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EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Wasta and Digital Discourses across the Gulf Region: Negotiating Legitimacy and Merit Online

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Abstract. This article examines how *wāsiṭa* (Arabic: واسطة), the use of personal connections to gain access to opportunities, is negotiated in digital forums across the Gulf region. Moving beyond traditional definitions of nepotism, we theorize *wāsiṭa* as a form of hybrid socio-cultural capital that blends social ties with cultural legitimacy and moral obligation. Using a hermeneutic approach combined with Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling, we analyse 811 comments from platforms including Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, and Saudi university forums. The findings reveal a constitutive moral ambivalence where online users simultaneously condemn the practice as a corrosive barrier to meritocracy while defending it as a pragmatic tool for navigating institutional gaps. We identify three primary interpretive clusters, including pragmatic navigation, moral ambivalence, and structural entrenchment, that illustrate how informal institutions adapt rather than disappear under conditions of modernization. By mapping this digital moral grammar, the study contributes to broader debates on the resilience of informal governance and the shifting nature of legitimacy in contemporary Gulf societies.
Keywords: Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); Digital discourse; Hybrid socio-cultural capital; Informal institutions; Wasta

[es] Wāsiṭa and discursos digitales en la región del Golfo: negociando legitimidad y mérito en línea

Resumen. Este artículo examina cómo la *wāsiṭa* (árabe: واسطة), el uso de conexiones personales para acceder a oportunidades, se negocia en los foros digitales de la región del Golfo. Superando las definiciones tradicionales de nepotismo, teorizamos la *wāsiṭa* como una forma de capital sociocultural híbrido que fusiona vínculos sociales, legitimidad cultural y obligación moral. Mediante un enfoque hermenéutico y el modelado temático (LDA),

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analizamos 811 comentarios en Reddit, YouTube, Instagram y foros universitarios saudíes. Los resultados revelan una ambivalencia moral constitutiva en la que los usuarios digitales condenan la práctica como una barrera corrosiva para la meritocracia mientras la defienden como una herramienta pragmática para subsanar deficiencias institucionales. Identificamos tres clústeres interpretativos titulados navegación pragmática, ambivalencia moral y atrincheramiento estructural que ilustran cómo las instituciones informales se adaptan en lugar de desaparecer ante la modernización. Al mapear esta gramática moral digital, el estudio contribuye a los debates sobre la resiliencia de la gobernanza informal y la transformación de la legitimidad en las sociedades contemporáneas del Golfo.
Palabras clave: Consejo de Cooperación del Golfo (CCG); Discurso digital; Capital sociocultural híbrido; Instituciones informales; Wāsiṭa

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1. Introduction

Few words in Arabic social life carry the weight of *wāsiṭa* (Arabic: واسطة, translit. *wāsiṭa*). It represents the whispered key to a job interview, the phone call that secures a hospital bed, and the favor that opens a bureaucratic door otherwise closed. While often reduced to nepotism, *wāsiṭa* is more than corruption by another name. Its root *wasata*, meaning to mediate, recalls the trusted intermediary who once resolved tribal disputes. What began as tribal intercession now permeates modern Gulf bureaucracies, operating simultaneously as a coping mechanism, a source of privilege, and a moral dilemma.[3][4][5] It reflects norms of reciprocity and honour shaped by hierarchical and communal expectations.

Scholars have long grappled with this paradox. Gold and Naufal[6] examined how Gulf students experience *wāsiṭa* as both a lifeline and a liability, while Hutchings and Weir[7] compare it to *guanxi*, emphasizing the moral economies that make it socially intelligible. Such findings confirm that *wāsiṭa* maintains a degree of moral legitimacy today. Despite government efforts to curtail it through anti-corruption programs or broader meritocratic reforms, the practice persists as a living institution that unsettles simple binaries of traditional versus modern and formal versus informal.

Existing research offers two main perspectives. One frames *wāsiṭa* as a form of corruption that entrenches inequality, while the other conceptualizes it as a form of social

[3] Mohamed A. Ramady and M. Sadiq Sohail, "Assessing the Role of Family Business in Promoting Economic Growth: Perspectives from Saudi Arabia," *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business* 10/4 (2010): 447.

[4] Fadi Alsarhan and Arwa Al-Twal, "Towards Understanding the Relationships between Economics, Tribalism and the Use of the Wasta Informal Network in the Workplace," *Employee Relations: The International Journal* 45/4 (2023): 925-43.

[5] Arwa Al-Twal, Mohammad Alawamleh, and Doaa M. F. Jarrar, "An Investigation of the Role of Wasta Social Capital in Enhancing Employee Loyalty and Innovation in Organizations," *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship* 13, no. 1 (2024): 12

[6] Gary D. Gold and George S. Naufal, "Wasta: The Other Invisible Hand: A Case Study of University Students in the Gulf," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 2/1 (2012): 59-73.

[7] Kate Hutchings and David Weir, "Guanxi and Wasta: A Comparison," *Thunderbird International Business Review* 48/1 (2006): 141-56.

capital akin to *guanxi* or *jeitinho*.[8][9][10] Both perspectives, however, tend to underplay the normative dimension: the cultural logic through which *wāsiṭa* becomes both operable and socially meaningful. This moral ambivalence serves as the point of departure for our analysis.

Guided by the question of how *wāsiṭa* is framed and justified in the Gulf's digital public sphere, this article moves beyond the corruption versus culture dichotomy. We examine how younger generations negotiate *wāsiṭa* as both a social obligation and a challenge to meritocratic ideals. By combining hermeneutic reading with computational topic modelling, we trace how the practice is narrated, mocked, or defended across platforms such as Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, and Saudi university forums. We argue that *wāsiṭa* functions as a form of hybrid socio-cultural capital, representing a fusion of economic advantage, social obligation, and cultural legitimacy. This study ultimately examines how justice is felt, legitimacy is contested, and the tension between meritocracy and loyalty is negotiated.

