RESEARCH ARTICLE

Wasta: The Culture of Nepotism on 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. 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 analyses public perceptions of wasta based on data from social media platforms Reddit and YouTube. The findings reveal a complex narrative: while some view wasta as a form of social capital essential for navigating the region's social structures, others criticize it as a barrier to meritocracy and fairness. This paper introduces the theory of hybrid socio-cultural capital, positioning wasta as a multifaceted tool that blends social, cultural, and economic capital. The study concludes that wasta remains an essential, albeit controversial, element of Gulf societies, warranting further exploration in the context of globalization and social reform.

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. The term *wasta* is widely recognised 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 centres 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 modernisation 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.

In this context, the central question of this study is:

- **RQ**: How is *wasta* perceived by the 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 labour 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] characterising *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[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, emphasising the roles of trust, familial bonds, and mutual favours in shaping these traditional models of interpersonal relationships, particularly in the context of internationalisation and modernisation.

In a business context, *wasta* can reduce the transactional costs associated with protracted bureaucratic procedures[11]. It can also facilitate the exchange of information within organisations, thereby improving work efficiency[24][25]. Additionally, *wasta* can provide professional support and foster the development of constructive interpersonal relationships in the workplace[20].

The theory that most accurately encapsulates the essence of the *wasta* phenomenon is proposed as the theory of hybrid sociocultural capital. This theory extends traditional concepts of capital (economic, social, and cultural) by integrating and accounting for their interactions within specific sociocultural contexts. Hybrid sociocultural capital comprises a combination of resources that individuals and groups utilise to gain social advantages. In the context of *wasta*, which is regarded as a key element of both social and economic life in the Gulf region, hybrid sociocultural capital provides insight into how various forms of capital—such as family ties, cultural norms, and economic resources—interact and mutually reinforce one another.

This concept positions hybrid sociocultural capital as a tool that actors in the region employ to optimise their social, economic, and cultural advantages. The theory highlights that these types of capital cannot be viewed in isolation but must be understood in terms of their interconnectedness and synergy. For instance, *wasta* can be seen as a means through which individuals in the region mobilise their social capital (relationships and networks) in conjunction with cultural capital (knowledge of norms and values) and economic capital (resources and influence) to achieve personal or professional goals.

This hybrid approach is particularly pertinent in contexts where traditional and modern values coexist, and where individuals must navigate complex social structures. *Wasta* can thus be viewed as a mechanism that helps balance these

different forms of capital, optimising their use to achieve desired outcomes.

Globalisation and modernisation 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 characterised 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 labour 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 labour 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].

Data and Methodology

Objective

Our goal was to analyze the prevailing narrative surrounding the perception of the *wasta* phenomenon among residents of the Persian Gulf, across different educational, age, and ethnic groups. Traditional survey methods in the region might face challenges, such as a lack of transparency or respondents' reluctance to speak openly. To address these issues, we opted to analyze social networks relevant to the studied region. Currently, platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter) are popular, but due to the availability of text-based comments, we focused on YouTube and Reddit, where the comments were more accessible for qualitative analysis.

Data

Data for this study were collected from YouTube and Reddit, chosen for their suitability in providing public, text-based comments that allow for both qualitative and quantitative analysis. YouTube allows for an in-depth exploration of user discussions, particularly in response to video content, while Reddit offers a broader range of user interactions with more detailed commentary. Both platforms provide a valuable opportunity to gather real, unfiltered opinions, avoiding the reluctance respondents might feel in direct surveys.

On YouTube, we analysed 20 videos related to *wasta*, which fell into two distinct categories. The first, predominantly in English, presented *wasta* as a form of social capital and networking, often aimed at expatriates. These videos highlighted the importance of cultivating valuable contacts and provided guidance on how to effectively leverage these networks. The second category, primarily in Arabic, featured local media interviews that focused on the negative impacts of nepotism, particularly emphasising how *wasta* can result in unfair hiring practices and inefficiencies. Comments on these Arabic-language videos frequently expressed strong dissatisfaction with the system and included personal accounts of being overlooked for jobs in favour of those with better connections.

