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Communicative spaces of their own: migrant girls performing selves using instant messaging software

Article (Accepted version) (Refereed)

Original citation:
Leurs, Koen and Ponzanesi, Sandra (2011) Communicative spaces of their own: migrant girls performing selves using instant messaging software. Feminist Review, 99 (1). pp. 55-78. ISSN 0141-7789
DOI: 10.1057/fr.2011.39

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Introduction

In this paper, we argue that instant messenger (IM) is actively made into a communicative space of their own by Dutch-Moroccan adolescent girls. Drawing from a large-scale survey, interviews and IM transcripts of Fatiha, Naoual, Midia, Kamal, Khadija, and Inzaf, we set out how gender, diaspora, youth culture and technologies intersect and influence each other. In the 'backstage' of instant messaging (Jacobs, 2003: 13), our interviewees seem to be primarily engaged in under-the-radar identity-forming processes. Our interviewees turn to IM as a relatively safe playground, seeking validation of their feelings in trying out relationships and scheduling meetings. Furthermore, we observe how interviewees, in the more public 'onstage' of IM, use display names that combine various intersecting 'symbolical grammars of difference' (Wekker, 2009: 153). Combining gender, diasporic, religious and internet cultural affiliations, as well as references to global youth culture, Dutch-Moroccan adolescent girls claim diverse group-memberships and belongingness. A greater understanding of IM use as a 'way of being in the world' of Dutch-Moroccan youth is particularly relevant when considering that there is a 'paucity of research on immigrant adolescents' practices with digital media' (Lam, 2009: 381), and feminist analyses of girl culture 'primarily address the experiences of white, heterosexual, middle-class girls' (Merskin, 2005: 64).

Dutch-Moroccans make up some two percent of the total Dutch population of 16.6 million. They are the second-largest minority group in the Netherlands, following those of Turkish-Dutch background. Of this group, 48 % migrated to the

Netherlands from the 1960s onwards, when there was a growing demand for guest workers in Northern-Europe. The other 52 % were born in the Netherlands, after their parents had migrated (CBS, 2010). Various hidden axes of differentiation - such as diaspora, generation, adolescence, gender and religion - intersect when deconstructing the term 'Dutch-Moroccaness' for our six interviewees. All born in the Netherlands to parents who migrated there from Morocco, they experience various conjunctions in their everyday, transitional journeys of adolescence and in negotiating diasporic affiliations. For instance, daughters of immigrant diasporic families can find themselves in a position of being 'used as a site of interaction between hegemonic and minority cultures' (Ponzanesi, 2002: 210). In the wider Dutch discourse on migration and integration, Dutch-Moroccans are seen as the 'absolute other'[i] and females with a migrant and Islamic background especially run the risk of being isolated as 'unemancipated others' (Ghorashi, 2010: 75-81; Brouwer, 2006). For Dutch-Moroccan girls, instant messaging appears to be a space where they can negotiate these issues and strategically (re-)position themselves.

While other forms of computer mediated communication (CMC) come and go, instant messaging has been around for almost two decades.[ii] As boyd argues, the importance of IM can be grasped by comparing it to offline gathering places such as shopping malls and schoolyards. Mostly away from close adult supervision, such spaces are important to fend off boredom, 'hang out' and engage in various 'friendship-driven' activities (boyd, 2010: 80-84). Logging onto instant messenger, young people are able to connect with groups of friends who are 'always-on' (Baron, 2008). Lenhart et al. report that three quarters of American adolescent youth use IM frequently, and they found that girls are especially attracted to the communicative space (2002: 38). From the 346 Dutch-Moroccan young people who participated in

our large-scale survey, we found that IM is very popular among this group. Most girls (97%) and boys (93%) use the technology at least once per week, while 53% of participating girls and 43% of boys reported that they to log in more than once daily.[iii]

Our theoretical framework first aims to bring together insights from CMC and digital literacies' scholarship by turning to instant messaging as a discursive practice with an emphasis on postcolonial intersectionality. Earlier work on IM is mostly centred on white American teenagers; we diversify this scholarship by focussing on adolescent, immigrant girls' intersectional performance of identity. Second, we discuss our methodological approach and introduce the interviewees. In the third section, we present two case studies on Dutch-Moroccan IM expressive culture, drawing on original research on migrant youth online worlds. In the first case study, the focus is on the *backstage* of IM, where we highlight how our interviewees negotiate ownership over IM and engage in private, personal identity formation. In the second case study, the focus is on the *onstage* of IM. Here, we set out how Dutch-Moroccan youth work against ethnic absolutist labels by authoring multiple selves and expressing diverse social belonging as forms of public social identification.

IM as a way of being in the world

IM has become a 'fact of life, a way of being in the world' (Lewis and Fabos, 2005: 470, 493). How can we grasp its specific role in the lives of Dutch-Moroccan youth? Being such an important part of everyday communication, IM has been studied from a variety of perspectives. CMC scholars argue that 'computer mediated written language often has speech-like characteristics' (Hård af Segerstad and Hashemi, 2006: 56). In instant messaging, these speech-like characteristics are represented through a distinct writing style with its own 'internet-speak' norms, consisting of abbreviations,

apparent misspellings, ungrammatical and 'incorrect' uses of typed language. Journalists, teachers, policymakers, and parents have expressed their concerns about these linguistic features of IM. Often dressed up in moral panic rhetoric, IM applications and the informal speech circulating there are seen as a challenge to written culture. The practice is suspected of corrupting formal writing skills among young people and causing harm to print culture institutions (Thurlow, 2006). Baron discusses how discussions of IM by educators and in the media conflate 'language change' and 'language decline' when arguing that IM is 'destroying language' (2008: 161). Tagliamonte and Denis argue that IM is not leading to 'linguistic ruin', they rather, and more importantly, acknowledge that it has 'its own unique style' (2008: 3).

