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The Saudi 'White Dialect' Across Regions and Generations: Perception, Prestige, and National Identity

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***Abstract*—Arabic dialects in Saudi Arabia are among the most enduring markers of cultural identity, yet rapid urbanization, inter-regional migration, educational expansion, and digital communication have contributed to the emergence of a supraregional variety that speakers themselves call the "White Dialect" (*al-lahjah al-bayḍāʾ*). Production studies document its deployment in inter-regional contexts, and perceptual dialectology research indicates broad recognition of a Riyadh-centered national *koiné*, but no experimental perception study has tested whether listeners assign uniform prestige to the White Dialect across Saudi regions and generations. This study addresses that gap through a multi-regional, age-stratified perception experiment involving 508 Saudi listeners drawn from four dialect regions (Najd, Hijaz, South, Eastern) and three age groups (18–30, 31–55, 56+). Participants rated two 27-second audio clips of authentic White Dialect speech on dimensions of professional competence, modernity, institutional appropriateness, and prosodic neutrality. ANOVAs tested for regional and age effects; chi-square tests examined patterns of metalinguistic awareness. Results showed no significant regional or age differences in prestige ratings, including the absence of predicted Hijazi resistance, suggesting that positive evaluations extend across the major dialect regions and generational groups sampled. Metalinguistic awareness, by contrast, was significantly stratified by generation: younger speakers showed considerably higher conceptual awareness and terminological familiarity with the White Dialect than older speakers did. These findings provide evidence that broadly similar prestige evaluations can coexist with uneven metalinguistic awareness across generations.**

***Index Terms*—Saudi White Dialect, language prestige, enregisterment, regional variation, metalinguistic awareness**

I. Introduction

Arabic dialects in Saudi Arabia are among the most enduring markers of cultural and national identity, yet decades of urbanization, migration, and digital communication have reshaped how Saudis speak across regional boundaries. The result is what speakers themselves call the "White Dialect" (*al-lahjah al-bayḍāʾ*): a supraregional form of Saudi Arabic with leveled phonology, regionally neutral vocabulary, and few strongly local features (Al-Rojaie, 2021; Alkhamees, 2023). Unlike traditional regional varieties such as Najdi, Hijazi, and Southern Arabic, which index place-based identities, the White Dialect is used for communication across regional boundaries and involves fewer strongly localized features. These linguistic developments have occurred alongside broader social changes associated with Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasizes national cohesion while also recognizing regional heritage (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Whether the White Dialect has also become associated with a broader Saudi national identity, understood here as a shared sense of collective belonging expressed through common cultural and linguistic practices (Smith, 1991), remains an empirical question.

Two recent studies have documented this phenomenon. Al-Rojaie (2021) used perceptual dialectology to show that 87% of respondents across major Saudi regions identify the Riyadh dialect as closest to an emerging national *koiné*, while Alkhamees (2023) examined how young Qassimi speakers deploy leveled features strategically in inter-regional and professional contexts. Together, these studies show that speakers both use the White Dialect and recognize it as a distinct way of speaking. What neither study addresses is whether listeners actually value it. Recognition is not the same as prestige. A speaker may recognize a variety without assigning it high status, and widespread use does not necessarily imply shared evaluations. It therefore remains unclear whether the White Dialect receives comparable prestige ratings across Saudi regions and generations, and what such evaluations may suggest about its association with national identity.

The current study addresses that question through experimental perception methods. A total of 508 Saudi listeners from four dialect regions (Najd, Hijaz, South, Eastern) and three age groups (18–30, 31–55, 55+) evaluated two samples of naturally occurring speech identified as White Dialect on dimensions of professional competence, modernity, institutional appropriateness, and prosodic neutrality. The analysis addresses four questions: (1) Do prestige ratings vary by listener region? (2) Do they vary by age, indicating generational differences in evaluation? (3) Do region and age interact, such that resistance is concentrated in particular demographic subgroups? (4) Are listeners metalinguistically aware of the White Dialect as a named sociolinguistic category?

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II. Literature Review

A. Koineization and Enregisterment: Multi-Generational Processes

When speakers from different dialect backgrounds come into sustained contact, their varieties tend to converge toward a compromise form through the leveling of marked local features. Trudgill (1986) and Siegel (1985) describe this as koineization, a multi-generational process that progresses from initial variability through stabilization to functional expansion. The generational dimension is central: Kerswill (2002) notes that full convergence typically requires two to three generations, with younger speakers socialized in contact settings showing greater leveling than those whose formative years preceded intensive inter-regional mixing.

Linguistic convergence, however, does not automatically produce prestige. A variety can circulate widely without acquiring the ideological status of a recognized register. Agha (2007) uses the concept of enregisterment to describe the process through which a linguistic repertoire becomes socially recognizable and associated with meanings such as professionalism, modernity, or education. Such associations develop through speakers' recognition and evaluation of linguistic forms and may become increasingly available for explicit metalinguistic commentary. Johnstone et al. (2006), for example, show how features associated with Pittsburgh speech acquired greater social salience through media representation and metalinguistic commentary. Contact varieties may therefore become widely used without being evaluated in the same way across communities. Holes (2018) notes a similar tension in Gulf *koiné*s, which may be valued for intelligibility and modernity while also being criticized for reducing local distinctiveness.

