Article

Arabizi in Saudi Arabia: A Deviant Form of Language or Simply a Form of Expression?

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Abstract: The popularity of social networking sites in the Arab world has resulted in a new writing code, *Arabizi*, which combines Roman letters and numbers to represent the Arabic language. This new code received vehement criticism from Arabic linguists who argued that Arabizi is detrimental to the Arabic language and Arab identity. Arabizi use, however, has been increasing, especially in Saudi Arabia, a highly conservative and religious society. To address this apparent contradiction, this study investigated the reasons why young Saudi Arabians use Arabizi online and their attitudes towards its use. The research was based on 131 questionnaires distributed on social networking sites, and 20 interviews conducted with Saudi users of Arabizi. The findings suggest participants use Arabizi because (1), it is the language of their peers, (2) it is cool and stylish, (3) they have difficulties with the Arabic language, and (4) Arabizi constitutes a secret code, allowing escape from judgements of the older generation. The study concludes that Arabizi is a strong marker of Arab youth identity and group solidarity.

Keywords: sociolinguistics; social media; youth language; Arabizi; snowball sampling; netspeak

1. Introduction

While using social networking sites (SNSs) as a means of communication, many aspects of our lives are reconfigured and reshaped. An important aspect that is altered by the use of SNSs is language, with new forms constantly emerging. The most common characterisation of the language we use to communicate on online platforms is often referred to as *Net-Speak* whether written or oral (Crystal 2006). Net-Speak, as explained by Crystal (2006), has unique features that assist users in achieving ease and swiftness in writing. This results in simplifying online communication as well as the creation of new features, such as invention of new technical terms, acronyms, and abbreviations that are mostly associated with internet use, such as acronym use in text messaging (Crystal 2006). Such simplicity in internet language also provides its users with new opportunities to use language (Crystal 2006; Greiffenstern 2010). Users of the internet are able to create their own rules of communication and adopt new rules which allow them to accommodate to their speech communities.

One of the new forms of language used online is Arabizi or romanised/latinised Arabic which was developed by Arab users on social media sites and the internet at the end of the 1990s. Arabizi is a new form of writing which reportedly developed as a response to the need to use new technologies which did not yet support Arabic, and was promoted with the internet revolution (Aboelezz 2009; Abu Elhij'a 2012; Alajmi 2014; Keong et al. 2015; Yaghan 2008). Facebook, which became global in 2006, was launched in English and other languages, such as French, German, and Spanish (Lüsted 2011). However, the Arabic script, even though used by 250 million people, was not in use until Facebook launched an Arabic version in 2009 (Black and Kiss 2009). Twitter, which was launched in 2006,

did not support Arabic until March 2012, when the official Twitter blog stated that Twitter was available in Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi, and Urdu (Twitter Now Available in Arabic, Farsi, Hebrew and Urdu 2012). Since this release, Arabic has become "the fastest growing language ever on Twitter" (Dubai School of Government's influential Arab Social Media Report).[1] In addition, Yahoo! Mail, launched in 1997, did not support the Arabic script until its deal in 2009 to include Maktoob.com, which is the only Arabic mail service to be wholly owned by Yahoo!. Despite the support of Arabic on the internet, Arabizi continues to be used widely in the Arab world. Young people, often described as the generation of the internet (Alajmi 2014), use Arabizi on SNSs as an adopted means of communication.

This widespread use of Arabizi has created a big divide amongst scholars, religious entities, and institutions. There have been numerous campaigns around the Arab world against the use of Arabizi, claiming that it is a dangerous tool aiming to promote westernisation and to strip Arabs of their Arab identity. On the other hand, others consider Arabizi as a natural and simplified code allowing users to express themselves (Alshwuairekh 2014).

This phenomenon is highly prevalent in Saudi Arabia, and has contributed to the marginalisation of Arabizi users on the internet. A large number of studies discussed the negative effects of using Arabizi in the Arab world. However, limited empirical research has taken place to examine the users' view of this phenomenon, which this research addresses.

2. Previous Literature

In this paper, we begin by discussing the phenomenon of Arabizi, and its development and use by online users. Then, a review of relevant literature and research conducted on Arabizi in the Arab world is provided, followed by a discussion of the contribution of this research on the work on Arabizi in the Saudi context.

2.1. The Phenomenon of Arabizi

Arabizi is often described as the process of using Roman letters to write Arabic; that is, it is Arabic using a different script (Aboelezz 2009). The word Arabizi is a blend of the words "Arabic" and "English" where the "*izi*" part of the word stands for English. Several other terms have been employed to describe this phenomenon: Latinised Arabic (Aboelezz 2009), romanised Arabic (Bjørnsson 2010), Arabish (Bianchi 2013), ASCIIization (Palfreyman and Al Khalil 2003), and Arabtini (Alajmi 2014). For the purpose of this study, the term Arabizi is used because it is the most widely used term among young Saudi users of the script. This type of writing is seen mainly on SNSs, in texting, and is particularly used by young people from their early teens to late twenties (Alajmi 2014; Romaih 2014).

Currently, Arabizi is widely used by young Saudis on SNSs, and, as said previously, its use became popular with the use of smart phones, SNSs and other new communication methods. Despite the increased use of Arabizi by young Saudis on SNSs, Arabizi is often negatively portrayed, and its users are socially stigmatised on social media, traditional media, and even attacked by government institutions. There have been numerous campaigns against the use of Arabizi in the media across online and offline forums. These campaigns claim that Arabizi is a tool of westernisation, which has the potential to strip its users of their Arabic language, identity, and culture. Arabizi is often referred to by its opponents as a "deviant" code that should be rejected (Alajmi 2014; Alsabaan 2014; Alsharafi-Taim 2014; Srage 2014). Some have gone even further, and argued that the "retarding situation of the Arabic language is caused by such hybrid languages which make young people lose pride in their mother tongue" (Srage 2014, p. 149).