From the perspective of performativity of self, our question is not whether IM is detrimental to language, but rather, what process of meaning-making lies behind its unique style for youth, and migrants in particular? We are interested in the dynamic, expressive culture circulating in IM, for instance, that of the display names that appear in 'buddy lists' of users. Additionally, IM expressive culture includes sending short messages, exchanged by users to express themselves, using a 'full range of variants from the speech community - formal, informal, and highly vernacular' (Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008: 24).

Scholars in the new literacy studies (NLS) tradition have examined digital literacies that have evolved in IM. Lam recognizes that 'to perform different voices and versions of one's self dependent on the audience has come to characterize the aesthetics and epistemology of IM' (2009: 380). The communicative space of IM sheds light on two 'modes of adolescent connectivity': private self-identity formation and the more public social identity formation (Boneva et al., 2006: 202). First, youth engage in 'person-to-person communication' for purposes such as comparing

themselves ‘to similar others and to receive verification for his or her own feelings, thoughts and actions’. In their personal conversations youth ‘“decipher” the self’ and negotiate their being in the world. Besides private self-identification, IM is used for ‘one-to-many communication’. ‘[C]rucial to their social identity formation’, this form allows adolescents to express their ‘connectedness to a group that creates a feeling of group belonging’ (Boneva et al., 2006: 202). Display names are examples of more public one-to-many forms of communication in IM. By naming themselves in distinct ways, users show affiliations, for instance with peer groups.

The distinction between the onstage and backstage underlines the distinct ways instant messaging is taken up. Building on Goffman’s dramaturgical understanding of the everyday theatre of the performance of self (1959), Jacobs describes the IM practices of Lisa, a white American middle-class adolescent girl: ‘the backstage conversations [synchronous, dyadic IM exchanges] are where alliances are formed, problems are discussed and solved, and plans are made beyond the hearing of others … the onstage places [display names] are where alliances are declared and social positions and presence are established’ (2003: 13). The distinction between what is collectively made visible onstage by IM users such as display pictures and display names, and what is negotiated in the backstage in personal conversations corresponds with the two modes of adolescent connectivity of public and private identity formation. In the backstage, IM can be used to ‘rehearse different ways of being before trying them out offline,’ as Kelly et al. learned from their interviews with Canadian girls (2006: 3). In the onstage, IM can be used to signal affiliations and claim memberships. Lewis and Fabos argue, for instance, that IM is ‘multi-voiced’, as it can be taken up to ‘perform a version of self’ that can be shifted for different

audiences (2005: 493). However, these findings are mostly based on the study of North-American white, middle-class teenagers.

Recently, scholars have began to focus on American minority youth's IM practices. Yi, for instance, studied IM identity construction among Korean-American adolescent youth. Her interviewees embraced IM as a safe space in which they 'were becoming active, participatory social agents who constructed their own transnational and transcultural community'. They were '"re-makers" of the textual, technological, linguistic, and cultural resources available' (2009: 123). Lam conducted an in-depth case study of instant messaging multiliteracies of Kaiyee, a Chinese-American adolescent girl. She traces the instant message networking of Kaiyee with the local Chinese immigrant community, her translocal network of Asian American youth and transnational connections with peers in China (2009). Yi focuses mostly on the performance of transcultural identifications, while Lam focuses on the issue of adolescence and migration. In both cases, isolating one of multiple axes of signification means that others are overlooked.

An intersectional lens can make visible the ways persons are differentially positioned and position themselves in specific ways in particular situations. Wekker argues that intersectionality refers to both theory and methodology, 'which have as central insights that gender and 'race' or ethnicity (and other axes of signification such as class, sexuality, age, religion, etc.) operate simultaneously as social and symbolical grammars of difference and co-construct each other' (2009: 153). The danger of taking up intersectionality as a 'catchall phrase' resides in its ambiguity; it might gloss over the distinctive character that remains in all inequalities (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 198-200). Paradoxically, as Davis argues, the potential of intersectionality also lies in its ambiguity; alerting scholars 'to the fact that the world

around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated' (2008: 79). She continues by arguing that intersectionality does not provide a 'normative straitjacket' guideline for feminist inquiry, rather the approach forces scholars to be innovative, explorative and accountable in their critical and reflexive engagement with feminist analysis.

