COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF GENDER AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, access to the internet has proliferated in a way that people are getting connected not only from homes, but also on multiple other devices like mobile phones, video games, hand-held tablets…etc. The result is people getting more connected to each other especially through social networks. When logged in, the aim has switched from getting in touch with others and making friends to looking for social support. In brief, social support can be defined as empathy-seeking or looking for persons who will 'understand you'. This fits people sharing the same issues (anorexia, obesity, cancer, illness…etc), yet the novelty with the internet concerns also 'basic' people who join online communities looking for social support. This study aims to investigate the role of gender on social support in all its categories: Tangible, Belonging, Self-esteem and Appraisal. A survey will be distributed each time to different facebook groups (100 persons with 50 men and 50 women) in seven popular domains: Funny shows/Entertainment, music, sport, news, education, politics and religion. The results of a large sample population of 700 persons in total will be treated statistically with SPSS24 using the Mann Whitney test for significance and validity of the study.

Keywords: CMC- Social support-gender-sociolinguistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research in computer mediated communication has flourished with a body of empirical research that is contradictory and confusing, and which offers recommendations for further practice all different from each other. This study is no exception, because the context of CMC and social support is done in a different context and a different place namely: the Algerian online community on Social Media.

Due to its geographical position in the Mediterranean, Algeria had witnessed many intrusions to exploit its resources and therefore many colonisations as well. But the one which has left a bigger impact was France. As a result, Algeria is a multilingual country speaking Tamazight (Berber variety), Arabic and French. Meanwhile, the language question is very complex in the country for Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is used in official speeches and a local variety Algerian Arabic is the mother tongue of the majority of the population, and used for daily life interactions, nearly in all the domains.

Therefore, the sociolinguistic situation of Algeria comprises diglossia, code-mixing, borrowing and code switching between the cited varieties. In other words, there are significant local variations in Algerian Arabic, from pronunciation to grammar, as the root is Arabic with influences from the Berber, French, Spanish, Turkish and Italian due to the geographical position, colonisation and history of the country. (Droua-Hamdani et al., 2010)

This statement was said in 2007, but with the advance of computer mediated communication, code-switching is becoming common in north African Arabic in general since comments on social networks and news feeds very often contain code-switching (Salia, 2011) and one may (indirectly) understand that this unintelligibility gap is becoming narrower.

As the researcher belongs to the Algerian community, it will be convenient to conduct an empirical / ethnographic research.

Due to the intensive use of the internet and social networks in particular. A general enquiry is to know how do people behave online? How do they socialise in the absence of any physical clue (eye contact, face expressions…etc)? What attitudes or value judgments do they hold about others? What makes some groups develop and have a load of followers? how do some people become 'close' and share solidarity whether for compassion or conflict management? How are feelings expressed? What is the place of 'self esteem'? what are the characteristics of the Algerian online user? Because those characteristics are all related to social support, this study explores how is 'social support' established?

The sample population of this research represents groups of Algerian facebook users expressing themselves in French. Finally, the main research question of this paper is to investigate the relationship between Gender and social support for internet users. No answer could be possible without the exploration of language use since it's a valid 'measurable' tool available in this study. Hopefully, sociolinguistics combines the psych/sociological aspect dominating this study in addition to the scientific study of language.

Traditional ways of collecting data, conducting interviews, making poll questions, matched guise technique, semantic differential questions, surveys, Likert scale ethnographic interview to name few techniques used in the sociolinguistic ground may no more be effective, representative and reliable when it comes to online communication. As more data is to be found from web-based resources, methodology to treat it should be reviewed as suggested by many researches especially in the field of CMC (Androutsopoulos, 2015). For this study, a 'blended data' will be sought for.

So, cyclical procedures of blended data collection can begin with observation, followed by screen data collection and preliminary analysis, then establishing contact with selected participants.(Androutsopoulos, 2015).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this paper, the concept of social support and the numerous literature related to it is highlighted. Then, different definitions are acknowledged in relation to its integration in the wide world web. Indeed, the aim of this paper is to compare between Social Support (SS) and Online Social Support (OSS) and verify if they are the same or distinct concepts due to the different implications that research methodologies imply and the new context of online communication.

