White dialect Versus White Identity New Media and the crisis of Arab cultural identity: A qualitative study

Thouraya Snoussi

Associate professor, College of Communication, UOS
Email: tsnoussi@sharjah.ac.ae
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6457-2265

Abstract

This paper embodies a qualitative research to identify features of the Arab cultural crisis and mechanisms of preserving its particularities within the new media from universities professors affiliated with universities in the Arab region. The results of in-depth semi-structured interviews revealed that Arab new media users seem to feel a deep gap between the export of technology and consumer societies; this negatively affects their psyche and may push them to reconsider their original identity, creating what might be called a "white identity" as a kind of hybrid character, transcending the forms of local and regional values, but deriving from them features of a new, globalized, and unifying culture. To overcome the risk of losing authentic Arab identity features, interviewees advocate judicious use of cyberspace: Openness while maintaining the compass of authenticity; participants in this research paper call the intellectual elite to play a significant role in raising awareness and consolidating Arab cultural identity features through new media.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Identity Crisis, Globalization, New Media, Arab identity

Introduction

New media created an alternative world based on the free and unlimited exchange of information, making the world a "small global village," as mentioned by Marshall McLuhan in his talk on technological determinism. The virtual space erased the boundaries between cultures, but the gap between societies widened; Cultural hegemony has exacerbated the identity crisis in the Arab region, as young people who flock to online cultural, artistic, and media materials have become confused. This situation inevitably calls for a research move to accurately monitor the features of the crisis and come up with a set of solutions to mitigate the impact of the overlapping cultural tide on Arab youth.

Literature Review

Concept of the "Cultural Identity"

Hall (1976) shows at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity: the first position defines cultural identity in terms of one common culture, a kind of 'collective one true self, hidden within many people. Other "selves," more superficial or artificial, are shared by people who have a common history and ancestors. Thus, cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" and "existence"; it is not beyond place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere and have a history, but they are constantly transformed. Culture is a process that reflects the phenomenon's complexity (Subtil, 2014); Karjalainen (2020) stressed the importance of cultural identity on distinguishing the specificity of a particular community among its people. According to her, a distorted view can significantly impede understanding and Communication with citizens of a specific country. Today, there is a renewed interest in the complex and multidimensional process of identity building in transnational and cross-

cultural workplaces. Since cultural identity is not innate but learned, it may be constructed or reconstructed within a multicultural context. For example, Bicultural people can use different cultural identity strategies to adapt to multicultural and global work contexts. Therefore, new media help in re-sculpting identities' features and cultures.

Cultural identity in the context of New Media

McLuhan (1962) argued that ICTs lead to cultural change and bring about a tightly interconnected world with an integrated consciousness: The "global village"; Hall (1994) stated that we are not able to study cultural values in isolation; context plays an important role. McDowell (1997) stressed that having a nationality and a sense of place has been changed and reinvented as our view of the world has changed with technological uses and virtual space development. The social impact of the virtual context, as pointed out by Manuel Castells, is that global networks of computers and people transform all cultural and civilizational landmarks, such as business, politics, psychology, romance, and entertainment; people think and act in a "network community" (Markku Wilenius, 1998). In this context of new media, we encounter a form of culture that is not associated with any place or period. It is without context, an actual mixture of disparate components drawn from everywhere and nowhere, born on the vehicles of the global communication system (Smith, 1990).

According to Chen et al. (2010), the technical convergence directly affects the construction and development of cultural identity; the emergence of new media and globalization breaks through traditional time and space and challenges the meaning of cultural identity. Besides, Singh (2010) notes that the public is no longer an intrinsic component of a particular state or political/economic system but instead has a global public sphere as a space to act upon, giving shape to the concept of 'Vasudev Katumpkam' as seen by Mahatma Gandhi. Thus, the whole world is like a family or a "global civil society." In the meantime, the author asserts that new media is the root cause of cultural change processes; the author highlighted that technological developments lead to the emergence of a different culture, and therefore considered a threat to indigenous values; which

means the rise of "identity crises." Jensen (2011) shows that exposure to diverse cultures leads to the complexity of cultural identity development; he stated that the opening of pluralistic development paths to form a cultural identity. He added that cultural gaps might occur.