Here we consider the intersecting symbolical grammars of difference, as constituted through the performative acts of the young women we have researched. Performative acts in instant messaging include the updating of one's display name, display photo and abiding by IM speech conventions of emoticons, short utterances and opening and closing conventions. Technological, linguistic and social norms give order to the performance of self in IM, but also leave room for re-signification.[iv] The performativity of gender has famously been deconstructed by Butler. In order to be acknowledged as a gendered subject, the 'I' has to satisfy various 'norms of intelligibility': '"intelligible" genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence' (Butler, 1999: 23). These norms are socially constructed, but leave room for re-signification; 'it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible' (Butler, 1999: 185). By extension, we want to argue that other categories of difference such as age, generation, diaspora and youth culture, are also performed. In this way, we account for the multilayered identification and complex intersecting journeys of children of immigrant groups. Durham describes their complex journey of identification: 'the psychological transition of adolescence, already charged in terms of gender and sexuality, is then imbricated with the conundrums of the other transition – the diaspora identity that demands delicate negotiations of race/ethnicity, nation, class, language, culture and history' (Durham: 2004: 141).

Our interviewees' personal experiences differ, but in the Netherlands, Dutch-Moroccan boys are often 'allowed a wider radius of action outside the house', while 'girls still face the most restrictions, and they spend much of their leisure time with female family members and friends' in domestic settings (Pels and De Haan, 2003: 61). Brouwer notes that 'Dutch-Moroccan girls have to struggle against western stereotypes and against the restrictions they encounter within their families and communities', and argues that online, girls can 'demonstrate counterviews towards the dominant western image of Muslim women as well as to their own communities' (Brouwer, 2006). Issues of stereotyping, generation, diaspora, and religion and youth culture complicate their process of coming-of-age. In our analysis of IM, we combine CMC and digital literacy perspectives and remain aware of symbolical grammars of difference that intersect in our interviewees' performance of self in the digital realm.

Following Hall, performativity of self in instant messaging can be seen as connected to wider, intersecting 'discursive formations' (Hall, 1997: 6). Discursive formations reveal power relations, which can be restricting but also empowering. Inspired by Foucault, Hall argues that discourse concerns 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular moment' (1997: 44). These go beyond mere linguistics to constitute practices of shaping the world. Identification, as Hall argues, is a process which 'operates across difference, it entails discursive work [the process of making sense of things, making meaning of what's happening], the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries' (1996: 3). IM performativity reveals discursive formations by making connections with larger power structures in IM expressive culture as well as by acknowledging micro-politics of subversion.

The interviewees and our methodological approaches

In our research, we triangulate data gathered using three methodological approaches: large-scale surveys, interviews, and textual analysis of IM transcripts. With surveys distributed among a large group of youth (1353), aged between 12 and 20 years old, we aimed to learn more about *what* young people living in urban areas of the Netherlands commonly do online. We then carried out interviews with a smaller group of six Dutch-Moroccan youth who had helped in piloting the survey. With these interviews, we intended to find out *why* youth do what they do online. We take a closer look at *how* youth perform their identities online by assessing the discursive formations in instant messaging transcripts (Hall, 1996, 1997). Below, we set out the innovative combination of the three methodological approaches further and introduce the reader to our interviewees.

From the survey we learned about IM's importance – almost three quarters of the participating Dutch-Moroccan girls (62.8 %) and half of the boys (50 %) reported to miss IM very much if they were not able to use it anymore. More specifically, 95 % of the girls versus 82.5 % of boys would miss it at least somewhat if they were not able to use it anymore (see table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Fatiha, Naoual, Midia, Kamal, Khadija and Inzaf take centre stage in this study. They are aged between 13 and 18 years old: Khadija is 18, Fatiha is 17, Kamal is 16, Inzaf and Naoual are 15, and Midia is 13. These six youth were contacted using snowballing methods in two cities in the Netherlands, with the help of university students of Dutch-Moroccan descent and through local volunteering work. This

approach resulted in an over-representation of girls in our sample, as Kamal was the only boy. We chose to include him in our analysis, however, since he also introduced us to his IM network. Our interviewees are all born in the Netherlands. They are urban, ethnic minority teenagers. They combine the use of Dutch with either a Berber language or Arabic at home, and while using IM. The participants are religious, but Islam is differently practiced and performed, offline and online. All youth connect to the Internet from their home; several have to share the computer with siblings, while others have access to the Internet from within the safe confines of their bedrooms.

Data gathering was partly adapted to the preferences of our interviewees. Interviews were conducted through e-mail, IM and face-to-face in domestic settings and cafés. Most were one-on-one interviews, except for the interview we held with both Inzaf and Naoual, as they preferred to be interviewed together. During our interviews, we learned for instance from Fatiha that she uses IM 'every day at least 2 hours'. Major motivations behind IM use included connecting with her friends, as she states: 'all of my friends use msn', but also because 'it is a free way of talking to your friends and family'. Naoual agrees and adds that 'it is convenient in the case you need to reach somebody'. Our interviewees report that they talk about school and discuss things they would like to buy through IM. Midia, Khadija and Fatiha also list conversation topics such as celebrities, music and film. Kamal likes to talk about computer games, sports and technologies, while Khadija talks about personal issues and international news events. Inzaf and Fatiha also talk about health, while Midia discusses moral issues and Fatiha converses about religion.

Following the example set by Jacobs (2003) and Thiel-Stern (2007), participants were invited to save IM conversations to the hard drives of their computers during the period of December 2009-February 2010. From their collection,

we asked the young people to select five transcripts consisting of at least ten turns that they deemed fit for us to read. Before sharing, our interviewees were requested to ask their conversation partners permission to share a transcript of their talk. This was done for instance as follows: [v]

El Hoceima is the bom, that's the place where i come from so just tell everyone thats the city number ONE says: I participate in a research on msn[vi] and I have to copy and paste conversations and send them to them would you allow me to use this conversation?