The number of comments varied across platforms. Arabic-language YouTube videos averaged 30 comments per video, with political figure-related content generally attracting more engagement. On Reddit, the average number of comments per thread was 49, although this number varied significantly, with some threads receiving hundreds of responses, while others had substantially fewer. In total, we gathered 78 relevant comments from YouTube and 330 from Reddit.

Methodological Approaches

Hermeneutic Method

The theoretical framework of this paper is grounded in Gadamer's hermeneutic method, which facilitates a deeper understanding of *wasta* within Gulf society by interpreting it through the lens of local culture, societal structures, and historical evolution[26]. Originally developed for the interpretation of literary and philosophical texts, this qualitative method has since been adapted to explore a wide range of cultural and social phenomena.

Gadamer's approach does not seek to provide definitive answers but rather guides the researcher towards understanding through the dynamic interplay between the parts and the whole of a text or phenomenon. This process is referred to as the hermeneutic circle, where meaning emerges from interpreting individual components in relation to the broader context[26]. According to Gadamer, complete objectivity is unattainable, as any interpretation is inevitably influenced by the observer's own historical and cultural context.

When applying this method to *wasta*, it is essential to recognise the observer's "hermeneutical horizon," which shapes and limits understanding based on personal experiences and perspectives. By broadening this horizon to include the local historical, cultural, and Islamic religious contexts, one can achieve a more nuanced interpretation of *wasta*. It is imperative that the observer remains conscious of their own biases and continually challenges preconceptions to foster a more balanced understanding of the phenomenon.

This hermeneutic approach proves particularly valuable in examining whether *wasta* is perceived as a form of social capital rooted in familial and social networks, or as a practice that undermines meritocracy through corruption. Context and the subjective interpretations of individuals are crucial for fully comprehending how *wasta* operates within Gulf societies.

Other thinkers, such as Heidegger and Ricoeur[27], have also made significant contributions to modern hermeneutics. Heidegger emphasised the interpretative nature of human existence, asserting that understanding is always grounded in one's own experiences and context[28][29]. Ricoeur, on the other hand, focused on the interpretation of texts and symbols, offering valuable insights into the analysis of culturally complex phenomena like *wasta*. Ricoeur's approach is particularly useful in examining how cultural practices and symbols are understood within their broader societal frameworks, further enriching the interpretation of *wasta* as both a social and economic mechanism.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)

The text corpus from social media platforms was analysed 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 characterised by distinct word patterns[30]. By analysing the frequency and co-occurrence of words, the algorithm identifies these hidden topics, allowing researchers to interpret the structure and content of the data[31][32]. This method is particularly well-suited for analysing 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[33]. 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.

However, while LDA is a powerful tool, it presents challenges, particularly in terms of interpreting results and determining the optimal number of topics. Choosing too few topics risks overlooking important distinctions, while selecting too many can result in fragmentation[34]. To mitigate these issues, we manually reviewed the results to ensure that the identified topics were meaningful within the context of Gulf societies. Moreover, since the quality of the input data significantly impacts LDA's results, thorough preprocessing was critical to enhance the accuracy and relevance of the analysis[31].

An additional advantage of LDA is its ability to coordinate effectively with artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. Once trained on a dataset, the model can recognise 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[35], thereby refining its insights into social phenomena like*wasta*.

For this study, we utilised the Orange Data Mining tool, which offers strong data visualisation 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[36].

Analysis of the Perception of the Wasta

In the age of digital communication, online platforms such as Reddit and YouTube have become pivotal spaces for public discourse, providing valuable insight into how individuals discuss and engage with various social, cultural, and political issues. This chapter presents the results of an analysis of comments from Reddit and YouTube, focusing on discussions surrounding *wasta* in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. The comments were analysed using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a topic modelling technique that allows for the identification of hidden thematic structures within large text datasets.

