RESEARCH ARTICLE

Wasta Unveiled: Navigating Nepotism in the Arabian Peninsula

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Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of wasta, a form of nepotism deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of the Arabian Peninsula, particularly within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (namely Bahrain, Kuwain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates) and its dynamic. Despite ongoing modernization efforts and attempts to combat corruption, wasta persists as a critical mechanism for social and economic interactions. Through a combination of Gadamer's hermeneutic method and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), this study analyzes public perceptions of wasta based on data from social media platforms Reddit, YouTube and King Fahad Petroleum University Forum.

Introduction

Does an individual's success in the Gulf region depend on their investment in education and qualifications, or are other informal influences crucial in helping individuals build their status? These questions are the focus of this article, which explores the phenomenon of *wasta* in the Gulf region. These states are still characterized by enduring tribal ties in society, which largely define the trajectory of an individual's career[1]. Although the economies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are striving to diversify away from dependence on the oil industry and accelerate societal development, some traditional elements persist, with nepotism being one of them[2][3][4][5].

At present, the governments of oil-rich states are striving to eradicate corruption, with the Kuwaiti Emir having launched the ambitious Adaa project, which aims to transform Kuwait into a transparent state by addressing manifestations of corruption[6]. However, the degree to which corruption is entrenched in the region, and the extent to which certain practices can be classified as corruption, remains a matter of debate. Similarly, the term wasta is currently often debated on the political grounds of the GCC states, although it is questionable whether to see is as a corruption. The term *wasta* is widely recognized as a form of nepotism that continues to thrive across the Middle East and North Africa. To some extent, it bears similarities to terms found in other regions globally. Concepts such as *blat* in the former Soviet Union,*guanxi* in China, *jeitinho* in Brazil, and *raccomandazione* in Italy all describe the use of personal connections to gain advantages or services, a practice common across various cultures. Despite their geographical differences, these concepts share a

common reliance on informal networks and reciprocal relationships. While *blat* in the Soviet Union emerged as a survival strategy in an economy marked by scarcity[7], *guanxi* in China centers around long-term trust-building and mutual relationships[8]. In Brazil, *jeitinho* refers to creative methods of circumventing rules to gain advantages[9], and in Italy, *raccomandazione* involves the use of personal recommendations to secure employment or other benefits[10]. The concept of *wasta* in Arab countries typically involves the mediation of a third party who leverages their influence, usually within familial or tribal networks[3]. Historically, *wasta* was closely associated with traditional tribal societies, where a central figure, the *waseet* (mediator), acted as an intermediary between parties in various matters[11]. As modernization and the development of state structures have progressed, *wasta* has evolved to fit new circumstances, becoming a prominent feature not only in the social domain but also in public administration and the job market. This adaptation has frequently resulted in accusations of nepotism and corruption[1][11][12].

Given its deep-rooted presence in social and economic life, *wasta* is often viewed in contrasting ways. While some perceive it as a form of nepotism that undermines meritocracy and equality of opportunity, others see it as an essential form of informal social capital, derived from long-maintained familial and social ties, that facilitates access to resources and opportunities.

- **RQ: How is *wasta* perceived by the young population of the Gulf states—primarily as a societal mechanism that generates social capital, or as a practice that compromises fairness and meritocracy?**

Literature Review

At present, numerous authors concentrate on specific manifestations of nepotism in individual Middle Eastern countries, particularly examining the role of *wasta* in the labor market and political spheres. However, two parallel perspectives on the *wasta* phenomenon have emerged. The first regards *wasta* as a form of corruption, while the second interprets it as a mechanism for generating social capital. Transparency International subscribes to the first viewpoint, identifying *wasta* as corruption that exacerbates inequality in society by denying certain individuals access to education, employment opportunities, and quality healthcare. Despite the introduction of awareness campaigns and the establishment of several official anti-corruption bodies in the region, Transparency International's 2019 research reveals that most respondents continue to prefer relying on personal contacts over formal channels[13]. Unfortunately, the ability to leverage such contacts is not equally available to all social groups. For instance, women[14] and ethnic minorities[15] often encounter significant barriers in accessing the relationships that could facilitate improvements in their lives.