~ ..ღ. n O u я я .ღ.. ~ says: yee course… hahaha its bout nothing 

We stressed in our invitations that we did not mind with whom or what the conversation would be about, we welcomed everyone and all topics. Participants chose conversations to construct a self that they wanted us to see. In total, we received 26 transcripts, ranging in length from 10 sentences to over three pages. We include excerpts from IM conversations and interviews, enabling interviewees to become, to some degree, active participants and co-authors of this article.[vii] Participants sent in IM logs of conversations with friends ranging from 13 to 22 years old. All our interviewees said the transcripts they sent in were talks with friends that they knew from outside the digital realm, for instance through school, work or from their neighbourhood. Twenty of the talks were with women friends, and six with male friends. We take a case study approach to these transcripts, along with the survey data and interviews, aiming to generate a contextualized analysis of the backstage and onstage of IM performativity of self.

Introducing the case studies

The time is 8:30 pm on a Saturday evening late January 2010, when classmates Khadija and Nada, two 18-year-old Dutch-Moroccan girls, have a private conversation over MSN Messenger. We enter the conversation following an exchange over a school assignment that the two classmates have to prepare. The girls agree to sit down after the weekend to finish their presentations about fashion. The girls also talk about a holiday trip that Khadija's parents made to Dubai. Her parents' holiday was 'chill', or very cool. They took nice pictures and bought a Playstation portable as a holiday gift for her brother. She herself received Dubai souvenir t-shirts, Mexx blouses and 'expensive fabric for a Moroccan dress'. Nada types 'Besaha', to congratulate her in Latinized Arabic for these gifts.

-- Ms. Laouikili ❤, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: ah well

im going for a nice swimm tomrw

really feel like going

**** Porque es el destino. says:*** Haha thats good!! Good dont drown he hahaah

-- Ms. Laouikili ❤, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: no no I have nough love handles

**** Porque es el destino. says:*** hahahahahah Silly

-- Ms. Laouikili ❤, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: haha yea true

**** Porque es el destino. says:*** Swia swia [shwia shwia: calm down, calm down]

tina was doing a diet of some sort [tina: you]

-- Ms. Laouikili ❤, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: hahaha

yeah, ze3ma [ze3ma: expressing doubt]

I have started to eat les and so

but it is quite difficult

the temptation is too strong

especially here at home

**** Porque es el destino. says:*** hahahha

I believe so for sure

with that little chef

eee we havvve

soon

-- Ms. Laouikili ❤️, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: haha

**** Porque es el destino. says:*** eat that dish of your mama

-- Ms. Laouikili ❤️, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: yes i just told herr tha

**** Porque es el destino. says:*** tina have to learn me

-- Ms. Laouikili ❤️, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: we hadnt had tha in a long time

-- Ms. Laouikili ❤️, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: yes i have to lear it myself

tina should come make t yema with me [yema: mother]

**** Porque es el destino. says:*** Yes inshallah [inshallah: God willing]

-- Ms. Laouikili ❤️, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: inshallah

In the transcript, Khadija talks about how she is planning to go swimming the next day. Nada jokingly urges her to be careful not to drown. Half jokingly, Khadija replies her 'love handles' will keep her afloat. Nada turns to Arabic, stating 'schwia schwia' or 'calm down, calm down' to downplay this last remark. She then asks about the diet

Khadija was following. Khadija explains that the cooking skills of her mother make it difficult to pursue the diet. Nada wants to learn from Khadija and her mother how to prepare good food. Nada and Khadija end their conversation in Arabic wishing they, 'Inshallah' or God willing[viii], will soon learn to cook together. We observe how Khadija states she 'ze3ma'[ix], meaning 'with doubts', 'started to eat les and so'. In typing the word 'ze3ma', the number three is used to write the Arabic letter ع. This is the 18th letter of the Arabic Alphabet, which has no equivalent in the Latin alphabet. In Arabic chat and text-messaging transliteration, the letter is often represented with a 3 (Palfreyman and Al-Khalil, 2003). Ending their conversation, Khadija and Nada expressed 'inshallah', God willing, they would get together to learn to cook from Khadija's 'yema' or mother. In all these cases, the Latin alphabet is used to write a specific dialect, Moroccan-Arabic or Darija.[x]

We have included this transcript excerpt, as it sheds light on two focus points that we want to discuss in more depth: the private backstage and public onstage of IM. First, considering that Nada and Khadija use instant messaging to discuss personal struggles over dieting, the excerpt illustrates that instant messaging is taken up in the backstage as a safe communicative space of their own. Second, words from various languages (Dutch, English, Spanish, Moroccan-Arabic) were used in the display names. Khadija used the display name 'Li Tmenit Lqito Fik' (Moroccan-Arabic for 'what I hoped I found in you'), illustrating how various symbolical grammars of difference can circulate in IM onstage expressive culture, used to express multiple belongings.