In general, Online Social Support theories are investigated for validity considerations of any research that entails SS and OSS.

2.1. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

For any language, one of the aims when communicating is to understand and be understood. This is not different when the verbal message is no more aural-oral but written behind a screen creating a new atmosphere that some like for the security and anonymity allowing them to overcome their reserve or introversion. This 'hybrid' like situation of communicating differently is referred to 'Computer Mediated Communication' (Herring, 1996) in the literature diaspora and as 'Computer Mediated Discourse' (Herring, 2004) in linguistics studies like this one, although sometimes both terms are used interchangeably or referred to as 'Electronic Discourse' (Meredith, Potter, lim, Ling, & Sudweeks, 2014).

Broadly speaking CMC is defined as human-computer interaction.(Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004)with an interest in the field proliferating rapidly (Walther, 1996). It all started with emails as a mode of communicating linking the social exchange with the context (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986); (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987);(Wright, Bell, Wright, & Bell, 2003). Other researches payed attention to the influence of CMC on cultural ties as Herring (Herring & International Pragmatics Conference, 1996) described these kinds of conversations as a new dimension of intercultural communication between different communities. Among others (Gibson, 2009), (Lea, 1992) study uncovered a socio-psychological facet in relation to the outcomes produced in conversations. In teaching and education, the impact is considerable (Althaus, 1997). One example is Althaus, S.L (1997) study about supplementing face-to-face discussion with computer mediated communication which enhances academic performances of undergraduate students.

In ethno-methodology, ways of treating online talk as research data constitutes a novel approach (Greiffenhagen, Christian and Watson, & Rod, 2005; holtz, peter and appel, & markus, 2011; Jowett, 2015)

Apart from emails, online talk takes place through a range of modalities (Paulus, 2016) which have evolved over time from Usenet, chat discussions, forums, instant messenger to Facebook, Twitter and youtube.

Unlike (Schegloff, 2006) who states that "Computer chats should not be considered 'talk' at all" (p90), the majority of researchers in different disciplines regard computer chats and all ways of verbal writing through computer as a form of 'talk' applying methodologies that they would use to analyse normal talk with a predominance for Conversation Analysis (paul Ten Have, 2000)(P. Ten Have, 2007).The disciplines include linguistics (Crystal, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2011; Vessey, 2015) , Sociolinguistics (Androutsopoulos, 2006; Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2011) ,Pragmatics (herring, 2013; yus, 2011)and discourse analysis (Herring, 2004; myers, 2010).

With a special attention to language studies, researchers have explored other features like gender(Herring, 2004), community, play and performance (Georgakopoulou, 2011) to name a few.

This paper goes with the view of(Meredith & Potter, 2013)who argued that "electronic discourse should be seen as electronic interaction"(p.374) and therefore the methodology applied to will be related to sociolinguistics and CMC.

2.2. Social Support and Online Social Support
2.2.1. Social Support as defined in the Twenty First Century

By reading all the above definitions, one may have a general eye view to understand the concept. Therefore, it is needless to get into details in this section for a definition of social support in the year 2000 because from that time, Online Social Support has emerged and a special section will be dedicated to it. What should be known is that the definition has evolved so much to include social networks and computer mediated communication.

Among the few who did not link the concept to CMD are (Burleson, Brant, & MacGeorge, 2002) who defined social support as " verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid " (p. 374).

Also, (Shaughnessy, 2004) talked about Self-efficacy and confidence levels as dependents upon social support from parents, students, and the institution. Besides, Gomez (Gomez, 2009) who stated that receiving social support was an effective socialisation way to help new members assimilate into an organisation.

Nevertheless, the definition of House (J. S. House, 1981) will be given more attention since this investigation has close ties with it.

2.2.2. Categories of Social Support

In examining the social support aspect, findings indicate that the socialisation process is facilitated through House's (1981) four categories of social support which are: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal. These four categories were later studied by many researchers and the version used for this investigation, would be the measures used in psychology developed by (S. Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). The following categories will be detailed in the following section.

