

99 | **communicative spaces of their own: migrant girls performing selves using instant messaging software**

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abstract

In this article, we argue how instant messaging (IM) is actively made into a communicative space of their own among migrant girls. Triangulating data gathered through large-scale surveys, interviews and textual analysis of IM transcripts, we focus on Moroccan-Dutch girls who use instant messaging as a space where they can negotiate several issues at the crossroads of national, ethnic, racial, age and linguistic specificities. We take an intersectional perspective to disentangle how they perform differential selves using IM both as an 'onstage' activity through which they express their communal, public and global youth cultural belongings and as a 'backstage' activity through which they articulate their individual, private and intimate identity expression. Instant messaging appears to be a space where they can strategically (re-)position themselves. The relationship between the online world of IM and the off-line world is shown to be intricate and complex; at certain points, both worlds overlap and at others they diverge. Despite all existing constraints that are both related to gender restrictions, often disenfranchised family backgrounds, religious dictums, and surveillance by parents, siblings and peers, which affect Moroccan-Dutch girls in specific ways, IM is also understood as a unique space for exerting their agency in autonomous, playful and intimate ways.

keywords

adolescent migrant girls; Moroccan-Dutch youth; instant messaging; communicative space; intersectionality; performativity of self

introduction

In this article, we argue that instant messaging (IM) is actively made into a communicative space of their own by Moroccan-Dutch adolescent girls. Drawing from a large-scale survey, interviews and IM transcripts of Fatiha, Naoual, Midia, Kamal, Khadija and Inzaf, we show 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, Moroccan-Dutch adolescent girls claim diverse group-memberships and belongingness. A greater understanding of IM use as a 'way of being in the world' of Moroccan-Dutch youth is particularly relevant when considering that there is a 'paucity of research on immigrant adolescents' practices with digital media' (Lam, 2009: 381), and that feminist analyses of girl culture 'primarily address the experiences of white, heterosexual, middle-class girls' (Merskin, 2005: 64).

We therefore want to focus here on Moroccan-Dutch girls who use instant messaging as a space where they can negotiate several issues at the crossroads of national, ethnic, racial, age and linguistic specificities. We aim to do so by focusing on their use of instant messaging both as an 'onstage' activity through which they express their communal, public and global links and as a 'backstage' activity through which they articulate their individual, private and intimate identity expression. This offers not only a complementary and innovative reading of current literature on girl culture engaging with new media and instant messaging, but also on studies on digital practices by migrants, by focusing on the gender differences across several other axes of differentiations, and focusing on the rather under-theorized group of young Moroccan-Dutch in the Netherlands, who have global resonances but also differences with other migrant youths globally.

the Netherlands

'Dutchness' is constructed upon ideas of whiteness, maleness and Christianity, and migrants are constructed as others who do not fit in 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 attacks and subsequent attacks across Europe, and the political murder of controversial Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by Moroccan-Dutch Mohammed Bouyeri, Islamophobia especially

targets the Moroccan-Dutch community. Spearheaded by anti-Islamic Member of Parliament Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party (PVV), Moroccan-Dutch boys are dismissed as 'street-terrorists', while girls are constructed as specifically oppressed by their Muslim culture.

The Moroccan-Dutch diaspora make up some 2 per cent 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 per cent migrated to the Netherlands from the 1960s onwards, when there was a growing demand for guest workers in Northern-Europe. The other 52 per cent were born in the Netherlands, after their parents had migrated.¹ Various hidden axes of differentiation – such as diaspora, generation, adolescence, gender and religion – intersect when deconstructing the term 'Moroccan-Dutchness' for our six interviewees (Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2011). 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, Moroccan-Dutch people are seen as the 'absolute other' and females with a migrant and Islamic background especially run the risk of being isolated as 'unemancipated others' (Brouwer, 2006; Ghorashi, 2010: 75–81).

1 CBS (2010) 'Population, core figures, 20 October 2010' Statistics Netherlands, <http://statline.cbs.nl/>, last accessed February 21, 2011.

