



## Research Article

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# Foul Language on Arabic Television: A Case Study of the First Jordanian Arabic Netflix Series

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Doi: 10.36941/ajis-2020-0007

## Abstract

*This study explores the controversial use of taboo language in Jinn, the first original Jordanian Arabic supernatural Netflix series. Taboo words uttered in each episode of Season 1 of the series (length=159 minutes) were compiled, quantified and categorised according to Ljung's (2011) thematic categorisation. The results show that 75% of the taboo words fall under 'major themes' (scatological (31%), religious/supernatural (20%), sexual activity (12%), sex organ (9%) and mother (3%)) and 25% fall under 'minor themes' (prostitution (16%) and animals (9%)) in Ljung's (2011) thematic divisions. Furthermore, the results show that the first episode has the greatest concentration of taboo words (55%). We argue that the writers/producers intentionally condensed the majority of the taboo words under investigation into the first episode in order to attract the attention of the largest viewership possible because they were aware of how polemical the issue of uttering Jordanian Arabic taboo words on screen was. Finally, it is evident that Jordanian society is still conservative when it comes to using/hearing taboo words in Jordanian cinema and television as demonstrated by the angry reaction of Jordanians in the press, television and social media.*

**Keyword:** *taboo, Netflix, Jinn, Petra, censorship*

## 1. Introduction

Ever since the release of *Jinn*, the first original Arabic supernatural Netflix series, on 13 June 2019, it has been sparking controversy, backlash and uproar in the Jordanian press, television and social media for breaking some cultural and religious taboos in Jordanian society. Some members of the Jordanian Lower Parliament have criticised the series and questioned why it had permission to be filmed at one of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Petra. Several official and non-official Jordanians have called for halting the broadcast of the series. For instance, the top prosecutor in Amman, the capital city of Jordan, asked the Jordanian Cybercrime Department to investigate the controversy surrounding the series. The Jordanian public questioned how and why The Royal Film Commission facilitated the filming of the series in Petra in cooperation with Petra Development and Tourism Region Authority. As a consequence, The Royal Film Commission released an official statement explaining that its main job was to promote national and international television and cinema

productions in Jordan. In other words, it has no censorship role on any proposed production, especially if it is not going to be broadcast locally. Thus, it admitted not reading the script of *Jinn* before granting it permission to be filmed in three main locations in Jordan, the most famous of which is Petra (Husseini, 2019). Interestingly, the Jordanian General Iftaa Department responsible for answering Jordanian Muslims' questions related to the specifics of their religion denounced the series for deviating from Islamic teachings. Netflix, in turn, explained via Twitter that it had always encouraged showing diversity in its productions. As regards the verbal attack on the leading female actress on social media, Netflix reiterated that it will never accept bullying against any member of the crew of the series. This study intends to highlight why *Jinn* has attracted such a publicity in Jordan.

## 2. *Jinn*, the Series

Before we talk about the series, a brief definition of the term 'Jinn' is in order. According to Lebling (2010, p. 1) 'Jinn' are a "species of intelligent beings that live secretly...[and] often appear humanoid or even human but possess amazing powers that we lack. They can change their shapes, can fly through the air...Occasionally they abduct humans and even mate with them." The term 'Jinn' is mainly widespread in the Middle East, Asia and North Africa. In Europe and North America, however, the closest cultural equivalent to the term is the 'aliens' (Lebling, 2010).

*Jinn* is a mini supernatural Arabic series that consists of five episodes in its first season. The plot centres on Ammani school students who go on a trip to Petra where they face supernatural presence. Some of the students try to explain some strange events on the presence of *Jinn*. Later development proves that some characters are really possessed by *Jinn* who try to harm other students, especially the bullies. Throughout the series a number of universal, Arab and Jordanian youth issues are discussed in an unprecedented way, i.e., in a real and authentic manner. The final episode closes asking further questions about the presence of *Jinn* and opens doors for further seasons.

The cast consists of young Jordanian and Arab young actors. The series was filmed in three principal locations in Jordan: Amman, Wadi Rum and Petra. It was directed by two Arab directors: a Lebanese and a Jordanian. It premiered on 13 June, 2019 on Netflix in Arabic with English subtitles and also in an English dubbed version.