2. Literature Review

Building on the questions raised in the introduction, this article situates *wāsiṭa* within broader debates on informal institutions, social capital, and cultural legitimacy. Existing scholarship commonly approaches *wāsiṭa* through a conceptual tension between corruption that undermines meritocratic ideals[11] and culturally sanctioned forms of social access comparable to informal networking practices elsewhere, such as *guanxi* in China,[12][13] *jeitinho* in Brazil,[14] or *raccomandazione* in Italy.[15] While analytically productive, such binary framings tend to oversimplify the phenomenon by overlooking the normative logics through which these practices acquire local legitimacy. This article therefore approaches *wāsiṭa* as a relational practice that simultaneously reproduces inequality and draws on culturally embedded expectations of obligation, loyalty, and moral responsibility.

At the institutional level, drawing on North's[16] institutional theory, this study conceptualises *wāsiṭa* as an enduring informal rule system operating alongside formal

[8]Hayfaa Tlaiss and Saleema Kauser, "The Importance of Wasta in the Career Success of Middle Eastern Managers," *Journal of European Industrial Training* 35/5 (2011): 467-86.

[9] Dorothy Louise Zinn, *Raccomandazione: Clientelism and Connections in Italy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019).

[10] Sven Horak, Ibrahim Abosag, Kate Hutchings, et al., "Questioning the Appropriateness of Examining Guanxi in a Wasta Environment: Why Context Should Be Front and Center in Informal Network Research – A Commentary on 'De-Linking From Western Epistemologies: Using Guanxi-Type Relationships to Attract and Retain Hotel Guests in the Middle East'," *Management and Organization Review* 19/5 (2023): 1040-45.

[11] Lisa Baranik, Brandon Gorman, and Natalie Wright, "Wasta and Its Relationship to Employment Status and Income in the Arab Middle East," *Current Sociology* 71/5 (2023): 830-47.

[12] T. K. P. Leung et al., "An Examination of the Influence of Guanxi and Xinyong (Utilization of Personal Trust) on Negotiation Outcome in China: An Old Friend Approach," *Industrial Marketing Management* 40, no. 7 (2011): 1193–1205.

[13]Horak et al., "Questioning the Appropriateness," 1040-45.

[14]Maria Cristina Ferreira et al., "Unraveling the Mystery of Brazilian Jeitinho: A Cultural Exploration of Social Norms," Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 38/3 (2012): 331-44.

[15]Dorothy Louise Zinn, *Raccomandazione: Clientelism and Connections in Italy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 40-61.

[16]Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 25.

bureaucracy in Gulf societies. Beyond bypassing red tape, it signals social identity, trust, and moral obligation, reflecting personalised accountability rather than impersonal procedure.[17] Following Helmke and Levitsky,[18] *wāsiṭa* combines competing and substitutive logics where formal channels are weak or inaccessible. Organisational studies show that *wāsiṭa* functions both as a moral economy and a leadership mechanism in Arab contexts,[19][20][21] helping explain its persistence despite inequitable effects. Moral evaluations of *wāsiṭa* are occasionally articulated through broadly shared ethical idioms, including notions of justice and obligation.[22]

Cultural logic further clarifies how practices formally labelled as nepotistic may be viewed locally as morally warranted. As studies of Cunningham and Sarayah as well as that of Gold and Naufal show[23][24] assisting kin is commonly interpreted as fulfilling duty and care rather than violating fairness, illustrating how internalised norms can coexist with and challenge-emerging meritocratic expectations.

In the Gulf, these moralized expectations shape not only how *wāsiṭa* is justified but also how it becomes effective. Influence derives also from the presence of social ties but as well as from the cultural authority attached to them. This fusion of relational access and moral standing constitutes what we term *hybrid socio-cultural capital* - a contextual lens capturing how honour, obligation, and religious duty structure access to opportunities. Rather than introducing a new form of capital, the concept clarifies how moral and relational expectations shape practice. Consistent with social capital theory, particularly Lin's[25] emphasis on the activation of ties within specific moral and institutional contexts, hybrid socio-cultural capital explains why some actors can mobilise assistance with ease while others cannot.

Recent research on Saudi Arabia helps explain both the persistence of *wāsiṭa* and its heightened visibility in digital arenas. Studies of gender equality show how institutional access remains mediated by family structures and moral expectations, even amid formal reform.[26] Work on Vision 2030 highlights shifting modes of citizenship, bureaucratic capacity, and inclusion that simultaneously expand access and intensify informal mediation.[27] Political–institutional analyses further demonstrate how informal brokerage persists within an authoritarian bureaucratic framework, rather than being displaced by

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[17] Andy Barnett, Bruce Yandle, and George Naufal, "Regulation, Trust, and Cronyism in Middle Eastern Societies: The Simple Economics of 'Wasta'," *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 44 (June 2013): 41-46.

[18] Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda," *Perspectives on Politics* 2/4 (2004): 727.

[19] David Weir, "'Management in the Arab World,'" *Culture and Management in Asia* (London, 2003)

[20] Al-Twal, Ahmad, et al., 'Transformational Leadership and Wasta: An Empirical Study from a Middle Eastern Context'.

[21] Alsarhan and Al-Twal, "Towards Understanding the Relationships," 932.

[22] Abbas J. Ali and Abdullah Al-Owaihan, "Islamic Work Ethic: A Critical Review," *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal* 15/1 (2008): 5.