2.2.2.1. Self-esteem

Also called Emotional Support, This category is associated with sharing life experiences in general and involves the prerequisite of empathy, love, trust and caring. It consists on the conviction that others are willing and able to provide caring and understanding (Helgeson, 1993; Schaefer et al., 1981).

As cited by Frison (Frison & Eggermont, 2015)" Perceived emotional support or information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued and belongs (Cobb, 1976) has been recognised to improve individuals' well-being (Murberg & Bru, 2004; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2010)".

As emotional support is sought in friends, it is however perceived differently nowadays since friends are to be found online and in social networks (Liu & Yu, 2013) as they facilitate supportive interaction among teenagers(Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011).

In addition, according to Rains (Rains & Brunner, 2015) "Perceived support availability is a fairly robust predictor of beneficial health-related outcomes (Gruenewald & Seeman, 2010; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Uchino, 2009) ."

Examples include expressions of caring, concern, and sympathy towards relieving pain and stress.

2.2.2.2. Tangible Support

Also called Instrumental support, it involves the provision of tangible aid and services that directly assist a person in need. It is provided by close friends, colleagues and neighbours. Examples would be of lending money, borrowing a car, calling and transporting a person to emergency…etc.

At this stage, the help sought is to be fulfilled with a concrete help like money or a touchable thing. It is not linked to giving advice and/or opinions.

Examples include providing financial or practical assistance (e.g., job referrals) for a network member in need.

2.2.2.3. Informational Support

Informational support involves the provision of advice, suggestions, and information that a person can use to address problems. The person in need may consult friends, relatives and family members to give their opinion retell from their experience and provide trustworthy information. The person would feel confident in decision-taking because he has sought advice from trustworthy persons. This step does not involve any physical or material matter. It could be a phone call, an email or an opinion resulting from face-to-face interaction.

Examples include advice, factual input, and feedback to help network members evaluate actions and make decisions.

2.2.2.4. Appraisal Support

Appraisal support involves the provision of information that is useful for self-evaluation purposes: constructive feedback, affirmation and social comparison. The person is certain that when in need, the called person may come physically and stay as a companion for a time until the other feels better. It is a social behavior of getting physical contact which may relieve the person in need.

Examples include providing companionship or verbal reinforcement about one's choices. Still others have examined the relationship between social support and psychological distress, size and structure of a social network, and individual differences such as attachment motivation and relationship commitment (Vaux, 1988).

2.2.3. Online Social Support

With the rise of internet use, social support has been transferred into the wide web with online communities developing in every topic. Therefore, many platforms have been created by caregivers especially for people suffering from different diseases as a parallel juncture with the physicians' healing process.

Many are devoted to mental and psychological disorders, ranging from anorexia to dementia, while others are gender-based like breast cancer or prostate. Meanwhile, some groups are age-oriented like teenage hazing or ageing, and this has ascended confusion and perplexity in the definition and the research methods applied to the concept.

In brief, unlike social support, online social support is not exclusively associated with sickness, illness and injuries but rather means 'caring' as a broad term since Social support moderates caregiver burden, yet studies using different conceptualizations raise questions about validity.

One example is about the framework of Cooper's (Cooper, 1984) methodology, as an integrated literature review was used to examine 50 studies (1980-1995) involving adult caregivers of older family members. The findings report inadequate explication of social support, potential spuriousness and reverse causation, threats to statistical conclusion validity, and lack of generalisability were found. Hence, progress has been made in care-giving and social support research, yet many problems remain. Recommendations about future research include multiple measures of support, controls for spuriousness and reverse causation, valid and reliable instruments, and samples of diverse populations. (Vrabec, 1997).

In the same context, the methods used to research the data are different from SS .

2.2.3.1. Gender Difference as a Factor in Online Social Support

Men and women can be different in many matters. Stress coping is one of them in dealing with social relationships (E. . Greenglass, 2002). Some studies indicate that women outnumber the men in the use of the internet for social support like the study conducted by (Seçkin, 2009) who found that out of 31 OSS groups for cancer, approximately 75% of the participants were women.

