

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Young Algerians' Linguistic and Cultural Identity

دور وسائل التواصل الإجتماعي في تكوين الهوية اللغوية و الثقافية للشباب الجزائري

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Abstract

The current study attempts to describe the impact of social media on EFL students in the department of English in Djillali Liabes University of Sidi Bel Abbes, in Algeria. The main objective is to explore the role of social media in shaping linguistic and cultural identity of younger Algerians. The quantitative and qualitative methods were used to examine the participants' language practices and cultural behaviours. For that, a group of first-year master students was selected as the subject of the study, with who a questionnaire was administered and observation with focus group were conducted to validate data. The main findings show that the participants admit both positive and negative impacts of digital platforms, and hence they confirm that some can struggle using correctly their native language and representing their cultural identity under some conditions, while others benefit from the myriad of cultures and from the diversity of languages they can meet online.

Key words: younger generation, social media, language, culture, linguistic identity, cultural identity

1. Introductory Section

Different transformations have occurred in human life during the last century because of modernisation, fast technological revolution and the wide use of social media. Worldwide communication has become so easier that people can join virtually any area they like at any time. Hence, new horizons towards multilingualism and multiculturalism have been built leading to the emergence of new online communities and new linguistic styles. This has led to different linguistic and cultural issues, mostly affecting young people's language and communication since they have always been the most active users of social media.

Today's world has become much more connected by new means of communication, serving as the easiest and quickest sources of information transfer, thoughts' exchange and peoples' virtual relationships. In Algeria, as well, social networking sites have attracted all categories of people, but mainly younger generations. Facebook, Instagram and Tiktok, are highly adopted in Algeria for diverse purposes, like creating and sharing content with others. What is more, over 70% of the Algerian population is under 30 years old, and 'Language and religion are the two factors of cultural identity in Algeria'¹. Therefore, it is very significant to explore the role of social media in shaping youths' linguistic and cultural identity.

On the one hand, young Algerians usually show their interests in discovering other cultures and learning foreign languages. On the other hand, many aspects of influence have been noticed in the last few years in their clothes, hairstyles, lifestyles and ways of thinking, as well as in their linguistic performance and communication styles through social media. This may reflect that some younger Algerians contend with preserving their identity within the haze of what is exposed digitally. Thus, it is significant to investigate the factors that can endanger the young Algerians' identity, highlighting the impact of social media on their language and culture. In view of that, two main objectives were determined as follows:

1. Identify the impact of social media on youths' language practices and preferences, and hence on their linguistic identity.
2. Investigate the effects of social media on youths' cultural identity, highlighting the duty to preserve their native belongingness and the need to attend modernization.

More focus is given to the description and the analysis of the linguistic patterns and communication practices and the cultural behaviours of young Algerians in their interaction

¹ [01-EuroMedJeunesse-Etude_ALGERIA-090325.pdf](#)

with their peers on social networking platforms. Thus, the purpose of this study lies in depicting the role of social media in shaping young Algerians' linguistic and cultural identity. In view of that, two research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What effect does the excessive use of social media have on the language and culture of younger Algerians?
2. To what extent do social media contribute in shaping today's youth's linguistic and cultural identity?

In relation to the above-stated research questions, it can be hypothesised first that the major effect of social media on language is the use of new codes full of symbols, Emojis, and special vocabulary, without respecting the basic linguistic and communicative patterns, while on culture, it lies in the foreign behaviours adopted by many younger Algerians and loss of some native cultural norms. For the second hypothesis, it may be assumed that social media may have less or no impact on some younger Algerians' identity, while it can be deeper on others, mainly when it comes to language, gender, rituals, and some cultural practices.

A combination of an understanding of the basic concepts and a review of some related literature should be provided first to better identify the main dimensions of social media that contribute in shaping the cultural and linguistic identity of young people in response to today's digital modern world. After that, the practical section will elucidate the data collection procedure and analysis, in relation to the Algerian context, to better answer the research questions, achieve the objectives of the study, and draw conclusions as a final step.

