

Gendered Language Use and Its Impact on Identity Among Youth in Benghazi

Al-Batoul Awad Bubaker EL-Haddad*

Faculty of languages, Benghazi University , Libya

*Email: Haddad.mesho@gmail.com

استخدام اللغة الجندرية وتأثيره على الهوية لدى الشباب في بنغازي

البتول عوض بوبكر الحداد*
كلية اللغات، جامعة بنغازي، ليبيا

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Abstract

Language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a powerful marker of social identity, particularly in societies with strong gender norms. In Libya, a nation navigating post-revolution transformation, the linguistic practices of young adults offer a unique window into evolving gender dynamics.

This study aims to investigate the intersection of language, gender, and identity among young adults in Benghazi, Libya, exploring how linguistic practices reflect and reinforce gendered social norms within a conservative yet rapidly changing society.

The sample population consists of 65 undergraduate students (ages 18-25) recruited from three major universities in Benghazi: Benghazi University, Libyan International Medical University (LIMU), and Salam University.

A structured questionnaire, distributed digitally via Google Forms, served as the primary quantitative tool. It combined closed-ended scale items to assess language attitudes and demographic data for statistical cross-analysis.

Preliminary findings suggest that while traditional gender distinctions persist in formal settings, informal contexts reveal evolving behaviors. Young women increasingly adopt assertive speech styles, while young men navigate between local dialectal prestige and globalized linguistic trends, indicating an active role for youth in reshaping linguistic norms.

Keywords: Gendered Language, Social Identity, Youth, Gender Norms, Sociolinguistics, Benghazi, .

المخلص

لا تعد اللغة أداة للتواصل فحسب، بل هي أيضاً علامة قوية للهوية الاجتماعية، لا سيما في المجتمعات التي تسودها معايير جندرية صارمة. في ليبيا، الدولة التي تعيش مرحلة تحول ما بعد الثورة، تتيح الممارسات اللغوية للشباب نافذة فريدة لفهم الديناميكيات الجندرية المتطور. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء التداخل بين اللغة والجندر والهوية لدى الشباب في بنغازي، ليبيا، واستكشاف كيفية عكس الممارسات اللغوية للمعايير الاجتماعية الجندرية وتعزيزها داخل مجتمع محافظ لكنه سريع التغير.

تتكون عينة الدراسة من 65 طالباً وطالبة من المرحلة الجامعية (أعمارهم 18-25 عاماً) تم اختيارهم من ثلاث جامعات كبرى في بنغازي: جامعة بنغازي، وجامعة ليبيا الدولية للعلوم الطبية، وجامعة السلام. تم استخدام استبيان منظم تم توزيعه رقمياً عبر نماذج جوجل كأداة كمية رئيسية. جمع الاستبيان بين عبارات على مقياس مغلق لتقييم الاتجاهات اللغوية وبيانات ديموغرافية لإجراء تحليل متقاطع إحصائي. تشير النتائج الأولية إلى أنه بينما تستمر الفروقات الجندرية التقليدية في السياقات الرسمية، تكشف السياقات غير الرسمية عن سلوكيات متطورة. تتبنى الشباب بشكل متزايد أساليب كلام حازمة، بينما يتنقل الشباب بين مكانة اللهجة المحلية والاتجاهات اللغوية المعولمة، مما يشير إلى دور نشط للشباب في إعادة تشكيل المعايير اللغوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الجندرية، الهوية الاجتماعية، الشباب، المعايير الجندرية، علم اللغة الاجتماعي، بنغازي، ليبيا.

1.1. Introduction

Language is never neutral; it carries social meaning, reflects power structures, and actively shapes individual and group identities. In societies where gender roles are deeply embedded in cultural, religious, and social frameworks, the way men and women speak can become a key site for both reproducing and contesting norms. Libya offers a particularly rich context for examining this dynamic. As a North African nation with a predominantly Arab and Muslim population, Libya has long maintained conservative gender expectations, where public and private spheres remain largely segregated, and linguistic behavior is often coded as appropriately masculine or feminine. Libyan society maintains strong traditional gender norms, yet its urban centers, particularly universities, serve as dynamic spaces where youth negotiate these expectations daily. The historical linguistic landscape of Libya, from its Amazigh origins to Arabization and colonial influences, has continually transformed, especially following the 2011 revolution.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Despite growing interest in Arab sociolinguistics, critical gaps remain in research on Libyan universities specifically. There is a lack of systematic investigation into how young men and women in Benghazi use language not just to communicate, but to actively construct and express their gender identities in academic and social settings, leaving a gap in understanding the role of language in post-revolution social change.

