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**VIRTUAL LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE: A FERTILE SPACE FOR
WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION
PAYSAGE LINGUISTIQUE VIRTUEL: UN ESPACE FERTILE POUR
L'EMANCIPATION DES FEMMES**

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Abstract

Women have traditionally been deprived from not only the mere right of freedom of expression, but also from the natural right to “exist” in a culturally male-dominated space that considers women *personæ non gratae*. Today, women are given the chance to “exist” and express themselves on virtual spaces thanks to Internet without being physically present. The goal of this paper is to reveal the extent to which the Algerian virtual scenery may reflect women's presence and semiotic attitudes as emancipatory acts. Hence, women's public and visible productions on an Algerian Facebook page have been observed and analyzed. Unsurprisingly, the results demonstrate the significant extent to which women have appropriated the virtual space as they are rejected in the physical one. Furthermore, women seem strong-willed to exploit virtual spaces to change and better their situation in real-life.

Keywords: linguistic attitudes, virtual Interaction, women's empowerment.

Résumé

Les femmes ont traditionnellement été privées non seulement du simple droit à la liberté d'expression, mais aussi du droit naturel ‘d'exister’ dans un espace culturellement dominé par les hommes où elles sont considérées *persona non grata*. Aujourd'hui, les femmes ont la possibilité ‘d'exister’ et de s'exprimer sur des espaces virtuels sans être physiquement présentes grâce à Internet. Le but de cet article est de révéler comment le paysage virtuel algérien pourrait refléter la présence des femmes et leurs attitudes sémiotiques en tant qu'actes émancipatoires. Pour cela, des productions publiques et visibles des femmes sur une page Facebook algérienne ont été observées et analysées. Sans surprise, les résultats démontrent la mesure importante dans laquelle les femmes ont approprié l'espace virtuel vu qu'elles sont rejetées dans l'espace physique. En outre, les femmes semblent posséder une forte volonté d'exploiter les espaces virtuels pour changer au mieux leur situation dans la vie réelle.

Mots-clés : attitudes linguistiques, autonomisation des femmes, interaction virtuelle

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Introduction

Women's emancipation and involvement in the fight for their rights have gone through several stages. From solidarity to activism, women have participated in this "battle" using different "weapons" and strategies according to what their context allows them to accomplish. Admittedly, women have been deprived for a month of Sundays from not only the mere right of freedom of expression, but also from the natural right to "exist" in a culturally male-dominated space that considers women *personæ non gratae*.

In this day and age, women succeeded to gain some "battles" and to change their situation concretely. As the world is changing and the notion of space is being redefined, there is a transposition of this fight from physical to virtual spaces. More and more women are aware of the impact that their presence and interaction on virtual spaces might implicate as an asset for emancipation. Today, women have started invading virtual spaces in order to change things in their physical space especially that many scholars and international organisations are calling for women's emancipation through the use of Internet and information technologies.

Background of the Study

In 1995, the Platform for Action ("*Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*", (1995: 7.69) adopted in the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing called for the empowerment of women through enhancing their skills, knowledge, access to and use of information technologies. It was a major change in the strategy used for women's emancipation. Its strategic objective was to increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication. Since then, women have been encouraged to express themselves and to be active actors through the use of technology and thus Internet.

Later in November 2001, the Action Plan of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force (2001, p. 2), aimed to "provide a platform to analyze how programmes for promoting education, combating diseases, promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and those targeting youth, the disabled and people living in poverty in general can be leveraged and enhanced with ICT (Information and Communication Technology)". In its declaration, the need to incorporate a gender perspective in different areas is also acknowledged. Conjointly, in its 47th session in 2003, the Commission on the Status of Women (2003: 07.12), has straightforwardly concentrated on the issue of ICT and the empowerment of women. It recognized the importance of the issue and states: "Participation and access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women".

Moreover, in its annual report of 2005, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women ("*Annual Report*", 2005, p. 5) argues that:

Access to Internet and Technologies of Information can enable women and men to gain a stronger voice in their communities, their Government and at the global level. ICT also offers women flexibility in time and space and can be of particular value to women who face social isolation, including many women in developing countries.

