



From Roots to Relevance

Making Arabic the
language of opportunity
for MENA's young people



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The Congress of Arabic & Creative Industries is a global platform that brings together policymakers, investors, technology leaders, entrepreneurs, and creative industry experts to unlock the commercial potential of Arabic across the creative and digital economies.

Organized by the Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre, part of the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi, the Congress explores the policies, investment models, and technological innovations needed to transform Arabic content and intellectual property into scalable products and sustainable economic value.

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Executive summary

The Congress ACI Arab Youth Pulse Survey 2025 revealed a dichotomy in the relevance of Arabic to the young people of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. The survey found that Arabic is the dominant language across all aspects of their lives, particularly in social and cultural contexts. But it also revealed that Arabic's dominance is significantly less pronounced in education, work, online learning, and other digital contexts. In short, Arabic is not always the language of opportunity for MENA youth.

When MENA youth are asked where more investment in Arabic is needed, they specify technology and AI platforms, schools and universities, government and public services, and media and entertainment. When asked what would encourage them to use Arabic more often, they call out higher-quality Arabic education, more Arabic online content, and better Arabic interfaces.

MENA youth are not losing their connection with Arabic. They are asking Arabic to keep pace with their world. Policymakers and institutions responsible for protecting and enhancing the relevance of Arabic can help make it the language of opportunity for MENA youth by taking five actions:

- Connect Arabic education to real-world applications and professional use.
- Build shared Arabic language technology.
- Turn Arabic digital standards into measurable user outcomes.
- Help build modern Arabic content ecosystems and sustainable creative career pathways.
- Assign clear ownership, measure outcomes, and scale what works.

If the region's policymakers, educators, and creative and digital producers act today to bolster Arabic's use in the realms of AI, education, content and creative production, and digital interfaces, they can ensure that it will be the language of opportunity for MENA youth tomorrow.

Arabic's utility gap

The future of Arabic is the young people of the MENA region. They are the ultimate arbiters of Arabic's role in their lives. They will determine Arabic's relevance in the Digital Era.

This reality was a primary impetus behind the 2025 Ipsos/Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre Arab Youth Pulse Survey. The survey explores how Arabic relates to the creative aspirations and technological outlook of 4,092 respondents aged 18–25 across 10 MENA countries, alongside the economic challenges they face.¹

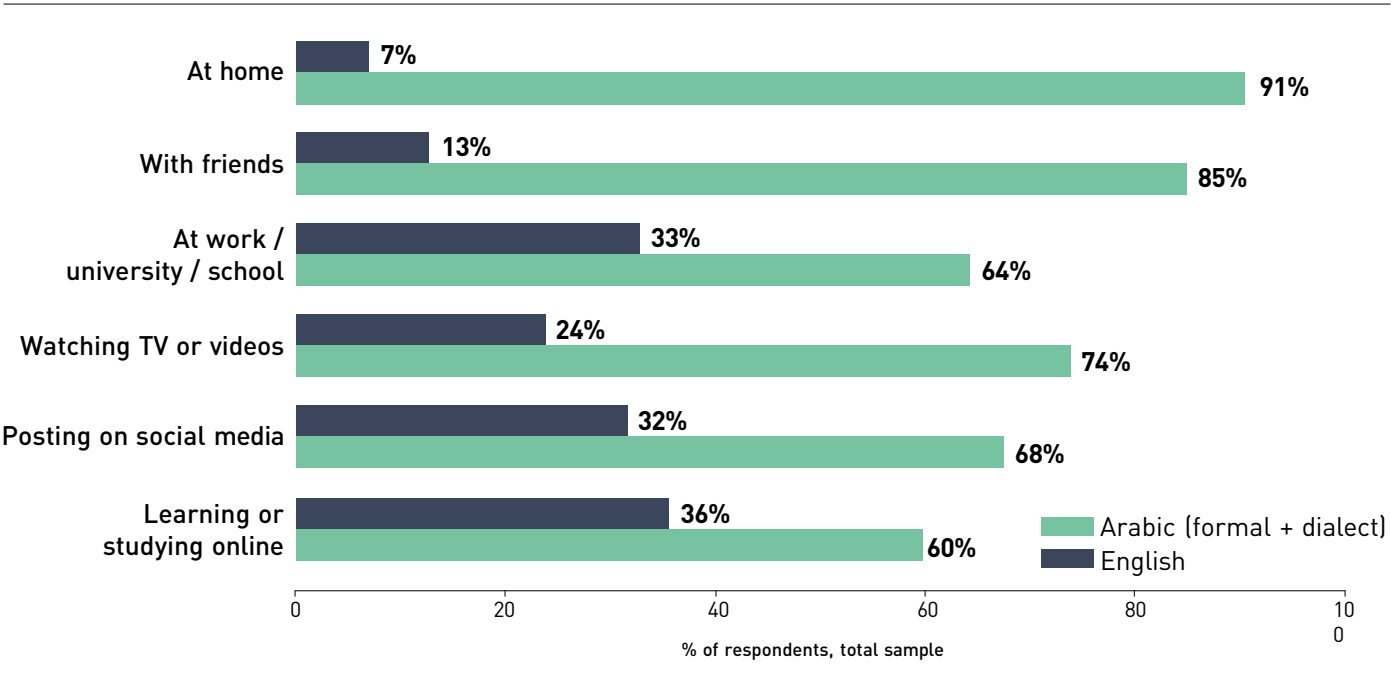
The survey found that Arabic is the dominant language across all aspects of young people's lives in the region. It is particularly meaningful to MENA youth in social and cultural contexts. Arabic connects them to their families and friends: 91% of respondents use it at home and 85% of them use it with friends. Arabic also serves as a strong anchor to their cultural heritage: slightly more than three-quarters of the respondents (76%) said that Arabic connects them to their roots.

