The Importance of Netiquette in the Tunisian Virtual Speech Community

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Abstract: **The Evolution of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is inherent to the emergence of new media that support communication such as Social Network Sites (SNSs). Their evolution has led to the re-definition of communication. Facebook is a SNS whose use is pervasive worldwide and that deeply penetrates in its users' everyday life and tends to become invisible once it is widely adopted and taken for granted. Not different from other social network sites, Facebook encourages its users to mind their manners online in order to guarantee communicative relevance and effectiveness. Netiquette are codified rules that are either stated or unannounced but they maintain order within any virtual speech community. This research paper aims to study the importance of politeness rituals or simply netiquette in the Tunisian Facebook speech community and its variation along the variable age. Based on a quantitative method of data collection and a statistical analysis of variance, it was found that netiquette does not vary in terms of users' age. The participants are conscious about the importance of online social interaction norms and about the necessity of some rules of conduct on Facebook IM in order to guarantee successful communication. This study gives ample evidence that there is consensus about the importance of norms in online media and discredits the speculative claims about the crisis of standards in virtual speech communities.**

Keywords: **CMC, Virtual Speech Community, Netiquette, Flaming.**

I.   INTRODUCTION

The internet and particularly social network sites (SNSs) have brought about outstanding changes in relation to communication, information disclosure, and burgeoning new spheres of linguistic and social behaviours. They are ultimate communicative tools that bridge unimaginable distances and create relations that would be impossible offline [1]. The evolution of SNSs and the increased number of Internet users have engendered the evolution of a new notion which is the virtual speech community. The definition of a speech community can be equally applied to virtual settings. Online users share an understanding of the linguistic and discursive norms, despite the fact that some younger or new coming members of the group feel less competent and hence less proficient than those central experienced members who will be more fluent [11]. Herring [11] proposed six criteria according to which "the notion of "virtual community" might be broken into component behaviours that can be objectively assessed." These are: Participation (timing, frequency of posting messages and sending feedback), Shared history(use of group-specific style, jargon, language routines, norms and values, netiquette, and reactions against violations of rules of conduct), Solidarity(the use of verbal humour, linguistic support, speech acts of positive politeness), Criticism and conflict(flaming, negative politeness), A group's self-awareness('us vs. them' language, shared norms), and Evidence of roles and hierarchy (participation, analysis of speech acts in terms of leadership, governance and ritual) [11].

With the advent of technology, SNSs also turn to be powerful professional tool whose success is made clear through the advent of such new domains as e-commerce, e-medicine, e-conferencing, and e-learning to name a few [2]. These new domains necessitate a certain level of politeness and rules of conduct since they link different people whose credentials, communicative behaviours and reactions are referred to when necessary [2]. This is referred to in the literature as the rules of netiquette. The concern about codified online rules is dating to 1983 and attributed to apple's Chuq Von Rosbach [3].

"Netiquette, a cyber word, is the combination of the words network and etiquette. It is the social code of the Internet"[4]. These norms stress obligations for group and self monitoring to insure that members maintain a correct language, respect for the interlocutors, and communicative relevance [4]. Tolerance is an important notion and The Golden Rule in Netiquette is: 'Do unto others on the Internet as you would have done to you' [4].

However, out of any utopian world, dystopia is created [1]. Social media still carries the stigma of a crisis of standards. Netiquette, however, is not always guaranteed online because offenses are differently judged and evaluated. "It is equally possible that what one group condemns, another condones" [5]. The typical threat to netiquette is Flaming. "Flaming is the act of posting or sending offensive messages over the Internet" [6]. They may be posted within online discussion forums or newsgroups, or sent via e-mails or instant messaging programs [5]. Flaming or cyber-bullying is the output generated by people due to the wrong use of social media that opens the way to the violation of equilibrium and disorder [1]. Flaming leads to the exchange of insults between members of the group and to the breakdown of a topic. Generally, flaming is the result of the discussion of hot real life issues such as religion, sexism, racism, and politics but it can also be generated because of trivial issues such as sports, fashion, etc. This depends on the interpretation of the members of the forum. In fact, misunderstanding is the primary cause of flaming. For example, a sarcastic comment may be explained differently and "this often throws the discussion of a legitimate topic well off the track" [6]. Today, as we speak about hackers we speak about flamers. These are people specialized in flaming that are known with the advance of time, particularly when the Internet user became an active member in a newsgroup[6].

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the use of a standardised questionnaire as quantitative method of data collection. It is based on closed and multiple choice questions. The first 3 questions are demographic. They specify the characteristics of the participants in this study such as age, sex, and occupation. Questions 4 through to 10 are about Facebook instant conversation netiquette. This section is used to test the hypothesis stating that "computer-mediated groups develop norms of practice regarding 'how things are done' and what constitutes socially desirable behaviour" [7]. This is what Herring calls the situational context of CMC variation. This study aims to validate this hypothesis by focusing on age as an independent social variable that can be a determiner of computer-mediated norms on Facebook.