It is also stated that: "Women are enjoying freedom of expression and privacy of communication to oppose gender discrimination and to promote women's human rights". As one may notice, it is commonly agreed upon the fact that ICT and Internet are being viewed as an asset that may help women to voice their opinion and to contribute to changes not only at the local level but also at the global one. Connectedly, it is recognized that Internet offers women a secure space in which they may not only "exist" without being discriminated but also express themselves freely and without any social constraints. It is true that this space is virtual and not tangible; however the repercussions that it might engender are strongly feared and apprehended. The best example that can be cited is the "Arab Spring"; social networks such as Facebook and Youtube have greatly contributed to mobilizing people for protests in many countries as it was the case in Tunisia and Egypt. People effectively used these virtual spaces as a tool to change their situation in the physical space. The same strategy might be used by women; they can use virtual spaces to change their situation in the physical ones. It is true that the physical and virtual spaces are interconnected thanks to the fluid movement between the two spaces but each one has its own particularities and characteristics.

The specificities of a virtual space for women are multiple. For Edwina Sandys (Sandys, 2005, p. 27) virtual spaces help women "to overcome some socially constructed gender roles and relationships". For example, the fact of being physically absent for a woman may push her ahead to do and say things that are not possible for her to do or say in a physical space. This is more likely to happen in the Arab-Muslim contexts where the female presence is sometimes problematic. Also, being physically distant for women is associated with body implication, which is an aspect proper to virtual spaces.

However, there are other facets which differentiate the two spaces. For instance, there is no time constraint on a virtual space unlike the physical one. Women can easily be on any virtual space at any time they want without any constraints. Moreover, connecting or disconnecting on any virtual platform repeatedly is not problematic as it might be the case entering and/or exiting from a shop or a bank. On a virtual space, users may sign in and sign out as much and as often as they want. Moreover, virtual spaces do not make of gender an obstacle to enter some places as it is the case in the physical world. For example, there are no websites made exclusively for women or for men. All users are treated equally regardless of their gender. Undeniably, the notion of virtuality seems to make of Internet spaces favourable spaces for women's involvement in different domains especially in the MENA regions where traditional gender roles are still omni-present viewing women's space being home and no-where else.

Aim of the study

The present paper aims to focus on the Algerian virtual scenery for the sake of being aware of the extent to which women's emancipation could be portrayed on the Algerian virtual linguistic landscape and how it is depicted. This would allow having an idea on women's role in this 'unreal' space which gives them more opportunities than the real space. This study relies on a virtual linguistic landscape analysis which seeks to reveal the undertones of public discourses. This method tries to reproduce the linguistic landscape approach used in the analysis of public discourses in the city space. The objective behind the selection of this methodology is to shed light on different women's linguistic behaviours that are visible on the virtual scenery. Thus, it is important to consider public linguistic behaviours as they form the visible

aspect of the virtual scenery. Besides, the goal of this study is to try to discern whether the particularity and the characteristics of the virtual space encourage women to overtly express themselves in an emancipated manner.

Methodology

This work focuses on social network interaction, bottom-up communication, given its importance compared to websites where the social interaction is not significant. The most popular social network in Algeria is Facebook according to statistics provided by Social bakers (Social bakers: URL1) in 2015. The following statistics show the significance of Facebook in Algeria.



Figure 1

It is noticeable that the number of users has irreversibly increased in four years only. This has made of this social network the first and most popular one in Algeria. The gender repartition clearly indicates that there is a male domination. In 2010, 70% of the users were male users and 30% female users. However, in 2014, the female number of users has increased, the 32% of female users are much more active than the male users.

The methodology used in this work is inspired from Dejan Ivkovic (2013) model in which he analysed language attitudes on data taken from another significant social network. Ivkovic analysed the public comments made on YouTube pages featuring videos uploads of songs performed in the Eurovision Song Contest. The selected comments for his analysis were the ones that appear at a first sight in the comments section. Thus, the number of the analysed comments varies according to the length of the comments in the same section. The choice of considering the perceptible comments only is a way to transpose the technique used in the analysis of the linguistic landscape of a city space.

In the present paper, the same approach is followed for the same reasons. However, a translation for every comment had to be done by the authors as most of the posts are written in French or Arabic. The analysis concerns female comments on public posts in a more than 267 000 followers Algerian page named 'envoyés- spéciaux- algériens'. Not all posts have been taken into account, only public posts that have been posted in the period between February and September 2015, and that were commented by at least 50% by females. Thus, five posts have been considered for the selection of the comments that are analysed. On the other hand,

the number of the analysed comments depends on their visibility and their length in the comment section. Consequently, this number varies from one post to another.

