Saudi Women's Speech as a Gender Identity Marker in Mixed-Gender Informal Interaction: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the Saudi women's style of talk that constructs their gender identity in mixed-gender informal interaction qualitatively. The sample of the study consisted of four Saudi females and two Saudi males. The study included two embedded units, in which each unit involved two female participants and one male participant. Besides, observation of the two units was used to collect data. To analyze data qualitatively, an instrument based on the interactional sociolinguistics and the conversation analysis approaches and the description of women's language, which was validated by six EFL university professors, was used. It was found that the females' use of the involvement forms and strategies and the discussion of feminine topics were extremely prominent. However, the females employed the politeness strategies and the general features of women's talk to a certain extent. Yet, this accommodation the female attempted to reach did not results in a great shift with respect to their feminine identity. Therefore, the feminine identity of the females was presented clearly in both units. Furthermore, implications and recommendations for future research were offered.

Keywords: speech, women, gender, identity, female, politeness, involvement

INTRODUCTION

This study aims at investigating the Saudi women's style of talk that constructs their gender identity in mixed-gender informal interaction qualitatively. The social identity concept is one of the most important concepts in sociolinguistics. It includes all the aspects that constitute the self-image of a person which is based on the person's membership in social groups that is linked to an emotional aspect (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The members in such social groups share a number of thoughts, values, attitudes, and habits (Stets & Burke, 2000). For instance, teenagers, who represent a social group, have similar ideas and practices in common which stand as a part of their social identity.

Similarly, women represent another social group with distinctive attitudes and behavior that represent a part of their overall social identity. Holmes (2013), who considered the gender identity as an essential part of an individual's social identity, stated, "Approaching the construction of gender as a process, rather than regarding gender as a given category, leads to a view of individuals as constantly 'doing' gender" (p. 321). Therefore, women tended to speak in a more masculine way in mixed-gender interactions and thus represented a set of gender identities that contained high levels and low levels of femininity or masculinity (Al Ghathami, 2015; Hancock & Rubin, 2015; Leaper, 2019; Mendelberg, Karpowitz, & Goedert, 2014; Tenenbaum, Ford, & Alkhedairy, 2011).

There is a lack of research exploring the women's style of talk in mixed-gender informal interaction in the Saudi culture, which can be attributed to a number of reasons. First, the studies of Alanazy (2013), Alghamdi (2017), Hancock and Rubin (2015), Larsson and Alvinius (2019), Mendelberg et al. (2014), Polletta and Chen (2013), Song (2018), and Young and Clark (2017), which were carried out in the area of the females linguistic behavior in mixed-gender interactions, were conducted in non-Arab formal settings. Additionally, there were some studies conducted in informal settings, which involved Leaper (2019), Schnittka and Schnittka (2016), and Tenenbaum et al., (2011), but the cultures in which they took place were non-Arab cultures. Only Al Ghathami (2015) carried out her study in an Arab community, and in the Saudi culture in particular. Second, the time in which Al Ghathami (2015) conducted the study was the time in which women were less empowered in the Saudi community than they are now. Besides, the separation between men and women in the Saudi community in almost all the domains was almost complete where men and women, except family members, did not interact with each other, established relationships in the workplace, or attended mixed lectures or events. Consequently, the fact that the Saudi women are more empowered in the Saudi community in the recent time and men and women are not totally separated makes the investigation of the Saudi women's speech that constructs their gender identity in mixed-gender informal interaction worthy of study. Third, few of the studies, which included Alghamdi (2017), Song (2018), and Young and Clark (2017), explored the women's speech in mixed-gender interactions qualitatively. Hence, studying the Saudi women's talk as a gender identity marker in mixed-gender informal interaction qualitatively is significant since such an approach allows the researcher to have detailed data and thus provides an in-depth treatment of the phenomenon.

In mixed-gender interaction, a power conflict is created where the most dominant gender group imposes its linguistic behavior on the interaction (Lakoff, 2004; Wardaugh, 2006). Thus, the subordinate group's gender identity is shifted through the linguistic choices that follow the patterns of the superordinate group (Lakoff, 2004). The studies of Al Ghathami (2015), Hancock and Rubin (2015), Leaper (2019), Mendelberg et al. (2014), and Tenenbaum et al. (2011) revealed that the males' and females' linguistic behavior shifted based on such a power conflict. However, the empowerment of women and the wider scope of interaction between men and women in different domains in the recent time in Saudi Arabia makes the study of the women's style of talk in mixed-gender informal interaction in the Saudi culture worthy of research since such factors may affect

the power conflict found in mixed-gender interaction and hence influence the women's talk. Moreover, there are few qualitative studies conducted in this field in the Saudi culture in recent time, especially in informal settings. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the Saudi women's speech that constructs their gender identity in mixed-gender informal interaction.