LDA has proven particularly effective in uncovering patterns within unstructured data by clustering words that frequently appear together into distinct "topics." This method enables us to observe how individuals frame their discussions, the key themes that emerge, and how sentiments may differ across platforms. The analysis not only highlights the prominence of particular topics but also reveals how online communities navigate complex issues such as nepotism, privilege, and social dynamics.

In this chapter, we will first describe the preprocessing steps undertaken and the rationale behind applying LDA to this dataset. Following this, the key topics generated from Reddit and YouTube comments will be presented, with a focus on their thematic relevance. Each section will delve into the most prominent topics, offering a detailed examination of the language used, recurring themes, and subtle variations in the discourse between the two platforms. The results will provide a deeper understanding of public sentiment and engagement with *wasta*, illustrating how social issues are discussed in different digital spaces.

LDA – Reddit Platform

A Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) analysis was conducted on 330 Reddit responses discussing*wasta*, a prevalent form of nepotism in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. The chat streams were selected to capture perspectives from individuals likely based in the Gulf area, though it is possible that commenters from other nationalities also contributed. The model produced six distinct topics, each offering a unique perspective on *wasta* and its implications. Below is an in-depth analysis of each topic:

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, emphasising 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 centres 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

Keywords: *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 recognise 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 emphasises 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.

The LDA analysis of the Reddit discussions reveals a complex and multifaceted perception of *wasta* in the GCC region. While many participants express negative feelings towards *wasta*, particularly concerning fairness and legality, others acknowledge it as an unavoidable part of social and professional life. Some even perceive *wasta* as positive, especially when it enables deserving individuals to access opportunities. Overall, the analysis reflects the deep entrenchment of *wasta* in GCC societies, with mixed perceptions regarding its role in the employment process.

LDA – Youtube Platform

The results of the analysis from YouTube presented a somewhat different direction, with more negative experiences surfacing among the commenters. However, it is important to note that the volume of YouTube comments (87) was significantly smaller compared to Reddit, and the comments were predominantly in Arabic. Many of these comments were posted under videos that mocked the prevalence of *wasta*, making it more challenging to determine the nationality of the commenters compared to Reddit.

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

Keywords: *the, wasta, year, someone, find, until*

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.

The critique and defense of *wasta* align with broader views expressed in Arabic media. The analysis of these articles shows that both groups—those who actively use *wasta* and those affected by its shortcomings—tend to critique the system but from different perspectives. On the one hand, users of *wasta* recount positive experiences, such as efficiently solving urgent problems through personal contacts. For instance, a woman obtaining emergency medical care for her father due to her uncle's connections illustrates how *wasta* can have a significant positive impact on individuals' lives[37].

On the other hand, stories from individuals who faced rejection due to a lack of contacts reveal the frustration and injustice associated with *wasta*. Examples include a young woman denied a teaching position because another candidate had better connections and a man overlooked for promotion due to the absence of *wasta*. These stories reflect how *wasta* can undermine career opportunities and personal aspirations[38].

On Reddit, opinions about *wasta* were more diverse. While 63% of discussions centred on the practical aspects of building connections and using *wasta* for various purposes, only 14% of commenters explicitly referred to it as nepotism. Many Reddit users acknowledged that while *wasta* could be beneficial, it is still crucial to work on one's qualifications. A common view shared in the discussions was that *wasta* is almost inevitable in Qatar and other Gulf countries, where it is seen as a vital tool for success, especially for expatriates who often lack local contacts.

This divergence between positive and negative perceptions of *wasta* highlights its deeply embedded nature in the regional context and the significant impact it has on individuals. On one side, *wasta* is regarded as a valuable tool, particularly in crisis situations and for securing opportunities; on the other, it is viewed as an obstacle to equality and fairness, where those without the right connections face unfair competition. This divide mirrors broader discussions on Reddit, where 63% of conversations focus on the practical use of contacts, while 14% of commentators express concern about the dangers of nepotism. This nuanced understanding provides insight into how *wasta* operates in practice and is perceived within the wider social and cultural dynamics of the Gulf region.

