

Critical Discourse Analysis of Social Justice Campaign “Cancel Culture” in the Arab Social Media

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Abstract

Cancel culture refers to public backlash through social media in response to actions or statements made by individuals, groups, or organizations, which are considered offensive, harmful, or contrary to social norms or public sentiments. This study examines whether Arab cancel culture has aligned with global cancel culture language trends or has developed a distinct linguistic style. It focuses on two cases, Balqees Fathi in 2019 and Fatima Jaafer in 2023, to explore the linguistic evolution of Arabic linguistic usage and ideological shifts related to social justice in Arab social media. Fairclough's (2015) 3D model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been used for studying X posts. The study has found a shift from traditional Arabic with its poetic and patriarchal undertones, as seen in Balqees's case, to a more globalized style, as seen in Fatima's case. By 2023, there was an increased use of global cancel culture practices such as code-switching and transliteration, reflecting a blend of modern influences and national identity. The findings show that a linguistic transition emerged among Arabic social media users from traditional, monolingual expressions to modern, bilingual usage, which highlights the impact of global discourse or linguistic trends on Arab cancel culture.

Keywords: Cancel culture, Arabic language, Balqees Fathi, Fatima Jaafer, Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

Cancel culture became popular over the past few years as social media started empowering ordinary people to express dissent toward socially unacceptable behaviors. It holds groups, organizations, or individuals accountable for objectionable comments, behavior, or beliefs. The purpose of such social media campaigns is to withdraw public support and bring shame to the target, causing humiliation, reputational damage, and professional setbacks, as well as social isolation. Various phenomena trigger such campaigns, including religious, social, and political factors. Darmon et al. (2015) pointed out that people require a deep understanding of the cancel culture with its different manifestations, complexities, and implications across different societal contexts.

Arab societies, which generally share ideological, social, and cultural foundations, have a distinct perception of social phenomena like cancel culture. This study is an attempt to see how global cancel culture terminologies and practices have been adopted and adapted by users of social media in Arab societies. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, this study examines the linguistic strategies, power dynamics, and ideological foundations that influence Arab cancel culture. The focus of the study is two high-profile cases: Yamani-Emeriti artist Balqees Fathi in 2019 and Lebanese influencer Fatima Jaafar in 2023. It analyzes how linguistic choices of Arab social media users evolved during these years and whether they align with global trends or develop their distinct features.

Context of the Study

The first case belongs to Balqees Fathi, who faced public backlash after a tweet on March 31, 2019, about the murder of Israa Gharib, a 21-year-old Palestinian girl from the West Bank. Male family members reportedly beat Israa, leading to her death. It was believed to be an honor killing. The incident sparked the hashtag #WEAREALLISRAAGHARIB demanding justice. Balqees's tweet, seen as unsympathetic toward Israa, triggered the hashtag #SHUTUPBALQEES (#بلقيس_اخرسي) and intense criticism on Twitter (now X). The platform's hashtag and “Trending Topic” features amplified the public response and organized the protest. The second case concerns

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Fatima Jaafar, a Lebanese influencer with a large following. Fatima liked a post on Instagram in November 2023, which sparked outrage on social media due to its perceived disrespect toward Saudi Arabia's national identity. Different social media platforms perceived Fatima's action as an attack on Saudi national pride and sparked outrage. Although Fatima issued a public apology to her Saudi followers, however, the backlash intensified, leading to the generation of hashtags like #BOYCOTTFATIMA (مقاطعة فاتيما) and #FATIMAOUT (فاتيمَا_اوت), reflecting national pride and deep political sensitivity. Both these cases highlight how Arab cancel culture evolves during this period, leveraging global social media practices while reflecting regional values and ideologies.

Research Questions

- 1- How do linguistic choices in Arab cancel culture campaigns evolve to align with global cancel culture language trends?
- 2- What specific linguistic strategies are employed to enforce social exclusion in both the Balqees and Fatima cases?
- 3- How do the linguistic choices in both the Balqees and Fatima cases reflect underlying ideological patterns related to social justice and accountability within Arab cancel culture?

Literature Review

Cancel culture has become a significant and powerful tool in modern society, shaping political and cultural discourse, affecting language usage, and affecting social interactions internationally. People collectively withdraw their support from a known personality, organization, or individual who they deem offensive or objectionable. Clark (2020) is of the view that the term cancel culture originated from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the early 2010s, where “canceling” referred to disassociating from someone due to unacceptable or disliked behavior. Digital spaces like X (formerly Twitter) amplified and popularized such terms (Merriam-Webster, 2021). It gained popularity as an internet meme, which ultimately started influencing social norms through content going viral on social media and the ultimate collective action of canceling (Shifman, 2013).

Cancel culture offers space to marginalized groups to express their dissent, anger, and sentiments and withdraw support from individuals or organizations whose actions violate social norms or values (Brock, 2020). This is a kind of digital accountability that enables marginalized people to vent resistance against dominant political, social, and cultural narratives, because social media provides a viable space for collective action and raises a voice to challenge systemic injustices (Nakamura, 2015; Clark, 2020; Jackson et al., 2020).

By amplifying diverse perspectives, opinions, and viewpoints, cancel culture provides opportunities for public debate, challenging the status quo and elite-controlled discourses, and nurturing a more inclusive social environment (Fraser, 1990; Gerbaudo, 2012). Recently, we have seen movements like #METOO and #BLACKLIVESMATTER, which demonstrate that cancel culture can raise awareness among the masses about issues like sexual harassment and racial discrimination, ultimately leading to an egalitarian societal and political change (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Taylor, 2016).

