Strategies of Facebook users in offering condolences on a death anniversary: A case study from Jordan
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Abstract
This paper explores the most frequently used strategies by Jordanian Facebook users when commenting on the death anniversary status of Wasfi al-Tal, a former prime minister of Jordan, who was assassinated in 1971. The corpus comprises 530 comments. The findings reveal the use of nine strategies, e.g., praying for God’s mercy, praying for God’s mercy annexed to wishing the deceased an abode in paradise, praying for God’s mercy in combination with highlighting the uniqueness and unforgettability of the deceased, among others. The findings also uncover that while some Facebook death anniversary related strategies were similar to those associated with offering condolences in general, some other strategies appeared to be solely used for this death anniversary.

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1. Introduction
Linguistic competence in any language does not necessarily imply pragmatic competence. The former focuses on the use of language system with all its components in terms of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics while the latter involves the ability of the speaker to use language appropriately in different social contexts and to determine inappropriateness of language use on occurrence. Differences in cultures are responsible for different realizations of speech acts. Thus, what is acceptable in one culture might not be in the other. Even in the same culture, speakers must learn how to respond both verbally and nonverbally on different occasions, especially in times of bereavement. This has been highlighted in a large number of studies whose main focus is on speech acts such as compliments, offers, invitations, greetings, partings, refusals and congratulations. In contrast, very few studies have addressed the speech act of giving condolences and the strategies used while responding to a death anniversary on Facebook.

The paper reports on the findings of a detailed analysis of comments that were posted on Facebook on the 44th
strategies of Facebook users in offering condolences on a death anniversary: A case study from Jordan

and 49th death anniversaries of a famous Jordanian politician and statesman, Wasfi al-Tal, who descended from a large family living in Irbid in the north of the country. His father, Mustfa Wahbi al-Tal, also known as Arar, was a well-known Jordanian poet. Wasfi was born in 1919 in Iraq. He assumed the position of prime minister three times in 1965, 1967 and 1970. On 28 November 1971, he was assassinated in the Sheraton Hotel while attending a meeting of the Arab Joint Defense Council in Cairo, Egypt.

What is important is the fact that the comments posted on the two death anniversaries under investigation, 2015 and 2020, are very crucial since this period is part of the Arab Spring that started in the early 2010s. This era of anti-government protests and rebellions began in the region in response to corruption and oppressive regimes. Wasfi al-Tal was one of those people who were described as being honest and who stood firmly against corruption. His anti-corruption legacy showed up in various anecdotes and stories. For instance, once Wasfi al-Tal, prior to his first premiership, applied for an agricultural loan, and thus he met with Mohammad Qur’an, the Director of the Agricultural Credit Corporation. The Director asked one of his staff to check if Wasfi was eligible for a loan. The answer was in the negative and Wasfi’s application was rejected. After a short while, Wasfi was appointed prime minister. Upon hearing this, Qur’an was worried and expected immediate dismissal. On the contrary, the Director was promoted to a higher position. In the promotion letter, Wasfi acknowledged the honesty and integrity of Qur’an and wished him every possible success in his endeavor.

This context which exemplifies part of Wasfi’s status is very important for the reader to appreciate the large number of posts shared by Jordanians on the death anniversaries of this national statesman. Thanks to Facebook which made all this possible; probably before the creation of social media, Jordanians had to show their appreciation of Wasfi’s deeds and achievements through totally different activities such as organizing and attending speeches, with limited oral interaction, to commemorate his departure or publish essays on his achievements.

The fact that the data of the study reported here came from one source, Facebook, may merit a highlight of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and obituaries.