To sum up, previous studies dealt with the concept of cultural identity and linked it to many temporal and spatial contexts. Some studies also focused on technological development and the use of the Internet and its role in modifying individual and collective identity, the parallelism of virtual and real identities, and its impact on society. This research will focus on the Arab cultural identity within the virtual world to examine the effects of new media on its characteristics and ensure its stability within the globalized virtual world, full of similar and contradictory cultures and values.

Research Problem

This study attempts to identify the features of the Arab cultural crisis and the mechanisms for preserving its peculiarities in the new media from the perspective of university professors in the Arab region.

Research Questions

Research questions and concerns related to the topic under study are:

o   Is it possible to talk about a contemporary crisis of Arab cultural identity?
o   How to build a solid Arab identity within the new media?

Research Purposes

The research aims to identify the characteristics of the cultural identity crisis in the Arab context and ways to get out of it, as well as to stave off the specter of cultural alienation from Arab users of new media and weaken the threat of cultural dependency.

Research method

This qualitative research is based on 33 in-depth electronic interviews with academicians from

Arab universities, using several programs and applications that suit each interviewee, such as Messenger, Skype, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. The author conducted interviews from 1 to July 30, 2021; The sample members were chosen from the researcher's Facebook and Twitter friends list that the author knows personally to avoid fake profiles.

Table1. Sample composition

Number	Country of residence	Specialization	
8	Tunisia	Social sciences	
		Information	and
		Communication	
		Cinematography	
6	Algeria	Information	and
		Communication	
		Audio-visual arts	
4	Morocco, West, sunset	Sociology	
6	The United Arab Emirates	history	
		Sociology	
		Information	and
		Communication	
4	Kingdom Saudi Arabia	Information	and
		Communication	
2	Egypt	Information	and
		Communication	
2	Iraq	Information	and
		Communication	
		Sociology	
1	Jordan	History	
Total 33	Eight **countries**	Five **majors**	

Research results

1. The manifestations of the Arab cultural identity crisis

Reshaping the self-identity within the virtual space

The respondents emphasized that individuals cannot shape their self-identity from the temporal and spatial contexts. One of the participants stressed that "it is not possible to talk about self-identity without linking it to its external environment and determining the individual's position within the group and his role in it. Throughout his life, the individual had situations that pushed him to carve out the foundations of his primitive identity and then reshape some aspects with progress in life experiences; and this causes a kind of overlap between self-identity and multiple other forms of affiliation that causes an identity crisis".

Another respondent added: "Identity is not static, but rather it progresses through life stages, and the tributaries of culture are the most important elements of identity development, and it occurs with the accumulation of new ideas about "others," which makes self-identity in a state of continuous formation. Thus, the new media contributed significantly to the shame of self-identity as one respondent explained: "Today we are dealing with a mixed set of civilizations and cultures; a unique combination of convergent and contradictory principles and customs in terms of references; we lose 'mother identity' amidst this crowd."

Therefore, the cultural identity crisis occurs from childhood, colored by the sequence of the individual's life stages, relationships, and position in society; it matures with new experiences and ideas pushing to the re-form. One interviewee likened the formation of self-identity to the "white dialect" of the Arabic language, explaining that "dialects are one of the foundations of local cultures, which an individual acquires from an early age, at home with his family, in the neighborhood and then with peers at school… etc.; this authentic local dialect turns into decay when exposed to new cultural spaces relatively or entirely different from the original. "To communicate effectively and convey meanings with others, the individual uses a mixture of dialects simultaneously and masters several dialects; little by little, the new mixed dialect is automatically used by him even during his internal conversation; this is how a white dialect emerges., i.e., it is difficult for others to recognize his origin and homeland based on his dialect", the participant added.

Meanwhile, another respondent said: "The loss of the local dialect due to the invasion of foreign dialects pushes towards talking about the crisis of local dialects and the danger of their dissolution over time. The same is true when we talk about the intertwining of foreign cultures with our own; the patriotism that arises in the individual is capable of disappearing in front of a torrent of customs, traditions, and practices within the new media."