1.3. Research Questions

1. How do male and female university students in Benghazi differ in their use of gendered speech patterns, including politeness strategies, code-switching, and slang?
2. How does the context of interaction (formal academic vs. informal social/digital) influence these gendered linguistic behaviors?
3. In what ways do students perceive their language use as either reinforcing or challenging traditional Libyan gender norms?

1.4. Research Aims

Firstly, to identify and document gender-specific speech variations among students at Benghazi's major universities. Secondly, to analyze how contextual factors (academic, social, digital) influence gendered communication patterns. And lastly to explore student attitudes regarding how their language use relates to the reinforcement or challenge of existing gender roles.

1.5. Literature Review

This study is grounded in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which explains how language reinforces group belonging and gender divisions; Genderlect Theory (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990), which highlights culturally constructed communication differences; and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991), revealing how linguistic choices reflect and perpetuate social hierarchies. This section surveys the existing body of knowledge on language, gender, and identity, providing the theoretical framework and empirical grounding for the present study.

1.5.1. Definitions of Key Concepts

Understanding the relationship between language and gender requires first clarifying several core concepts that form the foundation of modern sociolinguistic research.

1.5.1.1. Gendered Language

Gendered language refers to the systematic ways in which linguistic forms and practices are associated with, reinforce, or challenge conventional notions of masculinity and femininity within a speech community. The term genderlect was coined to describe these gendered ways of communicating (Tannen, 1990), though early theories tended to "contrast female and male speech styles as two stables, clear-cut and opposite gendered varieties" (Lakoff, 1975, p. 45). Modern research, however, recognizes that gendered language is far more fluid and context-dependent. In Arabic, for instance, which possesses a two-gender grammatical system with feminine and masculine distinctions, gendered language operates at multiple levels: from the structure of the language itself (grammatical gender) to the social expectations about how men and women should speak. Gendered language thus encompasses not only who speaks but also how they are spoken about, reflecting and perpetuating broader social hierarchies.

1.5.1.2. Gender Performativity

Building on the work of philosopher Judith Butler, the concept of gender performativity holds that gender is not a stable identity or a locus of agency from which various acts proceed, but rather an identity instituted through a “stylized repetition of acts” over time (Butler, 1990, p. 179). In this view, “gender is discursively made or constructed performatively” (Butler, 2004, p. 1) through daily social practices, including speech. Language is thus a primary tool through which individuals “perform” their gender. Every choice of word, politeness strategy, or code-switch is not merely an expression of pre-existing gender but is itself an act that constitutes gendered identity. This theoretical lens is crucial for understanding the youth in Benghazi: their innovative language use is not simply reflecting changing gender norms but is actively producing those changes.

1.5.1.3. Politeness Theory

Politeness theory, most influentially developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987), provides a framework for analyzing how speakers manage social relationships through language to avoid conflict and maintain social harmony. Central to this theory is the concept of face, defined as an individual’s public self-image, and face-threatening acts (FTAs), which are communicative acts that inherently threaten the speaker’s or hearer’s face. Speakers use various politeness strategies—positive politeness (emphasizing solidarity), negative politeness (showing deference), or off-record indirectness—to mitigate these threats. Gendered differences in politeness have been extensively documented: research consistently shows that women tend to use more politeness strategies and affiliative speech, while men often employ more direct, assertive language (Holmes, 1995). Within the Arab context, politeness is a critical variable, interacting with both gender and social class in complex ways, as factors like social distance and power differentials influence the weightiness of FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

1.5.1.4. Code-Switching and Diglossia

Code-switching refers to the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties within a single conversation or communicative event.

In sociolinguistics, it is considered a key part of a speaker’s “communicative competence” (Gumperz, 1982). Diglossia is a specific type of language situation where two distinct varieties of the same language coexist within a society: a “high” variety (H) used in formal, prestigious contexts (e.g., Modern Standard Arabic) and a “low” variety (L) used in everyday conversation (e.g., Libyan Arabic) (Ferguson, 1959). Code-switching in the Arab world is pervasive, involving both diglossic switching (between MSA and dialect) and bilingual switching (between Arabic and another language, such as English or French).