In the past few years, the Internet has penetrated all aspects of human life. In actuality, almost all conventional forms of correspondence are replaced by e-mails, Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, instant messaging, blogs, chat, etc. The Web has also become the first choice for information inquiry and leisure activity (Crystal, 2006). In the meantime, computer-mediated social network (CMSN) has offered a venue for engagement in different academic, political, social and historical events such as debate, marriage, death, award ceremonies etc. Al Jaba’an (2004) has classified the recent manifestations of obituary into five categories; (1) newspapers, mainstream media, forums, public pages on the Internet; (2) short messages and e-mails; (3) mosque minarets and minbars; (4) scientific seminars, speeches through media, writing a short note about the deceased; and, (5) lamentation. It is noteworthy that these five types are either written before burying the deceased or after depending on the reasons behind them. Al Jaba’an added that people use obituaries for several reasons, some of which are: to announce the death of someone, to indirectly invite people and acquaintances who would like to attend the deceased’s funeral, to encourage people to pray for God’s mercy and forgiveness for the deceased, to offer condolences to the relatives of the deceased and to ensure if the deceased is debt free.

With the advent of CMC, early research has been directed towards addressing the pros and cons of CMC (Berry, 2004), language and style of CMC in its different manifestations as well as the impact of culture and gender on online speech acts (Al-Momani, 2016; Al-Sa’di and Hamdan, 2005; Al-Sayyed and Rabab’ah, 2020; Banikalaf, 2019) and neologisms and social media applications (Hamdan and Al-Salman, 2021). However, this study seeks to cover another manifestation of CMC, commenting on a death anniversary post, because the researchers believe that it is an area of study which has been neglected or not yet been addressed. Using social media as a platform for either offering condolences or commenting on death anniversaries is twofold. Firstly, it offers a reasonable and practical opportunity for people to commemorate a loved one’s death since it is accessible for a large number of people as they can write freely whatever they want. Secondly, although people can memorialize and honor the deceased through a memorial service or some other real time events, the display of these engagements may come to a close at the end of the event as opposed to CMC events which are fully documented and can outlive their producers and participants in the form of virtual comments, posts,
memes and videos, among others, which can be archived for long periods of time.

This study focuses on the strategies which Jordanians use when posting tributes that are particularly directed to the deceased person’s family, his close friends, fellow citizens and the general public at large. In actuality, many of these condolences which appeared 44 years after Wasfi’s assassination were written by people who had been children or not yet born when the deceased was in power. The results of the study may also have pragmatic implications for learners of Arabic as a second or foreign language who are expected to take part in different communicative interactions in the target culture, including offering and receiving condolences. In particular, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What are the most frequently used strategies by Jordanian Facebook users when commenting on the death anniversary status of a former late prime minister?
2. To what extent are these strategies different from/similar to those used in giving condolences as reported in Islamic and Arab contexts?

2. Review of literature

A speech act is an utterance that serves a function in communication. Greetings, requests, partings, invitations, congratulations, apologies as well as condolences are manifestations of different speech acts. Austin (1962) claims that a speech act can be analyzed on three levels — locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. While the locutionary level refers to the performance or exact form of an utterance which a speaker actually says, the illocutionary level refers to the language functions which the utterance conveys, e.g., greeting and the perlocutionary level refers to the actual effect of the utterance on the recipient.

In terms of form, a speech act might range from a single word to several words and even sentences. Li [1] claims that ‘speech acts are real-life interactions which require not only knowledge of the language used but also knowledge of the rules that govern appropriate or inappropriate use in that language and culture’. Searle [2] proposes a set of illocutionary speech acts, viz., assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives. The following sub-sections are devoted to reviewing the related studies. For the reader’s convenience, they are classified into four main categories: (1) studies on strategies utilized for offering condolences; (2) contrastive studies on obituaries/condolences; (3) studies on the impact of culture on offering condolences; and (4) studies focusing on the linguistic features of condolence messages.

2.1. Studies on strategies utilized for offering condolences

Several studies have addressed strategies used in offering condolences (Al-Shboul and Maros, 2013; Farnia, 2011; Murad, 2013; Nurlianiingsih and Imperiani, 2020; Williams, 2006). The corpora of these works vary from written and oral responses to online comments either via e-mails or Facebook posts. For example, Williams [3] studied the methods of expressing condolences from a sociolinguistic perspective. Williams collected 13 written and oral comments directed to her after the death of her cousin. The comments were from friends, students, family members, colleagues and work supervisors. Williams classified the condolences into three strategies — acknowledgment of sympathy, question of concern and inquiry for information. The study also focused on the ‘correlation between the choice of strategy and the relationship of the interlocutors’.