The second perspective on the *wasta* phenomenon regards it as an investment in social capital, which is essential in modern society and not inherently negative, but rather dependent on how it is applied[16]. According to Robison et al[17], there is considerable debate surrounding the precise definition of social capital and its key components. Burt[18] views family, friends, and colleagues as sources of social capital, providing opportunities to access other forms of capital. Bourdieu[19] defines social capital primarily in terms of membership in certain groups, formal or informal, from which individuals derive specific benefits. In this context, Tlaiss and Kauser[20] interpret *wasta* as a positive form of social capital

in the Arab world, facilitating the construction of social networks and comparable to practices like "networking" and mentoring in Western cultures. Similarly, Smith et al.[21] argue that *wasta*, like *guanxi* in China and *jeitinho* in Brazil, represents a culturally specific form of informal influence, which can be seen as a constructive element of social interaction and social capital. Other studies reinforce this perspective, with Harrigan and El-Said[22] characterizing *wasta* as a common form of social capital in the Arab world, offering significant benefits in the creation and maintenance of social networks and relationships.

From an institutional theory standpoint, as explored by Cunningham and Sarayrah[3], wasta is perceived as a social phenomenon with deep historical and cultural roots in the region, evolving into an effective tool for goal achievement in environments where formal resources are limited. Hutchings and Weir[23] compare guanxi in China and wasta in Arab countries, emphasizing the roles of trust, familial bonds, and mutual favors in shaping these traditional models of interpersonal relationships, particularly in the context of internationalization and modernization. This comparison aligns with broader research, which suggests that informal influence practices are widespread but culturally tailored, as seen in *jeitinho* in Brazil, *svyazi*[1] in Russia, and "pulling strings" in the UK[21]. These indigenous practices not only serve as mechanisms for achieving influence but also reflect each society's unique historical and social context. In a business context, *wasta* can reduce the transactional costs associated with protracted bureaucratic procedures[11] and facilitate the exchange of information within organizations, thereby improving work efficiency[24][25]. Additionally, wasta can provide professional support and foster the development of constructive interpersonal relationships in the workplace[20]. This is further supported by Tlaiss and Kauser[20], who highlight how *wasta* influences business outcomes in the Gulf region, and Wang and Hsu (2018), who examine the implications of informal networks like *guanxi* and *wasta* for business practices. Other studies, such as those by Khanna and Palepu (1997) and Pahl (2016), discuss how informal networks contribute to organizational effectiveness and strategic advantages, emphasizing the relevance of these practices in emerging markets and public sector organizations.

Globalization and modernization processes have significantly influenced the traditional functioning of *wasta*. Modern technologies, such as social media and digital communication channels, are transforming how individuals establish and maintain their networks. Despite these shifts, the role of family and social ties within *wasta* remains robust, with trust and reciprocal relationships continuing to play a crucial role[23].

Wasta also exerts a considerable impact on political processes in many Arab countries. It is often used to gain political support and maintain influence, which can reinforce existing power structures and limit democratic principles. In some instances, *wasta* secures loyalty among political actors and their supporters, undermining transparency and reducing the efficiency of government institutions. Moreover, *wasta* can exacerbate economic inequality, as it primarily benefits those with access to influential networks[25].

From an economic perspective, *wasta* can serve as a tool that, in certain contexts, reduces transaction costs and expedites bureaucratic processes. In environments characterized by complex administrative procedures, *wasta* can provide an efficient means of securing necessary resources or permits. However, this system can also perpetuate inequality and discrimination within the labor market, as those without access to *wasta* networks may find their

opportunities severely limited[11][23].

Moreover, *wasta* can exacerbate gender inequality, as women often face restricted access to these informal networks. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations frequently hinder women's ability to cultivate the necessary contacts for leveraging *wasta*, thereby placing them at a disadvantage in both the labor market and other areas of life. Additionally, women in some regions may encounter greater pressure to comply with formal regulations, further limiting their capacity to benefit from *wasta*[14]. Similarly, ethnic and social minorities often face obstacles in accessing*wasta*, leading to further forms of exclusion. In many societies, informal networks are structured around ethnic, religious, or social affiliations, thereby disadvantaging those outside of these dominant groups and reinforcing existing social hierarchies[15].