1.5.1.5. Language and Identity

The relationship between language and identity is dynamic and reciprocal. Language does not merely label a pre-existing identity; it is a primary resource for constructing, negotiating, and performing identity in social interaction. Sociolinguists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2005) have extensively theorized identity as an emergent product of cultural semiotics, continuously co-constructed in discourse. Within this framework, linguistic choices—whether accent, vocabulary, or code-switching—are acts of identification that locate speakers within social categories such as gender, generation, class, and ethnicity. For youth in particular, creating innovative linguistic forms, such as slang or hybrid digital languages, is a powerful means of establishing a distinct generational identity apart from older generations (Eckert, 2000). The proliferation of slang within digital networks is a significant manifestation of cultural dynamics, playing a pivotal role in the formation and evolution of distinct linguistic subcultures.

1.6. Previous Studies

While research on gendered language in Libya remains newly developed, several significant studies conducted elsewhere in the Arab world and beyond offer valuable comparative models and empirical findings. Four such studies are summarized below.

1.6.1. Study 1: Badr, A. (2022) – Egypt

Amal Badr of Ajman University, Egypt, focusing on Egyptian youth groups on Facebook. Titled “The Impact of Digital Communication in Social Media on Linguistic Transformation in Egyptian Youths: A Study on the Impact of Gender on the Facebook Language,” this study analyzed the relationship between gender and linguistic response patterns within Facebook youth groups. Using content analysis, the researcher examined posts and comments in two diverse youth groups over a three-month period (Badr, 2022). The research revealed that young people’s language on social media is a hybrid mixture of verbal and visual expression. A key gendered difference emerged: young men tended to employ vocabulary that is Arabized from English, sometimes using Latin letters and numbers to write Arabic words. In contrast, young women’s language was characterized by a tendency to use linguistic texts unaccompanied by pictures or videos, and they frequently employed the “Arabizi” method (writing Arabic with Latin letters and numbers). The study also found that both genders, to varying degrees, use vulgar language online that disregards traditional norms (Badr, 2022).

1.6.2. Study 2: Gender-Based Lexical Perceptions in Saudi EFL Learners (2025)

A research team from multiple Saudi universities (Taibah University, King Saud University, King Faisal University, Majmaah University). Saudi Arabia, a highly gender-segregated society. This study, published in the Journal of Language Teaching and Research, investigated gender-based lexical perceptions among Saudi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners’ vocabulary use, focusing on how male and female students perceive and use gendered lexical items (Alharbi, Alqahtani, Almutairi, & Alshammari, 2025). The study confirmed the existence of gender-based

sociolinguistic variations in how Saudi men and women use adjectives and other expressions to describe one another.

Moreover, research in the Saudi context more broadly has found that female adolescents demonstrate a more positive attitude toward certain language varieties—a pattern that differs from some established theoretical principles about women’s language. Additionally, Saudi females’ speech is characterized by substantially more code-switching from Arabic into English, particularly single nouns and adjectives, compared to their male counterparts in both single- and mixed-sex interactions, reflecting lingering cultural customs and gendered ideologies of language (Alharbi et al., 2025).

1.6.3. Study 3: English and Identity in the Digital Age Among Jordanian Gen Z (2026)

Researchers at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar (study on Jordanian participants). Jordan, with a focus on Jordanian Generation Z (born 1997–2012). This recent study examined the impact of social media on the linguistic behavior of Jordanian youth, investigating how their daily use of colloquial speech reflects sociocultural change and how they employ code-switching and linguistic hybridity to construct identity (Al-Khatib & Hamdan, 2026). The Jordanian youth demonstrate a high level of openness to borrowing and language contact, reflecting both global cultural influences and local identity negotiations. Jordanian youth slang shows a remarkable capacity for linguistic innovation, drawing from English and other global resources while remaining embedded in local communicative practices. The use of English loanwords inflected with Arabic morphemes serves as a form of slang employed by young people in Amman to claim a specific, modern social identity. This mirrors patterns in other Arab contexts where the creative mixing of Arabic and English, sometimes called “Arabizi,” functions as a badge of both cosmopolitanism and in-group belonging (Al-Khatib & Hamdan, 2026).

1.6.4. Study 4: Sadiqi, F. (2003) – Morocco

Fatima Sadiqi, a renowned Moroccan linguist. Morocco, focusing on urban areas and multilingual dynamics. In the foundational work *Women, Gender, and Language in Morocco*, Sadiqi (2003) conducted a comprehensive comparative study of how gender interacts with Morocco’s complex multilingual landscape, which includes Moroccan Arabic, Berber languages, French, and Modern Standard Arabic. Sadiqi posited that gender performance acquires meaning only within a particular culture, meaning that any analysis of gendered language must be deeply contextual. A central finding is the role of urbanity: written languages such as Modern Standard Arabic and French are associated with institutions, knowledge, and power in urban areas, while non-written, colloquial varieties are tied to domestic and rural spheres. Women’s access to—and use of—the high-prestige written languages is thus mediated by their social position, urban residence, and educational opportunities. Sadiqi’s (2003) work demonstrated that

language choice in Morocco is not merely a matter of competence but a politically charged act of identity positioning within patriarchy.