Arabic's dominance also extends to education, work, online learning, and other digital contexts, but in these contexts, its usage among MENA youth is less prevalent than in social and cultural contexts. The survey respondents report that their use of Arabic falls off at school and work, as well as in digital activities. Correspondingly, their use of English increases significantly in these contexts, with slightly more than three-quarters of the respondents (77%) saying that English is essential for achieving their goals. In short, Arabic is not always the language of opportunity for MENA youth.

This linguistic dichotomy highlights the primary challenge facing Arabic in the Digital Era (see *Exhibit 1*). The salient issue in this challenge is the gap in Arabic’s educational, professional, and digital utility.

Exhibit 1

Arabic’s utility gap is defined by opportunity, not by emotional attachment



Source: The Congress ACI Arab Youth Pulse Survey 2025; Strategy& analysis

The future of the Arabic language depends on closing this utility gap and extending Arabic’s relevance among the 140 million people under age 30 in the MENA region.² The actions that policymakers, educators, and creative and digital producers take today can ensure that Arabic is the language of opportunity in the MENA countries.

MENA youth point the way forward

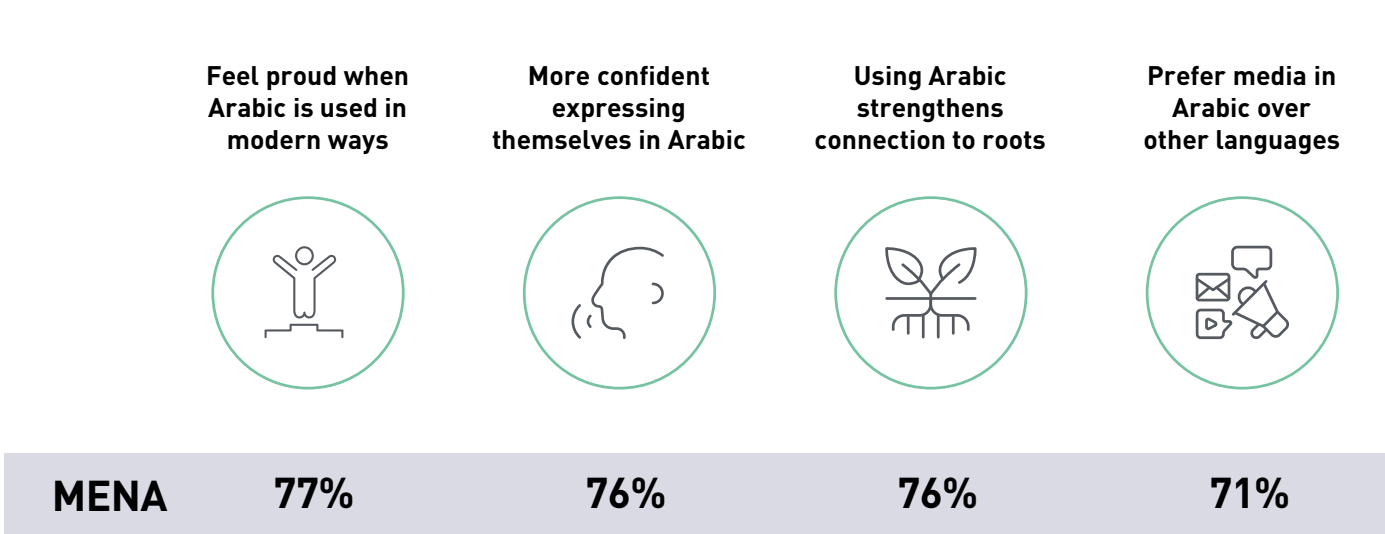
Although Arabic is the dominant language of MENA youth and a deeply valued mainstay of their identities, they also know that Arabic’s relevance does not extend in equal measure to all aspects of their lives.