The authors of this article propose a distinct perspective on the phenomenon of wasta. While it may originate from the pre-institutional context of GCC development—where a mediator was essential for facilitating communication, this historical context might now be largely forgotten by the modern population. Nevertheless, wasta persists as a form of socio-cultural capital, evolving from historical experiences and serving as a tool to navigate various aspects of society, from education to the labor market.

We introduce the concept of hybrid sociocultural capital as a theoretical framework that most accurately encapsulates the essence of the wasta phenomenon. This theory expands upon traditional capital concepts (economic, social, and cultural) by integrating and accounting for their interactions within specific sociocultural contexts. Hybrid sociocultural capital encompasses a combination of resources that individuals and groups utilize to gain social advantages. In the context of wasta, regarded as a key element of both social and economic life in the Gulf region, this concept provides insight into how different forms of capital—such as family ties, cultural norms, and economic resources—interact and mutually reinforce one another.

Hybrid sociocultural capital is positioned as a strategic tool that actors in the region employ to optimize their social, economic, and cultural advantages. The theory underscores that these types of capital should not be viewed in isolation but must be understood in terms of their interconnectedness and synergy. For instance, wasta can be conceptualized as a means through which individuals in the region mobilize their social capital (relationships and networks) alongside cultural capital (knowledge of norms and values) and economic capital (resources and influence) to achieve personal or professional goals. This theoretical framework allows for a nuanced exploration of how wasta manifests in digital interactions, revealing the ways in which traditional practices of influence are adapted and transformed into the context of social media. Furthermore, it enables us to assess the broader socio-cultural dynamics at play, illustrating how hybrid sociocultural capital operates as a vital mechanism for maintaining and expanding social capital in an increasingly interconnected world.

Data and Methodology

As the ambition to analyze the perception of wasta among the GCC population of 56.4 million citizens (2021) faces several challenges, such as exhaustive surveying that may encounter a lack of transparency or respondents' reluctance to

speak openly, we decided to narrow the research group to users of selected social media platforms. Given the data availability, we focused on commenters on Reddit, where users tend to be younger, particularly those aged 18-29 (Statista, 2024). We also chose YouTube, which is popular among both younger and middle-aged adults (Statista, 2024), where comments on political videos related to wasta provide direct street opinions. We analyzed comments in both English and Arabic to capture a comprehensive understanding of perceptions across different language speakers.

Data

For our analysis of opinions among the younger GCC population, we collected 300 comments from five YouTube videos and 460 from Reddit threads discussing wasta—whether users have used it, their connections with intermediaries, and personal experiences. YouTube videos were categorized into English-language content, presenting wasta as social networking for expatriates, and Arabic videos criticizing nepotism. We also used comments from a university forum addressing wasta on campus. This data was processed into a text corpus for Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), as detailed in the following chapter. Reddit threads were in English, while YouTube and university comments were in Arabic, targeting GCC users in the intended age group. Detailed insights and percentages from this analysis will be provided in the interpretation section.

Methodological approach

Hermeneutic method

The research is structured around two key methodological approaches for analyzing the retrieved comments. At the forefront is our theoretical framework for interpretation, which is essential for unpacking the complexities of the social media discourse. This interpretative analysis will be preceded by a technical examination using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a method that will help us identify and categorize the underlying themes within the comments.

By prioritizing the interpretative framework, we seek to delve into how a specific group from the Gulf region perceives the phenomenon of wasta, setting aside conventional academic definitions of nepotism, clientelism, or corruption. Our focus will be on the commenters' perspectives and how their views are shaped by cultural nuances and social dynamics. To facilitate this deeper understanding, we employ Gadamer's hermeneutic method, which allows us to interpret wasta through the lens of local culture, societal structures, and historical context[26]. Although originally designed for literary and philosophical texts, this qualitative approach has been adapted to explore a wide array of cultural and social phenomena, enriching our analysis of wasta in contemporary Gulf society.