B. Regional Variation in Prestige Consolidation: The Saudi Case

Saudi Arabia's linguistic landscape at the time of national unification in 1932 was sharply regionalized. Ingham (2006) identifies four primary dialect zones: Najdi in the central interior and north, Hijazi in the west, Eastern along the Gulf littoral, and Southwestern in the south. Low urbanization (estimated at 13% in 1932) and limited inter-regional mobility reinforced these boundaries, keeping regional and tribal affiliations linguistically encoded and socially salient (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Over the following eight decades, urbanization reached 81% by 2004, and large-scale internal migration created dialect contact at a scale the Kingdom had not previously experienced.

Al-Rojaie (2021) provided systematic perceptual evidence of an emerging nationally recognized variety. Hand-drawn dialect maps from 674 respondents across the major Saudi regions showed that 87% identified the Riyadh dialect as closest to an emerging national *koiné*, describing it as neutral, relatively free of regional accent, and associated with government, formal work, and modern urban life. This pattern was broadly consistent across regions, with one notable exception: middle-aged women from Hijaz positioned Hijazi Arabic as an alternative national model, citing its cosmopolitan history and association with the holy cities. This exception raises a question that the study was not designed to answer. Perceptual dialectology captures how respondents recognize and conceptualize dialect differences, but it does not directly test their evaluations of speech. Whether the Hijazi orientation toward a regional alternative also entails lower evaluation of White Dialect speech, or can coexist with positive evaluation of leveled speech, requires experimental perception data. So does the generational question: do prestige ratings differ across age groups, with older speakers potentially more attached to regional varieties than younger speakers with greater exposure to inter-regional contact?

C. Production Evidence and the Usage-Ideology Gap

Alkhamees (2023) examined production in an ethnographic study of young Qassimi speakers in Riyadh. Her participants consciously deployed leveled phonological and lexical features in inter-regional and professional settings, describing the White Dialect as "a passport to smooth communication" and "what you use when you want to sound professional." The study thus provides evidence that the White Dialect is used as part of speakers' sociolinguistic repertoires rather than recognized only as a folk category.

Production evidence, however, cannot settle questions of evaluation. Labov (2006) showed that lower-middle-class New Yorkers hypercorrected toward prestige variants in formal styles without rating those variants highest in conscious evaluations. Trudgill (1974) documented systematic under-reporting of non-standard usage, illustrating that what speakers do and what they value can diverge. Alkhamees's (2023) sample of young, mobile Qassimis cannot tell us how listeners from other regions, or older speakers with different patterns of inter-regional contact, evaluate White Dialect speech. Use and evaluative prestige therefore need to be examined separately.

D. Perception Methods and the Research Gap

Perception experiments have long been used to investigate language attitudes. Beginning with Lambert et al.'s (1960) matched-guise technique, such methods use listeners' evaluative responses to speech samples to examine attitudes that may not surface in direct metalinguistic questioning. Garrett (2010) reviews substantial evidence that evaluative responses and explicit beliefs do not always coincide. In Arabic sociolinguistics, Bassiouney (2015) showed that Egyptian listeners assigned Cairene Arabic high status while associating Upper Egyptian varieties more strongly with solidarity, illustrating how familiar varieties can receive different evaluations across social dimensions.

No experimental perception study has specifically examined the Saudi White Dialect. Al-Rojaie (2021) documents perceptual recognition, while Alkhamees (2023) documents use. Alhazmi (2023) applied a verbal-guise technique to

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examine 568 Saudi listeners' attitudes toward four major dialects and identified three evaluative dimensions (dynamism-status, dynamism-language, and solidarity). That study, however, excluded Hijaz because of its complex linguistic situation and did not specifically test the White Dialect as a supraregional variety. Existing research therefore does not show whether listeners assign comparable prestige to White Dialect speech across regions or generations. This question is particularly relevant given the regional pattern reported by Al-Rojaie (2021) and the different levels of inter-regional contact experienced across generations.

E. The Present Study: Alignment Hypothesis and Theoretical Stakes

The present study examines whether three lines of evidence point in a similar direction: the use of the White Dialect in inter-regional settings (Alkhamees, 2023), its perceptual recognition (Al-Rojaie, 2021), and its evaluation by listeners. Convergence across these three lines of evidence would be consistent with an ongoing process of enregisterment, whereas differences among them would suggest that use, recognition, and evaluation have developed unevenly. Examining regional and generational variation in prestige ratings and metalinguistic awareness can therefore provide a clearer account of the White Dialect's current sociolinguistic position and its possible association with a broader Saudi national identity.

III. Methodology

A. Research Design

This study uses a perception-based experimental design to test whether prestige ratings for the White Dialect differ significantly across four Saudi regions and three age groups, or whether they remain broadly comparable. The design is motivated by enregisterment theory, which draws attention to the social recognition and evaluation of linguistic forms across communities (Agha, 2007). Particular attention is given to whether Hijazi listeners and older speakers show lower prestige ratings, as the literature review suggests these groups are most likely to exhibit evaluative resistance.