Case study 1: negotiating ownership backstage

In the first case study, we zoom in on the various ways youth negotiate their

ownership and perform the boundaries of their personal territory of instant messaging. Negotiating ownership can only be understood when we know what is discussed using IM. When we asked what Inzaf and her friends usually do on IM, she reported that girls gossip 'mostly about boys where they are in love with or about other people', while Naoual added: 'girls talk about other things, such as shopping, school and some girls talk about boys'. In our survey, we asked our respondents what topics they prefer to talk about online rather than face-to-face (see figure 1). The three most frequently mentioned topics among Dutch-Moroccan girls are talking about 'homework' (49.4 %), 'friendships' (40.6 %) and 'music, fashion, pop stars and film' (40.0 %). Dutch-Moroccan boys list 'friendships' (38 %), 'what happened in the neighbourhood' (38 %) and 'homework' (38 %). Furthermore, important topics for both girls and boys are 'relationships, love', 'what happened today', and 'in the school'. For the girls who participated in the survey, 'making appointments and dates' is done more frequently than boys, while boys report the topic of 'sexuality', 'making money and buying things' and 'using new gadgets and applications' more often than girls. One out of every three boys and girls list the topic of relationships and love. From our survey data, we also found that using MSN to make appointments and dates is mentioned by almost 40 % of girls.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Topics such as friendships, relationships and love resonate with private self-identity formation, the first of the two modes of adolescent connectedness, next to more public social identity formation. Processes of private self-identity construction can be understood as backstage performances of self. Following Goffman, Jacobs

argues that ‘backstage behaviour’, beyond the observation of power holders, is often done in IM to ‘build and test social ties’: ‘Once operating within the safety of the backstage’, her informants ‘use a variety of discourse cues and conventions to signal closeness, to build meaning and to work through misunderstandings’ (2003: 8, 31). Relationships and expressions of love are also common markers in the display names that our interviewees and their friends use to identify themselves. For instance, Souad, Midia’s 13-year-old girlfriend used the display name ‘I am Crazzy in love with you  .. my feelings for you cannot go away  ’ to express her affections. IM appears to be used as a playground for establishing (romantic) relationships.

In one of the transcripts shared with us, Fatiha talked with her 22-year-old Dutch-Somalian classmate, Owsark. The exchange is about something that happened when Owsark visited Fatima, a mutual friend. There, stored on Fatima’s laptop in the personal pictures folder, she discovered photos of a boy she likes. Before discussing this however, Owsark makes sure that nobody can ‘eavesdrop’ on the conversation by asking Fatiha whether she is sitting behind the computer all by herself. Once they are both convinced that they have the privacy to talk, girls turn to the sensitive topic of boy-talk. This IM gesture can be compared to non-mediated settings when it sometimes is desirable to make sure nobody can overhear the conversation.

owsark says: ohyea theres something are you alone

Show remorse!! .....Allah (swt) will accept it from you and inchAllah will offer you goodness!! says: yes why

American adolescent girls in Thiel-Stern’s study consider IM a private space where parents are literally shut out. By being able to keep conversations private, girls

can share their thoughts on personal, compromising and embarrassing topics on IM. IM users can quickly close the chat window when unwanted onlookers, such as parents or siblings, approach the computer (2007: 52). The American teenagers in Grinter and Palin's study emphasized the advantage of being able to operate IM 'below the radar': 'use can be unobtrusive, go unnoticed, or even be covert' (2002: 26). Our informants describe their MSN conversations as very personal**;** as Midia claims, IM 'is for yourself, nobody sees who and how many contacts you have in your list'.[xi]

Our interviewees report encountering few restrictions in their instant messaging. But when there is control over their use, it is mostly asserted by their fathers, mothers or older brothers. As a private space largely outside of parental supervision where youth are negotiating processes of coming-of-age and identity-in-the-making, IM has caused concern among some parents. Declining our invitation to participate in the study, a mother voiced her concerns over the computer use of her three children (aged 8, 11 and 13): 'occasionally I have seen the [IM] conversation history and the conversations between the kids did not charm me very much'. She eventually decided to prohibit her kids from using IM and online social networking sites: 'I am of the opinion that too much dirt and nonsense is sold and spread through these media and the disadvantages outweigh the advantages'.

In attempting to elude such parental supervision, as Brouwer states, Dutch-Moroccan girls turn to the Internet to discuss sensitive topics and to establish contact 'without the social control of parents and without crossing social boundaries' (2006). IM users have an active say over their space; they can maintain its boundaries themselves by deciding who is added to and banned from their contact list. Fatiha describes negative experiences with boys who demanded that she show herself on her

webcam; she said that IM turns bad ‘when the other directly asks whether you can turn on your cam’, leading to an avoidance of those contacts. Midia spoke to us about her straightforward solution when people she did not know ‘stalked’ her; ‘you just have to block them and delete them off your list’. This technical feature enables youth to keep out unwanted outsiders. As Kelly et al. learned from their study of adolescent girls in Canada, they resisted sexually harassing boys and men by blocking them off their friend lists. The authors recognized the significance of girls being able to block ‘boys who were mean’: ‘this power to respond to insults is significant in light of research showing that girls and women still appear to be more vulnerable to sexual insults, because boys and men have more diverse sources of strength and status’ (Kelly et al, 2006: 22).

When we interviewed Inzaf and Naoual together, they reflected on a bad IM experience of a girl they both know. Their friend was pressured into showing parts of her body to a boy using a webcam on instant messaging. He forced her into showing herself in the nude, stating he would spread other revealing pictures of her if she would not cooperate. Eventually she exposed herself in front of her webcam, which had very serious consequences.

Interviewers: are there any bad experiences that you or someone you know has had online?