These issues are addressed, explored and elaborated upon in our Utrecht University research project 'Wired Up' (<http://www.uu.nl/wiredup/>), from which we present findings in this article. In the project, we study digital media as providing innovative socialization practices for migrant youth. We conducted a computer-based online questionnaire. The survey was carried out among 1,353 participants from Autumn 2009 to Summer 2010, in multiple secondary schools in the Netherlands. Three hundred and forty-six young people of Moroccan-Dutch descent from various educational backgrounds completed the survey. The group includes 52 per cent girls and 48 per cent boys. The interviewees who gave us a glimpse of their instant messaging practices for this article took part in the piloting of the survey.

For Moroccan-Dutch girls, instant messaging appears to be a space where they can negotiate these issues and strategically (re-)position themselves, as we argue more in detail below.

outline

Forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) come and go. The online social networking site Facebook has, for instance, superseded weblogging sites from the early 2000s, such as Live Journal and Xanga. Instant messaging, on

the other hand, has been around for almost two decades. As boyd [sic] 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). By logging on to IM, 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 (2001: 38).

We found that IM is very popular amongst Moroccan-Dutch young people who participated in our survey. Most girls (97 per cent) and boys (93 per cent) use the technology at least once per week, while 53 per cent of participating girls and 43 per cent of boys reported that they log on more than once daily.

Our theoretical framework 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 focusing on adolescent, immigrant girls' intersectional performance of identity in the Netherlands. In the second section we discuss our methodological approach and introduce the interviewees. In the third section, we present two case studies on Moroccan-Dutch IM expressive culture, drawing on original research on the online worlds of migrant youth. 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 Moroccan-Dutch 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 Moroccan-Dutch 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 the space are seen as a challenge to written culture. The practice is suspected of corrupting formal writing skills amongst young people and causing harm to print culture institutions (Thurlow, 2006). Baron suggests that 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 new literacy studies have examined digital literacies that have evolved in IM. Lam recognises 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': the 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' (*ibid.*: 202). In their personal conversations, youths "'decipher" the self' and negotiate their being in the world. Besides private self-identification, IM is used for 'one-to-many communication' (*ibid.*: 202). '[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' (*ibid.*: 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 in which instant messaging is taken up. Building on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical understanding of the everyday theatre of the performance of self, 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 begun 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' (2009: 123). They were "'re-makers" of the textual, technological, linguistic, and cultural resources available' (*ibid.*: 123). Meanwhile, Lam conducted an in-depth case study of instant messaging multiliteracies of Kaiyee, a Chinese-American adolescent girl. She traces the IM 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 the multiple axes of signification means that others are overlooked.

An intersectional lens can make visible the ways in which people 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 (Davis, 2008).

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. 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). Technological, linguistic and social norms give order to the performance of self in IM, but also leave room for re-signification.

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. Studies on acculturation have shown that those who have migrated themselves are more focused on acquiring a solid social-economic position, while identity issues play a large role for descendants of migrants (Berry *et al.*, 2006). 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, Moroccan-Dutch 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 'Moroccan-Dutch 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 that ‘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 the 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 (1,353), 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 Moroccan-Dutch 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 Moroccan-Dutch girls (62.8 per cent) and half of the boys (50 per cent) reported to miss IM very much if they were not able to use it anymore. More specifically, 95 per cent of the girls versus 82.5 per cent of the boys would miss it at least somewhat if they were not able to use it anymore (see Table 1).

Interviewees Fatiha, Naoual, Midia, Kamal, Khadija and Inzaf take centre stage in this study. They are aged between 13 and 18 years old: Khadija is an 18-year-old avid YouTuber; sending around thirty text messages per day, 17-year-old Fatiha

Table 1 Attachment to IM usage

<i>Attachment to IM usage</i>	<i>Not at all (%)</i>	<i>Somewhat (%)</i>	<i>Very much (%)</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>
Girls	5.0	32.2	62.8	100
Boys	17.5	32.5	50.0	100

Would you miss IM if you could not use it anymore?

is a heavy texter; Kamal is a 16-year-old soccer fanatic; 15-year-old Inzaf likes to post and read online stories; and Naoual (15 years old) and Midia (13 years old) are into playing online games such as World of Warcraft. These six youth were contacted using snowballing methods in two cities in the Netherlands, with the help of university students of Moroccan-Dutch 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 mentioned at some point that they experienced 'being Muslim' as a way of belonging to a particular Dutch as well as global youth-subculture grouping.