B. Participants and Recruitment

A total of 519 respondents completed the survey. Eleven were excluded because their regional backgrounds fell outside the four target dialect zones (North, n = 6; unspecified or international, n = 5), leaving a final analytical sample of N = 508. Participants were distributed across Najd (n = 228, 44.9%), South (n = 128, 25.2%), Hijaz (n = 80, 15.7%), and Eastern (n = 72, 14.2%). The South region combines Asir, Al-Baha, and Jizan, treated as a single Southwestern dialect zone following Ingham (2006). The four regions correspond to those sampled in Al-Rojaie (2021), enabling direct comparison with prior perceptual dialectology findings.

Within each region, participants were stratified across three age groups: 18–30 (younger), 31–55 (middle-aged), and 56 and above (older). This stratification allows testing of whether generational differences in inter-regional exposure and linguistic ideology predict prestige assignment. Table 1 presents the full distribution. Inclusion criteria were: age 18 or above, native Arabic speaker, born or raised in the target region or with sustained regional ties, current residency in or strong connection to the region, and internet access sufficient to complete an online survey with embedded audio.

Participants were recruited over two months through the researcher's personal networks spanning universities, government agencies, and private businesses. Distribution relied on institutional email lists, WhatsApp groups, Twitter, and QR codes, with snowball sampling encouraged. Demographic information collected included age group, gender, education level, native dialect, and frequency of inter-regional contact. As a non-probability convenience sample recruited through personal networks and snowball sampling, the sample is not nationally representative; findings should be interpreted as evidence of evaluative patterns within the educated, digitally connected Saudi population rather than as nationally representative estimates.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT DISTRIBUTION BY REGION AND AGE GROUP

Region	18–30	31–55	56+	Total
Najd	67	122	39	228
South	19	78	31	128
Hijaz	18	42	20	80
Eastern	20	31	21	72
Total	**124**	**273**	**111**	**508**

C. Audio Stimuli

The study used two 27-second clips of naturally occurring White Dialect speech: one from a male speaker in a conversational professional context and one from a female speaker in a conversational everyday context, both identified as Najdi speakers in their thirties. Both clips exhibited leveled phonology, regionally neutral vocabulary, appropriate Standard Arabic borrowings, and broadcast-like prosody free from salient regional intonational patterns. Clips were normalized for volume and presented to participants in randomized order.

Prior to data collection, the clips were validated by seven Saudi experts: three sociolinguistics researchers specializing in Saudi Arabic varieties and four educated professionals with extensive inter-regional communication

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experience. All seven confirmed that the clips sounded neutral and leveled, that speakers' regional origins could not be reliably identified from the audio alone, and that the rating items were clearly worded. Estimated completion time of 6–7 minutes was also confirmed at this stage. One outcome of the validation was the addition of a prosody rating item, prompted by unprompted expert commentary identifying prosodic neutrality as a defining feature distinguishing the White Dialect from marked regional varieties.

D. Survey Instrument

The survey was administered in Arabic via Microsoft Forms and organized into four sections totaling approximately 30 items, with exact counts varying by branching logic. Estimated completion time was 6–7 minutes.

Section 1 collected six demographic items: age group, gender, education level, native region, native dialect, and frequency of inter-regional contact. Sections 2 and 3 presented the male and female clips respectively, each followed by five Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) assessing professional competence, modernity, formal appropriateness, behavioral intention to use the variety, and prosodic neutrality. Each clip section also included a four-point clarity rating, an open-ended geographic origin question, and a yes/no/unsure item on whether the speech sounded like a neutral shared variety. Section 3 used feminine grammatical agreement throughout to match the female speaker. Section 4 assessed metalinguistic awareness through five items with branching logic: accommodation behavior, conceptual awareness of a neutral variety, domain associations (shown only to those affirming conceptual awareness), term recognition, and a folk definition item (shown only to those reporting familiarity with the term).

Following Al-Rojaie (2021), who found that Saudi speakers explicitly associate the White Dialect with national identity through labels such as "formal," "official," and "national," the present study operationalizes national linguistic identity through listeners' conceptual awareness of a shared neutral variety (Q18), domain associations with institutional contexts (Q19), and term recognition of the White Dialect as a named national category (Q20). Together, these items assess whether listeners recognize and orient to the White Dialect as a marker of shared national identity, extending Al-Rojaie's (2021) qualitative evidence into a quantitative experimental framework. Complete survey items appear in Appendix.

E. Procedure and Ethics

Data were collected over two months through the researcher's personal networks across academic, government, and private sector contacts. Response numbers and demographic characteristics were monitored daily to ensure that regional and age group targets were being met. Participants gave informed consent electronically before accessing the survey, with information provided on study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time. No identifying information was collected. The study received ethics approval from Qassim University Research Ethics Committee. The survey was accessible on both mobile and desktop devices.

F. Data Analysis

Regional differences in prestige were tested through one-way between-subjects ANOVA with Region (four levels) as the independent variable and the prestige composite score (mean of four Likert items) as the dependent variable, run separately for male and female clips. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were checked using Shapiro-Wilk and Levene's tests respectively; where violated, Welch's ANOVA was reported. Omnibus F-tests are reported with partial eta-squared (η^2p) as the effect size measure. Post-hoc Tukey HSD comparisons were conducted across all region pairs as exploratory tests, with particular attention to the Najd vs. Hijaz contrast as the theoretically motivated comparison, regardless of omnibus significance. Internal consistency of the four prestige items was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with a target of $\alpha \geq 0.70$. Open-ended geographic origin and folk definition responses were independently coded by two raters using categories derived from pilot data. Inter-rater agreement was strong ($\kappa = 0.84$, $p < .001$), exceeding the target threshold of $\kappa \geq 0.70$. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion before final coding was applied.

