Projecting, Exposing, Revealing Self in the Digital World: Usernames as a Social Practice in a Moroccan Chatroom

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This article analyzes the characteristics of 141 usernames in a Moroccan chatroom gathered over sixty days (September 4 2011, through November 3 2011). Analysis of the results of this study identifies eleven categories of usernames, including those using a common Moroccan first name, a first name followed by a last name, a name with a number, usernames referring to Anglo-Saxon and French cultures, and those referring to the Muslim religion. This study offers insights into the construction of Moroccan identity in the virtual world that fluctuates between a traditional local Muslim Moroccan identity and a desire to belong to the global community.

KEYWORDS username, chatroom, Morocco, identity, Internet

Introduction

Since the 1990s, the Internet has influenced millions of people's lives around the globe. Email, instant messaging, and chat are now everyday forms of communication. The Internet is used to obtain information, for leisure, and as a social community platform (Cherny, 1999: 2). Internet Relay Chat (IRC), more commonly called a *chatroom* or simply *chat*, is an open digital space where online conversations take place — one can literally hear the sound of a door when a chatter enters or leaves the room. It is also a digital social venue that stimulates new linguistic features (Crystal, 2001). This medium of communication is text based, often synchronous and anonymous: users can communicate with others and express opinions in real time.

   Chatroom participants identify themselves by usernames, also called *screen names* or *nicknames*, often abbreviated to *nick*. This article investigates username patterns by analyzing a sample of 141 usernames collected in a Moroccan chatroom between September 4 2011, and November 3 2011. I examine how Moroccan chatroom users construct and project an online identity (Turkle, 1995) by crafting a username

(Greenfield and Subrahmanyam, 2003: 659) that acts as an indicator of linguistic innovation and social norms (de Klerk and Bosch, 1996; Phillips, 1990). Unlike nicknames, which are usually given by one individual or group to another, Internet usernames are deliberately chosen, enabling users to introduce their web persona to the digital community. As explained by Cornetto and Nowak (2006: 379), usernames allow participants to establish an online identity that is recognizable to others. This self-tagging acts as a linguistic device that aims to attract contacts and allow the chat participant to be a unique member of a digital community.

   In Morocco, computers and the Internet are slowly making their entry into homes, while cyber cafés have been present for a decade on almost every corner in most Moroccan cities. Their affordable hourly rate (about a dollar per hour), given limited other sources of entertainment, makes chatting a popular pastime. The language used in Moroccan chatrooms is mostly French due to the limited use of the Arabic script within Internet domains. French is the third most widely spoken language in Morocco, after Arabic and Berber, as a result of the French protectorate (1912–1956). It is the first foreign language taught, and it is used widely in the media and in everyday life (Benzakour et al., 2000). Despite this strong presence of French on the Internet, it is also not rare to see instances of Arabic transliterated in the Roman alphabet in a chatroom.

   Chatrooms have piqued interest among scholars from various disciplines (Greenfield and Subrahmanyam, 2003). Barak and Wander-Schwartz (2000) have looked at the use of chatrooms as a successful venue for group therapy. Lam (2004) studied the use of chatrooms to improve English learning by Chinese immigrants in the United States, where the chatroom becomes a socialization forum that creates a collective ethnic identity. Chatrooms have also been used in the medical field as a preventive tool against HIV on a gay dating site (Davis et al., 2006; Rhodes, 2004). Chatroom dating has also been studied by Subrahmanyam et al. (2004), who found that a chatroom was used as a digital forum that allowed teens to freely discuss issues related to sexuality. The use of chatrooms has also been examined from a social science perspective, especially the distinction between the actual self and the virtual self. The complexity of this issue resides in the fact that the self, as explained by Donath (1999: 29), is mistakenly often viewed as being confined to a body that acts as an "anchor," a fixed object, while in fact the self is independent of the body and is continuously changing. In the digital world, since there is no "body" or "anchor," the question becomes, how are we going to approach and understand identity and identity construction?

   Cornetto and Nowak (2006: 379) claim that the choice of a username is "not an arbitrary process." Turkle (1995: 178) argues that chatroom interactions act as spaces in which users may reveal multiple selves. Bargh et al. (2002: 33–34) add that users in a chatroom may reveal their "true selves" because they are not subject to expectations or constraints. Humphrey (2009: 33), in her study of interactions in a Russian chatroom, makes a clear distinction between the real self and the virtual self, which she calls a "mask" or "avatar" that allows users to play out certain identities or roles. From a linguistic perspective, Merchant (2001: 295) analyzed the chatroom as a forum that displays linguistic innovation, as the language used in forums is perceived as a "hybrid" of spoken and written language. Despite this interest in chatrooms, onomastic studies on usernames have been very limited (Holland, 1990). This study, to my

knowledge, is the first to analyze the semantics of usernames in a Moroccan chatroom.