From another angle, some critics also argue that cancel culture creates an atmosphere where people fear expressing unpopular opinions. This fear can lead to the silence of some voices, ultimately affecting the right of free speech and the democratic spirit of open debate (Coyle & Wodak, 2020; Harper's Magazine, 2020). Some believe that cancel culture can also be misused for political reasons to silence opponents (Norris, 2021; Rubenstein & Stark, 2021). For practical purposes, it is important to strike a balance because, on one hand, silence culture empowers marginalized voices; on the other hand, it can be misused; hence, careful judgment is needed to assess the truth and authenticity of cancel culture and information connected with it. Only then can cancel culture foster a more just and equitable society (Sunstein, 2018; Johnson, 2021).

Social media can transcend geographical boundaries, so can cancel culture, and the information attached to it can also spread internationally while simultaneously adapting to local social and cultural norms (Chen, 2020). As social media users discuss global issues, they adopt the language and strategies of cancel culture, integrating them into their sociocultural frameworks (Abdel-Fadil, 2020). A befitting example of the influence of social media is the Arab Spring, where public opinion was shaped and crafted, ultimately fueling demands for political change (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). Social media has power, and it continues to empower social groups, political movements, and individuals, with cancel culture emerging as a powerful tool for activism and social change, especially among young social media users who are experts in navigating digital platforms (Ismail, 2018).

Like other regions, Cancel culture in the Arab world linguistically adapted itself to fit local languages and dialects. For example, terms like “الغاء” (cancellation) and phrases such as “حملة مقاطعة” (boycott campaign) are used to mobilize collective action. Blending of Modern Standard Arabic with colloquial dialects is seen among social media users to connect with a wider audience (Bassiouny, 2020). In their interactions, they incorporate culturally significant idioms, proverbial expressions, and references to strengthen their social and cultural kinship as well as increase the

persuasive impact of their messages. Internet and globalization also pact the use of language, and people are increasingly prone to using code-switching between Arabic and English (Alsamhan & Almutrafi, 2022). Local communities align their linguistic patterns, ideas, and norms with global discourses on social justice and values. To understand the linguistic and social dynamics of cancel culture, this study integrates several linguistic and social theories. The first such theory that this study draws up is **Code-Switching Theory**. It means the strategic alternation between languages within a single conversation or text (Gumperz, 1982). In the Arab world, individuals often switch between Modern Standard Arabic, local dialects, and foreign languages like English and French to reflect their bicultural identities and connect with global audiences. Through this, people express their bicultural identities and link themselves with international audiences. While explaining the Markedness Model, Myers-Scotton (1993) argues that speakers select language codes to express their peculiar social meanings. She underscored two categories in her Markedness model: Unmarked choices and Marked choices. Unmarked choices align with societal norms and expectations, while marked choices deviate to signal different social identities or stances.

Another relevant phenomenon is **Transliteration**, which refers to representing words of one language through the script of another (Crystal, 2011). It is the fluid blending of languages by bilingual or multilingual individuals (García & Wei, 2014). Thio's practice is rampant in the Arab cancel culture. Transliteration serves multiple functions within cancel culture discourse. Eleta & Golbeck (2014) noted that it helps writers bypass the censorship of various terms on social media by avoiding automated detection. Yaghan (2008) says that transliteration enhances cultural importance by bringing global concepts within reach of the Arabic-speaking audience. Activists seamlessly integrate Modern Standard Arabic, regional dialects, and English within their communication, reflecting complex identities and the interplay between local and global influences (Canagarajah, 2013). Translanguaging provides linguistic and communicative possibilities, enabling activists to express nuanced ideas and emotions that otherwise cannot be articulated in a single language (Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

To better understand the social dynamics behind linguistic choices, this study also draws on Noelle-Neumann's **Spiral of Silence Theory** and **Congruence Theory**.

The **Spiral of Silence Theory** (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1984) suggests that individuals remain silent if they realize that they are in a minority and raising their voice may make them socially isolate. Hence, popular opinions are amplified on social media, while dissenting voices remain low or even totally silent to avoid the backlash. Everyone is afraid of ostracism, and the result is the popularization of the majority stance. According to the **Congruence Theory**, when a person's personal values and opinions are not in congruence with the dominant group or society, he or she prefers to remain silent. (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1984). In societies where social and cultural alignment is valued, people whose ideas are aligned with social norms survive better than individuals who have divergent views. According to this theory, alignment with cultural and social dominant norms and trends is a compelling factor for engaging in public discourse.

Recent studies provide deep insight into cancelling culture's diverse and multifaceted nature. Hooks (2020), establishing cancel culture as a rhetorical phenomenon, termed it as an "epideictic performance" in which people blame or praise in accordance with community norms and values. The study deduced that cancel culture has a dual role; it is a method of punishment as well as a tool for expression of social solidarity. Hooks believes that cancel culture strengthens community identity and social solidarity. His study brings the cancel culture into the linguistic and pragmatic domain and sets the stage for future research.

Blitvich (2022) conducted a qualitative study on expressions of impoliteness in online interactions. He reveals that people resort to direct confrontation as well as polite critique in line with their group's priority norms while implementing what they consider social accountability. He believes that cancel culture is a linguistic battleground, where interpersonal dynamics come into action.

Erker, Goanta, and Spanakis (2022) used Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques to analyze 2.3 million tweets based on cancel culture-related keywords. Through sentiment analysis and emotion detection algorithms, they pointed out the prevalence of negative sentiments and emotional language in cancellation campaigns. They highlighted the linguistic patterns through which the cancel culture was perpetrated on social media and explained the digital dynamics of power structures.

Through qualitative discourse analysis, Klyueva and Sidorova (2023) in their research explore how societal values dominate the cancel culture through communicative behaviors on media platforms. By examining media narratives and public statements, they shed light on how cancel culture constructs socially determined narratives, channelizes public opinion, and enforces accountability in society.