Age effects were examined through a parallel one-way ANOVA with Age Group (three levels) as the independent variable, and Region × Age interaction effects through two-way ANOVA. Additional exploratory analyses included t-tests for gender effects, regression for inter-regional contact frequency as a prestige predictor, Pearson's r for the prosody-prestige correlation, and chi-square tests for metalinguistic awareness variation by region and age. A significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$ was applied throughout. Post-hoc Tukey HSD comparisons, which incorporate their own familywise error rate control, were treated separately and interpreted as exploratory given non-significant omnibus results.

G. Methodological Considerations

Four limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the prestige composite operationalizes evaluative orientation through self-reported Likert ratings rather than behavioral measures; listeners who assign high ratings may or may not adjust their own speech accordingly. Second, the study uses only two authentic speakers, which introduces stimulus-specific variability that limits generalization: findings reflect evaluations of these particular speakers rather than the White Dialect across its full range of realization. Pilot validation confirmed that both speakers were perceived as exemplifying White Dialect features, but future research should employ larger speaker samples or matched-guise

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designs enabling more controlled comparison. Third, the metalinguistic awareness items capture reported orientation rather than observed behavior; responses may be influenced by social desirability or by the survey context itself. Fourth, the sample reflects relatively educated, internet-connected Saudis from urban and semi-urban settings, and findings should not be generalized to rural populations, speakers with limited digital access, or age groups outside the 18-and-above range sampled here.

IV. Results

Results are presented in six subsections addressing the study's research questions and additional analyses. Prestige ratings for male and female clips are reported separately, based on composite scores derived from four items per clip. Internal consistency was high for both clips (male: $\alpha = 0.876$; female: $\alpha = 0.902$). Inter-item correlations ranged from .526 to .752 for the male clip (mean r = .640) and from .579 to .820 for the female clip (mean r = .698), indicating strong convergent validity. Item-total correlations ranged from .705 to .779 (male) and .732 to .836 (female), all significant at $p < .001$, confirming that each item contributes meaningfully to the composite.

A. Overall Prestige Ratings

Across all 508 respondents, White Dialect speech received moderate-to-positive prestige ratings. The female speaker received marginally higher overall prestige ratings (M = 3.60, SD = 1.17) than the male speaker (M = 3.44, SD = 1.19). Prosody ratings were similarly moderate: M = 3.61 (SD = 1.44) for the male speaker and M = 3.50 (SD = 1.41) for the female speaker. Across regions, ratings were generally highest for the educated/professional and modern/contemporary items, while willingness to use the variety in professional contexts tended to receive lower ratings (Table 2).

Table 2
Mean Prestige Ratings by Region (Male and Female Clips)

Item	Najd	Hijaz	South	Eastern
Male Clip				
Educated/professional	3.58 (1.31)	3.56 (1.26)	3.70 (1.45)	3.69 (1.16)
Modern/contemporary	3.49 (1.35)	3.49 (1.16)	3.68 (1.45)	3.68 (1.14)
Appropriate for formal settings	3.30 (1.44)	3.36 (1.39)	3.61 (1.51)	3.51 (1.51)
Would use in professional contexts	2.97 (1.41)	3.03 (1.35)	3.55 (1.53)	3.19 (1.38)
Prosodically neutral	3.55 (1.47)	3.35 (1.49)	3.71 (1.46)	3.94 (1.22)
Composite	**3.34 (1.17)**	**3.36 (1.06)**	**3.63 (1.31)**	**3.52 (1.11)**
Female Clip				
Educated/professional	3.76 (1.30)	3.85 (1.25)	3.86 (1.34)	3.75 (1.20)
Modern/contemporary	3.73 (1.29)	3.79 (1.19)	3.86 (1.33)	3.86 (1.18)
Appropriate for formal settings	3.33 (1.40)	3.48 (1.22)	3.75 (1.39)	3.44 (1.38)
Would use in professional contexts	3.19 (1.40)	3.25 (1.36)	3.67 (1.39)	3.18 (1.39)
Prosodically neutral	3.42 (1.42)	3.41 (1.41)	3.61 (1.45)	3.61 (1.32)

Note: Values are M (SD). Scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree.

B. Regional Variation in Prestige Ratings (RQ1)

One-way ANOVAs revealed no significant regional differences in White Dialect prestige ratings for either the male clip, $F(3, 504) = 1.968$, $p = .118$, $\eta^2p = .012$, or the female clip, $F(3, 504) = 1.610$, $p = .186$, $\eta^2p = .009$. Effect sizes were negligible in both cases. Given unequal variances for the male clip (Levene's $F = 3.252$, $p = .022$), Welch's ANOVA with Satterthwaite-adjusted degrees of freedom also yielded a non-significant result, $F(3, 202.94) = 1.785$, $p = .151$. A parallel Welch's ANOVA for the female clip was likewise non-significant, $F(3, 202.46) = 1.466$, $p = .225$.