All interviewees connect to the Internet from their home. In attempting to elude parental supervision, as Brouwer states, Moroccan-Dutch 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). Fatiha, for instance, shared with us that she finds it easier to talk on IM rather than offline/face-to-face about health and body issues and racism/discrimination, but she also likes to use the application to talk about celebrities, music and films. As an actively maintained private space where youth are negotiating processes of coming-of-age and identity-in-the-making, IM is largely kept outside of parental supervision.

Its private character has caused concern among some parents. Declining our invitation to participate in the study, a mother who migrated from Morocco to the Netherlands voiced her concerns over the computer use of her three children (aged 8, 11 and 13 years old): 'occasionally I have seen the [IM] conversation history and the conversations between the kids did not charm me very much. Many girls had a webcam and did their very best to look attractive'. 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' (e-mail conversation held between December 21 and 29, 2009).

All our interviewees report a great feeling of autonomy in deciding who they talk to and what they talk about on IM, but they have to strategically negotiate their liberties. Our interviewees live in small housing, in social-economically deprived neighbourhoods and they come from above average-sized families (for Dutch levels): Fatiha has three sisters and one brother; Khadija has two sisters and one brother; Inzaf has two sisters and one brother; Midia has one sister and one brother; Kamal has three sisters and one brother; and Naoual has five sisters and three brothers. Only Inzaf and Naoual have access to the Internet from within the

safe confines of their personal bedrooms. Most have to use computers outside of their bedrooms, where they have to share their use with siblings, and our informants therefore report to actively seek for ways to have private conversations. Midia, for instance, reports to use Ebuddy.com, a Web-based instant messaging service that lets users connect to contacts without having to install any software on the computer. Additionally, the service does not leave traces of personal conversations stored on the computer. Inzaf goes to the library to log on to IM, Fatiha and Khadija mentioned they frequently go to their friends' place to use IM, while logging on to IM on a mobile device is an option that Midia, Inzaf and Khadija make heavy use of. Also, as we will learn below, before discussing about sensitive issues, informants look to verify that no one is eavesdropping on a conversation.

Interviewees report to have 'buddy lists' ranging from 53 to 400 contacts. On average, 10 per cent of their contacts live abroad. These transnational connections cover the diasporic network of family members who have migrated from Morocco, or nephews and nieces who like our interviewees were also born in the diaspora. Informants mentioned setting up MSN² webcam conversations with family members from their account as their parents could not manage this on their own. However, transcripts of such conversations were not shared with us, and therefore they could not be included in our analysis. Inzaf and Kamal report to have, respectively, met 50 and 60 per cent of their contacts on the Internet, while our other interviewees mentioned they know all their contacts from face-to-face settings (Table 2).

During our interviews, we learned, for instance, from Fatiha that she uses IM 'every day for 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

2 MSN has recently been renamed Windows Live Messenger, but all our interviewees keep referring to it as MSN.

Table 2 Our interviewees' IM contacts

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>IM contacts</i>	<i>% contacts frequent conversations</i>	<i>% contacts living abroad</i>	<i>% contacts met online</i>
Khadija	53	20	10	0
Fatiha	114	100	10	0
Kamal	300	30	0	60
Inzaf	150	40	30	50
Naoual	110	50	10	0
Midia	400	70	10	0

How many contacts do you have on IM, what percentage of your contacts do you frequently talk to, live abroad and have you met online?

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.

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. 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:

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 and I have to copy and paste conversations and send them to them would you allow me to use this conversation?

~..O u u u .~ 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 twenty-six transcripts, ranging in length from ten 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. While the interviewees' names have been altered, original display names are included in the text when they can not 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.³ Participants sent in IM logs of conversations with friends ranging in age from 13 to 22 years. All our interviewees told us that 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 conversations were with female 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.