As Hans-Georg Gadamer illustrated, readers never approach a text without some preliminary understanding, which influences their interpretation[26]. This process, known as the hermeneutic circle, involves the interplay between individual components and the whole, where meaning is formed through contextual understanding. When applying this method to the phenomenon of wasta, it is crucial to acknowledge the observer's "hermeneutical horizon," which shapes understanding based on personal experiences and perspectives. Achieving a nuanced interpretation requires expanding

this horizon to encompass local historical, cultural, and Islamic contexts. This necessitates that interpreters remain aware of their biases and continually challenge their preconceptions. Thus, the hermeneutic approach proves particularly valuable in assessing whether wasta is perceived as a form of social capital or as a practice that undermines meritocracy through corruption. Other philosophers, such as Heidegger and Ricoeur, have made significant contributions to modern hermeneutics; Heidegger emphasized that understanding is always rooted in personal experience, while Ricoeur focused on the analysis of cultural practices and symbols, enriching the interpretation of wasta as a social and economic mechanism.

Key mechanism of text interpretation using hermeneutic method is the hermeneutic circle. It is a fundamental concept in hermeneutics, illustrating the iterative process of understanding where the interpretation of a text's parts informs the understanding of the whole, and vice versa. Friedrich Schleiermacher introduced this notion, emphasizing that interpretation is not linear but cyclical, requiring readers to navigate back and forth between specific details and the overarching context (Schleiermacher, 1998). Gadamer expanded on this idea, asserting that understanding is influenced by the historical and cultural contexts of the interpreter, and that awareness of one's preconceptions is crucial for deeper comprehension[26]. Martin Heidegger also contributed significantly to this concept, positing that understanding is embedded in our existence, thus shaping how we engage with texts[27]. In practice, the hermeneutic circle fosters a continuous dialogue between the interpreter and the text, promoting an evolving understanding that reflects cultural and historical dynamics.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation

The text corpus from social media platforms was analyzed using the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) method, a technique that helps identify underlying topics within large sets of unstructured text data, such as social media comments. The preprocessing phase involved cleaning the data, removing stop words, and reducing words to their base forms. Once the text was preprocessed, it was transformed into a numerical format that captured word frequencies across the dataset. LDA operates on the assumption that each document contains a mixture of topics, with each topic characterized by distinct word patterns[28]. By analyzing the frequency and co-occurrence of words, the algorithm identifies these hidden topics, allowing researchers to interpret the structure and content of the data[29][30]. This method is particularly well-suited for analyzing unstructured data, such as social media comments, as it uncovers themes and trends that offer insights into public perceptions of *wasta*.

LDA is ideal for this research because it systematically reveals patterns and themes in unstructured comments from platforms like Reddit and YouTube[31] An additional advantage of LDA is its ability to integrate effectively. These patterns provide a deeper understanding of how *wasta* is discussed in public forums, shedding light on both positive and negative perceptions. Its capacity to detect latent themes makes LDA a valuable tool for interpreting the broad range of public opinion in Gulf societies. An additional advantage of LDA is its ability to coordinate effectively with artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. Once trained on a dataset, the model can recognize and classify topics in new, unseen data, making it a robust tool for ongoing analysis. This capacity to "learn" and adapt over time allows the LDA model to improve its accuracy as it processes more data[32], thereby refining its insights into social phenomena like*wasta*.

For this study, we utilized the Orange Data Mining tool, which offers strong data visualization and analysis capabilities. This platform was chosen for its user-friendly interface and its ability to simplify the LDA process, enabling more accessible interpretation of large-scale social media data. Moreover, its integration with Python-based machine learning tools allows for further refinement of the model and the incorporation of advanced AI techniques, enhancing the accuracy of topic detection[33].

Results interpretation

The largest portion of comments (46%) came from users criticizing the existence of the wasta system. Many shared their negative experiences applying for jobs and voiced concerns about the practices of human resources departments, particularly in state-owned companies in the Gulf countries. In contrast, a smaller group of users (15%) viewed connections for obtaining jobs or education as a natural part of life, arguing that this phenomenon occurs everywhere in the world. These connections were often praised in a religious context as gifts from God, raising the question of why one shouldn't take advantage of them.

Some users expressed frustration that recent regulatory measures in Saudi Arabia have made it difficult to leverage connections, given the influx of foreign managers who fill positions with their own employees. This shift has created barriers for Saudis trying to enter the job market. The remaining commenters did not express a specific opinion, but 17% shared political views, mainly criticizing the ruling family in Saudi Arabia. While the government outwardly claims to combat nepotism, critics noted that official positions are still filled through such connections. Additional comments pointed to the persistence of tribal relationships that foster nepotism, with some users advocating for standardized electronic and anonymous hiring processes for jobs and university admissions. The remaining 29% of commenters focused on praising the video or making religious remarks rather than discussing nepotism.