In line with gender differences in OSS groups, Sullivan (Sullivan, 2003) showed that posts provided Emotional Support or appraisal (though compliments, thankfulness, politeness and positive encouragement) sharing personal information in a group about Ovarian problems with a majority of women. Whereas the group of Prostate in men's discussion, was rather concerned with Informational Support. Participants posted technical sequences to inform the others. Alternative treatment options were discussed, and the men seemed to adhere to a set of well established group norms; the discussions were informational and not personal in nature.(Dietrich, 2010).

It is not yet clear why this difference exists. Dedovic et al. (Dedovic, Wadiwalla, Engert, & Pruessner, 2009) have posited that the gender differences in coping, utilising social support, may be accounted for in some part because of the gender socialization process rather than some biological explanation.

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1. Preliminary study

In sociolinguistics, an interest in how language functions in its real social life results in an empirical investigation. This kind of research relies on data collected through fieldwork or observation as opposed to data collected through introspection, i.e., analytical analysis (J. Milroy, 1991; L. Milroy & Gordon, 2008). Johnstone (Johnstone, 2000) points out that "sociolinguists have their own analytical methods for collecting, describing and interpreting the data in a systematic way, whether the data consist of speech or signing or writing, by one person or many, on one topic or several".

Later on, this empirical observation will result in data that will be analysed later. (Johnstone, 2000).

In line with the above literature, the following study is composed of two main parts. The first one is a quantitative study based on a large proportion of the online community on youtube. The aim is to make sure and verify first if social support exists online. Based on the results of the quantitative study, a qualitative study would follow. This will allow to list in details which category in social condition is necessary in order to answer the research question set in the beginning of this work.

The results of this preliminary study comprising 3000 persons have enabled the researcher to limit the domains to the following seven (07): Music, Funny shows/entertainment, Sport, News reports, Education/culture, Politics and Religion. The next step now is to investigate social support in relation with gender.

3.2. Participants
A survey was distributed to seven facebook groups, each in one domain. For each time, the selected group had majority of French speaking members who are all Algerian. The survey comprised a question about age and gender in addition to eight questions about social support (SS) , where every two represented a particular category : Tangible support, Belonging, Self esteem and appraisal.

The electronic surveys represented 100 persons (50 males and 50 females) for the seven domains. A total of 700 surveys was collected at the end for the purpose of analysis.
3.3. Tools
In the study of Wong and Ma (Wong & Ma, 2016), the survey of Social support was also adapted from the one of Cohen (Cohen, Sheldon, & Syme, 1985) to test OSS into six (06) questions distributed. In this study, the same method was followed, but the number of questions was set to eight (08) for more accuracy.

The questionnaire comprise one question about gender, one about age and eight about the four categories of social support: 'Tangible support', 'belonging', 'self-esteem' and appraisal. So, every category of SS was investigated through two questions unlike other studies which devoted only one for it. This is done for more consistency and validity of the results later on.
The questionnaire was then sent to different group admins in order to publish it in the group wall. Answers were automatically directed to Facebook account for analysis.
The questions were in a likert-scale of five points ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.
3.4. Procedure
In order to look for what kind of social support exists or is dominant in every category, an intra-category analysis will be done and then this dominant category will be linked to the factor 'gender'. With a total of five choices, the agreement values when using Likert scale ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.
The Mann-Whitmann test was applied (SPSS v.24) for all the facebook groups in order to see if there is a main effect between the four SS categories and depict significant effects (if found) .