## 3. Controversy and Media Coverage

The series was not received positively in Jordan and stirred up controversy for containing some 'immoral scenes' and for using 'foul language'. By so doing, it violated not only the Jordanian Audiovisual Media Law but also the social, religious and linguistic norms of the relatively conservative Jordanian society. Mendel (2016, p. 19) summarises the prohibitions in Articles 8 and 20 of the Jordanian Audiovisual Media Law, No. 26 for the Year 2015 as follows:

- Not disseminating content which may "incite hatred or terrorism or violence, or incite sectarian or racial disputes".
- Not disseminating content which "may damage the national economy, national currency or undermine the national and social security".
- Not disseminating any false content which may "undermine the relations of the Kingdom with other countries".
- Not disseminating content, including commercials, which "promotes sorcery and which might mislead public, blackmail and deceive them".
- Not disseminating content which abuses Allah and religious beliefs.
- Not disseminating content which prejudices the values and heritage of the nation.
- Not disseminating content which violates public decency or morals, including pornography or violence.

While many young Jordanian viewers see the kissing, smoking (cannabis) and drinking

(alcohol) scenes normal in comparison with other Netflix original productions, others strongly condemn the so-called 'immoral scenes' and the heavy use of foul language and claim that such scenes and language give a distorted image of what they consider a conservative Jordanian society. In order to understand the controversy, one has to compare this series with other Arabic Jordanian series which do not contain any foul language or scenes of a sexual nature in accordance with the Jordanian Audiovisual Media Law. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of the proponents, this series is broadcast by Netflix which is a web-based subscription service which certifies the series as a +16 for 'language' - that is, it does not fall under Jordanian laws and watching or not watching it is a matter of free personal choice.

The release of *Jinn* on Netflix has received an immense coverage by the official and non-official Jordanian press. Within only nine days of the release of the first episode, Husni and Al-Btoush (2019) managed to collect 189 Jordanian press releases (17.5% of those appeared in daily newspapers and 82.5% in electronic newspapers) covering *Jinn*. In a publication for the Freedom of Journalists in Jordan, they quantitatively and qualitatively studied those press releases focusing on incitement to hatred, discrimination and hostility. They found that 14.8% of the coverage contained different forms of incitement to hatred: 5.9% by journalists, 4.2% by MPs, 4.2% by civil society institutions and 0.5% by religious institutions. The incitement targeted both the series as a whole and the individual actors and involved the following thematic areas:

1. Religion: hatred was incited against the series for it was viewed in the press as a violation of the laws of Islam by promoting vice (scenes of a sexual nature and foul language).
2. Social ethics: the Jordanian press described the series as a blatant violation of Jordanian social norms by promoting foul language, vulgarity and pornography.
3. Discrimination: the actors were attacked and discriminated against in the press releases under investigation based on their country of origin and the place of residence.
4. Conspiracy theory: a number of hate inciters suspected that the series was a part of a foreign plight targeting the young Jordanian generation in order to erase their national and religious identity via promoting a globalised Western audiovisual culture.
5. Personal: some incitement to hatred in the press took the shape of personal attacks against individual actors, namely their upbringings, gender profiles and morals.
6. Punishment: inciters demanded punishment for all those who facilitated, participated and promoted the series.

Moreover, the researchers found that Jordanian electronic newspapers incited hatred more than the daily newspapers. The researchers recommended that journalists in Jordan be educated against all forms and shapes of incitement to hatred, discrimination and hostility.

The focus of this study is the use of foul language in the series. Using foul language on Jordanian screen breaks the traditional Jordanian media laws and norms. Without a doubt, in Jordanian cinema and television, foul language is socially and officially prohibited regardless of whether it reflects actual language usage or not.

#### 4. Taboo Language and the Media

The origin of the word taboo goes back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when English borrowed it from Tongan 'tabu' which means 'forbidden' (Oxford Dictionary Online). With time, it developed to refer to any words or actions avoided for religious or social reasons for fear of punishment from supernatural forces (CALD Online). The concept of forbidding or tabooing humans from saying certain words or doing certain actions goes back to the story of Adam and Eve when they were ordered to stay away from the tree of knowledge, but they did not! Linguistic taboos came to centre stage in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries when Scottish poets started exchanging insults using foul language in a form of a contest called 'flyting' (Hughes, 1991). Perhaps the closest modern equivalent to 'flyting' is 'rapping' or 'sounding' where contestants exchange insults in a form of a contest. It could be argued that speakers throughout history have found using taboo language entertaining because it breaks the

forbidden.

Hughes (1991) admits that some taboos are universal, but some are culture-specific. Moreover, they change over time. In other words, what is considered taboo in one era might cease to be in another. Hughes argues that semantic fields often shift over time and certain words can suddenly become taboo. A case in point is the word 'rooster' that was called upon to replace the word 'cock' whose semantic field has drastically changed. Phonetic similarity with other foul words might sometimes cause a word to be avoided, such as the word 'donkey' which replaced the word 'ass' for being phonetically similar to 'arse'.