The significance of the study relies on the variables that are examined in which the women's style of talk in mixed-gender informal interaction is investigated. Although there are some qualitative studies conducted in such an area in the Saudi culture, the latest changes related to the empowerment of women in the Saudi community and the wider scope of interaction between men and women may cause some changes in the power conflict that is found in mixed-gender interactions. Accordingly, such a change may result in different linguistic behavior of Saudi women in mixed-gender informal interaction and thus construct different gender identities. Therefore, a new qualitative study investigating the Saudi females' linguistic behavior as a gender identity marker in mixed-gender informal discussions in the recent time is required.

This study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the Saudi women's talk that constructs their gender identity in mixed-gender informal interaction.

1. To what extent do Saudi women use involvement forms and strategies such as the supportive patterns in mixed-gender interaction?

2. To what extent do Saudi women use politeness forms and strategies in mixed-gender interaction?

3. To what extent do Saudi women use the women's general features of talk that include hedges, filler, intensifiers, precise color terms, admiration adjectives and avoidance of swear words in mixed-gender interaction?

4. To what extent do Saudi women discuss topics related to women such as gossip and personal issues in mixed-gender interaction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The Gender Identity as a Part of the Social Identity

The social identity is one of the crucial concepts in sociolinguistics since the social meaning of certain linguistic structures, as Ochs (1993) explained, comprises the social identity as a fundamental aspect. Tajfel (1974) defined the term of social identity, "That part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 69). Ochs (1993), who referred to the term of social identity as a set of social characters, explained that these social characters involve different social groups such as different social classes, roles, occupations, and connections, institutional identities, and other types of society identities that can be represented by a person in everyday life. Moreover, Holmes (2013) mentioned the social class, gender, age, and

ethnicity as significant aspects of the social identity. This indicated that the membership in social groups is not limited to the emotional aspect of the members towards their social group but it is extended to involve intellectual and physical aspects since each social group is distinctive in its physical appearance, way of thinking, use of language, as well as the psychological state. Besides, Padilla and Perez (2003) stated that the self-image that constitutes the social identity of individuals is socially perceived on the basis of these social groups. In addition, Coupland (2007) stressed on the importance of viewing the social identity as a dynamic process with no fixed categories and said that the social identity involves social and cultural aspects. The researcher claims that the fact that each individual has a unique social identity, which is different from other individuals' social identities since it results from the memberships in different social groups, asserts that the social identity is constructed rather than restricted to certain classifications. Furthermore, there are different factors such as the settings that may either reinforce or discourage the behavior of certain social groups and thus affect the overall social identity.

Gender represents a dimension of one's social identity which is socially constructed, negotiated, and not fixed (Holmes, 2013). This means that although each gender identity has a distinctive linguistic behavior, any change in the factors involved in a given situation may result in a change in that linguistic behavior, which consequently affects the represented gender identity (Holmes, 2013). Moreover, Holmes (2013) and Ochs (1993) stated that the social identity is constructed through language and the oral performance, which denotes that the language is an important marker of the social identity.

Female Gender Identity Markers

The female gender identity is unique in its linguistic markers (Holmes, 2013). However, the use of such features differs depending on the situation since this gender identity is negotiated (Holmes, 2013). For instance, women sometimes talk in a more masculine way and adopt some masculine features of speech. Lakoff (2004) introduced the term of women's language, which he viewed as a result of their subordination and lack of confidence although he stated other explanations, while considering the men's language as the norm of the general way of talk. In contrast, Holmes (2013) and Tannen (1990) viewed such a language as politeness devices since women are concerned with being liked. Besides, Tannen (2004) stated that women focus on connections and relationships unlike men who focus on status. Such a statement provides a convincing justification of women's use of language, which is characterized by being polite. In addition, viewing the women's way of talk as a result of their dependence and lack of confidence contradicts the fact that a lot of women of high status use such a language. Therefore, considering the women's language as politeness devices is a sound explanation. The women's features of talk occur at three levels, which are the phonological, syntactic, and lexical levels (Lakoff, 2004).

Women's General Features of Talk

Women's features of speech include hedges and fillers (Wardaugh, 2006). Furthermore, women usually use hypercorrect grammar and standard forms because they are associated with high prestige since women are class-sensitive (Coupland, 2007; Holmes,

2013; Labov, 1990). Additionally, Lakoff (2004) claimed that the women's style of talk is characterized by the extensive use of intensifiers, precise color terms, admiration adjectives, and the avoidance of swear words. Such characteristics result in the fact that women's language is more expressive (Labov, 1990). Regarding the topics discussed by women, gossip and personal issues are the most dominant ones. (Holmes 2013; Tannen, 1990). Tannen (2004) added that women are concerned with sharing troubles.

