

Nicknames of Kuwaiti Teenagers

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Although nicknaming among teenagers and nicknaming among Arab adults has been studied, nicknaming among Arab teenagers has not. Nicknames of their peers were collected from Kuwaiti teenagers, and Kuwaiti undergraduates judged the nicknames as derogatory, affectionate or neutral. In spite of religious injunctions against the practice, hurtful nicknames were the most common and females were as likely as males to receive uncomplimentary nicknames. Nicknames were also classified as based on appearance or on personality/behaviors, and how they reflected local or western culture. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and practices arising out of rapid oil-funded development are presented as possible explanations for some of the results.

Introduction

The practice of nicknaming is at least as old as the Ancient Egyptians (Dollinger, 2006) but it has recently become a fruitful focus of analytical attention. Fortado (1998) feels that nicknames at the workplace are keys capable of unlocking many meanings if one knows how to interpret them. The metaphor introduces the idea that nicknames must be viewed in terms of the socio-cultural milieu in which they occur and that they, in turn, may reveal something of the socio-cultural setting and relationships in which they are used. Some are derived from the original name and have been formed through morphological and phonological processes (de Klerk and Bosch, 1999; Van Dam, 2003). Others are externally motivated, resting on perceptions of the bearer's personality, behavior and appearance (Phillips, 1990). These may be purely descriptive (e.g. *Shorty*) but may also involve more complex reference to cultural, religious, and historical matters as well as to biographical incidents in the namee's life (de Klerk and Bosch, 1996). Cutting across all these is the possibility for nicknames to have positive interpretations signaling affection and acceptance, or negative interpretations signaling dislike and disapproval. One particular focus is what nicknames reveal about sex-role stereotypes. Phillips' (1990) analysis of Pennsylvania teenagers' nicknames found that nicknames were more commonly assigned to males, where they connoted strength, largeness, hardness, and maturity. Female nicknames related to beauty, pleasantness, kindness, and goodness. Clear gender differences also emerged in nickname use among South African adolescents (de Klerk and Bosch,

1996). Again, more males had nicknames than females, with male nicknames relating more to appearance, behavior, personal characteristics or background history and female nicknames more likely to be derived from the original name. In general, female nicknames were regarded as signs of affection or indicators of the bearers' femininity and were rarely openly insulting, which the authors attribute to the nurturing and nurtured status of women and to differences in male/female power in society. It would appear, therefore, that teenage nicknaming in these two studies point to the upholding of traditional attitudes to male/female roles. In both cases, the language from which the nicknames were drawn was English. While nicknames have been studied in languages other than English (see, for instance, Mehrotra, 1979; Al Shahi, 1988; Neethling, 1994; Nicholls, 1995), the published literature is sparse. The aim of the present study, therefore, is to provide an addition to the list of languages and cultures studied through the vehicle of nicknames, the language in focus being Arabic and the culture that of contemporary Kuwaiti teenagers.

The structure of Arabic names has been explained extensively by Schimmel (1989). While her emphasis on nicknames is mainly historical, she does present phonological rules for the construction of diminutive and hypocoristic forms commonly used up to the present day. Her treatment of regional variations, however, focuses primarily on how local languages affected Arabic names in non-Arabic-speaking countries that were converted to Islam. Wardat (1997), on the other hand, presents a sociolinguistic analysis of contemporary Jordanian Arabic nicknames, categorizing their sources under physical appearance, societal rank, occupation, etc. He draws attention to the critical nature of the nicknames in his corpus and concludes that this may be why he found that men were more likely to have a nickname than women, thus repeating what was found in the studies by Phillips (1990) and de Klerk and Bosch (1996). He attributes this to the fact that women enjoy a protected social status in Jordanian culture, a conclusion which seems to echo the earlier cited interpretation of de Klerk and Bosch (1996) on the relative infrequency of offensive nicknames among female South African teenagers. Wardat's (1997) study did not specifically target teenage nicknames and this appears to be uncharted territory not just for Jordanian culture but for that of other Arab countries. The present study addresses this research gap by providing information about teenage nicknames assigned in Kuwait by Kuwaiti teenagers. This small, oil-rich state provides an interesting background for such a study since it is a country which has undergone rapid and extensive societal changes in the relatively short time since the development of the oil industry. On the one hand are the influences of foreign culture brought about through contact with a large imported labor force and foreign media as well as through the foreign travel enjoyed by its affluent citizens. On the other hand are the conservative religious and traditional values which the modern Kuwait continues to uphold.