1.7. Research Gap

Few studies have employed questionnaire-based methods to examine gendered language patterns in post-revolution Libya, particularly within higher education institutions. Existing research largely focuses on other Arab nations like Egypt or Jordan, leaving the Libyan context underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by specifically investigating language attitudes and practices among students at three of Benghazi's major universities. It provides systematic, comparative data on gendered language trends across different academic environments within a single Libyan city, focusing on the distinct interplay of age, gender, and digital influence. The Libyan context is unique due to its recent revolutionary history, ongoing political transition, and specific blend of conservative social norms with rapidly expanding digital connectivity. The limited existing research cannot capture the current dynamism of youth identity formation, making focused study in Libya essential for a complete picture of North African sociolinguistics.

1.8. Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design, prioritizing quantitative data collection via a questionnaire. A questionnaire-based approach was chosen to efficiently gather a broad range of data from a diverse sample across multiple universities, allowing for systematic comparison and statistical analysis of trends, which is particularly valuable given the logistical challenges of field research in Libya.

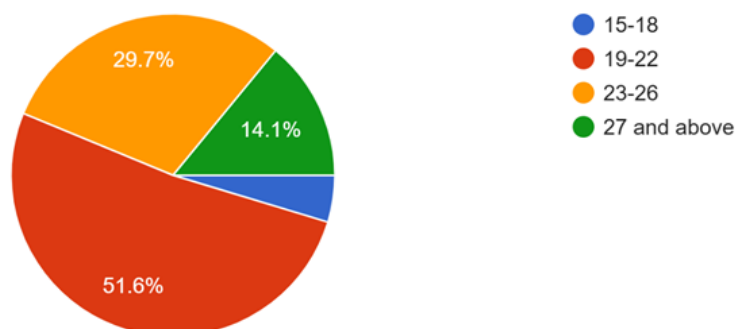
The target population was undergraduate students (ages 18-25) at three Benghazi universities. Using stratified random sampling, 65 participants were recruited: 40 from Benghazi University, 15 from LIMU, and 10 from Salam University, representing diverse academic disciplines with balanced gender representation.

The primary instrument was a structured questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. It was disseminated through university email lists, WhatsApp groups, social media platforms, and QR codes on campus notice boards. The questionnaire combined closed-ended Likert-scale items, open-ended questions on speech patterns, and demographic questions.

Quantitative data from closed-ended items were analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics, for gender differences, and conduct correlation analyses between age and language preferences. Qualitative data from open-ended responses underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework to identify patterns in slang, code-switching, and attitudes.

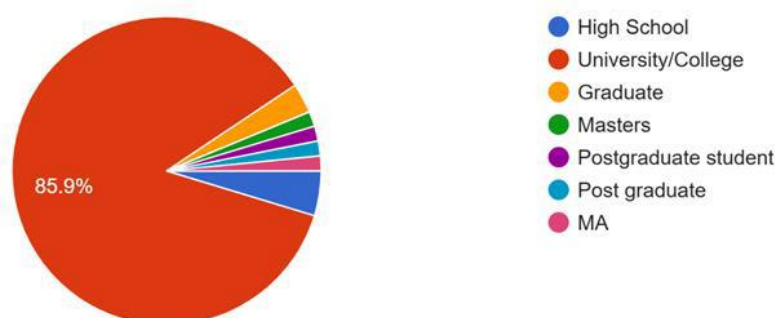
Age ?

64 responses



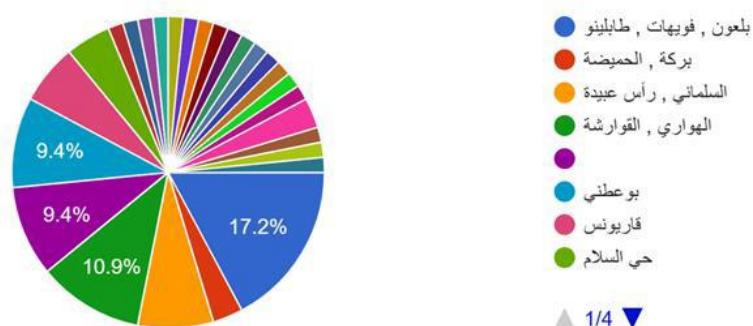
Educational Level?