In Saudi Arabia (the context of this study), which is more conservative and religious than other Arab countries (Al-Omari 2008; Elaine and Manny 2005), objection to Arabizi is more apparent and

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strong than elsewhere in the Arab world. Arabizi users are often hesitant to express their opinions because they do not want to expose themselves to condemning accusations. It has been reported that the strong media and public objection towards Arabizi in Saudi Arabia may have encouraged these young people to use Arabizi, as a method to express themselves freely, independent of the judgements of older people (Alshwuairekh 2014).

2.2. Research on Arabizi on SNSs in the Arab World

The phenomenon of Arabizi has sparked prolific research in Middle Eastern countries. Previous studies about this phenomenon have investigated several issues pertaining to its use. First, researchers examined how much Arabizi was used in certain contexts (Alajmi 2014; Almandhari 2014). These research papers of Alajmi and Almandhari were preliminary investigations of Arabizi use, and aimed to verify how widely Arabizi was used in the contexts of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Other researchers examined the general attitudes and beliefs about Arabizi (Al-Hawsani 2014; Almandhari 2014; Alsharafi-Taim 2014). However, all three of these researchers heavily warned against Arabizi, and their research was packed with accusations that it has negative effects on the Arabic language and culture (Al-Hawsani 2014; Almandhari 2014; Alsharafi-Taim 2014). Other research has examined the reasons for using Arabizi in different contexts, such as Egypt, Malaysia, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia (Abdel-Ghaffar et al. 2011; Assalman and Haraq 2014; Keong et al. 2015; Romaih 2014; Srage 2014; Yaghan 2008). These researchers reported different reasons for using Arabizi, and some warned that Arabizi could negatively impact its users (Assalman and Haraq 2014; Romaih 2014; Srage 2014). However, very few of the above studies relied on empirical research; they were based on researchers' observations or data obtained from the general population without providing the population details.

It is important to distinguish between papers that were written in Arabic about Arabizi and its users, which are usually critical and judgmental, and papers which were written in English (Aboelezz 2009; Abu Elhij'a 2012; Al-Khatib and Sabbah 2008; Keong et al. 2015; Bianchi 2012; Bjørnsson 2010; Palfreyman and Al Khalil 2003). The current study is an example of the latter, which do not make allegations against Arabizi users and/or Arabizi but rather examine and reflect upon Arabizi users' views.

Arabizi is often portrayed as a hybrid, impoverished, and non-standard variety of Arabic that should not be tolerated (Alajmi 2014; Alhumaid 2014; Alsharafi-Taim 2014; Almandhari 2014; Al-Hawsani 2014; Assalman and Haraq 2014; Romaih 2014; Srage 2014). Some studies have also claimed that Arabizi has negative effects on one's Arabic language competence, identity, and culture (Alajmi 2014; Alhumaid 2014; Alsharafi-Taim 2014; Almandhari 2014; Al-Hawsani 2014; Assalman and Haraq 2014; Romaih 2014; Srage 2014). It is important to note that the research on Arabizi is not yet mature, especially because most researchers investigating Arabizi use have related it to attitudes and beliefs, and have had an overarching aim to condemn Arabizi and present it as detrimental to the Arabic language (Alhumaid 2014; Almansour 2014; Alsabaan 2014; Anati 2014). Thus, objective research on the use of Arabizi is lacking and, for this reason, an empirical study to understand the reasons behind its use from the user's perspective is long overdue.

Some limited research examined code-switching between Arabizi and English (Aboelezz 2009; Al-Khatib and Sabbah 2008; Keong et al. 2015), and other researchers examined the stylistic features of Arabizi (Bianchi 2012; Bjørnsson 2010; Palfreyman and Al Khalil 2003).

In Saudi Arabia, there are only two empirical studies which have investigated reasons for Arabizi use (Assalman and Haraq 2014; Romaih 2014). Although these studies were empirical, the results suffered from many limitations. Both studies primarily used a close-ended survey and addressed the general population. The research of Assalman and Haraq (2014) and Romaih (2014), similar to other research reported earlier, warned that Arabizi could negatively affect its users and that institutions in the Saudi society should be aware of these effects in order to minimise the associated risks.

Saudi Arabia is also a unique sociocultural context, with differences from other Middle Eastern countries where Arabizi has been studied. Saudi society has been undergoing rapid developments recently, with youth being a strong cultural and economic power. It has been recorded that "65 percent of the population is under the age of 29" and, thus, they pose a strong influence in the country (Aldakhil 2017). For Saudi youth, it seems that the role of social media is significant. For instance, according to the Arab Social Media Report (Twitter in the Arab Region 2014), Saudi Arabia recorded the highest number of active Twitter users producing 40% of all tweets in the Arab region. Saudi Arabia is also a highly conservative and religious society, with Islam carrying historical and social significance for the rest of the Arab world. Hence, this study of the language use of youth has important implications for the future of Saudi Arabia. Arabizi therefore is a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon and requires understanding of the influence of different social factors, such as language, culture, society, religion, and history.

For the aforementioned reasons, this study addresses a number of gaps in this sociolinguistic research:

1. The lack of empirical research on Arabizi, which has been based on observations and has been highly subjective.
2. The absence of such sociolinguistic research on SNSs in Saudi Arabia, a conservative social context, where the phenomenon is booming.
3. The absence of research on code-switching on SNSs in the context of Arabizi. During observations of the online interactions, code-switching was a commonly widespread phenomenon amongst Arabizi users between Arabizi, Arabic script, and English; thus, understanding of the potential reasons behind the use of each code would contribute significant insights on the use of Arabizi.

2.3. Language and Identity

The role of language in shaping the identity of Arabizi users is significant, because language is a powerful tool for expressing identity. We are unable to understand the language if we do not understand the identity of its users and vice versa. According to Akkari (2004), "First, Islam as the main religion and Arabic as the language are key factors in the identity formation of the region" referring to the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia. In a globalised context, such as Saudi Arabia, the complexity of identity is evident especially because both English and Arabic are used by most young Saudis, although to a lesser extent than fluent bilinguals. Young Saudis strive to prove the claim by Mohd-Asraft (2005, p. 116) that "It is possible to learn, and in fact, to be highly proficient in English and still maintain one's identity as a Muslim."

