Sectarian language and perception of the "Other" after the Arab Spring

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This study explores how sectarian language prevalent on Arabic media shapes common Arab people's perceptions of sects such as Sunni, Shiites, and others. A sample of Arabic sectarian expressions was collected from social media, print media and TV channels. A sample of students and faculty was surveyed. Sectarian language was analysed according to the components of perception (perceiver, target, and situation), the factors that affect each, and the social amplification and attenuation risk framework. Sectarian language used by students, faculty and Arab media is characterized by contempt, hostility, hatred, and intolerance of the sect(s) they disapprove of as they constitute political and ideological threats. Many Sunnis are afraid of the Shiite tide and Shiite Crescent. Hezbollah, Houthis, and Muslim Brothers are considered "terrorists" and "militias".

Keywords: *sectarian language, Arab spring, political discourse, view of the other, components of perception, social amplification, risk attenuation.*

1. Introduction

For centuries, ethnic groups in Arab countries such as Assyrians, Caledonians, Turkmen, Kurds, Armenians, Tamazights, and Arabs have lived in peace and harmony. Similarly, people with different religious backgrounds (Sunnis, Shiites, Sophists, Alawites, Zaydis, Yezidis, Christians, Jews, and others) were living in harmony together. Since the Arab Spring in 2011, a plethora of sectarian words and expressions have been used on social media, satellite T.V. and print media. As a result, common people, even the young generation, started to openly declare their negative, hostile, and intolerant attitudes towards some religious sects as they feel they are threatening and causing tension and insecurity in their countries. Some ethnic groups are currently seeking to have their own states such as the Kurds in North Syria and Iraq, Sahara people in Morocco, Darfour and other parts of the Sudan. Hate and racism speech on mainstream and social media in numerous countries has even spread to refuges in numerous countries especially Europe.

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Due to the negative impact of hate speech, sectarian language and sectarian antisocial attitudes on social peace and solidarity, numerous studies in the literature have shed light on ethnocentric hate speech on social media. In Nigeria, Egbunike and Ihebuzor (2018) examined a sample of online ethnocentric hate speech among young Nigerian Twitter users. The sample was withdrawn from #Igbo hashtag tweets prevalent on Twitter between March 29 and 31, 2015. Content and semantic analyses revealed a high level of hate speech on Twitter. Conversation spaces have shifted from physical places like newspaper stands and cafes to digitally mediated online public spaces.

Since the early 2000s, there has been a surge in xenophobic and racist discourse on the Internet that involved attacks on Koreans and other ethnic minorities in Japan. As a result, a new right-wing nationalist and xenophobic movement, called the Action Conservative Movement, has appeared. Participant observation and in-depth interviews with people involved in and affected by the movement, highlighted the significance of online video sharing, streaming service, and social media in the formation of this Japanese social movement. These online tools have become very effective as they permeated every aspect of the participants' everyday life, activism and created a means of communication among supporters and critics (Yamaguchi 2013).

In Slovenia and across Europe, there has been a rise in hate speech against migrants and Muslims, especially in relation to the current *"refugee crisis".* Although Islam is the second largest religion in Slovenia after Catholicism, the view of Muslims as the vilified "other" remains racialized, gendered, and affected by misconceptions. The researcher indicated that there is a lack of mechanisms for prosecuting hate speech. However, a number of civil society actors have taken up the initiative to act (Bajt 2016; Bajt 2019).

In Cyprus and Poland, Baider and Kopytowska (2017) explored the various aspects of hate speech and hate crimes in ten EU countries and the dynamics of the online construction of the "Other" in the context of migration and refugee crisis. They examined online refugee- and migrant-related social media discourses in Cyprus and Poland and analysed metaphorical conceptualisations of migrants and refugees. Based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the researchers found that choices of particular metaphors and their frequency of use are likely to influence the salience of certain issues among the public, generate fear and apprehension and activate certain moral evaluations, thus, creating grounds for verbal and physical aggression against the "Other". Metaphors, including dehumanization, serve as a springboard for individual acts of prejudice, violence, and systematic discrimination.

With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the Sunni-Shiite divide appeared on the forefront in regional politics. Darwich and Fakhoury (2016) examined the process by which sectarian identities have become sources of conflict and security issues. They drew on the Securitisation Theory to examine speech acts and narratives leading to the construction of sectarianism as a security issue in the Middle East. They examined speech acts towards the Syrian crisis as cases that reveal securitisation of the Sunni-Shiite divide in the post-2011 era. They concluded that sectarian identities have acquired a security dimension, as actors have started framing each other as existential threats.