64 responses



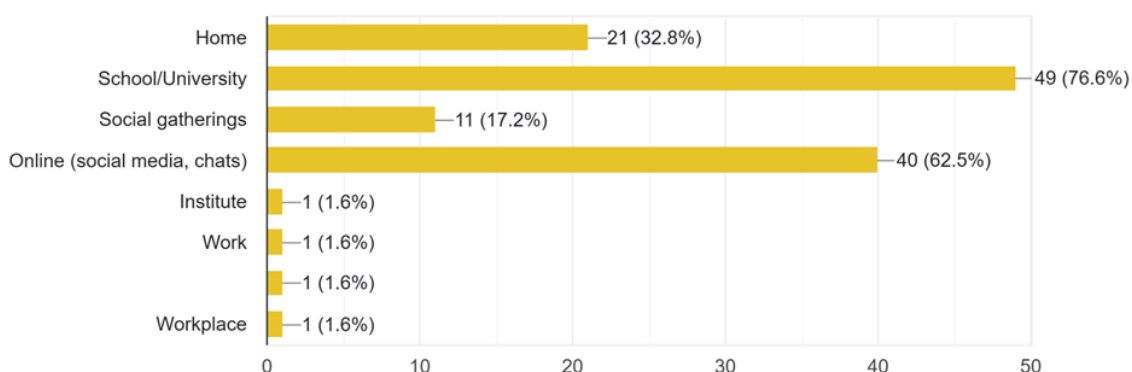
Neighborhood/Area in Benghazi?

64 responses



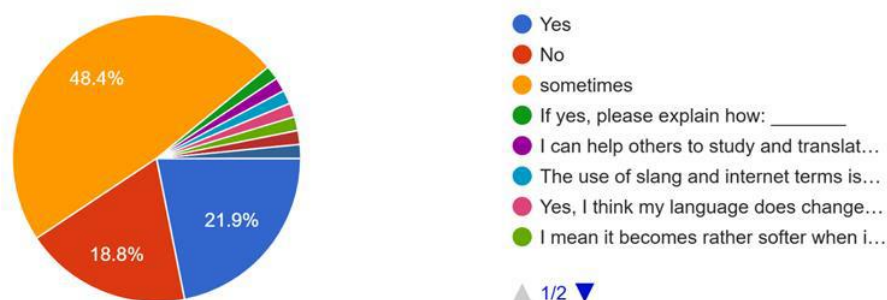
In which settings do you primarily use your languages (English)? (Select all that apply)

64 responses



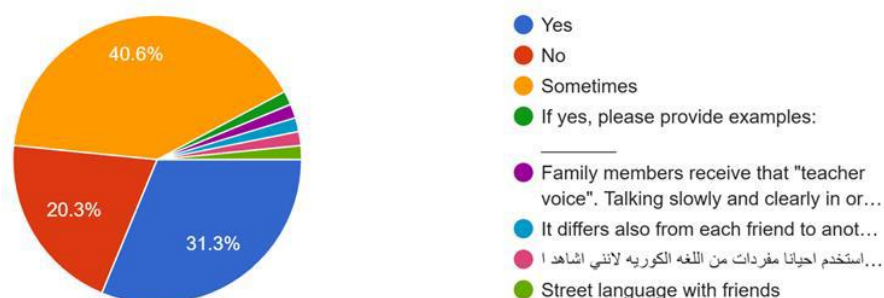
Do you feel your language use changes based on the gender of the people you're interacting with?

64 responses



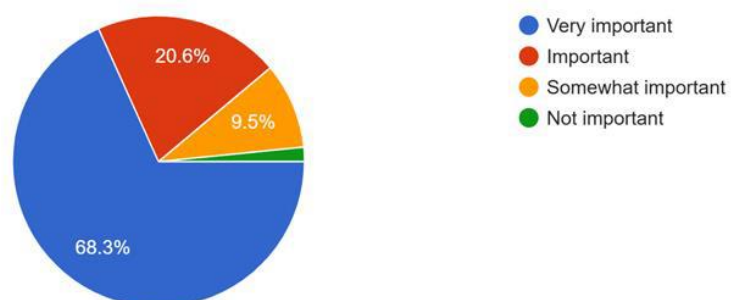
Do you use different language styles or dialects with friends vs. family?