However, there is still a wide array of pessimistic views when it comes to the dominance of English, particularly in conservative Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia. Many linguists heavily warn against the increasing demand and importance attached to teaching English, and lament the diminishing role of Arabic. Arab linguistics, including those in Saudi Arabia, further argue that Arabizi could marginalise the Arabic language and, thus, affect the identity of its users. In fact, this view of Arabizi is similar to the view of English in Saudi Arabia, when it first started to gain significance and priority in important sectors, such as commerce, banking and, recently, education. According to Al Haq and Smadi (1996, p. 308), "there is a sense of fear among the Saudis that the use of English entails Westernization and detachment from the country, and is a source of corruption to their religious commitment".

These issues, pertaining to the use of other languages in the Arab world and, particularly, Saudi Arabia, are important for understanding the development of Arabizi and the prevalent views on this phenomenon. Arabizi users in Saudi Arabia share the Muslim and Arab identity of the country, yet, their linguistic choices are shaped by their globalised, young, and vibrant identity on social media.

2.4. Aims of the Study

A primary aim of this study is to provide a more objective and comprehensive view of Arabizi use, employing a multimethod approach and focusing on the views and opinions of Arabizi users. The research questions answered in this study are as follows:

(1)   What are the attitudes and beliefs of young Arabizi users towards Arabizi on SNSs in Saudi Arabia?
(2)   What are their motivations behind the use of Arabizi on SNSs?
(3)   What are their opinions on code-switching on SNSs between Arabizi, Arabic, and English?

The study contributes to the negligible empirical research on beliefs about Arabizi use in Saudi Arabia. This study also offers another distinct contribution: it aims to give voice to Saudi Arabizi users to express their attitudes and beliefs, as well as the motivations behind their use of Arabizi. In fact, according to Ramsay (2013, p. 84) "choice of language variety and linguistic styles in blogs, electronic communication and throughout cyberspace remains a vast and independent field in Arabic studies which has yet to be explored". Hence, this study offers an in-depth understanding of the young users' views on their linguistic choices in Saudi Arabia. It is important, however, to acknowledge that such research carries multiple risks, but this is an integral aspect of sociolinguistic research.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The overwhelming majority of previous studies mostly adopted a single method, that of a survey questionnaire, to elicit data on Arabizi use (Abdel-Ghaffar et al. 2011; Alajmi 2014; Al-Hawsani 2014; Alsharafi-Taim 2014; Assalman and Haraq 2014; El-Essawi 2011; Srage 2014; Warschauer et al. 2002). This study employed a mixed methods design, combining two data collection instruments: e-questionnaires (electronic questionnaires) and face-to-face semi-structured interviews. One of the key advantages of the mixed methods design is that it offers a stronger basis for validating the research findings because it merges both qualitative and quantitative approaches together (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011) and, therefore, provides more evidence for studying a complex research problem, such as Arabizi. The choice of the sequential mixed methods design was considered appropriate and applicable for the collection of data on Arabizi, to maximise participants' opportunities to share insights in different ways. Arabizi users are often stigmatised and criticised online, and the mixed methods design offered avenues for insights from various angles.

The sequential mixed methods design comprises two stages: a quantitative stage, followed by a qualitative stage which aims at data triangulation. Following this design, first, e-questionnaires were used in this study, firstly, because Arabizi is mainly used by online participants, and this would be the most convenient and natural method to recruit participants. This method also allowed participants flexibility to submit their responses at their preferred time. It was also easier to share with their friends who were also Arabizi users by circulating the link of the e-questionnaire using different SNSs, therefore, a good response rate was recorded. This study attempted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of Arabizi as employed by Arab users and, thus, the method of semi-structured interviews was included to capture in-depth insights into the phenomenon. For the second stage, interviews were used as a follow-up tool for the e-questionnaire to explore, in more depth, areas of interest (Cohen et al. 2000; Richards 2009) that emerged from the e-questionnaire responses. This technique was especially used in this study to avoid instances of incomplete data in e-questionnaires, whether by participants leaving some questions blank because they required much thought, or, in some cases, that the participants deemed some questions an invasion of their privacy (Bailey 2008). The combination of the two methods contributed to data triangulation and validated the responses of participants.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 closed- and open-ended questions. The number was determined by the aim to keep the questionnaire short to ensure a high response rate. Closed-ended questions provide the respondent with pre-determined answers, and limit the possible range of responses for a specific question (Miller and Brewer 2003). Open-ended questions were included to provide the respondents with the opportunity to answer the questions in their own words and offer opinions freely (Miller and Brewer 2003). Most participants were keen to share their views on Arabizi and provided detailed answers to the open-ended questions.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format and comprised mainly open-ended questions to elicit in-depth information about Arabizi users' perceptions and opinions about their use of Arabizi. A set of questions and topics based on the questionnaire responses were designed, and were used as an interview guide, but interview questions also emerged during the interview. The findings from the interviews complemented the responses from the e-questionnaires by providing additional details.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

First, e-questionnaires were distributed to elicit more data about the reasons for its use, and attitudes and beliefs toward using Arabizi. Then, the researcher engaged with the participants in 20 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, to elicit in-depth information about Arabizi use.

For the quantitative stage of this research, the online survey software SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com) was used for administering the e-questionnaire. SurveyMonkey is an online survey research tool that is widely used by researchers because it is secure and safe (Waclawski 2012). This researcher carefully designed the e-questionnaire and made its format compatible with different devices and computer systems. The e-questionnaire was designed with a simple and attractive layout, appropriate font and colour, and to be user-friendly, to minimise the risk of discouraging prospective participants from answering the questions. The e-questionnaire was pretested on a small group of participants to discover any potential problems.

E-questionnaires were distributed using a snowballing method and were completed by a large number of online users on SNSs. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique (Babbie 2011) that involves the process of identifying respondents who then refer the researcher to other respondents (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Corbetta 2003; Vogt 1999). The process of snowball sampling uses the "bond" that exists between the initial pool of respondents and the referred respondents to participate in the research (Berg 1988). The snowball sampling was used in this study because it offered several practical advantages, including the ability to access a socially stigmatised population who may have tended to hide their identities for different political, ideological, or cultural reasons (Corbetta 2003).