In the same vein, Farnia (2011) examined the strategies that Iranian native speakers of Farsi used when responding to an obituary note. About 200 written comments on an obituary of a famous well-known actor in Iran were retrieved. Farnia concluded that the following strategies were used in expressing condolences: expression of regret and grief, praying for God’s mercy and forgiveness, expressions of positive feelings and compliments about the deceased. Al-Shboul and Maros (2013) studied how Jordanians responded to an
obituary status on Facebook for Mahmoud Saymeh, a famous Jordanian comedian, who passed away in 2011 after a long battle with kidney failure. The findings revealed that Jordanians used a host of strategies such as praying for God’s mercy and forgiveness for the deceased, reciting Quranic verses, enumerating the virtues of the deceased, expressing shock and grief, viewing the death as a natural phenomenon in addition to using proverbs and sayings. The paper concluded that the respondents’ use of such strategies was due to their religious beliefs and orientation. Murad (2013) examined the condolence strategies used by 85 Arabic-speaking lecturers who responded in Hebrew via e-mails to a college condolence announcement which was addressed to a Hebrew speaker colleague who lost his daughter. The results showed that the main condolence strategy was using religious expressions, a strategy in which the subjects transferred from one language into another. Other strategies included acknowledgement of death, expression of sympathy, offering assistance, future-oriented remarks, expression of concern, and appreciation of the deceased.

With special focus on Indonesian culture, Nurlianingsih and Imperiani (2020) studied the strategies of offering condolences and the impact of power and distance on the use of a particular strategy by Indonesians 11 to 19 years old. The data were collected through a discourse completion task (DCT) consisting of 20 condolence expressions. The study revealed that the most dominant strategies were seeking absolution from God and expression of sympathy. Other strategies included future-oriented remarks, expression of concern, related-question and acknowledgment of death. The variation in strategies was attributed to factors related to relationships. Subjects tended to use lower risk strategies in distant relationships and higher risk ones in intimate and close relationships. Religious backgrounds also had a strong influence on strategy selection.

2.2. Contrastive studies on obituaries/condolences

On the basis of a written DCT completed by 80 Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners, Eslami-Rasekh and Lotfollahi (2011) examined different patterns of condolences in English and Persian with special emphasis on the impact of social distance on strategies used in offering condolences. The results showed that there were significant differences between Eastern and Western societies in the way of expressing condolences. Expressing sympathy and requesting the recipient to accept condolences were two commonly used semantic formulas used by the subjects. The results also demonstrated that Iranians did not express much interest in the bereaved person.

Similarly, Samavarchi and Allami (2012) used a written DCT to investigate the pragmatic competence of 50 Persian EFL learners in offering condolences. The English version of the task was given to 10 native speakers of English. The findings revealed that Persian EFL learners were more direct than English natives in offering condolences. Further, the Persians tended to transfer some of their sociocultural condolence patterns into English. A similar data collection tool, DCT, was used by Behnam, et al. (2013), who studied giving condolences across English and Persian via short messages. About 60 short messages were equally gathered in Persian and English. The results uncovered that there was a difference in the way English and Persian individuals gave condolences. Furthermore, the results revealed that Persian messages were more direct and short in addition to including some signs of religious culture. In contrast, English messages were mostly indirect, sympathetic and apologetic. A major limitation of these studies is that the only source of data collection is the DCT which may not yield reliable results (Cyluk, 2013).

Unlike these previous studies, Pishghadam and Morady [4] explored condolence responses in Persian and English without resorting to a DCT. The data were compiled from 200 movies which were used to study the responses employed by two groups of Persian and English native speakers when someone offered condolences. The results unveiled the use of several strategies such as showing appreciation, expressing sorrow, sharing feelings, comments on the deceased, topic avoidance, self-blame statement and divine comments. Moreover, the results indicated that “the Persian responses were more celestial and collectivist in nature while the English ones were more terrestrial and individualistic”.