In addition, social media provides a broad access to information sources not controlled by governments or major corporations, thus facilitating the creation and coordination of activist networks, and constituting an unbeatable space for deliberating and exchanging ideas. Isasi and Juanatey (2016) indicated that the so-called Arab Spring is an example of how social media helped transform indignation into action and lead to liberating and transformative movements. The dissemination of messages inciting violence, using a variety of online forums, has been documented as "a detrimental channel through which violence was fueled, with over a thousand people killed and more than 600,000 displaced.

Another line of research focused on hate speech and sectarian antisocial behaviour among students. In Northern Ireland, Taylor and McKeown (2019) examined the mediating roles of family, ethnic, socialization and intergroup bias among 14-to-16-year-olds (50% male and 50% female; 49% Protestant and 51% Catholic). Results showed that previous experience with sectarianism, or intergroup violence was positively related to family ethnic socialization, which predicted later intergroup bias, which was in turn related to higher levels of adolescent participation in sectarian antisocial behaviour. Results emphasized the importance of family processes that link experience with the commitment of sectarian acts. In another study, Merrilees, Taylor, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, Cummings and Cairns (2014) examined the strength of you group identity in a context of protracted political conflict. The results showed that exposure to sectarian antisocial behaviours had a stronger effect on youth emotional problems. Youth with higher strength of group identity reported fewer emotional problems in the face of sectarian antisocial behaviour, but a stronger effect was found for Protestants as opposed to Catholics.

A similar study by McKinney, Francis and McKenna (2021) investigated attitudes towards sectarianism among a sample of Catholic school students aged 13 to 15 years old in Scotland. The researchers used the *Scale of Catholic Sectarian Attitudes* to assess the influence of five types of factors on shaping differences in sectarian attitudes among the students: Personal factors (sex and age), psychological factors (personality), contextual factors (Catholic schools), theological

factors (exclusivism), and religious factors (identity, belief, and practice). Findings revealed that sectarian attitudes exist in the young Catholic community in Scotland and that sectarian attitudes are higher among male than female students and among nominal than practising Catholics.

In Jordan, Al Serhan and Elareshi (2019) asked university social-media users whether social media platforms influence users' attitudes and feelings of safety when dealing with hate speech content in the news. Survey results revealed that university students could easily identify "hate speech" because they were exposed to it. They could also alert their friends and family members about such speech. The students reported that smart mobile devices were commonly used for spreading hate speech.

The above literature review shows lack of studies that investigated how sectarian language on Arabic social media impact common people's perceptions of different religious and political sects after the Arab Spring. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the following: (i) how sectarian language prevalent on Arabic social media, blogs, print media, and Arabic satellite TV shapes common Arab people's perceptions of sects such as Sunni, Shiites, Muslim Brothers, Salafists, Alawites, Jihadists, Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas and others; (ii) how Arab college students and faculty perceive different sects such as Sunni, Shiites, Muslim Brothers, Salafists, Alawites, Jihadists, Houthis, Hezbollah and Hamas and their attitudes towards them; (iii) the characteristics of sectarian language used on social media by college students and faculty; (iv) the impact of sectarian language on students, faculty and common people's perception (the perceiver, target, and situation), and the factors that influence them; (v) how sectarian language affects perception in the light of the social amplification and attenuation risk framework (SARF) of Kasperson et al. (1988 and 1996), i.e., how the social amplification of risk framework applies to sectarian language.

In addition, the literature review shows that scholars of communication and sociology are asking questions about the growing incidents of hate speech on social media. They enquire why people use media, what they seek to gain by using them and what the social, ideational, and online ethnocentric hate speech benefits are.

2. Theoretical framework
2.1. What is perception

According to George and Jones (2005) "perception" is the process by which individuals select, organize, and interpret sensory information to give meaning and order and shape the world around them. They indicated that perception has three

components: (i) The *Perceiver*, i.e., the person trying to interpret some observation that he or she has just made or the input from his or her senses; (ii) the *Target* of perception: Whatever the perceiver is trying to make sense of; and (iii) the *Situation*, i.e., the context in which perception takes place.

Each component of perception is influenced by several factors. The perceiver is influenced by three factors: (a) *Schema*, i.e., the organization and interpretation of information based on past experiences and knowledge; (b) *motivational state*, i.e., the needs, values, and desires of a perceiver at the time of perception; and (c) *mood*, i.e., the emotions of the perceiver at the time of perception.