The Involvement Style

Lakoff (2004) and Tannen (1990) stated that the involvement is a prominent characteristic in the women's patterns of speech since women employ different strategies and devices to involve the addressee such as encouraging discussions and the use of tag questions. Furthermore, the women's patterns of speech are supportive, collaborative, and interruptive since the overall style encourages providing feedback (Holmes 2013; Tannen, 1990; Wardaugh, 2006). Tannen (1993) stated that the differences between men and women in their patterns of talk are based on their roles in community which restrict women to a limited small environment and allow men to engage in a business environment which is characterized by competition. However, in the recent time, women are no longer restricted to such a limited environment in that women compete for a better economic level and institutional positions nowadays along with their maintenance of their relationships with others (Tannen, 1993). Besides, Tannen (1990) pointed out that women prefer to speak in private and have friendly conversations, which matches the involvement style since such a type of talk involves a small number of participants and thus helps in establishing and strengthening connections and creating closeness. However, when some men are present in a situation, women turn to behave as if they were in a public speaking situation. (Tannen, 1990).

Politeness

Women's language is characterized by being polite through the use of different devices and strategies. Although Lakoff (2004) stated that women use such strategies to express their lack of confidence, the researcher views these strategies as politeness devices. Women usually use indirect suggestions instead of giving direct commands (Lakoff 2004; Tannen 1990). In addition, the discourse particles, which are used by women to express emotions as well as to soften their commands, the raising intonation on declaratives, the tag questions, which give the sense of not forcing anyone to agree with the speaker, and the euphemisms, which lessen the impact of sensitive matters, are four prominent politeness strategies (Lakoff, 2004).

Turn-Taking System

The turn-taking in conversations is ruled by several principles that enable us to expect how conversations go and when the participants are allowed to participate (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, & Harnish, 2010). As a result, this turn-taking system reduces the chances of disruptive overlap among speakers (Akmajia et al., 2010). However, such a system is not usually followed in the women's conversations since they are characterized by the rapport talk and the involvement style that includes interruptive and collaborative

patterns and feedback. Accordingly, such a system is more likely to be followed in men's talk, which is characterized by being public, rather than women's talk.

Power Conflict in Mixed-Gender Interaction

When men and women interact in a conversation, a power conflict is created in which women are subordinate (Lakoff, 2004; Wardaugh, 2006). Consequently, women tend to talk in a more masculine way, speak less than men, and discuss different topics related to men such as sports and business as well as topics related to women since the way of talk of the dominant group is the followed one in the case of mixed-gender interaction (Lakoff, 2004). Besides, the men's talk in mixed-gender discussions differ from their talk in same-gender interaction in both form and content (Coates, 2003). Coates (2003) claimed that the gender, status, and relationships among the participants in interaction influence the style of talk. Additionally, men and women try to establish some kind of accommodation in relation to the patterns of talk in that they are not totally competitive, which is the pattern of talk men (Coates, 2003). Moreover, Coates (2003) stated, "Where female interactants are family members, men's story-telling also functions to maintain dominance in family roles such as husband or father or grandfather" (p.171). Nevertheless, women sometimes reduce the males' authority and power, especially when two or more women are involved in mixed-gender interaction (Coates, 2003). Therefore, such a power conflict is not stable. Besides, the cultural norms related to gender, the number of the participants involved in the discussion, and the social and institutional status play an important role in the power conflict.

The Interactional Sociolinguistics Approach

The interactional sociolinguistics approach pays attention to linguistic and paralinguistic behavior (Holmes, 2013). The interactional sociolinguistics approach is concerned with the contextualization cues people use in signaling and interpreting the conversations in its ethnographic context (Holmes, 2013). These contextualization cues involve verbal and non-verbal cues (Holmes, 2013). Therefore, the sociocultural norms and context, the background knowledge, and the presuppositions are essential for analyzing conversations based on the interactional sociolinguistics approach (Holmes, 2013).

The Conversation Analysis Approach

The conversational analysis (CA) is used to analyze the structure of talk and how the rules of everyday conversations are managed (Holmes, 2013). Furthermore, CA views the patterns of talk as a structure of turn-taking that is organized based on certain rules (Holmes, 2013). Holmes (2013) stated, "CA focuses on how an interaction unfolds as a sequence of actions by different participants, with the significance of an utterance highly dependent on its position in a sequence, as well as being jointly negotiated" (p. 387). CA depends on the internal linguistic and paralinguistic clues to interpret a conversation (Holmes, 2013).

Review of Practical Studies

Tenenbaum et al. (2011) aimed at examining the gender differences related to the emotion talk and the conversational style. To collect data, same-gender and mixed-

gender children groups told stories in a wordless picture book and they were recorded and transcribed (Tenenbaum et al., 2011). The researchers analyzed data based on the frequency of emotion state words and two aspects involving high and low affiliation and assertiveness (Tenenbaum et al., 2011). The females used more emotion talk in both same-gender and mixed-gender interaction (Tenenbaum et al., 2011). Moreover, the girls' speech was more collaborative than the boys' speech whereas the boys' speech was more informative than the girls' speech in the same-gender groups (Tenenbaum et al., 2011). However, in the mixed-gender dyads, the boys and girls were the same in terms of the use of collaborative speech acts but the girls were more informative than the boys in terms of the informing speech acts (Tenenbaum et al., 2011). Furthermore, the findings were consistent with the gender classification models and denoted that the gender of the speaker and the interlocutor affected the emotion talk and the conversational style (Tenenbaum et al., 2011). The researchers recommended conducting similar studies addressing different age groups (Tenenbaum et al., 2011).