The nicknames to be collected were those assigned to teenagers and young adults by their peers. In infancy and early childhood, pet names are assigned by caring adults which are protective towards the young child, so that they focus on some endearing aspect of the child and his interaction with the world around him. Nicknames, on the other hand, are assigned by the peer group who, far from shielding the recipient, may actively focus on the individual's perceived negative or weak features and may be tactless and wounding. However, there is a specific injunction in the Quran against the use of offensive nicknames:

... Nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames: ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness, (to be used of one) after he has believed: And those who do not desist are (indeed) doing wrong. (Chapter 49, Al Hujra:t, verse 11, trans. Ali, 1977)

This position is upheld in the Prophetic traditions. Al Nawawi, an early Islamic scholar, devotes an entire chapter (1412/1992) to the importance of refraining from offensive nicknames, particularly those focusing on physical ailments. This restriction is referred to by Schimmel (1989) who points to many examples in history where it has been ignored and to contemporary practice where unflattering nicknames have even become family names. Wardat (1997) also found this religious prohibition ignored in Jordanian (adult) nicknames. How far such a religious embargo would also be upheld in the nicknames of Kuwaiti teenagers seemed an interesting starting point in the present study. Other points to be taken up are drawn from the previous survey of the published literature, specifically the possibility of male/female differences in nicknaming practice, the degree to which nicknames might be regarded as affectionate or derogatory and the extent to which nicknames reveal something of the culture in which they are found.

Data collection

Wardat (1997) pointed out that the individual may be unaware that s/he has a nickname and, even when the nickname *is* known to the recipient, s/he may regard it as private and personal and may therefore not wish to divulge it, particularly if it is felt to be embarrassing. However, other problems may also arise such as shyness in responding frankly to an interviewer whom one does not know or to an interviewer of the opposite sex, a situation particularly likely to arise in conservative Kuwait, where young people of the opposite sex are largely kept apart outside the family circle. It was therefore felt that direct questioning of individuals about their own nicknames might not yield a true picture of nicknaming among Kuwaiti teenagers and that, instead, more might be derived from asking teenagers about the nicknames of their peer group.¹ It was also felt better to conduct the interviews within the family circle or between friends. Although this would still not eliminate altogether the possibility of the suppression of, for example, sexually offensive nicknames, the greater relaxation between interviewer and interviewee seemed a worthwhile trade-off in terms of the degree of willingness to cooperate.

The nicknames were collected by students of a second-year course on Language Acquisition at Kuwait University as part of their course project on pet names and nicknames. The students were required to interview teenagers aged around 15–16 years among their family or friends and elicit from them any nicknames they could remember of school friends. The individuals' real names were also recorded, along with an explanation of how the nickname had originated. This yielded a corpus of 250 nicknames, of which 117 were female and 133 were male. It will be noted that slightly more male nicknames were collected than female, a point which seems to be in line with the findings of Phillips (1990), Wardat (1997) and de Klerk and Bosch (1996).

Judges

Classifying the nicknames were twenty undergraduates from a third-year class in Psycholinguistics, none of whom had been involved in collecting the nicknames. They constituted a mixed group of Kuwaiti males and females aged between 20–24 and, as such, were in tune with Kuwaiti youth culture and would therefore be able to make their judgments on the basis of their inside knowledge of that section of their society. This is important since what might be regarded as an unflattering nickname in one culture might not be so regarded in another.

Derogatory vs. affectionate nicknames

The judges analyzed the nicknames into three categories: (i) derogatory, and therefore hurtful to the recipient, (ii) praising or admiring, and therefore a sign of affection or respect and (iii) neutral. The figures obtained are shown in Table 1.

It is clear that the most frequently occurring type of nickname was the hurtful type. A Chi-square test of the hypothesis that there would be equal numbers for each type found the differences to be highly significant (Chi square = 14.097, $df = 2$, $p < .001$), with the hurtful category making the greatest contribution to Chi square. Separating male and female nicknames, a Chi-square test for differences between the two groups did not reach significance (Chi square = 0.04, $df = 2$, $p > .1$). On the contrary, the two groups show an almost perfect correlation ($r = 0.99$). This situation becomes even clearer when the percentage figures are inspected and it will be noted how close the figures are for the two groups across the three categories.

