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Research Article

Moroccan students' perceptions of cultural heritage: the case of USMBA students in Fez

Mohammed Mourchid

Abstract:

This paper is about conceptions of heritage among Moroccan young people. It tries to identify and analyse these conceptions from a sociological point of view. It is methodologically based on a qualitative approach, using the individual interview with 98 students who belong to the University of Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah (USMBA) in Fez. The study reveals that the interviewees are aware of the importance of heritage in their life; they considered it as a part of their identity. However, their conceptions of heritage are mostly related to material elements which are close to them and have symbolic value. The intangible elements like songs, traditional music, tales, and rites are almost neglected by them.

Keywords: *heritage; cultural heritage; young people; intangible heritage; material heritage.*

1. Introduction:

Throughout its history, Morocco had been a country of multiculturalism and diversity. Over the centuries, various dynasties have succeeded each other, leaving behind a treasure trove of cultural and historical artifacts. The old cities, such as Fez, Meknes, Rabat, Sale, and Marrakech, stand as witnesses to this richness, with their intricate architecture, ancient traditions, and vibrant cultural scenes. Since 2008, many elements of Moroccan intangible cultural heritage have been recognized and inscribed on UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity. This recognition highlights their significance and brings attention to their preservation and safeguarding. The inclusion on the list ensures that these aspects of Moroccan heritage receive special care and protection, both at the national and international levels. In Moroccan academic context, research about the understanding of heritage among people, especially young people, is still restricted. The few contributions, which have been written related to this issue, highlighted the need of preserving cultural heritage to safeguard Moroccan identity. The only sociological study, which is related to the issue of the knowledge and conceptions of people about heritage, was carried out in 2010. This study is a part of the Cooperation Program, which is named 'The cultural heritage and the creative industries as vectors of development in Morocco 2008-2010'. The specific object is to identify Moroccan population's knowledge, perception, and practical attitudes toward its cultural heritage. The main findings of this study are as follows:

Moroccans know their heritage, they locate it in space, situate it in time. The interviewees are informed about certain details concerning landmarks and sites. Of course, the prestigious heritage, that is the subject of significant media coverage, which is present in school textbooks, in posters advertisements, on banknotes, etc., is better known than the heritage less publicized (Bouziane 2010, 73).^[1]

This paper is mainly related to the same perspective, which is to know the Moroccan population's opinion about their heritage from a sociological point of view. However, the sample it will focus on is constituted

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Authors Details

Mohammed Mourchid
Department of Sociology,
USMBA, Fez, Morocco.

Corresponding Author

Mohammed Mourchid
Department of Sociology,
USMBA, Fez, Morocco.

of young people, and particularly students. This choice is supported by the lack of studies concerning this category of age. Hence, the question of research could be stated as follow: **How do Moroccan young people perceive their heritage?**

Literature Review

On the international scale, studies of perceptions of heritage among students and young people are so rare. The common point of these few studies is the use of the qualitative approach. In 2014, Yazici conducted a study about "Perceptions of Cultural and Natural Heritage among geography Students". This study aimed to understand students' perceptions of "cultural and natural heritage." It involved 139 third-grade students from the Department of Geography at Karabuk University, Turkey. The findings showed that the students had difficulty providing a complete description of the concepts of cultural and natural heritage. The main factors influencing their perceptions were 'the differences caused by different experiences in life' and 'the variety of mental stimulants that they have met during their education'. (Yazici 2014, 555-556). Makridis et al. (2016) went deeply to explore the impact of experiences, such as visiting landmarks or embracing local customs, on students' connections to their culture and heritage. The findings revealed that student experiences significantly influence the interpretation of heritage and cultural perceptions. In their 2020 study, Röhl & Meyer analyse the perspectives of young people (secondary school students aged 14–17 years from Lower Saxony) on World Cultural Heritage (WCH), focusing on their presumed reasons of its imbalanced global distribution. The findings indicate the existence of Eurocentric thinking patterns among the participants, which may contribute to the imbalance in the distribution of World Cultural Heritage. In recent times, researchers have been delving into the connection between heritage and various other fields, such as tourism and education. Asoba & Mefi (2021) conducted a study focusing on entrepreneurship students and discovered that these students held positive views about the impact of tourism on communities. In a separate comparative study by López-Fernández (2021), 149 trainee teachers pursuing bachelor's degrees in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education at the University of Córdoba were examined. The findings revealed a mainly 'cultural conception of heritage' among both groups, based on local material elements. However, they displayed limited awareness of the connection between heritage and its relevance in contemporary life. All the studies mentioned above prove the importance of exploring young people's perspectives on heritage and cultural identity. They highlight the role of experiences, education, and cultural context in shaping these perceptions. Understanding how young individuals perceive heritage is crucial for developing effective heritage education strategies that promote cultural preservation and appreciation among future generations.