Features of the Arab cultural crisis within the new media

Respondents raised the intersection of civilization and the unequal enrichment of cultures in favor of the economically and technologically dominant countries. One participant noted: "Thanks to the Internet, our local culture has opened up to others, transcending all geographical and temporal boundaries; nevertheless, this openness can lead to one of the most dangerous types of alienation because the new media may contribute to weakening the sense of belonging."

Another person interviewed in the same context added: "New media have formed parallel virtual identities, that targets all the identities of the world in one crucible, conducive to cultural hegemony, and the dissemination of extraneous values. The "global cultural invasion," according to some of the interviewees, carries with it a peculiar identity, "contributing to the further erosion of some features of Arab cultural identity", as one participant mentioned.

New media can threaten local identities and direct users to cultural alienation. It is also evident that the sense of authenticity of social peculiarities and adherence to Arab values and standards have declined in the real world. Thus, we can answer in the affirmative to the first research question (RQ1) about the possibility of talking about a contemporary crisis of Arab cultural identity. The sample confirmed the danger of relying on the virtual world, full of hybrid values, principles, and morals that do not necessarily correspond to the essence of Arab cultural identity;

The next part is devoted to the measures taken to preserve the Arab cultural identity from regression.

2. Foundations for building a solid Arab identity within the new media

The principle of enhancing a sense of national belonging

The data show a consensus on the negative side of new media, claiming that local cultural identity constitutes the solid foundation of individuals' personality; participants call for a concerted effort to restore awareness of the local cultures' value through new media.

One respondent noted that some social media users today seem prouder of belonging to virtual communities than their real hometown. Another noted contempt for certain religious rituals, customs, and local traditions, adding that

intellectuals must take measures to save young Arab social media users before it is too late."

The abundance of Arab cultural content through the new media

The participants demand the need to promote Arabic content on the Internet, as more than 80% of what is spread on the virtual space is in English, conveying messages, viewpoints, attitudes, customs, and traditions belonging to Anglo-Saxon civilizations; this inevitably leads to a cultural invasion. Therefore, Arabs must enrich the digital content in quantity and quality; they need to stop acting like passive consumers. One interviewee explains: " Arab cultural movement must be revitalized through new media, in poetry, prose, literature, and science, individually and collectively."

The author noted a consensus on the necessity of establishing Arab websites, groups, blogs, etc., that define Arab cultural features, ensure their global visibility, and show the pride of belonging to them. In addition, one participant stated that Arabs should exploit virtual platforms and applications for self-proof. At the same time, another argued that creating artistic and creative Arabic content on the Internet, as in YouTube channels, or better in "Netflix," is a great way to show Arabic characteristics, pointing out that attention to quantity should not be at the expense of quality.

One of the participants elucidated that "it is not enough to increase the number of Arab websites, rather their contents should exude the smell of our authentic culture and not be a commodification of the values of others." At the same time, another criticized the Jordanian series "The Jinn," the first Arabic content produced by Netflix, explaining: "The violent campaign that the series faced to did not come out of nowhere, as it included some inappropriate scenes, inconsistent with Arab morals and ethics; in fact, this is unacceptable because we thus appear free from any original substrates. A number of those interviewed shared this position noting that such dramas do not contribute to the consolidation of Arab cultural identity. On the contrary, it is a manifestation of cultural alienation.

In the same context, one participant evoked the Tunisian cinematic movie "Dashra," where the writer delved into some serious social problems, namely witchcraft, sorcery, and cannibalism,

excitingly and shockingly approaching horror films. The director combined the originality of the content and the universality of the art form. According to him, this kind of movie should be encouraged as it presents a qualitative addition to the global artistic content.

Upholding the Arab cultural identity appears to be a priority for the participants; a respondent mentioned: "we must use arts for sharing features of our lives; dramatic creations can embody deep philosophical dimension with our appealing artistic and aesthetic standards."

