members are often quite careful not to seem “pushy” or “tacky” while flirting. A male interviewee (*Hussain*) informed me that ‘popular users have a reputation to build and maintain, they have to make careful choices as to who to flirt with, how, and where (i.e., in public before the audience or in a private chat room)’. For lurkers, this is not the case because they are peripheral members of the chat room community of practice and therefore are not expected to keep a high profile (according to *Hussain*).

The question that poses itself is: To what extent does chat room flirting relate to other chat room interactional features, such as greetings, endearments, compliments, teasing, and joking? To respond to that, I would argue that flirting is built into the chat room interactional fabric in such a way that it cannot be separated from other chat room features of interaction. So that an elaborate greeting which also consists of some endearments between a male user and female user may easily be considered as a gendered performance leading into a flirting exchange. The same can be said of compliments, teasing, and joking⁵⁷. Therefore, male and female users employ chat room

⁵⁷ I am not referring to attack sarcasm here because such extreme form of humour can hardly be expected to lead into a flirting exchange between male and female users.

discourse to perform gender in order to achieve certain goals within this heterosexual context.

7.2.2 Chat room identities

In this subsection I demonstrate how male and female users engage in identity exploration online (Cherny 1999: 64). To begin it is necessary to differentiate between two types of chat room identities, namely, “medium-related identities” and “gendered identities”. Medium-related identities revolve around one’s position or status in the chat room’s virtual hierarchy: whether a given user is a core, marginal, or regular member, or a lurker, and whether he or she is an administrator or owner of a given chat room. Gendered identities, on the other hand, relate more to individual traits and are based on heterosexual goals, which in turn manifest through chat room discourse. In theory, lurkers should not be considered in this discussion on identities due to their silence or lack of participation in chat room interaction. However, since they do have nicknames, they inevitably take part in the identity construction process (see discussion on nicknames and identity traits in Chapter 6). Furthermore, there are numerous reasons behind their silence which are worth considering. It is also of note that all users (whether popular or newcomers) are welcomed into most Kuwaiti chat rooms in Chit-chat and are often well received (see chat room routine greetings in Chapter 4).

Medium-oriented identities are based on four different types of participation as well as one’s position in the chat room administrative hierarchy (which consists of chat room owner, super administrator, and administrator). “Core users” are dynamic and popular participants in a chat group (a network of friends in a given chat room), and

usually stand out above the other users in a given chat room. More broadly, they are also considered core members in the chat room community of practice. They form a clique that plays a major role in chat room interaction events. For example, core users often choose the topics or change the topic of discussion. Topic choice is however not a privilege that is limited to core users, it is simply an initiative that they take because other users are indifferent about topic initiation⁵⁸. Additionally, most of the chat room administrators I have observed are usually core users. “Regular users” are members of a chat group whose participation, especially in terms of speaking over the microphone, is intermittent or not as significant as that of core users. Unlike marginal members, they are part of a chat group and, even though they do attend regularly, they choose not to be as central as core users. “Marginal users” are participants who are not part of a chat group but who do take part in interaction (both spoken and via text) with a chat group as well as other users in a given chat room. Their attendance in a given chat room is not regular which is why they do not become members in a chat group. “Lurkers”, as defined in Chapter 3, are users who choose not to engage in chat room events but simply exist in the background and observe other users’ contributions. It has to be noted however, that lurkers’ nicknames do actually appear in the chat room’s nickname list.

It is necessary to differentiate between lurkers and “idlers”, who are active participants but simply happen to be chatting in one room while simultaneously leaving their nicknames inactive in other chat rooms. Additionally, although lurkers are passive users in terms of participation in chat room activities and discussions, their category in

⁵⁸ It is noteworthy that although the selection of chat room topics of discussion has not been addressed fully in this study, it is a rather important chat room task as it usually determines the nature of interaction between users.

itself is quite complex. Users lurk in chat rooms for a variety of unrelated reasons. Firstly, many lurkers are “newcomers” or new users who want to learn about the chat room culture and norms of interaction before they take up a more active role in chat rooms. (Indeed, this is how I became familiar with the chat room culture being examined.) Secondly, some users are simply too shy to participate. In both cases, users are quite interested in chat room events and discussions. Thirdly, some users hide behind the *lurker* category as though they were invisible in order to look for a potential partner of the opposite sex. Once they find a user they wish to communicate with they reappear but only in a private chat room, and merely to engage in one-to-one interaction with a user from the opposite sex. They are therefore minimally interested in chat room events. These are predominantly male users who I refer to as “flirtish lurkers” in order to differentiate them from other lurkers.

There are no clear boundaries between the four different chat room identity categories (core, regular, marginal users, and lurkers), since users can easily choose to move from one type to another possibly by changing their nicknames. These categories have been identified based on two key factors: chat room participation and user popularity. It is necessary to point out that popularity here is indicative of the user’s position or status in a chat room among other users. A popular user is one who is the centre of attention, acknowledged, and consulted by most users, as well as one who plays a major role in chat room interaction and activities. Many of the interviewees agreed that these chat room identity categories are indeed representative of the identity types that exist in chat rooms, but users are generally unaware of their boundaries.

The other type of identity categories is gendered identities. These social identities – “Public Speaker”, “Muscle Flexor”, “Sweet Talker” and “Natural Femininity” – are largely classified according to style of interaction, which in turn is linked to a user’s goals in a given chat room (see Table 7.1). The Public Speaker is a popular male user who is articulate when addressing the audience over the microphone while the Muscle Flexor, also a male user, employs an adversarial speech style and is keen to be known for his macho behaviour among the female users. The Sweet Talker, a female user, is favoured among male users for adopting a performed or ‘pretentious’ speech style with characteristics that index promiscuousness such as a breathy low-tone voice quality and frequent giggling. The Natural Femininity is an unpretentious female user who makes important contributions during chat room topic discussions (see Table 7.1 for an illustration of the characteristics and goals of these gendered chat room identities).

Identity Categories	Characteristics	Chat Room Goals
Public Speaker (Male user)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech style: eloquent – confidant – occasionally uses the ‘white dialect⁵⁹’ – pleasant vocal qualities. • Topic discussion: very active – major contributions. • Other: often take up the role of chat room administrator. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain popularity. • Gain respect of other users. • Create a playful and recreational atmosphere.
Muscle Flexor (Male user)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech style: macho – rough tone of voice – adversarial speech style. • Topic discussion: short contributions. • Other: known to break chat room rules. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain attention and popularity. • To be perceived as macho and powerful.
Sweet Talker (Female user)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech style: performed or pretentious – singsong intonation – breathy, provocative voice quality – frequent giggling. • Topic discussion: minor contributions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain attention and popularity, especially among male users. • To be pursued and flirted with by male users.
Natural Femininity (Female user)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech style: natural – unpretentious. • Topic discussion: very active – major contributions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be acknowledged and respected during discussion. • Foster solidarity and friendship between users. • Encourage a “fun” atmosphere in chat room.