Most of the e-questionnaires were completed in Arabic, except for five high school students, who answered the e-questionnaire in English and/or Arabizi. The final number of completed questionnaires was 233 over a period of three months, but only 131 responses were collected from users of Arabizi. Other responses were discarded because they were either completed by opponents of Arabizi or by respondents who did not use Arabizi.

The e-questionnaire respondents were between 16 to 28 years old, consisting of 33 male (25%) and 98 female respondents (75%). The majority of respondents who completed the e-questionnaire, i.e., 63.3%, were between 16 to 20 years old. The rest (37.7%) ranged between 21 to 28 years old.

The interviewees were purposefully selected based on their availability to be interviewed and included 10 male respondents and 10 female respondents between 16 and 28 years of age from Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam. Diverse locations were selected to allow for generalisability of findings. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and were transcribed and translated in English for the purpose of analysis.

The data from the e-questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics and relative frequencies to examine tendencies. The percentages in the quantitative data below reflect participants who chose these attitudes as part of a list of options offered in the questionnaire or mentioned it

explicitly in the interviews. For instance, if 60% interviewees reported that Arabizi is easier and faster than Arabic, this means that these interviewees either answered "yes" to the question if Arabizi was easier than Arabic or that they reported it during the interview. The qualitative data obtained from the e-questionnaire and the interview were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Flick 2014; Roulston 2010) to identify, analyse, and report themes within the dataset (Boyatzis 1998). Thematic analysis examines the qualitative data systematically, in order to identify patterns of use, code the data according to themes, compare code frequencies, and identify the relationships between different codes within the dataset (Boyatzis 1998; Guest et al. 2011; Lapadat 2010). In thematic analysis, the researcher is involved in the interpretation of explicit and implicit concepts within the data (Guest et al. 2011).

The following section discusses the major findings of this study. Pseudonyms have replaced real names in the extracts below for protection of the participants' confidentiality. Additional information is provided in codes as follows: Ola (F-20Y) Ola is a pseudonym, F indicates female and 20Y indicates their age at the time of the data collection. The study received ethics clearance from a higher education institution which enabled participant consent for those participating in the study.

4. Research Findings

The findings are organised based on the research questions, and combine frequently reported themes from the e-questionnaire and interview responses.

4.1. Attitudes and Beliefs about Arabizi

Arabizi users reported a variety of attitudes towards and beliefs about Arabizi. The results from the e-questionnaire and the interview were similar but, in the interviews, additional information was offered, due to the nature of the interviews. The most frequently cited attitudes are (1) Arabizi is a code that is used for informal communication; (2) Arabizi is easier and faster than Arabic in terms of grammar and writing; (3) Arabizi is described as cool, stylish, trendy, and the language of young people on social media; (4) Arabizi may have some negative effects on the participants' Arabic writing skills, and (5) Arabizi does not undermine the Arab culture and/or identity. Table 1 summarises the frequently reported attitudes and beliefs and compares the results from both methods.

Table 1. The users' beliefs about Arabizi.

Attitude/Belief	E-Questionnaires	Interviews
Arabizi is informal	47%	95%
Arabizi is easier and faster than Arabic	24%	40%
Arabizi is cool, stylish and trendy	22%	30%
Arabizi has negative effects on Arabic language skills	16%	40%
Arabizi does not undermine the Arab culture and/or identity	90%	100%

4.1.1. Arabizi is Informal

Based on the e-questionnaires and the interviews, the majority of Arabizi users participating in this study indicated that Arabizi is an informal code. They explained that they use the script to chat with their friends and relatives within their age group on SNSs. However, they would not use Arabizi in formal settings, such as communicating with their boss at work or send a formal letter to a government official. This is exemplified in the quotes below.

> Shireen (F-20Y): *"Arabizi is informal and I use it only on social media such as Twitter because it is not a proper language. It should be only used in such settings. It is a fun language. It is not like Arabic."*

> Ola (F-20Y): *"Arabizi I view it as an informal language. It is not like Arabic or English, I mean it cannot be used the same, it is used with friends only."*

4.1.2. Arabizi Is Easier and Faster Than Arabic

Other participants suggested that Arabizi is easier and faster than Arabic script, especially for online communication. It was reported that Arabizi lacks spelling conventions, while the Arabic script has strict grammatical rules and diacritics. Arabizi provides them with an opportunity to hide their poor Arabic skills and an escape from certain grammatical/spelling rules when writing in Arabic script. Here, the participants did not specify Standard Arabic or Spoken Arabic. As Ramsay (2013) argues, electronic communication combines features of informal spoken and written varieties, thus, Arabizi users would have been referring to either Standard Arabic or Spoken Arabic. They did not specify that they find one more difficult than the other but, rather, insisted that Arabizi freed them from worrying about their spelling or grammar.

Basem (M-19Y): *"It is easy to write because it does not require accurate spelling."*

Tamer (M-21Y): *"Arabizi is easier because it does not need the diacritics like we do in Arabic which is problematic when it comes to diacritics. Arabizi is good and better."*

4.1.3. Arabizi Is Cool, Stylish, and Trendy

One of the most frequently discussed themes was the participants' firm belief that Arabizi is a cool, stylish, and trendy code they are using online. They viewed it as a writing style which defines their young, playful, and flexible nature as young people. Using Arabizi is a form of expression on SNSs and a form of solidarity among youth. Using it guarantees their belonging to a group of stylish, fresh, and trendy young people. This is explained below:

Alaa (F-19Y): *"Easy and nice and it is a trend now."*

Mimi (F-16Y): *"Maybe because it is a trend and I like it and I also like to try new things that are cool and stylish."*

Maria (F-16Y): *"It is a new way of expression and fun too."*

4.1.4. Arabizi Has Negative Effects on Arabic Language Skills

Although most Arabizi users reported their favourable attitude towards Arabizi, some of them acknowledged the possible negative effects it may have on their Arabic language skills. This topic may have emerged due to the widespread negative propaganda against Arabizi in Saudi society. However, possibly influenced by the strong resistance against Arabizi from other online users or their parents, many Arabizi users felt obliged to acknowledge the negatives of Arabizi use. A lot of the participants admitted, although hesitatingly, as seen in the excerpts below, the possible negative effect of Arabizi on their Arabic language skills.