Depending on naturally occurring data, Dowlatabadi and Jamshid (2019) conducted a contrastive study on how Persian and English native speakers express condolences and sympathy. To this end, 10 bereaved families from Iran and America were selected and data were collected by two means, direct observation and recording what people expressed as condolence. The findings indicated that the amount and length of emotional expressions vary in both groups. Persians were much more emotional than their American counterparts.
2.3. Studies on the impact of culture on offering condolences

Yahya (2010) examined the linguistic forms of condolences used in Iraqi Arabic with a view to identifying the extent to which these forms are affected by Islamic culture. Yahya also looked into the relationship between condolences and sociolinguistic variables (age, gender, education). The findings demonstrated the use of five dominant patterns — acknowledgment of death, expression of sympathy, offering assistance, future-oriented remarks and expression of concern. The analysis showed an obvious impact of Islamic culture on condolences. The results also indicated that the elderly tended to use ritualized phrases and some imported forms whereas young respondents expressed their support in simple direct words. Females used more emotionally charged supportive phrases which were longer than those used by males. Education also played a significant role in the subjects’ use of direct formal semantic formula without resorting to elaborated forms or innovative ones.

Adopting an ethno-pragmatic approach, Wakefield, et al. (2020) discussed cultural knowledge that guides condolences among Cantonese and Anglo-English speakers. Data were obtained through a DCT, native speakers’ intuitions in addition to counting the number of cultural phrases in cultural scripts related to offering condolences to someone close to them. The results showed that Anglo-English condolences zoomed mainly on a condoler’s sad feelings towards a bereaved’s loss. In contrast, Cantonese condolers paid special attention to calming down the bereaved telling them not to be sad and to take care of themselves.

2.4. Studies focusing on the linguistic features and structure of condolence messages

Kongo and Kodom (2015) analyzed the schematic structure and linguistic features of 36 condolence letters/messages retrieved from the International Centre for Theoretical Physics portal. Kongo and Kodom identified a number of moves each with lexico-grammatical features. The moves included acknowledging the news, acknowledging the deceased, acknowledging memories of the deceased, expressing sympathy to the family, among others. Further, Kuang (2015) examined the structures of Malaysian condolences that could help to alleviate misunderstandings of good intentions. Kuang also examined the semantic functions of Malaysian short message system (SMS) condolences. The condolences were written in English via (SMS) by local friends to a local Chinese female friend. The analysis showed that condolences had eight semantic functions. While condolences which expressed concerns via directives and wishful thinking were the most neglected, those which praised the deceased and expressed uncertainty were the most favored.

CMC has stepped in as an effective mode in offering condolences regardless of the condolers’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The literature revealed that a wide array of strategies has been used to achieve such a purpose. As is clear, condolence strategies posted on the death anniversary of a statesman, particularly in the Jordanian/Arab context have not been examined. Thus, this study is basically meant to fill in this research gap. It is noteworthy to mention that the classification of strategies in this study was developed in light of previous studies (Al-Shboul and Maros, 2013; Farnia, 2011; Murad, 2013; Nurlianingsih and Imperiani, 2020) as mentioned earlier. The literature also helped in identifying a research gap — strategies used in posts on death anniversaries. Further, the reviewed literature facilitated comparing and contrasting strategies used in Facebook posts on death anniversaries and those used in face-to-face condolences as reported in Islamic and Arab contexts.