 Polletta and Chen (2013) aimed at developing a theory about the gendered character of public discussions to interpret the variations of the women's talk in public deliberations. Data was collected from an online deliberative forum involving different groups of Americans discussing political issues and a quantitative questionnaire about the participants' assessment of the forums (Polletta & Chen, 2013). To analyze the data, a program comparing the number of occurrences and length of the women participation and men participation in the discussions and a choice of 12 groups' deliberations using quota sampling to provide a further analysis were used (Polletta & Chen, 2013). It was found that men and women participated equally in the discussions and that women were pleased about their level of participation in the forums like men (Polletta & Chen, 2013). The researchers recommended conducting similar studies taking place in other countries and sites of public talk, examining the influence of the visibility and audibility of the interlocutors on the deliberation pattern as well as the correlation between gendering the settings and the influence outside the settings, and paying attention to other types of inequality in public political discussions (Polletta & Chen, 2013).

 Al Ghathami (2015) explored the female gender identity markers in same-gender interactions and their shifts in mixed-gender interactions. The data was collected through recording same-gender and mixed-gender family gatherings (Al Ghathami, 2015). The recordings were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively using the conversational analysis approach and the interactional sociolinguistic approach and quantitatively by calculating the number of occurrences of certain linguistic features (Al Ghathami, 2015). Women constructed different social identities in mixed-gender interactions through the shifts in the use of the female gender identity markers and the decrease in the frequency of the female gender identity markers (Al Ghathami, 2015). Further investigations addressing different communicative events, same-gender and mixed-gender formal settings, and other Saudi dialects and large-scale studies enabling us to reach a pattern of the speech of the Saudi females and to include different social and educational levels were recommended (Al Ghathami, 2015). Furthermore, the increasing number of mixed-

gender events which reduced the gender linguistic differences suggested the importance of examining the female gender identity markers (Al Ghathami, 2015).

Leaper (2019) conducted a study on the influence of the same-gender and mixed-gender relationships on the conversational strategies used by young adult friends. The data was obtained from observation of same-gender and mixed-gender pairs during negotiation and self-disclosure tasks and a quantitative questionnaire measuring the quality of the pairs' relationship, which was analyzed quantitatively (Leaper, 2019). The observation was video recorded, transcribed, and analyzed qualitatively using two plans which classified and measured the strategies in the negotiation task and the listener's reaction in the self-disclosure task (Leaper, 2019). In the negotiation task, the women used requests, indirect suggestions, and justifications more than men did whereas men used more direct suggestions than women did (Leaper, 2019). Regarding the self-disclosure task, women used more self-disclosure statements and supportive patterns than men did, especially in the case of same-gender pairs whereas men appeared to use more negative comments than women did (Leaper, 2019). Furthermore, there was a correlation between the ratings of the friends' relationships and the strategies used (Leaper, 2019). The researcher recommended examining friends from other backgrounds for a longer time, taking into account a wider range of conversational settings, using a more comprehensive instrument of friendship quality, and investigating the reasons behind the most frequent gender differences in the conversational strategies among friends (Leaper, 2019).

 Mendelberg et al. (2014) studied the effects of the descriptive representation and the decision rules on the women's expression of their concerns in discussion groups and the effects of the decision rules on the descriptive representation as well. To collect data, a pretreatment questionnaire, discussion groups, a post-treatment questionnaire, and a task to earn money were used (Mendelberg et al., 2014). The discussion groups differed in their gender composition and the decision rules, which included the unanimous and the majority rule (Mendelberg et al., 2014). To analyze data, the pre-discussion attitudes of each individual were matched with their speech in the discussion phase and their post-discussion behavior and each participant's speech was analyzed using the Linguist Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) Software and matched with his individual features (Mendelberg et al., 2014). Both the descriptive representation and the decision rules affected the women's voice. The researcher recommended conducting similar experiments with different populations (Mendelberg et al., 2014).

 Schnittka and Schnittka (2016) examined the effect of the cultural norms related to gender in informal engineering contexts. Observation of same-gender and mixed-gender collaborative groups negotiating in a structured program in a rural community was used to collect data and the discourse analysis approach was used to analyze data (Schnittka & Schnittka, 2016). It was found that the females had a better learning experience in mixed-gender groups and that the groups composition in terms of gender influenced the functional and cultural features of the groups (Schnittka & Schnittka, 2016). The researchers recommended conducting similar studies on programs employing group

structural and teamwork supports to explore the effect of such supports on the participation balance between males and females (Schnittka & Schnittka, 2016).