More opinions in English can be found on Reddit, where the term "wasta" is easily searchable, as it is frequently discussed in the Gulf region and the broader Middle East and North Africa. Unlike YouTube content, much of the discussion on Reddit centers on job recruitment. Here, commentators present a different perspective on wasta, often framing it as a social network that needs to be cultivated. Overall, there are 35 threads on this topic, with 63% addressing questions like "How do I find wasta?", "Can wasta help me get a driver's license?", or "Can a business operate without wasta?".

Not all commenters took a clear stance on the system; only 14% explicitly labeled it as nepotism. In contrast, 69% described wasta as a valuable networking tool essential for achieving success while also emphasizing the importance of working on personal qualifications. These respondents essentially support the wasta system, accepting it as a reality without voicing a normative opinion on its legitimacy.

Seventeen percent were staunch advocates of the system, offering advice to others on building connections and where to find them. This group argued that similar networking is crucial in the United States and the European Union, suggesting that wasta is a global phenomenon rather than one confined to the Gulf. Interestingly, most users who viewed wasta negatively as a factor undermining state competitiveness tended to post comments that were 4 to 7 years old, while more

recent threads focused on wasta as social capital and the importance of networking.

In terms of the King Fahad Petroleum University students, it is unique that we know exactly the age and geographical group of the commentators, specifically young people aged 18-25 from Saudi Arabia or other GCC states in minor cases. The thread was under the question "Does wasta work at the university?" which implies that either the student wanted to use wasta, stumbled upon some situation that included wasta or has some negative experience in that matter. Majority of comments (37%) affirm that wasta is prevalent in university admissions, sharing anecdotes like "I know someone who got a score of 84.73, but others with higher scores weren't accepted." They note that "wasta exists everywhere, even in the smallest matters." Other students even shared doubts about the meritocratic nature of university admissions (29% of comments), stating, "Even if I work hard, I might not be accepted as they might be full." Comments like "wasta is very difficult to come by" highlight concerns about fairness. A few commenters share mixed feelings (22%), with one noting, "Many of our friends who entered through wasta didn't study and failed." Another mentions, "I tried through various wasta channels, but unfortunately, I got rejected." Suggesting that wasta might be in some cases supporting element, however it doesn't mean that it guarantees the smooth journey in pursuing university degree. The last and relatively small group of respondents (12%) emphasizes the importance of hard work, saying, "If your grades in high school are low, I don't recommend trying to enter university." They suggest that relying on wasta can lead to failure, urging, "Instead of saying all this, why don't you work hard in your studies?" That suggest that this particular group doesn't approve of such practices at the university and generally in the public life and stresses out owns discipline rather then connections.

LDA Analysis: A Comparative Analysis of Social, Professional, and Academic Perspectives

This chapter explores the insights from analyzing wasta discussions across Reddit, YouTube, and King Fahd University forums using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). On Reddit, wasta is primarily discussed as a controversial tool for job acquisition, often perceived as a form of corruption. Discussions underscore the frustration that wasta, rather than merit, frequently dictates job success, highlighting the ethical and legal dimensions of this practice. Many participants express resentment about the limitations wasta imposes on equal opportunity, particularly for those who lack influential connections. This platform's discourse revolves heavily around employment contexts, where wasta is viewed as undermining the value of qualifications and transparency in hiring practices.

YouTube presents a broader and somewhat less critical perspective, illustrating how wasta functions within social networks and family ties. YouTube users describe instances where connections, like those with a cousin or other relatives, help overcome obstacles, especially in the workplace. Although critiques are present, the discussions tend to reflect a more culturally embedded understanding of wasta, where it is seen as a pragmatic way to achieve success in specific regions, such as Qatar. Here, wasta is seen less as an ethical issue and more as a strategy for navigating professional challenges, with some emphasis on the tension between hard work and reliance on personal networks. This highlights a perceived need for family or social support in places where competition for resources or opportunities is intense.