In yet another research, Semenova (2023) highlights cancel culture's aggressive communicative strategies. Through qualitative discourse analysis of social media posts, online news articles, and public statements, this research brings out the destructive role of cancel culture as a form of criticism, ostracism, exclusion, and critique. This contrasts with the empowering perspective presented by Hooks (2020) and Williams and Singh (2022). Williams and Singh

(2022) opine that cancel culture is a mechanism that gives marginalized groups a voice to resist harm and establish their agency. In this way, they challenge the narrative that highlights the divisive nature of cancel culture. Using experimental methodology in their research, they investigate the empowering and beneficial potential of cancel culture for marginalized people and groups. These studies highlight the central role of language in cancel culture. Some scholars see cancel culture as a divisive tool for social control, while others view it as an empowering platform for marginalized voices. Thus, cancel culture emerges as both a tool for social justice and a mechanism of power, depending on perspective.

Although cancel culture is gaining prominence in the Arab world, it is primarily an under-researched area, particularly its linguistic dimensions and sociocultural implications. Most of the studies are not Arab-specific rather focus on Western social contexts and linguistic practices. The researchers believe that there is a huge research gap, and there is a need to understand how cancel culture operates within Arabic-speaking societies. The Arabic language, with its cultural values and linguistic diversity, is a unique site for cancel culture that requires deeper exploration. Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model provides a potent tool for examining the discursive patterns of dominant social structures in the Arab world.

Methodology

The research used a qualitative research design to examine the linguistic patterns and social dynamics of the cancel culture in the Arab world. The qualitative method is appropriate for analyzing intricate and complex social phenomena, which require a deep understanding of meanings in the context rather than quantifying data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative inquiry helps in in-depth exploration of language use on social media, revealing the peculiar patterns of social interactions and perceptions that languages build through cancel culture.

Analytical Framework: Fairclough's 3-Dimensional CDA Model

Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to explain the interplay between discourse and social change in the contemporary world. It is well-suited for studying the power relations between ideology, identity, and linguistic practices (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Those three dimensions are as follows:

- 1-textual (micro-level) analysis,
- 2-discursive practices (meso-level) analysis,
- 3- Sociocultural Practices (macro-level) analysis.
- 4-Textual (Micro-Level) Analysis:

This level pertains to discerning features such as vocabulary, syntax, intertextual references, and rhetorical devices because these textual elements help understand the linguistic choices, patterns, and their semiotic significance. These textual patterns shed light on how language constructs reality, representations, and the worldview. Identifying patterns, such as the recurring use of certain evaluative adjectives or metaphors, is the first step towards uncovering the underlying discursive strategies that ultimately frame representations. Words are signs that represent a particular semiotic value.

1. Discursive Practice (Meso-Level) Analysis

At the meso-level analysis focuses on how the texts are produced, circulated, and consumed. In our research, this analysis pertains to understanding the roles and dynamics of social media platforms, their influences, followers, and consumers. Investigation focuses on the retweeting behavior, psyche of hashtags, and engagement metrics, including likes, dislikes, and replies. The analysis explains why a particular narrative gains traction and then slowly diminishes in popularity over time. It is also important to note how certain voices and discourses are flaunted and maintained while others are marginalized by institutions that can control the spread of such discourses (Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

2. Sociocultural (Macro-Level) Analysis

Discourses do not exist in isolation. They are situated and embedded within the wider historical, social, and political contexts. At the macro-level of analysis, linguistic strategies and discursive practices are linked to larger sociocultural institutions, power relations, cultural norms, and ideological beliefs. In the backdrop of the current study, the researchers try to understand how cancel culture discourse maintains, perpetuates, or challenges existing socio-cultural hierarchies and value systems of the Arab societies. This analysis brings out the true vitality of Fairclough's (2015) approach by revealing the dynamics of cancel culture discourse as a *site* of interplay of power relations, which is both shaped by as well as shapes social reality. In this way, cancel culture in the Arab world becomes a discourse that reflects the dominant dynamics of the society.

This model provides a holistic approach to understanding the functioning of language at multiple levels. It enables researchers to uncover ideological patterns, power relations, and societal influences, and how they come into interplay through language.

Data Collection and Preparation

This study examines two high-profile Arab cancel culture cases: Emirati artist Balqees Fathi in 2019 and Lebanese influencer Fatima Jaafar in 2023. The primary data consists of tweets and related texts from X, collected using Arabic and English hashtags (e.g., #بلقيس_اخرسي, #BalqeesShutUp; #مقاطعة_فاتيمة, #CancelFatima). For consistency and accuracy, Balqees's original tweet and Fatima's apology video were translated into English while preserving their contextual meanings. Through comparing the two cases, the study tries to trace the shifts that occurred in linguistic choices, ideological stances, and sociopolitical considerations in the Arab cultural context.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with ethical guidelines for online research as recommended by Denzin & Lincoln (2018), all tweets were anonymized to maintain privacy. Although the data was drawn from publicly accessible platforms, it was ensured that the analysis remains respectful and does not target any individual.

Analysis

First case: Balqees Fathi

Textual analysis

English translated tweet:

Dear Middle Eastern man, if you find out that your sister went out with a man who is not related to her and punish her at home, telling her it was wrong and that this kind of behavior is not typical of our culture and then you hide it, that is much better than killing her and letting the whole world know about it and letting her name live on in an honor story. Although this story can have many aspects, Allah knows best.