Societies have always tended to camouflage taboo words by using colourless expressions instead (Smith, 2001). This camouflage is referred to in linguistics as 'euphemism' which is often applied for reasons of politeness, but occasionally it is used by politicians to hide the truth. For example, the Nazis used the term 'special treatment' for 'hanging' and 'resettlement' for 'deportation' (Smith, 2001). Whether used by politicians or by ordinary people, euphemisms are "alternatives to dispreferred expressions" (Allan & Birridge, 1991, p. 14). In film and television, euphemisms seem to be losing ground to a more realistic usage of language that is often full of swearing, namely the unprintable four-letter word. Hughes (2001, pp. viii-ix) admits that in today's "film and television dialogue, as well as in much family discourse, the old taboos are noisily disintegrating, not without resistance or protest." Viewers are indeed exposed to a barrage of what used to be taboo words and expressions on a daily basis. Surprisingly, young viewers are developing tolerance to hearing such language more than the adults are. Interestingly, as far as film and television are concerned, the censorship phrase 'not in front of the children' is being reversed to 'not in front of the parents' (Hughes, 2001).

Beyond doubt, foul language has become prevalent in the last few decades than it was before. It is becoming more and more common both in the media and in real life. Apparently, teenage speakers tend to use it more than other age cohorts do. Jay (1992) reports a significant increase of profanity usage in movies made between 1939 and 1989. Dufrene and Lehman (2002) report similar results. What used to be taboo in the past is indeed "becoming more commonplace in everyday discourse as well as on network television" (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004, p. 91). Undeniably, the use of foul language is witnessing a shift in domain from the private to the more public. This shift is led by members of the younger generation, especially males. De Clerk (1992) asserts that dominant teenagers often tend to defy social authority by adopting an antisocial linguistic behaviour that is characterised by a heavy use of taboo words. Put differently, while the older generation generally avoid linguistic taboos, the younger generation intentionally do the opposite. Perhaps, they do so in order to claim more social power. Thanjitt (1998) asserts that while the older generation sees taboo words as a tool to express negative feelings, such as anger, insult and discontent, the younger generation sees taboo words as an innovative tool to express a myriad of conflicting feelings, such as anger, joy and content. This linguistic behaviour is often reflected on the screen where young male characters use more taboo words than their female counterparts. In their study of 90 top-grossing teen movies in three decades (1980s, 1990s, and 2000s), Cressman, Callister, Robinson and Near (2009) affirm that the male teen characters on screen are often more "involved in the vast majority of instances of profanity" (p. 124) than their female counterparts.

In the US, what can and cannot be shown on television is generally governed by federal regulations. The Federal Communications Commission governs the US network television. Swear/taboo words are only permitted in the evening and at night. Although cable and streaming services are not under the federal regulations, almost all television programmes are rated for language usage and other adult content (Bednarek, 2019; Queen, 2015). Bednarek (2019) investigates swear/taboo words in 66 US television series. The results show that "there is no one-to-one relationship between legal norms, social attitudes, and language use" (p. 11). She identifies nine ways which screen writers negotiate in order to deal with the use of taboo words: 1) use euphemisms, 2) break taboo (via heavy use), 3) use milder taboo words, 4) avoid taboo words, 5) intentional bleeping, 6) accompany by negative metadiscourse, 7) use paralinguistic information (via mouthing and gestures), 8) use another language and 9) use innovative or archaic taboo words.

In almost all Arab countries, cinema and television projects must pass various censoring committees. Obviously, politics, religion and sex are redlines that should not be crossed by script writers. In Egypt, for instance, Islam, Christianity and Judaism (heavenly religions) should not be criticised. Sex should not be portrayed on screen and taboo language should not be used in dialogue. Similarly, consumption of alcohol or drugs should not be celebrated on screen either. Finally, political and social criticism is prohibited lest it causes civil unrest. Although the so-called new-Arab cinema rebelled against some taboos, there are still limits to what can and cannot be shown on screen in terms of images and speech (Shafik, 1998).

It has to be noted that transgressions to the Arab television and cinema moral codes sparsely exist in few Arab countries, such as Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria (Shafik, 1998). In these Arab countries, collaborations with foreign producers, namely French, resulted in few movies that broke the linguistic and moral codes of the Arab cinema. Although they were attacked by the public, they have marked a shift in what can and cannot be shown on Arab screens. In Jordan, *Jinn* is the first series to challenge the Jordanian viewers' linguistic and moral norms; therefore, it has received unprecedented backlash and uproar from Jordanians who expressed their discontent via television, press and social media.