The analysis of these comments is descriptive and interpretative at the same time. It follows computer-mediated-communication discourse analysis as it relies on screen shoots for data collection. Besides, the choice of considering female public and visible comments is directly linked to the methodological model followed. Ivkovic's model (2013) derives from the linguistic landscape analysis approaches in which public discourse in the city space is taken into account since it is full of indications related to language. In this particular case, analysing comments would be informative about many issues including females' freedom of expression and its performance on a virtual space.

Segmentation of findings

After data analysis, female discourse has been classified into three segments that divide gender linguistic norms into the following categories; social norms of gender, against social norms of gender, and the opposite of social norms of gender.

- Social norms of gender: it has been noticed that some women are reproducing the same stereotypical attitudes about them. As in the Difference and Deficit Theories advocated by Lakoff (Lakoff, 1975: 45,53), women express themselves politely, in a correct language, and there is solidarity between women.
- Against social norms of gender: it has been noticed that some women do not reproduce the commonly gender roles. In their comments, they express themselves strongly and firmly, they dare to diverge and to express their point of view, and to contradict others.
- Opposite of social norms of gender: it has been noticed that some women not only do not reproduce the stereotypical model but do exactly the opposite by eradicating the stereotypes. In their comments, they express themselves vulgarly and dare to use swear words publicly without any complex. They show a persistent behaviour and they are submissive unlike what has been reported in the Different, Deficit and Dominance Theories.

Findings and interpretation

The following examples will show that the three behaviours are present in the posts in which there are more than 50% of female comments. Screen shoots of the most pertinent comments have been considered. They have been classified according to which segment they belong to.



This post reveals the results of a survey made in Algeria, in which 59% of the female respondents stated that the husband has the right to beat his wife, and 66% of women in the rural areas accept to be abused. “No to harassment” is written in Arabic on the picture. In this post, there have been three kinds of women’s comments.

1. Social norms of gender: women expressing themselves politely



Translation: Are you sure that women have been asked? I am chocked



Translation: It is shameful that a woman says this kind of things, it’s downgrading for women in general. As one may notice, in this kind of comments, even if they do not agree with what has been reported, they express themselves politely. This can be related to what Jessperson (1922) and Lakoff (Ivkovic, 2013) have argued about women’s language being polite. It is clear that the social norms of gender related to this kind of comments are not challenged, they are reproduced.

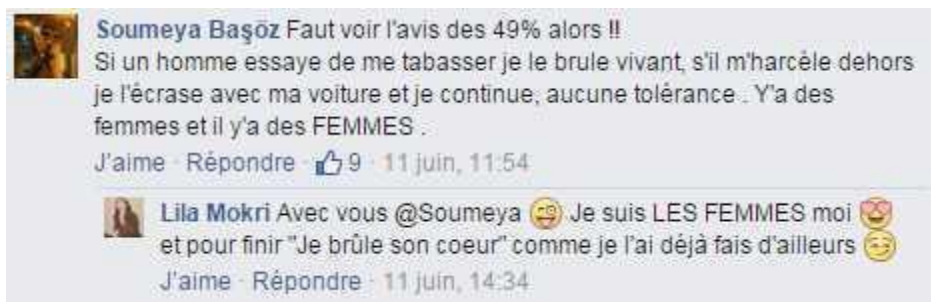
2. Against social norms of gender: women expressing themselves strongly & women’s solidarity



Translation: Those women who accept this should rather see a psychologist



Translation: it’s even harder to liberate when one doesn’t know that one is slave.



Translation: Then we need to check the opinion of the 49%! If a man tries to beat me, I will burn him alive, if he harasses me out, I crush him with my car and move on, no tolerance, there are women and WOMEN. I am with you Soumeya, I am WOMEN, and to end, I will burn his heart, as I already did. In this kind of comments, the reactions are rather strong and daring. Women here, and in many other comments, are against what is traditionally attributed to women's language. They reject firmly what has been reported and they say it clearly without any shame or embarrassment. They also refer to themselves as being different from those women who accept violence. Moreover, they show solidarity and agree to have a common behavior that will distinguish them from other women.



Figure 2: A controversial picture taken in a shop in Algiers.

Translation: Unveiled women are kindly asked to not tarry in the shop because it's our livelihood, thanks.

This controversial picture was taken in a shop in Algiers. In this post, women, as they are the most concerned ones, reacted much more than men. Their reactions were different according to many parameters. Women felt discriminated and did not hide their displeasure. The following comments are the most representative of the three segments selected.