Similarly, the target is influenced by three factors: (A) *ambiguity* that is lack of clarity and definiteness. When ambiguity increases, the perceiver may find it difficult to form an accurate perception and the perceiver's needs to engage in a lot more interpretation and active construction of reality to form a perception of the target. The more ambiguous a target is, the more potential there is for errors in perception; (B) *social status, i.e.,* a person's real or perceived position in society or in an organization; (C) *impression management*: an attempt to control the perceptions or impressions of others. Individuals who are high in self-monitoring are more likely to engage in impression management tactics than individuals who are low in self-monitoring. Targets use impression management tactics when interacting with perceivers who have power over them and who give them promotions, raises, and evaluations. Examples of impression management tactics are behavioural matching between the target of perception and the perceiver, self-promotion (presenting oneself in a positive light), conforming to situational norms, appreciating others, or being consistent. The *situation* is influenced by additional information and salience, i.e., the extent to which a target of perception stands out in a group of people or things.

In this respect, Lupyan, Rahman, Boroditsky and Clark (2020) found that the effects of language on perception can be observed both in higher-level processes such as recognition and lower-level processes such as detection and discrimination. They consistently noted that language causes us to perceive in a more categorical way. They concluded that the effects of language on perception naturally arise from the interactive and predictive nature of perception.

2.2. The risk amplification and attenuation framework

According to Kasperson et al. (1988) and Kasperson et al. (1996), risk is a complex phenomenon that involves both biophysical attributes and social dimensions. The concept of the social amplification and attenuation of risk framework (SARF) provides an approach for understanding how social structures and institutions

process a risk that greatly shapes their effects on society and the responses of management institutions and people. The social amplification and attenuation of risk framework is a tool for understanding how risks are perceived, interpreted, amplified, or attenuated as they are communicated by people throughout a society. It seeks to link the technical assessment of risk to sociological, psychological, and cultural aspects of risk perception and risk-related behaviour. It is based on the assumption that risk events and their portrayal in the media and other sources interact with social, psychological, cultural and institutional processes in ways that may amplify (exaggerate) or attenuate (understate) individual's and social responses to or perceptions of the risk event and shape the individual or group of people's risk behaviour. Different groups believe the other group to be either amplifying or attenuating a risk. Risk amplification occurs at two levels: The transfer of information about the risk, and the society's response to it. Signals about a risk are processed by individual and social amplification stations, including the scientist who communicates the risk assessment, the news media, interpersonal networks, cultural groups, and so others. The amplified risk results in behavioural responses that trigger secondary effects. The social amplification and attenuation of risk framework broadens our understanding of basic risk communication processes and leads to improved practice in communication about any social or environmental issues. Both amplification and attenuation of a risk can be harmful. Overestimation of a risk can lead to unnecessary anxiety and dangerous behaviour (Kasperson et al. 1988; Kasperson et al. 1996).

3.   Data collection and analysis

A sample of Arabic sectarian words and expressions was collected from Arabic Facebook and Twitter pages and hashtags, comments, Arabic online video clips, Arabic print media reports' comments, and Arabic satellite TV news channels. Sectarian words and phrases are those that describe something about smaller ethnic groups or sects in a community. They describe discord and tensions relating to internal divisions among the different social groups or sects in a society especially those that appeared after the Arab Spring that took place in 2011 such as *Sunnis, Shiites, Takfirists, Salafists, ISIS, Qaeda, Al-Nusra, Hezbollah, Muslim Brothers, HAMAS, the Syrian Revolution, Iran, Houthis, the Popular Mobilization Crowd in Iraq* and some religious and political personalities (*Qaradhawi, Bashar Assad, Sisi, Morsi, Hassan Nasrullah*), and others. These constituted the main categories of the sample of sectarian words and phrases collected (Alghashian and Menshawy 2022; Al-Jarf 2022; Al-Jarf 2015).

For each category, words and phrase used by the opponents and supports of each were grouped to find how each views the other. Words and phrases reflecting hate and racism speech were semantically classified into religious metaphorical slur, ethnic and racial metaphorical slurs (insults), satiric word play, pejorative descriptions produced by combining a general-purpose insult + the name of ethnicity, insulting modifiers to create loaded descriptivism and words and phrases that express abuse, hatred, contempt and hostility, disparagement, derogation, criticism, and disrespect towards those they oppose and towards the social and political situation (Al-Jarf 2022; Al-Jarf 2021; Al-Jarf 2015; Al-Jarf 2010; Al-Jarf 1998; Al-Jarf 1996).