64 responses



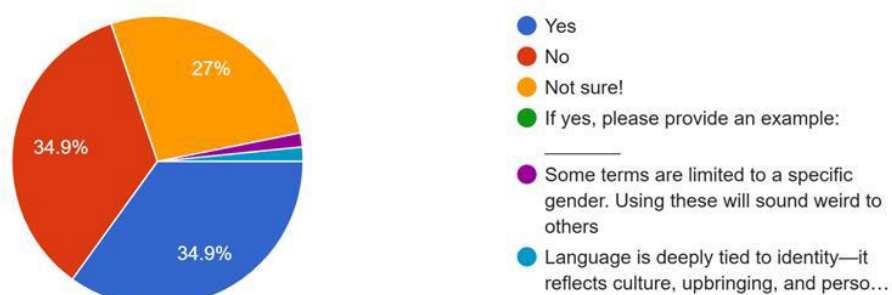
How important is language to your identity?

63 responses



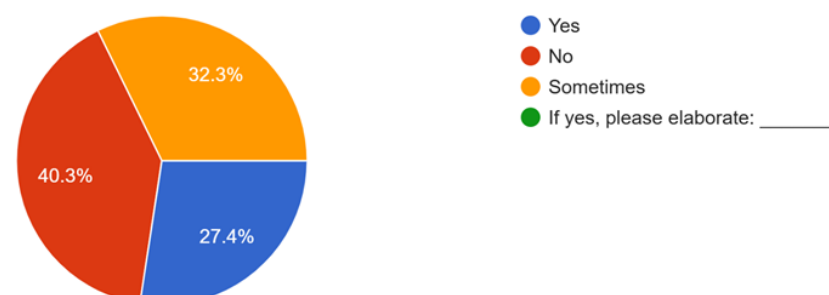
Do you think gender influences the way you express yourself in your language?

63 responses



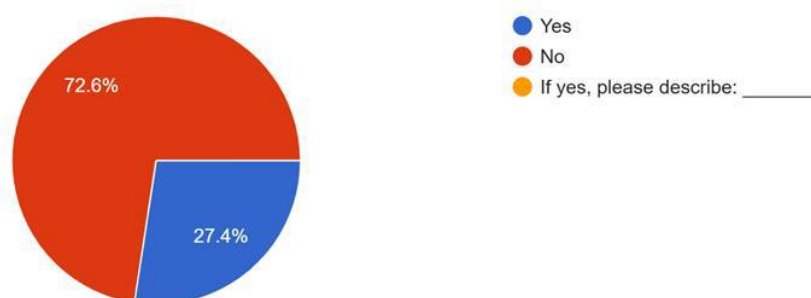
Do you feel pressure to conform to specific language use based on your gender?

62 responses



Have you ever faced criticism for your language use based on your gender?

62 responses



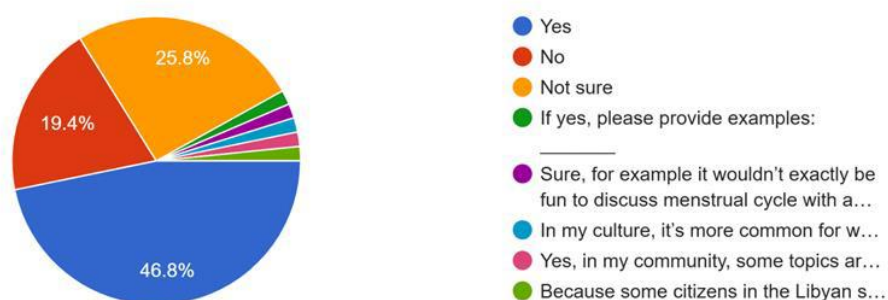
How do traditional gender roles in your community affect language use?

62 responses



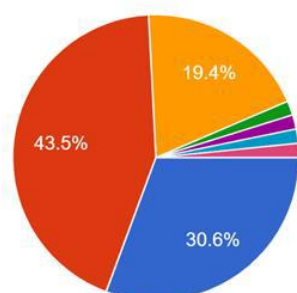
Do you believe that certain topics are considered more appropriate for one gender to discuss than another?

62 responses



How do cultural expectations influence your language choices in public settings?

