YOU SAY *HELLO*, I SAY *MAR7ABA*: EXPLORING THE DIGI-SPEAK THAT POWERED THE ARAB REVOLUTION

By

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ABSTRACT

YOU SAY *HELLO*, I SAY *MAR7ABA*: EXPLORING THE DIGI-SPEAK THAT
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This is an exploratory study of a digital-script called 3ngleezy, which was developed by the Arab youth in the Middle East and North Africa. This script incorporates Arabic numerals and the English alphabet in texts composed primarily in and for digital spaces. This study explores how such a script allows users to transcribe Arabic in these digital spaces while retaining some of the visual and aural integrity of the Arabic script. Furthermore, in light of the 2011 Arab revolution, this study explores the social subtext of 3ngleezy, which appears to have the rhetorical power to create and mobilize users in digital communities into social action.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Bill, Malea and John, thank you for your kindness.

To my interviewees, thank you for your honesty.

Many thanks to Nauf A. and Noora A. for your friendship and scholarly support.

Abid: thanks for making the coffee.

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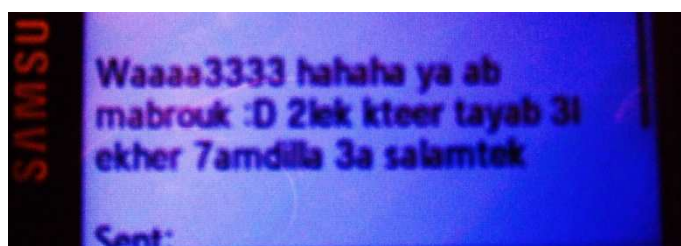
I.   Introduction

FIG. 1: Beginnings

(For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this thesis).

FIG. 1 shows a text message a Syrian friend mistakenly sent me five years ago. It read "Waaaa3333 hahaha ya ab mabrouk :D 2lek kteer tayab 3l ekher 7amdilla 3a salamtek". It was the first time I had seen such a script – transcribed Arabic, mingled with numbers. In this study, I will examine this digital script, which was developed by the Arab youth of the Middle East and North Africa. It is called 3ngleezy (pronounced [en'gle-zə]).

When I started this study a few months ago, I had no inkling that the lives of those that use 3ngleezy was about to change dramatically. The waves of protests that swept through North Africa and the Middle East earlier this year did not just alter the course of Middle Eastern history; they changed world history. Two unlikely powers fuelled these protests: the Arab youth, and digital technology. Historically criticized for their un-involvement in politics, the youth of these nations wielded a surprising weapon to power the resistance: digital networking .

In early January this year, 26 year old Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest the Tunisian regime. The aftermath of his self-immolation was heavily censored by the Tunisian government. However, the news quickly spread to neighbouring countries through YouTube, galvanizing the youth of Egypt, Algeria and Libya into resistance. Saudi Arabia and Oman experienced civil unrest, and Bahrain erupted into protests. Within digital minutes, Facebook and Twitter were awash with updates on the resistance. On YouTube,

thousands watched bulldozers tear down the Pearl Roundabout, Bahrain's symbol of resistance. Google openly expressed its support of Wael Ghonim, who left his job at Google to protest in Tahrir Square.

When the revolution was underway, I did not immediately pick up on the fact that 3ngleezy was the primary language being used by protestors in digital spaces. Instead, I was focused on trying to secure research and conference funding. While doing so, I had to answer questions about the 'importance' and 'timeliness' of my research. So I thought long and hard about how I would 'pitch' it: to my committee, to readers, and especially the community I was engaging, who believed that 3ngleezy was trivial and rhetorically deficient. At the time I was trying to come up with this 'pitch', I hadn't realized that 3ngleezy had the power to mobilize massive social movement. But 19 days after I finished my last interview with an 3ngleezy user, the Arab revolution began. I watched as the community I was engaging plunged into the resistance, using 3ngleezy to communicate across Arabics, using 'social' spaces to political ends. 3ngleezy was the digital language of the Arab youth, and the Arab youth were powering the revolution through digital spaces. These events in world history reaffirm why we study rhetorics that operate in digital spaces: their mechanisms, functions, and rhetorical strengths. This study did not need a 'pitch'.

Because it has received almost no scholarly attention so far, I realized an exploratory study of 3ngleezy would be most productive at this point. The intention was to focus on phenomena rather than individuals, and to identify the variables at play rather than control them. The design of my exploratory study draws from the research model created by Lauer and Asher in their work "Composition Research: Empirical Designs". Such a model recognizes that there are too many "predictor variables for the number of subjects", and therefore seeks to analyze data "with as little restructuring of the situation or environment under scrutiny" (1988). In the next section, along with the origins of 3ngleezy, I will discuss

the principles at the basis of my research design. Because I am not an 3ngleezy user, and therefore a community 'outsider', it was necessary for me to interrogate my own positionality as a researcher before I could approach my data.

II.   Methodology

As I mentioned earlier, my study examines a language that was born in text-messaging spaces. I observed this language in use in Sharjah and Dubai, two populous cities in the United Arab Emirates. While it began as a text-message script-of-convenience, it soon spread to email, Facebook, and Twitter. The script uses the English alphabet on keypads and keyboards to create messages that contain Arabic words that also encapsulate the *sounds* of Arabic. This use of numbers is not unlike the 'purely English' text messages that use numbers as an economical way of representing parts of words that sound like numbers, like 'gr8' for 'great' and 'b4' for 'before'.

However, this language has a completely different purpose and affect. The use of numbers aims not to shorten the words but instead convey the *sound* of the Arabic alphabet. This is because the incorporated numbers visually represent some Arabic characters. For instance, the number 7 resembles the Arabic sound 'haah', represented by the sign ح. For instance, the Arabic endearment 'hayati' is written 7ayati, which captures the deep 'h' sound of the Arabic word. Therefore, these numbers both visually and aurally represent an entirely different language even though they are flanked by English alphabet. Furthermore, even though the entire text message many contain several English words, the words with the numbers inserted into them are always transcribed Arabic. In my initial abstract, I called this language 'fused text', but later learned that users preferred the term 3ngleezy – which is what I have used.

3ngleezy users explained that the language grew out of their need to be able to verbally converse in Arabic, their L1, while being able to write in English, which was the medium of their education. 3ngleezy reconciles these two literacies – verbal Arabic and written English – in digital spaces. 3ngleezy-users are spread across various countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Since they all speak different varieties of Arabic, their use of 3ngleezy naturally reflects these dialectical differences. However, the numbers in 3ngleezy represent Arabic characters uniformly across these regions. This is because while the spoken Arabics vary, the Arabic characters themselves do not. Therefore, the characters and their 'numerical translations' are used in fairly consistent ways across 3ngleezy-using groups. I compiled most of FIG. 2 using the table in Palfreyman and Khalil's article "A Funky Language for Teenzz to Use" (2006) as a guide, but it is still incomplete. As with all communication systems, 3ngleezy is continually evolving as users add to the symbols in use.

Arabic Character	Visual Representation
ح	7
ط	6
ق	8
ع	3
ء	2
ص	9
غ	'3
ض	'9
خ	'7
ظ	'6

FIG. 2: Translating 3ngleezy

The use of '8' to represent ق is a more recent innovation – one that users say show 'hipness'. Based on the presence or absence of newer innovations in a message, 3ngleezy users make assumptions about the age, socio-economic status, and even religious values of a message composer (see section III. Part ii. For more details). In the time that's elapsed since I collected my data, I am confident that 3ngleezy has further developed in ways I haven't been able to document.