3. Method

The corpus of the study comprised 530 Facebook comments — 127 by females and 403 by males — posted on two death anniversaries of Wasfi al-Tal (29 November 2015 and 29 November 2020), a former prime minister of Jordan. These comments appeared in Arabic on a public page titled “The Martyr Wasfi al-Tal” with a relatively large number of followers (n=50,097). It had been created in May 2009 and was devoted to Wasfi’s life and character. Since it is a public page, it can be seen and interacted with by the general public. As for ethical considerations, it is useful to reiterate that the raw data which were analyzed and from which illustrative examples were derived came from a public page. To safeguard against privacy breaches, illustrative examples
were anonymized. As is clear, it was neither practical nor possible to obtain the consent of the posters to use their comments for research purposes. The fact that they left these posts on the page for an indefinite time implies that their content was not sensitive and that they looked at it the way that we did, as public property which could be accessed anytime by anyone. Even if it were possible for us to reach specific posters, we would have had to assure them that their data would be used for research purposes only and that their identity would be concealed. In actuality, all this was guaranteed in the study and thus no worries or ethical concerns were expected to backfire.

In order to transcribe and codify the posts, the researchers divided data between them. The two transcribers, native speakers of Jordanian Spoken Arabic (JSA), agreed on a division of labor in which they first transcribed and coded all data independently on the basis of an agreed classification developed by earlier researchers (Al-Shboul and Maros, 2013; Farnia, 2011; Murad, 2013; Nurlianingsih and Imperiani, 2020) and a preliminary joint analysis of 10 percent of the data. Once done with this task, they reviewed their work together following a consensus procedure. In light of this division of labor, each transcriber prepared a version in which each individual transcribed and coded all posts and related strategies independently. To examine the reliability of the analysis, 25 percent of the remaining corpus was selected from the transcribed and coded versions in order to be revisited and verified by the transcribers/coders as one team. The inter-rater reliability of their transcription and coding of posts and strategies was calculated and was found to be 85 percent. In case of agreement, the data were kept in a separate file for further analysis. However, when disagreements arose, the two transcribers/coders read the target transcribed posts thoroughly together twice. Most disagreements were resolved in the second reading. However, when disagreement persisted, the researchers consulted a linguist colleague speaking Jordanian Arabic. The two versions of the coded data were discussed with him and the one that he supported was eventually considered.

The purpose of the analysis was to highlight one aspect of the role of CMC in the socio-political life of Jordanians through the examination of the type and frequency of strategies used by Facebook posters in offering condolences. The output of this process yielded nine strategies (single or combined), presented and discussed in the next section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Praying for God’s mercy for the deceased</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Praying for God’s mercy + wishing the deceased an abode in paradise</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Praying for God’s mercy + highlighting the uniqueness and unforgettable of the deceased</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Praying for God’s mercy + enumerating the virtues of the deceased</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Praying for God’s mercy + acknowledging the deceased as a martyr</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Enumerating the general secular virtues of the</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of each condolence strategy used by the subjects. A quick look at the Table demonstrates that subjects followed two trends in expressing their comments on the death anniversary status. By and large, they tended to implement either a single strategy or a combination of two main strategies. Below are more details about each of these strategies along with illustrative examples. A sample of screenshot posts is provided in the Appendix.

4.1. Praying for God’s mercy for the deceased

Praying for God’s mercy was the most frequently used strategy whether as an independent single strategy or as part of a combination with another. It has gained the lion’s share among strategies, and thus ranked first (34.0 percent). Additionally, it is has been used as a core strategy which some other strategies have combined with to form compound ones. As a single strategy, it was used, though with slightly different lexical variants sometimes, to convey the same message of God’s mercy upon the deceased as in:

(1) الله يرحمه
‘May Allah mercy him.’

(2) الله يرحمك أبو مصطفى
‘May Allah mercy you Abu Mustafa.’

(3) ألف رحمة ونور لروحك الطاهرة
‘Showers of mercy and brightness shall go to his pure soul.’