Inzaf: Bad experiences?

Naoual: Yes I have heard of, a girl we both know, she has with her webcam.

Inzaf: Parts of her body.

Naoual: Parts of her body, she showed to the cam and that boy took a picture and he has sent that to everyone in our city. And at a certain point it got to her nephew, and he has beaten her up badly.

Inzaf: Yes terrible, she ended up in the hospital.

Naoual: For two days she was in the hospital I believe, and at a certain point her dad found out and she got beaten up again, she spent a week or so in the hospital […] You really have to consider that [when using IM].

(Interview with Inzaf and Naoul held on October 15, 2010)

The exchange reminds us that girls can remain very vulnerable in the digital realm, and it illustrates how familial, ethno-cultural and religious norms regulate the partly overlapping but also partly divergent spaces of IM and the offline world. Perhaps the attachment to IM can be explained by taking into account that within their families, Dutch-Moroccan girls are sometimes more restricted in their movements than boys, as they are perceived as gatekeepers 'to maintaining the family honour' (Pels and de Haan, 2003: 61). In the family circle, values such as honour and chastity prevail and are especially expected of girls. Familial social norms govern their contacts with boys, and 'for girls this often also meant to "shame" themselves in their presence, i.e. to behave timidly and modestly and to refrain from any looseness in appearance or expression' (Pels and De Haan, 2003: 58). The transitional journey of adolescence gets complicated as girls oscillate between conflicting motivations of gendered, religious and ethno-cultural patterns of continuity versus change. Although Inzaf and Naoul recognize the dangers of being 'caught', IM is used among our interviewees to extend the parameters of their physical and social worlds. Brouwer also recognized that for some Dutch-Moroccan girls, the Internet sometimes

'functions as a protected meeting place,' as it is not always considered 'appropriate for a Muslim girl to go to a café to meet the opposite sex' (2006). We see IM as being used to circumvent restrictions placed on Dutch-Moroccan girls by parents and siblings to get in touch with other people.

In the survey, we found that almost 40 % of participating girls use IM to schedule meetings and dates. Our interviewees report that girls can, for instance, exert agency in setting up dates. While Inzaf is hesitant about it: 'I don't know but I think there are many girls who think it is easier', Midia told us that 'well I think that every girl first talks to a boy on msn to get to know each other better and then tries to schedule a date'. Because familial and community control over their freedom remains a key issue, Naoual finds 'it is easier to approach a boy via msn via the internet than a boy who would walk by here, especially for girls who are a bit shy'. In the words of Fatiha: 'you get the chance to get to know somebody better without having to be with somebody face to face'. IM seems to be used as a space to get acquainted, as Brouwer describes, 'if a girl wants to make a date with a boy, after some chat sessions, she will meet with the intended party in the company of friends' (2006). These findings add another layer to the study by Kelly et al. who argue that use of instant messaging among girls they interviewed 'allowed them to rehearse different ways of being before trying them out offline'. They also used instant messaging to practice taking the initiative in (heterosexual) relationships in IM (2006: 3, 20).

Having the blocking feature at hand, IM is used to try out private conversations. Although Inzaf raised the issue of her friend getting beaten up after showing herself on a webcam using IM, she thinks that IM remains a safer option: 'it is a greater risk to approach a stranger on the street just like that, you never know how that person is, he could be aggressive'. If the conversation goes in the wrong

direction, or a contact demands webcam images, our interviewees report that they will block and delete the contact from their buddy list. Naoual told us about what can go wrong, but she still uses instant messaging 'because it is a fun way to spend your free time'. Herring argues that 'women participate more actively and enjoy greater influence in environments where the norms of interaction are controlled' (2003: 209). The different ways users take pleasure in staking out their own private communicative space resonates with the notion of 'jammer girls'. Merskin claims that, facilitated by sociological and technological changes and informed by third wave feminism[xii], 'jammer girls' negotiate their worlds by making use of Internet applications to 'enjoy a sense of freedom and a sense of control' and to 'validate their feelings' (2005: 57, 64). Notwithstanding dangers that remain, part of the power of IM is that it is a space where youth, away from unwanted onlookers, can have fun, rehearse personal identifications and experiment with relationships. In the next section, we discuss how youth not only negotiate their ownership over their communicative space, but also actively re-mix different cultural affiliations.

Case study 2: performing symbolic grammars of difference onstage

In the second case study, we analyze how Dutch-Moroccan youth perform the opposing motivations of continuity and change in the more public instant messaging 'onstage', through the micro-politics of updating display names.[xiii] After more private personal identity formation, display names are part of the second important mode of adolescent connectedness: public social identification. As a form of one-to-many communication in IM, display names appear in the buddy lists of friends. The buddy-list of IM users can be seen as a display window, listing the display names of all befriended people. By making references to specific inspirations and showing

orientations to friends, display names can be used to demarcate and manage an online presence. Onstage IM behaviour thus becomes 'a way to take the stage for a select audience' (Jacobs, 2003: 26). In the words of interviewee Noual, a display name 'as a matter of fact tells a sort of life story'. We will analyze the ways in which our interviewees re-mix various linguistic symbolic grammars of difference in their onstage display names.