Beyond the abilities to speak Arabic and write in English, 3ngleezy users also represent a certain socio-economic privilege. Because the script was created for, and is used exclusively in, digital spaces, users must have access to cell-phones and networked computers on a regular basis to become 3ngleezy-fluent. The survey I conducted showed that 3ngleezy users spent 7 or more hours a day in digital spaces, and owned an average of 2.5 networked devices, and this indicates a degree of wealth and access. The survey also revealed that the heaviest users of 3ngleezy fell in the under-30 age group, and none of the respondents over age 40 said they used 3ngleezy.

Now that we have some background on the script and its users, I wanted to explain how the name '3ngleezy' came to be. As I mentioned earlier, I initially referred to it as 'fused text' because the script was a mix of numbers and English alphabet, with numbers fused into whole words. It was a terrible name, and I hoped my findings would offer a more representative label. I wanted the users I interviewed to name the language. I wanted them to name it in a way that would give them a voice in my study, and in a way that was representative to their community. Early in my interviewing process, when I asked users what they might name this widespread language, they suggested '3ngleezy'. A few also suggested names like 'MSN-language' and 'English-Arabic', but they generally agreed that the name '3ngleezy' better embodied the language – both aurally and visually. And so that is what I have used.

i.   The Cultural-Rhetorical Perspective

Because it lies at the intersection of multiple literacies, a study of 3ngleezy engages several disciplines, including cultural-rhetorics and linguistics. However, I will focus on using a cultural-rhetorical lens to examine my findings. This is because the relatively small scale of this project makes it difficult to examine my findings through both lenses, and I think examining 3ngleezy through a linguistic lens is a worthwhile future project. Furthermore, the patterns I have gleaned from my interviews (see Section III) lent themselves to a cultural-rhetorical analysis. The following section explains the theoretical underpinnings of my decision to use a cultural-rhetorical approach for this study.

The users (and presumably the developers) of 3ngleezy are bilingual, technologically-savvy Arab youth. I say technologically-savvy because 3ngleezy is a language for electronic spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, and now email. This is because keypads and keyboards do not allow easy switching between Arabic and English scripts, so 3ngleezy was developed to expedite texting for heavy-technology users whose L1 was Arabic. As with all social phenomena, 3ngleezy use has developed social protocol that impacts how it is used and interpreted, and I wanted to learn more about this protocol. For instance, was it appropriate to use fused-text in formal communication? To initiate social contact for the first time? To express grief? Just as the use of 'b4' or '2moro' is inappropriate in, say, a message of condolence, 3ngleezy also carries its own set of social connotations.

Furthermore, since 3ngleezy has seeped into emailing and social-networking sites, it has brought its social codes to those arenas as well. Therefore, email—which is often used for 'professional' purposes — can take on a different tone if the script in use is 3ngleezy.
To examine such social implications, I thought it would be useful to draw on Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" for its notions of the active recipient and meaning making. More specifically, I am drawing from Hall's notions of 'decoding', especially as they pertain to the

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unintended messages that 3ngleezy allows users to decode about encoders (see Section III for more discussion on this). Hall argues that there is "a space for messages to be understood against the grain" – against (or beyond) the intent of composers. He also states that "in a 'determinate' moment the…code…yields a message: [and] at another determinate moment the 'message', via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices" (7). My findings suggest that 3ngleezy is enabling decoders to do exactly that, as its very use transmits and maintains highly nuanced social structures.

Furthermore, Hall states that:

"the typical processes identified in positivistic research on isolated elements – effects, uses, 'gratifications' – are themselves framed by structures of understanding, as well as being produced by social and economic relations, which shape their 'realisation' at the reception end of the chain and which permit the meanings signified in the discourse to be transposed into practice or consciousness (to acquire social use value or political effectivity)" (4-5)

Therefore, *because* my findings suggest that 3ngleezy is enabling decoders to glean 'against the grain' messages sustained by the social structures surrounding 3ngleezy, I am not exploring the structure of 3ngleezy itself but rather the *cultures surrounding its use.* By drawing on these specific ideas from Hall's work, I hope to identify the 'realisations' at the 'reception end of the chains' that take place in 3ngleezy interactions (see section III.ii for a fuller discussion).

However, I think Hall's framework is especially compelling because he employs a semiotic element in his analysis of visual discourse. And 3ngleezy, with its visual-aural bond, is a script that complicates notions of discourse-semiotics. When Hall argues that visual discourse "translates a three-dimensional world into two-dimensional planes, it cannot, of

course, *be* the referent or concept it signifies" (11). But does the visual-aural interconnectedness of 3ngleezy problematize this claim? It certainly demands more from it.

3ngleezy doesn't solely re/present verbal-conversational Arabic; it actually transforms previously-closed spaces into spaces for verbal-conversational Arabic. In other words, has 3ngleezy moved away from simply being a re/presentation to being a referent in its own right? Therefore, by drawing on Hall's theories of message production and reception, I hope to re-examine the semiotics of texts produced in and for increasingly digital spaces.

Finally, it is important to determine why users elect to preserve certain Arabic markers in 3ngleezy and not others. All 3ngleezy users can speak and write English, so arguably the digital messages could be 1) all English, 2) Arabic words transcribed to English, or 3) transcribed Arabic mingled with English. However, these digital-composers decided to add numbers. Why? What do the numbers convey that an all English-alphabetic script could not? For one, it injects Arabic sound into the message by adding signs — numbers — that resemble the Arabic character for that sound. This suggests the importance of sound over other elements in Arabic narrative, which could be rooted in Bedouin oral tradition. Scholarly support for the orality of Arab tradition ranges from discussions of Quranic recitation to Arab folklore (see Vinson's "Shahrazadian Gestures: Personal Memory, and Oral, Matrilineal Narratives*"). This situates 3ngleezy both historically and culturally—the language of the digerati built on ancient rhetoric. I explore this idea of Bedouin orality and 3ngleezy more thoroughly in Section IV.

The exploration of these questions will, I hope, be useful to cultural rhetoricians. However, it is also of interest to composition instructors in regions where 3ngleezy use is widespread, especially if elements of 3ngleezy appear in classroom composition. An understanding of the cultural significance of 3ngleezy might also open up more dialogue on linguistic diversity in the classroom. Finally, insight on the social codes of 3ngleezy might be

useful to marketing campaigns whose target market is the Arab youth. Because 3ngleezy is still, to a large degree, not understandable to (or at least not used by) older Arabic speakers, it can convey a degree of exclusivity if used in advertisements. If the message can only be 'read' by a certain group, there can be no doubt who the message is for.

As I mentioned earlier, I wanted to develop a methodology for this study that reflected the interdisciplinarity of the topic. I wanted it to reflect the multiple ways in which 3ngleezy can be theorized. I wanted it to include the voices of users who were making meaning of it, and with it, in varied ways. So I am presenting my methodology as a collage that I hope represents some of the visual-ness and layered-ness of 3ngleezy itself.

ii.   Methodology as Trail

"I hope for a methodology that recognizes <u>relationality</u> by acknowledging the position of the researcher in relation to subjects. I hope for a methodology that allows a <u>space for subject methodologies.</u> I hope for a methodology that is <u>decolonizing</u>, which recognizes that 'minority' populations can inscribe technology and not just have technology inscribe them. I want these hopes to form the basis of a methodology that is <u>(a)cumulative</u>."