Post-hoc Tukey HSD comparisons were conducted as exploratory tests. One nominally significant pairwise difference emerged: South-region listeners rated both speakers higher than Najdi listeners (male: M = 3.63 vs. 3.34, $p = .023$; female: M = 3.79 vs. 3.50, $p = .030$). This finding should be interpreted cautiously given the non-significant omnibus tests. All remaining pairwise comparisons were non-significant, including the theoretically motivated Najd–Hijaz comparison (male: $p = .877$; female: $p = .570$). Prosody ratings showed a marginal regional effect for the male clip, $F(3, 496) = 2.529$, $p = .057$, $\eta^2p = .015$, with Eastern listeners rating prosodic neutrality highest (M = 3.94, SD = 1.22) compared to Hijazi listeners (M = 3.35, SD = 1.49), though this did not reach conventional significance. No regional effect emerged for female clip prosody, $F(3, 496) = 0.725$, $p = .537$.

C. Age Group Variation in Prestige Ratings (RQ2)

One-way ANOVAs revealed no significant age-group differences in prestige ratings for either the male clip, $F(2, 505) = 1.153$, $p = .316$, $\eta^2p = .005$, or the female clip, $F(2, 505) = 0.746$, $p = .475$, $\eta^2p = .003$. Post-hoc comparisons also showed no significant pairwise differences across age groups for either clip. Table 3 presents prestige means by age group.

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TABLE 3
MEAN PRESTIGE COMPOSITE BY AGE GROUP

Age Group	Male Clip M (SD)	Female Clip M (SD)	n
18–30	3.57 (1.17)	3.49 (1.25)	124
31–55	3.42 (1.17)	3.63 (1.15)	273
56+	3.35 (1.23)	3.65 (1.13)	111

D. Region × Age Interaction (RQ3)

Two-way ANOVAs testing the Region × Age interaction yielded non-significant results for both the male clip, $F(6, 496) = 0.808$, $p = .564$, and the female clip, $F(6, 496) = 1.014$, $p = .415$. Neither Region nor Age main effects reached significance in the two-way models (male: Region $F(3, 496) = 2.324$, $p = .074$; Age $F(2, 496) = 1.691$, $p = .185$; female: Region $F(3, 496) = 1.394$, $p = .244$; Age $F(2, 496) = 0.430$, $p = .651$). Table 4 presents the cell means; no consistent interaction pattern is apparent.

TABLE 4
PRESTIGE COMPOSITE MEANS BY REGION × AGE (MALE CLIP / FEMALE CLIP)

Region	18–30	31–55	56+
Najd	3.54 / 3.52	3.34 / 3.52	2.96 / 3.44
Hijaz	3.54 / 3.57	3.27 / 3.48	3.39 / 3.85
South	3.66 / 3.47	3.56 / 3.79	3.81 / 3.97
Eastern	3.63 / 3.31	3.57 / 3.85	3.36 / 3.37

E. Exploratory Analyses: Gender and Inter-Regional Contact

Independent-samples t-tests revealed no significant gender differences in prestige ratings for the male clip (male respondents: $M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.15$; female respondents: $M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.27$; $t(506) = -0.380$, $p = .704$, $d = -0.036$) or the female clip (male respondents: $M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.16$; female respondents: $M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.19$; $t(506) = -1.726$, $p = .085$, $d = -0.166$). Simple regression analyses indicated that inter-regional contact frequency did not predict prestige ratings for either the male clip ($\beta = -.001$, $R^2 = .000$, $p = .991$) or the female clip ($\beta = -.054$, $R^2 = .002$, $p = .271$).

F. Speech Identification and Metalinguistic Awareness (RQ4)

Open-ended geographic-origin responses were coded into five categories: Najd/Riyadh, neutral/cannot tell, media/institutional, other regional, and tribal/Bedouin associations (inter-rater $\kappa = .84$). The most frequent attribution across both clips was Najd/Riyadh, followed by neutral/cannot tell and media/institutional associations.

Just over half of respondents (53.7%) reported adjusting their speech when communicating with Saudis from other regions (always: 13.0%; sometimes: 40.7%), while 46.3% reported little or no accommodation (rarely: 26.8%; never: 19.5%). Conceptual awareness of a shared neutral variety was high overall: 74.6% affirmed its existence, 15.0% denied it, and 10.4% were unsure. Regional differences in conceptual awareness were non-significant ($\chi^2 = 1.746$, $df = 6$, $p = .942$), whereas age differences were significant ($\chi^2 = 17.621$, $df = 4$, $p = .001$). Awareness was higher among respondents aged 18–30 (82.3%) than among those aged 56 and above (60.4%), with the 31–55 group between them (76.9%).

Term recognition showed a similar age pattern. Among all respondents, 61.0% knew the term *al-lahjah al-bayḍāʾ* and its meaning, 12.0% had heard it without knowing what it meant, and 27.0% had never encountered it. Regional differences were non-significant ($\chi^2 = 5.501$, $df = 6$, $p = .481$), whereas age differences were significant ($\chi^2 = 35.921$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$). The term was recognized by 79.0% of respondents aged 18–30, compared with 49.5% of those aged 56 and above; the corresponding figure for the 31–55 group was 57.5%. Among respondents who reported awareness of a neutral variety, media and television was cited most frequently as the domain where it is heard, followed by social media, public spaces, the workplace, and universities. Prosody ratings were positively correlated with prestige composite scores for both clips (male: $r = .567$, $p < .001$; female: $r = .626$, $p < .001$), indicating that listeners who perceived speakers as prosodically neutral also rated them higher on professional competence, modernity, and formal appropriateness.