There were also some nicknames attracting almost equal numbers of votes for two or more categories. Such cases were designated as undecided and there were four possible categories: affectionate/neutral, neutral/hurtful, affectionate/hurtful and affectionate/neutral/hurtful. The figures for these are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 1
HURTFUL, AFFECTIONATE, NEUTRAL, AND UNDECIDED NICKNAMES

	Affectionate		Neutral		Hurtful		Undecided		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Female Nicknames	32	27.4	23	19.7	44	37.6	18	15.4	117	100
Male Nicknames	38	28.6	29	21.8	52	39.1	14	10.5	133	100
Total Male + Female	70	28.0	52	20.8	96	38.4	32	12.8	250	100

TABLE 2
UNDECIDED NICKNAMES

	Aff/Neut		Neut/Hurt		Aff/Hurt		Aff/Neut/ Hurt	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Female Nicknames	13	11.1	4	3.4	0	0	1	0.9
Male Nicknames	7	5.3	3	2.3	1	0.8	3	2.3
Total	20	8.0	7	2.8	1	0.4	4	1.6

As can be seen, a few names were particularly confusing to the judges, who gave an equal number of votes classifying them as affectionate, neutral, or hurtful. The three male nicknames were *Koheila* /kohaila/ for *Khalid*, because ‘his eyes look as if they have kohl around them’, *Al Looty* /al lu:ti/ for another *Khalid*, because ‘he keeps talking around a point and never really gives the point’ and *Sequell* /seqwel/, a Playstation character, for *Fawaz*. Obviously judges were torn between the obvious reference to a handsome feature in the first young man’s appearance and its feminine overtones, while in the second the word /al lu:ti/ in the Kuwaiti dialect can have both positive connotations (in the sense that the talkative person is a joker) and negative connotations (in the sense that he may be deliberately trying to be evasive). The third example may also reflect ambivalent attitudes to a teenager being named after a Playstation character. The sole female example was *Abeeta* (/abi:ta/ = idiot) for *Kholoud* (/xolu:d/), where the hurtful connotations were perhaps mitigated by the affectionate interpretation offered by the explanation for this nickname namely that ‘she likes to joke a lot.’ In the undecided category, however, those categorized as being either affectionate or neutral were the most numerous. One likely explanation is that many simply involved phonological changes to the original name as in *Modiyah* (/modi:ya/) for *Moudhi* (/muði:/), *Marwita* (/marwi:ta/) for *Marwa* (/marwa/), *Anu* (/ænu:/) for *Anwar* (/anwa:r/) and *Azooz* (/azu:z) for *Aziz* (/azi:z/). Another reason is that there are ‘standard’ nicknames for particular names, as in the case of calling anyone named *Hussein*, *Abu Ali* (‘father of Ali’). Others reflect aspects of the person that might be intrinsically difficult to categorize as in *Al Sareea* (/al sari:‘a/ ‘the speedy person’) for *Sami* because ‘he does everything quickly,’ *Galaxy* for *Ahmed* because ‘he is interested in space and planets’ and *Bathfinder* (= Pathfinder, the name of a car) for *Isra* because ‘she is dreaming of having a Pathfinder.’ Those nicknames attracting equal votes for being neutral or hurtful reveal perhaps a certain lack of sensitivity on the part of certain judges since it does seem difficult to see how some could be considered neutral. Such is the case with /‘om al šamma:t/ (‘mother of moles’), for a girl called *Nashmiya* (/našmi:ya/) because ‘she has a lot of moles on her face,’ *Radyo* (/radyo/ ‘radio’) for *Wafa’* because ‘she keeps talking all the time’ and *Tona* (/tonal ‘tuna’) for *Qairawan* because ‘her smile is fishy.’ Similarly among the boys is *Tweety* for *Abdullah* because ‘he looks like the cartoon character’ and *Al Megrim* (/al megrim/ ‘the criminal’) for *Ali* because ‘he makes fights with other boys and doesn’t respect his father or teachers.’ However, perhaps the most interesting nickname with equal votes in two categories is *Bin Laden* for a boy called *Ahmed*. Judges’ opinion was completely split between affectionate and hurtful. The reason given for the nickname was that Ahmed ‘is very religious, strict and sectarian’ and it is possible that this is what divided the judges. Some focused on Ahmed being religious and strict, which would have strong positive connotations in Kuwaiti society. Others focused on the sensitive matter of being sectarian, which would have very strong negative connotations in Kuwaiti society. It may be useful at this juncture to mention the other instance of this nickname, in this case *Osama bin Laden*, given to another Ahmed. This time, the reason given was ‘he believes in his ideas and has adopted his character.’ Eleven of the judges considered this to be a neutral nickname, four considered it hurtful, and five considered it to be a sign of affection. With the removal of the touchy matter of sectarianism, the picture emerging may point to