-      Excerpt from an early memo expressing the basis of my methodology

Methodologies are slippery. They exist even if they are not recognized – in which case their unrecognition becomes part of the methodology. You see the four phrases underlined above? In this section, I want to see how those four threads weave together into a methodology for my thesis. Those threads came out of various events, some research-related, others not. I want to listen for the stories coming out of them. Those stories changed my position as researcher, and consequently the way I listen to my research and myself.

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"My research is on a digital-script used by the Arab youth in the UAE. They devised a method of texting in Arabic using English keypads. A '3' resembles the Arabic 'aain' character (ع), and a '7' resembles the character 'haah' (ح). Now, young Arabs routinely type mar7aba (hello), ya3ni (I mean), t3am (food), and 7ala (you're welcome) in messages. They are reclaiming what Arab mathematicians developed centuries ago: numbers. Bedouin tradition is historically oral, stemming from Qur'anic recitation and nomadic lifestyles. This makes it significant that users of this text want to convey a sense of sound in their messages."

This is an excerpt from the very first description I wrote on this topic. It's part of an abstract that I sent to some faculty, trying to woo them into being on my committee. I emailed it to three folks, along with a 'pitch' I thought they could get behind. I told Bill about the digital - rhetorics component of the research. I told John about the global studies aspect. I told Malea about the semiotic component, which is the element that first drew me to the study. I had spent two years thinking about this language before I wrote my abstract. The faculty I talked to – now my committee – responded generously.

And then a happy coincidence put me in touch with a visiting scholar. He knew my topic. He was a linguist and an 3ngleezy user. He lived in Dubai and would be there when I returned to collect data. The perfect fourth member for my committee. I sent him my abstract in an email (FIG. 3):

MA Thesis: Arab text-messaging language   Inbox | X

○ **Lamiyah Bahrainwala** to   show

Salaam,

I'm not sure if you remember me -- I'm a graduate student of Rhet/comp and went to AUS for undergrad

I was wondering if you'd consider joining my thesis committee

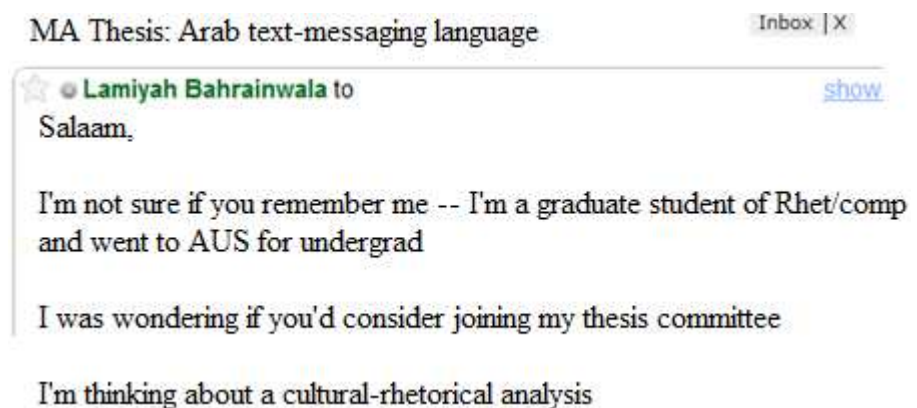I'm thinking about a cultural-rhetorical analysis

FIG. 3: The Email

Bolstered by my committee's responses to my abstract and initial plans, I felt confident about pitching my ideas to an outside scholar. I hoped he'd share my enthusiasm at this happy alignment of research interests. And then I got a response (FIG. 4):
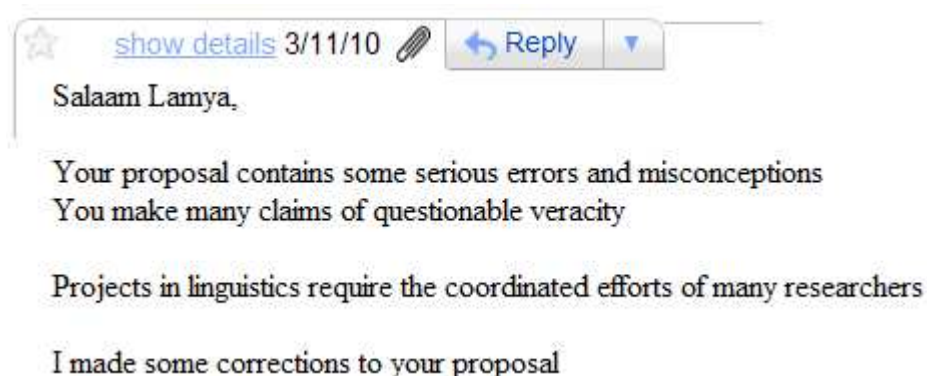
FIG. 4: Response

I was disconcerted, so I re-evaluated my abstract. And then I re-evaluated my subject position. I was not a member of the community that used the language I was studying. I wasn't even Arab. I was entering a realm where my credibility would always be questioned because of my ethnicity, my researcher positionality. It was the first time I realized that I might be unwelcome on scholarly territory that was already occupied. This scholar assumed that if I wanted to continue, I would have to accept his corrections. He assumed that I would take a linguistics approach, even though I had stated otherwise in my email. He had colonized the beginnings of my research.

"As scholars, we are taught to search around for a subject, publish on it, claim it, colonize it, and build our scholarly identities off of it".

- *Malea Powell, in class*

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After this interaction, I became preoccupied with my position as a researcher, and my relationships to/ with the user-community. To understand where I stood and how I'd be perceived by them, I began to map and re-map the relationality between my methodologies and theirs. The partial maps below depict the groups I'd be engaging as a researcher, and FIG. 5 shows roles I would/could fill. FIG. 6 illustrates how the various pieces of my identity – UAE resident, non-Arab, university alumna, etc. – position me in relation to the community as well as larger theoretical frames.
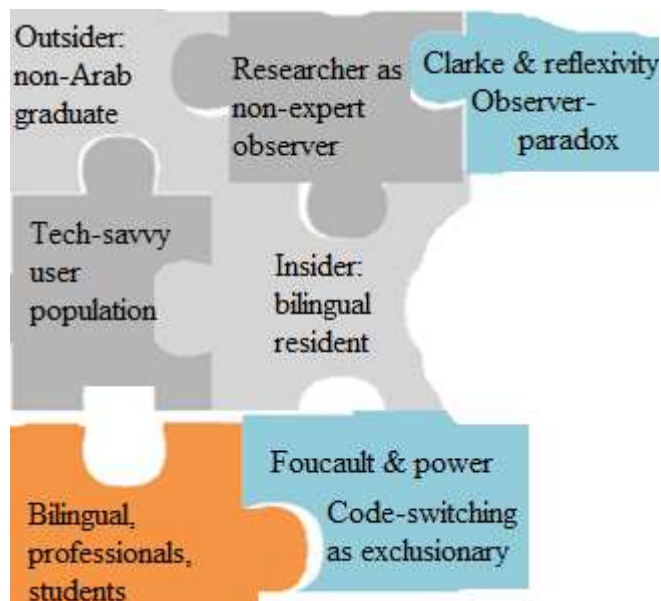

FIG. 5: Researcher Roles

FIG. 6: Relationality

Having begun my project with reflections on colonization, I became determined not just to hear the *voices* of participants in my research, but their *methodologies* as well. I did not want to assume that I was the first to theorize their language. I did not want to name their language *for* them. Just because there was little (US, institutional, English-language) scholarship on the topic didn't mean users weren't theorizing 3ngleezy. And they were.

"Our teacher calls it Arabizi, but that's not right. It doesn't fit. It doesn't show the character of the language."