3 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, and

introducing the case studies

The time is 8:30 p.m. on a Saturday evening late January 2010, when classmates Khadija and Nada, two 18-year-old Moroccan-Dutch 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 and clothing. 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.

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.

- 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

4 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'.

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',⁴ will soon learn to cook together. We observe how Khadija states she 'ze3ma', meaning 'with doubts', 'started to eat les [sic] and so'. According to Boumans, the word 'ze3ma' is a discourse marker used among Europeans of North African descent to express uncertainty: 'perhaps it is so' (Boumans, 2003: 1). In typing the word 'ze3ma', the number three is used to write the Arabic letter ع. This is the eighteenth 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 by users who make use of Latin script keyboards (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. 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).

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 focus on the various ways in which 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

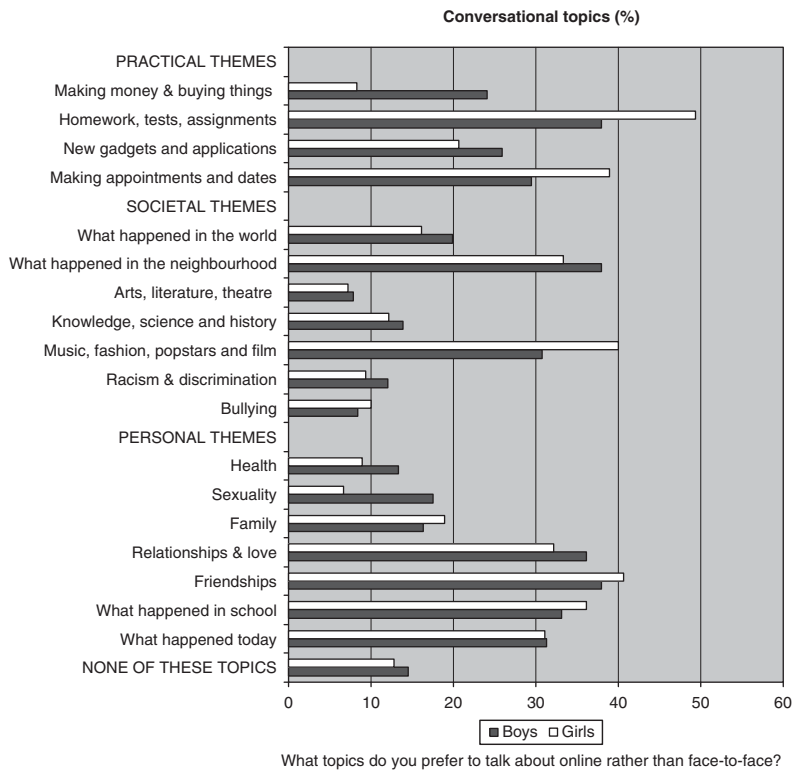


Figure 1 Conversational topics.

shopping, school and some girls talk about boys'. In our survey, we asked our respondents what topics do they prefer to talk about online rather than face-to-face (see Figure 1). The three most frequently mentioned topics among Moroccan-Dutch girls are talking about 'homework' (49.4 per cent), 'friendships' (40.6 per cent) and 'music, fashion, pop stars and film' (40.0 per cent). Moroccan-Dutch boys list 'friendships' (38 per cent), 'what happened in the neighbourhood' (38 per cent) and 'homework' (38 per cent). 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 per cent of the girls.

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 Crazy 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 Somalian-Dutch 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, the 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. Using codes such as 'mh' for 'Mom's here' and 'brb' for 'be right back' girls keep conversations private, and they make sure they 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 (Thiel-Stern, 2007: 52). The American teenagers in Grinter and Palen's study emphasized the advantage of being able to operate IM 'below the radar': 'use can be unobtrusive, go unnoticed, or even be covert'.⁵ 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'.

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

5 Grinter, R.E. and Palen, L. (2002) 'Instant messaging in teen life' Proceedings of the 2002 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work. (21–30). <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/587078.587082>, last accessed November 3, 2010.