Method: data collection

To obtain a reasonable sample size, I observed a popular Moroccan chatroom website called *maghrebchat.net* for sixty days from September 4 2011, through November 3 2011. I collected usernames from a subgroup called *Casa chat*, targeting users from the city of Casablanca, located in the western part of the country on the Atlantic Ocean and considered the largest city and the economic capital. This subgroup displays the last twenty users in a window on the home page. Out of 1200 log-ins, 141 different usernames were identified (users logged in more than once). Once the data was collected, I classified it on a spreadsheet, which facilitated the creation of a typology of usernames, as presented in Tables 1 and 2. It is important to note that the data presented in the analysis is transcribed as originally written by the users. It is also important to mention that all the data collected was written entirely using the Roman alphabet; Arabic script was not used. I did not create an account or enter the chatroom in order to protect users' privacy. Neither age nor gender was taken into consideration, as it is not possible to verify the accuracy of this information in a chatroom (Cornetto and Nowak, 2006; Rollman et al., 2000).

Results and discussion

In the corpus analyzed, eleven categories of usernames were found, as presented in Tables 1 and 2.

The first category includes typical Moroccan first names, such as *zineb*, *redouan*, and *houda*. These appear in 18 instances out of 141 (12.7%). These usernames some-

TABLE 1

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF EACH CATEGORY OF USERNAMES IN A MOROCCAN CHATROOM

Category	Number of usernames used	Percentage of total usernames
Usernames using only a common Moroccan first name	18	12.7
Usernames using a common Moroccan first name followed by a surname	7	4.9
Usernames using a Moroccan first name followed by an initial or a suffix	6	4.2
Usernames using a common Moroccan first name followed by a number	19	13.4
Usernames referring to Arab or Moroccan culture	13	9.2
Usernames referring to French culture	7	4.9
Usernames referring to culture of English-speaking countries	14	9.9
Usernames referring to Spanish culture	18	12.7
Usernames referring to the Muslim religion	2	1.4
Usernames referring to a place (city, region, country)	7	4.9
Other	30	21.2
TOTAL	**141**	**100**

TABLE 2

EXAMPLES OF THE ELEVEN CATEGORIES OF USERNAMES IN A MOROCCAN CHATROOM

Category	Examples (female, male)
Usernames using only a common Moroccan first name	*Redouan, faical, huda*
Usernames using a common Moroccan first name followed by a surname	*Achraf Benis, ahmetozdamar, amineragihi*
Usernames using a Moroccan first name followed by an initial or a suffix	*selmaH, amina-lo, walidos*
Usernames using a common Moroccan first name followed by a number	*adel1980, Ahmed2299, Nassiraa1982*
Usernames referring to Arab or Moroccan culture	*Wahedani* "lonely," *fayn* "where," *Salamsalam* "hello hello"
Usernames referring to French culture	*Bonbon* "candy," *Cmoi* "it's me," *MaGnoLiA*
Usernames referring to culture of English-speaking countries	*four in one aicha, miss nadia, Webmaster*
Usernames referring to Spanish culture	*plata-pura* "pure silver," *sorbito* "a sip," *isnara la Chula* "sexy isnara"
Usernames referring to the Muslim religion	*islam1984, muslime7*
Usernames referring to a place (city, region, country)	*berkania-oujdia,* "a female from Oujda in the northeast region of Berkan," *tanjawi75* "a male from the northern Mediterranean city of Tanger," *karim_frankfurt*
Other	*sala-00, bouza, isa tkm*

times omit capitalization, as in the examples above. Some names are rendered in all capitals, perhaps to make the name more unique, as in *NAJWAA*. Another user, *amYne*, used a capital letter in the middle of his name. This phenomenon — known as inter-capitalization — is used in advertising to make the name of a product more eye-catching. Users may introduce variety in spelling a first name by eliminating a vowel or changing it in some other way, as in *abderrahmane* vs. *abdrrahman* and *acheraf* vs. *acharaf*. Using real first names may facilitate reciprocity and interaction in chatrooms.

This phenomenon is also apparent in the second category: 7 users out of 141 (4.9%) chose to use both a first name and what looks like a surname, with or without a space between the two names. For instance, a user called himself *kameldhinio*. *Kamel* is a common Moroccan male given name and *Dhinio* is a common surname. Similar cases are noted in *Acharaf Benis*, *RACHID el alamy*, and *azizohina*. As reported by Merchant (2001: 298), chatroom names may provide hints about participants' real persona. The use of the given name followed by the surname might be motivated by a desire to bring real-world sincerity and authenticity to cybersphere communication to create transparency and reinforce relationships.