[23] Robert B. Cunningham, Yasin K. Sarayrah, and Yasin E. Sarayrah, "Taming 'Wasta' to Achieve Development," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16/3 (1994): 32.

[24] Gold and Naufal, "Wasta: The Other Invisible Hand."

[25] Nan Lin, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001),19-40.

[26] Jawad Syed, Faiza Ali, and Sophie Hennekam, "Gender Equality in Employment in Saudi Arabia: A Relational Perspective," *Career Development International* 23/2 (2018): 168.

[27] Rosie Bsheer, "The Limits of Belonging in Saudi Arabia," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52/4 (2020): 748-53.

formalisation.[28] Sociological research likewise underscores how kinship obligations and norms of care continue to shape interactions with state services.[29][30]

As these institutional and moral logics become contested under reform, online platforms emerge as key sites where users narrate, normalise, or criticise *wāsiṭa*. Drawing on digital ethnography, which treats user-generated content and hybrid online–offline spaces as analytically meaningful social fields,[31] we situate digital discourse as an extension of these broader socio-institutional dynamics.

Together, these strands provide a grounded socio-institutional backdrop for interpreting how users frame and contest *wāsiṭa* in contemporary Gulf publics.

Conceptualising *wāsiṭa* in this way moves beyond the corruption versus culture optics, highlighting how relationships in the Gulf are shaped by both moral expectations and material incentives. This framework explains why *wāsiṭa* operates not only through bureaucratic backchannels but also in everyday settings, including hospital waiting rooms, university admissions, and job recruitment, and how global norms of fairness and merit are locally interpreted, adapted, or resisted.[32][33] Apparent contradictions in public discourse, where some users condemn *wāsiṭa* as corruption while others defend it as justice, reflect situated evaluations shaped by shifting interpretive horizons.

Although *wāsiṭa* appears across Arab societies, its Gulf-specific forms reflect the region's socio-political environment. In the GCC, especially in Saudi Arabia, *wāsiṭa* functions both as a moral practice and as a structural response to rapid modernisation, demographic pressure, and hybridised authority. Since the 1970s oil boom, economic expansion has coexisted with state paternalism, segmented labour markets, and tribal- state compacts.[34][35]

In Saudi Arabia, where most of our dataset originates, *wāsiṭa* remains central to the circulation of opportunities. Strong state control over education and employment coexists with opaque distributive mechanisms, making personal mediation familiar and often necessary. Competition for prestigious public sector roles, which continue to serve as markers of stability and status, further reinforces the reliance on such networks.[36][37] Access, however, is uneven. Gender, family background, and region influence who can activate effective intermediaries. Women and minorities frequently report exclusion from male-

[28] Jean-François Seznec, "Democratization in the Arab World? Stirrings in Saudi Arabia," *Journal of Democracy* 13/4 (2002): 33-40.

[29] Ramady and Sohail, "Assessing the Role of Family Business."

[30] Abraham Stefanidis, Moshe Banai, and Grace Dagher, "Socio-Cultural Capital in the Arab Workplace: Wasta as a Moderator of Ethical Idealism and Work Engagement," *Employee Relations: The International Journal* 45 (August 2022): 25-9.

[31] Dhiraj Murthy, "Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Technologies for Social Research," *Sociology* 42/5 (2008): 837-55.

[32] Hutchings and Weir, "Guanxi and Wasta".

[33] Tlaiss and Kauser, "The Importance of Wasta in the Career Success of Middle Eastern Managers."

[34] Steffen Hertog, ed., *National Employment, Migration and Education in the GCC* (London: Gerlach Press, 2013).

[35] Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli, eds., *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[36] Amelie Le Renard, A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia (Stanford University Press, 2014), 51-85.

[37] Ramady and Sohail, "Assessing the Role of Family Business."

dominated mediation networks, which limits access and mobility despite strong credentials.[3839]

Shifting cultural discourse compounds these tensions. Economic liberalisation and managerial reforms coexist with persistent informal privilege. Initiatives such as Vision 2030 promote efficiency and anti-corruption, yet many citizens remain sceptical.

This ambivalence is central to the analysis. Digital platforms such as Reddit and YouTube provide spaces where resentment, resignation, critique, and accommodation are publicly articulated and negotiated. In these settings, where personal narratives intersect with broader social concerns, *wāsiṭa* functions as a lens through which users discuss justice, power, and opportunity.

Adopting a hermeneutic perspective, we treat online discourse as a site where kinship-based moral expectations intersect with globally circulating ideals of merit and transparency.[40] This reveals a contested field of legitimacy, which we term the moral grammar of *wāsiṭa.* Through this grammar, users frame the same practice as duty, corruption, necessity, or injustice, and justify, criticise, or normalise it using culturally available moral vocabularies.

Recent scholarship has increasingly combined interpretive approaches with computational text analysis, including topic modelling techniques such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation.[41] Rather than collapsing the epistemological distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods, this work uses LDA to identify recurring themes and lexical patterns in large corpora, which are subsequently interpreted through hermeneutic or sociological frameworks. Studies adopting this hybrid strategy show how clusters of terms associated with moral authority, kinship, or loyalty often contrast with vocabularies emphasising corruption, unfairness, or procedural injustice. Such patterns are interpreted in relation to the social and symbolic contexts from which they emerge. This conceptual and methodological synthesis enables us to examine how *wāsiṭa* is discussed and also why it remains salient emotionally, morally, and institutionally. In so doing, we contribute to the critical study of informal governance and transnational legitimacy, offering a framework that can be applied beyond the Gulf to other settings where informality is culturally embedded.