Table 7.1: Gendered identity categories

⁵⁹ As defined by male and female users, the white dialect combines standard Arabic and the Kuwaiti dialect and is often used by well-educated people and politicians in offline settings.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet point out that one's linguistic style plays an important role in identity work (2003: 315). When users consciously or unconsciously embrace a certain style of chat, they are creating distinctions among each other and as such display what Benwell and Stokoe label "conversational identities" (2006: Chapter 2). What is interesting in the speech style characteristics of the female users illustrated in Table 7.1 is that they are oppositional categories. In other words, the Sweet Talker intentionally tends to adopt a promiscuous, heterosexual feminine speech style to avoid being perceived as a Natural Femininity user and the same is true for the user of Natural Femininity. Both chat room observations as well as perceptions from male and female interviewees have led to my argument that in general many male users admire female users and encourage them to make significant contributions during topic discussions, since this enables them to find out more about the female sub-culture in their society. More specifically, the Sweet Talker is more audibly encouraged to speak over the microphone by male users, and she is therefore aware that when she "does" feminine promiscuity before a chat room audience she can easily win male user attention.

In the case of the male users' identities, according to interviewees there is no doubt that most male and female users in the Kuwaiti chat rooms under examination favour the Public Speaker image in general. Most often than not, it is the Public Speaker who encourages a friendly and discussion-oriented atmosphere inside the chat room. The Muscle Flexor identity, on the other hand, is only popular among members of its own chat group as well as among certain types of female user, ones that value the macho image.

Many male and female users perceive themselves as possessing more complex and distinct identity characteristics than the four gendered identities proposed in Table 7.1. Numerous users have stated that they identify themselves as a combination of two identity types. For example, a male user, *Hamed*, who I identify as a Muscle Flexor based on his spoken chat room interaction, perceives himself as having some characteristics of both the Muscle Flexor and the Public Speaker. *Hamed* therefore believes he has a more (in his words) ‘individualistic, original masculine identity’ than those proposed in Table 7.1. Classifying the gendered identities as perceived through chat room interaction as I did therefore prompt the interviewees to identify themselves in a still more differentiated fashion. Additionally, *Inass* (a female interviewee) explains why she experiments with different chat styles: ‘Depending on the mood I’m in and how playful I feel on a given day, I shift and combine between styles just to see the audience’s reaction’.

In sum, chat room identities of both types – medium-related identities and gendered identities – are identified by users and assigned chat room social roles that rely in the main on style of interaction and participation in chat room activities. These chat room identities are by no means fixed, since users can choose to shift from one category to another, combine features of one category with another, or create new categories and negotiate their characteristics through group practices with other members in this chat room community of practice. This flexibility means a shift away from gender essentialist categories (male/female) to the performative construction and achievement of diverse gendered identities. Additionally, since heterogeneity within a group is recognised by the community of practice theory, individualized practices are seen as a fruitful way of negotiating new social meanings between members in a community of practice. Thus,

more often than not, the user's individual identity does not clash with the larger group identity. According to *Hamed* (a male interviewee, see above), 'Even if people go on and do their own thing, we all kind of realize that we're in here for the same thing: passing time and having fun in a mixed-sex environment and so we all want to maintain this place so that we can always have it as a refuge'. Also, given the fact that users can choose to move from one chat room category to another entails that positions of power and status are also changeable and flexible. This is certainly the case with the status of an administrator (who could be male or female), which can be passed on from one user to another depending on whether their nickname colour entitles them to this privilege.

7.2.3 Online-offline cultural complexity

A common goal that stands out alongside the chat room identity categories (see Table 7.1) is "popularity". Users who construct the chat room identities presented in this study have different perceptions of popularity. Additionally, many users who are active members of a chat group as well as in the chat rooms' heterosexual context aim to become popular through promoting their self-image in this chat room community of practice. To them this culture becomes like a second life and their chat group friends (whether popular or not) become trusted people whom they respect and with whom they share memorable chats.

Other users choose the chat room culture to escape from responsibilities and social roles that burden them in the real world. This is especially true for some married people. Chat room interviewees have told me that many married users are careful not to identify themselves as married in order to be able to establish romantic relationships built

on deception. Internet infidelity is an issue that is commonly addressed in local newspapers and magazines. In an article in *The Kuwait Times*, Alqatari (2010a) illustrates Internet cheating using an example of a 40-year-old married man who secretly engages in chats with women. Alqatari supports his discussion by quoting Almousawi, a family counsellor in Kuwait who addresses Internet cheating. Almousawi points out that the phenomenon of men and women getting involved in secret affairs on the Internet is very common in Kuwait, and is the reason behind disputes in many marriages. Alqatari explains how the married man in his article shifts from his identity as a father and husband and adopts a chat room identity:

Abu Khalid is in a world of his own where he is no longer the father and the husband with responsibilities and obligations. Instead, he becomes the passionate lover, the midnight knight warrior who is on the lookout for a girl – or two, or three, it doesn't matter – to take her away on a cyber ride. Depending on how their conversation goes, Abu Khalid (aka Romeo) might go on an e-rendezvous or two, before meeting in person (Alqatari 2010a: 9).

Internet infidelity is a critical issue in many cultures not only in Kuwait (see Hertlein and Piercy 2006 for a review of the literature on Internet infidelity). But certainly in Kuwait, infidelity, whether offline or online, is an immensely problematic (male-oriented) phenomenon that is frowned upon by society. Clearly, establishing a discreet romantic relationship on the Internet is a much safer and viable option for married people who

wish to adopt *new* more dynamic virtual identities than those they are confined to offline. According to users interviewed, chat rooms facilitate the process of meeting a potential partner from the opposite sex by allowing the user (whether married or not) to overcome the first two difficult steps of this process. The first step being able to find a suitable partner and the second is to build enough trust to establish a romantic relationship. If these steps were to occur offline, people would risk social exposure. Of course, following this initial stage online, the relationship may easily shift into a “private” place offline.

