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Amazigh Language Use on Social Media: An Exploratory Study

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A B S T R A C T

This paper aimed to investigate Moroccan Amazighs' use of the Amazigh language on social media and the various aspects of Amazigh's presence on these platforms. The study was carried out following a descriptive research design whereby data were collected by way of a large-scale online survey. A sample of one-thousand informants was randomly selected from all over Morocco based on several social variables, including sex, age, education, and region of belonging. Data analysis revealed that the Tifinagh script is less used compared to Latin and Arabic in which the language is highly present on social media platforms. It was also found that Amazigh is greatly used in chatting and that Moroccans highly interact with Amazigh-related content on Amazigh public pages and groups on social networking websites. The survey respondents accordingly showed remarkable satisfaction with social media content published in Amazigh. The analysis also demonstrated that Amazigh social media users are particularly interested in topics pertinent to the fields of history, culture, and art. It was yet discovered that Moroccans view the use of Amazigh on social networking sites as an effective alternative for promoting and improving the language. The study calls for upholding and ameliorating online Amazigh language use, as well as extending its scope by adopting digitization policies centering on the prominence of Tifinagh.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although Amazigh language use in different formal and informal contexts has been investigated (El Kirat & Boussagui, 2018; El Kirat et al., 2010; El Kirat, 2009; Errihani, 2008, 2006; Idhssaine & El Kirat, 2019, Idhssaine, 2020; Marley, 2004; Reino, 2007), social media has significantly been overlooked. This area has not been fairly researched to explore the extent of Amazigh's presence on social networking sites (SNS) and discover whether or not the Amazigh language has a future in the current technological era. Given that Amazigh has been identified by UNESECO as endangered, it has been suggested that the Internet provides a space for the languages in danger of extinction to be documented and promoted (Debski, 2004; Ouakrime, 2001; Sperlich, 2005; Warschauer, 2002).

Amazigh language use in the various domains

of public life has been relatively weak (Boukous, 2012; Idhssaine, 2020). Yet, several alternatives have been proposed for increasing the presence of Amazigh in the public sphere, including social media (Almasude, 1999; Belgharbi, 2014, Ennaji, 2014). Amazigh activists have been using these social platforms to improve Amazigh, which is observably used online for different purposes and in different modes. All these uses, nonetheless, seem to converge into one broad aim: voicing one's identity and promoting the Amazigh language (Lafkioui, 2008; Lafkioui, 2013).

The present study, therefore, attempts to investigate Moroccan Amazighs' use of the Amazigh language on social media. It seeks to explore the different facets of Amazigh's presence on social networking websites. Reference is not particularly to the standardized Amazigh notably used for institutional purposes but to the three

varieties spoken across Morocco, namely Tashelhit, Tamazight, and Tarifit.

Amazigh is a language that has persisted for centuries (Boukous, 2015). The speakers of this language are scattered around Africa but are mostly present in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya (Ait Laaguid, 2022). From the independence of Morocco in 1956 till the 1990s of the last century, the Amazigh language has encountered several political, social, and cultural impediments, which could all be associated with the Arabization policy that caused a great challenge to the Amazigh development.

However, the Amazigh situation gained more momentum thanks to the Ajdir speech of King Mohammed VI in 2001, which counted as an actual declaration of a new age for the Amazigh language and identity, whereby vital initiatives and projects were given the green light to revitalize and improve Amazigh as a primordial part of Moroccan national identity, including the establishment of the Royal Institute of the Amazigh Culture (IRCAM). Amazigh was then introduced for the first time in its history into primary education in 2003. After a consistent course of pleading, Amazigh was constitutionalized along with Arabic in 2011. Since then, there has been a serious regression in the constitutional status of the language, especially since its official character has not yet been activated.