[38] Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Women and Work in Saudi Arabia: How Flexible Are Islamic Margins?" *Middle East Journal* 53/4 (1999): 568–83.

[39] Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 175-211.

[40] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed. (Continuum Impacts, 2004).

[41]David Blei, Andrew Ng, and Michael Jordan, "Latent Dirichlet Allocation," *Journal of Machine Learning Research* 3 (January 2001): 601-8.

3. Methodological Approach

The methodological design of this study reflects the cultural, political, and epistemological particularities of the Gulf context outlined above. In settings where public critique is constrained and where *wāsiṭa* functions simultaneously as a practical resource and a source of moral ambiguity, conventional research instruments such as structured surveys or institutional ethnography often offer limited insight. Previous research suggests that respondents tend to deflect, equivocate, or reproduce dominant narratives when addressing sensitive practices of informal mediation.[42]

Rather than seeking to measure the prevalence of *wāsiṭa* or document individual behaviour, this study focuses on how *wāsiṭa* is publicly framed, justified, and contested in discourse. By examining how people talk about *wāsiṭa,* and under which discursive conditions such evaluations emerge, the analysis aims to capture the moral positioning of the practice as it is articulated in everyday interpretive contexts.

3.1. Data

To address this complexity, we adopted a methodologically pluralistic strategy centred on digital discourse analysis. Our primary corpus comprises 811 publicly available comments relating to *wāsiṭa*, collected between 2019 and 2025 from Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, and two Saudi publicly available university discussion forums. These platforms provide a distinctive vantage point: they are simultaneously public and semi-anonymous, emotionally charged yet discursively moderated, allowing forms of indirect self-disclosure and moral reasoning.

Platforms were selected using geographic and contextual markers, such as r/qatar or r/saudiarabia discussion threads, videos by Gulf-based public figures on YouTube, and Instagram posts tagged with #wasta. The demographic composition of users broadly corresponds to recent available platform statistics on Resourcera[43] and Statista;[44][45] on Reddit, users aged 18–29 account for approximately 44–46 %t and those aged 30–49 for 31–35 %; YouTube audiences are dominated by users aged 18–34; and on Instagram, users aged 34 years and under represent roughly 60.4 %.

Selection of material followed three criteria. First, topical relevance: content was included only if *wāsiṭa* featured centrally. Second, contextual grounding: preference was given to discussions with explicit references to Gulf institutions, policies, or lived

[42] Baranik et al., "Wasta and Its Relationship to Employment Status and Income in the Arab Middle East."

[43] Resourcera, "Reddit Statistics 2025: Usage, Demographics, Revenue & More," 18 October 2025, https://resourcera.com/data/social/reddit-statistics/. (Accessed August 18, 2025)

[44] Statista, "Distribution of YouTube Users Worldwide as of October 2025, by Age Group and Gender," DataReportal & Meltwater, 15 October 2025¨, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1287137/youtube-global-users-age-gender-distribution/ (Accessed November 20, 2025)

[45] Statista, "Distribution of Instagram Users Worldwide as of July 2025, by Age Group," *Statista*, https://www.statista.com/statistics/325587/instagram-global-age-group/ (Accessed August 18, 2025)

experiences. Third, discursive density: only threads or videos with sustained engagement (minimum of 20 comments explicitly addressing *wāsiṭa*) were included to ensure analytic depth. These criteria ensured the dataset captured substantive, Gulf-specific debates while introducing a bias toward more visible and active discussions. Accordingly, the corpus should be understood not as a representative survey of youth opinion but as a record of salient online discourses through which attitudes toward *wāsiṭa* are contested and performed.

3.2. Latent Dirichlet Allocation

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was employed as an exploratory instrument to identify recurring discursive patterns within a regionally grounded yet socially stratified dataset.[46] From a total of 811 individual comments, we constructed 404 textual documents for topic modelling. Documents were defined as aggregated comment units. Although relatively small by machine-learning standards, the corpus was heterogeneous across platforms and linguistically mixed, making manual thematic coding less effective in capturing latent structures. Within our mixed-method design, LDA functioned as a generative aid, highlighting co-occurrence patterns in language use that could then be interpreted hermeneutically.

Implementation was carried out in RStudio using the "*topicmodels*" package with default symmetric priors,000 iterations to ensure thematic stability. In our specific analysis, based on 10 keywords per topic, we derived seven topics.

The number of topics was determined using topic coherence scores, which measure the semantic quality and interpretability of topics. High coherence indicates that the top words in a topic frequently co-occur and make intuitive sense. By comparing coherence scores across models with different topic counts, researchers can identify the optimal number of distinct, semantically meaningful topics. The CV coherence score is calculated by analysing co-occurrence of top words within a validation corpus, quantifying their semantic relationship based on document frequencies.[47]

Prior to modelling, the dataset underwent standard pre-processing, including tokenization, including lemmatization for tenses (e.g., 'working' to 'work') and removal of platform-specific noise (such as prepositions, articles). Comments originally written in Arabic were translated into English with close attention to semantic nuance and contextual fidelity. All comments were then processed in English using consistent linguistic tools. Instances of code-switching or informal expressions were present but infrequent and did not materially affect the modelling outcomes. The original language of each comment was retained as metadata, allowing us to reflect interpretively on how language choice shaped discursive positioning rather than treating it as a technical complication.

The analysis used words based on their frequency; thus, specific words with dual meanings were excluded if their occurrence was lower than 5% of the text. Alternative computational approaches, such as BERT topic or transformer-based models, were

[46] Hamed Jelodar, Yongli Wang, Chi Yuan, et al., "Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) and Topic Modeling: Models, Applications, a Survey," *Multimedia Tools and Applications* 78/11 (2019): 169-211.