Androutsopoulos comments on diasporic groups' online multilingualism in Germany: 'being marked off as a personal territory, screen names and signatures allow their bearers to engage in cultural bricolage, appropriating resources from various domains' (Androutsopolous, 2006: 539-540). Display names in our corpus reveal ethnic affiliations, often used in combination with gendered articulations. Examples include the use of 'Maroc', referring to the French word for the country of Morocco, 'mocro chick', 'mocro girl' and 'mocro-boy'.[xiv] Inzaf informs us that names such as 'mocro-boy' are common. She told us 'mocro-boy means I am from Morocco and I am a boy,' and she thinks names such as these are written in English 'to sound cooler'. Androutsopolous also found that ethnicity gets articulated through English language screen names, mostly in combination with gendered expressions, 'as in Persian Girly, PersianLady, prince of Persia, and sexy greekgirl, GreEk Chica, greekgod19' (2006: 540).

References to ethnic ties are among one of the markers of difference expressed in display names. Inzaf logged in to MSN using a display name written in English: 'El Hoceima is the bom, that's the place where I come from so just tell everyone thats the city number ONE'. The rhyme combines rap vernacular, informed by global youth culture, with an expression of diasporic belonging. When we asked her to tell us more about the name, Inzaf told us 'I stumbled upon it on a website, and I thought that is

something for me,' so she copied and pasted it into her display name. She explained its significance to us: 'it means a lot to me because that is the town in Morocco where I am from and I want to show that I am proud of it'. The name represents her attachment to the city of El Hoceima in Morocco: 'I was not born there but my father is from El Hoceima. When I was using it, he saw my name and he thought it was good'. She adds that 'it rhymes in English' and it is 'nicer to say it in English than in Dutch'.

Hall argues that identification is the ongoing production 'of the marking of difference' combining 'where we came from' but also 'what we might become' (1996: 4). In the case of the bricolage of display names in IM by Dutch-Moroccan youth, we see how these junctures get mediated in the digital realm. The display name of Inzaf displays the emotional influence the migration experience of her father has on her life. However, there is another layer to this marker. The display name also illustrates her mediation of contemporary orientations. Turning to English, she signals her affiliation with contemporary global youth culture.

In IM, as Jacobs argues, 'spellings indicate membership in an online community' (2003: 35). For instance, in our research, we came across the display name of a girl who crafted a 'netspeak' translation of the Arabic name Nour, '..ﻮ. n O u я я .ﻮ..', and also the display name of a Dutch-Moroccan boy consisting of both Latin and Arabic characters, 'Mø محمد BadBoy'. In the latter we see a combination of netspeak, Mø, combined with Arabic alphabet characters to write the name Mohammed. The name also integrates a connection to mainstream global hip-hop culture by referencing to BadBoy, the American record label set up by Sean 'P. Diddy' Combs. The take up of CMC-specific writing styles in display names reveals

another dimension to the ways in which our interviewees become active agents over their own representation: they author multiple selves and express diverse social belongings.

Besides English, our informants also tap into Latinized Arabic. Khadija included 'Li Tmenit Lqito Fik', Moroccan-Arabic for 'what I hoped I found in you', while Fatiha logged in with the display name showing religious orientations: (partly translated from Dutch) 'Show remorse!! .....Allah (swt) will accept it from you and inchAllah will offer you goodness!!'.[xv] During our interview with Khadija, she makes it clear that this statement is used to express her commitment to Islam: 'I am a believer and what is in my name is a sort of phrase taken from the Koran'. Our interviewees thus not only turn to English to express their affiliations. Display names that include Moroccan Arabic communicated using the Latin alphabet appear quite widely. By writing Arabic while using the Latin alphabet, Palfreyman and Al-Khalil argue, IM users claim membership to specific ethnic peer groups, but also enjoy this 'funky' everyday informal writing style that generates 'peer-group prestige' (2003).

Yi notes that his Korean-American interviewee Mike came to think of reading and writing Korean as 'cool' after his American peers complimented his use of Korean in diary writing and web-posting. '[H]e seemed to (re)learn the value of his heritage language and to construct a positive self-image' (2009: 108). IM might also be a significant safe space for our interviewees to find acknowledgement of their heritage language as a positive, empowering resource.[xvi] The display names discussed above indicate how the lived experience of difference among Dutch-Moroccan youth – who are sometimes seen as 'absolute others' – is not always an oppressive one, but can also be empowering. We observe them foregrounding various group-memberships, belongings and loyalties to gain solidarity from peers. In articulating

their display names, our interviewees go beyond a singular onstage articulation of identity; rather they perform a multiplicity of selves by re-mixing diasporic, gendered, internet culture and religious affiliations.

Conclusions

The Internet, as Woo describes, is 'perhaps the least understood location of youth culture' among adults, by both parents and educators (cited in Yi, 2009: 102). In taking an intersectional approach and triangulating quantitative and qualitative methods, we aimed to connect and nuance studies on immigrant adolescents' use of digital media and feminist analyses of online teenage-girl culture. This research shows how Dutch-Moroccan girls, in their quotidian interaction with the digital realm, carve out a communicative space of their own. Our interviewees become active agents over their own space as they themselves control its boundaries. Only if these girls find themselves in a safe enough space to circulate self-narratives and appreciate their cultural trajectories, can they begin to raise awareness of cultural difference and sameness (Ghorashi, 2010: 90). Fatiha, Naoual, Midia, Kamal, Khadija and Inzaf, along with their friends, have offered us a glimpse of how that relatively safe backstage space is negotiated. Experimenting with relationships and rehearsing personal identities, interviewees appeared to be expanding the parameters of their social and physical worlds through IM, while navigating between conflicting familial, gendered, religious and ethno-cultural motivations. The relationship between the online world of IM and the offline world was seen to be intricate and complex; at certain points, both worlds overlap and at others they diverge. They cannot be understood properly in isolation from each other. In the onstage, we witnessed how our informants articulate a nuanced presence by tapping in to various symbolic

grammars of difference. As young people's digital identifications are becoming increasingly valued as much as their offline identifications, our interviewees' IM expressive culture seems promising. They are asserting more and more of themselves online, and they have fun while doing it.