uncertainty and divided opinion over how to view the Bin Laden phenomenon, with the majority of judges clustering in the safe middle territory of neutrality but with a sizeable minority revealing polarization of opinion.

Physical appearance vs. personal attributes

In generating a nickname, whether one showing criticism or appreciation of the recipient's qualities, the focus may be either on the physical appearance or on some aspect of the individual's personality. Table 3 shows the figures obtained with regard to this distinction.

Appearance and personality constituted the most common basis for the formation of nicknames since together they account for 86% of all nicknames, with the figures for male and female nicknames being very close. The remainder are based on a miscellany of sources such as the sound of the original name (e.g. *Nadoo* (/nadu/) for *Nadia*, *Lolo* (/lolo/) for *Ala*, or an incident from the individual's past as in the case of a boy nicknamed *Ketchup* because on the first day of school his friends put ketchup on his chair and he sat on it. Similarly, a girl was nicknamed *Om el naml* ('mother of ants') because 'when she was a baby, ants would always come to her wherever she was put down.'

The total number of nicknames based on personal appearance or physical attributes and those based on personality or general character are remarkably similar, with only a very slight and statistically non-significant weighting in favor of physical appearance (Chi square = 0.1293, df = 1, p > .1). This would indicate that Kuwaiti teenagers are just as likely to focus on the one as on the other. This is also shown when the figures for male and female nicknames are considered separately. However, the tendency towards focusing on appearance over personality or character is slightly greater for female names than for male names.

Another dimension is the degree to which personality and appearance may indicate praise or criticism. The figures for this analysis are presented in Table 4.

The totals for the two sexes combined show differences across the four categories. A Chi-square test of the hypothesis that, for males and females combined, there would be equal numbers in each category found the differences to be highly significant (Chi square = 37.47, df = 3, p < .001). However, a Chi-square test of differences between males and females did not reach significance (Chi square = 3.46,

TABLE 3
NICKNAMES BASED ON PHYSICAL APPEARANCE VS. NICKNAMES BASED ON
PERSONALITY/CHARACTER

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	% of all male nicknames	n	% of all female nicknames	n	% of all nicknames
Physical Appearance	61	45.9	52	44.4	113	45.2
Personality/Character	57	42.9	45	38.5	102	40.8
Neither	15	11.3	20	17.1	35	14.0
Total	133	100	117	100	250	100

TABLE 4
 PRAISE AND CRITICISM IN NICKNAMES RELATING TO APPEARANCE AND PERSONALITY/CHARACTER

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	% of all male nicknames	n	% of all female nicknames	n	% of all nicknames
Hurtful based on Appearance	39	29.3	29	24.8	68	27.2
Hurtful based on Personality/Character	13	9.8	11	9.4	24	9.6
Affectionate based on Appearance	8	6.0	12	10.3	20	8.0
Affectionate based on Personality/Character	26	19.5	14	11.9	40	16.0
Total	86	64.6	66	56.4	152	60.8

df = 3, $p > .1$). Thus, within this fourfold classification, the most common type of nickname for both sexes focuses negatively on appearance. These are often colorfully accurate, and even amusing, although obviously not so to the recipients. Some illustrations are given in Table 5. The reasons for the nicknames are as supplied by the students who collected the data.

On the other hand, when affectionate nicknames are considered, they are more likely in both sexes to be based on personality or character than on appearance. Some examples of these are presented in Table 6.

