

## Language Identity and the Other Gender

*Hussein Obeidat, Khadidja Hammoudi*

*(Department of English Language and Literature, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan)*

**Abstract:** There is small amount of research conducted on “gay focused linguistic scholarship” and its counterpart in Arabic-gay-sociolinguistics is virtually non-existent. The present paper raises the issue of the existence of gay community in the Arab world. On the basis of empirical investigations, field-direct and indirect observations, interviews as well as random questionnaire, we hypothesize that there exists a gay speech community in (at least in the studied countries) the Arab world for we investigate and determine its social and linguistic dimensions. This lead us to find out the discursive criteria which characterize modes of gay-speak that are part of their identity. After comparing them to women’s talk, we assume, however, that in spite of this high rate of assimilation in language behavior at the phonological, lexical, and even gestural ones, gays cannot be defined as “women” nor can they be classified as a separate gender or third sex (as other studies claim).

**Key words:** other gender, gay, gay community, identity, repertoire, style, effeminate

### 1. Introduction

Identities are shaped by society and reflected in the language people use. These identities mirror the way a particular group of people think. Some identities are stigmatized and pejoratively perceived, just like the one of the OTHER gender and similarly is their language.

Talking about the OTHER gender (along the paper, we will focus on gay people only) and their culture is becoming wide spread (and more and more socially accepted) in the Western and European World (regarding the number of pieces written on this topic). Yet, it is not that accepted in the Arab world though a good number of this group of people is found and in continuous growth especially among youngsters. Our Arab (Muslim) society has a homophobic attitude towards them. The negative view attached to this category comes from the behaviors of its individuals including gestural and linguistic ones which are stereotypically been thought of being akin to women’s. This, in turn, makes them to fall under feminine classification (effeminate — often mocked at — and thus often hidden and publically avoided).

The elimination of the traditional binary of gender differentiation (male-female sociolinguistic distinction) can be successful if the OTHER gender (i.e., gay people) has their own: repertoire, style, register, intonation and tone of voice which assign an independent identity and make them a third category along with the male-female distinction. Therefore, the study of the ways gay people use language and structure their discourse will give us

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Hussein A. Obeidat, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Yarmouk University; research areas/interests: discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and language acquisition. E-mail: [hobeidat@yu.edu.jo](mailto:hobeidat@yu.edu.jo).

Khadidja Hammoudi, Lecturer, Department of Linguistics, Tlemcen University; research areas/interests: sociolinguistics. E-mail: [doujamido1@gmail.com](mailto:doujamido1@gmail.com).

insight into “the construction and maintenance of gay identity across multiple contexts” (Baker, 2002, p. 10).

Most of the work done regarding “thirdness” is devoted to the sexual orientation and desires of those individuals in addition to their biological behaviors towards the same sex. However, little attention has been given to the language these people use to interact either with each other or with other out-group individuals. In fact, there is small amount of research conducted on “*gay-focused linguistic scholarship*” or gay language in the simple sense. As Butters 1989 (cited in Gaudio, 1994, p. 30) says “any notion of what might constitute gay sociolinguistics, and gay linguistics in general is virtually non-existent. One looks in vain for references to materials on homosexual subjects.” This is one reason why this piece of linguistic research tries to investigate and explore along the coming lines.

In the Arab world, homosexuals have become subject to discrimination and condemnation. This is why no studies are conducted on gay language in these countries in comparison with those in other parts of the world. For this reason, this research aims at investigating the features and functions of the language used by gay people. Additionally, we explore some of the ways in which they use dialectal Arabic in everyday life. This study also aims to contribute to the literature of gender studies in general as well as sociolinguistics as a broader field of work.

## 2. About the Topic

The field of Language and Gender deals primarily with the study of hetero-normativity in language. In some cultures and under particular circumstances, however, it is acceptable for a woman to perform typically male linguistic practices, but the opposite is not (Motschenbacher, 2010, p. 17). Queer Linguistics blurs the lines of traditional thought about gender and studies other gendered (sexual) identities such as that of gays.

Lavender linguistics is the study of language use by gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer speakers. It encompasses a wide range of everyday language practices on LGBTQ (Dictionary of Sociolinguistics, 2004). It is, in fact, a subsection of sociolinguistics which has built on Queer Studies stating that sexual and gender identities are constructed (Butler, 2004, p. 7). It is, therefore, the study of communicative practices and language of the LGBTQ community (Rudwick, 2010, p. 128).