Ahlam (F-18Y): *"I think maybe it's negative, my family tell me always that I began to forget Arabic."*

Nawaf (M-18Y): *"There are people who are writing it excessively, those are wrong."*

Ola (F-20Y): *"You can say I look at Arabizi as a negative thing sometimes because my Arabic spelling is worse now".*

4.1.5. Arabizi Does Not Undermine the Arab Culture and/or Identity

Another important question, which was featured in the e-questionnaires and the interviews, asked users if they agree with the stereotyping against Arabizi users, and 90% of the questionnaire respondents and all interviewees categorically denied such an allegation. The majority of the participants highlighted that the accusations that Arabizi will smear their Arabic identity and replace the Arabic language are unfounded. Most Arabizi users expressed their firm belief that they are, deep down, proud users of the Arabic language, proud Muslims, who respect the Arabic language and their religion. The following quotes represent the participants' views:

Omran (M-20Y): *"Well this is crazy I don't know how can a language makes someone not proud of his culture or religion. I am Muslim, I pray I fast Ramadan and I am proud too. Those people everything is wrong and dangerous to them. I don't think it is true."*

Shireen (F-20Y): *"Many people say that Arabizi users are people who like the west more than their countries or culture or religion, this is not right, you see me I am a normal Muslim, what is different? Nothing."*

Maria (F-16Y): *"It is just a style of writing that does not control your personality."*

Sarah (F-18Y): *"There is nothing wrong in writing in Arabizi."*

4.2. Motivations Behind the Use of Arabizi

The second research question aimed to explore the participants' motivations behind the use of Arabizi. The participants provided different reasons for using Arabizi when interacting with their peers. The reasons for using Arabizi are similar to the attitudes and beliefs about Arabizi which are reported in the previous section. Table 2 below provides a comparative summary of the reasons for using Arabizi as reported in the e-questionnaires and the interviews.

Table 2. The reasons for using Arabizi.

Reason	E-Questionnaires	Interviews
Arabizi is easier, faster, and more flexible than Arabic script	24%	60%
Arabizi is a habit	42%	45%
Arabizi is cool and stylish	24%	55%
Arabizi is a secret code of communication	24%	50%
Arabizi is used by peers	23%	65%
Arabizi helps to overcome issues with Arabic writing	21%	40%
Arabizi helps to overcome technical issues	11%	25%
Arabizi is a means of communication with non-Arabs	14%	15%

Many of the reported reasons seem to be interrelated. For example, the flexibility of the Arabizi script, the lack of diacritics and grammar rules enabled an easy communication (1) and assisted them with overcoming technical challenges due to the lack of support for Arabic script on social media (7). This flexibility also enabled some participants to hide their poor Arabic skills and avoid embarrassment (6) and communicate with their non-Arab friends (8). The majority of the respondents used Arabizi because they believed it was easier, faster, and more flexible than Arabic, and they did not have to follow certain grammatical or spelling rules when using it.

Hameed (F-28Y): *"Yes it's easier when it comes to Arabic grammar because Arabizi is a free language it has no problems or errors that people may criticise me for whether in Arabic or English."*

The ease of writing in Arabizi on SNSs due to the absence of grammar and spelling rules is similar to the use of Latinica, a latinised form of Slavic as reported by Ivković (2015). Ivković (2015) explained that, "Pragmatic considerations favor those forms that align themselves with some function, giving priority to cognitive/mental and/or physical shortcuts. One of these shortcuts is the omission of diacritics where these secondary markings may not be seen as absolutely necessary, especially if the presence of context provides additional information." Also, Arabizi users seem to resort to Arabizi (latinised form of Arabic) to omit the use of diacritics and avoid ambiguity. Salam, who is a programmer, reports:

Salam (M-24Y): *"Honestly yes it can solve a lot of problems in coding but nowadays a lot of applications begin to support Arabic."*

Maria (F-16Y): *"My Arabic spelling is very bad, and this is why I use Arabizi, it is easier than Arabic. I mean I don't have to worry about my spelling in Arabizi".*

As reported earlier, there were many technical problems facing Arabic online, and Arabizi offered a solution to these technical issues which might have led to continuous and habitual use of Arabizi. Their habitual use also seemed to be linked to the fact that they mainly used it for communication with peers. Arabizi seemed to flourish among young SNSs members, the digital generation who grew up using the internet (Alajmi 2014; Boyd 2014). Arabizi was reported to be a code of communication shared by Arabizi users to signal group membership.

Khater (M-16Y): *"I use Arabizi because it is a habit. I use it every day because I am used to use it with my friends."*

Norah (F-16Y): *"Because I use it with my friends all the time and because it is easier, after a while I got used to it, now it is a habit really".*

Arabizi users even used Arabizi with their non-Arab friends who understand Arabic but cannot read the Arabic script. They use it to establish solidarity and effective communication even with friends who are not part of their ethnic group.

Raghda (F-18Y): *"Hmm when I first started using it it was that I knew a friend called Rasha online who didn't write Arabic and doesn't understand Arabic letters, she was writing Arabizi only . . . . yes and she was living in Morocco and I knew Arabizi from her."*

Mimi (F-16Y): *"And I can communicate with all people even those who speak Arabic but can't read the Arabic script like our Indonesian maid where I can send her messages in Arabizi."*

Another popular reason for the development of Arabizi on SNSs was the feeling of being cool, stylish and trendy. Participants described the Arabizi code as cool, stylish, and trendy, which could also be an ascription to a character they aspired to be by using it. It seemed to give its users a sense of belonging to a trendy and stylish social group.

Reem (F-18Y): *"I write in Arabizi because it is cool, stylish and, honestly, it looks nice"*

Loly (F-19Y): *"I use Arabizi because it is cool and stylish and I like to look cool. Actually all of us young girls I mean want to look cool and use cool language style. That is why honestly."*

One of the unexpected and novel findings of this study outlined by the participants was their acknowledgement that Arabizi serves as a secret code of communication among peers. Participants used Arabizi as a secret code to control access to what they shared on their social media accounts, and to avoid criticism or monitoring from older people or adults.