In general, every user has his or her individual purpose(s) for wanting to be part of the chat room culture. And based on these purposes, male and female users engage in chat room performances through which they find their chosen sense of identity and in turn present them to other users in the chat room community of practice, either to display allegiance to or difference from other identities already on display. Playing with new forms of expressive communication – as presented in the numerous examples in this study – inspires users to explore and experiment with a multiplicity of chat room identities. In this heterosexual context, language strategies are chosen and speech styles rehearsed in order to parallel these identities. One may therefore conclude (crudely) that most users are in fact “performing” a gendered act on the chat room’s virtual stage in order to negotiate a sense of appropriateness or acceptance by users from the opposite sex.

One can therefore certainly think of Kuwaiti society as displaying characteristics of the difference approach because it is a gender segregated society in which men and women are socialized separately and are thus likely to communicate differently. Yet, the mixed-sex sociolinguistic situation in Kuwaiti chat rooms displays a community of

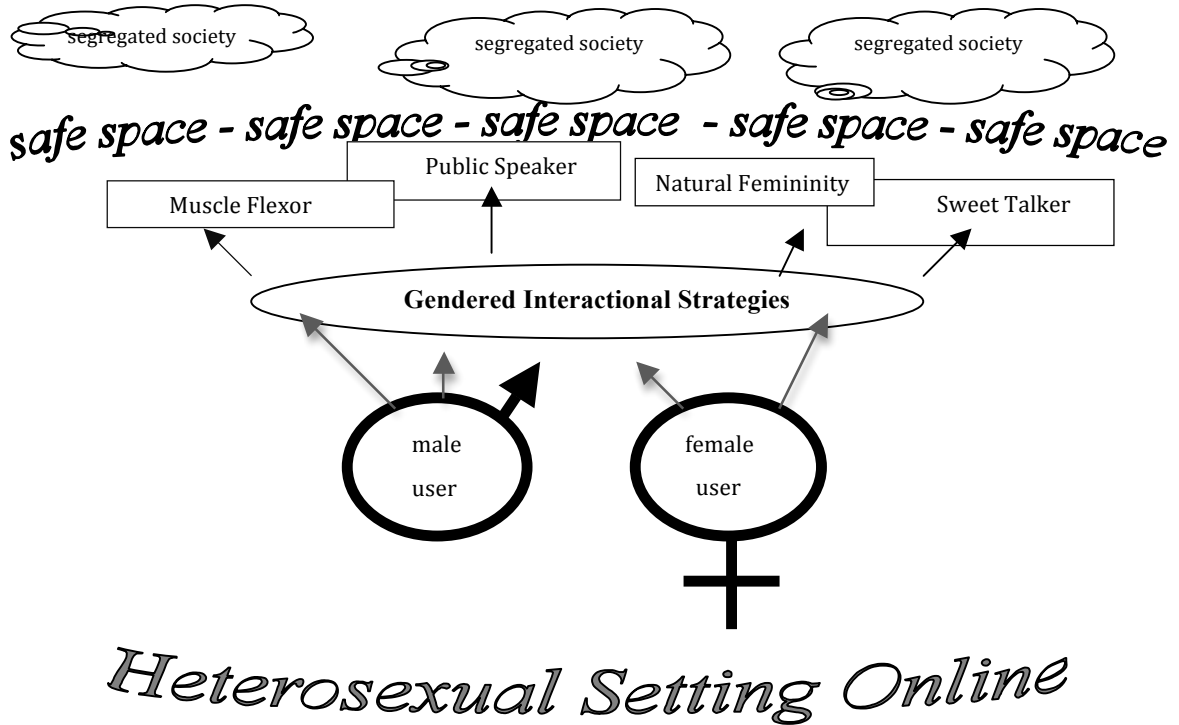
practice that has established a shared enterprise and common goals that do not orient to enterprises and goals existing in offline society. In fact, the many interactional strategies and cooperative practices that are used in the Kuwaiti chat rooms being examined cannot be used in offline settings in Kuwait and this is why this unique chat room setting is viewed from a social constructionist perspective.

It is worth noting here that despite their somewhat pretentious nature, it is hoped by users that the performance of chat room identities will seem appealing to users of the opposite sex. This is further reinforced by (usually positive) personal information that many users fabricate during chat room mingling. People offline perceive these pretentious identity performances as well as the deception in portraying personal qualities as shortcomings that cause chat rooms to be seen as unpopular. Kuwaitis in offline society are increasingly judgmental of this online culture and look at it condescendingly. People interviewed from offline society (aged 20-45) from all walks of life unanimously believe that the chat room culture is:

A vile, virtual ghetto that is fuelled by deception. A space which is frequented by none other than losers, unattractive and overweight people who wish to hide behind masks, as well as by married people who are secretly involved in extra-marital relationships (source: a summary taken from comments by interviewees from offline society).

On the other hand, online users interviewed believe that the chat room is not simply a space that they have created to escape the religious and cultural constraints of the real

world, but also a context that has allowed them to experiment with multiple identities through chat room discourse. In general, the chat room culture has created a safe space for a mixed-sex community to emerge, considering that mixed-sex opportunities are limited and sometimes forbidden in offline society (as Wheeler 2003, has found in her study). To encapsulate perceptions from chat room users interviewed, Schema 7.1 mirrors what the chat room culture represents to its users.



Schema 7.1: A schematic representation of the Chit-chat culture.

In sum, Chit-chat's emerging culture may seem like a group of virtual mixed-sex communities that have been created as a separate entity from offline society. However, in

reality the chat room culture being examined is influenced by offline Kuwaiti norms and traditions, and the sociolinguistic landscape of chat rooms not only clearly captures the offline local identity but also the social changes taking place within Kuwaiti society today (see section 7.4). The only instrumental aspect that separates the online Chit-chat culture from the Kuwaiti offline culture it represents is the medium of communication, the Internet. This medium of communication protects and encourages mixed-sex interaction where it is otherwise prohibited in segregated offline settings (cf. Wheeler 2001). This online context allows male and female registers to coexist and cooperate in one chat room and presents its members as men and women who feel a need to make a communicative effort in order to engage in successful mixed-sex interaction.

7.3 Penetrating and transcending the chat room

This final section discusses how different aspects of chat room culture penetrate to the real world, creating interplay between the online and offline spheres. Most male and female users believe that logging into the chat room sphere is like walking into a “mini world” where one can have fun with other users from the opposite sex without being judged or reprimanded by society.