Language use is a form of identity, a way for speakers to signal their identification with a particular social group and their distinction from others (Cameron & Kulick, 2006, p. 18). That is, there is an interconnection between language and identity in the sense that each mirrors the other. In this respect, Leap (1996, pp. 434-436) asserts that “speaking the self maybe the most powerful action in the creation of an identity, and gay identity may illustrate this better than other mainstream identities”. He added that language is important in gay socialization as well as identity construction.

A discussion of “gay language” might assume that “gays themselves form a clearly identifiable and homogeneous group in society” (Gevisser & Cameron, 1994, p. 219). Gay is the social identity that arises in connection to a person’s identification as a member of a community of people whose most significant sexual and romantic partners belong to the same sex/gender (Geda, 201, p. 16). Interestingly, style is an appropriate starting point for the description of linguistic gendering as a process of identity construction that may exhibit context-dependent intra-gender, and even intra-individual, diversity (Mostshenbacher, 2010, p. 50) continuing the debate of the “existence and distinctive features” of gay language (Cameron & Kulick, 2006, p. 18).

Language exists in contexts. It has been claimed that “we distinguish between linguistically conveyed

meanings relating directly to the immediate context of the discourse of participants, and those involving the construction of personal or stylistic identities” (Podesva, Roberts & Kibler, 2001). In studying the language of gays, we are interested in the discourses they produce in different conversational and interactive situations. That is, we approach the gay speak from a way of thinking about and analyzing the pragmatics of ordinary conversations, focusing on the interactive, practical construction of everyday interchanges.

In recent years, a number of sociologists with an interest in transgenderism (e.g., Bockting, 1997a&b; Diamond, 2003) together with transgender authors (Bornstein, 1994; Feinberg, 2006, 1992; Wilchins, 2002) have argued that characterizing transgender identities as a kind of third sex, distinct from male and female categories, provides personal and political empowerment to transgender people (cited in Zimman, 2011). A resurfacing of anthropological studies on the cultural existence of third sex and non-heterosexual categories that were interpreted as defying European and North American organizations of gender-variants among the Igbo in Nigeria (Amadiume, 1987), the xanith in Oman (Wikan, 1982), the berdache in Native America (Whitehead, 1981; Williams, 1986; Roscoe, 1991-1987; Lang, 1998), the mahu in Tahiti (Levy, 1973), and that hijras in India (Nanda, 1986). These are instances of studies done with regard to the concept of “third gender” in its general broader sense.

Studies in Arabic sociolinguistics about gay language and identity are limited. For example, “Ana Gay”: Coming to Terms with Male homosexuality in Egypt by Abaza (2010) discusses gayness as a mode of psychological performativity. “Unspeakable Love”: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East by Whitaker (2006) discusses homosexuality in relation to religion and views social and political attitudes towards it. “Homosexuality in the Middle East” by Tolino (2014) views the historical and religious approaches to homosexuality. “Sociolinguistic of Farsi” by Safer and Sheeraz (2011) concludes that Farsi is as good as any other language, but the number of its lexical items is small because of its limited and private usage. Hence, one may notice that linguistic items are not really a matter of focus.

In addition to those studies, there is a book that discusses the issue of sexuality in the Arab world, more precisely in the Middle East. It is entitled “Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East”. The author, Ilkcaracan, examined homosexuality in Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, and Turkey. Yet, the aim was only to find out the contemporary political and social dynamics pertaining sexuality in the Middle East. He highlighted the cultural and linguistic factors by saying that the purpose is not just to reconstruct the language, but to create a linguistic context where concepts and vocabularies are used to express desire (Ilkcaracan, 2008).

Part of our study takes place in Jordan; the other part in Algeria. Accordingly, we tried to find some already-done studies on gay speak in those countries; but unfortunately, research on gay discourse is rare. This is why we attempt to highlight this lavender sociolinguistic aspect that is neglected in Arabic sociolinguistic discussion.

### 3. The Present Investigation

This research paper aims at investigating the social and linguistic dimensions of the third gender in the Arab world. The research tries to figure out the characteristics of gay discourse; and then, make a comparison and contrast with women’s talk in order to find out whether this group of individuals can be linguistically classified as females or they have their own categorization. Ergo, this paper endeavors to identify such *speech styles* — i.e., “modes of speaking restricted to or primarily associated with a particular social group” (Crystal, 1971, p. 185) — that cause a man to be perceived as “gay” by people of the surrounding speech community.