In order to ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was tested by 20 persons: 10 persons using a print version and 10 persons online on a Facebook group. A pre-test was conducted so that the validity of the questions, how easy they are to understand, and the pertinence of the proposed response modalities can be verified. Accordingly, the structure of the questionnaire was progressively improved thanks to the reactions and the remarks of the test group. The construction of the final version of the questionnaire ultimately led to Appendix A. In order to ensure better comprehension and a wide administration of the questionnaire, an Arabic parallel version was prepared.

Once the final version of the questionnaire was ready, two methods of administering were chosen. The first method consists of administrating a print version of the questionnaire in a face to face setting. This procedure permits a direct response to the respondents' queries and needs of clarifications about the nature of the questions and it also enables better control of the samples' representativeness. 175 questionnaires were distributed to people with different demographics, of which only 150 questionnaires were fully answered. In order to maximize response rates, a second method of monitoring questionnaires was used. It consists of a web based questionnaire available on: http://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ gform?key=0AuDFAlCmC6rvdFlSYzJwd3ZaN0pLMDJwN1hIQ1pubVE#invite). This link was circulated to all my friends on Facebook. They were asked to anonymously fill in the questionnaire on a voluntary basis, and to forward the link to their friends. 125 participants provided useful responses.

The collected data is categorized according to the age groups of the participants. The proposed division of the age groups is based on the categorization released by Facebook.com in 2011 but with some modifications. In the Facebook brochure, only those aged 13 years can have Facebook accounts. But, it was observed that a considerable proportion of people in Tunisia aged less than 13 years have Facebook accounts providing fake information about their birthdays. So, it was decided not exclude them from this study and since it concentrates on Facebook IM that is based on written CMC, those aged 6 years are incorporated since they are able at this age to write, hence the first age group includes those aged between 6 and 13 years. In the second age group, the first two age categories are mixed. Based on Bumgarner' s terminology [8] of "emerging adults" which incorporated teenagers (13 to 17) and early adults (18 to 25), the second age

group includes "Facebookers aged between (14 and 25). For the following two age groups, the age group categorisation stuck to Facebook.com categorization. That is to say, the third age group includes those aged between 26 and 34 and the fourth age group includes those aged between 35 and 45.Finally, the fifth age group includes those aged over 45 years. There is further categorisation in this last age group because it was anticipated that the rate of Tunisian Facebookers aged over 55 years will be low.

 Two hundred and seventy five persons participated in this study. In the light of age groups categorisation, the distributions of participants are the following: The first age group (6 – 13) contributed 10.5%, the second age group (14 – 25) 47.6%, the third age group (26- 34) 29.5%, the fourth age group (35- 45) 5.5% and the fifth age group (Over 45) 6%. The following figure summarizes the obtained data.
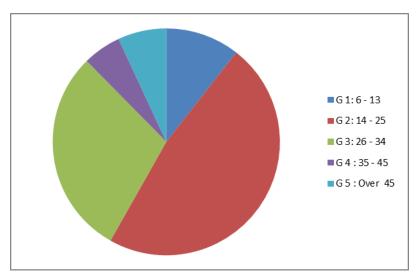

Fig.1 Age Groups on Facebook

44.4% of the participants are males and 55.6% are females. The participants are a mixture of people who belong to different socio-professional categories, that is to say they have different educational levels and different incomes. The software of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 17.0) is used as software of statistical data analysis. Two types of data analysis are used: descriptive statistics and ANOVA compare means. The One-way ANOVA analysis is used to compare the scores of independent age groups in relation to the respect of netiquette on Facebook IM.

III.   DATA ANALYSIS

Some questions about the participants' evaluation of the chat language and their reactions towards the violations of CMC norms of conduct or more simply "netiquette" were asked. This section was used to validate the hypothesis that netiquette is indispensible on Facebook and age is a determiner of computer-mediated norms on Facebook IM. As there are norms of conduct in face-to-face (FtF) conversation, the participants were asked whether they think that Facebook IM needs some politeness rituals or not. The following table presents their points of view.

TABLE I Age and the Use of Politeness Rituals on Facebook IM

Age Groups	Need for politeness rituals in online chat	
	Yes	No
G1: 6 - 13	28	1
G2: 14 - 25	118	13
G3: 26 - 34	69	12
G4: 35 - 45	13	2
G5: Over 45	18	1

Almost all participants (89.5 %) believed that CMC in general and Facebook IM in particular need a certain level of communicative politeness. Even in the light of the participants' views in function of their age, it is clear that there is consensus and the instances of exception were very few. In order to investigate the existence of netiquette on Facebook IM in depth, the participants were asked whether they speak the same way with all their friends in Facebook or not. 17.8 % maintained that they do not vary their language on Facebook IM regardless of their interactants. 82.2 % stated that they vary their language on Facebook IM according to their interlocutors. In fact, those who vary their language said that there are many factors that make them modify the way they speak.