Arabic tweet:



We begin by examining how Balqees's linguistic choices in a single tweet sparked backlash and calls to boycott her, leading to a whole social justice campaign. Using Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional CDA, we analyzed the linguistic and rhetorical frames that fueled the reaction. The hashtag #SHUTUPBALQEEES (#بلقيس_اخرسي) emerged after her comments on the death of 21-year-old Israa Gharib, reflecting Arab users' adoption of cancel culture.

Textual Analysis (Description)

At the textual level, Balqees' tweet employed specific linguistic features that conveyed her message, along with invoking cultural and religious references. The direct address, "Dear Middle Eastern man," directed the message directly to a specific gender and situated the discourse within a shared cultural context. She also used a kinship term, "your sister," to emphasize the familial relationship and invoked the patriarchal structure in which males are considered the guardians of female behavior. Her words have strong negative connotations and emotional weight. Terms like "punish", "killing", and "honor story" refer to the corrective attitude of males and the concept of honor killings, prevalent in the collective consciousness.

The tweet's conditional structure ("If you find out that your sister went out with a man...") allowed Balqees to avoid direct accusation while still suggesting the possible course of action: discovering the sister's behavior, punishing her, and then concealing the matter within the family without public scrutiny to protect family honor.

The tone of the tweet is advisory rather than commanding. The phrase "that is much better than killing her" implies a comparative evaluation of actions and guidance. The absence of strong modal verbs presents the message as a suggestion rather than as an order.

Cohesively, the tweet maintains clarity through consistent pronoun use, with "you" and "her" referring to the brother and sister, respectively. Conjunctive devices like "and" link clauses and ensure the logical flow of ideas.

Rhetorically, Balqees appeals to shared cultural values (“our culture”) to appeal to communal norms. The emotionally charged language is intended to elicit strong feelings and to persuade the reader. The religious element “Allah knows best” adds moral authority to the message and is a rhetorical strategy to discourage further debate by aligning Balqees’ advice with her audience’s religious beliefs.

Discursive Practice (Interpretation)

Understanding discursive practice involves analyzing how Balqees’s tweet was produced, distributed, and received within its social context. Her status as an artist and women’s rights activist amplified the impact of her words. By responding to the #WEAREALLISRAAGHARIB campaign, Balqees positioned herself within the broader discourse on women’s rights and social justice.

Intertextually, the tweet engages with narratives on honor killings, cultural norms, and the role of women in Arab societies, both reflecting and shaping public perceptions. The hashtag #SHUTUPBALQEES was a collective response, linking her tweet to wider social movements, including cancel culture.

The distribution of the tweet via Twitter (X) facilitated widespread interaction, which intensified public reactions. The response was overwhelmingly negative, particularly because Balqees’ message was considered insensitive, perpetuating harmful norms, and contradicting her public stance as a women’s rights activist. Her suggestion of punishment and secrecy was considered hypocrisy, leading to an intensified social justice campaign against her.

Social Practice (Explanation)

Social practice examines broader cultural and ideological patterns that are shaped and reinforced by discourse. The tweet reflected deep-rooted societal issues related to honor killings, patriarchal structures, and gender dynamics in which family honor is inextricably tied to female behavior. By suggesting punishing the woman at home and concealing the matter, Balqees reinforced the notion that males can discipline females to preserve family honor. This idea conflicts with contemporary beliefs in women’s rights and gender equality. The hashtag #SHUTUPBALQEES and calls for boycotting her work reflect the power of social media in holding public figures accountable and the increasing influence of social justice campaigns in the Arab world.

Social Media Responses

Text Analysis (Description)

We analyzed the linguistic and rhetorical features used to construct meaning and convey messages.

- ***Newly Coined or Modernized Language***

Arab Twitter users often use لغة مستحدثة (modernized language), where social media meanings differ from traditional or dictionary definitions. For example, “مستشرف” and “استشراف” traditionally mean “anticipating the future” with positive or neutral connotations. However, on social media, “مستشرف” now refers to a pseudomoralist—someone who condemns others based on moral standards they don’t apply to themselves, reflecting a shift in meaning and a social adaptation of the critical term in modern online discourse.

- ***Transliteration:***

In the campaign against Balqees, terms like “انفولو” (unfollow), “بلوك” (block), and “رپوت سبام” (report spam) were transliterations of English terms. This Arabization reflects the influence of digital spaces on language, blending local cultural identity with global digital vocabulary.

- ***Commands and Imperatives:***

Imperatives like “اخرسي” (shut up) and “قاطعوها” (boycott her) created urgency, compelling immediate action. In Arabic, these imperatives are used with elongated vowels or by adding emphatic particles to intensify the tone, conveying desperation or sincerity. This aligns with Arabic rhetorical tradition, where direct calls to action foster solidarity and resonate with culturally attuned audiences.

- ***Emotive Language:***

The use of emotive and morally loaded language like “حقاره” (meanness) and “ملعونه” (cursed) provoked emotional reactions, positioning the speaker as an advocate of morality and righteousness. The tweets framed Balqees as moral offenders whose actions violated communal standards. In Arabic, the use of such emotive and moral terms serves as a call to action by drawing on the community’s collective culture and moral code.

- ***Hyperbole and Metaphors:***

Hyperbolic and metaphorical language, like “بلوك والى مزبلة التاريخ” (Block her and consign her to the trash of history), implied erasing the target’s existence. The metaphor “مزبلة التاريخ” (trash of history) intensified condemnation, reflecting poetic justice—a common feature of Arabic rhetoric. Similarly, “تلبسون ثوب المثالية والتصنع” (dressed in

idealistic and pretentious garments) symbolizes hypocrisy, as garments in Arabic culture represent character and social image.

Discursive Practice (Interpretation)

We investigated how these tweets were produced, disseminated, and interpreted in the context of social media to reveal the underlying cultural and ideological frameworks.