Alghamdi (2017) aimed at investigating the Saudi female students' experience of attending mixed-gender courses of English as a second language (ESL) in Australia and the factors influencing their participation in such courses. Individual interviews with semi-structured style were used to collect data. Individual interviews with semi-structured style were used to collect data qualitatively and a descriptive phase and an interpretive phase were carried out to analyze data (Alghamdi, 2017). The marital status as well as the level of the language proficiency were two prominent factors that affected the Saudi females' engagement in the mixed-gender courses (Alghamdi, 2017). In addition, the participation in classroom work with males influenced the Saudi female students' behavior in the mixed-gender classes (Alghamdi, 2017). The researcher recommended exploring the English language teachers' experiences of dealing with different aspects of the Saudi culture in ESL institutes in Australia and the male students' experiences of attending mixed-gender classes (Alghamdi, 2017).

Young and Clark (2017) investigated the cultural adjustment experiences of Saudi graduate female students studying for the first time in a mixed-gender environment in a university in the United States. The data was collected using three instruments, which included an unstructured survey, interviews, and observational notes, and analyzed qualitatively throughout descriptive and interpretive phases to select the recurring themes and patterns of thoughts and classify them into two groups based on the academic and the psychological contexts (Young & Clark, 2017). It was found that cultural identity and the gender norms of the Saudi female students affected their social communication, opinions, and perceptions about such an experience in the psychological context and restricted their participation in the classroom (Young & Clark, 2017). The researchers recommended conducting similar studies exploring the cultural transition process due to the lack of research in such an area (Young & Clark, 2017).

Song (2018) investigated the social experience of Saudi female students involved in mixed-gender discussions during their study abroad and how they dealt with the expectations that were based on cultural norms. Individual semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and the researcher's notes about the recurring themes as wells as a further discourse analysis were used to analyze data qualitatively (Song, 2018). It was found that the cultural norms related to the Saudi women influenced the females' gender identity (Song, 2018). Therefore, shyness and fear of judgement represented two dominant aspects of the women's gender identity which affected their participation in the mixed-gender classes and social interactions (Song, 2018). However, women were participating actively to get social or academic opportunities (Song, 2018). Additionally, the religious beliefs were used by some of the females to support the gender cultural norms (Song, 2018). In contrast, some females employed such religious beliefs and interpretations to reject such cultural norms (Song, 2018).

 Alanazy (2013) conducted a study investigating the attitudes of Saudi female students studying in the United States towards online and face-to-face mixed-gender interactions. To collect data, an electronic questionnaire consisted of Likert-type items was used and

SPSS program was used to analyze data statistically (Alanazy, 2013). It was found that the Saudi female students' engagement in the face-to-face mixed-gender discussions was mostly affected by their marital status whereas their level of engagement in online mixed-gender interactions was mostly influenced by their attitudes towards technology (Alanazy, 2013). Besides, the language skills and the overall learning environment were two fundamental factors as well (Alanazy, 2013). The researcher recommended exploring other factors and barriers affecting the Saudi female students' participation in online and face-to-face mixed-gender interaction as well as the correlation between the stay time of the Saudi female students in the United States and their level of participation in both online and face-to-face mixed-gender discussions (Alanazy, 2013). Additionally, future research on the responsibilities and the cultural norms influencing the Saudi female students with different marital status and conducting similar studies including synchronous learning discussions were suggested (Alanazy, 2013).

Hancock and Rubin (2015) conducted a study on the influence of the gender of the communication partner on language. Data was collected from 80 three-minute prescribed conversations, which involved trained men and women working as communication partners, transcribed, and analyzed quantitatively based on the number of the uttered words, the speech rate, the talk time, and the frequency of certain linguistic strategies (Hancock & Rubin, 2015). There were no noticeable differences in the language use based on the gender of the participant speakers or the sameness or contradiction of the gender of the interlocutor (Hancock & Rubin, 2015). However, the cultural norms and the gender of the interlocutor affected the language of both the female and male participants (Hancock & Rubin, 2015). The researchers recommended that the future studies investigating the accommodation in communication in spoken contexts must examine the gender schema of the speaker and the production (Hancock & Rubin, 2015). Furthermore, the general process model should be examined in different live conversational contexts involving more gendered topics (Hancock & Rubin, 2015). Moreover, Using virtual reality environments in the investigation of causes leading speakers to accommodate to their interlocutors was suggested (Hancock & Rubin, 2015).

Larsson and Alvinius (2019) compared the differences in the self-rating of the leadership between men and women in male-dominated, female-dominated, and mixed-gender work environments. Within-gender comparisons in all of the three work environments were created as well (Larsson & Alvinius, 2019). The data was collected using a Developmental Leadership Questionnaire (DLQ) and analyzed using t-tests to compare between the men and women, one-way ANOVA to create within-gender comparisons across the three work environments, and the chi-square test to evaluate the differences on categorical background variables (Larsson & Alvinius, 2019).There were no significant differences in the self-rating with respect to the men across the three contexts (Larsson & Alvinius, 2019). In contrast, the women in the female-dominated and mixed-gender environments judged themselves more positively than the women in the male-dominated environments (Larsson & Alvinius, 2019). The women were confident, sensitive to the interpersonal relations, and flexible in their leadership behavior and their leadership behavior was more transformational and less transactional (Larsson &

Alvinius, 2019). Furthermore, the males' instrumental, dominant and authoritative style was seen in the mixed-gender environments whereas the females' expressive, supportive and collaborative style was seen in the female-dominated and mixed-gender work environments (Larsson & Alvinius, 2019). Future research providing detailed information about the participants' real occupations and more objective data from the assessment of the leadership behavior by employees from different ranks and employing several instruments to collect data was suggested (Larsson & Alvinius, 2019).