The forums from King Fahd University offer a distinct angle on wasta, focusing on its role within academic institutions, particularly around admissions processes. Discussions reveal a strong skepticism toward meritocratic ideals in higher

education, with students questioning whether admission decisions are truly based on qualifications. Words like "nepotism" and "connections" underscore the sentiment that social ties often influence educational opportunities. Users frequently share personal anecdotes, pointing to specific instances where individuals gain university access through connections, thus casting doubt on the fairness of the academic selection process. This viewpoint shows how wasta is not only prevalent in the professional sphere but also in education, affecting students' prospects and highlighting regional challenges to equal access.

While each platform reflects unique concerns, they share common themes around fairness and social influence. All three emphasize how wasta often leads to inequalities, though each interprets its role and acceptability differently. Reddit focuses on its negative impact on employment fairness, YouTube on its pragmatic uses within familial networks, and King Fahd University forums on its implications for academic access. This analysis illustrates wasta's complex role across various aspects of society, revealing it as a deeply ingrained yet contentious mechanism for navigating social and professional systems. This analysis reveals wasta as a multifaceted phenomenon with varying interpretations across social and professional settings. While Reddit users primarily criticize wasta's role in the job market, YouTube discussions provide a culturally nuanced perspective, acknowledging both the advantages and downsides. King Fahd University discussions reflect a more localized concern with wasta in academia, adding depth to our understanding of wasta's role across different domains. Together, these findings highlight wasta's complexity, illustrating how it functions as both a contested and accepted aspect of social interaction in many communities.

Wasta phenomenon from a hermeneutical perspective

The phenomenon of wasta can be profoundly analyzed through a hermeneutical lens, particularly focusing on the perspectives of younger generations aged 18 to 35. At the core of this analysis is the hermeneutic circle, which emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the whole and its parts. Individuals' preconceptions—rooted in cultural norms and societal values—form the hermeneutic horizon, shaping their initial understanding of wasta. These preconceptions are influenced by factors such as social status, family background, and personal experiences, as well as specific cultural values like collectivism and respect for family ties, which are prevalent in many Middle Eastern societies. As young adults navigate their environments, they encounter specific instances of wasta that challenge or reinforce their prior beliefs. For example, their experiences in educational settings, professional networks, or social interactions can either validate the necessity of connections or highlight the inequities inherent in the practice. Each encounter serves as a piece of a larger puzzle, contributing to their evolving interpretation of wasta. This cultural context emphasizes the importance of relationships and networks, often viewed as essential for achieving success, which further complicates their understanding of meritocracy.

The hermeneutic horizon is not static; it evolves as individuals engage with various facets of wasta. This evolution reflects broader cultural discourse, wherein the younger generation critically reflects on the implications of wasta for meritocracy and social mobility. Through discussions on platforms like Reddit and YouTube, young adults articulate a spectrum of views that oscillate between acceptance and critique. This highlights the tension between traditional values—such as

loyalty to family and community—and contemporary aspirations for fairness and individual achievement.

Consequently, the hermeneutic circle illustrates how individual experiences with wasta feed back into the collective understanding of the practice. As young adults share their narratives and reflections, they collectively reshape the cultural meanings of wasta, making it a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon. This continuous interplay between personal encounters and broader societal contexts emphasizes the importance of viewing wasta as an evolving concept that reflects the complexities of modern social interactions, particularly within a culture that prizes familial and communal bonds.

Hermeneutical perspective allows for a nuanced exploration of wasta, revealing how it is not only a personal experience but also a collective phenomenon shaped by cultural contexts and ongoing dialogues among young adults. By recognizing the dynamic nature of their interpretations, we gain deeper insights into the multifaceted role of wasta in contemporary society, particularly as it relates to the enduring influence of social networks and traditional values.

Discussion

The data from social networks reveal that the perception of wasta in the Gulf States is both ambivalent and polarized, reflecting its complex socio-cultural role. A significant portion of the respondents who benefit from wasta view it as a necessary and valuable tool for navigating both professional and personal spheres. For these individuals, wasta serves as a form of social capital that is deeply rooted in long-maintained familial and social ties. Its positive aspects are especially evident in circumstances where formal procedures may be inefficient or lack transparency, allowing individuals to gain access to services such as healthcare or employment opportunities.

Conversely, there is a sizeable group of respondents who view wasta as a corrupt practice that perpetuates inequality and undermines meritocracy. This group often consists of individuals who lack access to influential networks and express frustration with a system that they perceive as unfair. For them, wasta is a significant barrier to equal opportunity, especially in state-owned companies where the use of personal connections can hinder efficiency and transparency.