The idea of having a mixed-sex exchange over the net may seem like foreign or westernised behaviour, yet nothing about the Kuwaiti chat rooms being examined is “un-Kuwaiti” in nature. From what I have observed, many societal norms play a key role in users’ daily online interactions. Symbols of Kuwaiti culture are perpetuated in metaphorical humour, which users employ during communication in order to shift back and forth between the real world and the virtual world. The presence of tangible

traditional practices from the real world are inevitable, for example, the call for prayer five times a day or the break of a day's fast at sunset during the holy month of Ramadan. Supposing, for instance, music were being played in a given chat room and prayer time was due to begin, the administrator will announce that the music should be turned off for prayer time. Religious practices such as prayer times are shared by most Kuwaiti users, due to their being in the same time zone. Thus along with the music being stopped, some users will also excuse themselves and retire temporarily for prayer. Interestingly, during such instances, one becomes aware of other important notions, such as religious affiliations, i.e., that different sects are present in a given chat room, since the Shi'ite users will jokingly announce that their praying time is in half an hour⁶⁰.

Additionally, more banal aspects of the real world are also allowed to penetrate into the virtual world through metaphorical jokes. A common example is joking about marriage, which according to male and female users allows people who are unmarried to pretend temporarily to experience the bliss of marriage. Many users would like to get married but often cannot do so for financial or social reasons. They may enjoy the feeling of pretending to be married. Example 7.1 illustrates an instance of such metaphorical humour (a virtual joke about being married), which occurred in chat room *Kuwait_Love_2009*.

Example 7.1 (Spoken chat)

[These are *Dreamer's* comments on the microphone
upon seeing a female user's nickname appear among the list of nicknames.]

⁶⁰ This is an indication that they are Shi'ite. The Shi'ite Muslims usually pray half an hour later than the Sunni Muslims.

- Dreamer** (m) [laughingly] Hi Nathya-Cool.
- 2 Wow what a nickname?
Why do you girls have to have such nicknames?
- 4 It makes it hard for us guys to resist temptation.
Would you marry me Nathya-Cool?
- 6 I know how to iron, clean, do the laundry, and everything you
want.
- 8 I promise to make you happy.
What do you say?
- 10 [In response to Nathya-Cool's approval 'ok ☺ ☺']
Ok my dear, we have a deal.
- 12 How much do you want in dowry⁶¹, then?
He he, no really your nickname is amazing [change of subject].

(Original Arabic)

Dreamer (m) *Halla Nathya-Cool Walkum, il salam, allah ish hal nick
il hhilouw? Intaw yal banat ish hhegeh tikhtaroon hal nikat, il wahid ma yigdar
tchithe, Nathya titzawajainy? Tara a'arif atthrib outi, ou aghasil, ou anathif, ou
kil ili tabeeneh. Ha ishgiltay? (OK) Khallass itfeqneh a'ayel. Tsham tabeen
mahar? Hhhhh la ssij nikitsh iyshawig hhail.*

Note the change of subject toward the end along with the passing of a final comment about the nickname (line 13) to signal the end of the joke and more importantly to

⁶¹ A bride in Kuwait is given a very generous dowry; usually in the form of money that is determined by the bride's parents. High wedding dowries is one of the reasons why Kuwaiti men are shying away from marriage nowadays.

emphasize that this is in fact merely a joke. Such humour using metaphors is typical especially by male users (see Example 5.3, line 36, but also see threats which involve metaphor in Example 5.7, lines 15 and 16). Surprisingly, in Example 7.1, the male user admits before an audience to wanting to take part in domestic practices that are known by society to be female-oriented. It appears that the shifting of gender roles is not likely to affect a man's macho image and hence is resorted to in order to playfully envisage the farfetched idea of marriage.

Jokes which use metaphor involve other aspects of real-life such as religious or national celebrations. These are reinforced in chat rooms, largely because most users actually experience them offline. During *Eid*, for example, users often wish one another a *Happy Eid*. Many others jokingly ask for the *Eiddy*, which is money given as gifts usually by adults to young girls and boys as well as wives (very much like Christmas gifts in Western cultures). Example 7.2 illustrates an instance in which a female user asks her chat room audience to give her *Eiddy*.

Example 7.2 (Spoken chat)

- Funky_Girl** (f) [addressing the audience in the chat room]
- 2 Come on everyone the Eiddy is 2 Dinars.
 Come on we want Eiddyas.
- 4 Why do 'we' always have to give away Eiddyas?
 This time we want the Eiddyas.
- 6 [A user sends her a **flower** emoticon] No, we don't want flowers.
 [A user sends her a **kiss** emoticon] No, we don't want your kiss either.
- 8 Keep your kiss to yourself.

Come on we want Eiddyas.

- 10 [A user sends a **dollar** sign and then other users follow suit]. [laughing] He he he, ok good, common everyone, bring out all you got.

(Original Arabic)

Funky_Girl (f) *Yalleh, ya jama'aeh il e'edyeh dinarain, yalleh nabi a'ayadee. Ish hhageh ihhneh ili kileh na'attee a'ayadee? Alhheen intaw ibtta'attouneh a'ayadee. La ma nabi wardeh, la wala boseh, khaleehe lik il boseh. Yalleh nabi a'ayadee, hhhhh ei zain yalleh kil min ittalli'i ili i'indeh.*

It is worth noting that when the female user *Funky_Girl* asks for *Eid* money (*Eiddy*) she rejects text emoticons of a flower and a kiss (see lines 3, 7, and 8). After being satisfied with a dollar sign given by a user, *Funky_Girl* asks all users to do the same. The frequent shift between reality and virtual joking, along with the laughter sounds in line 10, are what makes this exchange playful and creates a sense of fun among users as shown by the use of appropriate emoticons.

An online feature which relates to the Arab culture is the frequent metaphorisation of the microphone as an honourable gift that is passed from user to user during daily interaction. The different names and adjectives that are used to refer to the chat room microphone is a good example of the linguistic practices that are specific to the chat room community of practice in Chit-chat. This is one of the practices that newcomers have to learn and eventually use to demonstrate their membership to this community of practice. To signal turn-taking during spoken chat over the microphone, all users have to verbally “pass on” the microphone (e.g., ‘Ok Sara, the microphone is yours now’). Many users from the Kuwaiti chat rooms being examined add adjectives along with the word mic. (short for microphone, and pronounced as ‘mike’) and say for example, ‘Ok Sara, I give

you the best, nicest and most precious mic.’, or ‘Ok Sara, the perfumed and adorned mic. is now yours’. The recipient of the microphone – being granted his or her turn – also responds when receiving the microphone by saying, ‘And the best mic. has been given by you.’ Furthermore, the microphone is personified with diminutive terms such as ‘moka’ or ‘mikey’. These designations for the microphone are routinely used by many male and female chat room users and are therefore not gender-specific. When asking interviewees about this chat room interactional feature, I was told that the microphone is no longer perceived as a virtual object, rather users see it as an actual gift or an emblem of oneself that is passed from user to user and the user has to therefore model in words the Kuwaiti practices of generosity in terms of gifts in offline settings.