Cultural heritage

The word 'heritage' refers to any object and practice that are conserved and passed down from one generation to the next. It concerned something which belongs to the past but still has an attachment to the present. In other words, people are still concerned about this past, and they made of it something valuable. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'heritage' as:

- (1) That which has been or may be inherited; any property, and especially land, which devolves by right of inheritance.
- (2) The fact of inheriting; inheritance, hereditary.
- (3) Anything given or received to be a proper and legally held possession.
- (4) That which comes from the circumstances of birth; an inherited lot or portion; the condition or state transmitted from ancestors.
- (5) Heirs collectively; lineage. (The Oxford English Dictionary 1989, 167)

According to these characteristics, it could be said that the main component of heritage is the term 'conserved', which is a keyword that permits to make the difference between 'heritage' and 'non-heritage'. It is all about people's choices: which objects to conserve from the past and what to throw out, which buildings to save and which to allow to be built over, which memories to keep and which to neglect, which practices sustaining and which to be demolished. To conserve an object (building, artefact, site, landscape, etc.) or a practice (language, music, memory, handicraft, dish, ritual, dress, etc.) is a way people use to understand who they are. Using the objects and practices of heritage does not mean being stuck in the past but taking advantage of this past and promoting it positively in the present and the future. The historian David Lowenthal points out that heritage is not history at all, 'it is not an inquiry into the past, but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes' (Lowenthal 1998, X). For this reason, heritage must be seen as separate from the pursuit of history, as it is concerned with the rebuilding of the past for some purposes in the present.

'The concept of heritage not only encompasses a nation's relationship to history and history-making, but also refers increasingly to the ways in which a broad range of other constituencies are involved in the production of the past in the present' (Harrison 2013, 5). Rodney Harrison puts a relevant question, which is the process of making, or considering, some places, objects, and practices as 'heritage', while other things are not. He states that there are two inter-related understandings of heritage: the 'top-down' approach to the classification and promotion of particular places by the state as an embodiment of regional, national, or international values which creates 'official' heritage; and the 'bottom-up' relationship between people, objects, places, and memories which forms the basis for the creation of unofficial forms of heritage at the local level. Trying

to give some elements of answer, Ahmed Skounti (2009, 75) points out that ‘what we consider today as heritage was not always so’. This means that heritage is not pre-existed, but it is rather produced and created through so many factors. Firstly, it is economically produced, because people expect to get gains by promoting some sites as a tourist destination. Secondly, it is politically produced since ‘heritage is called upon during elections, fuelling competition between groups and individuals to claim chunks of power’. Thirdly, it is produced socially, because people try to get social prestige and symbolic capital through heritage. Fourthly, it is culturally produced, as it has a great impact on forging a strong, homogenous, and unchanging identity.

Methodology

In terms of methodology, researchers distinguish, usually, between two different approaches: the quantitative approach and the qualitative approach. The word approach refers to the way the researcher adopts to investigate the topic of interest. Quantitative approach requires numerical assignment to the phenomena under study, whereas qualitative approach produces narrative or textual descriptions. Every approach has its specific characteristics, and, consequently, its upsides and downsides, which are inverses of each other. The table below gives makes a comparison between these two approaches:

Table 1: Quantitative versus qualitative Research

Characteristic	Quantitative research	Qualitative research
<i>Type of data</i>	Phenomena are described numerically	Phenomena are described in a narrative fashion
<i>Analysis</i>	Descriptive and inferential statistics	Identification of major themes
<i>Scope of inquiry</i>	Specific questions or hypotheses	Broad, thematic concerns
<i>Primary advantage</i>	Large sample, statistical validity, accurately reflects the population	Rich, in-depth, narrative description of the sample
<i>Primary disadvantage</i>	Superficial understanding of participants’ thoughts and feelings	Small sample, not generalizable to the population at large

Source: Vanderstoep & Deirdre, 2009, 7.