TABLE II Age and the Factors behind Communicative Politeness

Age Groups / Reasons	G1: 6 - 13	G2: 14 - 25	G3: 26 - 34	G4: 35 - 45	G5: Over 45
Age of the respondent	10	38	14	2	1
Gender of the respondent	3	41	18	4	2
Status of the respondent	1	11	11	1	0
Your relation with the respondent	26	103	60	12	17
Other	0	1	0	0	0

It seems that all the factors according to which the participants vary their language with their interactants in order to insure netiquette were a combination of some social factors. But, the relationship between the interactants appeared to be a determinant factor. The other factors were age, gender, and the status of the interactants. In fact, these same factors have also their influences in FtF conversations. The existence of netiquette on Facebook IM does not negate the existence of some instances of politeness violations or more simply "flaming". The participants were presented with a frequency scale about the spread of flaming in Facebook. 30.5% stated that flaming was very frequent on Facebook IM, 44.4% believed that flaming was just frequent, while 3.6% maintained that flaming did not exist. The existence of computer-mediated norms is a fact but as etiquette exists, flaming also exists. About 96.4% of users stated that they would have different reactions towards flaming.

Table III Age and the Participants' Reactions towards Flaming

Age Groups / Reactions	G1: 6 - 13	G2: 14 - 25	G3: 26 - 34	G4: 35 - 45	G5: Over 45
You also use flames in response	6	13	7	1	0
You signal the message as undesirable	1	22	11	4	0
You omit this person from your Friends' list	15	86	48	9	9
You do not respond	8	19	15	1	15

As the violation of netiquette seems to be a pervasive phenomenon on Facebook, the reactions of the Facebookers vary in their degrees of seriousness. The majority tended to omit the flamer from the Friends' list so that they put an end point to such behaviour. While, some others tended to not respond not because they accepted such behaviour but may be to avoid confrontations particularly when flaming came from their close friends or may be because the flamers were just virtual friends. Much in the same vein, 14.34 % of the participants reacted differently. They tended to signal the messages which contained instants of flaming as undesirable and they showed their refusal of such behaviours directly to their interlocutors. In contrast, the rest tended to react in an aggressive way. So, they respond using flames. Such reaction may pave the way to the increase of online flaming but as we have seen before as impoliteness exists, politeness rituals also exist.

There are many factors that explain the spread of flaming. It is clear that the majority (55.6%) considered that flaming in computer-mediated communication was in fact a regular personal behaviour. The flamer is accustomed with such behaviour even outside CMC. He/she makes use of a rude impolite language even in FtF communication and in his/her daily life. Some others (44%) found that the absence of control on Facebook opens the way to the development of

Page | 314

flaming, while 37.1% believed that the use of fake identities and particularly pseudo names gave the flamers some freedom to use a rude language as they guaranteed that none will know their real identity. On the other hand, some of the participants stated that the spread of flaming was due to the reduced social cues online. The social relations online are not as strong as those in real life. The interactants on Facebook IM could be people who do not know each other and who may not even meet in the future. This makes online social relations so flexible which may explain the spread of flaming.

In order to further analyze computer mediated netiquette on Facebook IM and whether it varies according to the variable of age, an analysis of variance took place and it would be automatically followed with a Post Hoc test if the test of variance is significant. Two hypotheses are proposed. H_0 stands for a null variance. That is to say, the five age groups display the same respect of politeness rituals on Facebook IM and are not different from one another. And H_1 stands for the reciprocal case.

TABLE IV One-Way Analysis of Variance of Age and the Respect of Netiquette

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	,363	4	,091	,959	**,430**
Within Groups	25,578	270	,095		
Total	25,942	274			

Table IV illustrates that the Between Groups variation 0.363. This variation is due to the interaction in samples between the groups. This value is very small. This means that the mean differences between the age groups are close to each other. The table also lists that the Within Groups variation 25.578 is relatively low. This means that the within the same group differences are not so great. More interestingly, the significance level of 0.430 is superior to the threshold level value of 0.05. This indicates that H_1 is rejected in favour of the null hypothesis. So, there is no significant variance between the five age groups in what concerns their respect of Netiquette on Facebook IM.