Morocco's multilingual character, comprising, besides Amazigh, Classical Arabic (CA) Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Moroccan Arabic (MA), French, Spanish, and currently English, has placed Amazigh in quite a problematic position. CA is held as the most high-status language in Morocco owing particularly to its religious significance, as it is the language of the Holy Qur'an. This language is specifically used for religious purposes, including prayers, Friday sermons, and Islamic rituals. MSA, on the other hand, is Morocco's official language together with the rest of the Arab world. It is the language used in influential domains of public life, such as administration, education, and media. Regarding MA, which is also known among Moroccans as Darija (Abbassi, 1977), is the adopted lingua franca; it is used for daily communication and in almost all spheres. Youssi (1995) claims that 90 percent of Moroccan people are inclined to speak Darija.

There are chiefly three foreign languages used in Morocco, i.e. French, Spanish, and English. Both

French and Spanish are attached to colonization. During the colonial period, French was used in primary public spheres, essentially government, education, and administration. After independence, it was used as the language of prestige and modernity by the political elite. Today, the French language is adopted in higher education as the language of instruction for science courses. It still enjoys, however, the prestigious status it has always been connected to, given its predominant employment in different media outlets, administrative dealings, and education-related matters. Vis-à-vis Spanish, as another colonial heritage, its influence can still be noticed in Northern and Southern regions where it was the official language utilized in administrative arenas. Spanish has nevertheless become less vital, particularly in education and media.

As the only foreign language with no colonial links, English is quickly progressing in the Moroccan linguistic market, thanks fundamentally to its international standing and the array of opportunities it provides its speakers with (Sadiqi, 1991). The immense presence of English in higher education and several media productions, as well as the state's increasingly positive attitudes, are tangible signs that the English language has taken over Morocco's linguistic landscape.

Language is the vehicle of communication. It is used to convey ideas, share experiences, and interact with the world. It also embodies the culture associated with it and surpasses real-world requirements in such aspects as the search for knowledge, education, and exchange with different ethnicities and identities. Learning yet using a language aims to not only contact others but to keep a social connection, "a shared sense of values and communal awareness" (Olojede et al., 2018, p. 3).

New forms of communication have risen to the surface over the last two decades due to the Internet. There has been a revolution that has changed a variety of concepts pertinent to space, context, and interaction. The world has become globalized and it is rapidly changing. Nowadays with social media, the world is witnessing unprecedented progress in information technologies.

Social media as a term was first used in 2004. It refers to the forms of electronic communication that provide the service of creating online communities, sharing personal information and images, and discussing, co-creating, and modifying

user-generated media content (Kietzman, 2012). The majority of these social media platforms are free and accessible to everyone. It has been suggested that there are different types of social media (Monica & Anamaria, 2014; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For instance, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, among others, are categorized within virtual communities. LinkedIn is considered a business interaction platform, whereas Instagram is labeled a social bookmarking tool for getting particular content.

Extensive research in this area is important for essentially two reasons. Firstly, social media can no longer be treated as a dispensable, optional, and negligible set of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (Lenhart et al., 2010; Tess, 2013); on the contrary, these spaces are in one way or another controlling the lives of millions of people, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly. Secondly, people are now spending much of their time using SNS such as Facebook and Instagram. A separation line could hardly be drawn anymore between 'real' and 'virtual' life.

The focus of the current study however is the use of the Amazigh language on these networking spaces. Research has shown that English is taking over social media by virtue of being an international language commonly used for communication in practically most spheres of influence (Al Arif, 2019). Still, for a population that is exposed to various local and global languages, it would be hard to expect the dominance of a certain language over the other. This paper is therefore going to specifically shed light on the degree and forms of Amazigh's presence on social media platforms, primarily Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram.

The current study fundamentally intends to explore the presence of the Amazigh language on social media by investigating the patterns and forms of this presence, discovering the degree and level of interaction in Amazigh, identifying the topics of the Amazigh content that interest Moroccan Amazighs, and Evaluating the utility of social media platforms in revitalizing and promoting Amazigh.