MENA’s youth rank among the most digitally-connected young people on the planet: in 2024, 86% of people aged 15 to 24 in the Arab States were online, compared to 67% of the rest of the population.³ Yet, as of July 2026, Arabic language websites account for only 0.6% of websites.⁴ Thus, nearly all the content that is accessible to MENA youth online is not in their native language.

Further, while 77% of the survey respondents report feelings of pride when they see Arabic used in modern contexts, two-thirds of them (67%) say that the Arabic content they can find feels dated compared to English content. [See Exhibit 2].

Exhibit 2

Arabic is the language of choice for MENA youth



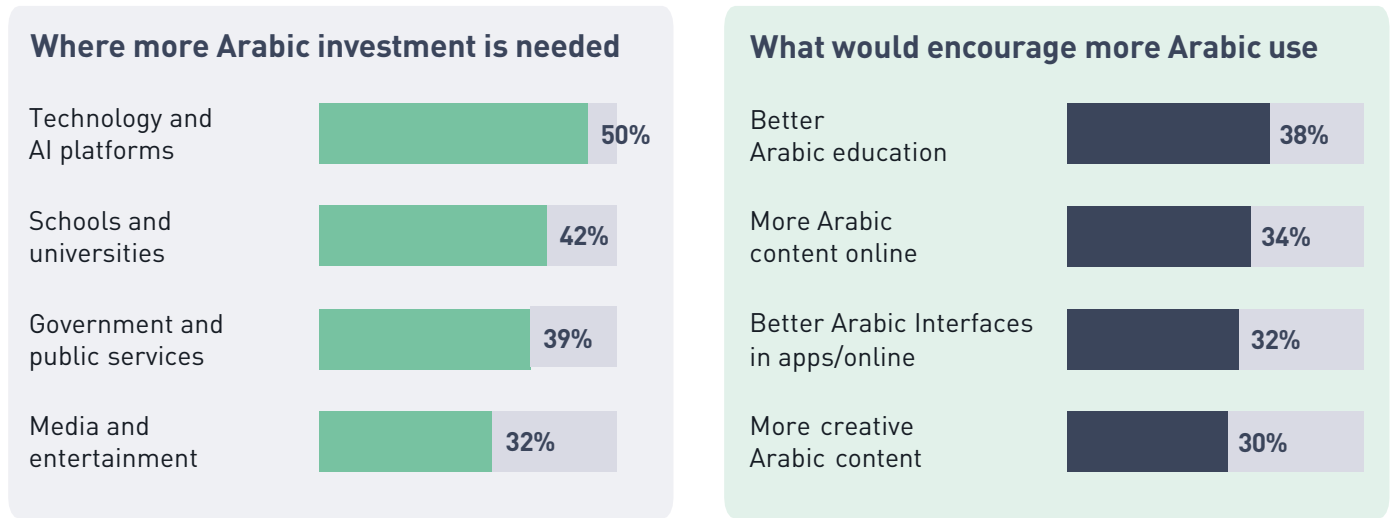
Source: The Congress ACI Arab Youth Pulse Survey 2025

MENA youth are rightly questioning whether Arabic is keeping pace in the domains where opportunity is created. Many of them feel the need to switch to English in technology, education, business, government and public services, and media and entertainment. Indeed, many of them are reconciling their identities with their ambitions by living bilingual lives: seven in ten (70%) of the survey respondents report switching languages depending on context and the same number of respondents mix Arabic with other languages when expressing themselves.