It seems that these comments and the like were written by users who were influenced by their Islamic cultural background. They tend to reflect users’ belief in God as the only one to whom all people pray for mercy and forgiveness. Another reason for using this strategy may be ascribed to the general Islamic belief that praying for God’s mercy is considered sadaqa jaariya (a ceaseless charity deed). This goes in harmony with what Abu Hurairah, a famous Hadith narrator, reported: The Prophet said, ‘When a descendant of Adam dies, their deeds come to an end except for three things: sadaqah jaariya (ceaseless charity): a knowledge which gives benefit, or a righteous child who prays for them (the deceased)’ (An-nawawi, 1992: our translation). Further, praying for God’s mercy is generally believed by Muslims to rest the soul of the deceased. This strategy is general, and it is not peculiar to somebody. This means that people can use it to offer condolences to anybody regardless of their status, religion or relationship with the deceased. To clarify, on 18 November 2020, a Facebook obituary was posted by one of the researchers in this study announcing the departure of two friends because of COVID-19. This post has received about 244 comments, the majority of which used the strategy of “praying for God’s mercy for the deceased”. It is useful to state here that only a handful of the posters had known the deceased or had a personal connection with him. Another post was written by a Christian colleague, whose parents had
passed away recently. Although the deceased were Christians, a number of comments made by posters with Muslim names included “praying for God’s mercy for the deceased”. The use of this general strategy is in line with those reported in the literature in similar cultural contexts (Al-Shboul and Maros, 2013; Behnam, et al., 2013; Farina, 2011; Murad, 2013; Nurlianingsih and Imperiani, 2020; Pishghadam and Morady, 2013; Yahya, 2010), which may contribute to explaining why such a strategy prevailed over all other strategies.

4.2. Praying for God’s mercy compounded with wishing the deceased an abode in paradise

This compound strategy ranked second (21.9 percent). Once again, mercy is accompanied by wishing the deceased a higher place in paradise. The subjects utilized these two religious supplications together in a variety of ways as exemplified below.

(4) رحمة الله تعالى علیك واسکنک فسیح جناته ‘May Allah mercy you and make you abode in His spacious gardens.’
(5) الله يرحمه ویجعل مثواه الجنة ‘May Allah mercy him and make his abode in paradise’
(6) رحmk الله واجنطفک من أهل الجنة وصعفی الثل ‘May Allah mercy you and make you a resident of paradise ...
Wasfi al-Tal’

Such a combination of these two strategies might be due to the religious background of the posters and their belief that once human beings die, the only thing needed from others is supplication and praying to God. This result is compatible with those of Pishghadam and Morady (2013), who argued that Persian responses to condolences were celestial. This result is also attested in Yahya (2010), who posited that the Islamic culture had left its impact in giving condolences.

4.3. Praying for God’s mercy accompanied by highlighting the uniqueness and unforgettability of the deceased

This compound strategy ranked third (10.0 percent). This could be justified by the fact that the deceased was not an ordinary person. He served as a prime minister for three terms and his achievements were the talk of the country for decades. His fame was also heightened by his tragic death at the hands of his opponents.

(7) بعک ل تحلم آمپرات الشمک ملکک ، الله يرحمك وا سید الشمک ‘Women in the north of Jordan have not given birth to any of your likes, May Allah mercy you, the master of the north.’
(8) رحmk الله علیک يارم الأردن ما زلت حی فی قلبі العربین . لن بنسک ‘May Allah mercy you, the symbol of Jordan. You are still alive in all Jordanians hearts. They will never forget you.’
(9) رجال لن بنسامب التاريخ، رحmk الله يا وصعفي ‘History will never forget such men, may Allah mercy you Wasfi.’

4.4. Praying for God’s mercy as well as enumerating the virtues of the deceased

Another clear merger between enumerating virtues of the deceased and praying for God’s mercy ranked fourth (10.0 percent). This means that Facebook users do not only stick to praying for God’s mercy but have also elaborated on the good deeds of the deceased as demonstrated in the examples below. Such amalgamation brings to the fore a general belief in the Islamic tradition that the deceased can be remembered for a host of reasons, an important one of which is the positive and good virtues the dead leave behind. A similar strategy was attested in Al-Shboul and Maros (2013), Farina (2011) and Pishghadam (2013), who all demonstrated in one way or another that using expressions to describe virtues of the deceased was a frequent strategy in offering condolences.
4.5. Praying for God’s mercy and acknowledging martyrdom status

This strategy which ranked fifth (8.7 percent) is an amalgamation of praying for God’s mercy and acknowledgement of the deceased as a martyr. This recognition of martyrdom may be attributed to the fact that the death was not natural nor accidental. It was seen as a criminal act by an enemy against a national leader who defended his country in the face of danger, and thus deserves to be considered a hero who sacrificed his life for a national cause. In such a case, the victim can be viewed as a martyr.