The interest in the Amazigh language per se is driven by three facts. There is a large Amazigh-speaking community in Morocco that would prefer to communicate with the online community's members or even the entire world using Amazigh

for identity maintenance, identity construction, or identity reconstruction (Lafkioui, 2013). In addition, since 2016, Facebook has accredited Tifinagh as one of the scripts that can be used on the platform. Lastly, Amazigh speakers may perceive social media as an opportunity that should be seized to revitalize, promote, and develop the Amazigh language.

II. METHOD

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive research design, exerting a fundamentally quantitative research instrument for data collection, to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends, and categories (McCombes, 2022), and therefore answer the specified research questions. The reason for choosing this design is that it allows for an analysis of several issues that are better reported quantitatively. In this respect, an online questionnaire was adopted to gain an inclusive exploration of Amazigh language use on social media using relevant statistical measures.

Sampling and Participants

To represent the online Amazigh community using social media, a large-scale sample was employed. A sample of 1000 informants was randomly selected from all over Morocco. The survey specifically targeted Moroccans with

Table 1 The Sample's Background Information

Variables	Categories	Percentages
Gender	Male	82,8%
	Female	17,2%
Age	Less than 20 years old	7,1%
	Between 21 and 30	73,9%
	Between 31 and 40	14%
	More than 40	5%
Profession	Employee	31,1%
	Student	53,4%
	Worker	5%
	Others	10,5%
Educational Level	Bachelor degree	47,6%
	Master degree	38,5%
	Doctorate degree	3,6%
	High school degree	8,3%
	Middle school degree	2%
Area of Belonging	North (Tarifit speaking regions)	7,5%
	Center (Tamazight speaking regions)	80,8%
	South (Tashelhit speaking regions)	11,7%

Amazigh origins. For this purpose, the participants were distributed over three large geographical areas, i.e. the Northern area (where Tarifit is spoken), the Center area (where Tamazight is spoken), and the Southern area (where Tashelhit is spoken). Table 1 shows further characteristics pertinent to the survey respondents.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the majority of informants were males, young, holders of higher education diplomas, and belonging to Tashelhit-speaking regions. These qualities are suggestive of a highly active group in the target population. It is the (Amazigh) group that seemingly dominates SNS. Overall, the represented variables are likely to affect the sample's choices.

The Research Instrument

An online questionnaire was utilized to collect data for the current study. Input related to the extent of Amazigh language use on social media was elicited via exclusively close-ended items. Besides the section on demographic information, the survey was divided into three relatively large parts:

- 1) *The displays of Amazigh on social media*: it aimed to pinpoint the frequency of Amazigh language use on SNS, using a 5-point Likert scale varying between *always* and *never*, as well as the alphabet and variety mostly used.
- 2) *The forms, degree of interaction, and Amazigh-content creation*: it sought to provide a profound outlook on Amazigh language use on social platforms. It comprised items relevant to how the language is used (chatting, posting, and sharing content), the degree of interaction on Amazigh-related pages and groups (ranging from *extremely high* to *inexistent*), whether or not specific Amazigh-content creators were followed, and finally the language users' subjects of interest.
- 3) *Revitalizing and developing Amazigh through SNS*: it primarily tried to investigate the sample's perceptions of social media in connection with a prospective change in the status of the Amazigh language. In other words, it intended to determine the extent to which SNS contribute to the development of Amazigh as an official national language and the empowerment of its online presence among other languages.

Data Analysis

Given the objectives of the study and the nature of the collected data, general descriptive statistics were employed to quantitatively analyze the survey responses. The focus was specifically on frequencies and percentages designed based on the examined numerical data. The goal was to eventually interpret the findings following precise quantitative descriptions.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Manifestations of Amazigh Language Use on Social Media

The Predominant Adopted Alphabet

The Amazigh language can be written using different scripts, especially since not all Moroccan Amazighs have learned Tifinagh. The other two predominantly used alphabets are Arabic and Latin. The survey participants were then asked which alphabet they typically employ to write the Amazigh language on social media. They however had the choice to select more than one option since they could be using different scripts for different purposes. Table 2 demonstrates the divergent use of the three scripts.