2. Theoretical Framework

The way people communicate today has become more electronic due to the large expansion of social networking services, and hence, it has experienced rapid transformations in terms of linguistic and communicative patterns and cultural norms. Therefore, the key concepts in this paper are defined.

2.1. Definition of Language

Language is usually defined as the means of human interaction, used to express one's ideas, beliefs or feelings as well as to spread one's knowledge, culture or traditions. This breeds the concept of social institution and the aspect of group that require an intelligible tool of communication. Hence, language is basically a significant element in building

society, as the Welsh proverb puts it (cited in Crystal, 2003, p.37), 'A nation without a language is a nation without a heart'. Language retells the fascinating story of human beings and reports contemporary life. Besides, it does not only serve contact but it reflects human existence in all its facets, as described by Berque (cited in Bouali, 2012, p.1), 'A language is not a means of communication, it is a way of being'.

It is noteworthy that language is a homogeneous set of systems that function generally through sounds, words, rules and structures in relation to a set of particular social and cultural norms. However, the contact among generations within the same society or individuals from different societies often leads to the exchange of traditions, cultures, languages, and the adaption or adoption of new linguistic patterns and cultural practices, which can breed new communication styles when the influence is strong. This can interpret that since language functions as a means of human interaction, related to strong social and cultural dimensions it is dynamic and subject to synchronic and diachronic change, under specific circumstances.

2.2. Culture Defined

Culture is defined linguistically in Cambridge dictionary as the way of life of a particular people, especially as shown in their ordinary behaviour and habits, their attitudes toward each other and their moral and religious beliefs. It refers to a set of social norms and values created and shared by a group of people living together in the same area, and sharing a common history, language, and religious beliefs. Origins, traditions, customs, life styles, ideologies, education, gender, and age are other standards taken into consideration in many studies as components of culture.

According to the English anthropologist Edward Tylor (1871), "Culture ...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"². In view of that, culture consists of definite and indefinite patterns related to human practices and beliefs. It can be inherited or learned, as it can be particular to one person or shared by a particular group of people. Since culture is related to human practices and beliefs, it is flexible and can be subject to change, mainly when having contacts with other people. The more individuals are influenced by others, the more their culture change.

² From Britannica – <https://www.britannica.com/topic/culture> (Accessed on 26-03-2024)

2.3. Identity Defined

Identity is usually defined as who someone is or what something is characterised by in relation to others. It is the way to identify someone or something. Identity refers to a mirror reflecting the self and who a person is. It is defined by Giddens (2005) as ‘the code through which an individual can identify himself in his relationship with the social and cultural group to which he belongs, and through which he is recognised as belonging to that group,’ (cited in M. Radwan, 2022, p. 3).

It is worth to note that it has been noticed that identity as a general concept is usually confused with native identity or social identity, and even used interchangeably. This is because one cannot be identified without referring to a group. Furthermore, language and culture are other standard measures to distinguish individuals, and their change can influence identity. Linguistic identity and cultural identity are also concepts that need be put more explicit in this research paper.

2.3.1. Linguistic Identity

Language has always been described as a marker, a key component and a symbol of identity. It is mostly seen as the character that makes the Algerian different from the Tunisian or the Mexican from the Spanish, for example. Through language, people do not only express their ideas and feelings, but become recognized and distinguished from others. It is commonly agreed that individuals’ qualities are dimensions taken into account in shaping the meaning of ‘identity’. However, in sociolinguistics, identity is commonly related to language and community. Therefore, once a language holds the story of an identity and symbolises it.

Hence, the position of language should be very significant in the hearts of its speakers. The native and national languages are tightly related to identity for the feeling of the belonging to the community of the speakers of that language. Nelson Mandela declared in one of his talks that in his way that ‘if you talk to [*a man*] in his own language, that goes to his heart.’³ In fact, linguistic identity is a matter of an emotional relationship, expected to grow between people and their language. The more people respect their language and feel

³ John Worne (Director of Strategy – British Council), in a report about ‘Languages for the Future – Which languages the UK needs most and why’ (2013), quotes these remarkable words of Nelson Mandela. Retrieved from www.britishcouncil.org (06/12/2015 at 19:22)

inseparable from it, the more they value it and work on preserving and developing it, and hence they feel the real sense of their linguistic identity.