الله يرحمك يا شهيد الوطن (13)
‘May Allah mercy you, Martyr of the country.’
رحمك الله يا شهيد الأمة (14)
‘May Allah mercy you, the martyr’s nation.’
رحمك الله يا شهيدنا (15)
‘May Allah mercy you, our martyr.’

4.6. Enumerating the general secular virtues of the deceased

Although some Jordanian Facebook users tended to use a combination of strategies, others preferred using a single strategy. A further look at Table 1 reveals that some subjects utilized the strategy of enumerating the secular virtues of the deceased (6.6 percent).

أحب الأردن فأحبه الله (16)
‘He liked Jordan and Allah liked him too.’
في حضرة العظماء لا يبقى للكلامات حضور (17)
‘In the presence of great people, there is no room for words.’
ماتت الرجال (18)
‘Real men have passed away.’

4.7. Praying for God’s mercy for the deceased linking him mainly with eminent Jordanian figures

As is clear, God’s mercy for the deceased and others has very little presence among other strategies (4.3 percent). Below are illustrative examples:

الله يرحم وصفى وحزاع وجميع شهداء الوطن (19)
‘May Allah mercy Wasfi, Hazza’ and all martyrs of the country.’

The eminent figure here is late Hazza’ al-Majali, another former Jordanian premier who was assassinated in Amman on 19 August 1960.

الله يرحم جلالته الملك حسين ويرحمك يا وصفى (20)
‘May Allah mercy His Majesty King Hussein and mercy you, Wasfi.’

The eminent leader here is late King Hussein of Jordan who passed away in 1999.

الله يرحمه ويرحم أ家务 المسلمين (21)
‘May Allah mercy him and all deceased Muslims.’

This exact text is sometimes viewed by moderate Muslims as a manifestation of fundamentalism or even extremism. While some tend to restrict God’s mercy to Muslims only as is the case here, others believe that the deceased, regardless of their religion, are subject to God’s mercy. This controversy has been entrenched among ordinary Muslims and is unlikely to disappear in the foreseeable future.

4.8. Using established quotations

This is another strategy that has low presence in the data (3.6 percent). The examples below show how Facebook users respond to death anniversaries by resorting to verses from the Quran and Arabic poetry. A general observation is due here. It seems that Arabs tend to be eloquent in their selection of words and phrases when they praise or lament their princes, rulers, caliphs and notables. This may explain the posters’ use of extracts from poems that were once used to describe patriots. To illustrate, the verse in (22) was originally said by Abu Tammam, a famous Arab poet (died in 845 AD), to lament Muhammad bin Hameed al-Tousi al-Ta’ii, a 32-year old leader who defeated the Romans and was killed while defending the Abbasid Islamic cities. The poet in this verse has viewed the deceased as second to none (Mahdawi, 2007). Actually, the condolence in (22) is a copy and paste of Abu Tammam’s line of verse which was borrowed to show that the deceased, Wasfi al-Tal, is matchless and thus will never be matched. The verse in (23) is extracted from the Quran to show appreciation of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for God’s sake, an implication that Wasfi al-Tal is among them. As for the verse in (24), it has its own occasion; Al-Mutanabi, an Abbasid Arab poet (died in 965 AD), went to Tripoli. There, he met Isaac bin Ibrahim and was forced by Isaac to compliment and praise him. Upon Al-Mutanabi’s refusal, he was arrested. Following his release, Al-Mutanabi praised another ruler and attacked Isaac. The Facebook post in (24) borrowed a verse from Al-Mutanabi’s poem in which the user alluded to Wasfi as a person with pure honor who cannot avoid harm and escape death (Al-Barqouqi, 2014).