"I think it's a twist on English. It's English, Arabic-style. For MSN chats and all stuffs [sic]. I call it 3ngleezy."

The excerpts above come from some of the conversations I had with users of the language. After one of them coined the term '3ngleezy' based on the rationale above, I pitched the name to other users. Many of them liked how the name embodied the language, and asked me to use it in my research. I said I would.

"Groups may differ in their presentation of theory, but not in…capacity to theorize" (5).
- *Lee Maracle, "On Oratory"*

"Relational accountability invites the community into the methodology…to develop an indigenous paradigm that [they] can use forms of expressions that [they] judge to be valid for [themselves]" (14).
- *Shawn Wilson,* Research is Ceremony

There were other ways to bring their voices into my work. During our conversations, I noticed that interviewees could not stop themselves from scribbling 3ngleezy on scraps of paper (FIG. 7). I wondered why they were doing that – perhaps for my benefit, since I was a community outsider? When I pointed it out to them, they were surprised – they hadn't even realized they were doing it. Some of them told me that 3ngleezy was a language that was more connected to its written script than most languages. The script existed solely to convey sound, they explained. They were theorizing.
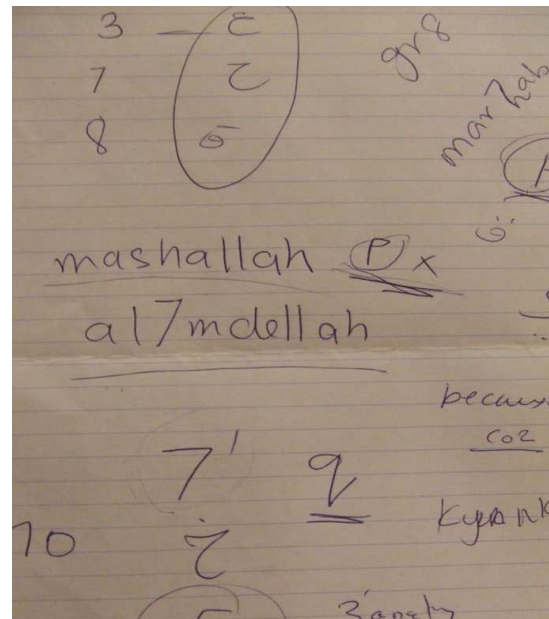
FIG. 7: A photograph of a text produced during interviews

I collected the scribbles that came out of those conversations. They existed as an archive within my research, helping me reconstruct narratives that would otherwise be lost. In the bottom right corner of the picture above, I see my own handwriting. I'd written down Hindi words I'd phonetically transcribed to English. During our conversation, I was trying to talk through how my own experiences intersected with my interviewees'; how our textual practices overlapped. If it weren't for this collection of scraps, I would have forgotten this moment when our methodologies – researcher and 'subject' – began to meld.

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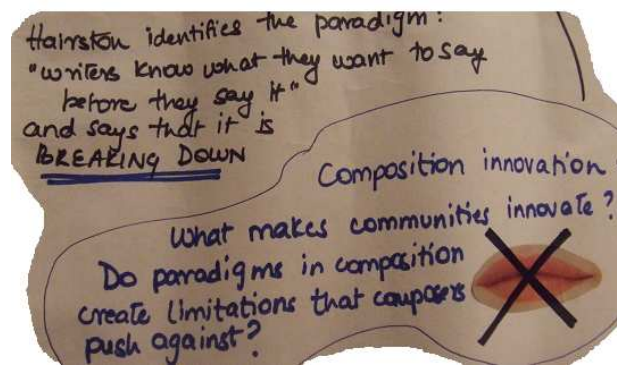
FIG. 8: Unheard Narratives: a map I created while planning my methodology

"The problem is not that [narratives] are being silenced, but being unheard" (50).

-     *Emma Perez,* The Decolonial Imaginery

And so I went back into this archive, hoping to retrieve those methodological instances and stories that I believed were unheard (see FIG. 8).

My most productive interviews were the result of a happy coincidence. As I was walking around my undergrad campus in Sharjah, I ran into two women I knew as a sophomore – Nauf and Noora. They were now MA students in translation, as well as 3ngleezy users. I told them about my research. We found a table at the library coffee shop and talked for three hours. When I got back to Michigan I found this in my inbox:
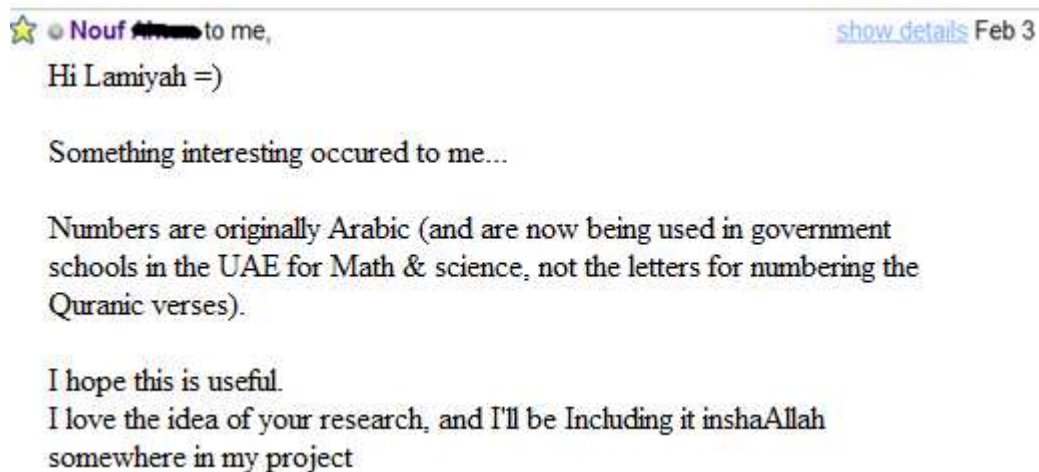
FIG. 9: Correspondence

Not only was Nauf continuing to inform my methodology, but she was incorporating my methodology into *her* thesis (see FIG. 9) – which she was in the process of writing. She asked me how I'd like my name spelled in her acknowledgements. We've since been in touch.

It is easy for me to assume that the user-community is not theorizing my research topic. It is convenient to assume that I am the first to 'discover' my findings, and only I have the expert knowledge to decipher them. But Nauf and Noora brought both translation-expertise and insider-knowledge of 3ngleezy to the table.

"The privilege of discovery is the colonizer's alone" (28)

- *Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument"*

But there was another striking narrative that came out of my many conversations with 3ngleezy users that I didn't want to leave untold. The users repeatedly expressed contempt for 3ngleezy, and disgust at having to use to it.

"It's not a real language. It's just made-up."

"We shouldn't distort the Qur'an's language"

"It's polluting English and Arabic."

"My dad makes me retype anything I write in 3ngleezy."

I heard these statements over and over again in my interviews. I began to recognize that, when it came to making sense of 3ngleezy, the methodologies of users were based on religion and a sense of language 'purity'. 3ngleezy users saw the language as an admission of defeat, that they could neither express themselves fully in English nor in Arabic. And yet, 3ngleezy was empowering them to bring the rhetorical richness of Arabic to digital spaces.

"For me, [language] was a tool that I wanted to use in developing a new means of expression, so that while still being French [I could retain] a black character" (83).