Nicknames conveying an admiring assessment of the individual's appearance are the least common. Some illustrations of these are given in Table 7.

To be noted, however, are the gender differences within this distribution. When an affectionate nickname is given to males, it is more than three times as common for it to focus on personality as on appearance. For females, on the other hand, the

TABLE 5
 EXAMPLES OF DEROGATORY NICKNAMES FOCUSING ON APPEARANCE

Male			Female		
Original Name	Nickname	Reason	Original Name	Nickname	Reason
Hosny	<i>Al Lamba</i>	His head looks like a light bulb	Asma	<i>Sahra</i> (/səhra/) 'witch'	Her long black hair and big nose made her look like a witch
Ahmed	<i>Rajul Fada'</i> (/raju:l fada'/) 'space-man'	He has very faint eyebrows and when he smiles his eyes go back as if they had disappeared	Kholoud	<i>Gabsula</i> (/ga:bsu:lə/)	She is white but with a red face and is short and thin. She looks like a medical capsule
Adel	<i>Al Feel</i> (alfi:l) 'the elephant'	He is very huge	Nahla	<i>Laimona</i> /laymona/	She has a yellow face, like a lemon
Ali	<i>Baba Smurf</i>	He is short and small like a Smurf	Dhoha	<i>Dracula</i>	She has dark skin and red eyes
Fahed	<i>Abu Bateekha</i> (/abu bati:xa/) 'father of watermelon'	He has a head like a watermelon	Qairawan	<i>Tona</i> (/tona/) 'tuna fish'	Her smile is fishy

TABLE 6
 EXAMPLES OF AFFECTIONATE NICKNAMES FOCUSING ON PERSONALITY

Male			Female		
Original Name	Nickname	Reason	Original Name	Nickname	Reason
Mohamed	<i>Abu Ziad</i>	Ziad was an early leader in Islam. He thinks of himself as a leader	Narijs	<i>Malikat al nahl</i> 'queen of the bees'	She cares about other people
Mohamed	<i>Al Faylasuf</i> 'the philosopher'	He likes to talk a lot and explain everything	Noura	<i>Hat-hoot</i> /hathu:t/	From a character in a poetry magazine who is funny like her
Salem	<i>Turbo</i>	He's the fastest in his class	Tahani	<i>Al Sha'era</i> 'the poetess'	She likes poetry
Salem	<i>Al Malek</i> 'the king'	He likes to be the leader and give orders	Reem	<i>Al Malak</i> 'the angel'	She's a good girl
Khaled	<i>Al 'Abqaree</i> 'the genius'	He's clever and gets high marks at school	Asma	<i>Kita</i> 'kitten'	She's very quiet

TABLE 7
 EXAMPLES OF COMPLIMENTARY NICKNAMES FOCUSING ON APPEARANCE

Male			Female		
Original Name	Nickname	Reason	Original Name	Nickname	Reason
Ali	<i>Shirazi</i>	He is fair, bold and has green eyes like a Persian cat	Nada	<i>Shakira</i>	She looks like this famous artiste
Mishal	<i>Baby Face</i>	He has a cute face	Reem	<i>Shokolat</i>	She is dark and sweet like chocolate
Tamer	<i>Taisun</i>	From the boxer Tyson, whom he looks like	Yasmeen	<i>Al Jameela</i> 'the beautiful one'	She is beautiful
Fawaz	<i>Ustadh Kashka</i> 'Mr Show off'	He is always changing his appearance and wears unusual clothes	Hanan	<i>Qamar</i> 'Moon'	She is like the moon

numbers of affectionate nicknames based on appearance and personality are almost equal.

Cultural influences

Kuwait may be said to be multicultural since it contains elements of imported (mainly, but not exclusively, western) culture mixed with the traditional features of (Gulf) Arab culture. The nicknames were therefore further inspected to pick out those which seemed to be culture oriented with a view to revealing how far these two strands of modern Kuwaiti culture might be represented.