IV.   DATA DISCUSSION

It was found that 89.5% of the samples believe that politeness rituals are as important in FtF as on Facebook IM. Even when looking at the participants' views, the instances of exception were very few in each age group in relation to the whole number of the age group. The scale of politeness or netiquette in an interaction is determined by the level of showing respect to each others' differences in terms of age, sex, status, or the relation between the interlocutors. The participants gave exceptional interest to the kind of relation that exists with their interlocutor. The existence of computer-mediated norms is a fact but, as etiquette exists, flaming also exists with considerable amounts (approximately 96.4 % believe in the existence of flaming). But, almost all participants take some reactions towards such violations of netiquette. These reactions differ in their degrees. They range from using counterpart flames to showing no reaction. But, silence could be considered as a reaction since it entails the refusal of aggressive reactions that may open the way for the use of rude language and accordingly increased flaming.   Facebook.com is trying to develop its affordances to meet users' needs in relation to etiquette maintenance. Today you can choose how to react to unacceptable shared content from different options such as: hiding the post (see fewer posts like this), unfollow the flamer (stop seeing posts but staying friends), and report the content (explain your attitude towards the content: it is annoying, it is not interesting, it is a spam, you appear in the content and you object to posting it, it should not be on Facebook).

In order to compare the variance between the different age groups in their respect of netiquette on Facebook IM, the One-Way test of variance was used to see whether the mean difference between the age groups was significant or not. The analysis gave a significance level of 0.43 which is superior to the threshold level value of 0.05. So, the different variance hypothesis was rejected in favour of null variance hypothesis. These results lead to the conclusion that there is no significant variance between the five age groups in what concerns their respect of Netiquette on Facebook IM.

The participants are conscious about the importance of politeness and about the necessity of some rules of conduct on Facebook IM in order to guarantee successful communication. The variation of language according to the interactants and the rejection of flaming are all indices of politeness respect. Accordingly, there is a certain consensus about the existence of netiquette norms on Facebook IM and the anecdotal stories about the inexistence of CMC etiquette seems to be discredited. In fact, CMC etiquette was previously studied. But, as far as the review of the literature was concerned, the

study of the correlation between netiquette and age groups on Tunisians' Facebook IM has not been made clear. But, the findings of this research are discussed in the light of these previous researches of CMC etiquette. Morand and Ocker [9] maintained that the evolution of CMC permitted the development of many of its aspects, particularly politeness that "begin[s] to jell". This is in accordance with the results since politeness on Facebook IM has become grounded as all age groups showed the same respect to netiquette. Much in the same vein, Planchenault [10] argued that any online community has a set of rules and codes that should be adopted by any new member; otherwise he/she will be rejected. He showed that there is a link between joining a virtual community and using positive politeness strategies. This is in accordance with the obtained results.   The creation of dystopia is the responsibility of people's wrong use and unproper output. Netiquette is a communicative regulator that makes network sites attractive and appealing to people and without it its effectiveness is reduced [2].

Herring [11] argued that CMD can vary depending on certain social variables so that it created stratifications along these variables. But, she maintained that this variation cannot exceed some stylistic norms such as netiquette. This is what Herring called the situational context of language variation in CMD. She stated that the situational context would either minimize or maximize the sociolinguistic variation. In this case, the situational context reduces the sociolinguistic variation. Even if the variation of stylistic choices in relation Tunisians' age on Facebook IM is evident, it cannot exceed the norms of netiquette. For example, someone who belongs to the first age group would be more conservative in his/her use of emoticons or acronyms with another one from the last group, particularly when he/she know that they do not have the same knowledge of the meaning inferred by these forms. One marker of politeness is the use of clear and acceptable language.

V.   CONCLUSION

Adopting a sociolinguistic approach to Facebook IM language, this research paper came to show that the rules of netiquette are strongly built in Tunisians' Facebook conversations and do not vary in terms of users' age. The participants are conscious about the importance of online social interaction norms and about the necessity of some rules of conduct on Facebook IM in order to guarantee successful communication. The scale of netiquette is determined by the level of showing respect to each other's social differences and particularly the relation between the interlocutors. This study gives ample evidence that there is consensus about the existence of netiquette norms in Facebook IM and the anecdotal and speculative claims about the inexistence of CMC etiquette seems to be discredited.

The importance of the obtained results does not negate the existence of some limitations that might affect its further generalizations particularly in relation to population size and the use of quantitative methods to study netiquette where answers may be idealized since the respondents may behave differently online. This highlights another methodological limitation in relation to the analysis of politeness rituals online using quantitative methods of analysis. So, major future researches could be directed to the use of comparative sociolinguistic studies and the use of an analytical framework such as pragmatics to analyze the participants' chat logs using speech acts analysis or the analysis of the maintenance and the violation of Grice maxim using qualitative methods of data collection that document the thoughts and reactions of Facebookers.

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