- *Aime Cesaire,* Discourse on Colonialism

And so my methodology expanded to include an exploration of how 3ngleezy was empowering, enabling, and returning agency to users. I was especially pushed to confront that question when I had to address the following prompt (FIG 10):

CCCC Scholars for the Dream Travel Award
1) The Problem: The presentation promises to describe a significant problem or issue, meeting one or more of these criteria

Timeliness: **Contributes to a current issue in rhetoric or composition studies**

FIG. 10: The Need for Scholarship

And I wrote:

We need to study this now *because studies on technology use in the Middle-East treat user populations as though they are passive. Studying 3ngleezy demonstrates how users bend technology, and not just how technology bends users. Exploring 3ngleezy necessitates a decolonizing methodology*

3ngleezy's use was widespread, but my interviewees still regarded it as a trivial, inconsequential language. But on February 15, I woke up to a startling realization of how users were being enabled and empowered by 3ngleezy. I watched the revolutions sweep through Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt. Then Libya, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Bahrain. The youth across these nations had been galvanized, and they were using digital spaces to power the revolution. These spaces were overflowing with nationalistic messages in 3ngleezy.

FIG 11: The 2011 Revolution – sparked by digital media, sustained by 3ngleezy

Those that I interviewed thought 3ngleezy was a language of convenience, not of purpose. It was never 'serious', they said. However, 3ngleezy returned the power of activism to the youth of the Middle East and North Africa. It gave them a voice that people heard, and

listened to. And so in light of these startling events, I re-assessed my own approaches and methodology.

When I presented my research at the CCCC 2011, I changed my introduction. Instead of beginning with a description of 3ngleezy, I began with images of its impacts (see FIG. 11). My methodology had shifted: I was no longer as concerned about pitching the importance of studying 3ngleezy, but newly awakened to its social and political capital. These methodological principles acted as a guide as I determined the most appropriate research methods to use for this study. Those methods are detailed below.

iii.   Methods

I used three data collection techniques for this study: questionnaires, scenario-responses, and interviews. Ordinarily, I would focus my energies on the interviews and scenario responses because they would yield the more descriptive and detailed data, which would allow me to acknowledge multiple realities. However, my research topic occupies an unusual position in that it has received almost no scholarly attention save for a single article: Palfreyman and Khalil's "A Funky Language for Teenzz to Use" (2006). Furthermore, this piece engages a morphological rather than socio-cultural approach, referring to the script as 'AA' or ASCII-ized Arabic (ASCII is an acronym for American Standard Code for Information Interchange). As a result, this absence of scholarship on the social capital of 3ngleezy meant that I needed some empirical, investigative data before I could implement my other research methods. I needed to determine *who* to pick for interviews before I could interview them, and I did that based on the results of the questionnaires.

The Questionnaire: The purpose of this method was to gather demographic information on the users of 3ngleezy. Because little research has been done on 3ngleezy, I needed to collect statistical information to determine some characteristics of the target group.

This was not so much a finding in itself as it was a way for me to determine who to interview. For instance, certain bilingual Arab youth may not use 3ngleezy if they were educated entirely in Arabic-medium schools, and the questionnaires helped expose these subtle differences. Based on the responses, I also determined which respondents were the heaviest users of 3ngleezy, and I tried to recruit as many of them as I could for the interviewing and scenario-response portions of the research.

The method itself was simple. The questionnaires were disseminated electronically to 75 people through email, Facebook, and Twitter. This meant that I knew most of the individuals that I contacted, either directly or indirectly. Because response rates to questionnaires tend to be low, it helped that I knew many of the survey-takers and it may have raised the response rates. I also slipped a few 3ngleezy phrases into the subject of my email as well as the questions in the survey to create an interest in my study and increase response rate. The questionnaire contained two widely-used 3ngleezy phrases – *ya3ni* ("I mean") and *7ala* ("okay/you're welcome") – to illustrate my topic. I also included questions about respondent age, profession, nationality, languages spoken, languages written, how frequently they used 3ngleezy, and the media (eg. Twitter, email, etc.) in which they used it.

Scenario Responses & Interviews: Since little research has been done on 3ngleezy, I am in the fortunate position where participants have probably not yet developed 'triggered responses' from overexposure to questions on this topic. Therefore, I could ask participants to respond to hypothetical social scenarios to determine whether or not 3ngleezy would be effective or appropriate to use in those situations. I also provided situations in which I believed 3ngleezy use would be inappropriate, and asked participants to respond to those situations.

An example of a scenario:
The following is a text-message sent by a college student offering condolence to a friend.

Ya A7mad, bas 7araam. Anta ab… alf aasif ya sadeeq.

(Approximate translation: Ahmad, it's terrible. I heard about your father. Really sorry my friend.)

When I implemented this method, to my surprise I found that I needed to reassure participants that they were the 'experts' in that situation and that there were no 'wrong' responses. They also had the opportunity to clarify or extend their responses in the follow-up interview. During the interview, I also initiated the semiotics-driven discussion on whether 3ngleezy can (or is?) destabilizing the way numbers are 'read'.

The scenarios preceded the interviews because the scenario responses focus on the *use* of 3ngleezy rather than user *perceptions* of it (which was tackled in the interviews). This meant I was asking participants to make a decision on the use of 3ngleezy based on a situation I had provided, and the follow-up interviews then interrogated why they made those decisions. Furthermore, I hoped that asking participants to react to the use of 3ngleezy in unorthodox situations would highlight its implicit social codes — another issue I wanted to address in the interviews.

I decided to limit the scenario-response participants to those who demonstrated heavy 3ngleezy use in the questionnaires, but I also enlisted two non-users. The non-users helped me determine how accessible (or inaccessible) 3ngleezy was to 'out-groups'. Ultimately, I enlisted 15 participants for the scenario-responses, and the same 15 for the interviews. The scenario-responses took approximately 20 minutes to complete and were administered face-to-face. The interviews varied from 20 minutes to three hours in length, and the duration was always determined by the participants themselves. The interviews were loosely structured with no pre-set interview questions as the questions arose from the responses to the scenarios. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in public spaces, such as libraries, coffee shops, and parks.

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I spent some time thinking about the best way to record the interview transcripts, and I decided the most reliable method would be to tape-record the discussions. This was to ensure I didn't record just those details that interested me or confirmed my assumptions, which is a danger many researchers face when researching familiar communities (see Beverly Moss' discussion of auto-ethnography in "Studying Language at Home"). Furthermore, tape-recordings also captured speaker tone and voice-emphasis. This was especially important because many of the participants were non-native speakers of English, which means that voice-emphasis, tone, and hesitation — which my written notes would miss — were particularly significant. But I also had notepaper and pencils on hand to record ideas that I wanted to bring up later.

At this point, I would like to describe the findings that these research methods yielded. These findings identify and document social and linguistic patterns in the use of 3ngleezy. My aim is not to provide a case study/ies, but instead understand the attitudes and social rules surrounding the use of 3ngleezy.

III.   Findings

i.   User Attitudes and 3ngleezy

As a researcher in a community I was familiar with but *not* a member of, I tried to avoid looking for patterns because it could cause me to overlook crucial details. In this case, my partial knowledge could be more harmful than no knowledge. Instead, I tried to listen *to* and *for* commonalities in narratives without aiming for them. So I thought it was very interesting when all fifteen interviewees I engaged articulated the same attitude towards 3ngleezy. They thought it was silly, shallow, and lacked seriousness. They called it a "made-

up" system of communication that wasn't valuable, shouldn't appear in print, and that they would never, ever use in formal interaction.