As can be seen from Table 8, around a third of both male and females nicknames show some kind of cultural influence. However, there is a gender difference with

TABLE 8
INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON NICKNAMES

	Female Nicknames		Male Nicknames	
	n	% of Female Nicknames	n	% of Male Nicknames
Arab/Kuwaiti Culture	21	17.9	19	14.3
Foreign Culture	13	11.1	25	18.8
Total	34	29	44	33

female nicknames showing a stronger local influence and male nicknames a stronger foreign influence. The figures, however, narrowly miss statistical significance (Chi square = 1.8822, $df = 1$, $p > .1$), indicating that perhaps a larger sample would give a clearer picture.

As to how nicknames in the group were judged, no trend was discernible in those relating to Arab culture since, taking males and females together, there were virtually equal numbers judged to be affectionate, neutral, or hurtful, a uniformity largely upheld when male and female nicknames are considered separately (see Table 9). However, in nicknames reflecting foreign culture there is a highly significant weighting in favor of these being judged as affectionate (Chi square = 16.35, $df = 2$, $p < .001$).

As mentioned above, girls' nicknames were more likely to be influenced by local culture and the largest single category (9 out of the 21) was based on the girl's similarity to Arab cartoon characters. Indeed, cartoon characters whether Arab or foreign provide a source of nicknames across both genders, but the only sizeable number are the female nicknames from Arab cartoons. These were mostly judged as neutral (with four votes), with two judged as affectionate and three as hurtful. Arab show business personalities also figure among both male and female nicknames. Notable is the case of a girl given the nickname *Adel Imam*, because of her likeness to the (male) Egyptian comedy film star known for his gaunt cheeks and amusing facial expressions. Local custom and wildlife are also featured as in the girl's name /*šihana*/ ('falcon') (reflecting the popular Arab sport of falconry), the boy's name /*al saqr*/ ('falcon') and the girl's name /*hud hud*/ ('hoopoe'), the latter combining elements of the recipient's original name (*Hoda*) with the name of a beautiful bird.

TABLE 9
JUDGMENTS OF CULTURALLY-INSPIRED NICKNAMES

	Arab Culture			Foreign Culture			Total Male and Female
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
Hurtful	4	7	11	3	3	6	17
Affectionate	7	5	12	12	8	20	32
Neutral	5	7	12	7	1	8	20
Undecided	3	2	5	3	1	4	9
Total	19	21	40	25	13	38	78

Among the boys' nicknames were a few instances of names of famous Arab literary or historical figures and the inevitable footballers. As mentioned earlier, two boys were nicknamed after Osama Bin Laden, which gained mixed views as to its tolerability, while one girl was given the nickname *Saddam* because she was very bossy. In view of the recent history of Kuwait, this would be very hurtful. Modern Kuwaiti society is so car oriented that the car now seems an integral part of Kuwaiti culture and this is reflected in a few of the girls' nicknames which indicate either the car the recipient drives (/wanet ahmar/ ('red pick up')) or would like to drive (e.g. /baθfaindər/ for Pathfinder, /borʃ/ for Porsche). Perhaps surprisingly, no instances of car-oriented boys' nicknames were collected.

Turning to other cultural imports, a striking factor was the use of English words (e.g. *Ketchup*, *Galaxy*, *Baby Face*, *Bus*) as male nicknames, of which eleven cases (= 8.2% of all male nicknames) were recorded. No similar instances of female nicknames were recorded, apart from the two car names referred to above. However, common to both groups were names of international pop stars, film stars, or sports personalities. The boys favored footballers *Zidane* and *Pele*, while *Shakira* and *Jennifer Lopez* were the most popular among the girls. Two girls were nicknamed *Barbie* on account of their resemblance to the doll, and particularly their fondness for wearing pink, which provides a dramatic contrast to the very wounding nickname of *Dracula* given to a girl because of her 'dark skin and red eyes.' Indian films are popular in Kuwait, which has always had close trading ties with the sub-continent and some Indian influence could be seen in nicknames like *Chandra* and *Ranee*, given because of the recipients' Indian appearance and fondness for Indian films. However, satellite TV has also played a role, as witness the girl hurtfully nicknamed *CNN* because of her penchant for spreading news and rumors, which could be compared with the corresponding nickname *KUNA* (= Kuwait News Agency) from the Arab culture group, hurtfully given to another girl for the same reason.