The third category of patterns found is a username constructed with a first name followed by a letter or a number, identified in 6 out of 141 names (4.2%). Sometimes the letter may refer to the user's real surname, as in *selmaH*. It is possible that users

choose an initial instead of the full surname to maintain anonymity while hinting at their real identity. In the same category are first names with the diminutive or affectionate ending –*nou*, as in *acharafinou*. Another noted variation is the addition of a suffix, for example *-Lo* added to the name *Amina-Lo*. This is sometimes found in names of users from sub-Saharan African countries, possibly due to the growing number of students from these countries who come to Morocco to study. The suffix *-Lo* may also represent a calque of the nickname of American singer and actress Jennifer Lopez, *J.Lo*.

In the case of a first name followed by a number, the number may be attached to the name itself, such as *ali80*, *Sarah86*, or *hanan22*, or may be hyphenated, as in *mohsin-10*. Sometimes users drop the final syllable and add a number, as in *fati2012* and *ibra32*, which probably refer to *Fatima* and *Ibrahim*. The number of digits varies from one to four. Some of the numbers seem to be random; these probably indicate a user wanting to use his or her first name but finding it already in use, for example, *anisah123*. Digits may refer to age, as in *fares 20*, or to the year of the user's birth, as in *abe-83*.

References to Arab/Moroccan culture appeared in 13 usernames (9.2%), all written in the Roman alphabet. For example, in *chra3*, the number 3 represents a voiced pharyngeal fricative sound in Arabic, corresponding to the letter /ʕ/ (pronounced *ayn*), which is often transliterated by a 3 due to the absence of an equivalent sound in the Roman alphabet. The term *chra3* refers to a loud, chatty person who is not afraid to speak his or her mind freely. *Ferkouss*, a humorous term for a hip guy, is another example of a username derived from Moroccan culture. A similar example is the compound username *Lalla Latifa*. *Latifa* is a common Moroccan female name meaning "kindness," while *Lalla* "miss" or "lady" is a polite form of address for speaking to a woman. Another such username is *Zinn25*, *Zinn* meaning "beauty" in Moroccan Arabic. The term is often used in catcalling or romantic teasing. Other usernames referring to romance include *HabibAlbi* "love of my heart" and *habibi99* "my love."

In Morocco, cyber cafés are open to all ages and there is no division between males and females. This phenomenon breaks with Arab sociocultural rules, which traditionally create a distinct separation between roles and spaces for women and men (Kaya, 2009). The popularity of chatting may be due to the fact that entertainment infrastructures are less able to reinforce cultural rules and are perceived as a forum where men and women can meet for dating or marriage. In Morocco, a predominantly Muslim country, male and female interactions outside marriage are often negatively perceived. Chatrooms act as a neutral space between the "public and private spheres" (Kaya, 2009: 253) where anonymity and privacy allow women to communicate with male strangers without hurting their reputations.

Moroccan usernames often convey humor and a playful complicity in shared culture and knowledge. As Lam (2004) shows, chatrooms allow the construction of shared cultural beliefs and values. This explains why usernames avoid referring to physical attributes and sexuality, as explicit references to sexuality are often negatively perceived in Morocco. This phenomenon shows how Moroccan users appropriate and customize the Internet according to their accepted sociocultural conduct. The flexibility of the Internet facilitates this opposition of the local within the global (Wheeler, 2006: 194).

Seven usernames in this study (4.9%) refer to the French language or culture. This is not surprising, given the historical colonial ties between France and Morocco. Lexical words are used as usernames, including those referring to sweet edible items, such as *Bonbon* "candy" and *Fraise* "strawberry." These may be a way to enhance the user's appeal, given the sensual or sexual connotation these terms have, relating to the stereotypical image of French as the language of romance and love. The use of chatrooms for dating and sexual encounters is well known. Still, even in sexually oriented chatrooms, usernames with sexual connotations are not positively perceived (Mills, 1998: 34). Other references to French culture in usernames included *Diabless* "female devil," *Cmoi*, a shortened version of *C'est moi* "It's me," and *FemmeB*, which may be a calque of the famous French fashion designer Agnès B.

The impact of the English language and culture is apparent in 14 usernames (9.9%), as in *goodmen*, *yankeeboy*, and *IronMaidenHM85*, referring to the British heavy-metal band. There are also typical Anglo-Saxon names (sometimes misspelled), such as *Walker31*, *eeliot*, and *rayan12850*. It is surprising to find a username referring to physical relationships in English — *lovebabykiss* — while other usernames in Arabic referring to dating relationships are more subtle, as in *HabibAlbi* and *habibi99*, mentioned above. The name *goodmen* can also be read as self-promotion of the user's positive moral attributes. In the name *WanteD*, a term often seen in translated American Western movies in Morocco, the last letter may be capitalized as an attention getter.