All the interviewees rejected the term 'language' to describe 3ngleezy, primarily referring to it as a 'way of speaking' or 'slang language'. These comments afforded me a glimpse of what 'constitutes' a language to different communities. I often think the term 'language' is bestowed on those systems of communication that become dominant. However, if language-status is bestowed based on the number of people who use it, 3ngleezy would certainly make the cut. There are possibly more 3ngleezy users than speakers of any one dialect of Arabic – whether Egyptian Arabic, Gulf Arabic, or Tunisian. This is because 3ngleezy cuts across Arabic dialects, and is almost equally intelligible to the Arabic-speaking digerati of any country. But despite its wide use, it was almost universally dismissed by all my interviewees. Did 3ngleezy occupy such a low status in their minds because of its inherent characteristics, or because it was contrasted with the classical Arabic script?

The more I talked to 3ngleezy users, the more reasons they gave me to believe the latter. Several interviewees admitted feeling 'guilty' about using 3ngleezy because they considered the addition of each number an attack on the language of the Qur'an. Because Arabic occupies the unique status of being the language of Islam, it occupies a sacred status in the minds of Arab Muslims. Even the non-Muslim Arabs I interviewed recognized this status. Three interviewees expressed concern that classical Arabic – the language of the Qur'an – was already in disuse. Even worse, 3ngleezy was now annihilating the very *script* of the language, which was cited as a major source of guilt in the interviews. In my conversation with two 3ngleezy users who were also translation scholars, they pointed out something I had overlooked: the language of the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet (called *Hadith*) were *never* transcribed in 3ngleezy. Ever. It was just too disrespectful, they said. 11 of the 15 interviewees stated that they wouldn't need to 'resort' to 3ngleezy had they been educated in

Arabic. They said they used it only because they were used to writing in English but more used to conversing in Arabic, and that this 'unfortunate' combination made it necessary for them to devise a system that combined these dis/abilities.

Another reason several (eight) interviewees cited for their guilt at using 3ngleezy was that they felt it eroded national identity. English occupies a second-language status in many Middle-Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan. This means that English is often the language of commerce, higher education, and news media in these countries. Therefore, it is unsurprising that citizens feel concerned that the 'globalization of languages' (or the dominance of English) is a threat to national identity. Arab identity is closely tied to the regional dialect of Arabic, both because it encapsulates cultural values that cannot be articulated in English *and* because it is the language of the region's dominant religion. For this reason, three of the interviewees expressed disgust at the thought of seeing 3ngleezy in print. They believed that it was offering far too much validation to a 'non-language' that shouldn't be encouraged in the first place. One of them mentioned seeing a restaurant sign saying *Na3Na3* (which means mint [see FIG. 12]) and feeling a sense of horror that 3ngleezy might gain such prominence; she wanted it to remain a discourse that was confined to the spaces of text-messages and MSN. She also rued the fact that because the restaurant name was in 3ngleezy, the name did not appear in the Arabic script, as it would have otherwise (along with an English transliteration).

FIG. 12: A restaurant sign in 3ngleezy

My interviewees repeatedly described 3ngleezy as a "corruption" of both English and Arabic; a crutch they used because they could not express themselves in "perfect" English or Arabic. They regretted that they needed a "made-up language" because they could not fully express themselves in a "proper language". Even though 3ngleezy was a powerful tool enabling users in previously limited spaces, users were carrying negative attitudes towards it. These prevailing negative attitudes surprised me, and were complicated by the fact that users still expressed affection for 3ngleezy in certain contexts. They were expressing the belief that certain communication systems may still not be legitimate *despite* their ability to build community.

During the interviews, the 3ngleezy users repeatedly communicated a desire for language 'purity', as well as a desire to speak a 'standardized' variety of Arabic and English – and they believed 3ngleezy undermined both these efforts. That a community can be the biggest disparagers of their system of communication is not new or unique to 3ngleezy, nor even a recent phenomenon. Indeed such prevailing attitudes are relics of a post-colonial era, where linguistic innovation is often dismissed in an attempt to retain a sort of linguistic 'purity' that has been put in place by the dominant group. The particularly insidious aspect about such language-based discrimination is that it doesn't just compare other languages to English; it is a heuristic through which communities compare their *own* languages to each other using colonial ideals of 'purity' – in the way that users were comparing 3ngleezy to Arabic and finding the former 'lacking'.

This research does not reveal but rather reinforces what linguists and educators have been discussing for decades: how language-based discrimination is internalized by user-communities. Geneva Smitherman is a powerful voice in this discussion, especially as it pertains to the negative attitudes towards African-American Language (AAL). In *Talkin That Talk* (2000)*,* she outlines the events of the King v. Ann Arbor case, from which I learned that

African-American educators – who Smitherman calls "boojy Black 'leaders'" (2005, pg. 58) were some of the harshest critics of the decision to train public school teachers to understand AAL. I was struck by the language these African-American educators used to protest the decision. They said AAL was "not a real language", "made-up", and "lazy English" (Smitherman, 2000, pp. 551-557). It was strikingly similar to how users were describing 3ngleezy. Once again, the derision came from within the community.

Smitherman posits that the most effective way to change negative attitudes towards a language is to begin by changing *user* attitudes. Smitherman states that "American English would be shonuf wack without contributions from US Ebonics. Doan know why sometime we Black folk be actin like we ain got sense enough to know what we got!" (2005, pg 57). Therefore, her scholarly efforts focus on reinforcing the rhetorical value of AAL and its contribution to the language of wider communication. Smitherman adopted a "'codeswitching" approach in her writing to enable [her scholarship] to appeal not only to a broad array of disciplines outside the field of linguistics, *but also to the lay audience and the community*." (DoBell, 2008 [emphasis mine]).

At a conference earlier this year, an audience member asked me how I proposed to 'teach' 3ngleezy to non-users in the US classroom. He assumed that that was my intention, which it wasn't. My research intentions, I explained, were similar to Dr. Smitherman's with AAL: to recognize the rhetorical strengths of the language, and then describe them to users. Just as Dr. Smitherman advocates that educators know the fundamentals of AAL, I too believe that understanding the rhetorical and social capital of 3ngleezy would benefit educators in the Middle East and North Africa. However, more research on the structure of 3ngleezy needs to be done before such a goal can be set.

ii.　　　3ngleezy's Social Rules

Another attitude that all my interviewees articulated was that 3ngleezy was completely inappropriate to use in conversation with anyone they shared a formal relationship with. They said this in response to a scenario I put forward: a student sending an Arabic-speaking professor an email in 3ngleezy. Every interviewee said that it was wildly inappropriate to do such a thing. It didn't matter that the teacher was an 3ngleezy user. When I asked if it was because they felt uncomfortable being so familiar with teachers, they said no. Instead, they said it was because they "knew for a fact" that those who were older and/or in positions of authority hated 3ngleezy. A few of them told stories of how their parents disciplined them for the occasional 3ngleezy slip. One interviewee said her dad forced her to retype 3ngleezy messages in the Arabic script; another said that her aunt sent her a scathing message in response to receiving an 3ngleezy message from her. Those who did enjoy using the language (and even admitted to having a fondness for it) continually said that their parents berated them for using it. Why? Their parents cited the reasons mentioned earlier: national, religious, and cultural-identity erosion.