In addition, a sample of 35 Arab college students and 15 instructors was surveyed. They were given a list of sects, countries, and names of politicians and Imams and were asked to describe each in at least 3 words *(Shiites, Houthis, Erdogan, Qaradhawi, ISIS, Iran, Muslim Brothers, Hamas, Bashar Assad, Hizbollah, Aljazeera).* Descriptions given by the subjects were grouped according to those categories. Those used by opponents and supporters were classified in the same way as the sectarian language collected from social media.

4. Results
4.1. View of the "Other" on Arabic social media

Data analysis has shown that the sectarian expressions collected from Facebook and Twitter pages and hashtags, comments, Arabic online video clips, comments on Arabic print media reports', and Arabic satellite TV news channels are characterized by inciting and deepening sectarianism, call for hatred and violence, spread and promote terrorist ideas, and reflect intolerance of the sect(s) the perceivers disapprove of, show contempt, criticism, hostility, accusations, hatred, disparagement and the use of cynical expressions and ethnic and sectarian slurs. They refer to personalities, parties, countries, TV channels that the users oppose or dislike in a derogatory, pejorative, satirical, and/or insulting manner. They use loaded language, as in the following examples:

1. Shiites are perceived by some Sunnis, Salafists, and Takfirists as *children of pleasure,* i.e., *illegitimate children, terrorists, Rwafids, Magi, Safavi, fundamentalists, Shiitism-phobia, Shiite phobia, Shi'ite Stan (land/state of Shiites), Zionist-Safavi, Kharijites of the End of Times; curse of God be upon the Shiites and the Magi.* On the other hand, some Shiites consider Sunnis as *Nawasib who curse Ali and the Prophet's family, infidels whose blood and*

money are permissible, fundamentalist, radical groups, and Sunni sectarians. They call Al-Azhar Mosque as *Al-Azar Al-Sharif (ill-mannered)*, in addition to *Sunni/Sunna-Stan*, i.e., land/state of Sunnis, and the *Sunni resistance in Iraq.*

2. Some call Iran rulers the *Wali Al-Faqih government, Mullahs of Iran, the Mulla regime, the Persian plot,* and *blundering of the Magis.*

3. Hezbollah is described by opponents as the *Devil's Party, Hizb Lat (apre-Islamic idol), a terrorist militia, Shiite Hezbollah, Hezbollah phobia, Iran's party, and Hezbollah Militia.* They described the leader of Hezbollah as *Hassan text lira; Hassan Nasr Al-Lat; Nasrallah, leader of the Hezbollah gang.* On the contrary those who support Hizbollah consider Hezbollah and its leader as *heroes, liberator of Southern Lebanon, Martyrs, victorious, conquered Israel, guerrillas.*

4. Opponents of Bashar Al-Assad, the Alawites and advocates of the Syrian revolution call it the *Alawi army, Alawi Regime, the Alawi Nusayri sectarian regime, Alawi Stan (Alawite State); the enemy of the Sunnis, Bashar's barrel bombs (exploding barrel); Bashar is killing his own people; Aleppo is being abolished by Bashar; the Syrian regime is infidel*. Supporters of Bashar call supporters of the Syrian revolution *rebels, dissidents, outburst, traitors, vandals.*

5. Sisi followers and opponents of the Muslim Brothers call them the *stray group, sheep brothers, corrupt, bankrupt, criminal Brothers, Islamized sheep (phonetic slur), bankrupt Brothers, Brothers' militias, Brothers' phobia, Ikhuanistan (land of the Muslim Brothers)*. On the other hand, advocated of the Muslim Brothers describe Sisi followers, and the June 30 Revolution as *the coup, the military coup, government of the coup, head of the coup, Prime Minister of the coup, Military militia, military's dogs.* The Muslim Brothers view Morsi as *the legitimate,* and *the elected president*. On the contrary, Muslim Brothers view President Sisi as *the military rule, the coup*. President Sisi followers call Morsi and Mubarak *the Islamized sheep; the remnants of the Mubarak regime; the ousted.*

6. Takfirists and Salafists are considered by their opponents as *fundamentalist, Jihad Salafists, Salafist Groups, extremists, radicals, Takfiri terrorism, Takfirist and Hijra groups in Egypt, Takfiri organizations, apostate, atheists, Islamic militants, Sunni fundamentalists, extremists.* Their advocates consider them *true Muslims, righteous groups, mujahideen, defenders of Islam, the surviving group.*

7. Houthis are described as *militias, Houthi coup militia, coups against legitimacy Houthi phobia, Houthi armed men, Houthi discourse, Houthi followers, Houthi songs and hymns, a Houthi journalist (female).*