Discussion

One point of difference between the present findings and those of de Klerk and Bosch (1996) arises out of their report that, while female nicknames were more likely to be linguistic variations of the original name, male nicknames targeted the appearance, behavior, personal characteristics, or background history of the recipient. In the present study, appearance and personality constituted the most common basis for both male and female nicknames, with only a small percentage based on the sound of the original name. Compounding this contrast was a very significant trend for Kuwaiti nicknames of *both* sexes to involve a hurtful reference to the namee's physical appearance, while the next most common type referred to the namee's personality or character in an affectionate way. In general, nicknames were more likely to target negative aspects of appearance than positive ones, and more likely to target positive aspects of personality or character than negative ones. It is tempting to extrapolate from this that these teenagers are intolerant of odd appearance but are appreciative of what they view as good character or personality characteristics, both of which notions do not seem inconsistent with popular views on teenagers in general.

As we have seen, with culture-oriented nicknames, the male/female totals for foreign vs. local influence did not differ significantly, although this masks male/female differences as to the particular cultural area from which nicknames were drawn. The popularity of Arab cartoon characters as a source of girls' nicknames is particularly striking, as is the use of English words exclusively for boys' nicknames. However, the significant trend to emerge here was that, regardless of gender, nicknames based on foreign cultural influences were judged to be affectionate. This may reflect a widespread attraction among Kuwaiti teenagers for foreign culture so that it is 'cool' to have a foreign-inspired nickname.

It may be pertinent at this juncture to raise the question of what constitutes foreign culture in the modern Kuwaiti context since there are many foreign imports which have become so indispensable to life in Kuwait that they could now be regarded as part of the culture. This is particularly so in the case of the car which, as well as being a means of transport, is a cultural status symbol. No Kuwaiti ever takes public transport, which is considered the sole preserve of the expatriate work force. While not part of traditional Arab culture, the car could now be regarded as integral to modern Kuwaiti culture. We have seen how this is reflected in the sprinkling of car-oriented girls' nicknames, but the nicknames have revealed other instances of the intrusion of cultural imports (e.g. *ketchup*, *bus*, *Barbie*, the names of international singers and sports personalities, cartoon characters, etc.). This may indicate the development of a Western-oriented youth sub-culture, but traditional practices such as gender segregation, arranged marriages, the adoption of Islamic dress code, etc., are still the norm even among the young. Just how deep the impact is of Western importations on the traditional conservatism of Kuwaiti culture would provide considerable scope for sociological examination.

However, a major aim of this study was to investigate whether or not Kuwaiti teenagers would respect the religious injunction against the use of hurtful nicknames. That they clearly do not is evidenced by the fact that nicknames judged to be hurtful were the single largest group. Kuwaiti teenagers are thus in line with the other Arab groups dealt with in Schimmel (1989) and Wardat (1997). The difference here, however, is that girls' nicknames are just as likely to be hurtful as boys', which seems contrary to the conclusions of De Klerk and Bosch (1996) that female nicknames are more likely to indicate affection than to be used as vehicles of humor or criticism. They attributed this to the 'nurturing and nurtured role' of women in society and the broad differences in male/female societal power. Wardat (1997) also found restraint in the nicknaming of Jordanian women, attributing it to the particular importance, in a conservative society like Jordan, of protecting their social standing and reputation. Kuwait is also a very conservative Islamic society and the same shielding mechanism would be expected to be at work here. In trying to explain the divergence between the present findings and those of the other studies, a number of possible reasons can be suggested. Wardat, for instance, did not focus on the nicknames of teenagers, who might be expected to be more cruel in their nicknaming practices than adults, a possibility that needs empirical validation. Also, while De Klerk and Bosch (1996) *did* focus on the nicknames of South African *adolescents*, their method of data collection involved respondents self-reporting their own nicknames. There is, therefore, the possibility of some degree of self-editing to select only flattering

nicknames or edit out unfavorable ones. The present study required teenagers to report the nicknames of their peers, and would perhaps provide scope for a less inhibited response. Also, high schools in Kuwait are gender segregated, a factor which may affect the nature and volume of nicknaming. It is possible, for instance, that in a conservative Muslim society girls may be less inhibited in the nature of the nicknames they devise when they are operating within an all-female context. An interesting question is whether these (and indeed other types of) nicknames die out or persist as the individual passes into adulthood. In fact, adult nicknames in Kuwait have not yet been studied and it would be interesting to compare these with nicknames of (a) Kuwaiti teenagers and (b) Wardat's Jordanian adults.