Because municipal research on gay linguistics/gay discourse/gay speak is incredibly scarce, it appears that, at this moment, anything written on this topic fills a gap and is instrumental in generating greater awareness about this under-researched, marginalized linguistic community in the Arab world in general. What the research hopes to achieve is then, at the very minimum, to “inspire a greater interest among local scholars to pursue additional research in this field” (Wu, 2000, p. 56).

#### **4. Data and Methods**

In order to collect the needed data and fulfill the purposes of the study, the researchers adopt a triangulation of methods with the use of the following fact finding strategies and instruments:

1) Indirect observation took place in spaces where gay people can be gathered generally known as friendly zones where they are accepted as a community (where discourses can be interactively produced) allow us to directly see what people do rather than relying on what people say they did.

2) Semi-structured interviews (plus records) to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of individuals on the studied matter and to provide a “deeper” understanding of social phenomena (gay speak in our context).

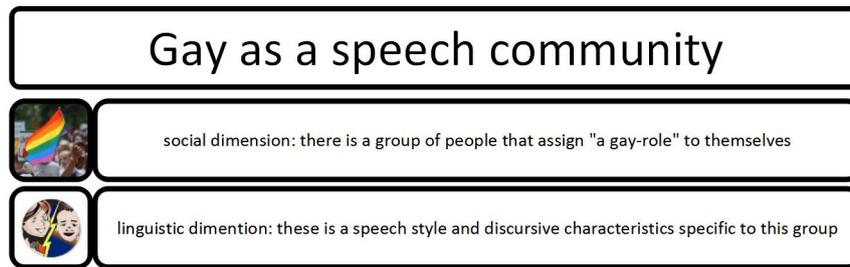
3) Field survey/questionnaires were online delivered (through the social websites like Facebook) to the sample.

The present investigation is done through three techniques: questionnaire, interview, and observation. First, a random set of questions was asked to people who assign themselves a gay identity on social media. Ten gay persons agreed to discuss the topic in written form; 14 others refused to talk. The sample is consisted of two Jordanians, two Tunisians, and six Algerians. Second, a semi structured interview was designed for two other participants who overtly talked about the topic. Simultaneously, an observation was done (with the help of an already prepared check list) so as to get an overall account of the different characteristics of the language used by the informants.

#### **5. Results and Discussion**

There is a huge belief that there exists no such thing as “gay language” ( Kulick, 2000, p. 247). Similarly, it has been claimed that saying something like “gay speak” and “gay community” is bound to be misleading (Penelope & Wolfe, 1979). Yet, the opposite can be significantly true; our investigation confirms this idea. Gays form and constitute an independent speech community that can stand on its own. It constitutes a small community in a larger one; a community that Arab gay people prefer to label “a social minority” rather than a deviant group from society.

There are two main reasons for this to be consistently true. First, members of this community share common cultural perceptions, beliefs, and experiences. Second, there are shared norms and expectations with regard to how the language should be used (Yule, 2006), conceived, and interpreted. Interestingly, once having a shared community membership, i.e., individuals who assign themselves a gay role; plus a shared linguistic communication including pragmatic implicatures that is the way in which they interact either with each other or in other communicative contexts, gay speech community is there.



**1) Social dimension:** it is something normal to find out that there is a gay community in the Arab world; yet, the more surprising fact is to discover that there are certain social roles assigned to each stretch/group in this community. They are divided into groups; each having divergent criteria regarding their behaviors as well as their (inside) feelings as (a specific type of) gays. Through our investigation we come across notions of “*active*” and “*passive*” roles. These terms are generally used within the relationship that can exist between the members. The “*active*” usually plays the role of the “*male*” or more exactly the “*man*” in this relation. On the other hand, the “*passive*” is namely used to indicate those who have a more feminine behavior, i.e., they conventionally play the role of the “*woman*” in the relation.

All the participants gave the same reasons for a gay to have a certain direction or role in this community. These reasons are namely related to biology, sociology, as well as psychology. These reasons are all related, reflected in, and influenced by one another.