[47] Jelodar et al., "Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) and Topic Modeling", 181.

considered but not used, as the corpus size, mixed languages, and context-dependence required prioritising interpretive transparency over algorithmic sophistication.

The use of LDA is therefore methodologically appropriate not because it offers predictive power, but because it provides a transparent way of mapping lexical co-occurrence patterns within a heterogeneous, cross-platform corpus. In the context of an abductive and hermeneutic research design, LDA functions as a heuristic device: it surfaces recurring discursive fields without imposing external theoretical categories or normative assumptions. Its outputs were treated as prompts for interpretive inquiry rather than as statistically representative structures, which makes LDA particularly compatible with a qualitative epistemology that prioritises meaning over measurement.

3.3. Language considerations

Because the corpus includes both Arabic and English comments, and LDA cannot be reliably applied to mixed-script data, all Arabic comments were translated into English prior to topic modelling. This process involved interpretive choices; to minimise semantic loss, culturally salient and polysemic terms were translated contextually, with alternatives noted during hermeneutic coding. Computational outputs were used to identify thematic regularities, while semantic nuance was examined through the original Arabic texts.

Multilingual topic models could in principle integrate cross-linguistic data,[48] but we did not adopt them. The dataset was relatively modest, and our hybrid computational–hermeneutic design prioritised interpretive clarity over statistical integration. Arabic and English comments were therefore processed separately, with themes reconnected at the interpretive stage. This approach is consistent with our abductive orientation, which privileges meaning-making over cross-linguistic prediction.

Language was not treated as a confounding factor but as an indexical marker of social and cultural positioning. While user locations could not be verified, the corpus includes material from Saudi university forums and Gulf-referenced discussions on Reddit, YouTube, and Instagram. These platforms function as cultural arenas where norms are negotiated.[49] Platform differences informed interpretation: Reddit discussions were longer and deliberative, YouTube comments were shorter and affectively charged, and Instagram users were more openly critical of *wāsiṭa,* often using English. These patterns reflect discursive variation rather than demographic differences.

Although *wāsiṭa* has gendered dimensions, reliable gender inference was not possible. Gender coding was applied only when users explicitly self-identified or used unambiguous gendered expressions. Such cases provide illustrative insights, particularly regarding female exclusion from male-dominated mediation networks but are not generalisable.

3.4. Hermeneutic Framework

Alongside computational topic modelling, this study employs a hermeneutic framework to deepen interpretive analysis of public perceptions of *wāsiṭa*. Hermeneutics, rooted in philosophical and social science traditions, focuses on interpreting texts within their

[48] Ivan Vulić, et al., "Probabilistic Topic Modeling in Multilingual Settings: An Overview of Its Methodology and Applications," *Information Processing & Management* 51/1 (2015): 113-124.
[49] Murthy, *Digital Ethnography*, 842.

cultural, historical, and social contexts.[5051] Rather than measuring frequency or prevalence, it seeks to elucidate underlying meanings, intentions, and socio-cultural logics shaping communication.[525354]

The analysis follows the hermeneutic circle, moving iteratively between individual textual elements, such as social media comments, and the broader discursive context in which they are embedded.[55] Central to this approach is the recognition of pre-understandings, including assumptions embedded in participants' social contexts as well as in the researcher's own interpretive standpoint.[56]

Guided by these principles, the analysis attends to linguistic nuance, metaphor, references to religion and tradition, and the symbolic meanings attached to *wāsiṭa* in Gulf socio-cultural life. Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" captures how understanding emerges through the interaction between the perspectives of online participants and the researcher.[57] This process highlights tensions between inherited norms of social obligation and emergent ideals of meritocracy**,** particularly in discussions involving younger generations in the GCC.

By combining large-scale thematic identification with hermeneutic interpretation, the study moves from detecting patterns to interpreting their significance**.** This hybrid approach enables a more contextually grounded reading of how fairness, social mobility, and tradition are negotiated in contemporary discourse on *wāsiṭa* in the Arabian Peninsula.

4. Results

The analysis of the user comments reveals divergent attitudes towards *wāsiṭa*, but also deeper contestations over legitimacy, fairness and success in contemporary Gulf societies. The LDA model surfaced seven coherent topics, which were subsequently interpreted through close reading. Table 1 summarises the revealed dominant, analytically stable topics, Figure 1 illustrates their relative prevalence within the dataset.

[50] Gadamer et al., *Truth and Method*.

[51] S. L. Bartky, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and David E. Linge, "Philosophical Hermeneutics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 39/4 (1979): 599-610.

[52] Manfred Lueger and Oliver Vettori, "Finding Meaning in Higher Education: A Social Hermeneutics Approach to Higher Education Research," in *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research II* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014).

[53]Valerie Fleming and Yvonne Robb, "A Critical Analysis of Articles Using a Gadamerian Based Research Method," *Nursing Inquiry* 26/2 (2019)

[54] Nicholas H. Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[55] Gadamer et al., *Truth and Method*.

[56] Fleming and Robb, "A Critical Analysis of Articles Using a Gadamerian Based Research Method".