Some studies see that language is the symbol of identity, unity, social patrimony, and speech community, and so language and identity are usually related, mostly if dealing with identifying a social group. According to Cooper (1989, p.133), there is an urgent need to protect it, mainly 'when linguistic variants serve as markers of our identity, we may be loath to abandon them, particularly in the name of a soulless efficiency.' Every language has its specific sounds, signs and systems, particularly known by some communities of speakers but not by others. Such characteristics make a language properly associated to a community or to a group of people said to be its native speakers.

2.3.2. Cultural Identity

Cultural identity refers to that feeling of having a different culture that makes at the same time part of the world's myriad of cultures, and is independent and distinguished from the rest. It is viewed as the norms that distinguish individuals within the same society or from others in a different social group. Cultural identity can be created by the language, beliefs, and social arena of a group of speakers, since entire societies may define themselves based on their language or dialect, social and religious practices. Hence, people can have common morals and features and share the same cultural norms and/or language.

Culture is dynamic since human beings change due to different internal and external factors. Global events, language contact, immigration, technology, education and other factors can contribute to culture change. It is noteworthy that cultural identity is stronger than being easily transformed or lost, because it relies on many constant components, such as social identity, language and religion. However, human culture can be affected under some circumstances that result in adapting new cultural norms. In most of the cases, this can occur if the principles of human cultural identity are not well constructed, in critical age, or when the influence comes from another strong culture, and this is the central question of this paper.

3. Discussion of the Context of the Study

Before describing the methodological and practical framework, it seems significant to define the context of the study. Since the topic turns around the role of social media in shaping the younger generations' linguistic and cultural identity, a description of the scope of

the study is required, in which the researcher attempts to clarify why social media, and why the cultural and linguistic identity of younger generations, highlighting the Algerian context.

3.1. Why Social Media

Social Networking Sites have played a very important role in connecting people throughout the world, and allowed individuals to create their own virtual communities or deal with others from different societies, but to have a pleasure or fit a desire many times. Today, people share their real and unreal life details through social media with other users all over the world, regardless to their origins, religion, and culture. Facebook, Instagram and other web-based services provide people with a sophisticated digital system that create virtually any type of information and choose to make it public or private, i.e. shared only with a list of friends. Hence, many web users make their own communities based on their own interest, field, needs, profession, and the like.

However, it is worth noting that not all web users know how to filter what corresponds appropriately their cultural and linguistic identities, mainly when it comes to younger generations, regarding their large exploitation of social media. Since this latter has become a central means of communication in people's daily life, many transformations in life styles, human habits, cultural principles, social aspects, and even language practices have been noticed. Social media have taken the lion share in people's connection and communication today, standing for one of the major causes of social, linguistic and cultural change, notably with younger generations.

3.2. Why Cultural and Linguistic Identity

Language is commonly considered as a marker and a key component that symbolises cultural identity, while the latter is seen as the identification of social features that distinguish a group of people from another. Identity is defined in Oxford 'The fact of being who or what a person or thing is.'⁴ Hence, the human qualities are seen as dimensions that shape identity, mainly when dealing with the same social group. Language and culture are always seen as inseparable in different fields, like in sociology, anthropology, and linguistics. The former is the core stone in shaping one's identity and the latter is the fact of belonging to a particular

⁴Definition of identity in English by Oxford Dictionaries <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/identity>

culture, mostly the native one. However, both language and culture vary individually and socially, as they are subject to change through time.