1. Social norms of gender: women expressing themselves politely



Translation: It's just as we are entering the Mosque, so, God may help him, we will buy elsewhere



Translation: None has the right to judge, not because a woman is unveiled means that she has no value, and vice versa. Comments like this on this post are rare. However, they exist to show that some women keep using a polite language unlike the majority of them. Even if these women feel being discriminated, they keep using the normative form of language. It is true that they do not agree or support this kind of behavior, but still, their reaction does not challenge the stereotypical gender norms.

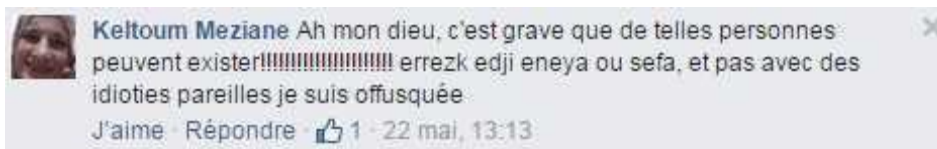
2. Against social norms of gender: women expressing themselves strongly & women' solidarity



Translation: In this hypocrite country of hypocrites, one just needs to wear the veil and to have a beard to do anything... stealing, lying, corrupt, fornicate... it's allowed as long as it's not visible... just a precision, I suppose you know that God sees everything?



Translation: You rather love the hypocrites, those who wear the veil and wear a string and a slinky jelaba. Being a Muslim is in the heart



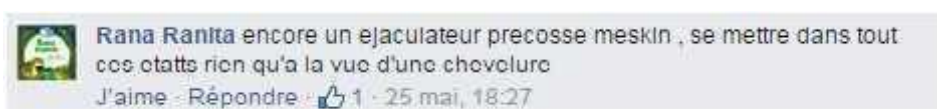
Translation: Ah my God! It's serious that such people might exist!! Livelihood comes thanks to honesty and a good heart, and not via these stupidities, I feel offended.



Translation: I wear the veil but I will never set foot in your store, bunch of berks.

In comments like these, women are challenging the social gender norms by expressing themselves strongly and by daring to use insulting words and expressions. Moreover, one can notice that there is solidarity between them, even if they do not know each other. This kind of linguistic behaviour is rarely applicable in a physical space as it is against the gender norms.

Opposite of social norms of gender: women expressing themselves vulgarly & persistently



Translation: Again a poor premature ejaculator becoming very excited by seeing hair.



Translation: Holy shit



Translation: pff pathetic, poor miserable.



Translation: I, personally, never buy from them, group of pedo-zoophiles, we have to boycott them.



Translation: He is a donkey.



Translation: Go to hell



Translation: Band of perverts! Shame on you, the dirtiness of the world it's you...



Translation: Band of frustrated and hypocrites! You only downgrade women! Go and dare challenge the politics, go to work and respect others, it's already a start, they say the Prophet just said, we know, but the day men will have the Prophet's (PBUH) wisdom, Algeria will go better.

These kinds of comments are the most frequent in this post. As one may notice, women are using swear words and vulgar expressions that are not supposed to be part of their 'repertoire'. Women are not only disrespecting the social norms of gender but also challenging men and showing a great sense of rebellion and persistence. What has been written by women in these comments is definitely the opposite of the traditional and conventional women's language. Being vulgar and persistent has traditionally never been considered as a behaviour that can be adopted by women. Yet, most of the female comments on this post are vulgar and insulting.

Obviously, women are freely expressing themselves because of the context. All this would hardly happen in a physical context



Figure 3: An article about a scandalous news

Translation: A female-student prevented from sitting for the exam because of her skirt considered too short.

This incident has generated a lot of reactions on Internet and even on the traditional media. Not only feminists or women have reacted to this event, but also men did so by being involved in the debate. However, the reactions were different.

1. Social norms of gender: women expressing themselves politely

Remarkably, when classifying the most pertinent comments according to what they express, it has been noticed that there was no single comment on which women are reproducing the traditional gender norm. Not a single comment on which women are submissive and polite in what they are expressing. This clearly reflects the extent to which women were seriously affected by this event as they feel concerned.

2. Opposite of social norms of gender; women expressing themselves vulgarly & women's solidarity



Translation: Again a poor premature ejaculator becoming very excited by seeing hair.



Translation: She should've showed him her ass, then he would've let her enter ...little bastard.



Translation: I am addressing those who think they have rights on the female world: tell me, who gave you the right to tell women what to wear? Everyone has his own tomb band of obsessed, you better care for your look and small brain



Translation: Hello, I'm a lawyer and I would like to help this woman in this affair. Please send me her number.