Spanish sounds are present in 18 usernames (12.7%), which could be due to the geographical proximity as well as historical colonial ties between Morocco and Spain. Usernames relating to the Spanish language and culture include *elbueno* "the good," *Aqui* "here," *asesino* "killer," and *MIMADRE* "my mother." The names *lorena* and *Murciana36* may be a reflection of the popularity of translated Latin American soap operas in Morocco.

In the category of usernames with a religious connotation, only the Muslim religion was referred to, possibly because a large majority of Moroccans are Muslim. The link between Islam and the Internet has been discussed by Wheeler (2006: 187) in her research on Kuwait, where the Internet is used to inform and improve Muslim practices. By creating usernames like *islam1984* or *muslime7*, users are openly declaring their religion, and may be informing the chatroom community that conduct will need to conform (at least at first) to Muslim religious principles. Usernames displaying the user's religion may also indicate a need for affiliation via shared sociocultural elements. Subrahmanyam et al. (2004: 659) note that the creation of a username — the projection of self — relates to the audience targeted and the motives behind the use of the chatroom. In the case of a Moroccan chatroom, Islam might help create in-group solidarity or intimacy among users (de Klerk and Bosch, 1997).

Usernames may reflect a need to establish solidarity among chatroom participants, as well as an assertion of belonging to a specific place. Seven names (4.9%) make reference to a city, region, or country, including *german-layla*, a reminder of the large Moroccan immigrant population in Germany; *tanjawi75*, referring to a male inhabitant of the northern Moroccan city of Tangier; and *oujdi*, a male inhabitant of the northeastern city of Oujda. Both cities are considered average in size compared to large cities like Casablanca, Rabat, or Fes. As explained by Merchant (2001: 299),

technology fails to provide instant spatial–temporal information needed in any successful communicative interaction. The dialectic between nicknaming practices and places is also discussed by Rymes (1996: 244) in her study in which a young gang boy refers to himself as *Little Creeper* and *Diamond Street* to show his belonging to his street gang, in opposition to other gangs on other streets. A similar case is noted in this study as geographical references in usernames reinforce community ties and promote pride in belonging to smaller cities, which might facilitate connections among users from similar places, or, on the contrary, increase rivalry between cities.

Gross (2004: 635), addressing the use of the Internet by adolescents, argues that cyberspace has become "an anonymous playground that allows users to explore identities." This experimentation can also be found in the last category of usernames, labeled "other," representing usernames with a hidden meaning. These represent the majority of the usernames detected, 21.2% or 30 instances. They include *lala*, *lalilu*, *tatifa*, and others with more foreign sounds, as in *kikokimo*, *bakarov*, and *HaaS*. As explained by Jönsjö (1979: 16), a nickname is sometimes "beyond the scope of linguistic analysis" as it involves subjective interpretation based on sociocultural values and ideological assumptions, as illustrated by the cryptic username *DD40a*. Antoun (1968: 167), in his study of naming practices, notes a prevalent ambiguity in nicknaming in the Arab culture that allows participants to create their own meaning, thereby attracting more respondents and interest. This need to create an ambiguous username might also be motivated by a desire to remain totally anonymous. From the literary perspective, Kerr (1987: 94) argues that, when a novelist chooses an ambiguous name for a character, this is an intentional decision to create a climate of "deliberate vagueness." As in literature, these instances of usernames are a linguistic strategy for creating a nebulous self that might tickle the curiosity of users and generate a higher rate of attention and responses.

Conclusions

Usernames and their manifestations in the cybersphere may seem like a trivial topic, but in fact they are a valid linguistic indicator of sociocultural norms and practices. Results of this study show that usernames in the Moroccan chatroom draw on creative patterns using typical Moroccan first names, last names, suffixes, numbers, and the Arabic language transliterated using the Roman alphabet, all acting as indicators of continuous linguistic innovation. Usernames are not just a form of etiquette; they constitute a complex naming practice that acts as a barometer of identity construction, projection, and mutation reflecting political, economic, and sociocultural impacts and shifts. This study has shown that usernames are imaginative, eclectic, and consciously crafted to best brand the self in the digital world, allowing Moroccan chat users to engage with the globalized discourse, as seen in usernames referring to French and Anglophone cultures while reaffirming, valuing, and projecting their share local Moroccan, Arab, and Muslim cultures and values. Internet onomastics is a rich field in which the lack of clear boundaries between the public and the private sphere, along with more relaxed cultural rules, favors imbrications, altercations, and blending of local and global elements. The construction, evolution, and reinvention of identity via Internet names merits more scholarly attention.

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