8. The Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq are looked at as *militia, terrorists, and sectarian militias.* On the other hand, *supporters consider them liberators of Mosul, nationalistic,*

9. HAMAS: *terrorists; Hamas-stan (land/state of Hamas)* as opposed to those who consider *HAMAS as mujahideen, resistance, heroes, fighters, defenders, martyrs; victorious, conquerors of Israel, guerrillas.*

10. ISIS, Al-Nusra and Al-Qaida are described as *Takfirists, the stray group, bloody, inhuman, mass massacres, terrorist groups, militant (armed) groups, ISIS gangs, ISIS phobia, ISIS criminal acts, ISIS leaks, Qaida leaks, Jihad of marriage, Jihadstan (land/state of Jihad), Jihadists-phobia, Kharijites at the end of time.*

11. An Algerian journalist one wrote *"Algeria should be a federal state, no Islam, No Arabic".*

12. Those who die in war or explosions are described as *martyrs* by one group, and as *victims, casualties* or *dead people* by another.

13. The wall built by Israel in the West Bank is called *The security wall* as opposed to *The apartheid wall* by Palestinians.

14. One group uses *rebels* vs *armed men, fighters, or revolutionaries*.

15. Users of sectarian language have different views of Islam, Muslims people and sects such as saying *moderate Islam, radical Islam, fundamental Islam, extremist Islam, the Salafi jihadist ideology, Jihadi Salafism, the Caliphate State, heretics, Kharijites, abstaining sect, wrongdoing group, astray group, the opposition, the earners, mujahidin, Islamized groups.* Some question and doubt the Arabic descent of Shiites in Iraq. Others categorize Arab/Muslim countries into *moderate Sunni Arab governments* versus *Iran's extremist Shiite rulers*.

4.2. Participants' views of the "Other"

The sample of students and faculty in the current study used sectarian expressions similar to those used on social media, media reports and News TV stations to describe political and religious sects and some political and religious figures as in the following examples: They called Iran and Shiite *rawafid, rejectionist, extremists, magi, Shiite tide, enemy of peace, dangerous, fire worshippers.* They said about Bashar Assad: *Bashar kills his people, killer, murderer, tyrant, corrupt.* They described Hizbollah as *Terrorists, Party of Satan, Party of Lat (an idol).* They called Erdogan a *tyrant.* To them Al-Jazeera broadcasts *fake news, lies;* and *lacks credibility.* They called Hamas and Houthis as *terrorists, killers, Iran infiltrators.* They described Muslim Brothers as the *Islamised sheep,* and *stray group.* Other descriptions used were *infiltrator, spiteful, hypocrites, traitors, secular, infidels, accomplice, the astray group,* and *terrorists*.

The descriptions the subjects used are characterized by their non-literal, loaded expressions, dysphemisms and slurs. They expressed disparagement, derogation, criticism, and disrespect towards the sects, the social and political situation they oppose. They used of religious metaphorical slurs as in *Islamized sheep* for the *Muslim Brothers* in Egypt; ethnic and racial metaphorical slurs as *Satan's Party* and *Lat Idol Party for Hizbollah in Lebanon;* satiric word play such as phoneme substitution, phoneme interpolation and word substitutions as in *?aahir (salacious) for ?ahil (monarch); Qirdogan/Kirdogan for Erdogan where Qird is monkey and Kir is donkey.* Moreover, they used pejorative descriptions produced by combining a general-purpose insult + the name of ethnicity as in *Nasrullat,* i.e., *idolator; half a lira for Hassan Nasrullah; calling Arabs "a nation of ewes"; calling Iranians "fire worshippers".* They added common insulting modifiers to create loaded descriptions as in *history's dump, biggest Satan, NATO's dogs, snake's head, regime's trumpet, America's tail, desert's crab.* Semantically and pragmatically, metaphorical slurs express abuse, hatred, contempt, criticism, and hostility.

4.3. Analysis of sectarian language according to the Perception Theory

Perception is the organisation, identification, and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the world around us. To understand the effect of sectarian language on perception, the components of sectarian language can be analysed into the perceiver, target and situation. Examples of perceivers on social media, media reports and TV are preachers such as Ar'oor, Qardhawi; TV anchors especially those who work for the opposition TV Channels and pro-state channels such as Mutaz Matar, Mohammad Nasser, Zoubaa, Emad Al-Bihairi, Amr Adeeb, Ahmed Musa; Ali Hussein Mahdi; party leaders and activists such as Ayman Nour. Examples of the target of perception are the public, the Sunni and/or Shiite population, the Muslim Brothers, and their followers and so on. Examples of the situation are the Islamic State (Caliphate), June 30 coup/revolution in Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Syrian revolution, legitimacy in Yemen, War on Gaza and so on.