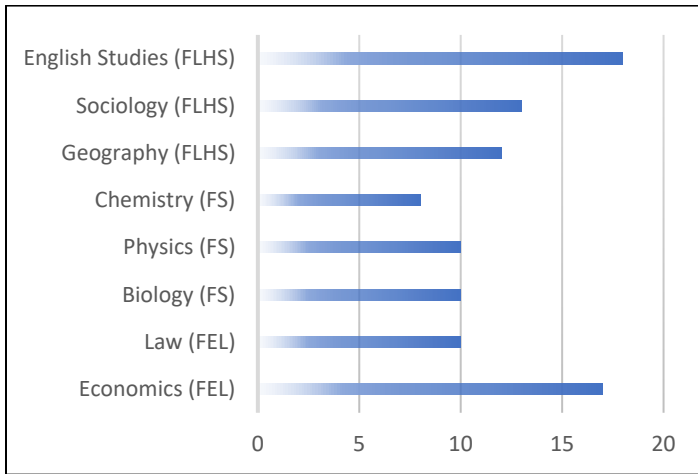
Based on the problem of research, which is related to the students’ conceptions and representations of cultural heritage, a qualitative approach will be adopted. The objective of research and the volume of the sample fit more with this approach. In addition, more specifically, the method used is the interview. This latter has been used and examined in many disciplines, particularly oral history, anthropology, and sociology. The aim, states Henige, is ‘pursuing the past through the spoken word’. (Henige 1988, 3). An interview is a conversation. However, one

might distinguish between these two terms, which cannot be used interchangeably. In other words, some differences make the interview more specific than any normal conversation. They are both kinds of verbal exchanges, but the interview is a conversation with a purpose. It is more limited in terms of time and function. Nigel Rapport (2012, 55) precises that ‘an interview is a nonroutine conversation, with a purpose or design which at least one of the talking-partners has previously determined, and which need not be.’ This definition gives, at least, three significant elements of the interview: nonroutine, purposiveness, and boundedness. The elaboration of the tool of this research has taken into consideration these characteristics. The purpose is to identify the relationship between students and heritage, and more specifically, the way they understand it, and how they deal with it. For this reason, the questions of the interview have been divided into three major parts:

- (1) The first part is composed of four questions that are related, directly, to students’ preconceptions of heritage. It deals with the meaning they give to the term heritage. Students are also requested to give some elements that they think of as heritage.
- (2) The second part is composed of five questions. They are associated with the sources of students’ knowledge about heritage. The focus is set on the role of family, school, and media in terms of the education of children and young people about the importance of their heritage.
- (3) The third part contains two major questions: in the first one, the respondents are invited to give their own opinion about the measurement and procedures people should adopt to preserve and safeguard cultural heritage; in the second one, they are requested to imagine a situation in which they become decision-makers and to give decision they predict to do to preserve their heritage.

The sample is constituted of students of Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University. It is a non-probability sampling, which means a non-random selection. Therefore, the selection of the interviewees was based on some criteria, especially gender, age, level of education, and department. 98 students have been interviewed: 50 girls and 48 boys. The interviews were carried out at the end of April and the beginning of May (2022), and the average length of the interviews ranged between 20 and 25 minutes. The process adopted in terms of carrying out the interview was open to giving more freedom to the interviewees to be more spontaneous and expressive. The interviewees belong to three different faculties of USMBA: the Faculty of Letters and Humanities (FLH), the Faculty of Sciences (FS), and the Faculty of Law and Economics (FLE). The figure below represents the distribution of students in relation to their affiliations:

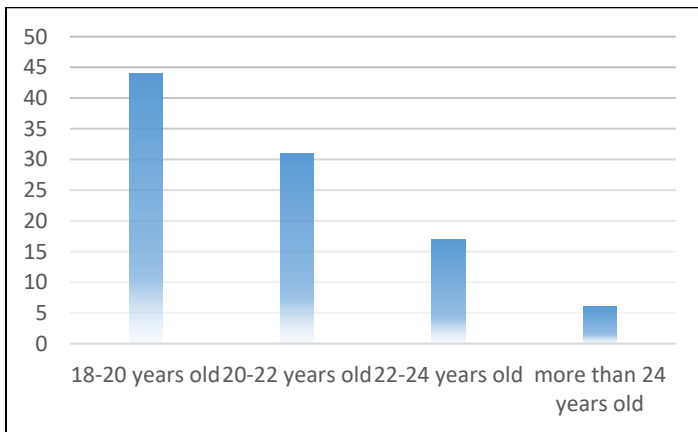
Figure 1: Distribution of the interviewees based on their department



Source: Compiled by the author

Another variable which was taken into consideration in terms of choosing the members of the sample was the age of the students. It will be able to distinguish between four age categories: 18-20 years old, 20-22 years old, 22-24 years old, and more than 24 years old. The second Figure shows us the distribution of the sample research based on the age of students:

Figure 2: Distribution of the interviewees based on their age

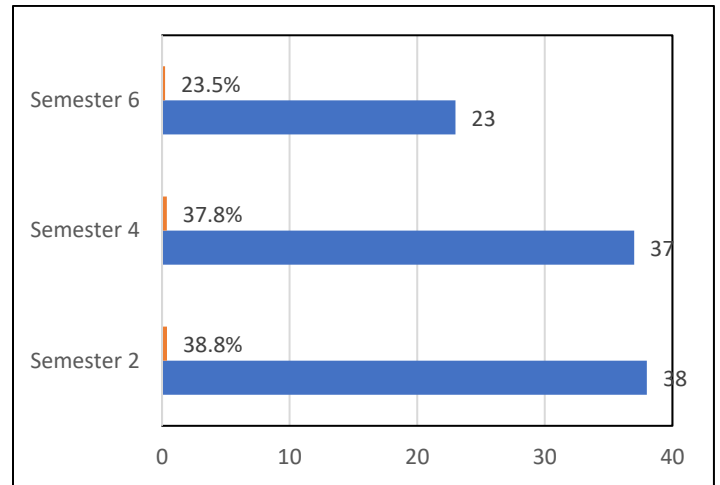


Source: Compiled by the author

Regarding the level of education, the interviewees cover all undergraduate programs' semesters.

The figure below represents the sample distribution based on students' level of studies:

Figure 3: Distribution of the interviewees based on the level of study



Source: Compiled by the author

Results

Based on the findings of this study, it seems evident that students of SMBA University have a strong awareness of the significance of heritage in their lives, viewing it as an integral part of their identity. As a result, they hold a firm belief in their capacity to contribute positively to the preservation and enhancement of heritage. Their proposals for improving the state of heritage demonstrate a high level of innovation. These actions and ideas serve as evidence of their sense of responsibility and commitment to safeguarding and promoting heritage. To these students, heritage is not merely a relic of the past; rather, it holds a special place in defining Moroccan identity.

Students' knowledge about cultural heritage

According to the students' answers about heritage, it could be stated that the majority of them link heritage with "the past". It is related to 'what has been inherited'. They mostly see it as a part of the civilisation, a symbol of the nation's identity. Some of them consider it a treasure to be protected: "For me, heritage is something that reflects a civilization. It is proof that this civilization is still alive. And I think, there are three kinds of heritage: the first one is represented by the language, the myths, and the tales transmitted orally or in writing from one generation to the next. The second one is embodied in traditional costumes and local food. And the third one is presented by the buildings". (Girl, 18 years old, English studies, Semester 2). However, this distinction between material heritage and non-material/intangible heritage is not generalised among students. Most of them associate it with material elements. The table below indicates the elements which are mostly cited by students:

Table 2: Material heritage mostly cited by the students

Material heritage	Elements mostly cited by the students
Old buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The archaeological site of Volubilis. The gate of Boujloud in Fez. The old city of Fez. The gate of Mansour Laalaj in Meknes. Jamaa Lfna Square in Marrakech. Tazota.
Historical mosques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Al-Qaraouiyyine Mosque in Fez, Al-Andlous Mosque in Fez Minaret of Hassan Mosque in Rabat, Al-Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakech, Mausuleum of Moulay Idriss in Fez.
Traditional clothes and Jewellers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kaftan. Djellaba. Selham (cape).
Mausoleums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Batha Museum in Fez.
Medersas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Medersa Bou Inania in Fez.

Source: compiled by author

From the previous table, it seems clear that students’ conceptions of heritage are mostly related to material elements which have a historical/symbolic value in the eyes of the population. Other elements like songs, traditional music, tales, and rites are almost neglected by them. Three students only were able to indicate some intangible elements of cultural heritage:

- “Ahidous”.
- “Henna Day
- Andalouisi Classical Music.

In addition to this material conception of heritage, the study reveals another characteristic of these conceptions. They are generally related to the local elements. The majority of students were able to mention especially some elements that are close to them (mostly located in Fez and Meknes). Some of them mentioned the Minaret of Hassan in Rabat and Al-koutoubia mosque in Marrakech. This means that students know elements of heritage, which are situated close to them. Two interviewees were able to extend this perspective, indicating some elements outside of Morocco: The pharaonic Pyramids in Egypt and the Eiffel Tour in France.

Students’ main sources of knowledge about cultural heritage

During the interviews, the focus was on three major sources of students’ knowledge about heritage: family, school, and media. Indeed, they represent the main social institutions that have the role of instructing and educating people from a very early age. Obviously, they don’t have the same weight, but they are expected to be the principal institutions that provide people, especially children and young people, with social values and convictions. Almost half of the interviewees said that they usually discuss heritage inside their families. The topics mostly discussed are the

old medina of Fez, weddings, festivities, language, traditions, etc. Some interviewees stated that they usually evoke the major dangers which threaten this heritage (new buildings, lack of politics of safeguarding, young people’s lack of interest in their heritage, etc.). Despite this interest expressed by students, the frequency of family discussions about heritage is very restricted. They rarely discussed these issues (one to three times a month). The periods they could evoke this kind of topic are related to some specific moments (the upcoming family marriage, a visit to the old Medina, etc.). The role of the school is crucial in terms of educating pupils on the importance of cultural heritage. 60 % of students said that they had the opportunity to learn about their national heritage in high school and elementary school. The subjects highly cited by the students are related to human sciences and languages: History, Arabic, French, Islamic Education, Philosophy, and Arts. The undergraduate subjects mostly cited by the students are those, which are related to culture, such as: Reading in Culture, Cultural Studies, Muslim Heritage, and Sociology of Culture.

Table 3: The subjects in which students have learned about heritage

	Subjects	Frequency
High School subjects	History	49
	Arabic	12
	French	2
	Islamic Education	1
	Philosophy	2
	Arts	1
Undergraduate subjects	Reading in Culture (English Studies)	3
	Cultural Studies (English Studies)	3
	Muslim Heritage (English Studies)	1
	Culture & Society in UK and USA (English Studies)	1
	Sociology of Culture (Sociology)	3
	Civic Responsibility (Law)	1

Source: Compiled by the author

Related to the role of the media in terms of promoting a good image of Moroccan heritage, it could be said that girls are more interested in this kind of program in both: traditional and new media. They usually see some specific programs which talk about heritage, like ‘Amoddo’, ‘Mrahba Bik’. The girls also use social media (especially Instagram and Facebook) to share pictures of traditional clothes (Kaftans, Djellabas), and Moroccan foods (Couscous) with their friends. While the boys share mostly some pictures of the old buildings and famous places in Morocco with foreigners.