While it is true that many of the hurtful nicknames reported here are entertaining or witty, they must surely still be upsetting to the individual on the receiving end. Crozier and Dimmock (1999) found that 20% of the British primary schoolchildren in their study reported unkind and distressing nicknames, and concluded that such names are hurtful because of the threat to the individual's identity. While British primary schoolchildren may not present the same population as Kuwaiti teenagers, there is no reason to suggest that they are any more vulnerable when it comes to offensive nicknames. The fact that hurtful names were found to be even more common in the present sample (i.e. 38.4% as compared to 20%) may again be attributed to the difference between self-reporting and peer reporting, but there is also scope for future investigation of whether the degree of hurtful nicknaming increases during the teenage years. The relatively high figure uncovered in the present study also requires further scrutiny of possible underlying societal and individual factors, as well as an examination of its effects on personal growth and well-being. In this context, it may be worth bearing in mind the recent history of Kuwait and the psychological after-effects of the invasion and occupation of the country. That the residual traumas of these are still working their way out through Kuwaiti society has been shown by numerous studies. For example, Kuwaiti undergraduates show the lowest level of happiness among similar groups from other countries, including Bahrain (a neighboring Gulf state with a comparable culture) and the USA (Abdel-Khalek, 2004), lower scores for optimism (Abdel-Khalek and Lester, 2006), and higher scores for depression than their American counterparts (Lester and Abdel-Khalek, 1998). In addition, Kuwaiti females score higher than males on measures of general anxiety and general depression (Abdel-Khalek, 2002), a factor relevant to the findings here regarding hurtful female nicknaming. Exacerbating these post-invasion effects are anxieties stemming from rising unemployment among young Kuwaitis as well as from the conflict between the traditional, but still prevalent, cultural roles of females as wives and mothers and modern career-oriented expectations. Although many of the studies referred to above were based on university undergraduates, the pressures facing teenagers in Kuwaiti high schools would not be so different from their older counterparts. They too have the worry of passing exams and finding employment or a place in higher education. Many face early marriage with its concomitant pressures, while post-invasion trauma may still be a constant background theme. Yet another strand to societal influences can be found in the widespread use of maids (mainly from the Indian sub-continent and the Philippines) for child care. Concern is now being expressed about the long-term harmful effects that this practice

may have on the social and psychological development of children since these maids are, for the large part, uneducated and untrained in child care (El-Haddad, 2003; Roumani, 2005). Indeed, El-Haddad goes as far as saying that the resulting 'dysfunction in socialization is the major problem facing the contemporary Gulf family' (2003: 6). At the individual level, it may also be worth noting that Kuwaiti undergraduates score highly on extroversion (Al Masha'an, 1993; Haggan, 1998). The significant point here is that extroverts are described as being 'relatively insensitive, impersonal and tough-minded' (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1969), a portrayal that accords well with the popularity of hurtful nicknames found in the present study, particularly in view of the fact that Haggan's subjects were predominantly female. In summing up, hurtful nicknames could well be an outcome of a general societal and psychological malaise, but could equally well be a contributory factor in the negative scores alluded to in the foregoing studies. Finally, of course, there is also the possibility that these unkind nicknames might signal acceptance or even affection on the part of one's peers. De Klerk and Bosch (1996) made the point that not all apparently offensive nicknames are disliked by South African adolescents, and may depend on who uses them. Obviously, the final chapter has yet to be written on Kuwaiti teenage nicknames, but the variety of nicknames revealed here provides a tantalizingly brief glimpse into the lives of young Kuwaitis.

Note

¹ Some retrospective support for this approach comes from the fact that when the twenty students subsequently acting as judges in categorizing the collected nicknames (see below) were asked whether they themselves had nicknames and whether they liked them or not, fourteen said that they had a nickname which they liked, but only two said they didn't like their nickname (each being unflattering and hurtful,

namely *Basketball* from the rounded shape of her forehead, and *Olive*, because she was skinny like the wife of Popeye). Of the remainder, two said they did not have any nickname and two did not answer. It would seem that some self-editing might have been at work here and that even submitting one's hurtful nickname anonymously may engender some embarrassment and concealment.

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