Mimi (F-16Y): *"Yes I tried that in school and university when I talk with my classmate in a paper and I am afraid that the teacher or the lecturer will pick the paper and know what we are talking about so I write in Arabizi, and some students I saw using Arabizi to write their cheat sheets in exams so if someone noticed them they won't consider it cheating because they can't understand what is written (laughs loud) so it has beneficial uses actually (laughs again)."*

Khater (M-16Y): *"Yeah I remember now, sometimes my friends will tweet about school and how difficult an exam was or that a teacher has mistreated him and all of that will be in Arabizi because who knows if my teacher is following me or can see what we tweet about and he might think that we are being disrespectful."*

4.3. Code-Switching between Arabic, Arabizi, and English

The third research question aimed to explore the reported reasons for the users' code switching between Arabic, Arabizi, and English. Table 3 below compares the results obtained from the e-questionnaire and the interview participants on their uses of Arabic, Arabizi, and English.

Table 3. The reasons for code-switching between Arabizi, Arabic, and English.

When is Each Code Used?	E-Questionnaires	Interviews
Use of each code depends on the addressee and the topic	41%	30%
Arabizi is used in informal settings (e.g., communicating with friends)	47%	95%
English is used with non-Arabs or friends who speak English	32%	25%
Arabic is used in formal settings (e.g., government sector)	30%	50%

Based on the table above, one of the most common responses was that the use of each code, Arabizi, Arabic, and English was highly dependent on the addressee and the topic involved in the interaction. It was clear that participants were conscious of the use of each code in their online interactions and had clear functions for each code. This is explained below by the participants:

Ali (M-23Y): *"Each style of writing is suitable for certain people and situations you can't mess things up."*

Saja (F-28Y): *"I use Arabizi to talk about silly things and daily things with my friends. I use Arabic to write serious things like school and important matters and I use English when I want to write English terms and expressions or songs."*

In regard to Arabizi, the participants reported that they switch to or employ Arabizi for communicating within informal settings on SNSs with close friends and relatives of their age group. Omran and Ali, for example, explain:

Omran (M-20Y): *"Hmm I write Arabizi to people on SNSs such as BBM, path, Instagram, Facebook and such places who are 12 to 22 years old."*

Ali (M-23Y): *"Arabizi is informal and is used only in informal situations."*

Arabizi users highlighted that Arabizi is never used in formal communications, such as communicating with their teachers, parents, or government officials. Its use is limited to informal settings, such as SNSs, online chat, and texting.

The respondents reported switching to English to communicate with non-Arabs and/or friends who tended to communicate in English or those who do not write or read the Arabic script. However, respondents also said that they used English when communicating with friends who preferred to use English in their interactions. Saja (F-28Y) and Loly (F-19Y), for example, argue:

Saja (F-28Y): *"I use English mostly with my friends because they go to international school and they write to me in English, so I reply back in English even if my English is not very good."*

Loly (F-19Y): *"Most of my friends use English to talk to me, so I often switch to English to talk back to them but I still of course use Arabizi too mixed with English."*

For these participants, the use of English assisted them in expressing solidarity, group membership, and accommodating to their friends' linguistic code.

On the other hand, there was an overwhelming agreement that the Arabic script was retained for specific purposes, and was not used randomly. Arabic was treated by all participants as a formal code adopted when communicating with participants such as relatives, employers, and people in formal settings and relationships, such as their boss at work. Interviewees indicated that they used Arabic because it is inappropriate and disrespectful to use Arabizi to address older people.

Basma (F-16Y): *"I use Arabic with old people like dad and mom and my uncles and aunts."*

Saja (F-28Y): *"Sometimes no I respect people's age and status and I can't write to them in Arabizi especially if it's business or job or something official it's impossible to use Arabizi in such settings I use either Arabic or English."*

A large majority of the interviewees (60%) reported that they switched to Arabic whenever they wanted to write Quranic verses or prophetic hadiths (sayings). The interviewees explained that they switched to Arabic because if they made any minor mistake while writing such texts, the whole meaning could be altered. They also reported that they would be heavily criticised if they wrote these texts in Arabizi because these are sacred texts that should be respected. Some interviewees mentioned that other religious topics, such as supplication and prayers, can be written in Arabizi.

Finally, 20% of the interviewees reported that they switched to Arabic to avoid criticism and protect their self-image. For example, they switched to Arabic when communicating with their family or when writing to people who are firm opponents of Arabizi.

Shireen (F-20Y): *"I feel that I become more of an Arabic user with my friends because they criticise Arabizi a lot . . . before then I used not to care about their opinion but with time I am now ashamed of using Arabizi and I feel that I should be flexible with changes in my community and group of friends who are lovers of Arabic now."*

Shireen described her friends during the interview as "Arabic language fanatics" who love Arabic poetry and literature and promote the use of Arabic. She felt socially obliged to use Arabic in her interaction with her group of friends. This feeling was shared by other interviewees. In fact, such a finding indicates how young people adhere to the communication rules and language styles within their speech community, whether with or against Arabizi, to signal solidarity and show group membership. It is important to highlight, though, that the majority of Arabizi users participating in this study are using Arabizi despite its widespread criticism.

5. Discussion

The discussion of the findings will be organised based on the research questions.

5.1. Arabizi Users' Attitudes to and Beliefs about Arabizi

Arabizi is a sociolinguistic phenomenon, and studying the attitudes and beliefs towards its use facilitates an understanding of the effects it has on the society and the individuals who use it. This is because "attitudes to language reflect attitudes to the users and the uses of language" (Holmes 2008, p. 405). As such, this study extended sociolinguistic research on a relatively new linguistic phenomenon in the Arab world.