Clearly then, sharing the same culture (as well as being in the same time zone) encourages users to transcend the chat room atmosphere on a regular basis. Shifting an online romantic relationship with a user from the opposite sex into the offline world is another form of chat room transcendence (see section 7.2.1). Moreover, nicknames are a virtual feature that sometimes surfaces into the real world. Male interviewees have pointed out that some male users can become so overwhelmed by the popularity of their chat room identity that they decide to transport it to the real world. This is commonly done by displaying the user’s nickname on his car bumper (also see Kazak 2008: 4).

Finally, some users are keen on transporting chat room experiences into the offline world. A female user (*Inass*) related to me how she wanted to shift the virtual chat group in which she was a member into the real world. She hoped to find out how much of a user’s virtual identity is in fact embedded in his or her real-life identity. To achieve this, *Inass* invited her chat group – male and female friends – for an offline meeting in a

coffee shop. Like Turkle (1995: 178–9), Danet (1998: 129–150) and Crystal (2006: 55), *Inass* found that people did not embody their chat room characters and gendered performances. She concluded that sometimes chat room friendships are better left where they are, in chat rooms.

In sum, the chat room space is penetrable by norms from societal culture offline. Users consider the interplay between the two worlds (offline and online) one of the chat room culture's assets, since it allows them to operate in both worlds simultaneously. This is often achieved by playfully employing interactional social practices from both worlds to their advantage, mostly aiming to develop the chat room atmosphere into a world that is "semi-real".

7.4 Social change and public image

To understand the dynamics of interaction and behaviours that take place in the chat room culture being examined here it is necessary to determine how they stem from offline social reality and to what extent there is an interplay between offline society and the online chat room community. Two key sources from offline society have a direct impact on people's linguistic choices in Kuwait: current aspects of social change and public image. Therefore, chat room interactional norms must be seen in light of these two factors.

In general, Arab men and women are very careful about how they appear in public places (Nydell 2006: 43). For Kuwaiti men and women this concept is of such significance that social gender separation has been well-established since the pre-oil

era⁶², and has been maintained up to the present day (Almughni 2001: 15–6). This social separation stems in the main from traditional norms, which consider it improper for unmarried men and women to meet alone and for this to be strictly avoided (Nydell 2006: 43). Moreover, in Arab male-dominated societies such gender conservatism is practiced to protect a woman's image and her family's honour (Nydell 2006: 44). With this social concept and moral belief in mind, there can never be a neutral context in Kuwaiti society that is unaffected by gender struggles and discrimination. It is for this reason that gendered behaviours, spaces, attitudes, and so on, are seen from a binary perspective in terms of right or wrong, moral or immoral, proper or improper, Islamic or Western and, most importantly, legal or illegal.

In order to find a way around this binary societal state of affairs, unacceptable or immodest social behaviours and practices inevitably take place behind the scenes. Practices such as private parties, illegal bachelor apartments⁶³ and secretive rendezvous between men and women are carried out away from the public eye. However, those who are unable to have access to such private spheres resort to public flirting behaviours. Although such practices and behaviours are to some extent concealed from the public, they are in fact under constant scrutiny by the media. Kuwaiti magazines and newspapers daily contain headlines about imported negative Western or foreign practices, such as heterosexual mingling and the boyfriend/girlfriend phenomenon (Alqatari 2008b: 4), marriages of convenience known as ('Misyar'⁶⁴) (Jamal 2009: 148–9), women's current,

⁶² Oil was not discovered until 1935 in Kuwait (Abdulmouti 2004: 131).

⁶³ It is usually unacceptable for men in Kuwait to have bachelor apartments since they should either live with their parents regardless of age or be married and live with their wife and children.

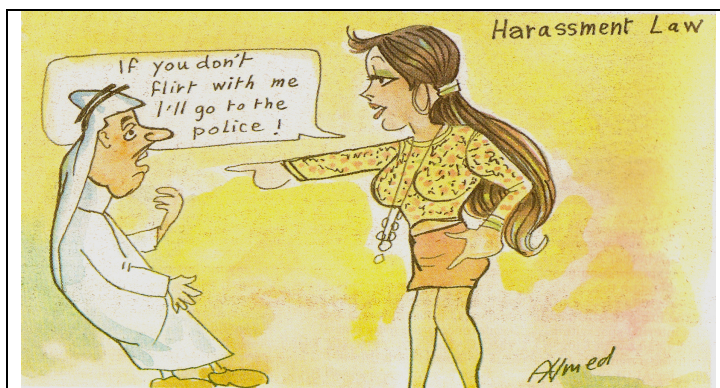
⁶⁴ A legal but unregistered marriage that is agreed upon between a man and woman, and is based solely on a sexual relationship without being bound by the constraints of traditional married life.

immodest dress trends (author unidentified 2008: 9), restoring women's virginity⁶⁵ with an artificial hymen (Alhawari and Aladwani 2010: 20–3), gender segregation at Kuwait University (Als Salman 2008b: 12–13), underground parties (Alqatari 2008a: 5), bachelor apartments (Alqatari 2008d: 4), women smoking in public (author unidentified 2010: 50–2), high divorce rates (Aljayar 2007: 37–42) and, finally, flirting (Khraiche 2008: 9).

The last phenomenon, flirting, is especially problematic and is seen as an unsettling epidemic that never seems to diminish and is therefore constantly attacked in the media. Flirting is perceived as a negative method of public mixed-sex communication, although not all women respond to men's flirtations. It is, in fact, a process of communication, starting with flirting behaviours such as staring, passing street comments, stalking and moving on to use *Bluetooth*, meaning using one's mobile phone to send messages or pictures via Bluetooth to somebody else's mobile phone (also noted in see Chapter 6), and "numbering", when men (persistently) ask women to take their mobile number⁶⁶ (Jannat 2008: 25). Nowadays, flirting is sometimes initiated by women rather than men; a behaviour that the Kuwaiti society finds shocking and unacceptable (see Cartoon 7.1, see also Als Salman 2008a).

⁶⁵ A woman's honour and that of her family revolve around her virginity, which should be protected until she marries. Most men will divorce their wives upon realizing she is not a virgin.

⁶⁶ Another very common behaviour is a mobile number is left on a woman's car in the form of a piece of paper with a number and often a fake name written on it.



Cartoon 7.1: An illustration of flirting behaviour in Kuwait (*The Kuwait Times* 2010).