The factors that affect the perceiver can be analysed into: (i) Schema, i.e., organizing and interpreting sectarian language based on past experiences and knowledge as in *connecting the Shiite situation to what happened to Al-Husain (grandson of Prophet Mohammad who was killed centuries ago.* (ii) The motivational state of the perceiver, i.e., the needs, values, and desires of a perceiver at the time of perception such as *getting rid of Bashar Al-Assad, Houthis,* and *Muslim Brothers; establishing democracy; supporting one's own sect; reinstating Morsi and defeating President Sisi.* (iii) The mood, i.e., emotions of the perceiver at the time of perception as in *feelings of hatred, rejection, derogation,*

contempt, criticism, hostility, accusations, disparagement, intolerance of the sect(s) the perceivers disapprove of; and *denouncing what Bashar, the Muslim Brothers, Hizbollah or Houthis did/are doing*.

The factors that affect the target of sectarian language are ambiguity and social status. Here, the public and/or sectarian language users do not know what exactly is going on behind the scenes. They do not verify the information they receive from the perceiver. Some do not watch multiple TV channels, and do not read multiple resources. They believe what they are told by the perceiver. They just follow what they hear. A lecturer in the sample confused the Prime Ministers of Iraq. She thought a former PM was the current PM. The perceivers (as Mutaz Matter) are usually public figures with millions of followers on social media (Facebook and Twitter). They have their own YouTube Channels and/or TV shows. They are highly influential.

The perceivers use several impression management tactics to influence the public and targets: (i) Behavioural matching between the perceiver and the target of perception. *They believe in, support, and follow what they are told.* (ii) Self-promotion, i.e., perceivers present themselves in a positive light by *citing verses from Quran to prove they are right* or citing lines of verse by famous poets. (iii) They conform to situational norms. For example, *Saudis support the war in Yemen; Yemenis in SA support the allies; Syrians in SA are all against Bashar Assad.* A Jordanian professor who is anti-Shiite and anti-Iran told a colleague of his *"How come you support Iran and Shiites".* (iv) Appreciating others who have the same political or religious views. (v) Being consistent. Here, the perceivers keep repeating sectarian expressions such as *Sisi the Zionist agent/enemy, Sisi the leader of the gang, Sisi the criminal, the infidel, a political dwarf; Morsi the Martyr, the hero, the legitimate president; Bashar the dictator, killer of his own people, destroyed his country* and so on.

Furthermore, newspapers and television such as *Aljazeera, Al-Arabiya, DW Arabic, RT Arabic, BBC Arabic, CNN Arabic, TRT Arabic TV Networks;* r*eligion-oriented TV channels* (there are more than 100 channels); and *Alhayat, Asharq Alawsat, AlAkhbar, Annahar, Al-Ahram, Alyaoum Al-Sabe* newspapers are powerful communication tools that enable their users to send messages and convey information to millions of people simultaneously. TV networks, YouTube private channels, newspapers, and social media pages have different agendas.

T.V. networks, newspapers, and social media act on the assumption that recipients of a media message (a newspaper article, a tweet, a post, a lecture, a video clip, a TV show) process not only the explicit verbal content of the message, but also the implicit message contained within its pictures and figures of speech. All media use emotional appeals which influence people at an affective level. Adding a picture of a catastrophic event, as a mere means of illustration, can convey information that appeals to the common people's affect as in pictures *of Imran,*

Aylan, destroyed homes in Aleppo, the Sarine gas victims, chemical gases, Bashar kills his own people, exploding barrels, ethnic cleansing. Pictures of Rohingya (Muslim people in Mianmar) with adjectives that appeal to the emotions *(slaughtered, burnt, hanged on trees, thrown into the river, picture of a man stepping on a child's neck* as in Figure 1. They add "*If you don't share or take action, then you are heartless, you are a non-Muslim"*. Picture captions ask people to sign an appeal to the UN. Such images arouse feelings of fear, disgust, anger and sympathy in the receiver of the message. Emotion, cognition, and behaviours are tightly interwoven and influence one another. By eliciting any kind of affect in another person, the media can impact their thoughts, emotions, responses, and actions as well.

Figure 1. Pictures on Social Media that appeal to emotions

Values, attitudes, social influences, and cultural identity determine what human beings perceive as a threat to their well-being and how they evaluate probabilities and magnitudes of unwanted consequences. For example, *in Egypt, they talk about the economic crisis President Sisi brought about, which wouldn't have happened if "Morsi" was in power. Syrian rebels claim that Bashar is undemocratic, kills his own people, and describe the consequences of Assad's regime*.