4. SIGNIFICANT RESULTS
Only significant results were depicted with the MW test as shown below:

Significant results for SS Categories in all the domains for Facebook FR		
Music	Q_D Appraisal	M <F, (35.25 vs. 65.75 %), p**=0.000
Sport	Q_C Self-Esteem	M >F, (60.28 vs. 40.53%),p**=0.000
Education	Q_C Self-Esteem	M <F, (45.60 vs. 55.40 %)p*=0.03

Table 1: Significant results for all the SS Categories in all the domains for Facebook Fr

In every case, a P value < 0.05 the result is significant *.P value <0.01 the result is very significant **
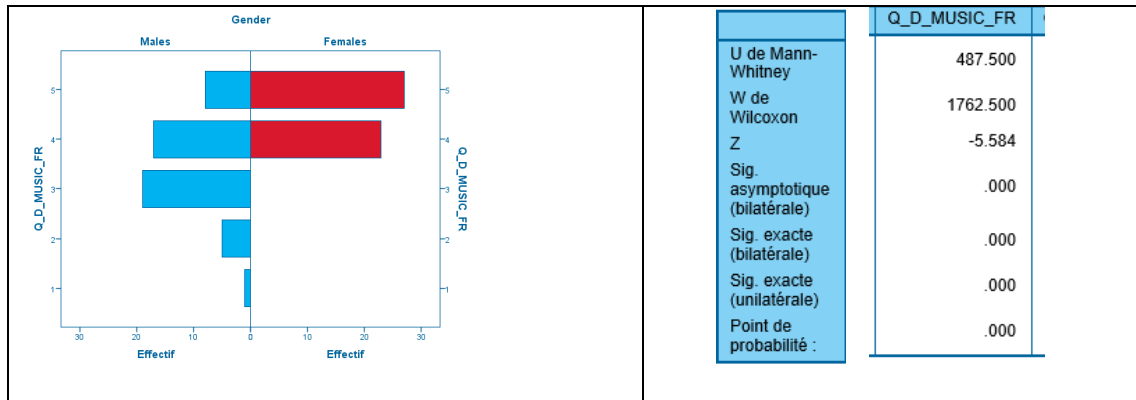The following figures detail every significant category:

- **Music**

Figure 1: significant results in the domain of Music in Facebook Fr.

As a conclusion, there is a main effect of gender with females scoring higher (totally agree) than males in the domain of music Fr for the SS category 'Appraisal'. In other words, women totally agree that they are looking for 'appraisal' when talking about music and expressing themselves in French.
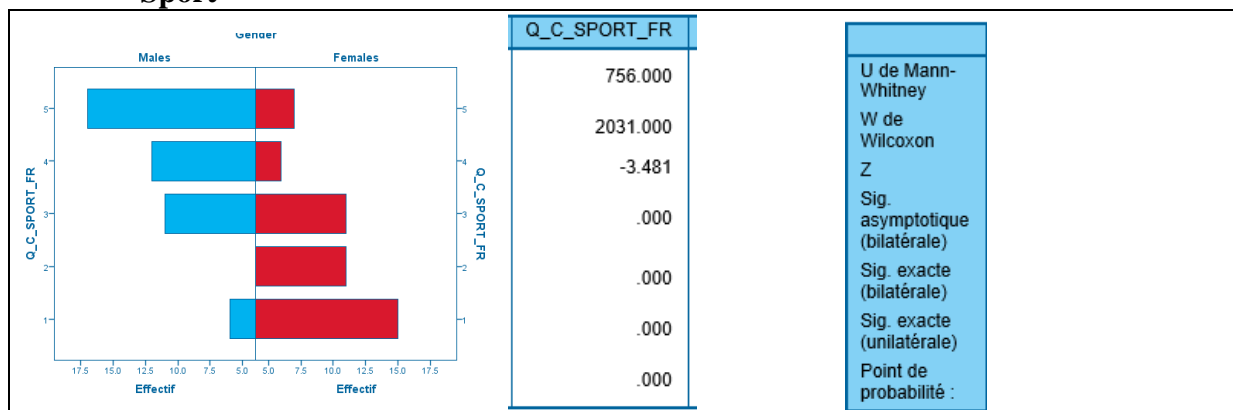
- **Sport**

Figure 2: significant result in the domain of sport in Facebook Fr.