Preserving cultural heritage in the eyes of the students

What could be done for the heritage? This question revealed the procedures people have to take into consideration in terms of acting to preserve their cultural heritage. According to their responses, it seems clear that students are aware of the importance of heritage in their life. They considered it as part of their identity.

For this reason, they are convinced about the role they could do to make the situation of heritage better than it is. To know students' attitudes about cultural heritage, two main questions were enclosed in the interview: the first question is about the appropriate behaviour population must do to protect their heritage, and the second question was like an imaginary situation; the interviewees were invited to imagine a future situation in which they become decision-makers. So, they were asked to propose some procedures that should be done to safeguard their cultural heritage. The main tendency which could be detected when analysing the students' answers to the first question is generally related to the fact of 'sensitising and educating people', especially future generations, about how to value cultural heritage, and how to act positively with this treasure. This role should be done inside the principal social institutions: family, schools, and media. The next answer given by a student in the fourth semester perfectly reflects this aspect:

'In Morocco, we have a diversity in terms of heritage. I urge Moroccan people to care about their heritage and to give it its real value. We have to be proud of our cultural heritage [...] we have also to promote our cultural heritage all over the world. Look at the others, they don't have enough elements of heritage as we have in Morocco, but they try to present it positively.' (Male student, 21 years old, Sociology, semester 4). If the first question is about social actions towards their heritage, the second question deals with political actions. The interviewee was invited to propose some decisions to be adopted if he/she will find himself/herself in a position of a decision-maker. All it could be said about this point is that the students have demonstrated a spirit of commitment and responsibility towards their heritage. This spirit is reflected by the ideas they proposed:

- Restoration of dilapidated historical monuments.
- Building museums specializing in the field of heritage.
- Organizing school visits to these archaeological sites.
- Using social media to publicize the cultural heritage of Morocco.
- Establishment of associations concerned with the field of heritage.
- Integrating the topic of heritage into school programs and curricula to enable future generations to recognize its value.
- Encouraging businesses to take an interest in the field of heritage and to promote it inside and outside Morocco.

The propositions put forth by these students demonstrate a high level of innovation when it comes to preserving cultural heritage. Their ideas are evidence of the responsibility and active engagement of young people in safeguarding their heritage. They view heritage as an integral part of Moroccan identity rather than something isolated in the past. This connection between heritage and identity is crucial. It highlights the inseparable relationship between the two. In essence, when discussing the identity of any society, cultural heritage plays a central role and cannot be

overlooked. Cultural heritage serves as a reflection of a society's collective cultural identity, encompassing the traditions, values, beliefs, and practices that have been passed down through generations. By recognizing the importance of cultural heritage in shaping identity, these students not only showcase their appreciation for their heritage but also acknowledge its impact on shaping who they are as individuals and as members of a larger community. The preservation and appreciation of cultural heritage are vital not only for the sake of the past but also for the continued cultivation of a rich and diverse identity in the present and future. 'People have to be proud of their heritage. It is a part of their identity. Therefore, we can see the identity of any society through its cultural heritage. I mean through their traditions, festivities, languages, clothes, buildings, etc. We have to educate children about the importance of their cultural heritage. This should be included in the school programs, and it should be discussed inside the family.' (Female student, 19 years old, Economics, Semester 2).

Discussion

This sociological qualitative study reveals that students' perceptions of heritage are generally connected with local material elements. Students who were asked to give some examples of cultural heritage did not find any difficulty to mention material elements which are close to them; the intangible elements were almost absent in this list. This result fits accurately with the main findings obtained by López-Fernández *et al.*, (2021). Their study reveals also that conception of heritage among students is based largely on local material elements. Previous experiences can have a profound impact on shaping student perceptions, especially when it comes to cultural heritage. Through various experiences, students may develop a stronger attachment to the culture and heritage of a particular place. Students' cultural experiences, perceptions, and awareness of a place's significance are primarily shaped through a combination of emotion and cognition. The emotional and informational reflections stemming from experiences in a place and its cultural heritage are regarded as crucial factors contributing to the overall perception of the cultural (Makridis *et al.*, 2016, 9). The main findings of this study raise two crucial questions: why are students more related in their conception of heritage to the material aspect? And why do they refer especially to some elements which are close to them?