While language is a means of human interaction, used to communicate ideas, emotions and desires in a particular area, culture refers to that complex whole which shapes human beliefs, morals, habits, customs, social norms and knowledge and any other features in society (Edward Taylor, 2005). Accordingly, language is used to express culture and it serves as a fundamental means that shapes human social norms, language behaviours, origins, traditions, customs, and religious beliefs. Therefore, people's culture can be affected by their linguistic and communicative interactions. The more people interact with one another, or learn other languages, the more their culture is exposed to change, because once the human brain gets systematically the new linguistic and communicative rules of a language, it is affected in parallel by some of the cultural norms of its speakers.

On the one hand, language identity is usually a symbol of cultural identity, and hence, they are associated. On the other hand, cultural identity is the overall system that reflects social values, characters, beliefs, and behaviours of people in a community, and hence, it is can be flexible for the flexibility of its components. It is worth stating that although each social group is characterized by its homogeneity and unique cultural and linguistic identity, reality retells that many factors impact on both language and culture, and hence on linguistic and cultural identity. Last but not least, people's native language is the core stone in building their identity and their culture is the basic component that makes them identified and distinct. Therefore, cultural and linguistic identities are tightly associated and what affects the former can affect the latter and vice-versa.

4. Language Use in Social Networking Sites

People have become familiar with the different types of social media, shifting from service to service, and maybe traveling virtually from a place to another in a very short time. They interact on social media with others, from similar or different origins, using their language sometimes or a mixture of languages in other times, but generally neglecting the appropriateness of linguistic and communicative norms. Language as the major means of human communication is used commonly to identify one's origin, express one's ideas or feelings, and make relations with other people. Hence, 'Language is a type of social behaviour,' as Ferdinand de Saussure (1906, p.20) puts it.

It is worth to note that the change in human cultural and linguistic behaviours can be personal, biological, regional or national, even though there are some major norms that can be shared homogeneously among individuals who make one society. In addition, the more individuals build new relations and discover new languages and cultures, the more they adopt diverse perspectives and ways of thinking, because ‘Diversity breeds diversity,’ (Crystal, 2003, p.53). However, younger generations are more exposed to change, as they make the most active users of social media, and hence they are usually affected in many societies.

Furthermore, the language use that has emerged on social media communication is characterised by its unique style and informal structure, denying the basic fundamentals of grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. Besides, many cultural aspects, morals and ethical behaviours are disregarded in various contexts. In Arabic-speaking counties, like in Algeria, and in many other countries in the world, many people do not care language to use and how to communicate. Access to these platforms has exposed users to a new linguistic code based on short texts, abbreviations and memes used sometimes without knowing their real meaning. Using Arabic, for instance, on social media has affected its real aspect and characteristics, in both its written and oral forms, and so is the case with many languages.

Therefore, language use in social media has known different transformations. Accordingly, the basic linguistic and communicative patterns of almost all languages have been affected due to the mutual influence, rapid spread of short text messaging abbreviations and symbols, the role of influencers, and many other factors in digital media. Being open to the world through smartphones can provide all possibilities to discover any language or any culture in the world, but being influenced by others can open all doors of cultural and linguistic change, both positive and negative. However, identity change cannot be that simple, except by the involvement of some particular factors, like age.

5. Methods and Research Procedure

The mixed-methods approach was followed to conduct the present research, using basically qualitative and quantitative methods. Direct observation, questionnaire and focus group served as the major research tools to collect relevant data, in order to achieve the research objectives and answer the research questions. The sample population consisted of thirty (30) first-year EFL master students of linguistics, in the department of English language in Djillali Liabes University of Sidi Bel Abbes, in Algeria.

The first tool was used by the researcher in her Language and Culture lectures. The module was taught once a week all along the academic year 2023–2024. Besides, previous personal observations on second-year and third-year undergraduate classes in Oral Expression and Comprehension were the first motive to do this research, because students themselves often declared the challenges they face to preserve their cultural identity and the difficulties they encounter to use their native language and other languages appropriately. Having many opportunities to discuss with master students different topics related to language and culture helped the researcher use focus group, as a second research tool, to depict how social media affected youth linguistic and cultural identity.