The analysis of comments from YouTube and Reddit suggests that *wasta* functions as an essential form of sociocultural capital in the Gulf. It is nearly ubiquitous in the region and seen as a vital tool for success in both personal and professional spheres, especially for expatriates who often lack established local networks. Deeply ingrained in the local culture and aligned with prevailing social norms, *wasta* is viewed by many as a practical and necessary mechanism for navigating the region's bureaucracy and institutional inefficiencies. The practical benefits of *wasta*, such as rapid access to important services or enhanced career opportunities, underscore its significance as a useful tool in critical situations. In an environment where institutional effectiveness is low and bureaucratic hurdles are high, *wasta* often becomes an indispensable means of achieving objectives.

However, while *wasta* is considered an inevitable part of life in the Gulf, its drawbacks—such as undermining meritocracy and contributing to perceptions of injustice—provoke frustration, particularly among those disadvantaged by it. This complex view suggests that, while *wasta* plays a crucial role as a form of sociocultural capital, it also brings significant challenges that affect individuals and society at large.

The Wasta Phenomenon in the Context of the Hermeneutic Circle

When applying the results to the theory of the hermeneutic circle, it is essential to consider the broader context surrounding the *wasta* phenomenon. In Arab societies, *wasta* is deeply embedded, with both positive and negative effects on individuals and the broader social fabric. From a wider perspective, it represents a social phenomenon that is perceived ambivalently—on the one hand, it serves as a tool for achieving goals, while on the other, it is seen as an obstacle to equality and justice. *Wasta* is intricately linked to the social structure, where personal relationships and obligations play a central role.

As these societies transition toward modern state structures, such as administrative frameworks and market economies, the significance of *wasta* has begun to shift. For some, it remains a vital instrument for social security and solidarity, while for others, it increasingly represents a source of frustration and injustice. This ambivalence reflects a broader societal conflict between traditional methods of organising society, in which personal connections, patronage, or tribal relationships dominate, and modern ideals of equal opportunities and transparent processes.

Criticism of *wasta* (46% of the comments) primarily comes from individuals who view it as a barrier to fair opportunities, particularly in the workplace. These critics often draw upon personal experiences of discrimination or injustice caused by a lack of connections. For them, *wasta* is perceived as a system that perpetuates nepotism and clientelism, thereby undermining efficiency and ethical standards, particularly in state-owned enterprises.

Defending opinions (15% of the comments) argue that *wasta* is an integral aspect of social life and is not inherently negative. Proponents of this view often assert that *wasta* is part of the cultural and religious fabric, where personal relationships and obligations are both legitimate and necessary. Some even see *wasta* as a means of ensuring that those in need receive assistance or access to services that might otherwise be inaccessible.

Understanding *wasta* as a broad social phenomenon helps explain why both criticism and defence coexist, and how they are interconnected. Recognising that *wasta* is rooted in cultural traditions and social norms clarifies why even those negatively impacted by it might acknowledge its value in other contexts. *Wasta*, as part of the cultural landscape in the Gulf States and broader Middle East, also surfaces in the perspectives of foreign workers, who, from different hermeneutic horizons, may struggle to grasp the concept and find alternative job opportunities when lacking *wasta*.

Conversely, focusing on individual experiences—whether critical or supportive—can offer insights into how the overall perception of *wasta* is evolving in modern society. For example, discussions on Reddit, which are largely conducted by a younger, educated demographic, indicate that this generation may approach *wasta* more pragmatically. In contrast, YouTube comments in Arabic may represent older generations, though this cannot be confirmed. If this generational difference is accurate, it suggests that younger generations are more factual and pragmatic in their view of *wasta*, while older generations may be more accepting of its role. It also hints at a potential shift towards meritocracy and transparency, although Reddit comments do not fully support this notion. It is possible that younger generations have not yet faced significant barriers where the absence of *wasta* directly affected their opportunities.

Reinterpreting the critical comments leads to the conclusion that negative experiences with *wasta* are not merely reflections of isolated system failures but are symptomatic of broader societal tensions, which are increasingly relevant in political debates in countries like Kuwait. These tensions arise from the clash between traditional societal structures, which prioritise personal ties and patronage, and modern ideals that emphasise equality and transparency.