• Intertextuality and Cultural Discourse:

Many tweets blend cultural and religious discourse to amplify the message. For instance, the tweet “إن لم يستطيع دينك أن يحكمك فلدع إنسانيتك هي من تحكمك” (If your religion is unable to guide you, then let humanity guide you) combines religious and secular values to appeal to both religious and non-religious audiences, expanding the reach of the message. This mix of moral and religious standards highlights the contradiction between Balqees’s public image and her statements, reinforcing the argument through familiar cultural norms.

The tweets also used idiomatic expressions to reinforce criticism. For example, “الي بيته من زجاج لا يرمي الناس” (Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones) targets hypocrisy. Similarly, “جأت تكلها عمتها” (She tried to beautify it with kohl but ended up blinding it), like “adding insult to injury” in English, refers to making a situation worse while trying to fix it. These idioms draw on shared cultural knowledge to highlight the perceived double standards in Balqees’s approach to social issues.

• Rhetorical Questions and Direct Address

Rhetorical questions like “انتي تضحكين ع نفسك او على العالم؟” (Are you fooling yourself or the world?) prompt critical thinking and self-reflection, engaging both the target and the audience. This direct engagement reflects Arabic rhetorical style, which seeks to establish a personal connection.

Other examples, such as “لو كانت أختك هل ستتكلمين هكذا؟” (If it were your sister, would you speak this way?), personalize the issue, encouraging empathy and highlighting the gravity of the situation. Similarly, “إيش صار على بلقيس؟” (What happened with Balqees? Did you relieve her from her position, or should we start a hashtag against you?) shifts responsibility toward institutions like the United Nations (UN), pressuring them to act. These rhetorical strategies transform the reader from a passive observer to an active participant, reinforcing their role as moral agents.

Social Practice (Explanation)

The tweets not only challenged power structures but also reinforced new forms of accountability regarding social and cultural norms.

• Criticism of Patriarchal and Honor-Based Violence

The tweets question the societal ideals constructed around honor-based violence in Arab society. For example, “ادعاء الشرف” (pretense of honor) was the expression used to delegitimize the cultural explanation of such violence. Terming the concept of honor as a mere *pretense*, the tweets undermine its legitimacy, thus challenging the socio-cultural institutions that uphold these norms as a form of patriarchal authority and male dominance.

• Digital Mobilization and Public Accountability

The tweets demonstrated the power of social media as a tool for public accountability and digital activism. Hashtags like #بلقيس_اخربي reflect strategic use of social media to mobilize people and create a collective movement against perceived injustices. The blend of traditional Arabic rhetoric and modern digital language highlights the evolution of Arabic discourse, where language and culture adapt to the demands of a digital world.

Applying Fairclough’s CDA model revealed that these tweets were multilayered linguistic artifacts that combined traditional Arabic rhetoric, modern slang, and digital language to criticize societal norms and mobilize collective action. The use of code-switching, transliteration, emotive language, and metaphors illustrated how language functioned as a powerful tool for social engagement and activism in the digital Arab world. The discourse engaged audiences through familiar cultural forms and adapted to the global influences that shaped modern Arabic-speaking communities.

Second Case FATIMA JAAFER

Fatima Jaafar’s Apology (In Arabic Lebanese Colloquial Accent):

“في شي لازم نحكي عنه معاً. أكثر شي مزعلني وقاهرني إنه عم تقولوا إني طلعت وسيتيكن. إذا أنا حطيت لايك على بوست بالغلط وأنتوا أخذتوها إنه مسيئة، هذا ما كان قصدي ويعتذر عن هذا الشي لأنه هذه ما كانت نيتي وما يعرف ليه أنتوا أخذتوها بهذه الطريقة. وليه هالقد كبيرتوا الموضوع بحيث إنه الموضوع أخذ حجم أكبر مما يستاهل. ولو بيكون من اليوم ليكرة، ما كان قصدي بهيدي الطريقة و *you already made up your mind* صراحة، بتويتز، بالتكتوك، وانستغرام، بكل شي. وليه عم تضحكي؟ الموضوع بيضحك؟ لا، الموضوع ما بيضحك، بس نحنا صارلنا أربع سنين مع بعض عالتيك توك مفروض أنتوا تعرفوني أكثر من أي حدا ثاني. بس أنا كتير مصدومة من هذا الشي وإذا أنتوا قررتوا ما بقي تتابعوني وبدكون تقاطعوني، ما ضروري تهيدوني وتهيدوا عيلتي وتحكوا الحكي اللي عم تحكوه. ممكن أنتوا صارلكم فترة ما بتحبوني ومنكن حابين الكونتنت تبغي، بس مش يعني تعلقوا على شي مثل هيدا الموضوع. في قصص أهم بكثير هلق عم بتصير بالحياة لازم نقعد نركز عليها بدل ما نقعد ونقلب على بعض ونعمل قننة. بس بتمنى نركز على الأشياء الأكبر والأهم. ويس، باي.”

Translation of Fatima Jaafar's Apology:

There's something we need to talk about. What's upsetting and frustrating me the most is that you're saying I went out and insulted you. If I liked a post by mistake, and you took it as an insult, that wasn't my intention, and I apologize for that because it wasn't what I meant at all. I don't know why you took it that way or why you've blown this issue out of proportion, making it much bigger than it deserves to be. Even if it's from today until tomorrow, my intention was never like that, but you already made up your mind, honestly, on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and everywhere. And why are you laughing? Is this funny? No, it's not funny. We've been together for four years on TikTok, so you should know me better than anyone else. But I'm really shocked by this, and if you've decided not to follow me anymore and you want to boycott me, there's no need to threaten me and my family or say what you're saying. Maybe you haven't liked me or my content for a while, but that doesn't mean you need to focus on something like this. There are many bigger and more important things happening in life right now that we should be focusing on, rather than turning against each other and creating problems. I just hope we can focus on bigger and more important things. That's all, bye.