The many articles published in Kuwaiti newspapers and magazines are a testimony to the existence of a mismatch between culturally conservative views and more liberal and western views. Furthermore, examples of such clashes are also clear in people's sense of dress in society's public spheres (see Chapter 1). A large number of men and women in Kuwait who are neither conservative nor liberal tend to live double lives. If one looks at Kuwaiti society and observes the social change that has rapidly taken over this once simple, modest society one is amazed at the clash between conservatism and liberalism in Kuwait (Abdulmouti 2004). For instance, although in 2005 women were granted suffrage (see Chapter 1), in 2009 there was mounting pressure as to whether female MPs and ministers (who do not usually wear the Hijab) should wear the Hijab in the workplace among male colleagues (Alqattan 2009: 3). As time passes, more paradoxes seem to be surfacing; these are seen either through promoting further institutional gender segregation and Islamic conservatism or conversely through individual liberal behaviours in Kuwaiti society.

On an individual level, many of the Kuwaiti women interviewed from both offline society and chat rooms expressed confusion over what is accepted or appropriate and what is not. Male interviewees also expressed disorientation between foreign practices that contradict Kuwaiti traditions, and questioned the extent to which individuals can get away with secretly engaging in such practices in private settings. Furthermore, unlike earlier generations in Kuwait, many men and women now shun away from marriage and establishing families (also noted in Chapter 1). Discouraged by high divorce rates, many men and women now either prefer having mixed-sex friendships, which is perceived as un-Islamic behaviour, or resorting to the unofficial type of marriage known as ('Misyar'), or a private marriage of convenience.

Such changes in the societal landscape of Kuwait are quite alarming to its people for whom public appearances matter a great deal. Given the country's small size, people in Kuwait are familiar with each other's family names as well as social standing. Consequently, both men and women are careful about their reputations, their honour and that of their families, making sure they present themselves appropriately in public at all times. (In fact, these are common social practices among all Arabs, see Nydell 2006: 15.) Appearances are, however, no longer significant to some Kuwaitis. As the women interviewed confirmed, social change has resulted in liberal people in Kuwait who now prefer to enjoy social freedom rather than be concerned with appearances and conforming to societal norms.

7.5 Conclusion

In Chapter 7 it has been argued that chat room linguistic resources have enabled users to recreate a multiplicity of feminine and masculine identities, to engage in mixed-sex communication and chat room activities, establish friendships and strengthen social networks. The emerging chat room culture under examination for this study has challenged gender segregation hegemonies that exist offline by using the Internet medium as well as one of its key assets, anonymity, to its advantage. In other words, men and women interact together on various inter-relational levels, but they do so semi-privately, away from the public eye, and without “physically” breaching gender segregation ideologies.

Influenced by norms of the heterosexual identity in Kuwaiti offline society, chat room users employ dynamic and playful forms of shared expressive communication as strategies to achieve mutual goals and fulfil what they are deprived of in the real world: mixed-sex mingling. Furthermore, although socialized separately, male and female users have little cause to misunderstand one another, since they find little difficulty in resorting to various interactional strategies in order to express differences and construct diverse chat room identities without having to compromise the unity of their chat room community of practice. Therefore, contrary to what has been argued in language and gender studies by some theorists (Tannen 1990 and Maltz and Borker 1982), if men and women intend to interact efficiently and cooperatively, they can ignore gender differences and miscommunications can be avoided. This is especially true when chat room participants are members of a community of practice, where communication patterns, cultural norms, and interactional goals are shared between its members.

CONCLUSION

The Kuwaiti chat room community in the online network Chit-chat may not represent the society's population as a whole, but it is a window into the societal realities of today's Kuwait. In this virtual realm, male and female users engage in experimentation. They rearticulate and reproduce gendered identities, shift gender boundaries, and re-evaluate beliefs with regard to gender segregation. These important social practices take place in the chat room community of practice where members have learned to negotiate shared socio-cultural goals, and have an opportunity to try out new identity performances through constructing and engaging in creative activities.

Aided by the non-physical nature of this Internet medium as well as by its anonymity, mixed-sex interaction, courting, and online relationships are facilitated between users from the opposite sex. And although Kuwait is undergoing dramatic social change (partly in the direction of westernisation), many of the online norms of interaction that occur in Chit-chat are still largely absent in offline public settings. Many chat room users therefore consider this online space a safe haven where they can attempt to bridge the gap between the male and female sub-cultures separated by cultural and religious gender-related norms and traditions. This, then, answers in the affirmative my first research questions: are male and female users able to communicate successfully given their separate socialization and the Kuwaiti society's gender segregation norms?

It may seem that chat room interaction is heavily dependent on gender, which is a rather active and dynamic variable in this particular online context, as is heterosexuality; however, culture plays an equally important role in this context. Chat room users maintain their traditional norms and behaviours, and ensure that their cultural

backgrounds are constantly visible in all chat room activities – illustrations of which are clear throughout the chat room data in this study. Culturally significant aspects of Kuwaiti society are particularly reflected in chat room nicknames, which are an important tool for identity construction. Socio-cultural features are also prevalent in debates concerning gendered topics, daily idle interaction, and even in chat room poetry. Indeed, users do not consider the chat room as a separate online world, but rather a continuation of their offline culture. This is a world which, simply put, allows for relatively lax gender-related rules and norms, a virtual culture they are content with. Furthermore, the fact that this context is virtual and semi-private permits its members to negotiate many of the interactional taboos that are forbidden in offline public settings. A good example is the frequent use of terms of endearment used between members of the opposite sex during chat room interaction. The abundance of endearments in this particular online setting has enabled users to negotiate new, less intimate meanings of these expressions that could be used among mixed-sex friends rather than confined to lovers.

Additionally, new dynamics of interaction are being introduced, many of which are playful and require highly resourceful and creative language use. These linguistic patterns are central to the community building work undertaken by chat room users and thus contribute in a major way to the emergence and evolution of this cyber culture. Whether it is online rapport-building interactional features (such as greetings, leave-takings, and compliments), or interactional features expressing flirtatious behaviour or conflict (such as heterosexual teasing and adversarial mockery), ultimately, the men and women in this interactional situation are joined by a need to communicate and cooperate rather than compete for power. Upon mutual agreement as to how these interactional

features are integrated into the chat room daily activities, the users find themselves in a position to accommodate to each other's styles and norms of interaction rather than allowing their different sub-cultural rules of communication to cause frequent misunderstandings during chat and thus possibly leading to the disengagement of this virtual community. Male and female users employ such interactional features as social practices in this online context. In fact, these language practices are used as strategies to fulfil certain shared goals that are markedly linked to this heterosexual social context in which enacting gender is pivotal. This, therefore, responds to my second research question pertaining to how representations of gender are manifested through chat.