As far as the biological reasons are concerned, one may summarize them in two main things: either the genes and hormones of the gay that are much more feminine than those that can be found in a straight man; or the structure of their sexual organs that make them ashamed of being partners of females (in real life) and therefore accept to play the role of a woman in the relationship that gather them with the other partner (men). The second reason that almost all the participants agree upon is the effect of society and the environment in which a certain gay was raised and hence had this character. An interesting example has been given by our informants: imagine a boy who is so close to his mother and live only with girls and in all his infancy and childhood and adolescence, he was treated like a girl. This may reform one’s behavior especially knowing that the Arab society obliges men to behave in a certain way and assign roles for each gender (which seem to be against what they have witnessed as kids); how can he construct a male identity in a situation as such? Thus, one may conclude that socialization plays a very important role in the studied phenomenon. This, in turn, can cause and be reflected in the psychological behavior of gay people. Two from our informants claim the idea that “it is out of our hand to be like that, I do what I feel myself comfortable in”. This is something abstract; something that is happening in the brain-mind of this category of people.

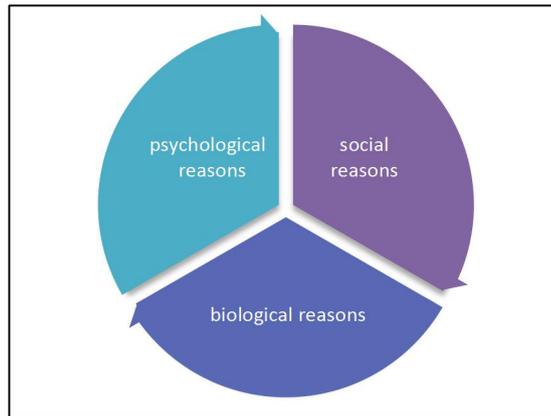


Figure 1 Reasons behind being “Gay”

2) **Linguistic dimension:** if there is no such thing as gay language, how can people manage in distinguishing straight men from gays? Only language can be the key answer — be it verbal including the linguistic forms used or nonverbal including body language. Just like talking about males and females as two different cultures where there is divergence in women’s and men’s habits and assumptions about how to participate in conversation (Kendall & Tannen, 2000), gay speech community can be considered as a distinct culture too. Within this culture, there are certain communicative practices as well as choices among speech forms to demonstrate in-group identification. Thus, gay speak can be considered as a sociolect.

Indeed, our investigation shows that gays manage to understand each other’s language including pragmatic implicatures of certain expressions. Additionally, once being together (in-group), they tend to feel at ease and speak in their ways although there exist no specific terms as some results (from studies outside the Arab world) claim. Therefore, one may notice that it is not necessary to have a restricted lexicon associated to and used only by them; but the idea turns around how dialectal Arabic is utilized by members of this group. Research on gay language was pretty much synonymous with lists of in-group terms used (Kulick, 2000, p. 247). Yet, how about whole interactive conversations among and outside this community? Gay speak can faultlessly be understood not in providing dictionaries and lexeme glossaries (Leap, 1995) but in analyzing concrete situations embracing both verbal and non-verbal conduct.

If there are basic classifications and split along the different types of gays, we can also expect that the language used is different from one group to another. The results show that some members tend to address each other with the feminine pronoun [inti] but they just do it in order to make fun between each other. Yet out of the atmosphere, it is not used, and there is no specific language outside the group.

According to our observation, there still exists some of gay’s talk once being outside the group which is generally found in woman’s talk. The observation check list included the characteristics of women’s speech since one of our goals is to make a comparison between it and our participants’ way of speaking. Although all of the informants claimed that they are not “women”, their speech is a total approximation to female’s speech (if not more exaggerated). These characteristics include:

<b>Soft voice</b>
<b>Adjectives</b>
<b>Weak, sweet-sounding swear words</b>
<b>Intensifying adverbs</b> [kti:r kti:r, aki:d, beza:f] “very, really”
<b>Introductory adverbial clauses</b>
<b>Tag questions</b> [sa7 aw laa, fhimti kif] “isn’t it, you get me right!”
<b>Questions in general and hedges</b>
<b>Politeness</b>
<b>Indirect orders than imperatives</b>
<b>More cooperative style of conversational interaction</b>
<b>Use minimal reaction to mark interest</b> [aha, hum, i:h]
<b>Aspects of code switching</b> (english and french mainly)
<b>Use more prestigious forms of dialects</b> (e.g., the glottal stop in Jordan and Qâf in North Africa)
<b>More emotional and personal</b>
<b>More inclusive pronouns</b> [inti:, ne7na] “you, we”
<b>Talk a lot:</b> -to be informative -Sharing life experiences
<b>Female register</b> [7abibiti: , oxti:, etc] “dear, sister”
<b>Body language:</b> -way of sitting -movement of hands -crossing fingers -smiles -position of the head
<b>Pitch of voice and intonation</b> (low pitch and feminine intonation with soft tone of voice)
<b>Average length of sentences</b> (sometimes short but most of the time long with the inclusion of details)