## 5. Objectives and Procedures

This study investigates the controversial use of language in *Jinn*. It tries to highlight the linguistic norms of Jordanian media and tries to show how certain aspects of the language used in *Jinn*, namely swear words, violate the linguistic norms, while, at the same time, reflect an actual usage of Jordanian Arabic of young Jordanians. Each of the five episodes of Season 1 of *Jinn* is meticulously analysed collecting taboo usage of Arabic. The total length of all five episodes is 159 minutes. In this study, taboo words mean any words that violate the norms of the Jordanian speech community and considered inappropriate and offensive. Judging whether a word is a taboo word or not is sometimes subjective; therefore, the two researchers negotiated over the status of each candidate taboo word. When the two researchers disagreed, a third native speaker of Jordanian Arabic was consulted to settle the dispute. The taboo words were then categorised and analysed according to Ljung's (2011) thematic categorisation. Ljung (2011) shows that swearing and taboo words differ from other referential expressions in the sense that the former do not have meanings, while the latter have. Taboo words function emotively and vocalise the state of minds of the speakers. Ljung (2011) argues that taboo words fall under five major themes: 1) the religious/supernatural theme, 2) the scatological theme, 3) the sex organ theme, 4) the sexual activities theme and 5) the mother (family) theme and five minor themes: 1) ancestors, 2) animals, 3) death, 4) disease and 5) prostitution. The collected taboo words used in *Jinn* were quantitatively analysed in terms of frequency in each episode of Season 1 of the series.

## 6. Findings and Discussion

This section expounds the major themes of taboo words used in *Jinn* along with their frequency of occurrence. Table 1 shows the number of tokens and the percentages of each theme that occurred in *Jinn*. Table 1 reveals that 75% of the taboo words uttered by the actors and actresses in *Jinn* fall under 'major themes' in Ljung's (2011) thematic categorisation, while only 25% of the words fall under 'minor themes'. As for the frequency of usage within the major themes, the findings show the following descending order: scatological (31%), religious/supernatural (20%), sexual activity (12%), sex organ (9%) and mother (3%). Only two minor taboo themes appear in *Jinn*: prostitution (16%) and animals (9%).

**Table 1.** Frequency and percentages of taboo themes in *Jinn*

Theme	Tokens/Frequency	Percentage
<b>Major themes</b>		
Scatological	21	31%
Religious/supernatural	14	20%
Sexual activity	8	12%
Sex organ	6	9%
Mother	2	3%
<b>Minor themes</b>		
Prostitution	11	16%
Animals	6	9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100%</b>

Moreover, the results show that most of the taboo words appear in the first episode. Table 2 displays the frequency and percentages of taboo words in each episode of Season 1 of *Jinn*.

**Table 2.** Frequency and percentages of taboo words in each episode of Season 1

Episode	Tokens/Frequency	Percentage
Episode 1: Strange whisperers	37	55%
Episode 2: Magic sand	6	9%
Episode 3:A dangerous funny feeling	9	13%
Episode 4: #jinnHunter	7	10%
Episode 5: Careful what you wish for	9	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100%</b>

Interestingly, the first episode accounts for more than half of the tokens. It is possible that the writers/producers intentionally did that in order to attract the attention of the largest viewership possible. Indeed, the controversy that arose immediately after the release of *Jinn* on 13 June 2019 was mainly provoked by a norm-breaking use of taboo language. The first episode contains a staggering 37 taboo words: 12 obscene words referring to excretions, 7 profane words challenging religious beliefs, 7 obscene mentions of sexual organs and/or activities, 6 obscene words related to prostitutions, 4 words referring to animals and one swear word directed at the mother of the addressee. In other words, the viewers were bombarded with words they have almost never heard on screen before uttered in Jordanian Arabic! The amount of shock the first episode created was on a par with the amount of debate on the topic in Jordanian television, press and social media. Numerous social media posts and press articles criticised the shockingly rude linguistic manner of the actors and actresses. Moreover, the first episode runs for 46 minutes, the longest in the series compared to episodes 2, 3, 4 and 5 which run for: 31, 28, 24 and 30 minutes, respectively.