Table 2. Distribution of Alphabets Employed to Write Amazigh on Social Media

Alphabet	Frequency	Percentage
Tifinagh	156	15.6 %
Arabic	346	34.6 %
Latin	810	81 %

Table 2 shows that the Latin script is the alphabet most predominantly used by the respondents to write Amazigh, followed by the Arabic script, then Tifinagh. This result indicated Moroccan Amazighs' lack of mastery of the official script adopted to write their language. The weak presence of Tifinagh may also be due to fear of not being understood; Amazighs thus tend to use the other alphabets, perceived as simple to use, especially the Latin, for the sake of conformity. This finding overall corroborates previous studies' results (Belhiah et al, 2011; Sadiqi, 2011; Soulaïmani, 2015), showing that Moroccans view Tifinagh as a burden since other alphabets could be simply adopted.

The Amazigh Variety Mostly Present on Social Media

The spoken Amazigh in Moroccan society is quite different from the standardized Amazigh

language being taught in school. There are fundamentally three Amazigh dialects in Morocco: Tashelhit, Tamazight, and Tarifit. Figure 1 displays the variation among the survey respondents regarding the variety they use on social media.

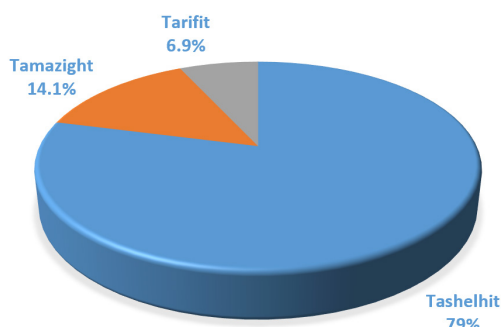


Figure 1. Amazigh Varieties' Use on Social Media

The greatest portion of the sample affirmed their use of Tashelhit on social media. This finding suggests at least two controversial readings; it is indeed the Tashelhit-speaking community that dominates SNS, or although the participating sample is arguably large, we cannot generalize the attained result. This finding is thus exclusively limited to the investigated sample. The researcher however is inclined to the first elucidation, contending that the survey was equally distributed online to the three geographically distinct communities. It is yet possible that Ishelhiin (Tashelhit-speaking people) were more interested and motivated to participate in the survey.

The Frequency of Amazigh Language Use on Social Media

Among the questions that were raised regarding the use of Amazigh on social media platforms was how often the language is used on these spaces. The researcher sought to discover the time extent of everyday communication in Amazigh on social media. Figure 2 presents the frequencies of Amazigh language use on the related sites.

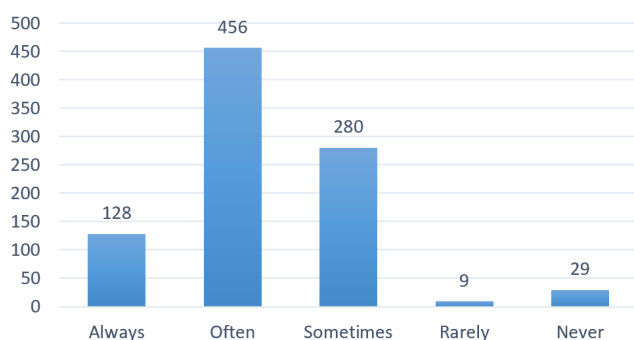


Figure 2. The Frequency of Amazigh Language Use on Social Media

Figure 2 shows that Amazigh is most regularly used by the respondents. This result revealed the participants' favoring of Amazigh over other languages in social communication. It is through their language that they share their thoughts and concerns and express their linguistic and socio-cultural identity. This finding disconfirmed Boukous's (2012) observation that Amazigh is not greatly present on social media.