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.

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 recognised 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 sexual-harassment 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 hers 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 Naoual 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, Moroccan-Dutch 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 Dutch society and the family circle, contradictory gender discourses circulate and requirements can be opposing, in some families 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 Naoual recognise the dangers of being 'caught', IM is used among our interviewees to extend the parameters of their physical and social worlds. Brouwer also recognised that for some Moroccan-Dutch 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 Moroccan-Dutch girls by parents and siblings to get in touch with other people.

In the survey, we found that almost 40 per cent 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 the use of instant messaging among the 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 being beaten 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, '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). 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). Notwithstanding the 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 analyse how Moroccan-Dutch youth perform the opposing motivations of continuity and change in the more public instant messaging 'onstage', through the micro-politics of updating display names and display pictures.

Display pictures are important means to performing an onstage presence; Kamal, for instance, wants to look 'cool' in his MSN display picture while Khadija wants to appear 'friendly' and 'fashionable/trendy' in hers. Display pictures are however more privacy-sensitive identity markers, and therefore they had to be omitted from this case study. After more private personal identity formation, display names, too, 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 Naoual, a display name 'as a matter of fact tells a sort of life story'. We will analyse the ways in which our interviewees re-mix various linguistic symbolic grammars of difference in their onstage display names.

6 Boumans lists 'moker', 'maroc' and 'mocro' as common Moroccan-Dutch self-identification labels (Boumans, 2002: 15).

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' (Androutsopoulos, 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'.⁶ 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'. In his study Androutsopoulos 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 Moroccan-Dutch youth, we see how these junctures get mediated in the digital realm. The display name of Inzaf displays the emotional influence that 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, '..ن.ن.و.ر.ا.ا.', and also the display name of a Moroccan-Dutch 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!!'. Here, 'swt' is the acronym for 'Subhanahu wa ta'ala' meaning 'may He be glorified and exalted'. 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 by 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.

The display names discussed above indicate how the lived experience of difference among Moroccan-Dutch 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 diversify feminist analyses of online teenage-girl culture. Focusing on performativity of self, in IM young migrant girls actively (re)position

themselves against the backdrop of racist/sexist discourses. This research shows how Moroccan-Dutch girls, in their quotidian interaction with the digital realm, carve out a communicative space of their own. Our interviewees construct 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 are empowered, expanding the parameters of their social and physical worlds through IM, while navigating between conflicting familial, gendered, religious and ethno-cultural motivations. However, IM is an in-between space, it is no social vacuum (Brouwer, 2010: 227). The example of sexual harassment raised by Inzaf and Naoual indicates that girls remain susceptible to male domination in IM. 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.

We have argued that for Moroccan-Dutch girls instant messaging appears to be a space where they can negotiate these issues and strategically (re-)position themselves. Despite all existing constraints that are both related to gender restrictions, often disenfranchised family backgrounds, religious dictums, surveillance by parents, siblings and peers, which affect Moroccan-Dutch girls in specific ways, as we have discussed above, IM is also a unique space for exerting their agency in autonomous, playful and intimate ways. As such IM offers a communicative space of their own, which is not disconnected from other socio-cultural practices, but which offers a unique opportunity to articulate the various selves both 'onstage' and 'backstage' as resulting from multiple forms of negotiations with technical skills, digital literacies, netspeak along with bending gendered discourses, youth branding and localized forms of global connections.

acknowledgements

An earlier draft of this article was presented at the 'Matters of Communication conference' organized by the International Communication Association in Singapore, June 2010. We thank those who participated in the session on 'Gendered discourses and networks of science, technology and modernity' for their feedback. Also, we would like to acknowledge the thought-provoking suggestions made by two anonymous reviewers. Thanks to Fayrouz Boulayounne for her assistance in translating the corpus and to Tamara Shepherd for proofreading the article. We are grateful to Fatiha, Naoual, Midia, Kamal, Khadija and Inzaf for granting us access to their private communicative space.

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doi:10.1057/fr.2011.39