Translation: If I were her, I would've forcefully sat for my exam and I would've argued with this guard... who gave him the right? (Even if I don't like miniskirts).

All comments on this post are rude and, sometimes, impolite. Women have massively and strongly reacted to this event by condemning what happened to the woman in question. Their reaction is very challenging with regard the social norms of gender roles, as they do not reproduce the stereotypical model of submissive women who do not dare giving their opinion in a free way.

Their linguistic behaviour also does not fit the prototype attributed to women in society. Moreover, what is interesting about this event is that it has created a very big movement of solidarity between women. In many comments, a lot of women in high positions proposed to help this woman. Connectedly, as a concrete feedback to this event, a Facebook page has been created by solidarity in order to gather women and to mobilise them to reject the idea of being submissive.



Figure 4: Women's solidarity

Translation: My dignity is not in the length of my skirt.

Furthermore, as an act of not only solidarity but also empowerment and liberation, women started posting on this page and on their profiles pictures of their legs as it is illustrated on the following picture.



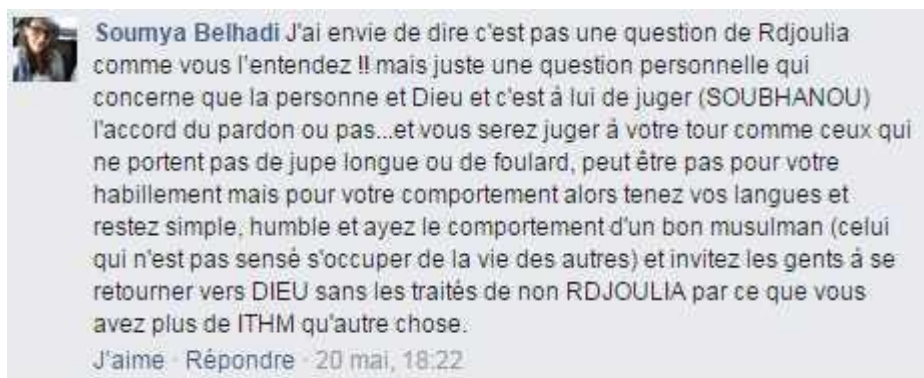
Women's mobilisation on social media during this incident was so active until the Rector of the University apologized to the lady on a TV show. This massive mobilisation of women could be seen as an indicator of the power of social media. However, what is noteworthy here is the way this virtual deployment succeeded to break and challenge the traditional social norms of gender. This happened not only via women's strong and free self-expression on Facebook pages, but also through the involvement of their body pictures as a challenging act of solidarity. It is important to note the unconventionality and innovativeness of such an act in the Algerian context where female body pictures are sometimes taboo.



Figure 5: The other reaction of veiled women
 Translation: Be a man and don't let your women go out with a disgraceful outfit

Simultaneously, a counter-attack and a counter-discourse have invaded the social media as a reaction by conservatives against those who showed solidarity with the woman in question. In fact, the impact of women's solidarity was so important that women who do not agree to see other women wearing miniskirts launched the so-called "anti-skirt campaign". Indeed, a lot of women started to post pictures of their Hijab asking for men involvement in women's dressing. As a reaction to this, women expressed themselves in different ways and manners. The following examples illustrate the diversity in women's opinion on this issue.

1. Social norms of gender: women expressing themselves politely



Translation: I want to say that it is not a question of manhood like you say, but a personal question that concerns only the person and God will judge...He forgives or not... and you will be judged as well like those who don't wear long skirts or the veil, maybe not for your dressing but for your attitudes so keep quiet, simple and humble, and adopt the behaviour of a good Muslim (the one who is not supposed to care about other people's live) and invite people to the straightway of God without treating them of non-virile because you'll get a bad act simply.



Translation: Dressing doesn't make the monk, and appearances are often deceiving, be it for someone wearing a long or a mini skirt.



Translation: Everyone is free to dress the way s/he likes...just respect places like schools, universities, Mosques, administrations and institutions which require a decent outfit... for the rest everyone is free.

Although some women do not agree with the content of this post, they express themselves politely and try to explain their point of view without being disrespectful to those women.

However, this kind of reaction is not the dominant one; very few comments were expressed politely.

2. AGAINST SOCIAL NORMS OF GENDER: WOMEN EXPRESSING THEMSELVES STRONGLY



Translation: Only women disturb you, band of obsessed, thieves, killers and rapists cause you no bother you as women's legs in a miniskirt, everyone should care about his own business and about other's business.