V. DISCUSSION

This study investigated whether White Dialect prestige ratings vary across regions and generations. No significant regional or age differences were detected, and there was no Region × Age interaction. Metalinguistic awareness showed a different pattern. Younger speakers were significantly more likely to recognize the term *al-lahjah al-bayḍāʾ* and to affirm the existence of a shared neutral variety, despite broadly comparable prestige ratings across age groups.

A. Prestige Ratings Across Regions (RQ1)

No significant regional differences in White Dialect prestige ratings were found across Najd, Hijaz, South, and Eastern. A non-significant ANOVA cannot be taken as positive evidence of equivalence, but the broadly similar ratings across regions are consistent with the possibility that positive evaluations of White Dialect speech extend beyond its Najdi geographical base. Equivalence testing would be needed to establish regional similarity more directly.

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The Hijazi results are particularly relevant in light of Al-Rojaie (2021), where some middle-aged Hijazi women positioned Hijazi Arabic as an alternative national model in perceptual dialectology tasks. The prestige data in the present study did not show a corresponding regional difference: Hijazi listeners' ratings did not differ significantly from those of Najdi listeners for either clip (male: $p = .877$; female: $p = .570$). A regional preference expressed in a mapping task may reflect identity orientations that operate independently of how listeners evaluate speech when they hear it directly. The two methods therefore need not produce consistent results, and a regional orientation maintained in one context need not entail lower evaluation of supraregional speech in another.

South-region listeners gave somewhat higher ratings than Najdi listeners in the exploratory pairwise comparisons. Because the omnibus regional tests were non-significant and the effect sizes were small, this pattern should be treated cautiously. Further research would be needed to determine whether it reflects a replicable regional tendency.

Ratings of prosodic neutrality were positively associated with prestige ratings for both speakers (male: $r = .567$; female: $r = .626$, both $p < .001$). This association suggests that perceived prosodic neutrality forms part of listeners' positive evaluation of White Dialect speech. The present design, however, does not allow prosody to be isolated from other properties of the stimuli, so its independent contribution cannot be determined.

B. Age and Prestige Ratings (RQ2)

No significant age differences in prestige ratings emerged for either clip. Positive evaluation of the White Dialect was therefore not limited to younger respondents with potentially greater exposure to inter-regional contact. Respondents aged 56 and above gave ratings broadly comparable to those of the younger groups. This differs from the generational differentiation often reported during dialect contact and koineization, where younger speakers may lead linguistic accommodation or leveling (Kerswill, 2002). The cross-sectional design, however, does not establish when or how these evaluative patterns developed.

The age pattern becomes more informative when considered alongside metalinguistic awareness. Older respondents evaluated White Dialect speech similarly to younger respondents but were significantly less likely to recognize *al-lahjah al-bayḍāʾ* as a named category or to affirm the existence of a shared neutral Saudi variety. They respond positively to the White Dialect, in other words, without necessarily identifying it as such. This distinction is broadly compatible with Garrett's (2010) observation that evaluations of linguistic forms and explicit beliefs about language do not always coincide. In the present case, knowledge of the category and evaluation of the speech appear to be distributed differently across age groups.

C. Region × Age Interaction (RQ3)

No significant Region × Age interaction emerged for either clip. The data therefore provide no evidence that regional differences in prestige ratings are concentrated within particular age groups. This is relevant to the expectation that older Hijazi listeners might show lower evaluations of a Najdi-centered supraregional variety. Hijazi respondents aged 56 and above rated the male speaker at $M = 3.39$ and the female speaker at $M = 3.85$, and these ratings did not differ significantly from those of other regional-age groups.

The absence of the predicted interaction should still be interpreted cautiously. Failure to detect an interaction does not demonstrate that all regional-age groups evaluate the variety identically, particularly given the smaller sample sizes within some cells. Within the present sample, however, there was no statistical evidence of a distinct regional-generational subgroup with systematically lower White Dialect prestige ratings.

Young Najdi respondents and older Hijazi respondents, for example, did not differ significantly in their evaluations despite their different regional and generational backgrounds. Within the limits of the present sample, the results suggest that positive evaluation of White Dialect speech is not restricted to the demographic groups most closely associated with its geographical base or with greater inter-regional contact.

D. Metalinguistic Awareness: Generational Asymmetry (RQ4)

Metalinguistic awareness showed clearer age differentiation than the prestige ratings. Overall, 74.6% of respondents affirmed the existence of a shared neutral Saudi variety. This figure is broadly comparable to the recognition pattern reported by Al-Rojaie (2021) and suggests that awareness of a supraregional Saudi variety is fairly widespread in the present sample. No significant regional differences in conceptual awareness or term recognition were detected.

Age, however, was clearly associated with awareness. Conceptual awareness was higher among respondents aged 18–30 than among those aged 56 and above (82.3% vs. 60.4%), and the age difference in recognition of the term *al-lahjah al-bayḍāʾ* was larger still (79.0% vs. 49.5%). The 31–55 group fell between the two on both measures. These results indicate that explicit knowledge of the White Dialect is more widespread among younger respondents, even though their prestige ratings did not differ significantly from those of older respondents. Evaluation and explicit recognition therefore appear to be distributed differently across age groups.