The questionnaire was administered to thirty students asking them about their language preferences in their daily interaction on social media, and whether they felt any change in their personal culture. However, Focus group was structured systematically for more validity, and data were gathered from discussions on several topics related to language and culture. From the obtained findings, it is expected that this paper will provide a clear image and deep understanding of the challenges faced by young Algerians exposed to the world's languages and cultures via social media, in the era of modernisation, and of the impact of social networking sites on youth linguistic and cultural identity.

6. Results and Interpretation

The major data of this study were collected from the questionnaire, as well as the direct observation conducted during the academic year 2023-2024, exactly in classes of language and culture. Focus group was added for more validity and reliability. Data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Questions of both the questionnaire and focus group were based majorly on similar aims. They meant to describe students' language preferences, frequency of the use of social media, and any impact on their linguistic and cultural identity. The most relevant data are described and discussed in the following sections.

6.1. The Impact of Social Media on Language Use

When asked about language preferences, responses to the questionnaire revealed that most students (exactly, 93,33%) preferred to use short text messages, symbols and emojis when connecting in social media, for not being guided with rules of spelling and grammar. Moreover, they also explained that they found it quicker and easier than writing full appropriate sentences. Whereas when asked about the language mostly used in students' daily

oral language practices, presented in a single-select Multiple Choice Question (MCQ), Algerian Arabic received the top rank with the highest percentage of 46,66%, Arabic-French-English with 20%, English with 23,33%, and the rest (Standard Arabic and French) with small percentage. However, when asked which script they used to write Arabic in social media, all the participants, except one, confirmed that they mixed Arabic with Latin scripts, but mostly the latter even when writing Arabic.

All the respondents stated that they favoured using symbols or short text, and replacing words and expressions in abbreviations, often created individually. Most of them, exactly 86,66%, confirmed they that social media highly impacted on their language, justifying by their lack of proficiency in Arabic. As for the frequency of their use of social media, again all the students confirmed their addiction to digital platforms, and the long time they spent following their favourite influencers, or checking their accounts, followers, likes and shares. Furthermore, they also confessed that most of their time was wasted on Facebook, Instagram and Tiktok just to watch a show, give a comment or share news.

Observation and focus group were done in parallel and confirmed the same data. From the observation, the researcher noticed that students' language use on social media influenced their oral style. First, discussions with some students on different topics showed a lack of self-confidence, excessive use of gestures, hesitation, and in some cases communication breakdown. Another negative impact was seen in students' preference to keep silent, because of their lack of proficiency, even when giving them a space to express themselves in Arabic, either because of the lack of vocabulary, their inability to filter the exact words and expressions, their tiredness for the long time they spent in front of screens.

It is noteworthy to say that some students even though they relied a lot on posted and shared knowledge on the net, they struggled to take part in class discussions, but some of them were able to develop their language and improve their communication skills, and learn more foreign languages, notably English, Korean and Turkish. Some of the respondents showed that social media helped them get more contacts and this encouraged them be more socialised and helped them in face-to-face communication. However, what was commonly proved was the students' interest in being integrated into the virtual global community. The researcher's observation and focus group findings could be attributed to the questionnaire's data, and all of them revealed that the language of younger generations has become affected both positively and negatively.

In view of that, one of the most impacts of social media on language is the violation of vocabulary and grammar rules. Most of younger users today do not care about fundamental linguistic rules, and hence the language they use to interact on social media seems to be like strange codes, but deciphered exclusively by the community of speakers who understand them. Such codes differ up to the age, origins, and interests of the group of speakers; for example, the style used by students of English to communicate on social media is different than the one used by students of French or Arabic, or by adolescents, for instance. Students also revealed that most of their time on Facebook, or other platforms, was devoted to fun or leisure and not to studies.

Therefore, differences of language use have led to the emergence of a large variation of virtual speech communities, and so of different language styles. This can interpret peoples' carelessness about the value of preserving correct and formal language style. Younger generations do no more pay enough attention to correct language, but tend to mix languages within the same conversation; this implicates their negligence of communicative and linguistics rules. Hence, this can result in ill language styles, and gradually to the emergence of new virtual codes more favoured in use than ordinary languages, as it can make people far from their original language.