The study of attitudes and beliefs of Saudi Arabian users about the use of Arabizi, is one of its kind, as no previous study involved Arabizi users in their research. The triangulated findings revealed that Arabizi users held favourable attitudes and beliefs about Arabizi. They perceived Arabizi as an informal, cool, stylish, trendy, easy and convenient style of writing online that lacks grammatical and spelling rules. They expressed a firm belief that it is simply a writing style that performs certain functions and enables its users to show solidarity with other users, and their unique identity as young people. These findings confirmed and expanded previous research on attitudes and beliefs about Arabizi (Almandhari 2014; Alsharafi-Taim 2014; Keong et al. 2015; Romaih 2014; Srage 2014). However, most of these studies were conducted in other contexts, while only the Romaih (2014) study was undertaken in Saudi Arabia. It is worth mentioning that the Romaih (2014) study compared Arabizi use in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and concluded that Arabizi use was not prominent in Saudi Arabia, which contradicts the current study. This study expanded research on Arabizi in Saudi Arabia by giving Arabizi users a voice to explain and express their opinions about and attitudes to Arabizi, and attempted to balance the overly negative research on Arabizi.

Even though Arabizi users viewed Arabizi positively, some acknowledged that it may have had negative effects on their Arabic language skills. Many of these opinions were elicited in the e-questionnaires, and were often combined with participants' acknowledgement that this is a criticism they often receive from parents and friends. They also acknowledged that excessive use of Arabizi could be detrimental to their Arabic writing skills. The attitude that Arabizi has a negative effect on Arabic language was not as prevalent in this study, and this contradicts previous studies which mainly highlighted that Arabizi is a negative influence and has only negative effects on Arabic language, culture, and identity (Al-Hawsani 2014; Assalman and Haraq 2014; Alsharafi-Taim 2014; Romaih 2014; Srage 2014).

The majority of the users viewed Arabizi as a channel that provided them with extra freedom of expression, because it was the language of their peers and a flexible language that could only be understood by members of their online community. Arabizi users highlighted that they are young people who are proud of their language, culture, and religion, and their Arabic identity. They insisted that their use of Arabizi does not strip them from their Arab and Muslim identity. The attitudes and beliefs of Arabizi users, as reported in this study, showed that Arabizi may not be threatening the Arabic language, but it is a writing style that allows its users to communicate freely. This freedom in communication could be freedom of expression, freedom from the fear to commit grammatical and spelling errors, and freedom to represent themselves in the way they desire.

The use of Arabizi on social media echoes the initial hesitations parents express of new language styles introduced by young people. Young people's use of social media has been found to often make parents anxious and worried that this will lead to a decline in their children's values (Boyd 2014; Boyd and Marwick 2014). However, teens around the world generally make an effort to be different and unique by using social media to engage with their communities and share what they want to (Boyd and Quan-Haase 2011). In a similar vein, the use of Arabizi by Saudi youth is an attempt to control the way they represent themselves in real life and online, and they do it by using different and new language styles.

5.2. Motivations for Using Arabizi

The discussion on the attitudes and beliefs about the use of Arabizi revealed similarities as to the motivations behind its use. The findings revealed that Arabizi users use Arabizi for a number of reasons which are often interrelated. These reasons were:

(1) Arabizi is a habit,
(2) Arabizi is easier and faster than Arabic,
(3) Arabizi is cool and stylish,
(4) Arabizi is used as a secret code among peers,
(5) Arabizi is used by peers,
(6) Arabizi helps to overcome linguistic and technical problems with Arabic,
(7) Arabizi is a means of communication with non-Arab friends,
(8) Arabizi encourages freedom of expression.

Amongst the reasons above, one of the most notable findings was that many of the participants cited the complexity of Arabic language as a barrier to its use. They pointed out that the use of Arabizi was due to the fear that people will judge them when making mistakes online. This reason seems to be connected to another important finding: Arabizi was also used because it provided its users with freedom to express themselves, and this was treated as a secret code understood only by their online community of friends. Arabizi users, similarly to youth around the world, resort to censoring content when older adults, such as their parents, are part of their audience on social media. In a study by Russett and Waldron (2017) on college students' use of social media, the authors stated that young adults "envision parents as part of their 'imagined audience', hence, they seemed more conscious or even cautious of what they posted when they envisioned family being their audience". The use of this

special code by Arab youth functions as a way that brings them together, strengthens group solidarity, and reduces social distance (Boyd 2009, August 16; Holmes 2008).

Some of the reported reasons for using Arabizi in this study were also reported by previous researchers, although some new reasons were revealed in this study. This study confirmed the results by Srage (2014) that Arabizi is used out of habit. It also confirmed the report that Arabizi is used to communicate with peers (Abdel-Ghaffar et al. 2011; Al-Hawsani 2014; Almandhari 2014; Assalman and Haraq 2014; Romaih 2014; Srage 2014) and that users find Arabizi easier and faster than Arabic (Abdel-Ghaffar et al. 2011; Alsharafi-Taim 2014; Almandhari 2014; Assalman and Haraq 2014; Keong et al. 2015; Romaih 2014; Srage 2014). The new findings in this study contradict Alajmi (2014), who attributed the feeling that Arabizi is easier to use than Arabic to the psychological effect, and the connection that new technologies generally adopt English as their main language. There was no evidence of this in the data of this study. It is worth mentioning that Alajmi's reported reasons for Arabizi use were based on his observations, and not on empirical data. The results also contradicted previous findings of Assalman and Haraq (2014), and Srage (2014), that Arabizi emerged from the interlocutors' need to find a shared language when they speak a different language. However, this study found that, although Arabizi users have access to an Arabic keyboard and communicate with those who understand Arabic, they still resort to Arabizi, which is a marker of youth identity and solidarity.

5.3. Code-Switching between Arabizi, Arabic, and English

All interviewees and the majority of the e-questionnaire respondents reported that they used Arabizi, English, and Arabic in their communications online rather than Arabizi alone. They reported that the use of each code depended on the addressee and the topic. Arabizi and English were used in informal communications to discuss informal topics with peers and relatives within Arabizi users' age group. Arabic was limited to the discussion of formal topics and to formal communications with older people and employers. Arabic was recognised as the mother tongue and the language that represented their religion and heritage. For example, Arabizi users reported using Arabic to write religious texts, such as the Qur'an. This result is in agreement with the results of Al-Khatib and Sabbah (2008), which indicated that Arabizi is often combined with English and/or Arabic, and that it is rarely used solely by young Jordanians.