As a conclusion, there is a main effect of gender with males scoring higher (agree) than females in the domain of sport Fr for the SS category 'Self-esteem'. In other words, men agree that they are looking for 'self esteem' when talking about sport and expressing themselves in French.
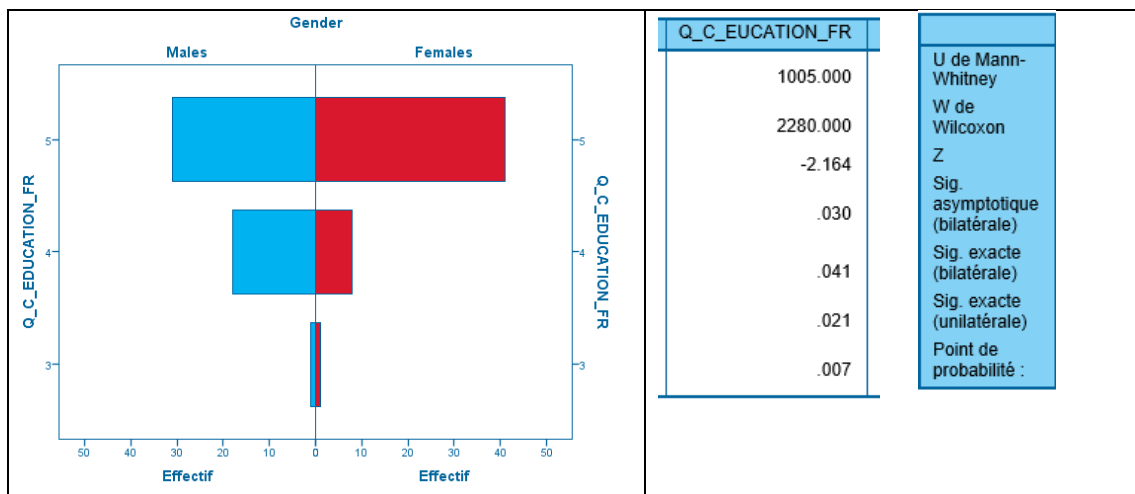
- **Education**

Figure 3: significant result in the domain of Education in Facebook Fr.

As a conclusion, there is a main effect of gender with females scoring higher (totally agree) than males in the domain of education Fr for the SS category 'Self-esteem'. In other words, women totally agree that they are looking for 'self esteem' when talking about education and expressing themselves in French.

CONCLUSION

Social support, as defined in the literature, is already developed in the social sciences and has a long way to go in the future. However, when applied to computer mediated communication; it becomes a different concept with its own rules and paradigms, and thus should be studied on its own since it differs from the original one.

The best examples concern the definition of House (J. S. House, 1981) for SS and LaCoursiere (LaCoursiere, 2001) for OSS.

Yet, one should admit that nowadays, more people connect online in order to seek mutual understanding, comfort and stress-free environments to feel better. In the older sense of SS, this was restricted to patients suffering from health issues whereas in online social support, this concept is applied to anyone whatever the age, gender or condition.

There is a significant effect of gender on social support since the results of this research show that females scored higher than males for the SS category 'Appraisal' in the facebook group of music. In addition, they have also scored higher than males in the SS category 'self-esteem' in the facebook group of education. Subsequently, males scored higher than females for the SS category 'self esteem' in the facebook group of sport.

We conclude that the relationship between social support and gender is very strong since when getting online, men tend to look for 'self esteem' while women for 'appraisal' and 'self esteem'.

This goes with the study of Sullivan, 2003 who stated that women seek Emotional Support or appraisal through compliments, thankfulness, politeness and positive encouragement.

Unlike Dietrich (Dietrich, 2010) who found that when online, men tend to be less personal and don't want to share/exchange a lot about their private life, this paper found that they do since they look for 'self-esteem' when talking about sport.

As sport is very popular among males in Algeria (and other parts of the world as well), when connecting online, men enjoy discussing about this domain with an interest that promotes a 'bond' with the rest of the community as stated by Ko, Wang, & Xu "Social network support … helps to enhance one's sense of belonging to a specific group with similar interests or situations"(Ko, Wang, & Xu, 2013).

The sample population here is different than the one investigated by Dietrich and for further research, it would be interesting to compare the relational between gender and social support in oriental VS occidental societies.

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