Common heterosexual goals as well as shared socio-cultural norms facilitate the negotiation of solidarity as opposed to the display of power. The notion of power in this online context is mostly individual in its manifestations since it is evoked in tandem with the chosen gendered identity that a chat room user constructs discursively. A male user may therefore decide to adopt characteristics of a popular chat room speaker by performing "Public Speaker" style of interaction, just as a female user who wishes to gain popularity among male users would adopt promiscuous "Sweet Talker" style of interaction. Moreover, users could even introduce new variations to these chat room language styles of interaction or combine them with various other interactional styles being used. Different interactional styles construe different images or representations of the user's self. The non-physical and anonymous nature of this virtual context not only minimizes the policing of identity work, but also allows identity performances to be diverse, dynamic and fluid. The identities constructed in this virtual environment, however, may possibly be unauthentic and deceptive, in that they may be different or in

opposition with a user's real-life identity and thus these performances could simply be pretend stage-like acting. Granted, they remain identity performances that are consciously chosen by their performers to fulfil a purpose or convey a message to an audience.

Representations of various gendered identities may exist in the offline world, but then only in the form of appearances (i.e., expressed through dress style) and hardly ever interactionally, due to the gender hegemonies that deem mixed-sex communication as unacceptable in offline (public) society. It is for this reason that both the online and offline contexts in Kuwait are considered rich and unique interactional sociolinguistic and ethnographic resources for future research in language and gender (this point is discussed in more detail below).

Whilst the preoccupation with gender in this online context remains clearly binary in its orientation, since it is influenced by the heterosexual social theme of chat rooms, yet this context does encourage the negotiation and construction of different shades of masculinities and femininities through language manifestations. This study has therefore contributed in various ways to language and gender studies. Firstly, it has shown a possible combined method (consisting of ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics, and communities of practice frameworks) to adopt when investigating language and gender in a gender-sensitive culture such as Kuwait. It has also demonstrated that ultimately adopting a social constructionist approach for this specific Kuwaiti online context was fruitful since it highlighted the importance of looking at how language used during chat constructs diverse male and female chat room identities. Additionally, the community of practice notion proved to be a useful framework in modelling mixed-sex interaction in an online setting since it shed light on the importance

of engagement in social practice as a process by which members in a community learn new and creative ways of interacting, and which in turn enable them to construct and perform who they choose to be in this specific virtual context. And finally, contrary to the theory that claims that separate socialization in the case of boys and girls leads to men and women having different ways of communicating, which may cause miscommunication, this study shows that when men and women are united by common goals and take part in community-building work together they are able to communicate cooperatively and successfully, at least within local contexts.

Limitations and further research:

Inevitably, this study is not free from limitations. Its first limitation arises from the research site itself. Chat rooms are an interesting sociolinguistic site of investigation. However, chat room communication usually occurs at many different levels, with far too many participants involved to enable a comprehensive overview. And although being able to investigate both spoken and written chat has been helpful for this study, the paralinguistic features of face-to-face interaction such as gesture, gaze, and body language are missing. This means that an important element of chat room interaction is absent and worthy of future research. Consequently, for someone who is unfamiliar with chat room communication – as I was, initially – and interested in pursuing this type of research, it is necessary to dedicate a long period of time to becoming acquainted with chat room interaction and culture.

Also unaccounted for in this study is the possibility of gender ambiguity or deception through nicknames, since a male user may pretend to be female by using a

feminine nickname and limiting himself to chatting by text only. Equally, it must be borne in mind that some users may be good at imitating voices and thus pretend to be a user of a different gender when engaging in verbal chat through the microphone. According to perceptions of many of the chat room interviewees, however, as well as my own observation of chat practices, heterosexuality is paramount in the chat room environment. It was therefore assumed for the purpose of the study that gender transparency, rather than ambiguity, was central to the Kuwaiti chat room being examined.

Another aspect of this study was that it did not examine the notion of gender as a construct on its own, but looked at the salient features of chat room interaction that are used as strategies to fulfil gendered goals and to construct gendered identities. A future study could focus on examining gender differences from this point-of-view, in terms of chat room interaction rather than Kuwaiti gender norms. Similarly, since this is a relatively new research context, the present study was more exploratory of general gendered chat room interactional features. Therefore, the present study may lead the way toward specific areas of examination such as gender differences during chat room interaction between male and female users.

The dynamics of topic selection and navigation could be pursued further, since as with the notion of the context of a speech event (which has been considered in this study), it plays an important role not only in the choice of linguistic practices by male and female users, but also in the overall dynamics of the relationships between chat room users.

These limitations and foci are therefore interesting avenues for future research. Topic selection and navigation in Kuwaiti mixed-sex chat rooms is certainly a promising perspective to pursue, since it may shed light on the relationship between the choice of topic in this mixed-sex environment and the gender-segregated Kuwaiti society. Indeed, research into Arab cultures where gender segregation is prominent, such as the Gulf countries, is worth pursuing because it offers different sociolinguistic perspectives to mainstream studies, which have traditionally focused on white, English-speaking settings. More specifically, the contrast and comparison of both same-sex and mixed-sex settings in Arab cultures offers a good avenue for analysis. Furthermore (as mentioned above), it would be interesting to examine differences between male and female speech practices, especially since in some cultures men and women have different registers – the sociolinguistic situation in Kuwait is a good example. Furthermore, this study has shown that the Internet is an appropriate point of departure for research, due to the difficulty in Arab society of gaining access to settings which allow interaction between men and women from gender segregated cultures. Additionally, we are currently in a period where communication technology is developing at a rapid pace and, accordingly, so are countries that rely on technology. The Arab world is changing as a consequence of the socio-cultural change in many of the Arab cultures, which can be linked to communication technology and, most specifically, to the Internet, as has been demonstrated in the chat room examples.

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Appendix A

Kuwaiti Arabic transliteration conventions for Arabic readers of examples in italics.