4.4. Sectarian language and the social amplification and attenuation risk framework

The effect of sectarian language on perception can be interpreted in the light of the social amplification and attenuation risk framework (Kasperson 1988; 1996). Social media posts are emotionally framed by appeals to fears and uncertainty which lead to shallow information processing on the part of the recipient, who overestimates the dangers and threats imposed by the sect they oppose. Secondary consequences of a risk event serve as amplifiers of the original risk and activate representations of similar events within the receivers. For example, opponents' view the *"Other"* as a source of political and existential threat that affects the country and/or the region's stability. *Many Sunnis are afraid of the Shiite tide, Shiite Crescent,* and *influence of Iran in the region*. Opponents of Iran are afraid of *the expansion of the Iranian regime in their lands; the role of the Shiite Magi in the fall of Iraq; questioning and doubting the Arabic origin of Shiites in Iraq; the Sunni-Shiite war; Iran's interference in Yemen; Shiite Iran's ambitions; Iran supplies Hamas with missiles; the mobilization of the Sunnis against the Shiites; Khamenei the new Hitler who cannot be tolerated; Khamenei who executes protesters; beheading the rejectionist Magi; dominance and/or takeover of the putschists; coups against legitimacy; coup militias and their plot; eradicating the Baath Party in Syria; the massacres committed by the Shiite militias against civilians in Falluja, Iraq; the Popular Crowd is similar to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards; ISIS* mass massacres; ISIS followers saying *"we are coming to you to slaughter, capture and sell the girls of Iraq"; Houthi's plan to take over Sanaa completely; Jihadist groups such as ISIS, Nusra perceive Shiites, Alawites, Christians, Yezidis are renegades and non-believers who should be killed. Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, and Muslim Brothers are banned as they are being considered "terrorists"* and *"militias"*.

Likewise, opponents view the "Other" as a source of ideological threat, show behaviours that are against their faith and question each other's faith. *Opponents are renegades* and *the stray group. The Shiites consider the Sunnis to be Nawasib, i.e., infidels whose blood and money are permissible; the Rafidah Arab Magi in Iran curse the Prophet's companions; the Raafidis, the Magi are Kharijites of the end of times; Iran's radical Shiite rulers; the poison inscribed in the Magi Shiite doctrine; the Rafidah Magi celebrate the death of Omar, Aisha and Hafsa… O Muslim, Listen! awakening the slumbering and their oblivious children from the danger of the Shiites to Islam; the maliciousness of the Rafidah Magi against the Arab Mujahideen Arab companions.*

5. Discussion

Findings of the current study showed that Arab Spring media had a negative impact of hate speech that characterizes sectarian language and sectarian antisocial attitudes on social peace and solidarity. Findings of the current study are consistent with findings of prior studies in the literatures such as Egbunike and Ihebuzor's (2018) study in Nigeria which found a high level of hate speech on Twitter; the surge in xenophobic and racist discourse on the Internet that involved attacks on Koreans and ethnic minorities in Japan (Yamaguchi 2013); the rise in hate speech against migrants and Muslims in Slovenia, especially in relation to the *"refugee crisis"* (Bajt 2016; Bajt 2019)*;* hate speech, hate crimes and verbal and physical aggression against the "Other" in EU countries (Baider and Kopytowska 2017); and the Sunni-Shiite divide after the Syrian civil war (Darwich and Fakhoury 2016).

Examples of sectarian expressions analysed in the current study reflect the Sunni-Shiite divide in the post-2011 era as reported by Darwich and Fakhoury (2016) who concluded that sectarian identities have acquired a security threat, as perceivers and receivers of sectarian language have started framing each other as existential threats.

In addition, the sectarian language used by faculty and students in the current study can be interpreted by findings of studies by McKinney, Francis, and McKenna (2021), Taylor and McKeown (2019) and Merrilees, Taylor, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, Cummings and Cairns (2014) in Ireland and Scotland which indicated that previous experience with sectarianism, or intergroup violence was positively related to family ethnic socialization and higher levels of adolescent participation in sectarian antisocial behaviour. Sectarian attitudes were found to be higher among nominal than practising Catholics.

Unlike students and faculty in the current study, Al Serhan and Elareshi (2019) found that university students in Jordan could easily identify "hate speech" on social-media platforms because they were exposed to it. Jordanian students indicated that smart mobile devices were commonly used for spreading hate speech and that social-media platforms affect users' attitudes and feelings of safety when dealing with hate speech content in the news. Jordanian students are able to alert their friends and family members about hate speech.