But what about the formal relationships they had with *younger* individuals who were fluent in 3ngleezy? Might they converse with a young aunt, or a young teacher using 3ngleezy? Well, they said, that depended. On what? On the cues those individuals gave them. Like what? Four out of the fifteen interviewees said that cousins or acquaintances who typed in the Arabic script were probably "conservative", or "old-fashioned", or "religious", and even "not well-off" (financially). If someone from their generation used the Arabic script in a casual typed exchange, it was a warning to tread carefully – here were people who wouldn't appreciate a mixing of symbols. I asked them why the Arabic script signalled conservativeness, and not simply a lack of proficiency in English. They asserted that such individuals were usually a product of Arabic-medium schooling, and that such schools tended

to be in more remote areas, less expensive, and tended to have a greater focus on religious studies than English-medium schools. These nuanced insights, gleaned from messages by 3ngleezy users, hearken back to Stuart Hall's argument that discourses can yield messages about social practices through decodings that are otherwise concealed to the untrained eye.

Since users were signalling that 3ngleezy use was inappropriate in formal situations, I had to ask: was it also inappropriate for *serious* situations? Could you, say, offer condolence in 3ngleezy? Of the seven interviewees I posed this scenario to, five said yes – if, and only if, the person they were condoling was a close friend. They explained that 3ngleezy could be used for formal and serious exchanges with someone you have a casual relationship with. However, it could not be used for casual, informal exchanges with someone you have a formal relationship with. With 3ngleezy use, it appears, the personal relationship users share trumps situational context.

Then I asked about the 'default-ness' of 3ngleezy. Was it a language they defaulted to if they were communicating with someone they hadn't yet established a relationship with? For instance, if they exchanged numbers with an Arab student they'd just met in class, would they text them in 3ngleezy asking about homework? All the (seven) respondents I posed the question to said yes, provided: a) the relationship was not obviously formal (i.e. there wasn't an obvious power/social imbalance) and b) the recipient wasn't significantly older than them. In those instances, it was sensible to open the conversation with 3ngleezy even if they weren't friends with the person they were messaging. Using the Arabic script, they explained, would signal 'stuffed-shirtness', and an all-English message would seem pretentious. In this case, 3ngleey was the most effective linguistic tool to convey in-groupness with one swift rhetorical choice.

Speaking of in-groupness, 3ngleezy users can discern various factors about other users based on the presence (or absence) of newer 3ngleezy innovations. As I explained in the

methodology section, 3ngleezy is a growing script with newer symbols being incorporated into the system to represent a greater range of Arabic characters. But what's interesting is that, based on the presence of these newer signs, users make assumptions about the age, conservativeness, religious values, and even the socioeconomic status of other 3ngleezy users. One of my interviewees, a 25 year-old graduate student, said that she could tell when her cousin was impersonating her older sister on MSN because she would use "some new characters that [the interviewee] couldn't understand". The interviewee also said that such exchanges made her feel "really old".

Similarly, three other interviewees said they could tell the educational and religious background of others purely based on the way they used 3ngleezy. If someone used the Arabic script in digital spaces, they might be "conservative and religious" because they believed "3ngleezy was polluting the language of the Qur'an". Or else they had received a governmental school education, where every subject is taught in Arabic – thus making them most proficient with the Arabic script.

These responses make it clear that users are actively theorizing 3ngleezy, and they certainly illustrate the many ways in which composers and receivers actively encode and decode the social contexts of messages based on the medium. Since 3ngleezy allows message recipients to actively decode the social background of composers, it might classify as a 'cool medium' (to use McLuhan's term). Furthermore, these findings also illustrate that 3ngleezy use is entrenched in social phenomena worth exploring by cultural rhetoricians. These social phenomena carry cultural-rhetorical implications that I'd like to explore in the next section.

IV. Analysis: 3ngleezy's oral, aural, and visual rhetorics

Because 3ngleezy can reveal so much about user backgrounds, it is an especially powerful language to enable social mobilization. In digital spaces (such as blogs and

YouTube) where participants are often faceless but not identity-less, the use of 3ngleezy allows groups to band together because it connotes shared religious, cultural, and educational backgrounds. But I began to wonder: beyond conveying a shared background, does 3ngleezy also *perform* the cultures of its users?

I ask this question because my interviewees repeatedly told me that, despite its 'shortcomings', 3ngleezy communicated something that was important to them: the *sounds* of their conversational Arabic(s). I wondered why this aural/oral aspect of conversation was so important, and whether it might be rooted in region-based cultures. For one thing, traditional Bedouin lifestyles, which involved frequent movement, created a strong narrative-based culture because documents were rarely produced and transported. Furthermore, Bedouin tribes often maintained a cohesive identity by telling stories specific to their group, and over time developed dialectical patterns distinct to their tribe (Sowayan, 1992). In this way, group identity became tied to the oral and aural aspects of Bedouin Arabic, and it may explain why this emphasis on oral/aurality persists among 3ngleezy users today.

Another possible explanation could be that Islamic tradition, which is strongly oral, has influenced 3ngleezy users' rhetorical choices. In Muslim countries, the call for prayer – the *azaan* – can be heard five times a day. The *azaan* issues from the minarets of mosques to enhance the acoustics, and they are made by mu'azzins – officials selected to lead the prayers. Among other reasons, mu'azzins are coveted for their sonorous voices and training in *tilawa,* which is the ability to recite verses from the Qur'an with a certain musicality. Musicologist Eve McPherson, who studies the Muslim call for prayer, posits that the "vocal timbre [of a mu'azzin's] voice has communicative capabilities that transcend language" (McPherson, 2005). 3ngleezy seeks to create a similar transcendence, as it is a script created with the purpose to mimic sound. Furthermore, since the majority of 3ngleezy users are either

Muslim or familiar with Islamic cultures, it is possible that the orality of Islamic tradition has impacted the creation of 3ngleezy.

But beyond the oral-rhetorical component, 3ngleezy also carries a visual appeal for users. During interviews, several of the interviewees remarked that they enjoyed using 3ngleezy because it was visually attractive. In fact, the connection between the verbal and the visual in 3ngleezy is so strong that my interviewees could not talk about the symbols without sketching them .

But when I pressed them for more specific details, two of the interviewees said that they liked the symmetry present in 3ngleezy texts, created by using the mirror-image of numbers as Arabic characters. Another interviewee said she thought the mix of numbers and alphabet made her messages look "balanced and harmonized". I found this affinity for symmetry striking, especially since geometrical pattering is the basis of most Islamic art. The pictures below (taken in UAE mosques) are two of many examples of symmetrical patterning in Islamic art (see FIG. 13). The sort of geometric calligraphy pictured below is highly coveted, and often used in transcribing verses from the Qur'an to create decorative art.

Because such patterning is so visible in the Middle East and North Africa, I wondered if such patterns have become a part of the Arab subconscious. And if this is the case, where a textual alphabetic medium is being used for artistic purposes, does it (to use Hall's words) become the "referent or concept it signifies"? If 3ngleezy is fulfilling dual semiotic roles of signifier and sign through its textual representation and aesthetics, it certainly challenges the idea that 'text' is a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional world. It is fascinating to see these patterns, if indeed they have been internalized, appear as a visual rhetoric in 3ngleezy. It is also worth asking whether such symmetry manifests in other unlikely spaces and texts, creating an embedded visual argument that only an in-group member can recognize.

FIG. 13: Examples of symmetrical Islamic Art

Some instances of 3ngleezy symmetry:

ع   3

6   9

ط   ص

There is an additional rhetorical layer to 3ngleezy that I was able to identify. As I discussed in the methodology section, every one of my interviewees expressed strongly negative attitudes towards the use of 3ngleezy, despite recognizing its popularity, convenience and visual appeal. The most commonly cited reason was that 3ngleezy undermined the linguistic purity of Arabic, which is especially sacred to users because it is the language of the Qur'an. However, the numbers as we know them today are historically Arabic, and are technically called 'Arabic numerals'. Even the term *algebra* stems from the Arabic phrase *al-jibr*. While this history has become backgrounded over time, the use of numbers in 3ngleezy actually perpetuates Arabic rhetoric by reclaiming the Arabic-numeral system.