6.2.The Impact of Social Media on Culture

However, when asked about the influence on their culture, 65,33% of the respondents saw it as positive, while 33,33% of them said it was negative, and a minority stayed neutral. Most of the students described the positive impact on their personality and culture construction. They reported that social media helped them enrich their culture. It served as a free accessible space for self-expression and self-development. Most of the respondents owned different accounts on which they posted their real and unreal details of life, on the footsteps of many influencers on social media. They said that social media facilitated cultural interactions on the one hand, but transcended cultural and geographical boundaries.

When asked about the extent of the influence of social media, their answers varied up to their situations. Most of them declared having a problem of cultural stereotypes, identity conflict and possible confusions in relation to social ethical practices, rituals and beliefs, and national identity. They all agreed on the positive promotion of cultural diversity and at the same time on the danger of cultural conflicts. When asked to retell their stories of challenges or dangers of social media, one of the students confirmed being negatively influenced by

social media. He reported that through online discussion about nature and human existence, he became atheist, and lost his beliefs which made him face great confusions and loss of self-confidence during more than three years. He added that in another discussion he regained his belief and trust in Allah and repented but he regretted being unable to save his friends from such movement.

Consequently, this can interpret that users of social media, not only younger generations, may face many challenges, but when it comes to a certain age of confusions, it can be clear why youth are more exposed to dangers of cultural shock or cultural loss, raising here the issue of age to note that the identity of individuals at earlier ages can be more endangered. That is to say speaking about children or adolescents might be more problematic than considering youth. However, the role of parents in controlling their children until the age of adolescence has usually been active unlike when they become mature. The factors of control, filter, the feeling of freedom and independency may multiply the danger of social media on the cultural identity of younger generations.

6.3.The Role of Social Media in Shaping Linguistic and Cultural Identity

Exploring the possible danger of social media on the linguistic and cultural identity of Algerian younger generations revealed that social media play a central role in the formation of younger generations' identity. After discussing data in the previous sections in this paper, it has become clear that encountering different social media platforms could be of both negative and positive impacts. The respondents showed more comfort with the use of quick short texts without caring about linguistic rules; i.e. a language based on signs and symbols written in foreign scripts seemed to compete with their native language.

Moreover, different cultural behaviours were acquired by younger generations, facing problems of violation, culture shock, imitation, extremism and many others. However, the findings showed that the positive impacts of social media could not be denied, notably learning foreign languages, enriching one's cultural competence and developing one's understanding of different aspects of life. The findings of the present study indicated that most youth use social networks very frequently, in most of the cases joining groups' discussion about issues up to their interest, sharing news or experiences or following influencers. In fact, they could not deny that their language use on social media has impacted on their daily language practices, and that some cultures they discovered influenced their

cultural behaviours. They confirmed that they faced issues with self-esteem and self-worth, due to comparing unfavourably themselves to the seemingly perfect life styles portrayed by others on social media, though not real in most of the cases. Therefore, social media plays a significant role in shaping the identity of young individuals.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The spread of social networking platforms in recent years has its impacts on people's communication and cultural aspects. Although social media provide easy connection with the world, they play a central role in reshaping ultimately the sense of belonging and identity. Digital media have encouraged global communication and exposed today's younger generations to different languages and cultures, because various societies are represented through billions of institutional and individual posts shared on social media platforms, mostly on Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. In fact, following a large variety of digital content is the first motive that drives the young people to be engaged in a journey of searching sometimes for the convenient source and in other times just running after fitting one's needs or meeting special interests. As a result, the young people's identity has become endangered and exposed to disorder or to loss in some situations. Since language is part of human nature, behaviour, thoughts, and daily life in general, and culture represents one's belonging and nativity, they must be protected. Without language, people cannot enjoy life, know each other or discover the world, and without culture, man cannot be oneself.

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