Analysis of Fatima Jaafar's Apology Using Fairclough's 3D Critical Discourse Analysis Model

By applying Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model to analyze Fatima's apology, we aim to understand the linguistic choices that led to the sense of offense within her Saudi followers. Also, to give a better understanding of the escalation of the boycott campaign under the hashtags #مقاطعة_فاتима and #فاتما_اوت.

Textual Analysis

- ***Minimizing Responsibility and Shifting Blame***

First, Fatima downplayed her responsibility and shifted blame to the audience with phrases like "If I liked a post by mistake" and "you took it as an insult," implying the audience's overreaction rather than her own mistake. By saying "that wasn't my intention," she tried to minimize the seriousness of her actions and avoid accountability for causing cultural offense. These linguistic choices resulted in an "apology" focused on intent instead of the impact of her actions.

- ***Laughing at the Situation***

The reason Fatima's apology backfired was her use of self-referential statements when discussing her behavior. After laughing at the situation, she asked, "Why are you laughing? Is this funny? No, it's not funny." The rhetorical question "Is this funny?" was aimed at herself but came across as defensive, and her self-directed criticism suggested that she was not taking the situation seriously. Thus, she reinforced the audience's view that she was disconnected from their concerns.

- ***Code-Switching and Emotional Distance***

Fatima, a multilingual living in Canada, naturally code-switches between Arabic and English. However, when she code-switched, saying "you already made up your mind," for an audience expecting a heartfelt apology, the phrase suggests that Fatima feels defeated and is no longer interested in engaging in dialogue. This contributed to the perception that she was unwilling to take responsibility or apologize for her actions.

- ***Self-Focused Language***

Fatima repeatedly shifted focus from the offense to her feelings, saying, "We've been together for four years on TikTok, so you should know me better." Instead of acknowledging the harm, she justified herself through emotional appeals. She also victimized herself by stating, "If you want to boycott me, there's no need to threaten me and my family," focusing on personal consequences rather than the harm caused. This attempt to gain sympathy positioned Fatima as the victim rather than the wrongdoer.

Discursive Practice

We will now discuss how Fatima's apology was produced, distributed, and consumed on social media in the context of the #مقاطعة_فاتима campaign.

- ***Production of the Apology and Inappropriate Tone***

Fatima intended to apologize, but her tone, laughter, and defensiveness suggested a lack of understanding of the cultural significance of the offense and her audience's expectations. Her laughter was also perceived as a sign of insincerity, which, instead of calming the backlash, made the audience feel belittled and intensified the criticism.

- ***Consumption and Amplification through Social Media***

Fatima's apology circulated across multiple social media platforms, brought her criticism, and her laughter was seen as a sign of insincerity. Hashtags #مقاطعة_فاتима and #فاتما_اوت became focal points of the boycott, and the collective response highlighted the power to mobilize to cancel public figures. The backlash reflects public frustration about Fatima's tone and perceived lack of accountability.

- ***Echo Chamber and Intensification of the Boycott***

As the apology circulated on social media, an echo chamber effect began to occur. Fatima's laughter became a focal point of users' criticisms. They shared discourse under the #مقاطعة_فاتима and #فاتима_اوت hashtags, which solidified the cancellation campaign against Fatima.

Social Practice

This section explores the broader cultural and ideological context behind Fatima's apology, revealing how her linguistic choices reflected deeper cultural values and power dynamics within Saudi social media.

- **Cultural Sensitivity and National Pride**

Fatima's failure to acknowledge her offense was particularly damaging in Saudi Arabia, where national pride and respect for cultural symbols are highly valued. Her laughter was seen as disrespectful of Arabic cultural sensitivities. This perceived disrespect intensified calls for her cancellation.

- **Content on Palestine and Audience Reactions**

Fatima's remark, "Maybe you didn't like my content lately," referenced her recent focus on Palestine, which her Saudi followers interpreted as an accusation of lacking support for the cause. This politicized the situation, adding to the backlash.

- **Power Dynamics in Cancel Culture**

The backlash against Fatima highlighted shifting power dynamics between influencers and their digital audiences. Hashtags like #مقاطعة_فاتима helped organize a widespread boycott, demonstrating the growing influence of audiences in holding public figures accountable. By using terms like "boycott" (مقاطعة), social media users asserted moral authority, reinforcing the expectation that public figures must align with cultural and ethical norms or face public backlash.

Saudi Social Media Posts

Textual Analysis (Linguistic Features)

- **Code-Switching**

Code-switching was notable in both cancellation campaigns. However, especially against Fatima, users frequently mixed English terms like "out" and "cancel" (e.g., "Fatima is ouuuutttt") to reflect global cancel culture trends and modernize the discourse. This blending allowed users to engage both local and international audiences, reinforcing demands for accountability.

- **Transliteration**

Many tweets wrote English terms phonetically in Arabic script, which reflects linguistic blending in social media discourse. Examples include "فاتيمة اوتتتتتتتت" (Fātimā 'awt...awt) from "out" for emphasis, "التيك توك" (al-tīktūk) for TikTok, "بلكوها" (balkūhā) from "block her" and "كنسلة" (kansalah) from "cancel". These terms show how global cancel culture has merged with Arabic, creating a hybrid discourse suited to digital communication.