## 6. Speaking and Implicature

Preferences tend to approach each other. Thus, they have similar ways of interpreting terms, expressions, sentences, and hints. Here “desire” comes to play a role (references: there is emphasis on some words or expressions rather than other ones to give hints or tips to the listener). It is a language of communication; a language of understanding, allusion, and hinting.

There also exists the concept of “Camp”. It generally refers to making humor amongst the members of this community especially those who belong to the same subgroup categorization of gays. An interesting example that we got from our sample involves the use of [inti] “you.2per.fem” as a pronoun to address the other. As explained by the subjects, camp has no other intention than making fun with (but not against) each other.

### 6.1 Speakers Adopt the Conventions in Order to Create a Given Gender Identity

Gender expression is canceled. According to our participants, media in the Arab world did not really have the right label for this community; rather it considered them as deviant groups “with reference to sexual orientation and practices especially”. Nowadays, there is something like the influence of **cultural imperialism**: Imperialism here refers to the creation and maintenance of unequal relationships between genders, favoring the more powerful gender classification. It refers to promoting and imposing “a western way of thinking” on the Arab gay mentality: they used to feel themselves as different but do not know how to classify themselves exactly, the influence of the

media, movies, the “to-be-like” identity: no one is expressing himself in a direct way, no one is reflecting his identity “who he really is”, they are just adopting other’s. It is just a kind of “acting” or “being like another character”; and that on its own in an identity (one inside, and one outside)

### 6.2 Discrimination Still Exists

Most of the informants claim the fact that people in our society generally accept “masculine gays” rather than the feminine ones since the latter are said to play a role which is not theirs and in fact even members of the same community prefer those who are much more masculine rather than feminine. Within this community, again, masculinity is praised; femininity is demonized. Because the larger society is patriarchal, even the small communities within it tend to be patriarchal. One of the very interesting questions received is “which one do our society accept more — a masculine woman or a feminine man-?” since the former is having a man’s character of being brave and courageous and tough and life needs this kind of women; whereas the latter is shameful.

This discrimination is reflected in the way members of gay community are classified. In places where members of this community are gathered there are stratifications which go under the degree of femininity and masculinity: we find tables for more feminine ones, a row for those who are much more masculine, those who do sports, etc. Results show that there is segregation.

### 6.3 “Doing Gender through Language, Femininity is Part of Gay Identity”

We asked the question “Under which basis you identify yourself as a part of this specific community?”, one of the most interesting answers we got is as follows:

We are in a very complex uncomfortable state. There is an existing identity but cannot be expressed overtly in our society. It is something denied in our society simply because whatever you do people will find things to stand against yours’. Identity can be defined as the thing that you have inside you when you are on your own (not necessarily to be in public because generally you are not yourself when you are with others, either you hide or show things that your addressee dis/likes).

Due to abnormal sexual practice and lack of direct femininity or masculinity, homosexuality was axiomatically understood as a “gender deviance” (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 6). However, “gay pride” pushes gay people to be “themselves” against social gender discrimination (Baker, 2002a, 2005). For these reasons, there is a call for a radical labeling approach which claims that there are two sexes at birth but more than two genders in practice, i.e., it is a matter of gender diversity (Romjampa, 2003). Therefore, there exists a gay identity with its separate linguistic and social dimensions (in the Arab world).

Kulick (2000) states that future scholarship should be capable of moving away from the research for the linguistic correlates of contemporary identity categories to focusing on the ways in which language is related to and conveys desire. An interesting fact is that all human beings have (sexual) desires be it to the opposite or the same sex. Desire exists; it is a natural fact which has its specific language whether it is consciously performed or unconsciously. However, who are gay people once being away from their sexual desire? And how do they communicate? What are the differences that make their language different from that of males and females? And finally, how can these characteristics identify them as a separate group?