Unsurprisingly, when MENA youth are asked where more investment in Arabic is needed, their answers are opportunity-driven. They say investments in Arabic should be directed to technology and AI platforms, schools and universities, government and public services, and media and entertainment. The same pattern appears when they are asked what would encourage them to use Arabic more often. Here, the strongest levers are higher quality Arabic education, more Arabic content online, and better Arabic interfaces. (See Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3

MENA youth point to a practical Arabic agenda



Source: The Congress ACI Arab Youth Pulse Survey 2025; Strategy& analysis

MENA youth are not losing their connection with Arabic. They are asking Arabic to keep pace with their world. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of the survey respondents think Arabic should evolve in ways that make it more relevant to the ways in which they learn, create, and work.

MENA youth — driven by ambition, grounded in heritage

MENA youth describe themselves as ambitious and confident, but they feel pressured by economic, cultural, and digital disruptions.



Source: The Congress ACI Arab Youth Pulse Survey 2025

MENA youth believe they can shape not only their own futures, but also the future of the region.

Youth views & beliefs:

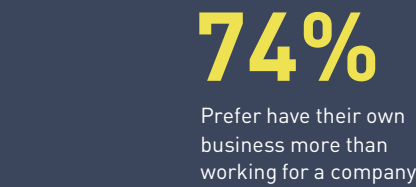


MENA

Source: The Congress ACI Arab Youth Pulse Survey 2025

MENA youth want fulfilling careers that offer work-life balance and agency.

What Arab youth value in their careers and lives:



Source: The Congress ACI Arab Youth Pulse Survey 2025

MENA youth are concerned about losing their traditions and language.

Youth concerns around identity and culture:



An action agenda for closing Arabic’s utility gap

MENA’s young people are concerned about the future of Arabic. They want to use it as their preferred language of opportunity. They want to be able to open the gateways to education, work, technology, and digital participation in Arabic. Policymakers and institutions responsible for protecting and enhancing the relevance of Arabic can help make it the language of opportunity by taking five actions (see *Exhibit 4*).