The results in Tables 1 and 2 are in line with Smith (2015) who asserts that bad language is instrumental in the ratings of films and television programmes as Netflix rates *Jinn* series +16 for 'language'. In the following two subsections, the major and minor themes in Table 1 that emerged from the data analysis will be discussed, illustrated and interpreted in relation to Jordanian society:

### 6.1 Major Themes

Ljung's (2011) thematic categorisation of taboo words is based on data taken from 25 languages, one of which is Arabic. The results in Table 1 support his claim that the 'major themes' recur more than the 'minor themes' in Arabic and other 24 languages. Three quarters of the taboo words that occur in *Jinn* fall under the five major themes: scatological, religious/supernatural, sexual activity, sex organ

and mother. The scatological theme accounts for 31% of the taboo words. Although words related to human excretions are common among the younger generation in Jordan, these words almost never occur in Jordanian cinema and television. Truly, hearing the actors and actresses utter scatological words in a Jordanian series using Jordanian Arabic was shocking to most Jordanian viewers. Words related to the act of emptying the body from solid and liquid waste are often euphemised in Jordanian Arabic unless they are uttered between close teenage peers. When the latter happens, they are often followed with laughter and excitement as they break the social rules in the Jordanian community. In *Jinn*, those words are used by teenage students but because they are shown on screen and heard by viewers from different age cohorts, they are still shocking to most viewers. Some young viewers tried to defend this use of language arguing that they reflect a realistic use of language in their everyday casual conversations. Others agreed but still thought they were inappropriate for the Jordanian screen. The second most frequent theme is the religious/supernatural (20%). As Jordan is a relatively conservative Muslim country, profanity is not tolerated even in informal domains. However, they are occasionally used by young speakers who often try to rebel against religious and social constraints. The use of profane words in *Jinn* to refer to practices prohibited by Islam such as drinking alcohol and smoking cannabis was not received well by the majority of the Jordanian viewers and participated in the controversy surrounding the media coverage of the series. Closely related to the religious theme is the sexual activity (12%) and sex organ (9%) themes. In Islam, sex is a contentious issue which is often dealt with cautiously using different types of euphemism. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no Jordanian series ever contained blatant mentions of sex organs and sexual activities before *Jinn*. Finally, the mother theme (3%) is uttered only twice in the series. By and large, the results show that the use of the aforementioned major themes of taboo words have caused the hype around the series and probably increased its viewership!

## 6.2 Minor Themes

Ljung's (2011) thematic categorisation of taboo words includes five minor themes: ancestors, animals, death, disease and prostitution. Only two minor themes appear in *Jinn*. This is in line with Ljung's (2011) claim that those minor themes are not as widespread as the major themes in the 25 languages he investigated including Arabic. Interestingly, although the use of language in *Jinn* has been attacked by most Jordanian viewers, it gives the impression that it reflects an actual use of language as shown in the results in Tables 1 and 2. The prostitution theme accounts for 16% of the used taboo words. One might rightly argue that this theme is related to other themes, such as the mother, religious and sexual themes. In fact, numerous major and minor taboo themes are interrelated. Ljung (2011, p. 36) argues that "although a given instance of swearing may be associated with several themes, one of the themes is more essential for the understanding of that particular expression than the other(s)". The other minor theme is related to animals which accounts for 9% of the total taboo words uttered in *Jinn*. As Ljung (2011) rightly debates, some of the minor themes are culture-specific and might change status into major themes depending on the speech community. To illustrate, name-calling using expressions, such as 'animal', 'donkey' and 'dog' differs in effect from one culture to another. In *Jinn*, there are six occurrences for the animal theme: 1 for 'animal', 3 for 'dog' and 2 for 'donkey'. Finally, there are no mentions for the other three minor taboo themes in *Jinn*, i.e., ancestor, death and disease. We might come across these themes if Netflix decided to release a new season of *Jinn* as they are very common in Jordanians' casual speech.

## 7. Conclusion

The principal objective of this study is to explore the reasons behind the controversy that surrounded the release of *Jinn*, the first original Jordanian Arabic supernatural Netflix series. The study argues that the chief reason behind the backlash and uproar in the Jordanian press, television and social media is the use of language in *Jinn*. It meticulously investigates the use of language in each episode

of the first season of *Jinn* and reports an intensive use of major and minor themes of taboo words according to Ljung's (2011) categorisation of taboo words. It is argued that although the dialogues in the series might reflect an actual use of language among the younger Jordanian generation, the main purpose of taboo words is to shock and consequently attract the largest viewership possible. This study may be replicated by other researchers on the same series focusing on unexplored variables. For instance, examining gender roles in the series and seeing how males and females use taboo language may yield interesting findings that help better fathom this linguistic phenomenon. Furthermore, a study of how these taboo words are translated in the English subtitles available on Netflix might reveal more insights into the subject of taboo language on screen.

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