The hermeneutic circle provides valuable insights into how these contrasting perceptions are formed. The historical and cultural context of the Gulf States plays a pivotal role in shaping how wasta is understood. While locals tend to view it as a culturally accepted practice that sustains social cohesion, expatriates and those without access to influential networks are more likely to criticize it as an impediment to fair competition. This tension between traditional values and modern ideals of meritocracy underpins the ongoing debate about the role of wasta in Gulf societies.

The theory of hybrid socio-cultural capital offers a useful framework for understanding the multifunctional nature of wasta. It highlights the interplay between social, cultural, and economic capital in the region, demonstrating that wasta cannot be easily categorized as either wholly positive or negative. Instead, it reflects the region's unique socio-economic dynamics, where personal relationships often carry more weight than formal qualifications. Among younger social media users in the GCC, wasta is viewed through a hybrid lens that combines these elements. Their discussions illustrate a complex

understanding of wasta that recognizes its practical utility while also expressing concerns about fairness and equality.

As social media becomes a key platform for discourse, younger generations actively engage in conversations about wasta, revealing their critical stance towards its implications for meritocracy. This generational perspective indicates a potential shift in attitudes, where traditional views of wasta are increasingly questioned in favor of more equitable approaches to social capital. This evolving dialogue highlights how hybrid socio-cultural capital is not static but rather reflects ongoing changes within the socio-cultural landscape of the Gulf States.

Conclusion

This study reveals the complex perceptions of wasta within Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, highlighting a divide between those who view it as a necessary form of social capital and others who criticize it as a barrier to meritocracy. While wasta is deeply embedded in social and professional networks, enabling individuals to navigate rigid bureaucratic and economic structures, it simultaneously perpetuates inequality by limiting access for those without influential connections. The concept of hybrid sociocultural capital provides a nuanced understanding of wasta, emphasizing its multifunctional role in GCC society, where familial ties and cultural norms intertwine with economic interactions.

The generational shift evident in social media discourse suggests that younger GCC residents may increasingly question the fairness of wasta, advocating for more merit-based systems. As digital platforms amplify these discussions, a gradual evolution in the perception of wasta is emerging, where the balance between tradition and modern ideals of merit and transparency is being renegotiated. This evolution signals potential shifts in the role of wasta in the region's future socio-economic landscape, as younger generations continue to grapple with its implications in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world.

Annex

Table 1. LDA Topics on Reddit	
Topic 1 — The Role of Connections in Employment	
Keywords:	people, connections, wasta, not, get, job, only, bribe, here, jobs
This topic highlights the strong relationship between wasta and employment, emphasizing how individuals often rely on connections rather than merit to secure jobs. The presence of the word "bribe" indicates that wasta is frequently perceived as a form of corruption, where job acquisition depends more on who one knows than on qualifications or skills. The discussion reveals frustration about inequality in accessing employment, with a particular focus on how those without connections face significant challenges in entering the job market.	
Topic 2 — The Legality and Fairness of Wasta	
Keywords:	wasta, really, job, not, law, someone, get, without, you,

		works

In this topic, the focus is on the legal and ethical dimensions of *wasta*, with terms like "law" and "without" reflecting concerns about its fairness. Many Reddit users question whether *wasta* should be accepted as part of the employment process, particularly when it bypasses formal legal procedures. The word "without" suggests a general sentiment that securing a job without the use of *wasta* is difficult, raising ethical questions about fairness and equality in hiring practices.

Topic 3 — The Negative Perception of Wasta

Keywords:		*job, wasta, because being, bad, people, some, no, used*

This topic centers on the negative perception of *wasta* among many respondents. Words like "bad" and "no" signal strong moral objections to the practice, particularly regarding how it undermines meritocracy. Respondents expressed concerns that *wasta* is used to exploit systems, enabling unqualified individuals to secure positions, which leads to widespread resentment. This theme underscores broader dissatisfaction with the misuse of *wasta* and its detrimental impact on societal values of fairness and equal opportunity.