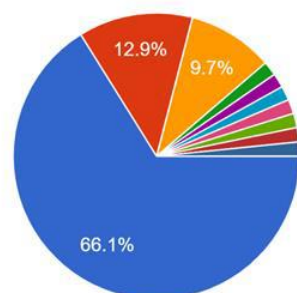
62 responses



- Strongly influence
- Somewhat influence
- Do not influence
- Please elaborate: _____
- In public, I try to speak more politely and respectfully because of cultural expect...
- Cultural expectations make me speak more politely and carefully in public, e...
- In Libyan society, my language shifts are often judged through a cultural lens....

Do you think that the way young people speak differs significantly from their parents' generation?

62 responses

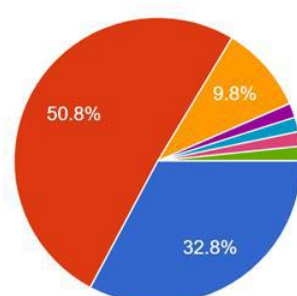


- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- If yes, in what ways? _____
- Of course it differs. Many new terms e...
- Yeah for sure young people talk like th...
- I have already explained similar point i...
- Yes, because they live in a different ti...

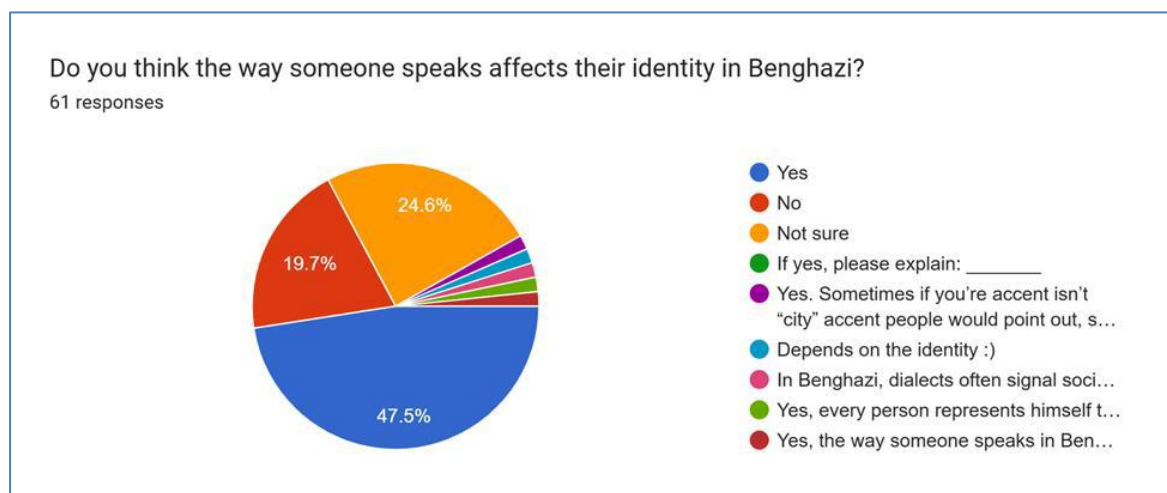
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How do you perceive the use of different dialects in your community?

61 responses



- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative
- Please explain your answer: _____
- If we're talking English use, only those who learn for aesthetics care about ac...
- People use different dialects to show where they're from or who they're clos...
- I do not have an opinion
- Different dialects add richness and div...



1.9. Research Findings

The data analysis revealed three primary findings: Firstly, Persistent Formal Distinctions: In formal academic settings (e.g., classroom discussions with faculty), traditional gender distinctions persisted. Female students reported using more formal registers and polite forms (e.g., using “Hello, Professor” instead of “Hey”) significantly more often than their male peers. Secondly, Evolving Informal Behaviors: In informal contexts (peer groups, social media), young women reported adopting more assertive speech styles, including the use of direct requests and certain slang terms traditionally reserved for men. Young men, conversely, showed a bimodal distribution, either emphasizing local dialectal prestige or adopting globalized, English-borrowed slang.

Thirdly, Generational and Digital Drivers: Over 70% of respondents agreed that social media is a primary platform for disseminating new linguistic forms, including pan-Arab youth slang and creative code-mixing between Arabic and English. This digital influence was cited as a key driver of perceived tension between their own language use and older generations' expectations.