According to Gumperz (1982); Holmes (2008); and Auer (1999), language choice is not only decided by context but, rather, by the participants who shape, maintain, and change linguistic details in the course of interactions. Also, social factors, such as participants, context, topic, and purpose of the interaction, are all important contributors to the actual language choice in different speech communities (Holmes 2008). The results in this study reflect such findings. Arabizi users use Arabic if they want to insert a religious verse, and they use English to communicate with friends who prefer to use English.

The participants' reasons for code-switching between the three codes offered evidence of the participants' multilingual communicative competence. These Arabizi users seem to display this competence which is defined as "competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner" (Hymes 1979, p. 30). Saudi users of Arabizi are multilingual language users who were aware of the different status and function of each code. They use Arabizi and English to display solidarity and in-group identity with other Arabizi online users, and they use Arabic to show respect to older people, formal relationships, and religious texts.

Arabizi users, like other bilingual speakers who have a repertoire of different codes, choose certain features of languages and codes strategically, to communicate efficiently with others in their community. This is defined by Cannagarajah (2011, p. 401) as translanguaging, which is "the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integral system". This means that in the case of Arabizi users, for example, they translanguage between the three codes for a number of purposes, and they choose to do so to make themselves understood, express their cultural hybridity or, as Li Wei (2011) explains, to express creativity and/or criticality.

Translanguaging is different from code-switching in the fact that users are not merely switching from one language to another but, rather, construct and use complex discursive practices that "make up the speaker's complete language repertoire" (Garcia and Wei 2013).

It is evident that the use of social media has not only introduced new writing styles in the context of the Arab world, but also in other countries, such as Cyprus and Macedonia. Ivković (2015) reports on the use of latinised Slavic employed widely as an internet language among Slavic speakers. Sophocleous and Themistocleous (2014) also discuss the codeswitching between latinised Greek-Cypriot dialect (GCD), latinised Standard Modern Greek (SMG), and English on Facebook sites in Cyprus. They explain that the latinised Cypriot dialect was associated with youth identity and informal communication among young people, while the Standard Modern Greek was used for formal and serious functions, and was preferred by older people, a finding resembling the use of Arabizi and Arabic in this study.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Rather than hypothesising about the Arabizi users' views and their Arab identity, the aim of this study was to provide Arabizi users with a voice to explain their views on their use of Arabizi. In fact, understanding the language of young people online requires triangulation and immersion in teen culture (Boyd 2015). Thus, this research is original in the way it tries to give voice to Saudi youth to express their opinions and attitudes towards the use of Arabizi, without the negative imposition towards Arabizi.

This study demonstrated that Saudi young people and their peers on social media are using language to enhance, create, and maintain their social relationships and reduce social distance. The use of Arabizi creates a redefined and unique identity for them as young people, so that through their Arabizi communications, these young people are showing the world that they are different and creative. On the internet, or as Thomas (2007, p. 5) refers to it "the digital world", personal identity "relies upon the texts we create in the virtual worlds we inhibit". Arabizi not only makes its users align themselves with a certain group, belief system, and/or culture, but also facilitates the creation of their online identity and presence. The playful and innovative nature of their language use is a characteristic of their age group. This study has shown that users of Arabizi are striving to be different, which is best described by Coulmas (2013, p. 75) in the following:

> "Certain aspects of youngspeak are designed to distinguish the speakers from their elders. Fed up by the past, they don't want to swallow it whole, but appropriate it, make it their own."

This research has provided substantial insights into Arabizi use by young Saudis. It has paved the way for extending and enhancing the understanding of Arabizi, its use, and its future. However, as with any study, it is important to acknowledge that this study has some limitations. The first limitation is the fact that this study investigated Arabizi use using online participants engaged in SNSs. It would have been ideal if more participants could have been recruited from other places beyond SNSs. Perhaps not all Arabizi users are engaged in SNSs, but rather, they use Arabizi only in their private chats, such as texting. Also, the interviews in this study were conducted only in the three major cities of Saudi Arabia. This was done for linguistic and manageability reasons; however, they are representative cities of the general population in Saudi Arabia. The inclusion of more participants, and recruited from schools and universities from different geographical areas beyond the three major cities of Saudi Arabia, would have increased the level of representativeness of this study and, so, increased the generalizability of the findings.

It is possible that participants may have felt hesitant and reserved in giving very detailed opinions about Arabizi. Efforts were made to provide a safe and comfortable environment for them to express their opinions freely. However, despite all the efforts, not all participants participated in the face-to-face

interviews. Future research should include additional face to face interviews and also analyse naturally occurring online interactions for further triangulation.

Further, it should be noted that this study did not investigate or identify any potential gender differences between male and female participants regarding their use of Arabizi and their attitudes towards its use. This was beyond the scope of this study and, therefore, remains as a topic to be investigated in future studies. No gender differences were reported or found either in the e-questionnaires or the interviews with respect to participants' attitudes. Other factors, such as the participants' socioeconomic class, their level of education, or institution of education, could also have an effect on someone's use of Arabizi or the degree to which he/she uses Arabizi. These factors were not investigated in this study, but could be investigated in future research in order to improve our understanding of Arabizi and its use.

Based on the mentioned limitations, research directions worthy of investigation include

1. An examination and comparison of male and female use of Arabizi and the different attitudes towards it, if any. This may provide further insights into the phenomenon of Arabizi in Saudi Arabia, as well as the Arab world.
2. Some participants highlighted that their use of Arabizi can negatively affect their Arabic writing, and this has been a key argument in the anti-Arabizi team. Therefore, research that examines the effects of Arabizi on the user's Arabic writing skills could be investigated empirically or through experiment in the future.
3. The socioeconomic class, level of education, and institution of education may affect someone's use of Arabizi, or the degree to which he/she uses Arabizi. Future research could recruit a larger number of participants and also analyse online data to examine if there is any relationship between these factors and one's use of Arabizi.
4. A small number of the respondents reported that Arabizi is declining, and Albirini (2016) linked the decrease of Arabizi use to the introduction of Arabic interface online, and the negative attitudes toward Arabizi in the Arab world. It would be interesting to investigate the use of Arabizi in Saudi Arabia to explore if it is still widely spread or is really declining.

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