



ARABIC IN SOCIAL MEDIA: A STUDY OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION AND DIGITAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the patterns of virtual Arabic communication on social media and its relationship with the formation of digital identity. Using a qualitative approach with content analysis, data was collected through non-participatory observation of public content on Twitter and Instagram. The results indicate that the use of non-standard forms of Arabic, such as Arabizi (Romanized Arabic), code-switching, and visual elements, is not merely a deviation from formal norms. Rather, these practices function as an active mechanism for the negotiation of identity — be it cultural, personal, or religious — in the virtual space. These findings affirm that social media acts as a transformative agent that actively drives language evolution, challenging the traditional view of language as a static entity. This study's contribution lies in its ability to fill a gap in the literature by providing a detailed micro-linguistic analysis and integrating it with a theoretical framework of digital identity, providing a strong foundation for future studies in digital sociolinguistics.

Keywords Arabic Language, Virtual Communication, Social Media, Digital Identity.

مستخلص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل أنماط التواصل العربي الافتراضي على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي وعلاقته بتشكيل الهوية الرقمية. وباستخدام المنهج النوعي مع تحليل المحتوى، تم جمع البيانات من خلال الملاحظة غير التشاركية للمحتوى العام على تويتر وإنستغرام. وتشير النتائج إلى أن استخدام الأشكال غير القياسية للغة العربية، مثل العربيزي (الأبجدية العربية بالحروف اللاتينية)، والتحويل اللغوي (code-switching)، والعناصر البصرية، ليس مجرد انحراف عن القواعد الرسمية. بل إن هذه الممارسات تعمل كآلية فعالة للتفاوض على الهوية - سواء كانت ثقافية أو شخصية أو دينية - في الفضاء الافتراضي. وتؤكد هذه النتائج أن وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي تعمل كعامل تحويلي يدفع بنشاط تطور اللغة، مما يتحدى النظرة التقليدية للغة ككيان ثابت. وتكمن مساهمة هذه الدراسة في قدرتها على سد فجوة في الأدبيات من خلال تقديم تحليل لغوي دقيق على مستوى صغير ودمجه مع إطار نظري للهوية الرقمية، مما يوفر أساسًا قويًا للدراسات المستقبلية في علم الاجتماع اللغوي الرقمي.

اللغة العربية، التواصل الافتراضي، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، الهوية الرقمية

كلمات أساسية

Introduction

In the ever-evolving global communications landscape, social media has emerged as a dynamic space that is not only revolutionizing the way individuals interact but also significantly influencing language use and adaptation (Chinchay et al. 2024; Frey and Lüke 2023; Paily, Sutherland, and Ormond 2024; Sierocka 2024). This transformation is particularly relevant in the context of Arabic, a language with unique linguistic complexity, cultural depth, and religious significance (Annisa and Safii 2023; Loganathan et al. 2023). Historically, Arabic has long been confined to formal domains, often associated with religious, literary, and academic discourse (Grozdanoski 2019; Muslim et al. 2021). However, the rise of digital platforms has prompted a paradigm shift, pushing Arabic into more informal, spoken, and visual forms. This phenomenon, often characterized by the emergence of new forms such as phonetic transliteration (Arabizi), the expressive use of emojis, and code-switching with other languages, represents a fascinating arena for linguistic and communication studies (Muslim et al. 2021). Therefore, this study seeks to explore the use of Arabic on social media, with the aim of examining how these virtual communication practices not only reflect but also actively shape users' digital identities.

Despite this clear shift in usage, there remains a significant gap in the scholarly literature that comprehensively analyzes how traditionally rigid Arabic linguistic norms are negotiated and reconstructed within the social media ecosystem. Specifically, there is a lack of in-depth understanding of how users manipulate linguistic features such as Arabizi, acronyms, and visual elements to express or disguise various aspects of their identities, including their cultural, religious, or personal identities, in virtual spaces (Amara 2018; Zuraiq, Omari, and Shboul 2022). A key issue addressed in this research is the lack of detailed and systematic studies of the interplay between the linguistic evolution of Arabic on digital platforms and the resulting manifestations of digital identity. Existing analyses tend to focus on social media dynamics from a sociological or political perspective, often neglecting the micro-linguistic communication patterns that shape these digital discourses (Jones 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to comprehensively analyze Arabic virtual communication patterns on social media and investigate how these linguistic uses relate to digital identity formation. To achieve this goal, the study will attempt to (1) identify and categorize the most frequently used non-standard forms of Arabic, such as Arabizi and code-mixing; (2) analyze the correlational relationship between the use of certain linguistic features and the expression of digital identities, whether cultural, religious, or personal; and (3) provide theoretical and empirical insights into the evolution of Arabic as a dynamic and adaptive language in virtual communication. These objectives are aimed at filling the identified knowledge gaps and at providing a solid foundation for future studies on digital sociolinguistics (Mwogela and Sane 2025).