METHOD

Participants

The sample of the study involved four Saudi females and two Saudi males. The ages of the female participants were 28 years, 30 years, 33 years, and 26 years while the ages of the male participants ranged from 24 to 48 years. The relationship between the participants was family membership. The participants had similar social, cultural, and educational backgrounds. The researcher used purposive sampling to have different but close ages of the participants.

Design

This study implemented a case study design and the type of the case study the researcher chose was the single case with embedded units. The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase included a pilot study whereas the second phase represented the data collection phase.

Instruments

The researcher used non-participant, unstructured, and overt observation to observe the women's linguistic behavior in mixed-gender interaction in two embedded units, each of which took place in different informal settings. During the observation, the researcher recorded the participants' linguistic behavior. The observation of each unit lasted for three hours. The topics discussed during the observation time were not restricted.

Procedure

The researcher carried out two embedded units of the case study in which each unit involved three participants in two different informal settings. In the first unit, the two female participants, whose ages were 30 years and 28 years, were interacting with their father, whose age was 48 years, in a weekly visit to their father at his home. In the second unit, the two female participants, whose ages were 33 years and 26 years, were interacting with their brother, whose age was 24 years, in a conversation during their weekly family gathering. In addition, the researcher attempted to observe the participants while they were in a good mood to elicit the normal linguistic behavior of the participants. Before each unit, the researcher got written permission from the participants to observe and record the conversation. Furthermore, to obtain natural conversations, the researcher eased the situation at the beginning of the conversation before starting to record the conversation and hided the recorder so that the participants did not get nervous. The observation of each unit lasted for three hours and the topics

discussed were not restricted. During the observation, the researcher interacted with the participants to a limited extent, took notes when required, and recorded the conversation to be transcribed later.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

The researcher attempted to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility throughout the course of the study. The choice of the design and the sample, the researcher's intensive exposure to the context of the study, taking notes, the recording and transcription of data, and the analysis of the data through two different approaches that analyzed data at the micro and macro levels supported the trustworthiness and credibility of the data and the findings.

Data Analysis Criteria

The data was analyzed using the interactional sociolinguistics approach and the conversational analysis (CA) approach. The researcher used such approaches along with the description of women's features of talk in Coupland, (2007), Holmes (2013), Labov (1990), Lakoff (2004), Tannen (1990), and Wardaugh (2006) to create criteria examining the females linguistic behavior in relation to the involvement strategies, politeness forms and strategies, the general features of women's talk, and feminine topics. To achieve the validity of the instrument, it was given to six EFL university professors and modified according to their comments.

RESULTS

To answer the first question, the researcher investigated four aspects with regard to the involvement style. These aspects included the supportive, collaborative, and interruptive patterns, the encouragement of discussions, the use of tag questions to create conversations, and the engagement in private and rapport talk. The supportive, collaborative, and interruptive patterns were prominent in the women's behavior in the two embedded units where linguistic and paralinguistic features were used to express different functions. These linguistic features included minimal responses expressing interest, sympathy, surprise, agreement, or understanding such as "أيوه" /ʔajwah/, translated as *Yes*, "يوه" /jo:h/, translated as *oops,* "إيه صح" /ʔi:h Sˤaħ/, translated as *that's true*, and "اها" /ʔaha:/, translated as *aha.* Additionally, the women collaborated with the co-participants by developing several topics extensively through sharing similar experiences and stories, providing more details and information, and asking questions. Moreover, there were non-verbal strategies such as head nod, facial expressions, gestures, and silences that the participant females used to express different functions. The interruptive patterns were used by the females to a certain extent. Most of the interruptions were among the females themselves. An example of the interruptive patterns could be seen when one female interrupted the other by saying "كذا فيه طعم ليمون", translated as *it has lemon flavor*, while the other female was saying " ما أتذكر طعمه بس كذا كأنه", translated as *I do not remember its flavor but it was like*. In addition, the overlaps occurred less frequently than the interruptive patterns. For example, the female's utterance of "يقول اسألوني أنا", translated as *he is saying ask me,* overlapped with the male's