This distinction is broadly compatible with Garrett's (2010) observation that evaluations of linguistic forms and explicit beliefs about language do not always coincide. Labov (2006) similarly observed that social evaluations of linguistic variants can be well established without corresponding levels of metalinguistic articulation. A similar distinction may be relevant here. Older respondents gave broadly similar prestige ratings to younger respondents, despite being less likely to recognize the White Dialect as a named variety. Their evaluations therefore do not appear to

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depend on explicit familiarity with the term *al-lahjah al-bayḍāʾ*. This pattern can also be considered alongside Trudgill's (1986) account of accommodation and leveling in dialect contact, although the present cross-sectional data do not establish how the evaluative pattern developed across generations.

Media and television were the most frequently reported domains in which respondents encountered a neutral variety, followed by social media, public spaces, the workplace, and universities. Media circulation may therefore provide one context in which the White Dialect and its social associations become familiar (Johnstone et al., 2006). The prominence of social media may also be relevant to the higher term recognition among younger respondents, although the present data cannot establish where individual respondents learned the term.

The relationship between prosodic neutrality and prestige adds another dimension to this pattern. Prosody ratings were positively correlated with prestige ratings for both speakers (male: $r = .567$; female: $r = .626$, both $p < .001$). This association suggests that perceived prosodic neutrality forms part of listeners' positive evaluation of White Dialect speech. It does not, however, establish prosody as the primary cue through which the variety is recognized or evaluated, since prosody was not manipulated independently of other properties of the stimuli.

E. Theoretical Implications

The present findings add an evaluative dimension to what is already known about the White Dialect. Alkhamees (2023) documented its use in inter-regional and professional settings, while Al-Rojaie (2021) found broad perceptual recognition of a Riyadh-centered national *koiné*. The present study shows that White Dialect speech also receives moderate-to-positive prestige ratings across the four regions examined. These three forms of evidence address different aspects of the phenomenon, but they point in a similar direction and are consistent with an ongoing process of enregisterment in which supraregional speech has acquired recognizable social value beyond its immediate geographical base (Agha, 2007). This does not mean that the process is complete or that the White Dialect has acquired the same social meaning for all speakers.

The age differences in metalinguistic awareness reinforce that qualification. Respondents across age groups gave broadly comparable prestige ratings, whereas younger respondents were much more likely to recognize the White Dialect as a named category. Broadly similar evaluations can therefore coexist with uneven knowledge of the variety's name and explicit conceptualization. Rather than treating use, recognition, naming, and evaluation as interchangeable evidence of register formation, the Saudi case suggests that these dimensions should be examined separately. This distinction is also compatible with Silverstein's (2003) account of indexical order, which draws attention to differences in the degree to which socially meaningful linguistic forms become available for explicit metapragmatic recognition.

The Hijazi findings add a regional dimension to this interpretation. Al-Rojaie (2021) found evidence that some Hijazi respondents maintained a distinct regional orientation and positioned Hijazi Arabic as an alternative national model. In the present study, however, Hijazi listeners did not give significantly lower prestige ratings to White Dialect speech than Najdi listeners. The prestige data therefore do not reproduce the regional contrast found in the earlier mapping task. This difference may reflect the different kinds of judgments elicited by the two methods. Identifying a variety as representative of one's region or as a possible national model is not necessarily the same as evaluating another variety negatively when it is heard. The findings suggest that a regional identity orientation need not entail lower evaluation of a supraregional variety. Regional and national linguistic orientations may coexist rather than operate as mutually exclusive alternatives.

This coexistence is relevant to the broader question of national linguistic identity in Saudi Arabia. The findings do not show that the White Dialect has replaced regional varieties as markers of identity, nor was the study designed to test such replacement. Rather, the broadly positive evaluations across the regions sampled suggest that a supraregional variety can acquire social value without requiring speakers to abandon established regional affiliations. In this sense, the White Dialect may provide an additional linguistic resource for interaction across regional boundaries rather than a substitute for regional dialects. This interpretation is consistent with the continued salience of regional varieties documented in previous Saudi sociolinguistic research (Al-Rojaie, 2021; Alhazmi, 2023).

These developments are occurring during a period of rapid institutional and social change associated with Saudi Vision 2030. Although the present study cannot determine whether those changes have directly influenced evaluations of the White Dialect, respondents reported encountering neutral speech in media, social media, professional settings, public spaces, and educational institutions. The relationship between these settings and the wider circulation of the White Dialect warrants further investigation through longitudinal and ethnographic research.

VI. Conclusion

This study examined whether Saudi listeners assign comparable prestige to White Dialect speech across regions and generations, addressing a question that prior production and perceptual dialectology research could not answer. No significant regional or age differences in prestige ratings were detected, and there was no Region × Age interaction. The anticipated pattern of lower Hijazi ratings, suggested by Al-Rojaie's (2021) perceptual dialectology findings, did not emerge in the present evaluation task. Considered alongside production evidence (Alkhamees, 2023) and perceptual recognition (Al-Rojaie, 2021), the prestige ratings documented here are consistent with the White Dialect acquiring broader social value across the regions examined.

