3. Expanding socio-cultural parameters of action using Instant messaging

The time is 8:30 p.m. on a Saturday evening in late January 2010, when classmates Khadija and Nadia, two eighteen-year-old Moroccan-Dutch girls, have a private conversation over MSN Messenger. The conversation below follows an exchange about 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.” They took nice pictures and bought a PSP (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.” Nadia 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 hahahah
-- Ms. Laouikili 😍, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: no no I have
ough 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, calmdown]
tina was doing a diet of some sort [tina: you]

-- Ms. Laouikili 😍, Some people!!!- Li Tmenit Lqito Fik says: hahahah
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
In the transcript, Khadija talked about how she is planning to go swimming the next day. Nadia jokingly urged her to be careful not to drown. Half jokingly, Khadija replied her “love handles” will keep her afloat. Nadia turned to Arabic, stating “schwia schwia” or in English: “calm down, calm down” to downplay this last remark. She then asked about the diet Khadija was following. Khadija explained that the cooking skills of her mother made it difficult to pursue the diet. Nadia in return typed she wants to learn from Khadija and her mother how to prepare good food. Nadia and Khadija ended their conversation in Arabic wishing “Inshallah” or God willing, they will soon learn to cook together. It can be observed how Khadija stated she “ze3ma,” meaning “with doubts,” “started to eat les and so.” In typing the word “ze3ma,” the number three is used to write the Arabic letter ٣. This is the eighteenth letter of the Arabic alphabet, which has no equivalent in the Latin alphabet. When using a Latin alphabet keyboard to type Arabic, this letter can be represented with a 3. Ending their conversation, Khadija and Nadia expressed “inshallah,” God willing, they would get together to learn to cook from Khadija’s mother (“yema”). In all these cases, the Latin alphabet was used to write a specific dialect, Moroccan-Arabic or Darija.

The MSN conversation excerpt sheds light on the private side of one-on-one conversations and the more public side of broadcasting one’s affiliation to one’s list of contacts. Socio-technologically, the medium configured the ways users can narrate their identities in these two ways. In this chapter, I explore these two dimensions further to better understand the popularity

---

1 *Insha’ Allah, inchAllah* or *In šā’ Allāh* is an Arabic phrase (للشَّاء إنَّ) that can be translated into English here as “If it is God’s will,” or “God willing.”

2 The word “ze3ma” is a discourse marker used among Europeans of North African descent to express uncertainty: “perhaps it is so” (Boumans, 2003, p. 1).

3 Darija covers varieties of Arabic spoken in the Maghreb.
of instant messaging (IM) among informants. First, considering that Nadia and Khadija used IM software to discuss personal struggles over dieting, the excerpt illustrates that IM established a safe communicative space they used to discuss intimate matters among themselves. On the private side, or “backstage” of instant messaging (Jacobs, 2003, p. 13), the informants were primarily engaged in under-the-radar, iterative identity formation processes. Therefore I assess how IM was valued as a relatively safe personal networked territory, where youth can receive a validation of their feelings and cement their relationships. Second, on the more public side that consists of one’s IM contacts, words from various languages (Dutch, English, Spanish, and 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 affiliations are circulated in IM expressive culture. Khadija expressed multiple belongings with this display name that was broadcasted to everyone in her friend list. Therefore, I assess how interviewees – in the more public “onstage” of IM that goes beyond the one-on-one conversation (Jacobs, 2003, p. 13) – used display names that represent multiaxial identification.

It should be noted that the social media landscape has tremendously changed since my fieldwork. Microsoft had shut down the standalone application Windows Live Messenger (MSN’s successor) on October 31, 2014, but many of the arguments put forward in this chapter remain valid because in different shapes and forms the service of instant messaging has been incorporated in platforms such as the social networking site Facebook (Facebook Chat) and the video-chat application Skype. In the lives of adolescents, the role of MSN has, in particular, been taken over by the immensely popular smartphone messaging applications such as BlackBerry Messenger (Davis, 2012) and WhatsApp Messenger (Church & De Oleveira, 2013). Although critical masses of users have migrated from one platform to another, the underlying communicative and symbolic principles of instant one-on-one exchanges are largely comparable.

In this chapter I argue that IM was actively made into a communicative space of their own among Moroccan-Dutch youth, where they negotiated personal and social identities at the crossroads of national, ethnic, racial, age and linguistic specificities. Instant messaging can be understood as a private territory where individuals in specific material-embodied spatial contexts perform everyday, but very meaningful, discursive interaction. Instant messaging remains relatively understudied and undertheorized because data gathering within this private space was and is not straightforward; users control who they let into their network and exchanges are not
stored in a publicly accessible environment online but on the computers or mobile phones of the users. In this chapter I make an empirical contribution to the performance of self in the field site of IM while also aiming for theoretical refinement of the understandings of the medium-specificity of instant messaging and distinct processes of adoption by its users. Drawing from Wired Up large-scale survey findings, in-depth interviews, and IM transcripts sent in by six informants – Fatiha, Naoul, Midia, Kamal, Khadija, and Inzaf – I set out how gender, diaspora, youth culture and technologies intersect and influence each other in this communicative space (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011c, p. 56).