Exhibit 4

Five actions can strengthen Arabic as a language of opportunity



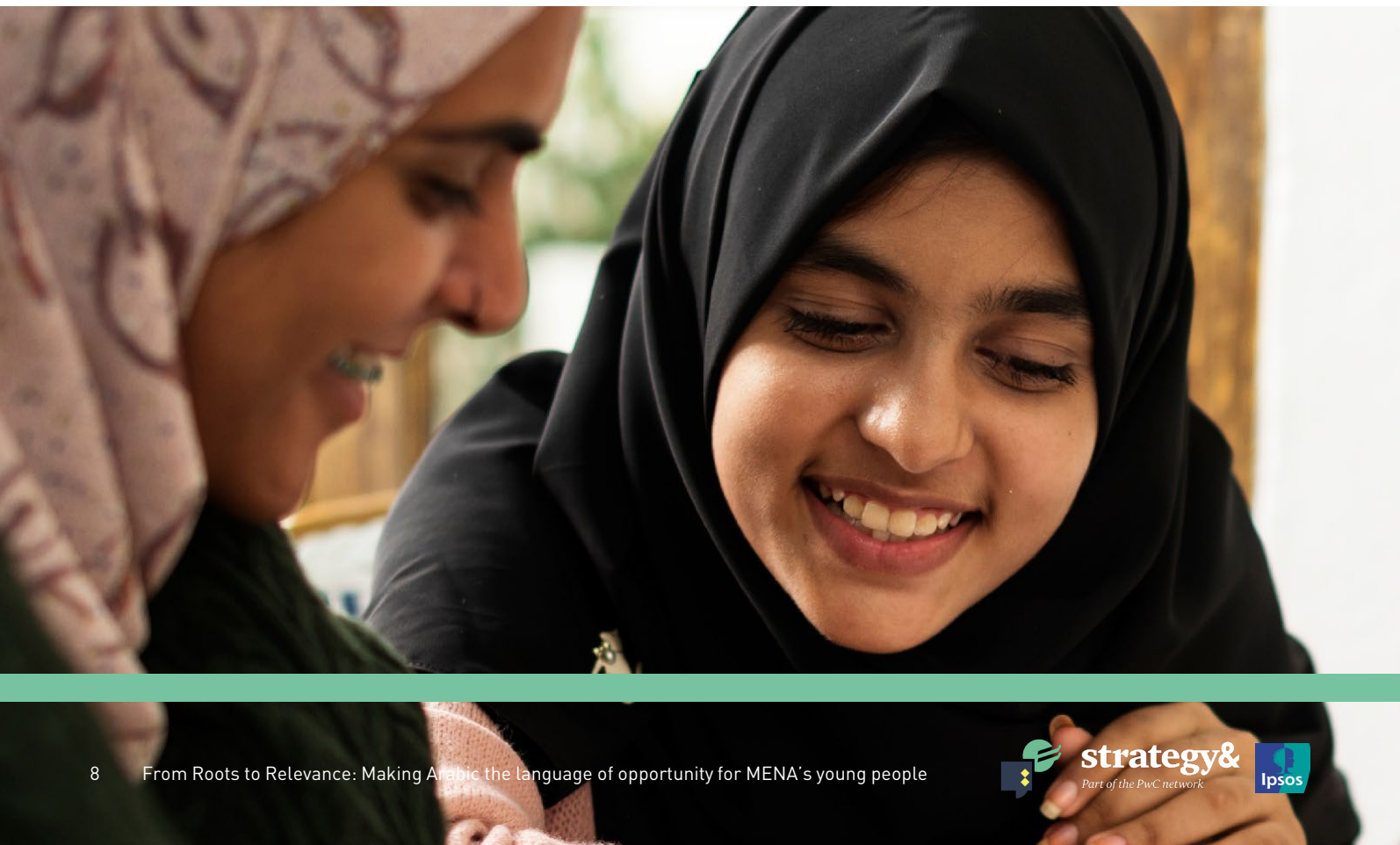
Source: Strategy& analysis

Connect Arabic education to real-world applications and professional use

There is strong demand for better Arabic education among MENA youth: 76% of the survey respondents believe that Arabic should receive greater priority in education; and 38% of respondents say high-quality Arabic education would encourage them to use the language more often.

Stronger language learning outcomes, however, do not automatically translate into use at the same pace. In the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain, the proportion of Basque speakers increased by 12.1 percentage points between 1991 and 2021, while the proportion using Basque as much as or more than another language increased by 6.4 percentage points over the same period.⁵ This suggests that language knowledge can grow faster than everyday usage, if learners lack the confidence, the social settings, or the practical reasons to use the language.

Thus, Arabic language education should extend beyond formal instruction into applied experiences, such as digital and AI projects, STEM education, media production, entrepreneurship, internships and public services. Partnerships with employers can help learners use Arabic in real workplace settings, supported by up-to-date professional vocabulary and Arabic-enabled tools for tasks such as writing, search, data analysis, and communication. New approaches should be piloted and evaluated based on whether they improve both Arabic capability and its actual use.



Build shared Arabic language technology

MENA youth want Arabic to work better across the technologies they use: 76% of the survey respondents wish for a greater Arabic presence in technology and AI; and 50% of respondents identify technology and AI platforms as the leading area requiring greater investment in Arabic.

External evidence supports this desire. Research finds that most online activity takes place in high-resource languages such as English and expanding access to digital opportunity requires greater inclusion of diverse languages.⁶ Moreover, many major LLMs (large language models) underperform in non-English and low-resource language contexts and they are often insufficiently attuned to cultural context.⁷

Overcoming the dearth of Arabic language technology cannot be accomplished with isolated applications. It will require shared technical foundations, including high-quality datasets, language models, speech-recognition and translation resources, developer tools, and testing assets that can be reused across products and sectors. Wales, for instance, made sustained investments in shared Welsh-language technology, including speech-recognition resources and improved automatic subtitling. The program also changed Microsoft Office 365 interfaces to Welsh for more than 78,000 users in Welsh-medium schools.⁸ Similarly, Catalonia's Project Aina makes open Catalan-language datasets and models available for developers to use in AI products and services. Its Aina Challenge received 85 proposals from more than 50 companies, of which 22 solutions were selected for real-world testing across social care, health, justice, education, tourism, audiovisual production, and public administration.⁹

Shared Arabic language technology can be built on existing regional capabilities by expanding, connecting, and improving access to high-quality datasets, models, speech, and translation resources, particularly across dialects and specialized domains. These assets should be interoperable and accessible to researchers, developers, public institutions, and businesses, while targeted funding can be used to support Arabic-first applications in priority areas, such as education, search, voice, public services, and content production. Shared infrastructure should be evaluated for accuracy, dialect coverage, bias, data provenance, and user trust.