1.10. Discussion

The study reveals significant generational differences in gendered language use among Libyan university students, highlighting how younger speakers are reshaping linguistic norms through innovative speech patterns. Unlike older generations who maintain more conservative Arabic usage, today's youth—particularly those aged 18-25—are developing a hybrid communication style that blends Libyan Arabic with English borrowings and digital slang, creating a distinct generational identity. Addressing the first research question on gender-specific speech variations, the findings confirm that female students consistently employ more formal registers, polite forms, and strategic code-switching in academic settings, while male students favor colloquial speech with greater English borrowings. However, in informal peer and digital contexts, young women increasingly adopt assertive speech styles—including direct requests and slang traditionally coded as masculine—thereby blurring previously rigid distinctions

between masculine and feminine language. Male students, meanwhile, navigate between traditional masculine speech markers and global youth slang, reflecting competing social pressures that pull them toward both local authenticity and cosmopolitan modernity.

This linguistic evolution is most evident in three key areas: peer interactions, social media communication, and informal academic settings, where young women are notably leading changes by adopting more assertive speech styles while strategically code-switching between registers. These observations directly answer the second research question concerning the influence of context on gendered communication. The study found a sharp contrast between formal academic environments, where traditional gendered norms persist (with students adhering to expected politeness and deference patterns), and informal social and digital spaces, where youth feel freer to innovate. Social media in particular acts as a permissive laboratory for linguistic experimentation, enabling both young men and women to deploy hybrid forms—such as English borrowings, pan-Arab youth slang, and creative code-mixing—that would be sanctioned in classroom interactions with faculty. This context-dependent flexibility demonstrates that gendered language is not a fixed trait of speakers but rather a strategic resource adjusted according to the perceived risks and rewards of each communicative setting. These transformations are largely driven by digital connectivity and global cultural influences, with social media serving as a primary platform for disseminating new linguistic forms, including pan-Arab youth slang and creative code-mixing. However, these changes have created tension between generations, as faculty and older Libyans often view youth language as threatening to cultural identity and Arabic purity, particularly in academic contexts where expectations of “proper” language persist. This generational tension leads directly to the third research question: whether language reinforces or challenges societal gender norms. Student attitudes reveal a dual consciousness. Most respondents acknowledge that their formal language use—particularly in front of professors or family elders—reinforces traditional gendered expectations, as they deliberately employ polite, deferential, or indirect speech to maintain academic standing and family respect. Simultaneously, a substantial majority view their informal, digitally-inflected language as a subtle form of resistance. By adopting assertive styles, mixing English into their Arabic, or using slang across gender lines, these youth carve out a modern, individual identity without directly confronting older generations. This ambivalence suggests that language is not simply either reinforcing or challenging norms but is instead a contested terrain where youth negotiate multiple, sometimes contradictory, social pressures simultaneously (Butler, 2004; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

The findings demonstrate how Libyan universities have become important sites for observing language change in progress, where global influences intersect with local identity negotiations. These linguistic shifts carry broader social implications, potentially affecting intergenerational communication, gender norms, and the future development of Libyan Arabic itself. While mirroring trends seen elsewhere in the Arab world—such as the hybrid digital slang documented in Egypt (Badr, 2022), Jordan (Al-Khatib & Hamdan, 2026), and Saudi Arabia (Alharbi et al., 2025)—Libya’s unique post-revolution context gives particular significance to these changes, as youth language becomes both a reflection of and catalyst for social

transformation. The study underscores the need for educational institutions to recognize these evolving linguistic realities while calling for further research into how these generational differences may influence professional trajectories and long-term language change in Libyan society.

1.11. Limitations & Future Research

This study was limited to three universities in a single city (Benghazi) using a primarily questionnaire-based tool with 65 participants. It did not include observational data of natural speech, nor did it capture the experiences of non-university youth or students in other Libyan cities like Tripoli or Misrata.

[5/7/2026 11:48 AM] ∴ Future research should cover more universities across different Libyan cities (e.g., Tripoli, Sabha) to provide a more holistic national view. Other research tools, such as ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews, are needed to capture nuanced, real-time linguistic interactions. Including more participants from a wider range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds would also provide a richer, more generalizable understanding of youth identity formation through language in Libya.

1.12. Conclusion

This study investigated gendered language use and its impact on identity among 65 university students in Benghazi, Libya. Using a quantitative questionnaire, it found that while traditional gendered speech distinctions persist in formal academic settings, youth are actively reshaping linguistic norms in informal and digital spaces. Young women are adopting more assertive styles, and young men are navigating between local and global influences. These evolving patterns, driven by digital connectivity and post-revolution social change, both reflect and contribute to shifts in traditional gender norms. The findings highlight youth agency in linguistic innovation and underscore the urgent need for further research on language and social transformation in the understudied Libyan context.

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Compliance with ethical standards*Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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