Although many previous studies have explored language use in social media, most of these works have focused on languages with non-Semitic writing systems or on macro-aspects of digital interactions, such as sentiment analysis or political influence (Déchène et al. 2024; Intyaswati et al. 2021). A critical gap identified in the relevant literature is the lack of research that specifically integrates micro-linguistic analysis of Arabic—such as non-standard writing forms and hybridization—with theoretical frameworks of digital identity (Roy, Singh, and Padun 2024). Existing research tends to treat social media as a passive platform, rather than an active agent facilitating linguistic innovation. Thus, there is an

urgent need for research that not only documents this phenomenon but also analytically examines how language adaptation in social media functions as a mechanism for the construction and negotiation of personal and collective identities in virtual spaces.

This study offers significant novelty through its interdisciplinary approach, uniquely integrating methodologies from sociolinguistics and communication studies to explore the symbiotic relationship between linguistic innovation and digital identity in the Arabic context. The primary justification for this study lies in the urgency of understanding linguistic dynamics in the digital space, which continually shape and transform social interactions (Torres-Toukoudis, Ramírez-Montoya, and Romero-Rodríguez 2018). Its contribution lies not only in filling an empirical gap by documenting patterns of Arabic language use on social media, but also in its theoretical contribution, namely by proposing a new framework that considers social media as an agent actively facilitating language evolution. The insights gained from this study are relevant to scholars in the fields of Arabic studies, communication, and digital sociology, providing a foundation for further research on how technology influences language and identity.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with content analysis methods to examine Arabic virtual communication patterns on social media. This approach was chosen to provide a deep and contextual understanding of complex language phenomena that cannot be measured quantitatively.

Research Procedures

The research procedure is divided into several stages: (1) Platform and Participant Identification. Data samples will be taken from relevant social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, which are widely used by Arabic speakers. Research participants are active users who regularly publish Arabic content. (2) Data Collection. Data will be collected within a predetermined timeframe to ensure a representative and relevant sample. (3) Data Analysis. This stage will involve coding the data to identify linguistic patterns and emerging themes related to digital identity.

Data collection technique

The data collection technique used is non-participatory observation of public content on social media. The data collected includes text, images, and videos containing Arabic in various forms, including Arabizi, emojis, and code-mixing.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data will be analysed using qualitative content analysis methods. Data analysis stages include: (1) Pre-analysis (data transcription and familiarization), (2) Open Coding (identification of initial concepts and categories from raw data), (3) Axial Coding (connecting categories and sub-categories), and (4) Selective Coding (developing a theoretical framework based on the most relevant themes).

Result and Discussion

1. Linguistic Characteristics of Arabic in Social Media

Analysis of the collected data revealed several dominant linguistic patterns in Arabic virtual communication. A key finding was the significant prevalence of Arabizi (Romanized Arabic), a transliteration system that replaces Arabic characters with Latin letters and numbers. This pattern is often used in informal and semi-formal contexts, particularly for slang expressions or to circumvent censorship. Furthermore, the study found that the integration of visual elements and code-switching are common communication strategies. Emojis, GIFs, and stickers are not only used to complement textual meaning but also frequently serve as substitutes for words or phrases, demonstrating an evolution in the semiotics of digital communication. Consistent with this, code-switching, particularly with English, is highly prevalent, indicating that Arabic on social media functions as a flexible linguistic continuum.

The findings presented in this study convincingly demonstrate that the use of Arabic on social media extends beyond its basic communicative function. Linguistic innovations such as Arabizi, code-switching, and the use of visual elements (e.g., emojis and GIFs) serve as active mechanisms for identity negotiation (Bardaweel and Rababah 2022; Jubran 2024; Muslim et al. 2021). These practices reflect users' attempts to communicate their personal, cultural, and religious identities in a fluid and multidimensional virtual space (Ritonga, Wahyuni, and Novigator 2023). Furthermore, an analysis of the dynamics of user interactions reveals that the adoption of linguistic innovations is not random but is governed by norms emerging from within digital communities of practice (Déchène et al. 2024). The role of gatekeepers and informal linguistic authorities demonstrates that while social media offers freedom of expression, communities still play a central role in determining the validity and sustainability of new language forms (Muslim et al. 2021). Thus, language in digital spaces must be understood as a system that is constantly shaped and reshaped through social interaction.