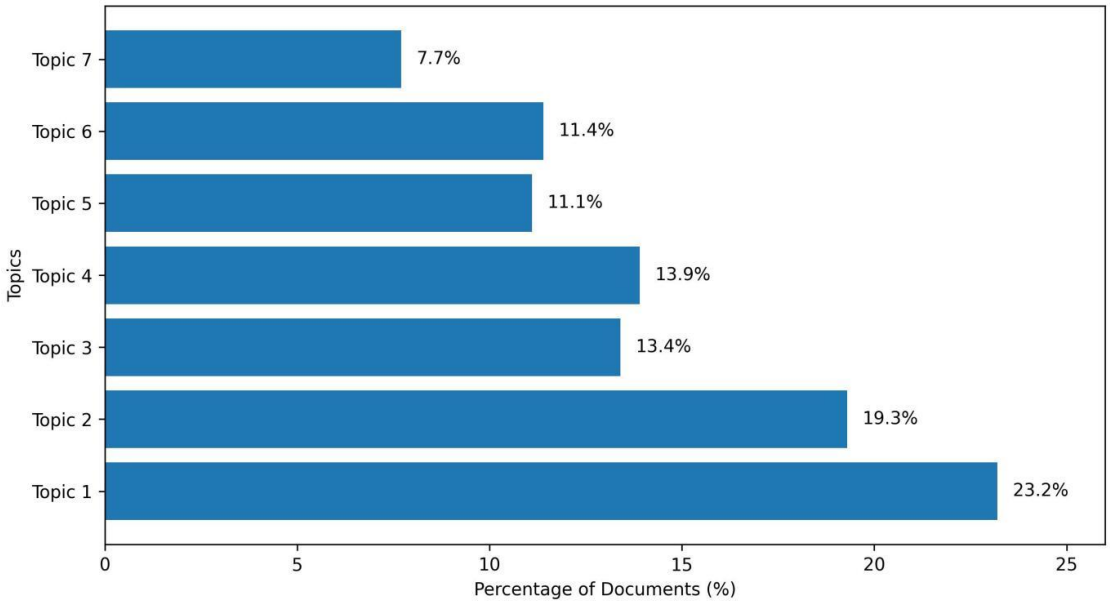
[57] Gadamer et al., *Truth and Method*.

Table 1: Overview of Topics, Keywords, Interpretive Labels, and Representative Excerpts

Topic No.	Primary Theme	Top 10 Keywords	Representative Statement	Arabic Original*
Topic 1	Transactional Corruption Narratives	job, get, bribe, person, something, use, used, really, someone, world	"If you want to get something done, it's not about the rules, it's about who you know. The stronger the connection, the easier things move, even if it means bypassing the system."	" إذا تبغي تخلص أمورك، السالفة مو سالفة قوانين، السالفة هي 'منو تعرف'. كلما كانت الواسطة قوية، كلما مشت أمورك أسهل، حتى لو اضطررت تتخطى النظام."
Topic 2	Meritocratic Disillusionment	people, someone, without, can, skills, world, everywhere, will, hard, get	"You can work hard and have the skills, but without *wasta* you may wait years. Sadly, this is not unique, it happens almost everywhere."	
Topic 3	Pragmatic social capital	connection, know, just, like, things, qualified, works, problem, use, can	"Being qualified alone is rarely enough; knowing the right people is simply how things work. Even those who criticize the system admit that connections get things done."	
Topic 4	Naturalization of Wasta	wasta, work, need, enter, find, know, good, dont, god, exists	"*Wasta* exists whether we like it or not. People accept it as part of life, say 'God knows', and move on because they believe this is how the system functions."	" الواسطة واقع نعيشه؛ الناس يتقبلونها كجزء من حياتهم بمبدأ 'الله كريم'، لأنهم عارفين إنها هي المحرك الحقيقي للنظام"
Topic 5	Normative Condemnation of Nepotism	wasta, everywhere, will, connection, like, nepotism, people, used, get, dont	"Calling *wasta* networking doesn't change the fact that it's nepotism. Unqualified people get positions while those who worked hard are left waiting or pushed out."	" تسمية الواسطة 'علاقات عامة' ما يغير حقيقة إنها محسوبية. ناس ما عندها مؤهلات تاخذ المناصب، واللي كدّ وتعب يلقى نفسه ينتظر أو برا اللعبة"
Topic 6	Moral Boundary Work: Networking vs Nepotism	nepotism, way, company, networking, friend, good, right, god, exists, dont	"Networking is okay, but when you're hiring your friend who has no experience, that's not networking - that's nepotism."	
Topic 7	Institutional Gatekeeping and Early Career Access	connection, wasta, university, hard, really, something, will, nepotism, get, someone	"After university, it becomes obvious that without connections, entry is much harder — people with lower scores are accepted, while higher-scoring students are left out."	" بعد التخرج، تكتشف الحقيقة المرة: بدون واسطة، طريقك مسدود. تشوف ناس درجاتهم طايحة (ضعيفة) يتوظفون، وأنت يا صاحب المعدل العالي والامتياز جالس تنتظر وما أحد يعبرك."

*Note: only if applicable

Figure 1: LDA topic distribution (RStudio, topicmodels package, 2025)



4.1. Interpretive Clusters

While the LDA model yielded seven topics based on lexical co-occurrence, these topics were subsequently grouped into three broader interpretive clusters. This step does not constitute a secondary computational clustering of the data, but an analytical synthesis aimed at enhancing interpretive clarity.

Table 2: Hermeneutic Clustering of LDA Topics

Cluster	Topics Included	Prevalence	Core Logic	Top Keywords
Pragmatic Navigation	T1, T3, T4	~50%	Instrumental realism	job/bribe, connection/know, wasta/exist
Moral Ambivalence	T5, T6	~23%	Ethical tension	nepotism/unqualified, networking/friend
Structural Entrenchment	T2, T7	~27%	Systemic barriers	skills/without, university/connection

4.1.1. Pragmatic Navigation

This interpretive cluster comprises T1 – Transactional Corruption Narratives (23%), T3 – Pragmatic Social Capital (13.4%), and T4 – Naturalization of Wasta (13.9%), highlighting how *wāsiṭa* functions as a practical tool for navigating social and institutional systems.