One of the participants exposed the popularity of Hollywood films, expressing that this did not prevent the shining of Bollywood, UK, or French productions; each cultural industry has its characteristics, and so does its audience. This difference caused by film producers' adherence to their cultural origins and by employing content that reflects their social uniqueness has led to gaining a distinct share of followers internationally. Hollywood has its fans, and so does Bollywood. But where are we in all of this? Where are we from, Hollywood and Bollywood?

To overcome this situation, exclusivity within openness and rooting within the context of modernity and globalization is recommended by participants.

Discussions and Conclusion

The qualitative study revealed that identity is not static, but rather it progresses through life stages; the tributaries of culture are essential elements of identity development. First, it occurs by accumulating new ideas about "others," which makes self-identity in a state of continuous formation. This meets with the reviewed literature: Cultural identities are subject to constant transformation (Hall 1976); it also reminds us of Plato's statements in "The Republic": "Never stop carving your statue!" (Snoussi, 2019). Smith (1990) also stipulated that cultural identity is in constant progress.

The data also showed that new media formed virtual identities parallel to real ones; this attractive parallel reality is conducive to cultural hegemony and the dissemination of external values, further eroding some features of Arab cultural identity. Indeed, respondents assert that the digital space can direct users to cultural

alienation and the gradual evaporation of local values affiliation. It is also evident that the sense of authenticity of social idiosyncrasies and adherence to Arab values and moral standards have declined in the real world. These findings are consistent with Singh (2010), who noted that in the various paradigm changes of globalization processes, the public has a global sphere as a space for action. In the same vein, Abdelghani (2017) argued that when cultural hegemony reaches an advanced stage, the evaluation criterion becomes confined to the "superior model"; This contributed to fueling the crisis of Arab cultural identity. Hamlink (1983) stated that forms of imperialism have shifted to social and cultural dimensions leading to artistic synchronization; the cultural development of particular countries appears following the needs of solid states, without taking into account the adaptive imperatives of the adopted nation. This situation represents a threat to the cultural identity of the least powerful countries in the world.

Participants called for concerted efforts to bring back awareness of the value of local cultures through new media by enhancing Arab content that defines Arab cultural traits, ensures their global visibility, and shows the pride of belonging to them. They stated YouTube channels and "Netflix" as best tools to show Arabic characteristics, pointing out that attention to quantity should not be at the expense of quality. Thus, according to the respondents, highlighting the uniqueness of Arabic content and the ease of integration as a competitive global content that exudes authentic Arab characteristics is the best way out of the Arab cultural identity crisis. This statement reminds us of Al-Jabri (1997), who believes that we cannot form a cultural identity for universality unless we embody its references in the homeland, the state, and the nation. Besides, the findings are in line with what was stated by Edgar Morin, who considers that every intellectual system is closed and open simultaneously, stressing the need to be open to culture; the values and civilization of the other support the pillars of the original cultural identity without unconscious drift, and cultural alienation (Telhami, 2002).

To conclude, sociologists generally point out that the identity crisis differs in its form, content, and strength from one society to another and

from one civilization to another. In the new media space, the Arab user seems motivated by the influx of cultures alienating him to reshape his cultural identity. So, he creates a hybrid "white identity", bypassing all forms of local, national, and regional cultural identities, trying to be in harmony with the requirements of the virtual morals, which deepens the crisis of Arab cultural identity. Thus, the talk about the essence of this stifling crisis and the complexity of solving it is confirmed. To get out of the bottleneck, we need to remain open to others while maintaining the compass of authenticity and producing authentic creative content embracing the depth of Arab civilization.

Pedagogical Implications

This research constitutes an important contribution to the identity and language learning; it helps to understand how the communication process is structured and re-structured across time and space. The language as a social practice, built by a range of interactions, endures many changes influencing the features of initial identity of persons and lead to globalized "white identity" with globalized manifestations.

Statements and Declarations

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Bio profile:

Dr. Thouraya Snoussi: Associate Professor and Assistant Dean of the College of Communication, University of Sharjah. She has a special interest in the new media uses and impact on society. She has published many refereed articles in indexed journals and has received several international awards and recognitions in scientific research. And teaching