The Forms and Patterns of Amazigh Language Use on Social Media

Since it was validated that the Amazigh language is considerably present on social platforms, it was imperative to unravel which method was mostly approached to use Amazigh, whether it was chatting, status updates, or simply sharing content that is external or already existing on the sites. Given that the participants could be using Amazigh in more than one way, they were allowed to pick out among the three options, according to their situation (see Figure 3).

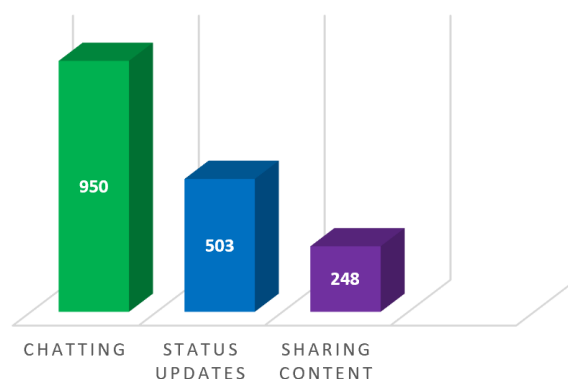


Figure 3 The Forms of Amazigh Language Use on Social Networking Sites

Only five percent of the total sample did not acknowledge the use of Amazigh in chatting, whereas half of it affirmed their preference for status updates. However, almost a third of the respondents asserted their inclination toward sharing relevant content as a favored method for using Amazigh on social media.

The predominance of chatting in Amazigh indicates the immense presence of the Amazigh language in the daily (virtual) life of Moroccan social media users. Yet this result is quite significant in that it shows the diverse use of Amazigh; since chatting is fundamentally chosen for one-to-one communication, be it individual-to-individual or group-to-group, status updates could reach an even

more general audience. The Amazigh language is therefore substantially disseminated.

Amazigh is not only found in chatting and status updates, or seen in resources taken from third-party websites, it is also available on public pages and groups on SNS. One way to discover the level of Amazigh’s presence in these spaces was by investigating the rate of interaction of Moroccan Amazighs (see Figure 4).

The vast majority of respondents remarkably interact with Amazigh-related content published on public pages and groups on social platforms. This result unveiled Moroccans’ interest in issues pertinent to the Amazigh language and culture. These open spaces for communication could serve the purposes of promoting, developing, and (re) constructing identity. These pages and groups provide Amazighs from different parts of the world with the possibility of reuniting and reconnecting with their communities. This perspective is quite consistent with Lafkioui’s (2008; 2013) assertions.

To further investigate the content written in Amazigh on social platforms, the participants were asked about their evaluation of the posts, publications, and interactions available to the public on the related sites (see Figure 5).

Almost the entire sample was satisfied with the social media content published in Amazigh. This is highly indicative of the obtainability of good and varied quality resources produced in the Amazigh language on SNS. These could be short texts, articles, images, videos, or else. The fact that these contents are positively viewed also shows the realization of several studies’ call for the need to change Moroccans’ attitudes toward Amazigh so that they become more positive (Errihani, 2008; Idhssaine, 2020). Social media can then be said to significantly improve the social status and image associated with the Amazigh language.

The Amazigh content shared on the concerned pages and groups raised the issue of content creation: is there a ‘serious’ Amazigh content