T1 emphasizes instrumental use of personal connections, where success often depends on who one knows rather than qualifications, reflecting perceptions of corruption: "You don't follow procedures; you trade connections to get things done." T3 captures the strategic cultivation of social capital, showing that even skilled individuals rely on networks to advance: "Being skilled is rarely enough; knowing the right people is simply how things work." T4 reflects the acceptance of *wāsiṭa* as an entrenched social reality, with fatalistic

recognition of its ubiquity: "Wasta exists whether we like it or not; you just have to accept it and move on."

Together (~50% of the corpus), these topics indicate that much online discussion focuses on the mechanics and practical realities of *wāsiṭa*, blending critique with acknowledgement of its everyday necessity.

4.1.2. Moral Ambivalence

Debates around fairness and ethics emerge most clearly in a second cluster composed of T5 – Normative Condemnation of Nepotism (11.1%) and T6 – Moral Boundary Work: Networking vs Nepotism (11.4%), where users negotiate what constitutes legitimate social support versus unjust advantage in relation to *wāsiṭa*.T5 criticizes nepotism, portraying *wāsiṭa* as unjust, particularly when less qualified individuals gain positions: "Calling *wāsiṭa* networking doesn't change the fact that it's nepotism, unqualified people get positions while those who worked hard are left waiting or pushed out." T6 explores the boundary between legitimate networking and nepotism, highlighting how friendship and familial obligations shape moral judgments: "Networking is fine, but hiring your friend with no experience? That's not networking, that's nepotism." Users also acknowledge tensions between ideals and obligations: "I may complain about nepotism, but if it's my cousin who needs help, I wouldn't say no. Family comes first."

A subtheme concerns moral duty to assist family, framing certain uses of *wāsiṭa* as socially and ethically justified despite broader critiques. Overall (~22–23% of the corpus), these discussions foreground fairness, social norms, and the limits of acceptable behaviour.

4.1.3. Structural Entrenchment

Frustration with systemic inequality forms the core of another cluster, combining T2 – Meritocratic Disillusionment (19.4%) and T7 – Institutional Gatekeeping and Early Career Access (7.7%), which foreground how opportunities are structurally shaped by entrenched networks from education to employment. T2 emphasizes that hard work and skills often fail in contexts dominated by entrenched networks: "You can work hard and have the skills, but without wasta you may wait years. Sadly, this is not unique, it happens almost everywhere." T7 illustrates how early career access such as university placements, internships, first jobs, is mediated by connections rather than merit: "After university, it becomes obvious that without connections, entry is much harder - people with lower scores are accepted, while higher-scoring students are left out." Together (~27%), these topics show that *wāsiṭa* is both a practical strategy and a structural mechanism reinforcing social hierarchies.

4.2. User Positioning, Gender, and Generational Perspectives

In addition to these thematic clusters, a smaller set of comments reflects how users position themselves socially and biographically within the landscape of *wāsiṭa*, revealing gendered and generational dimensions of experience and perception. Although systematic gender identification was not possible, a small subset signalled gendered experiences. Female commenters described exclusion from male-dominated mediation networks, particularly in hiring and promotion, whereas some male contributors lamented lost merit but did not report structural exclusion. These patterns are illustrative rather than representative, showing how gender enters Gulf digital discourse.

Generational differences were evident as well. Some users contrasted "our parents' world" with "our generation," framing *wāsiṭa* as an enduring norm in earlier decades but an obstacle today. Students and young professionals, particularly those exposed to global education or labour markets, were more likely to see *wāsiṭa* as limiting reform and self-fulfilment, yet ambivalence persisted: "I complain about *wāsiṭa,* but when my father called someone for my internship, I didn't say no. That's the hypocrisy we all live with."

These patterns align with regional surveys: the 2023 ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey shows that while most young GCC respondents support meritocracy, over 70% report that personal connections outweigh qualifications in securing employment.[58] Discussions were most emotive when related to life chances—university admissions, job interviews, healthcare—with some posts recounting extreme consequences: "*My brother died waiting for treatment. Someone else's uncle made one phone call. That's what wāsiṭa is.*"

Finally, some comments adopted ironic or playful positions, rejecting both moral and meritocratic framings. These outlying positions illustrate interpretive dissent: *wāsiṭa* can be moral or immoral, strategic or traditional, often within a single conversation. Collectively, these findings highlight *wāsiṭa*'s plasticity and its role as a contested lens on informal power in the contemporary Gulf.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that *wāsiṭa* functions not merely as a persistent informal practice but as a relational mechanism through which legitimacy is produced, contested, and recalibrated within Gulf digital publics. Rather than resolving moral tension, online discourse sustains it. From a hermeneutic perspective, ambivalence is not incidental but constitutive: critiques of *wāsiṭa* coexist with its mobilisation because actors interpret their actions across competing normative horizons. Narratives such as "It saved my father, but it shouldn't be this way" reveal how moral judgement is suspended under conditions of urgency, allowing relational obligation to temporarily override abstract commitments to fairness.[59][60]

Analytically, this points to *wāsiṭa*'s role as a situationally activated form of hybrid socio-cultural capital, whose value increases in contexts where institutional trust is perceived as weak or uneven. Establishing a "fusion of horizons" within the digital discourse of *wāsiṭa* requires an understanding of the practice's underlying moral grammar, which bridges traditional social obligations with modern institutional expectations. In the digital sphere, this fusion occurs as users negotiate the tension between the "logic of the gift" rooted in kinship and loyalty and the "logic of the state" which emphasizes meritocracy and formal law. By articulating *wāsiṭa* through a digital moral grammar, actors are able to justify informal intercession not as a corruption of the system but as a necessary moral corrective to bureaucratic inefficiency. This synthesis allows for a shared understanding where traditional values are not merely replaced by modern ones but are instead integrated into a new hybrid digital horizon that reshapes the legitimacy of both informal and formal

[58] ASDA'A Burson Cohn & Wolfe, "15th Annual Arab Youth Survey," ASDA'A BCW, 2023, https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com (Accessed March 28, 2025)

[59] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258.