question in "وشو هذي؟ ", translated as *what is this?*. As opposed to the interruptive patterns, the females' utterances overlapped with the male utterances in most of the cases of overlaps. Moreover, the women were extremely concerned with encouraging discussions and used four different strategies. The most dominant strategy was asking questions where the females asked questions such as " وش مجالاتها؟", translated as *in what fields are they?,* to create conversations. In addition, using the given names to involve a particular participant in a discussion throughout the two units was another strategy. For instance, the female named the female co-participant in the question " أسيل وش أخبارك؟", translated as *how are you, Aseel?.* Moreover, the females used declaratives to create conversations as in " أنا صايرة صحية آكل فواكه", translated as *I am getting used to a healthy lifestyle and eating fruits nowadays*, and the rising intonation on declaratives extensively to encourage discussions as in "أبغى بديل للشوكولاتات ", translated as *I want an alternative to chocolates*. The use of tag questions to involve the co-participants represented one of the involvement strategies which was used only to a certain extent in both units as in " إنت محاسبة صح؟", translated as *your major is accounting, isn't it?.* The fourth aspect of the involvement style was the engagement in private and rapport talk. However, the females' level of engagement in private talk was low in both units and associated with topics with a high level of femininity like births news, children, and gossip.

Concerning the answer of the second question, the data was analyzed based on four features. These features included the use of indirect suggestions, particles, tag questions, which gave the sense of not forcing anyone to agree with the speaker, and euphemisms. The females' participants made limited use of the indirect suggestions in both units as in " ترا عندنا مواقف كثيرة", translated as *I am sure we have a lot of parking places,* where the female suggested the possibility of parking the interlocutor's car since the speaker had enough space. Furthermore, the females used some pragmatic particles whose function was to express politeness prominently. For instance, the particle "أحس" /ʔaħis/, translated as *I feel*, was used to give the sense of not imposing a certain opinion on the listeners as in "أحس فرح تناسبها هالبرامج", translated as *I think such programs suit Farah*. Besides, the tag questions were limited in both units as in "مو واضح صح؟", translated as *it is not clear, is it?,* where the female participant used a tag question after stating her opinion about the clarity of an element to not impose her opinion on the others. Moreover, in the first and the second unit, the female participants rarely employed euphemisms. An example of the euphemisms could be seen when the female asked a question by saying " وين صادقة الوعد؟", translated as *where is the one keeping her promise?*, in which the female substituted the negative attribute, which was being a liar, for a positive one to soften the impact of her question.

To answer the third question, the researcher investigated the general features of women's talk which involved hedges, fillers, intensifiers, precise color terms, admiration adjectives and avoidance of swear words. The females did not hedge extensively in both units. For instance, when the female participant was giving her opinion about a kind of sweet and saying "أحس يبغى لها صوص كذا يعني", translated as *I think it is better to add some sauce*, in which she delivered a message denoting that the sweet needed some improvements without stating that the sweet was not delicious. In addition, the females

used fillers significantly across the two units such as "صراحة" /sˤaraːħah/, translated as *sincerely,* "عاد"/ʕaːd/, which was used to emphasize what the speaker was saying, "يعني" /jaʕ niː/, translated as *mean,* and "شوفي" /ʃuːfiː/, translated as *look.* Additionally, the intensifiers were prominently present in the females' talk in both units and took only one linguistic form which was the word "مرة" /marah/, translated as *very*, as in "روتين ممل مرة", translated as *it is a very boring routine.* Furthermore, the female's use of precise color terms was extremely limited as in the female's question "الطبقة البنية قصدك", translated as *do you mean the brown layer?,* where the female participant described the color of one of the layers in a sweet precisely. The admiration adjectives such as "رهيب" /rahiːb/, translated as *terrific,* and "رايق" /raːjiq/, translated as *charming,* took place in very few situations in both units. The female participants used swear words in very rare situations in both units.

To answer the fourth research question, the researcher investigated the topics discussed in both units and classified them into four categories in which three of them were categories of feminine topics and one category involved non-feminine topics. The feminine categories included personal issues, personal troubles talks, and gossip topics. Most of the topics the male and female participants discussed in the two units were feminine topics. The personal issues such as self-improvement, social events, everyday routine, children, cooking, shopping, and travelling represented the most frequent feminine topics the female participants discussed in both units. Additionally, the female participants engaged in personal troubles talks extensively in both units which were related to different concerns such as work, children, and health. There were very rare situations in which the females gossiped about others in the two units. In the situations in which the gossip took place, the female participants gossiped about other's physical appearance and social behavior. Moreover, the male and female participants discussed non-feminine topics related to different domains such as business in very few situations.

DISCUSSION

Concerning the first research question, the findings revealed that the females used involvement forms and strategies frequently, especially those related to the supportive, collaborative, and interruptive strategies. The researchers viewed the most frequent involvement forms the females used in this study as being similar to habits, which were not easy for the females to distance themselves from. Although there was a slight decrease in the females' use of the involvement forms, which resulted in a small shift in the female's gender identity towards the masculine identity, the feminine identity was constructed clearly. This finding was consistent with the findings of Larsson and Alvinius (2019), Leaper (2019), Mendelberg et al. (2014), and Polletta and Chen (2013), which revealed that the females' style of talk was prominent in the case of mixed-gender interaction. Besides, the findings of this study and those of Larsson and Alvinius (2019), Mendelberg et al. (2014) and Coates (2003) demonstrated that the number of women taking part in the discussion was an influential factor.