Translation: We are not in Saudi Arabia, we are free women, we dress as we wish.



Translation: Why not an anti-assholes campaign, who are vulgar to girls, young girls and even married women, do you find this normal? From what we see, some girls made of the Hijab a ridiculous outfit because of their behaviours, so stop it please you disgust me.



Translation: This chiffonier woman has apparently nothing to do in her life to go to write to men: beautiful from the outside, could be ugly from the inside.

Many comments are written in the same tone. Women are expressing themselves very strongly and firmly against this anti-miniskirt campaign. Even if it is against other women, they show their disagreement and do not allow other women dominate the floor and impose their way of thinking. This determination and divergence of viewing things is not commonly seen as conventional or proper to women's relationship, as women are traditionally seen as solidarity seekers.

2. Against social norms of gender: women expressing themselves strongly:



Translation: Be a man? Are you kidding us? Being a man is about not letting the girls of the family going out wearing skirts? Hell, girls of your family are humans vaccinated and independent; they do what they want and you, what is it for you? Fuck off, real men should instead care about their studies and work, poor people.



Translation: All the bitches wear the veil, girls wearing skirts are cleaner.



Translation: poor asshole, slave without knowing it, nonexistent shadow in the society, voiceless with no opinion, poor you, slave, you are a slave and you will always be so.



Translation: We don't care about their lives, I dress the way I like, long or mini skirt, pant, and I don't give a damn about others!!!!



Translation: You should be a man and don't be excited when you see a piece of legs, band of frustrated.



Translation: First victim: the woman, in this fucking country, whether she wears a skirt, a dress, a pant or a Hijab, anyway, she's always attacked by the frustrated perverts and savages. So please we know your stories.



Translation: Okay, she goes out wearing the Hijab, and then what she will do? She has the right to do the bitch! Assholes! – Go and buy a deodorant poor frustrated with life, For sure you are ugly, go and clean yourself.

Seemingly, the majority of the female comments were written in a vulgar way. Counter-attacks were rude and far from reproducing the stereotypical female linguistic attitudes. From swear words to ironic expressions, women are linguistically behaving in the opposite direction of what the social norms of gender dictates. This clearly indicates the extent to which women feel free and emancipated in such a context

According to the data analysis and interpretation, one can argue that some Algerian virtual spaces might be considered as favourable and fertile spaces for women's emancipation. This is due to the nature of the context; a virtual context in which women feel safe and free because of its characteristics. Also, women dare do and say things that are impossible for them to do and say in a physical space because of many obstacles that are proper to this context and not to the virtual one. Moreover, if some women are not activists or feminists in the physical space, they might become for a moment activists or feminists thanks to the virtuality of the context and the facilities it gives to women's reaction. That is to say, an ordinary woman is more likely to express herself and to show solidarity for a given event on a virtual space than in a physical space because of the barriers that are imposed on her in the latter.

Importantly, the socially constructed gender roles and relationships are often challenged on some Algerian virtual spaces. As it has been noticed, women not only "exist" and express themselves without any constraint, but they dare to do it strongly and sometimes vulgarly. It is true that being vulgar is not necessarily an emancipatory act. However, what is interesting is the fact that women dare confront and change 'the taken for granted' and stereotypical representations about women's language and behaviour. Such an action is not frequent in physical spaces, but on virtual spaces women express themselves freely without thinking of being judged by society; that is a start for women's emancipation and empowerment.

Conclusion

It is also noteworthy that the study revealed that whether they agreed or disagreed with the content of the posts or with other women's comments, women reacted freely and wrote exactly what they think. This is the accurate act of emancipation; it is to express oneself without considering the socially constructed gender norms and attitudes dictated and imposed to women

mainly, as it is reported in the gender theories in which women's language is described as polite and respectful in whatever context. Consequently, one can consider Algerian virtual space as a fertile space for women's emancipation and empowerment.

The exploitation of virtual spaces might be fruitful for women willing transposing change from the virtual to the physical context. The examples are many where virtual spaces have helped in changing the situation in physical spaces. With all the transformations that we witness in our current times, the fight now for women's rights and empowerment is taking place on virtual spaces more than in physical ones. Women should be aware of this reality if they desire bringing drastic changes in their contexts. However, this can only be achieved through educated women who are aware of the importance of education in the use of technologies and in life in general.

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