[60] Ingo Forstenlechner and Emilie Rutledge, "Unemployment in the Gulf: Time to Update the 'Social Contract'," *Middle East Policy* 17/2 (2010): 38–51.

institutions in the Gulf. Digital platforms intensify this process by externalising private moral reasoning into public debate, making ambivalence itself a visible and shared interpretive resource.[6162]

Structural conditions shape how these negotiations unfold in discourse. The prominence of *wāsiṭa* in discussions of public-sector institutions reflects not only their material importance but their symbolic role as sites where promises of equality confront lived inequality within Gulf political economies.[63] While similar logics appear in references to private and transnational settings, the moral stakes are articulated most sharply where state institutions are expected to embody impartiality. Across these arenas, users weigh relational loyalty against meritocratic aspiration, revealing how *wāsiṭa* mediates access while simultaneously exposing perceived limits of formal governance.

This discursive pattern helps explain why procedural reform initiatives frequently encounter scepticism in online debate. Anti-nepotism campaigns and administrative reforms target formal rules yet leave largely untouched the relational infrastructures through which trust, obligation, and legitimacy are enacted and justified. As one contributor summarised, "Reform is the slogan. *Wāsiṭa* is the reality" (Ramady, 2016). In this sense, digital discourse does not simply mirror institutional failure; it articulates the moral reasoning through which informal mediation remains intelligible and, in some contexts, defensible.

Comparatively, these dynamics resonate with global patterns of informal brokerage in settings characterised by institutional opacity or uneven access.[64] However, *wāsiṭa* is discursively distinguished by its embedding in a religiously inflected moral economy. References to ethical obligation, and moral honour frame intercession not only as strategic action but as a test of virtue. This framing does not dissolve accusations of injustice; rather, it repositions them within a moral calculus in which failing to intercede may itself be judged unethical. The overlap between sacred and pragmatic registers thus stabilises *wāsiṭa*'s legitimacy in discourse, even as it remains publicly contested, distinguishing it from more secularised forms of informal exchange such as *guanxi, blat* or *jeitinho*.

Taken together, the findings suggest that *wāsiṭa* persists in digital Gulf discourse not despite moral critique but through it. Online discussions perform the hermeneutic labour through which actors reconcile inequality with moral self-understanding, converting relationships into actionable capital while continuously renegotiating their justification. Seen in this light, *wāsiṭa* is less a residual tradition than an adaptive response to uneven modernisation as it is interpreted, debated, and normalised within digitally mediated publics.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on online comments, potential inaccuracies in multilingual topic modeling, and its focus on specific GCC countries, which may restrict

[61] Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
[62] Peter Rodgers et al., "Leveraging Symbolic Capital: The Use of Blat Networks across Transnational Spaces," *Global Networks* 19/1 (2019): 119–36.
[63] Steffen Hertog, "Defying the Resource Curse: Explaining Successful State-Owned Enterprises in Rentier States," *World Politics* 62/2 (2010): 261–301.
[64] Rodgers et al., "Leveraging Symbolic Capital".

generalizability. Future research could explore women's lived experiences with *wāsiṭa* through qualitative methods, shedding light on gendered barriers, coping strategies, and perceptions of fairness across different contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that the persistence of *wāsiṭa* in digitally mediated Gulf publics does not signal resistance to modernisation but rather its uneven and contested incorporation. As informal mediation moves from private social settings into online arenas, it becomes publicly scrutinised, debated, and morally evaluated. Digital discourse thus renders visible the gap between meritocratic ideals and lived institutional realities, not as a resolved contradiction but as an ongoing interpretive tension.

By analysing these debates through a hermeneutic lens, the study demonstrates that *wāsiṭa* functions as a flexible form of hybrid socio-cultural capital whose legitimacy is situational and relational. Actors do not simply endorse or reject informal mediation; instead, they navigate overlapping moral horizons in which communal obligation, religious ethics, and professional aspiration coexist without fully reconciling. The value of *wāsiṭa* emerges precisely in contexts where formal systems are perceived as opaque, inconsistent, or inaccessible, making relational mediation both morally intelligible and practically effective.

Importantly, the findings indicate that online discourse is not a passive reflection of institutional conditions. Rather, digital publics operate as interpretive spaces in which legitimacy, fairness, and responsibility are actively negotiated. The presence of distinct interpretive clusters highlights how resentment toward informal privilege coexists with pragmatic acceptance, revealing informality as a site of moral reasoning rather than merely a symptom of governance failure.

More broadly, this research contributes to scholarship on informality and modernisation by showing how digital arenas have become central to the reinterpretation of social practices that sit uneasily between tradition and reform. *Wāsiṭa* appears neither as a relic of the past nor as a simple form of corruption, but as an adaptive, morally charged practice whose meaning is continuously reworked in response to shifting institutional expectations. Attending to these interpretive dynamics offers a more nuanced understanding of how legitimacy and trust are negotiated in contexts where formal equality remains aspirational rather than fully realised.

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