Regarding the second question, it was found that females employed politeness strategies in very few situations and thus showed a deviation from the women's style of talk.

However, the females' use of particles was prominent. Moreover, the females' extensive use of particles and the limited use of other politeness devices indicated that the females were trying to accommodate to their male interlocutors. This finding was in line with the findings of Al Ghathami (2015), Hancock and Rubin (2015), Schnittka and Schnittka (2016), and Tenenbaum et al. (2011), which highlighted that the gender of the interlocutor affected the speaker's language and resulted in a shifted gender identity. Additionally, the researcher considered that the reason behind the extensive use of particles was that the particles could be interpreted easily by the male interlocutors due to the clarity of the contextualization cues of these particles. In contrast, the indirect suggestions, euphemisms, and tag questions required a shared knowledge males might lack to interpret their contextualization cues.

The findings of the third question illustrated that the females' use of the general features of women's talk was limited except for the avoidance of swear words and the use of intensifiers and fillers which were prominent. This indicated that the female participants shifted their gender identity to a more masculine identity. The results of this study supported those of Al Ghathami (2015), Hancock and Rubin (2015), Schnittka and Schnittka (2016), and Tenenbaum et al. (2011) which showed that the gender of the co-participants influenced the speaker's way of talk. The researcher attributed the females' avoidance of some features to the lack of a shared knowledge among the male and female participants, which was essential for the interpretation of the contextualization of these features. A further interpretation of the women's use of certain features could be seen in the difficulty the female participants had in distancing themselves from key feminine features which became a part of their subconscious behavior. Similarly, the females' avoidance of swear words could be attributed to the difficulty in and getting used to features the female participants were not familiar with. Therefore, the women reflected their desire to reach an accommodation with their male co-participants.

The results of the fourth question showed that the females discussed feminine topics extensively and thus indicated that the females' gender identity was constructed distinctively. This finding was in line with the findings of Leaper (2019), Mendelberg et al. (2014), and Polletta and Chen (2013) which showed that the females' gender identity was represented clearly by following the feminine features of talk. The researcher claimed that the female's discussion of feminine concerns in the mixed-gender interaction was due to the female's great comfort, which resulted from several factors, in the interaction environment and thus caused them to behave normally. This justification was supported by the results of Alanazy (2013) and Alghamdi (2017) which pointed out the marital status as a comfort source, Larsson and Alvinius (2019), Mendelberg et al. (2014) and Coates (2003) which asserted that the number of the male and female participants affected the females' way of talk, and Hancock and Rubin (2015), Song (2018), and Young and Clark (2017) which denoted that the cultural norms affected in the female's style of talk. In the present study, there were several factors resulted in such comfort.

The overall findings of this study illustrated the state of the power conflict and how this study went against Lakoff's claim (2004). There was a balance in terms of the power

conflict between the males and females. This could be seen in the female's partial use of the feminine features. Consequently, the overall style of talk was neither totally feminine nor masculine. This finding supported the results of Al Ghathami (2015) partially since the females' speech in this study was somewhat feminine unlike the results of Al Ghathami (2015) which showed a more masculine-oriented style of talk. Furthermore, the number and the relationships among the participants, the settings type, the cultural norms, and the women's empowerment contributed to such a balance. Besides, the results of this study contradicted Lakoff's claim (2004) which stated that the women's language resulted from the women's subordinate position in relation to men and the lack of confidence since the women in this study were empowered in the society and used the feminine features of talk extensively.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the Saudi women's talk which constructed their gender identity in mixed-gender informal interaction qualitatively. It could be concluded that the Saudi females used the involvement strategies and discussed feminine topics extensively on one hand and showed a slight decrease in the use of the general feminine linguistic features and the politeness forms and strategies on the other hand. This indicated that the females tended to reach an accommodation with their male interlocutors. However, this accommodation did not shift the females' gender identity greatly. Thus, the females' gender identity was represented clearly and the power conflict was balanced.

The researcher suggested several implications. First, the gender identity should be viewed as being socially constructed. Second, the effect of the overall environment, the settings, and the cultural norms on the Saudi women's talk in mixed-gender interaction must be taken into consideration to understand the shifts in the women' gender identity markers. Third, to achieve successful mixed gender communication, the interlocutors must be aware of the linguistic behavior of each gender and try to come to an accommodation with each other. Fourth, to increase the chance of representing the female' gender identity clearly in a mixed-gender discussion, the females' level of comfort must be high.

The researcher presents a number of recommendations for future research. First, a study investigating the Saudi women's style of talk in mixed-gender discussions in formal settings is suggested. Moreover, a similar study consisting of more than two embedded units, a larger sample of participants, and different contexts in terms of the level of comfort is recommended. Besides, studies examining the talk of women from different Saudi regions in mixed-gender informal discussions and combining quantitative and qualitative instruments are needed. Exploring the effect of the relationship among the participants on the females' talk in mixed-gender informal interaction is suggested.

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