Turn Arabic digital standards into measurable user outcomes

The availability of Arabic language technology is not the only criterion determining its use: 32% of the survey respondents say that higher quality Arabic interfaces would encourage them to use the language more often. Quality should be assessed based on user outcomes, such as Arabic-language selection, task completion, language switching, feature parity, and user satisfaction.

Arabic language technology must be easy to find and comparable in quality to other language options throughout the user journey. Several Arab governments already have relevant foundations for achieving this in place, such as the UAE Design System.¹⁰ Existing government design systems already provide important foundations for bilingual, accessible, and consistent digital services. The next step is to assess whether these foundations are translated correctly into procurement specifications, supplier evaluation, implementation, and acceptance testing. This review should examine the full user journey for Arabic speakers, including feature parity, right-to-left functionality, search, voice and dialect performance, captions, metadata, content discovery, accessibility, and testing. Where requirements already exist, the focus should be on implementation and measurable compliance; where gaps remain, additional standards should be introduced.

Governments can extend this agenda beyond public services by using partnerships, innovation funding, certification, and transparent performance benchmarks to encourage private platforms and app developers to improve Arabic functionality, including content discovery and support for major dialects.

Build modern Arabic content ecosystems and sustainable creative career pathways

MENA youth are looking for Arabic content and are interested in working in creative pursuits: 67% of the survey respondents say that Arabic content often feels outdated compared with English; 34% of respondents say more Arabic content online and 30% of respondents say that more creative Arabic content would encourage greater Arabic; and 41% of the respondents are interested in working in cultural and/or creative industries, such as software development, advertising and marketing, photography, language and translation, and publishing.

To build content ecosystems, governments can support the connection of audience-led commissioning and talent development to distribution, discoverability, fair intellectual property (IP) and revenue arrangements, repeat commissions, and paid work. The Welsh-language public television channel S4C offers a useful directional example: in 2024–25, viewing through S4C Clic and BBC iPlayer increased by 7%, while 97% of its content-commissioning budget was spent within Wales, primarily supporting Welsh-language content production and the local production sector.¹¹

For Arabic, pilot programs could focus on priority subjects and formats, provide creators with a clear route to market, and measure content satisfaction, reach, repeat engagement, creator income, employment, and IP retention. Content investment should address relevance, reach, and livelihoods, not volume alone.

The interest of MENA youth in creative pursuits is pragmatic and digitally oriented. The barriers they cite are also practical. These barriers include lack of funding or support; limited job opportunities; lack of training and experience; and financial risk or low income. Arabic language policy and creative industry policy can meet at this juncture of desire and need. They can work in tandem to provide MENA youth with financial support or grants, internships and work experience, specialized training, and mentorship in creative careers. If young people are given the opportunity to use Arabic in digital content, translation, publishing, advertising, media, software, games, and creator-led education, Arabic can raise its profile as a language of production, participation, and opportunity.

Assign clear ownership, measure outcomes, and scale what works

Government efforts to promote native language show that language relevance grows through use. Learning must be matched by opportunities to apply it; language technology by mechanisms that encourage adoption; content by audiences and sustainable careers; and investment by measurable outcomes.

Accordingly, Arabic-language initiatives should be managed as a portfolio of measurable interventions, not as a collection of discrete activities. Each initiative should have a named owner, defined delivery partners, a clear timetable, and outcome measures that are focused on whether Arabic use, quality, and/or economic value actually improves.

Interventions should begin with clear baselines and transparent methods. Pilot projects should be used to test what works in high-use settings and interventions should be scaled only after they demonstrate meaningful adoption and measurable impact. Then, Arabic relevance dashboards should be used to measure and track progress across education, work, digital platforms, AI tools, content, and creative careers.



Conclusion

Arabic is the language of family and heritage for the young people of the MENA region. It is a point of pride and holds deep personal meaning. However, they know that Arabic's relevance as a language of opportunity is not as strong as it could be. Accordingly, MENA youth want their native language to become more present in the systems that are shaping their futures.

If the region's policymakers, educators, and creative and digital producers act now to bolster Arabic's use in the realms of AI, education, content and creative production, and digital interfaces, they can ensure that it will remain relevant in institutions, platforms, education systems, and technologies that are central to the digital economy. Arabic will thrive when it is as useful in the realms where MENA youth build their futures as it is in their family and social lives.

Endnotes

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