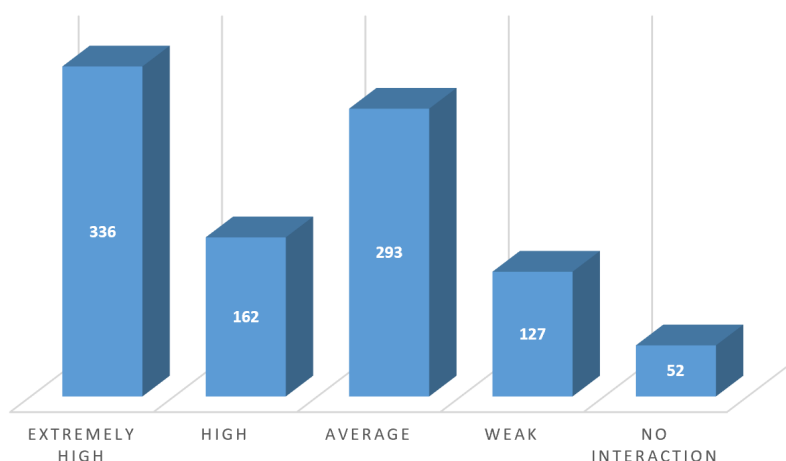


Figure 4. Moroccan Amazighs’ Degree of Interaction on Amazigh Public Pages and Groups

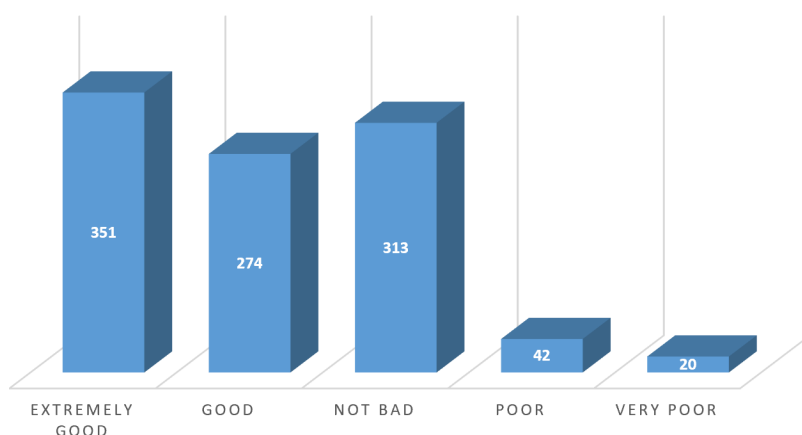


Figure 5. Evaluating the Posts, Publications, and Interactions in Amazigh on Social Media

DO YOU FOLLOW CREATORS OF AMAZIGH-RELATED CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

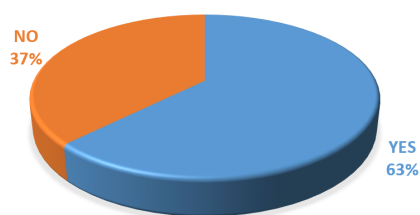


Figure 6. Confirmation of Following Social Media Amazigh-related Content creator

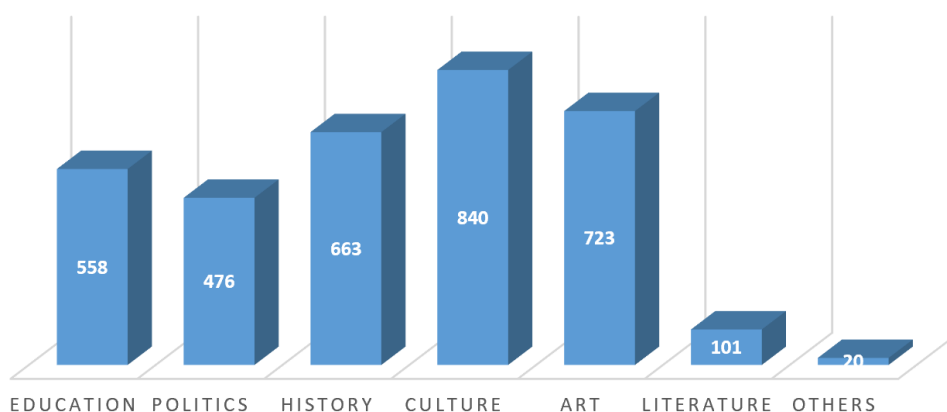


Figure 7 Subjects of Interest concerning Amazigh Language Use on Social Platforms

creation, and who are the creators? It was thus essential to the exploratory objectives of this study to inquire whether or not the survey respondents were following social media Amazigh-related content creators.