In his article titled "The Authentic illusion: Humanity's intangible heritage, the Moroccan experience.", Ahmed Skounti (2009, 75) states that 'intangible heritage differs from material heritage in that the former is rooted in the locality in real as well as in figurative terms, whereas the latter considers the locality as a dimension without it being subject to it in a definitive or durable way'. Referring to this distinction, it seems clear that heritage, whatever it is intangible or material, is related to a territory, and consequently to a community that occupies it. However, the

difference is that intangible heritage is deeply rooted in the cultural and social life of this community. By 'local', Skounti means a territory owned as much individually as collectively by a community. This "locality" is essential as it shapes and influences the expressions of cultural practices (beliefs, rituals, etc.). Therefore, intangible heritage is not physically localized, as well as material heritage, but it is emotionally and spiritually connected to the place and the people who practice it. Its existence and continuity are intrinsically linked to the local community's identity and collective memory. Moreover, the word heritage itself, as examined by Skounti, is not quite often clear in the eyes of people. In other words, the fact that something becomes an element of heritage is socially constructed. People, all over the world, could have a tight attachment to many cultural things without considering them as a heritage. Jamaa El Fna Square in Marrakech and the Moussem of Tan-Tan had been nominated as parts of the intangible cultural heritage list in 2008. They only became heritage from this date. Ahmed Skounti (2010, 19-34) talks about 'Heritagisation', a term which can be defined as the process by which elements of culture or nature become, at a given moment in the history of societies, invested with the quality of heritage property worthy of safeguarding, enhanced for the benefit of current generations, and passed on to future generations. From this point of view, it seems logic to link students' conceptions of heritage, mostly related to material elements, which are close to them, with this process of "Heritagisation". It would be possible to talk, in this case, about the egocentric or the ethnocentric perception of heritage among people, as stipulated other researchers (Röll & Meyer 2020). However, the problem of this kind of explanation is that it gives more importance to the cultural aspect of the identity. In fact, this latter is multifaceted and more complex than it could be considered. Other aspects of the identity should be taken into consideration, and especially the politic side. Rather than this ethnocentric explanation, one could be adopting this process of heritagisation. An egocentric perception of heritage occurs when individuals or communities emphasize their own cultural heritage, typically those elements closest to them, while overlooking or undervaluing the heritage of others. Furthermore, an ethnocentric perception of heritage happens when one culture considers its own heritage as superior or more valuable than the heritage of other cultures, leading to potential biases and exclusionary practices, which was not the case in the present study. Indeed, focusing solely on the cultural aspect of identity in this context may not provide a complete understanding of the complexities involved. Politics and power dynamics play a significant role in the process of Heritagisation. Political agendas, ideologies, and historical narratives often influence the selection, preservation, and promotion of certain cultural elements as heritage. Taking a more holistic approach that considers both cultural and political dimensions can provide a comprehensive understanding of how and why certain aspects of heritage are emphasized or

marginalized within a society. This approach acknowledges that the process of Heritagisation is not solely driven by cultural factors but is also influenced by politics, power dynamics, and historical context. By doing so, researchers and policymakers can gain a more nuanced understanding of heritage perceptions and work towards more inclusive and equitable heritage practices.

Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the conceptions of cultural heritage among Moroccan young people, focusing on the relationship between the past and the present. While youth are often associated with the present and the future, this study sought to understand their connection with the cultural heritage inherited from the past and its significance in their lives. The majority of the students perceived heritage as something from the past, representing what has been inherited. They viewed it as an essential part of their identity, a symbol of civilization. However, their conceptions of heritage were predominantly centred around material elements with historical and symbolic value. Elements such as songs, traditional music, tales, and rites were largely overlooked by the students. An interesting finding was that girls showed more interest in TV programs related to heritage and demonstrated a better ability to identify specific programs about Moroccan heritage compared to boys. Additionally, girls actively shared pictures of traditional clothes and Moroccan foods on social media with their friends. These gender differences raise questions about how cultural heritage is perceived and engaged with differently by young girls and boys.

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