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The relationship between evaluation and metalinguistic awareness adds an important qualification. Although no significant age differences in prestige ratings were detected, older respondents were substantially less likely than younger respondents to recognize the White Dialect as a named category. Broadly similar evaluations can therefore coexist with uneven metalinguistic awareness across generations. The Hijazi results likewise suggest that a regional identity orientation need not entail lower evaluation of a supraregional variety. Perceived prosodic neutrality was also positively associated with prestige ratings for both speakers, although the present design does not establish an independent effect of prosody on evaluation.

These findings are consistent with an ongoing process of enregisterment in which the White Dialect has acquired recognizable social value beyond the Riyadh-Qassim setting where it has previously been documented. At the same time, the generational difference in term recognition shows that explicit awareness of *al-lahjah al-bayḍāʾ* is unevenly distributed. Evaluation and explicit recognition should therefore not be treated as interchangeable indicators of a variety's sociolinguistic status. More broadly, the findings suggest that supraregional linguistic orientations can develop alongside, rather than necessarily replacing, established regional identities. To the extent that the White Dialect is becoming associated with a broader Saudi national identity, the present findings suggest that this process is reflected in broadly shared evaluative orientations rather than in uniform metalinguistic awareness across generations.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The sample reflects relatively educated, internet-connected, urban and semi-urban Saudis, and findings may not extend to rural populations or speakers with limited digital access. The cross-sectional design cannot distinguish generational change from age-grading effects in the metalinguistic awareness data. The use of only two speakers introduces stimulus-specific variability: findings reflect evaluations of these particular speakers rather than the White Dialect across its full range of realization. Future research should employ larger speaker samples or matched-guise designs to enable more controlled comparison across varieties.

APPENDIX. SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Complete items are presented below in the order administered. Items originally appeared in Arabic; English translations are provided for reference. Branching logic is indicated in brackets.

Part 1: Demographic Information

1. What is your gender? (Male / Female)
2. What is your age group? (18–30 / 31–55 / 56 and above)
3. What is your educational level? (Primary / Intermediate / Secondary / University / Graduate studies)
4. In which region did you grow up? (List of 11 Saudi regions plus Other)
5. Which dialect do you mainly speak? (Urban Qassimi / Riyadhi / Haili / Hijazi / Eastern / Southern / Other)
6. How often do you interact with Saudis from regions other than your own who speak different dialects? (Daily / Several times a week / Several times a month / Rarely / Never)

Part 2: Male Speaker Evaluation

Instructions: Listen to the following audio clip. You may listen more than once.

[Audio clip: 27-second male speaker, White Dialect, conversational professional context]

7. Please rate your agreement with the following statements (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree):
   - This speaker sounds educated and professional.
   - This speaker sounds modern and contemporary.
   - His way of speaking is appropriate for formal settings.
   - I would use this way of speaking in professional or formal contexts.
   - This speaker's way of speaking is free from regional or tribal intonational features.
8. How clearly can you understand the speaker in the audio clip? (Very clearly / Fairly clearly / Somewhat difficult to understand / Very difficult to understand)
9. Where do you think this speaker is from? You may name a specific region, city, or give a general description (e.g., Najd, cannot tell, neutral dialect). [Open-ended]
10. Does this speech sound like a neutral or shared variety of Arabic across Saudi regions? (Yes / No / Not sure)
11. How would you describe this person's way of speaking? For example: clear, eloquent, like television, modern, traditional. [Open-ended, optional]

Part 3: Female Speaker Evaluation

Instructions: Listen to the following audio clip. You may listen more than once.

[Audio clip: 27-second female speaker, White Dialect, conversational everyday context]

12. Please rate your agreement with the following statements (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree):
    - This speaker sounds educated and professional.
    - This speaker sounds modern and contemporary.
    - Her way of speaking is appropriate for formal settings.
    - I would use this way of speaking in professional or formal contexts.
    - This speaker's way of speaking is free from regional or tribal intonational features.
13. How clearly can you understand the speaker in the audio clip? (Very clearly / Fairly clearly / Somewhat

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difficult to understand / Very difficult to understand)

14. Where do you think this speaker is from? You may name a specific region, city, or give a general description. [Open-ended]
15. Does this speech sound like a neutral or shared variety of Arabic across Saudi regions? (Yes / No / Not sure)
16. How would you describe this person's way of speaking? [Open-ended, optional]

Part 4: Metalinguistic Awareness

17. Do you change the way you speak when talking with Saudis from regions other than your own? (Yes, always / Yes, sometimes / No, rarely / No, never)
18. Do you think there is a shared or neutral dialect that works across all Saudi regions? (Yes / No / Not sure)
19. [Shown only if Q18 = Yes] Where do you usually hear this neutral dialect? Select all that apply. (Media and television / Social media / Universities and educational institutions / Workplace / Public spaces such as airports and shopping centers)
20. Have you heard the term "*al-lahjah al-bayḍāʾ*" (the White Dialect) before? (Yes, and I know what it means / I have heard it but am not sure what it means exactly / No, I have never heard of it)
21. [Shown only if Q20 = Yes, and I know what it means] How would you describe the "White Dialect"? [Open-ended, optional]
22. Do you have any additional comments or observations about the two audio clips? [Open-ended, optional]

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