Over two-thirds of the participants confirmed that they were following creators of Amazigh-related content on social media. This result, therefore, revealed that Moroccan Amazighs are not only ‘producers’ of the Amazigh language but also ‘receivers’ of it. In other words, they are both disseminators (promoters) and beneficiaries (learners). This active state of participation on SNS is bound to not simply revitalize the Amazigh language and culture but strongly compete with the other prevailing languages on Moroccan social media spaces, especially Facebook. Amazigh is hence expected to have a bright future. These points are further discussed in the subsequent lines.

Another important aspect that was raised for exploration was the fields of the related Amazigh content; the survey respondents’ subjects of interest regarding Amazigh language use on social media were thus investigated (see Figure 7).

Figure 7 displays history, culture, and art as

the areas of interest recurrently preferred by the participants. The frequent selection of the three domains indicated the dominance of folklore and entertainment as the elements that interest Moroccan Amazighs. The finding overall suggested variety in terms of choices Amazighs make in their navigation through social media. Surprisingly, they showed that their use of Amazigh was not only confined to chatting; rather, they use the language to learn different issues within different spheres. This is arguably in favor of the effort for revitalizing and promoting Amazigh.

Social Media as an Effective Alternative for Revitalizing and Promoting Amazigh

To examine the previous postulates, the survey addressed the respondents’ perceptions of the odds that using Amazigh on social platforms can empower Amazigh’s position as a co-official language and contribute to its promotion and development (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 demonstrates that there was a consensus on the statement that using Amazigh on SNS promotes and improves the language. The advantages of disseminating materials created in Amazigh on the sites can prominently encourage