So ironically, even though users believe that 3ngleezy-use erodes Arab identity, a closer look reveals that it is actually reifying Arabic rhetorics on multiple levels: the visual level, the aural level, the numerical level (see FIG. 14). In fact, 3ngleezy is making it possible for these rhetorics to permeate digital spaces, where it has demonstrated its astounding ability to catalyze social movement.
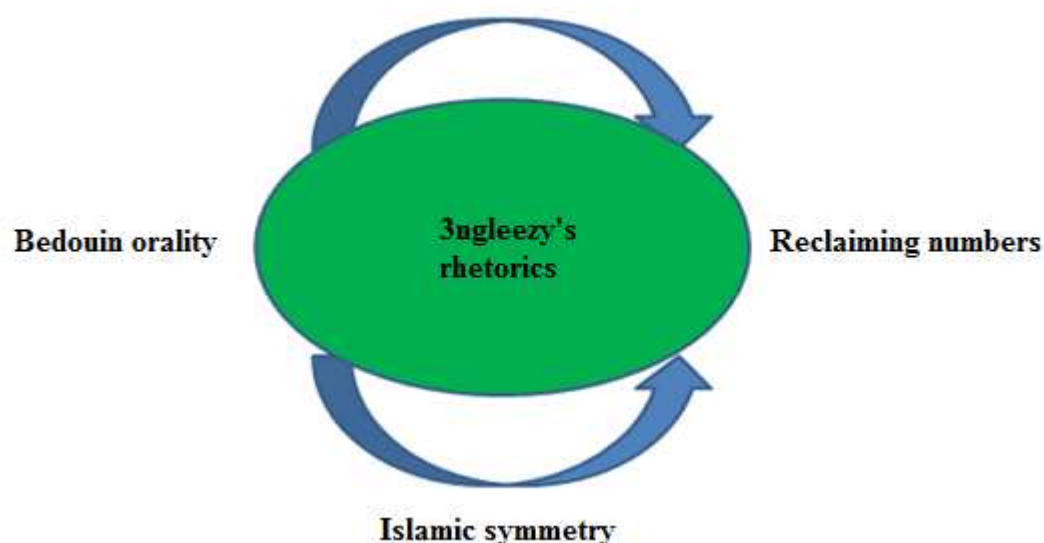

FIG. 14: A Summary

V.   The Future?

As I examined my data, I spent almost as much time reflecting on what my study wouldn't address as on what it would. This is a small scale exploratory study, and 3ngleezy is a widely-used, rhetorically rich, and little explored phenomenon. Several questions came up during the research stages, and I want to use this space to pose those questions.

Probably the first thing to strike me about 3ngleezy, well before I began this research, was the semiotic implications of using numbers to represent sounds. If 3ngleezy users are using numbers to signify sound rather than quantity, what might be the long-term impact of such a semiotic-shift? I toyed with the thought of 3ngleezy users 'reading' speed limits and other numerical signs as sounds. I asked a few of my interviewees if something like that

might happen, if they might hear a sound rather than see a quantity when presented with a number. All of them said no, that the context would make it clear how a number should be read. But they also added that such a shift, unlikely though it might be, *could* happen in the long term. It is worthwhile to examine 3ngleezy through a Saussurian framework, and to interrogate how we interpret and reassign signifiers more broadly.

Another question that came up was whether 3ngleezy would be the more effective choice for English-Arabic subtitling in various media. Nauf, the 3ngleezy-using translation scholar I interviewed, pointed out that 3ngleezy's social embeddedness made it a much more effective choice for movie subtitling. She explained that the current English-Arabic subtitling of Hollywood movies, which appeared in the Arabic script, alienated most of its intended audience: the digitally-savvy, English-medium educated, 3ngleezy-using crowd. And because such a crowd would be more comfortable reading 3ngleezy than Arabic, they would struggle to keep pace with the Arabic-script subtitles. Since the biggest consumers of Hollywood movies in the Middle East fall in the below-40 age group, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of those consumers are 3ngleezy users. If they were not 3ngleezy users, they were likely to be Arabic-medium educated, less familiar with conversational English, and therefore less likely to consume Hollywood movies. Nouf also made the intelligent point that using 3ngleezy would allow some of the voice acting to be represented in the subtitles. Since 3ngleezy exists primarily to represent the *sounds of conversation*, it can better translate the sounds of English conversation to conversational Arabic. Nauf expressed interest in exploring the subtitling-potential of 3ngleezy, and it might be worthwhile to do a controlled study of how viewers respond to 3ngleezy vs. Arabic-script subtitling across various media.

The 3ngleezy phenomenon is also an interesting one to study using perspectives from code-meshing. Code-meshing is presently defined as the act of fusing English and non-English dialects with Edited American English (2006). However, this definition leaves out

the possibility of code-meshing being a multi*modal* (and not just multi lingual/dialectical) phenomenon. What I hope to add to this theory of code meshing is this theory of multimodality: the multimodality of borrowing from various sign systems, as well as the multimodality of representing the oral, aural, and visual in one script. Not only are the sign systems being meshed, but so are the sensory representations. 3ngleezy offers a fascinating illustration of the limitlessness of code-meshing and its rhetorical affects.

Furthemore, I am interested in the much broader question of how people use social-digital systems to remain connected during times of upheaval and/or disaster, and the more specific question of why 3ngleezy is particularly effective in doing so. Liza Potts' work is especially instrumental in helping me think through these questions. She examines the use of digital networks during events such as the Mumbai shootings and London bombings, and how such networks are used to disseminate information, rally groups, and facilitate activism when there is the threat of physical harm (2009). In the wake of the 2011 Middle East and North Africa revolutions, I am especially interested in the specific ways in which 3ngleezy was used to circulate information to mobilize social action. While the analysis section of this study partially addresses this question, it would be interesting to examine 3ngleezy use specifically in crisis situations.

A study of 3ngleezy also critiques the argument that social networking sites are the single most important tool in allowing the composition and dissemination of social information. This is because 3ngleezy demonstrates that it is not the space but the *language* used within that space that needs to be foregrounded (or at the very least acknowledged). When the Arab revolution began, digital scholars 'credited' Twitter and Facebook for successfully mobilizing youth groups into protest. According to Kwak et al, Twitter is a social network *and* news medium (2011). Time Magazine's Lev Grossman calls it the "medium of the [Arab revolutionary] movement" (2011). Java et al believe it is responsible

for creating and sustaining micro-blogging communities because it allows "users with similar intentions" to "connect with each other" (2011). However, 3ngleezy is also greatly responsible for many of these social impacts during the revolution. In fact, my findings indicate that it is an astonishingly nuanced medium through which "users with similar intentions" can connect. If 3ngleezy use can communicate user age, socio-economic status, education and religious background, its presence in social-networking spaces is what facilitates much of the social-networking.

Just as 3ngleezy lies at the intersection of various social and communication systems, so does potential for its future study. As a research subject, it holds promise and pertinence for cultural rhetoricians, linguists, digital writers and communication scholars. But beyond that, it offers a glimpse into how users bend technology to present and re/present identity. While there is no denying that technology has the power to influence and mold users, it is also important to remember the ways in which users mold technology to reclaim agency.

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