Topic 4 — Wasta as a Key to Success

Keywords:		*wasta, key, connections, having, process, get, connection, because sell*

In this topic, *wasta* is viewed as an essential tool for achieving success, especially in terms of securing employment. Words like "key," "connections," and "sell" reflect the perception that *wasta* is not only necessary but something that may even be commodified or exchanged. This suggests that *wasta* is considered an integral part of navigating the job acquisition process, whether or not individuals agree with the practice.

Topic 5 — The "Good" Side of Wasta

wasta, good, when, job, way, qualified, what, person, society, need

This topic reflects a more neutral or even positive view of *wasta*. Some Reddit users recognize that, in certain contexts, *wasta* can be beneficial, particularly when the individual benefiting from it is qualified for the position. Terms like "society" and "need" imply that *wasta* may be seen as part of the social and cultural fabric, and sometimes even as a necessary mechanism to navigate a system where personal connections are crucial.

Topic 6 — The Ubiquity of Wasta

Keywords:		*wasta, people, someone, connection, know, connections, not, have, use, way*

The final topic emphasizes how common and widespread the use of *wasta* is. Terms like "people," "someone," and "connection" illustrate the extent to which individuals rely on personal networks to access opportunities. The frequent use of "connections" underscores the deep entrenchment of this practice in everyday life. This topic also highlights the divide between those who have connections and benefit from *wasta* and those who lack such ties and feel disadvantaged as a result.

Table 2. LDA Topics on Youtube

Topic 1 — Wasta in the Workplace	
Keywords:	*wasta, work, things, someone, can, they, who, where*
This topic likely revolves around *wasta*'s role in the workplace, focusing on how individuals ("someone," "who") use personal connections to accomplish tasks or overcome obstacles. There is an emphasis on *who* can help and *where* or *how* things are accomplished using *wasta*.	
Topic 2 — Wasta and Personal Networks	
Keywords:	*wasta, who, cousin, find, year, things*
This topic highlights the personal relationships involved in *wasta*, particularly familial ties such as with a "cousin." The term "year" suggests that individuals often spend time seeking *wasta* or navigating networks to achieve certain goals or gain access to resources.	
Topic 3 — Work, Hard Effort, and Wasta	
Keywords	*work, hard, someone, find, can, who, cousin, Qatar, where, right*
This topic reflects the tension between hard work and the necessity of wasta. There is clear frustration about the effort required to succeed in places like Qatar, while others use wasta to gain an advantage. The theme contrasts the "right" or fair way to succeed with relying on someone, such as a cousin, for help.	
Topic 4 — Frustration with Delays Due to Lack of Wasta	
This topic likely reflects frustration with delays caused by a lack of wasta. The words "year" and "until" point to the long wait times individuals without wasta experience. People feel forced to seek out wasta or rely on others, creating setbacks for those without connections.	

Table 3. LDA results from King Fahd University of Petroleum Forum

Topic 1 — Skepticism of Meritocracy in Higher Education	
Keywords:	exists, not, university, nepotism, connections, the, for, on, in, any
This topic appears to focus on the presence (or absence) of nepotism and connections within the university setting. The terms "exists," "not," "nepotism," and "connections" indicate a discussion on whether these elements play a significant role in accessing university opportunities. This could reflect a sentiment of skepticism about meritocracy in higher education.	
Topic 2 — The Role of Connections in University Admissions	
Keywords:	enter, connection, the, to, from, t, world, through, ', university
This topic emphasizes the pathways to entering university, particularly through connections. The use of words like "enter," "connection," and "world" suggests that social networks and relationships are crucial for navigating the university admission process. It implies a broader social context where connections facilitate access to educational institutions.	
Topic 3 — Personal Experiences and Anecdotes on Nepotism in Admissions	
Keywords:	you, through, nepotism, i, know, ', university, connections, who, what
This topic seems to highlight personal experiences or knowledge regarding nepotism and connections in university admissions. The phrases "who," "what," and "I know" imply a more individualized perspective, possibly pointing to specific anecdotes or observations about how connections influence university entry.	

Footnotes

¹ In the context of nepotism in Russia, two terms can be witnessed – blat and svyazi. To briefly summarize the difference, Blat refers to an informal system of favors and personal connections used to navigate bureaucratic processes in post-Soviet contexts, often implying mutual benefit and favoritism, while svyazi denotes a broader network of relationships that facilitates access to opportunities and resources without the same negative connotations[7].

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