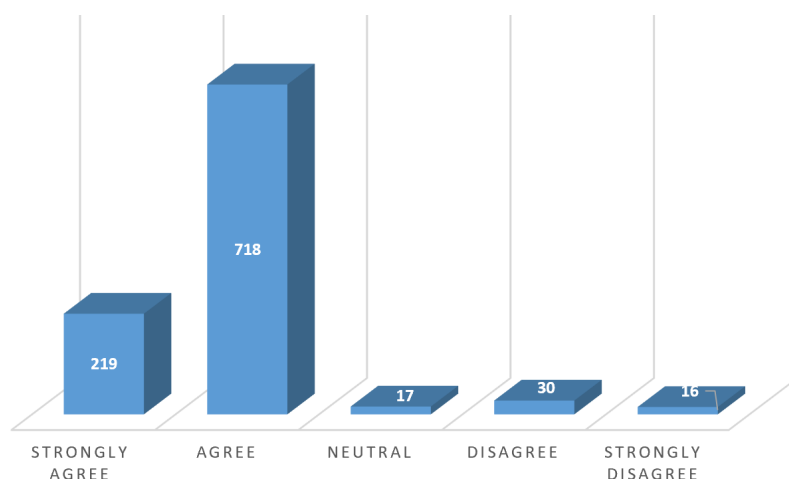


Figure 8 Amazigh’s Promotion and Development through its Use on Social Media

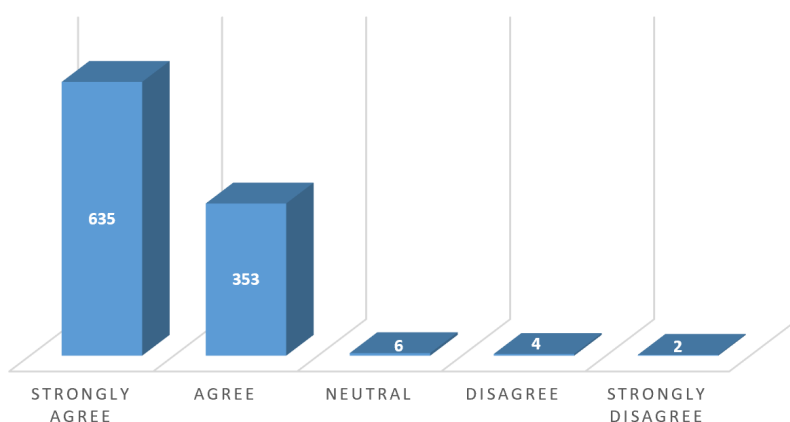


Figure 9 Amazigh’s Potential to Compete with other Languages on Social Media

Moroccans to fully accept Amazigh not only as the language of traditions and folklore but most importantly as a full-fledged national language that can serve different linguistic, social, political, and economic functions. This reflection is confirmed by Ennaji (2005) and Idhssaine (2020). Both studies show that there is a change in attitudes towards Amazigh in that it is no longer regarded as a dialect.

Accordingly, it was crucial to pore over the participants’ attitudes toward Amazigh’s potency to enjoy its co-official status on social media regardless of other languages’ dominance, especially Arabic (both Moroccan Arabic and Standard Arabic), French, and English (see Figure 9).

Almost the overall sample assured that Amazigh indeed has the potential to vie with other languages on social platforms. The motivation for this belief might be the respondents’ expected support of Amazigh in all cases as long as it is their mother tongue and a co-official language in the constitution. Although Darija (the Moroccan colloquial Arabic) is the lingua franca that

particularly dominates most social milieus (Boukous, 2012; Marley, 2004) and English is the language that typically predominates SNS (Al Arif, 2019), the participants were confident that Amazigh can survive and thrive on social media despite other languages’ powerful competition.

IV. CONCLUSION

The present study was an attempt to provide an inclusive image of the presence of the Amazigh language on social media. It particularly sought to designate the manifestations, forms, frequency, and status of Amazigh’s use on these platforms. The analysis of data collected online from 1000 Amazigh Moroccan participants generally showed that the Amazigh language has a special eminence in the (virtual) lives of Moroccan Amazighs. Although there is indeed an impact caused by the other competing languages, especially Arabic, the study’s findings suggest that Amazighs cling to their language as a means of communication, as well as an expression of a long-standing culture and a miscellaneous identity.

Social media spaces (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) are believed to be significant alternatives to promote and advance Amazigh, especially since the language is not greatly present in institutional and public life. The actual use of Amazigh on these websites allows the language to survive and thrive, provided that it is counted as endangered and hence necessitates proper intervention. The study does not claim that this fairly strong virtual presence is enough in that it sets Amazigh free from the constraint of institutional support; rather, it only stands as one of the windows through which Amazigh can gain more attention and sustenance. Besides its use for a wide range of purposes, comprising asynchronous interaction with the surrounding or even worldwide Amazigh-speaking community, social media can also be used to reach numerous and diverse audiences by using the Amazigh language. This way, non-speaking Amazigh communities may not only be aware of the various elements of Amazigh identity but also advocate for the linguistic and cultural rights of Amazighs.

Recommendations

The current exploratory study makes several recommendations to the parties responsible for the

Amazigh situation in Morocco, including decision-makers, language planning and policy specialists, and educational researchers. Some of these recommendations can be listed as follows:

- The remarkably significant presence of Amazigh on social media should be maintained and accordingly improved by offering necessary institutional provisions in public life.
- The ‘battle of the alphabet’ is still a sociolinguistic concern that clamors for reconsideration; the prominence of Tifinagh has not yet been digested by many Moroccans, believing that this script poses disconcerting issues at the level of its use. Since only recent generations have been exposed to this alphabet in school, it is hard for the rest of the people to read and interact using Tifinagh.
- Research is required on why Moroccans use Amazigh on SNS. The reasons for this use could be varied, depending on the user, the situation, and the addressee. These elements should hence be investigated to encircle the drives of the ongoing use.
- Applicable digitization policies centering on the prominence of Tifinagh should yet be adopted.

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