On the other hand, reassessing the defence of *wasta* reveals that for certain groups, this system is not only perceived as natural but also as essential for survival and success in an environment where formal structures may not always function effectively or fairly. This perspective may also signal resistance to changes that could disrupt established social norms and hierarchies. Given the increased ease of travel and exposure to global cultures, younger generations in the GCC may take pride in mechanisms, like *wasta*, that contribute to individual well-being within the local cultural framework.

Additionally, it is possible that negative comments are reactions to specific political actions by government officials. Since 2015, significant changes have taken place in the region, including efforts to curtail tribalism and promote greater participation of women. Simultaneously, the Vision projects in the GCC countries acknowledge the need for foreign expertise and labour, which has led to a more pragmatic and defensive approach to *wasta* among the younger, educated population. Despite these shifts, it is expected that the role of *wasta* will gradually diminish as the demand for foreign investment and expertise increases, thereby driving a greater emphasis on meritocratic principles and transparent processes.

Discussion

The data from social networks reveal that the perception of *wasta* in the Gulf States is both ambivalent and polarised, 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 lacking 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 consisting of individuals who lack access to influential networks, 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 criticise 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 categorised 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.

Conclusion

The analysis of public discourse on YouTube and Reddit concerning wasta reveals a nuanced and polarized understanding of this phenomenon in the Gulf states. For those who derive benefits from wasta, particularly individuals who have attained prestigious positions through personal connections, it is regarded as a crucial determinant of success and professional advancement. These individuals generally do not perceive the system as unjust, as it affords them significant advantages. Their experiences underscore how personal networks can play a decisive role in achieving career objectives in a region where formal procedures are frequently considered inefficient or lacking in transparency.

Conversely, individuals without access to wasta express frustration and a profound sense of injustice. To them, wasta is perceived as an obstacle that undermines meritocracy and the principle of equal opportunity. Their experiences give rise to feelings of disillusionment and demotivation, as their qualifications and efforts are often eclipsed by the significance of personal connections.

What is particularly noteworthy is that both groups—those with and without access to wasta—offer criticisms of the system, albeit from contrasting viewpoints. Those with access acknowledge its shortcomings but regard it as a necessary evil, typically advocating for internal reforms rather than outright abolition. In contrast, those excluded from wasta networks call for its dismantlement, viewing it as inherently unjust and a hindrance to their success. This dynamic tension between beneficiaries and those disadvantaged by the system fuels ongoing debate about wasta's role in society, with the former

seeking refinement and the latter demanding its eradication.

A crucial, and often overlooked, element is the historical and cultural foundation of wasta. Deeply embedded in tribal traditions and social structures, wasta has endured due to its long-standing role in preserving social cohesion and trust within communities. Despite the implementation of meritocratic reforms, this historical context sheds light on why wasta remains so deeply entrenched. The hermeneutic circle is especially valuable here, as it demonstrates how historical practices continue to influence contemporary perceptions and experiences of wasta.

Beyond these societal implications, the research introduces the hybrid socio-cultural capital theory, offering a new lens through which to understand the persistence of wasta in modern Gulf societies. This theoretical framework integrates social, cultural, and economic capital, illustrating how wasta operates as a multifaceted tool that cannot be reduced to mere nepotism or corruption. Instead, it reflects a complex interaction of resources that actors in the region mobilize to optimize their social and professional standing. The introduction of this hybrid concept is a significant contribution to the field, as it provides a more holistic understanding of how wasta balances traditional values with modern economic pressures.

In essence, wasta operates both as a potent form of socio-cultural capital and as a source of injustice, contingent on one's position within the network. Its enduring presence, despite repeated calls for reform, underscores the deeply ingrained cultural and social values of the region, where personal relationships frequently take precedence over formal systems. This inherent complexity is crucial to understanding why wasta continues to exert influence in the Gulf states, even as they advance towards modernization and globalisation. Future research could explore how these transformative forces may reshape wasta in the coming decades, particularly as younger generations grapple with the tension between tradition and meritocracy.

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