- **Cancel Culture Vocabulary and Hashtags**

The hashtags #مقاطعة_فاتيمة (Boycott Fatima) and #فاتيمة_اوت (Fatima out) were instrumental in uniting individuals into a larger boycott movement. Terms like "cancel" reflect social exclusion and the removal of someone from the public sphere. The use of English in hashtags (e.g., "out") reinforces the idea that cancel culture transcends linguistic boundaries and aligns with the global language of social justice movements.

- **Derogatory Terms and Exaggeration**

Language of abhorrence is common in both cases; however, in Fatima's case, sarcasm like "Fatima is out" leads to derogation by calling her a "barking dog" to undermine her self-importance. These rhetorical devices reflect the emotional engagement of users and the level of their outrage in cancel culture. Direct insults and bad terms were also common. Fatima was called "يا وجه العنز" (goat-face), while her associates were labeled "مجرد نكرات" (just nobodies) and "يا تافهين" (insignificant people). Animal-related insults targeted her appearance, such as comparing her teeth to those of a donkey ("وضروسها اللي كنها اسنان حمار") and calling her "فاتيمة السلقه" (Fatima the hyena). One tweet suggested Fatima and her followers belonged in "مزبلة التاريخ" (the trash heap of history). Terms like "بجيحه" (brazen) and characterizations like "جدد وعشوائيين و أطفال" (new, reckless, and childish) reinforced the tone of ridicule and social exclusion.

- **Gaslighting**

"Gaslighting" refers to psychological manipulation that makes someone question their perception of reality. This term was highlighted in both Arabic and English. For example, it appeared in its English form in "انك تغططين بعدين" "gaslighting" in which Fatima was accused of manipulating her audience by making them feel that they were overreacting. In several tweets, users identify instances of gaslighting, where Fatima reframes legitimate criticism as irrational hostility. For example, ("اتهامها للسعوديين بتهديد سلامة أهلها لازم ما يمر مرور الكرام هذا اتهام صريح بالإرهاب"), the post writer is addressing the act of gaslighting where Fatima attempted to portray them as aggressors instead of acknowledging her own offensive remarks.

Discursive Practice (Production and Consumption of Tweets)

Production of Discourse

Both cancellation campaigns were part of broader digital activism. Terms like “cancel” and “block” reflect how users adopted global cancel culture language while grounding it in local values.

Consumption of Discourse

The consumption of tweets takes place within a politically and socially charged context, involving Saudi users who are the epitome of national pride and cultural loyalty. However, the use of English terms like “gaslighting” suggested that the discourse was also aimed at a global audience, linking local accountability to broader social justice movements.

Social Practice (Power and Ideology)

- ***Cultural and National Identity***

Both the campaigns drew heavily on cultural and national identity to fuel outrage. In the campaign against Fatima, tweets like “we, the Saudi people, know how to lift you to the sky and bring you down” emphasized how cancel culture was used to reinforce national loyalty. Fatima’s actions were not framed as individual transgressions, but as offensive to Saudi values; this framing shifted the discourse from Fatima’s actions to her perceived betrayal of the nation.

- ***Power Dynamics and Public Shaming***

A clear power dynamic emerged when users positioned themselves as moral arbiters, with phrases like “we’ll bring you down to the lowest level” reflecting the power of cancel culture to regulate behavior through public shaming. The use of global terms like “cancel” added psychological and social weight to the accusations against Fatima.

- ***Ideological Conflict***

Fatima’s apology, particularly the statement “maybe you didn’t like my content lately,” exacerbated the ideological conflict because many Saudi users interpreted it as an indirect accusation that they were unsupportive of Palestine. The ideological tension fueled further backlash, as users framed Fatima’s comments as being misaligned with community norms; the backlash then became a vehicle for enforcing ideological purity within the community, positioning cancel culture as a tool to maintain social cohesion.

Findings

In 2019, the linguistic choices in Balqees’ case were relatively localized; they were rooted in the Arabic language and reflected Arabic society’s traditional values and social norms, such as gender and family honor. While there was a collective call to boycott Balqees, terms like “cancel” were absent. Instead, phrases like *#بلاقيس_اخرسي* (Silence, Balqees) and collective pronouns created a dynamic us-versus-them. The Arabic language is rich in strong metaphors, complicated wordplay, and rhythmical structures, which allow it to convey layered meanings and to evoke deep emotions (Bassiouny, 2020; Versteegh, 2014). This rhetoric was used to express moral condemnation of Balqees. We see that the style of condemnation was culturally grounded, and the tone of public shaming aligned with the core principles of cancel culture—socially isolating individuals for perceived moral transgressions.

By contrast, in the case of Fatima in 2023, the language had evolved significantly to include global cancel culture terminology by including English words such as “out” and “block,” which were incorporated into Arabic discourse via code-switching and transliteration. The use of terms like “gaslighting,” “block her” (*بلكوها*), and “cancel her” (*كنسلة*) showed a new dimension of cancel culture in a global context.

The ideological conflict in Balqees’s case centered on gender roles and family honor. The backlash reflected patriarchal values, with criticism focused on Balqees’s comments about disciplining women at home. The demand for her exclusion was tied to preserving societal norms about women’s behavior. In Fatima’s case, the conflict was driven by national identity and loyalty to Saudi Arabia. Her perceived insult to the nation by liking an “offensive” post sparked accusation of betrayal. Phrases like “We, the Saudi people” reinforced national pride while incorporating global cancel culture language like “out.” This shift shows that accountability in Fatima’s case was linked to national identity rather than moral behavior, as seen in Balqees’s case.