As in the present study, social media provides a broad access to information sources not controlled by governments or major corporations, thus facilitating the creation and coordination of activist networks, and they constitute an unbeatable space for deliberating and exchanging ideas. The Arab Spring is an example of how social media helped transform indignation into action and lead to liberating and transformative movements. The dissemination of messages, posts, tweets, and

video clips that incite violence, using a variety of online forums and social media, has been documented as "a detrimental channel through which violence can be fueled (Isasi and Juanatey 2016).

6.   Recommendations and conclusion

Data analysis in the current study has shown that sectarian language shapes the perceptions of the public especially students and the young generation in order to get the desired behaviour by creating a sense of political, existential and ideological threat.   Arab educational systems can play a major role in attenuating the intensification and harmful effects of sectarian language on Arab societies. As an example, Baytiyeh (2017) indicated that the sectarian structure of the Lebanese political system has contributed to periods of sectarian violence and wars in the past four decades. She discussed the origin of sectarianism in Lebanon and how public and religious schools have reinforced sectarian divisions in the Lebanese society. She demonstrated how poor educational policies and approaches have de-emphasized the Lebanese national identity. She called for better educational approaches that create a culture of tolerance and instil citizenship education, diversify school communities, and promote interaction among students from different religious and ethnic backgrounds in order to build social cohesion and reduce sectarian violence. She recommended that a long-term educational plan be developed to protect children from future hazards of sectarian hatred and violence.

Another study by Siegel and Badaan (2020) conducted a survey on Twitter to evaluate the types of counter-speech interventions that are most effective in reducing online sectarian hate speech and to what extent messages priming common national or religious identity attenuate the use of hostile anti-outgroup language. They found that elite-endorsed messages that prime common religious identity are the most effective in reducing the spread of sectarian hate speech. This means that the religious elites may play an important role as social referents who alert individuals to the norms of acceptable social behaviour.

Moreover, to reduce the harmful effects of sectarian language and the negative views of the "Other", this study recommends the creation of pages on social media for counteracting hate and racism speech associated with sectarian language among students and faculty. The pages should aim at raising students' awareness of the sectarian language prevalent on social media; teaching tolerance to the students; developing critical awareness, critical thinking skills, dialogue skills; global awareness related to religious and political sects in Arab countries and ability to search for valid and authentic information. Faculty and students from different Arab countries, sects, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds can follow such pages

and actively participate in the dialogs and activities. They can enter into a dialogue with each other to gain knowledge of the reality of sectarianism and critically reflect on it. The social media learning environment should be characterized by mutual trust, respect, care, and members' support of one another.

Since there are many misconceptions, developing critical awareness of the sectarian reality through reflection and action, and raising students' critical awareness will help interpret violent incidents related to sectarianism in everyday life, and help the students understand related news. Students and faculty can monitor bias on social media platforms and verify information by examining the source and checking facts in multiple resources.

To help promote facts, encourage salutegenic behaviours, calm down fears and discourage students from turning hateful, hate content can be opposed with counter-narratives and sending out consistent informed counter-hate textual messages. Students can respond, react to, and discuss such hate speech and counter-narratives. To help students understand sectarian language, they should avoid connecting politics with faith, social groups and ethnicities by avoiding certain visual images, and disassociating verbal and nonverbal connections.

Raising students' global awareness can be achieved by bringing the outside world to the students' classroom through publishing and watching videos about different ethnicities and religious sects around the world. Student followers can comment on and discuss the video content.

Students' awareness of the Islamic view of different Islamic religious sects can be raised by publishing views of senior Muslim Scholars such as Al-Azhar Shaikhs, Mufti of Egypt or Lebanon and senior Ulama's in Saudi Arabia which who call for unity among Muslims belonging to different sects in the community such as Abadhi, Sunnis and Shiites.

To teach acceptance and tolerance, faculty and curriculum can raise students' awareness of the Islamic view of the other. The Quran clearly says: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female, and made you peoples and tribes, so that you get to know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you, in the sight of Allah, is the most pious". The Quran also says: "There is no compulsion in religion. The right path and the wrong path are clear".

Since social media provides a broad access to information sources not controlled by governments, ministries of information, ministries of education or major corporations, they facilitate the creation and coordination of activist networks, and thus constitute an unbeatable space for deliberating and exchanging ideas. Therefore, Arab Ministries of Information should set cyber-laws, rules, and regulations for avoiding sectarian language and intolerance on social media and promoting national unity.

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