4.9. Casting damnation on those who assassinated the deceased

Apparently, the least frequently used strategy was casting damnation on those who assassinated the deceased (0.9 percent). The fact that a few comments appeared to express this stance may be ascribed to a general belief that a sizable number of Jordanians from different religions and polito-social spectra tend to be tolerant even towards those who cause harm. Another explanation is that the actual act of assassination happened more than four decades ago, and thus the bitter position against the perpetrators has lessened. One more justification might be due to the fact that not all generations know exactly the way al-Tal died. Therefore, instead of using damnation, they focused on asking God’s mercy for the deceased.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The results uncover that Jordanians used Facebook as a forum to commemorate the departure of an important
political leader. This has added one more function to CMC, namely, to replace traditional forums on death occasions, funerals and anniversaries. These online condolences and comments on the death anniversary of Wasfi al-Tal were not published on Facebook to replace the traditional method of paying attribute to the deceased, the ‘condolence house’. In fact, many of the posters were not even born when the murder was committed in 1971. Currently, fresh online condolences are published daily as an additive method as Facebook and other social media offer an instant venue to pay tribute to the deceased, particularly for those who cannot physically make it for whatever reason. However, when COVID-19 started in Jordan early March 2020, the government of Jordan banned all public meetings, including wedding parties and condolence gatherings, among others. At this point in time, CMC associated with these two main activities became the sole venue for Jordanians to use in the course of expressing their feelings and showing group solidarity. We believe that once the pandemic comes to a close, CMC will become an additive means but with greater social acceptance and popularity. Traditionally, once the funeral service comes to a close, Jordanians used to set what is called a ‘condolence house’ where the deceased family notables gather to receive condolences for three successive days following the burial. Thanks to the spread of COVID-19, official authorities banned such a gathering. Thus, condolences started to be offered through various social platforms, including Facebook. It seems that the role of CMC has been digging deep into the community, which explains why Jordanians resorted to this medium to commemorate the death anniversary of Wasfi al-Tal. On another related point, once again thanks to the pandemic, Jordanians have shifted to social media platforms to announce and celebrate weddings; they also use these platforms to send and receive congratulations. As is clear, this role of CMC has gained special importance all related to the pandemic.

Prior to the advent of social media and their public recognition, Jordanians used to commemorate death anniversaries of eminent figures through the organization of a ceremonies in large halls where keynote speakers give speeches focusing on the virtues of the deceased. The role of the audience or attendees was limited. On Facebook, what used to be attendees and keynote speakers are posters contributing to a given occasion in their own ways.

The findings also revealed that users implemented various strategies while commenting on a statesman’s death anniversary. They used two types of strategies: single or combined. The most frequently used strategies totaled between 0.9–34 percent whereas the least frequently used ones occurred less than 0.9 percent. Interestingly, praying for God’s mercy seemed to bleed into other strategies to form a compound one. The results also illustrated that the strategies used were driven by the subjects’ religious beliefs and national passions.

Based on the results of this study, future research may address death anniversary comments on Facebook for COVID-19 victims. It may also focus on death anniversary comments in other dialects of Arabic, say Algerian Arabic. A contrastive study might be conducted on death announcements in English and Arabic. The findings of the study also proved that social media is a new platform to say nearly the same thing without reaching people involved in the occasion. This was evident in the similarities found between strategies used to offer online condolences and those used traditionally to pay tribute to the deceased. It also opens the doors for people to express their thoughts and feeling freely in a written form. It is important to highlight that the traditional off-line commemorative event is a social and verbal event that happened but not customarily documented. Condolers usually pay tribute and leave the ‘condolence house’. Therefore, this event can be considered temporal with specific time boundaries. In contrast, online comments provide more space for recording and preserving what has been written. The permanence of the online comments allows anyone to go back to a given event and see the number of condolers and their written comments.

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Notes


References


Appendix: Sample posts.

Editorial history

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