Comparison

The comparison of these two cases reveals linguistic evolution in Arab cancel culture. Linguistic expressions in Balqees’s case in 2019 were focused on traditional values, grounded in moralistic language and local culture, without adopting global cancel culture terms. By 2023, Fatima’s case showed a shift toward global language, with terms like “block” and “cancel” reflecting the influence of international digital activism. The ideological focus also shifted from gender norms and family honor in Balqees’s case to national pride in Fatima’s case. Despite this shift, both cases used language as a tool for public shaming and social exclusion, which, in Fatima’s case, shows a tilt towards globally influenced strategies.

Discussion

Cancel culture has gained global attention recently, but its manifestation in the Arab world remains underexplored. This study focuses on cancel culture, its linguistic evolution in the Arab world, and whether it is aligned with the global phenomenon. While previous research has examined cancel culture's role in social justice and political discourse in Western contexts, studies on the Arab world are limited. Our study tried to address this gap by comparing two prominent cases, i.e., Balqees Fathi in 2019 and Fatima Jaafar in 2023, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

In Balqees's 2019 case, we found that the language relied on traditional Arabic expressions shaped by gender norms and family honor. No direct references to global cancel culture terms like "cancel" or "out" were found. Instead, sarcasm and moral judgment reflected a local, culturally grounded style. This aligns with what Hooks (2020) described in her work on rhetorical performances that cancel culture is a public act of shaming that reinforces community norms and values.

In Fatima's case in 2023, we observed a shift in the Arab cancel culture's linguistic style. English words like "block," "cancel," "out," and "unfollow" blended naturally with Arabic through code-switching and transliteration. This reminded us of Blitvich (2022), who focused on the power of (im)politeness in shaping social boundaries, and Erker, and the subtle mix of languages can reflect where we place the borders of acceptable behavior as a sign of evolving social gatekeeping. It also aligns with Goanta and Spanakis (2022), who tracked emotional currents in online cancellations where cancellation language is laden with feelings of hatred, empathy, passion, and anxiety.

We also saw that media narratives guide public perception and advertise shared value, as shown in Klyueva and Sidorova's (2023) study. While Semenova (2023) highlighted destructive aspects and ostracism, which we saw clearly in both cases. However, we see that Fatima's case allowed for both moral accountability and a wider global dialogue, which recalled Williams and Singh (2022), who emphasized the empowering potential for marginalized voices. Fatima's case awakens a global trend of English and Arabic words mingling to create a common vocabulary that allows more people to join the conversation.

We did not observe a complete replacement of local traditions but instead a layered expansion where existing norms coexisted with new linguistic features. It shows that Arab cancel culture connects older moral frameworks with global activism. In doing so, our findings align with earlier research, which suggests that language choice can negotiate with different worlds, reflecting an evolving landscape where multiple voices and identities find space.

These findings align with the theories of code-switching and translanguaging, which highlight how individuals use multiple languages to express identity and convey nuanced meanings (García & Wei, 2014; Gumperz, 1982). In Fatima's case, users strategically alternated between Arabic and English to frame the influencer's social exclusion, indicating both local and global audiences and reinforcing a more aggressive-action-oriented stance, which Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model described as a marked choice. This contradicts the unmarked choices in Balqees' case, in which traditional Arabic expressions were used to enforce social and moral judgment without inserting any explicit language of global cancellation.

In Balqees' case, a tacit ideological framework is governed by patriarchal values and long-established ethical hierarchies. Linguistic choices are influenced by the traditional Arabic language that is expressed in poetry and moral parables. There is no explicit global "cancel" terminology; instead, communication relies on an inherited moral background.

In Fatima's case, the ideological landscape follows a more hybrid character. There is an integration of global cancel culture terms like "cancel" and "out" into Arabic discourse. Yet this is not just a simple import of global norms; it is a deep emotional current flowing from national identity. So, even though there are clear borrowed terms that carry the aura of international social justice standards, it did not erase local ideological aims. We ended up with a stage where protecting cultural sovereignty and defending national honor are merged with global "cancel" terms. In this new mix, the sense of accountability became sharper and unmistakably linked to an internationally recognized larger script of calling people out.

While our study sheds important light on the evolution of Arab cancel culture, it has limitations. It focuses on two cases involving female public figures, which means it may not reflect the full spectrum of how cancel culture operates across the Arab region. Moreover, the study stuck to Twitter alone, missing out on other platforms like Instagram or TikTok, which future research could examine. Other factors, such as gender and religion, could also reveal more dimensions of cancel.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, we may conclude that the Arab cancel culture within the digital sphere has undergone linguistic and ideological evolution. From 2019 to 2023, we see a marked transition in language use from traditional Arabic rooted in societal norms to a more globalized and hybrid style. This reflects the influence of global digital activism on Arab online spaces, signaling a shift toward hybrid linguistic practices that blend local and international expressions. And this answers our first research question.

The article identifies several strategies for enforcing social exclusion. In Balqees's case, imperatives, rhetorical questions, and emotive language rooted in Arabic cultural norms were used to create a collective demand for her silencing and exclusion. Fatima's case incorporated modern strategies, including transliterated English terms, codeswitching, and hashtags. That answers our second research question.

Ideologically, we see a nuanced interplay between global trends and local Arab values. While the 2019 Balqees case was primarily shaped by patriarchal values and moralistic rhetoric tied to honor and gender roles, the 2023 Fatima case emphasized national pride and loyalty. These shifts underline how cancel culture serves as both a tool for social justice and a medium for reinforcing cultural and ideological boundaries. And that provides an answer for our third research question. Ultimately, the study highlights the unique adaptation of global cancel culture within the Arab context, highlighting the dual influences of tradition and globalization in shaping linguistic practices and digital discourse. By answering these research questions, the article provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between language, ideology, and social dynamics in Arab cancel culture, highlighting its evolution and adaptation in the context of globalization and digital communication.

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