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Notes

[i] Dutchness is constructed upon ideas of whiteness, maleness and Christianity, and migrants are constructed as others who do not fit this category. Migrants are not seen as belonging to the nation of the Netherlands, yet they live inside of it (Ghorashi, 2010: 81). After the September 11, 2001 Twin Tower attacks and subsequent attacks across Europe, and the political murder of controversial Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by Dutch-Moroccan Mohammed Bouyeri, islamophobia especially targets the Dutch-Moroccan community. Spearheaded by anti-Islamic Member of Parliament Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party (PVV), Dutch-Moroccan boys are dismissed as 'street-terrorists' and 'polder-Taliban', while girls are constructed as un-emancipated and oppressed.

[ii] Consider for instance the current popularity of online social networking sites such as Facebook, while in the early 2000s, weblogging was more popular with sites such as LiveJournal and Xanga.

[iii] This article presents findings from the Utrecht University research project Wired Up (http://www.uu.nl/wiredup/). In this project we study digital media as providing innovative socialization practises for migrant youth. We conducted a computer based, online questionnaire. The survey was carried out among 1353 participants from Autumn 2009 until Summer 2010, in multiple secondary schools in the Netherlands. Table 1 and figure 1 are based on the answers of 346 young people of Dutch-Moroccan descent from various educational backgrounds who completed the surveys. The group includes 52% girls and 48% boys. The interviewees who gave us a glimpse at their instant messaging practices for this article took part in the piloting of the survey.

[iv] We align ourselves with feminist technoscience approaches that go beyond 'gender essentialism' and 'technological determinism', and acknowledge the fluid and complex dynamics of techno-social networks (Wajcman, 2007: 294-296).

[v] While interviewees' names have been altered, original display names are included when they cannot be traced to individual users. As her display name, Inzaf in the example entered the line "El Hoceima is the bom, that's the place where i come from so just tell everyone thats the city number ONE". The line appears above every typed sentence that is sent to a conversation partner.

[vi] MSN has recently been renamed Windows Live Messenger, but all our interviews keep referring to it as MSN.

[vii] To open up this study to a larger audience, logs and interviews were translated into English. We sought out ways to include the specificities of the multi-lingual out-of school IM literacies in our translations, therefore all non-Dutch words and sentences (in English, Spanish, (Latinized) Arabic and Berber) were not translated into English in the running text, but are translated and clarified as bracketed text. Decorative creative spellings were carried over into English.

[viii] Insha' Allah, inchAllah or In šā' Allāh is an Arabic phrase (إن شاء الله) that can be translated into English here as "If it is God's will", or "God willing".

[ix] According to Boumans, the word 'ze3ma' is a discourse marker used among Europeans of North African descent. The particle is used here for its dubitative modal function, indicating the uncertainty of the statement (Boumans, 2003: 1).

[x] Darija covers varieties of Arabic spoken in the Maghreb, which includes Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and the Western Sahara in North-Western Africa. Darija includes many loanwords from Maghreb's past colonial rulers such as Turkish, Spanish and French (Ennaji, 2005: 58-60).

[xi] Within the communicative space itself, boundaries are also digitally dynamically produced and maintained. Linguistic practices become meaningful for users themselves and others through a citation and reconstitution of norms and repertoires. IM requires skills that are not fixed or pre-given. These skills demand continuous investment. IM norms are not static. Midia explains that 'you see by the way someone talks om [sic] msn whether he always uses it or sometimes'. Such dynamic language and social norms serve as exclusionary and inclusionary mechanisms, determining who is part of the in-group and who is not.

[xii] Moving away from essentialism and embracing ambiguity, third wave feminism is concerned with the micro-politics of the multiple oppressions, but also the opportunities for agency in the everyday life of women (Mack-Canty, 2004).

[xiii] Display pictures are more privacy-sensitive public identity markers, therefore they are omitted from this case study.

[xiv] Boumans lists ‘moker’, ‘maroc’ and ‘mocro’ as common Dutch-Moroccan self-identification labels (Boumans, 2002: 15).

[xv] Here, ‘swt’ is the acronym for ‘Subhanahu wa ta'ala’ meaning ‘may He be glorified and exalted’.

[xvi] In the Netherlands, according to Vermeij, youth with a Moroccan background have been recognized as linguistic trendsetters in creating and distributing slang (2004). She states that ‘teenagers that do participate in language crossing tend to be very limited in their uses of foreign languages’. It is mostly used to express the liking or disliking of others, ‘the interethnic language users do not use this way of talking for conversations about ordinary topics’ (2004: 164). Our research displays that interethnic language use is quite rich among our interviewees; it is used in the backstage and onstage of IM.

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