Arabic letter	English transliteration
ط	tt
ظ	tth
ذ	th
د	d
ص	ss
ض	ddh
شت	tsh
ش	sh
س	s
ق	q
ح	hh
خ	kh
غ	gh
ع	a'a/ i'i/ o'o/
ه	h
ج	j
ج	g
و	(word beginning) w
و	(word middle) ou
ل	(dark L) ll

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Offline Participants

1. Which features of greetings do you use with same-sex/mixed-sex with friends and/or acquaintances (e.g. kissing, embracing, handshake, formulaic expressions, elaborate greeting expressions, and so on)?
2. What types of endearments do you use with same-sex/mixed-sex friends and/or acquaintances (e.g. *habibi* 'my dear', *ba'ad* 'o'oumri 'my life', *i'iyouni* 'my eyes', *haboubah* 'dear', and so on)?
3. Which types of humour do you use with same-sex/mixed-sex friends and/or acquaintances (e.g. teasing, mockery, sarcasm, jokes and so on)?
4. [To women] how do you identify men generally in public places?
5. [To men] how do you identify women generally in public places?
6. Do you communicate with members of the opposite sex? How do you interact with them (i.e. freely, (un) comfortably, with difficulty, apprehensively? And where?
7. Do you feel that the Kuwaiti society has changed recently (in the last decade)? And how?
8. What forms of flirting do you usually see take place in public places?
9. How do you feel about mixed-sex mingling on the Internet (in Kuwaiti chat rooms)?

Appendix C

Pro forma information sheet and consent form



Information sheet

Research study [title]: information for participants

We would like to invite you to be part of this research project, if you would like to. You should only agree to take part if you want to, it is entirely up to you. If you choose not to take part there won't be any disadvantages for you and you will hear no more about it. *[If appropriate: Choosing not to take part will not affect your access to treatment or services in any way].*

Please read the following information carefully before you decide to take part; this will tell you why the research is being done and what you will be asked to do if you take part. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

If you decide to take part you will be asked to sign the attached form to say that you agree.

You are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

[Details of study]

This study involves examining language and gender in Kuwait. It will therefore look at men and women's mixed verbal interaction in Kuwaiti chat rooms on-line, bearing in mind Kuwait's gender-segregated society off-line. Participants who wish to volunteer will be asked general questions concerning use of certain expressions or phrases in an exchanges which takes place in chat rooms or in everyday interaction off-line.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

Consent form

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.

Title of Study: Language and Gender in Kuwait _____
Queen Mary Research Ethics Committee Ref: _____0059

. • Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organizing the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part.

. • If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

. • *I understand that if I decide at any other time during the research that I no longer wish to participate in this project, I can notify the researchers involved and be withdrawn from it immediately.*

. • *I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.*

Participant's Statement:

I _____ agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in the study. I have read both the notes written above and the Information Sheet about the project, and understand what the research study involves.

Signed:

Date:

Investigator's Statement:

I Nada Algharabali _____ confirm that I have carefully explained the nature, demands and any foreseeable risks (where applicable) of the proposed research to the volunteer

Appendix D

ورقة معلومات طلب الموافقة على المشاركة في بحث دراسي

كوين ميري ، جامعه لندن

ورقة الا معلومات

بحث عن اللغة والجنس في الكويت : معلومات للمشاركين

نود استضافتكم للمشاركة في بحث دراسي ، إذا كنتم تودون . حيث يجب الا تشاركوا في هذا البحث الا برضاكم ، والاختيار في المشاركة يجب ان يكون من ارادتكم كلياً . اذا كنتم لا تريدون المشاركة فلن يؤثر هذا عليكم سلباً ، ولن نتطرق لهذا الموضوع مرة أخرى . يرجى قراءة المعلومات التالية جيداً قبل ان توافقون على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة . المعلومات التالية ستخبركم ما هي أسباب هذا البحث الدراسي ، وماذا سوف يطلب منكم كمشاركين في هذا البحث . يرجى الطلب من الباحثه شرح اي استفسار أو توضيح عن اي غموض أو طلب معلومات إضافية ، في حال وافقتم على المشاركة في هذا البحث الدراسي يجب التوقيع على انكم موافقون . لا يزال لديكم الخيار في أي وقت للانسحاب من المشاركة دون اعطاء اي سبب أو تبرير .

موضوع البحث الدراسي :

يجري البحث دراسة على الاختلاف في التعامل اللغوي (او استخدام الادوات اللغوية) بين الرجال والنساء في الكويت وخصوصاً في غرف الشاتنج الموجوده على الانترنت . وايضا كيفية التعامل اللغوي بين الرجال والنساء كونهم يعيشون في مجتمع غالباً ما يعزل الرجل عن المرأة . سوف يسئل المشاركون اسئلة عامة عن استخداماته لبعض الادوات اللغوية او الاساليب اللغوية في تعاملاته اليومية داخل المجتمع عامة وفي غرف الشاتنج خاصة ، والامر متروك لكم اذا اردتم المشاركة في هذه الدراسة ام لا . فإذا وافقتم على المشاركة سوف تحتفظون بهذه النسخه من ورقة المعلومات ثم تقومون بالتوقيع على ورقة الموافقة .

كوين ميري، جامعة لندن

ورقة الموافقة

يرجى ملء هذا الطلب بعد قراءة ورقة المعلومات والسماع إلى شرح الباحثة عن موضوع دراستها.
عنوان الدراسة: دراسة عن اللغة والجنس في الكويت
لجنة كوين ميري الأخلاقية رقم: **0059**

- نشكر موافقتكم للمشاركة في هذا البحث الدراسي، يجب على الشخص الذي ينظم هذا البحث شرح إجراءات البحث وموضوعه قبل أن تشاركون فيه.
- إذا لديكم أي استفسارات عن ورقة المعلومات أو سؤال عن موضوع الدراسة الذي شرح من قبل الباحثة، يرجى إخبار الباحثة عن استفساراتكم قبل اتخاذ قرار المشاركة، وبإمكانكم الاحتفاظ بورقة المعلومات وتراجعونها حينما شئتم.
- أنا أعلم انه بإمكانني التراجع عن المشاركة في هذا البحث في أي وقت أثناء القيام بهذه الدراسة وذلك عن طريق أخبار الباحثة بأنني أريد التراجع عن المشاركة فوراً.
- أنا أوافق بان تستخدم معلوماتي الشخصية في ضمن هذا البحث الدراسي، وأني على علم بان هذه المعلومات سوف يتم التعامل معها بسرية تامة، وان تستخدم طبقاً لقانون حماية المعلومات **1998** تصريح المشارك:

أنا _____ أوافق بأنه قد تم الشرح لي عن مضمون هذا البحث الدراسي بما يرضيني، وأوافق أن أشارك في هذه الدراسة، لقد قرأت المعلومات المذكورة أعلاه وكذلك ورقة المعلومات عن شرح الدراسة التي ستجرى، وأني على علم بما يتطلبه هذا البحث الدراسي.

التوقيع: التاريخ:

تصريح الباحثة:

أنا _____ أؤكد أنني شرحت للمشارك بتأني طبيعة هذا البحث الدراسي، ومتطلباته ومخاطره المحتملة (أيضا تتطابق).