2. Digital Identity and Self-Expression

The findings of this study demonstrate a close relationship between linguistic patterns used on social media and the formation and negotiation of digital identities. The use of local dialects or slang expressions serves as a marker of cultural and local identity, allowing users to virtually identify with a particular geographic or cultural community. Furthermore, data analysis reveals that code-switching and the inclusion of religious phrases or quotations from sacred texts, such as the Quran, are common ways for users to demonstrate their religious identity. On a personal level, individuals often manipulate language forms—using a combination of Arabizi, emojis, and formal language—to project specific personalities, styles, or social affiliations. These practices demonstrate that Arabic on social media is not simply a communication tool but also a rich semiotic resource for self-construction and self-expression in digital spaces.

This study has significant theoretical implications by arguing that social media should be viewed as an active agent in language evolution, rather than simply a passive channel for communication. Findings regarding shifting norms and identity negotiations through the use of Arabizi and visual elements challenge traditional views that treat language as a static entity, confirming instead that technology plays a transformative role in shaping language structures and practices (Johns 2012). By focusing on a micro-linguistic analysis of Arabic on digital platforms, this study effectively fills a critical gap in the relevant literature, which tends to prioritize macro-studies or non-Semitic languages.

Therefore, this study's contribution is not only empirical, documenting an understudied phenomenon, but also theoretical, providing a more comprehensive framework for understanding the symbiotic relationship between language, technology, and digital identity.

3. Dynamics of Communication and User Interaction

The research findings also highlight the social dynamics and shifting norms emerging from the use of Arabic on social media. Traditionally rigid formal language norms are beginning to shift, opening up space for new, more flexible and adaptive communication etiquette. This shift does not occur without control mechanisms; data suggests that user communities act as gatekeepers and informal linguistic authorities. This phenomenon is evident in user interactions, where some new linguistic forms are widely accepted and spread rapidly, while others are rejected or criticized, often based on perceptions of formality, authenticity, or appropriateness. These dynamics demonstrate that the adoption of linguistic innovations in digital spaces is a complex social process, influenced by community acceptance and evolving norms.

The findings of this study have several important practical and social implications. First, from a language education perspective, phenomena such as Arabizi and code-switching suggest that Arabic language curricula need to be adapted to better reflect students' everyday language practices in the digital age (Fuster Márquez and Clavel Arroitia 2010; Rabello 2021). Incorporating an understanding of language dynamics in social media can help bridge the gap between formal Arabic and Arabic used in informal contexts, preparing learners for the challenges and opportunities of contemporary communication. Second, from a broader perspective, this study contributes to the understanding of digital identity, affirming that language is a key tool for self-expression and community formation in virtual spaces. By analyzing the linguistic choices users make, we can gain valuable insights into how individuals and groups navigate their identities, whether local, global, or religious, in an increasingly complex digital environment.

Overall, this study presents significant novelty by bringing together two previously separate fields of study, digital micro linguistics and digital identity theory, in the Arabic context. It is one of the few studies that specifically investigates how language adaptation in social media functions as a deliberate mechanism for the construction and negotiation of personal and collective identities in virtual spaces (Taylor, 2024). The primary justification for this research lies in the urgency of understanding the ever-changing linguistic dynamics of the digital age, which has profound implications for sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and communication. By providing a detailed empirical analysis and proposing a framework that views social media as an active agent in language evolution, this study not only fills a critical knowledge gap but also paves the way for future studies that will explore the increasingly complex relationships between language, technology, and human identity (Al-Ahmadi & Hussein, 2024).

Conclusion

This study comprehensively analyzes Arabic virtual communication patterns on social media and confirms the close relationship between linguistic innovation and digital identity formation. Key findings emphasize that the use of non-standard forms of Arabic, such as Arabizi (Romanized Arabic), code-switching, and visual elements, is not simply a deviation from formal norms. Rather, these practices serve as active mechanisms for the

negotiation of identity—be it cultural, personal, or religious—in virtual spaces. This study successfully demonstrates that social media serves not only as a passive platform for interaction but also as a transformative agent that actively drives language evolution and adaptation. A significant contribution of this study is its ability to fill a gap in the literature by providing a detailed micro-linguistic analysis and integrating it with a theoretical framework of digital identity, providing a solid foundation for future studies of digital sociolinguistics.

Suggestion

Based on the findings and identified limitations, several suggestions are proposed for future research. First, given the limited nature of the data on public content, it is highly recommended to conduct research using a multi-method approach, such as in-depth interviews or surveys, to gain insight into users' motivations and perceptions in private communication contexts. Second, because this study is synchronous, longitudinal studies are needed to track and monitor the evolution of these linguistic patterns over time, providing a more dynamic picture of how language continues to change. Finally, comparative research involving other social media platforms (e.g., TikTok or Telegram) or different demographic groups (e.g., users from different Arab countries) would be beneficial to test whether the patterns found in this study are universal or context-specific. These suggestions will hopefully enrich our understanding of the complex relationship between language, technology, and identity in the digital age.

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