In her *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick (1990) claimed that “people are different from each other” and these differences should not be exploited but accepted. Interestingly, it is the presence of distinctions that marks our identities which create a complex social ecology with the existence of gay identity as a separate one from that of men and women. In the same line of thought, Butler (1990) declares that just like gender which is not stable but

fluid and changes according to people and contexts, self-identity is performative as it is tied to our behavior. The latter encompasses our linguistic performance which, in turn, reflects our identity affiliation. Analogously, gay people have their own linguistic practices which reflect their identity. In discourse situations, identity can be observed both through spoken language as well as body language (McConnel- Ginet, 2011, p. 13).

**Ideologies** (the same way of thinking or different ways)

There are people who are sexist, homophobic, extra-feminist, people who think they are gay now and that after a certain moment they will get married and have kids. Therefore, we can say that there is something common (abstract thinking) but not long-term lasting or not really very strong among the members of this community. The goals differ as the insides differ. The culture that comes from experience is completely different from the culture that one can get from books or internet. **\*You are just feminine but you are not a woman.** And that through this life experience you can understand your situation even more. Some of the ideas or information that we can get from the media is kind of “directive” as they try to show that this community of people are “wrong” not only in their behavior but also in their identity and ways of thinking. (This is why they put some of the gays –who participate in some TV shows- in a very embarrassing situation where they cannot defend themselves nor can they explain their ways of thinking: this can only be solved through culture and experience).

**6.4 Body Language**

During our observation to the participants, certain remarks were noticed regarding body language and the use of some parts while talking. The first thing is about the way gay people sit. It was a bit surprising seeing how “classy” are these people especially those who are much more feminine. Crossing legs, putting one hand on the chair and the other to make movement once talking were the initial characteristics done by the observed sample (and those with whom we made interviews). The second thing is using hand and crossing fingers while talking (in list giving or counting); and this was done in a very feminine expressive way. Besides, we observed a given head movement (right and left in a soft way during the explanation of items). Therefore, body language is present in their speech.

According to the informants, there is something called “**gay-dar**” so as to know or to couch each other (members of the same community). As a matter of interest, members do not have to fall under a certain **stereotype** in order to be identified within this community (the feeling of getting shocked once knowing that a given person is “gay” should be deleted, and this idea should be much more accepted even within the same community).

The last question that has been asked to our participants was “if men are from Mars and women are from Venus; where are gays from?” The answer has been that this group just falls in-between. They are males but with a feminine attitude and behavior. Because of this, the Arab society considered them as deviant. It is a small community within the larger one but the discriminatory traditions are still there.

**7. Conclusions**

Gay is a social identity that arises in connection to a one’s identification as a member of this community. Arab gays consider themselves as a “social minority” rather than a deviant social group as our society views them. They constitute an independent speech community for at least two reasons: socially speaking, they are a group that assign “gay identity to themselves” plus specific social roles, experiences, practices, and beliefs. Linguistically speaking, we conclude that language is a key factor to distinguish straight men from gays; this is mirrored in both styles of speech and pragmatic implicatures as well as body language which play a very crucial

role in their identification. Thus, one may deduce that self-identity, in gay community, is performative.

Through our experiment, we observe that there is an intra-gender linguistic style which shifts to more feminine especially in comfortable non-constrained situations. Interestingly, femininity (or extra-feminine behavior) is claimed to form a part of their identity which is reflected in their language (be it verbal or gestural)

It is a distinct culture but not a separate gender on its own: they are males (in sex) with extra-feminine behavior which makes them feel like women. Yet, the more the person is feminine, the more they are negatively perceived even from members of the same community and masculinity is always praised. Hence, social discrimination is still present even in groups of social minorities.

Our investigation, though limited to certain number of participants and countries, is different from other studies in western literature about gay community in at least two distinct ways. First, most of the studies are interested in gathering lists of words produced specifically by this group of people; second, recent work on gays focus on how language can be used to express desire. However, research should move beyond lexicon and queering as we concentrate on speech styles and understanding pragmatic implicatures plus on how language is part of the gay identity. For this reason, further research needs to be conducted in this topic with larger samples and other countries in the Arab world in order to arrive to more significant and consistent results about gay community and Arabic-gay-sociolinguistics in general.

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