This chapter is structured as follows. In Section 3.1, I ground the IM use of Moroccan-Dutch youth in Wired Up survey findings and explain the key characteristics of MSN in the words of my interviewees. In Section 3.2, I bring together insights from computer-mediated communication (CMC) and digital literacies scholarship by turning to instant messaging as a discursive practice with an emphasis on postcolonial intersectionality. Earlier work on IM mostly centers on white American teenagers; I diversify this scholarship by focusing on the intersectional performance of identity of adolescent, Moroccan-Dutch youth. Subsequently, I explore two dynamics of MSN expressive culture that arose during my analysis of the corpus of interviews and chat transcripts. The focus in Section 3.3 is on the backstage of IM, where I highlight how our interviewees negotiated ownership over their IM territory and engaged in intimate and personal identity formation. In Section 3.4 the focus is on the onstage of IM through which more public identifications are expressed. First I analyze the use of gendered selfies as display pictures. Second I discuss the semi-public expressions of collective local, transnational diaspora and global youth cultural orientations. As forms of social identification among their peers I analyze whether Moroccan-Dutch youth act against ethnic absolutist labels by authoring multiple selves and expressing diverse social belongings.

3.1 Moroccan-Dutch youth using instant messaging

When I get home, I go online. I press “busy” and I go downstairs. I grab something to eat and I go and pray a bit. Then I go back upstairs and have a look at who has talked to me. I have a look what’s going on and talk about homework. And about, “Have you heard about this?” – you know, gossip, just to keep up to date about everything that is going on.

– Bibi (a sixteen-year-old girl)
In this section I introduce main patterns of usage my informants noted. IM was very popular among the Moroccan-Dutch young people who participated in the 2010 Wired Up survey. In line with US and Dutch adolescent user patterns (Lenhart, Rainie & Lewis, 2001; Duimel & De Haan, 2007), the great majority of girls (97%) and boys (93%) used the technology at least once per week, while 53% of participating girls and 43% of boys reported logging in more than once daily. Respondents also expressed their attachment to IM; almost-three quarters of the participating Moroccan-Dutch girls and half of the boys reported that they would 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 5).

Table 5: The importance of instant messaging in the lives of Moroccan-Dutch youth (percentages, n = 344)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Would you miss MSN if you could not use it any longer?</th>
<th>Completely not</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Very much</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>62.8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviewees corroborated the survey findings, as eighteen-year-old Safae confessed, “I think you can call it an addiction, because automatically I go on MSN, every day,” while thirteen-year-old Amina laughingly shared “MSN? I use it every day. I have been online this morning, and yes tonight again. I just have to check my MSN.” I learned, for instance, from Fatiha that she used IM “every day at least two hours.” Major motivations behind IM use include connecting with her friends, as she stated: “All of my friends use MSN” and “It is a free way of talking to your friends and family.” Naoul agrees and added, “It is convenient in the case you need to reach somebody.” Thirteen-year-old Soesie noted, “When you have nothing to do, you go and enjoy yourself on MSN.” Night after night, IM was bustling with activity. Fourteen-year-old Inas stated that “especially in the evening, when everyone has finished doing homework, I also go online.” Now that young people increasingly own mobile phones with Internet access, they are also on MSN more often. Fourteen-year-old Senna noted that she is nearly always online: “I’m on MSN almost every day. The whole day. When I have my mobile with me, then I’m online.”

Figure 11 shows a screenshot of an instant messaging conversation I held with Soufian, a twelve-year-old boy, during the summer of 2011. The
example is included here to set out the various analytical dimensions to the medium-specific performativity of self in IM I aim to unpack. At the top of the conversation screen, Soufian’s display name “@ Marokko 🌞” appears. Logging in to MSN, he indicated in his display name that he was on holidays in Morocco at that moment and the sun was shining. As Soufian logged into MSN using eBuddy.com Web Messenger, an automatic second name is added below his display name. eBuddy allows users to have conversations with MSN contacts without having to install any software on a computer. The application does not store any conversation history on the computer, unlike the Windows Live Messenger software that archived exchanges by default. Soufian used a display picture showing the blue, green and yellow Berber flag next to the green-starred red Moroccan national flag. Soufian’s display name showed up in friend lists of people who have added him, together with the names of all other people in their lists. The display picture appeared on the screen of the conversation partner upon initiation of a one-on-one conversation. At the bottom of the conversation screen, a box is shown where users can enter messages to the conversation partner. A small smiley emoticon appears in the bottom. When clicked, a drop-down menu appears from which users may insert a smiley in their conversation. At the bottom, a commercial message appears: “Beautiful dresses for low prices you order at bonprix.nl.”
IM is distinct from profiling practices on social networking sites such as Hyves and Facebook, which I discuss in Chapter 4, as it is considered as a more intimate space, said fifteen-year-old Hajar: “On Hyves it’s less personal, because everyone can see it, on MSN it’s more personal and you can share things.” Meryam, also fifteen years old, added: “MSN, I find it totally different from Facebook. Facebook is more to horse around while MSN is to have a chat. More serious.” The medium-specificity youth recognize in IM as a space that is not publicly accessible – allowing for greater personal autonomy in circulating personal information among a selected group of friends – is, however, not always acknowledged by adults, said sixteen-year-old Naoul:

*My mother thinks that MSN is like chat. That you are chatting with the weirdest people from across the globe. But that’s my mother, I can explain it to her one thousand times, and she still does not understand it. She will see a picture of me on the screen and she will say, “Do not put any pictures on the Internet,” and I will say, “No, this is not the Internet, this is a picture on MSN, only the people in my personal list can see it.” She will say, “No, this is the Internet.” I can explain, but she won’t take note of it. So I keep it to myself.*

MSN was a private communicative space. In thirteen-year-old Midia’s words, MSN “is for your self, nobody sees who and how many contacts you have in your list.” Relationships and affiliations that were built within this space could be kept personal; they are only for the eyes of the individual users. Naoul and Midia suggest MSN was taken up to negotiate processes of coming-of-age where identity-in-the-making can be observed. However, IM was largely kept shut off from parental supervision and from other onlookers. Its private character has, for instance, 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 eight, eleven and thirteen): “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).

Although not fully publicly accessible, informants nevertheless noted staggering numbers of people in their personal contact lists. Fourteen-year-old Ziham had 789 contacts, fifteen-year-old Carlos brags he had
something like 900" contacts, and thirteen-year-old Soesie listed 328. As ready knowledge that informants listed from off the top of their heads, such numbers seemed to mean much. For some, large numbers of friends were a status symbol. Thirteen-year-old Rachid, however, commented:

I have something like 50 friends in my MSN list. I am unlike some people who have I don’t know 500 people in their list. They just add people that they don’t even know, just to get a long list. But I don’t think it’s cool to have so many people in my list.

A friend list was a status symbol that allowed young users to show off how many people they know. Wired Up survey findings showed that young people with a migration background had more people in their IM contact lists than ethnic-majority Dutch youth. Moroccan-Dutch young people listed an average of 231 contacts and ethnic-majority Dutch youngsters listed 205 contacts (Wired Up, 2011). The higher average number of contacts among migrant youth can partly be explained when considering that migrant teenagers also maintained contact with family and friends in the diaspora using IM. For instance, sixteen-year-old Faruk described he had family members living in the Netherlands, France, Spain and Morocco in his list. However, as I argued in the introduction, like most other informants I spoke with, Faruk did not really communicate with contacts in the diaspora himself but he mainly brokered access to contacts from abroad for his parents:

We just use MSN. My parents do not really know how it works. Yes I log in for them; I will click on my aunts’ name when she is online. I set it up for them. I will put my parents in front of the webcam and have them communicate. Actually I enjoy it because my mother eyes the webcam with a real look of amazement on her face. It’s nice because in the past I can say they would have never been able to do that. They are astounded.

Sixteen-year-old Naoul, for instance, said: “The children have to start up everything, and my dad will sit in front of the camera and he will talk. He does not know how to do it.” Informants noted that parents had difficulties managing IM on their own. These statements by Faruk and Naoul reveal a generational divide in ICT knowledge and skills that may exist in some Moroccan-Dutch families. Moreover, it should be noted that some parents – especially Moroccan mothers of Berber descent who migrated to the Netherlands – were illiterate or had received little formal education at the moment of immigration (Pels & De Haan, 2007, p. 72). Having grown up with technologies such
as MSN that their parents are unfamiliar with, Moroccan-Dutch youth may act as technology brokers as they assist their parents to cross a digital divide by brokering diasporic IM connections. Complicating intergenerational relations, the roles of parents as educators and children as learners get reversed (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2013). This practice resembles other instances of invisible work multilingual migrant teenagers may have to engage in such as “culture” and “language brokering” when having to translate for their parents across private (e.g., filling in financial documents) and public domains (e.g., dealing with medical consults) (Orellana, 2009, pp. 19-21; De Haan, 2012). As the possibility of having conversations with contacts in the diaspora does not fully explain its value in the lives of Moroccan-Dutch youth, the question arises as to which other identity performance roles were invested in the communicative space of IM. Below I discuss scholarship in the traditions of CMC (computer-mediated communication) and digital literacies to theorize instant messaging as a power-laden discursive practice that displays how identities are performed across axes of differentiation.

3.2 Theorizing instant messaging as a way of being in the world

Forms of computer-mediated-communication come and go. The online social networking site Facebook has, for instance, largely superseded blogging sites from the early 2000s such as LiveJournal and Xanga. Instant messaging, on the other hand, has been around for almost two decades. Instant messaging is now available on various platforms such as the recent smartphone apps like What’s App and it has been subsumed in larger applications such as Skype and Facebook. The practice of instant messaging, available online as a standalone platform since the 1990s, remains important in the lives of many adolescents. IM has been established as “fact of life, a way of being in the world” (Lewis & Fabos, 2005, p. 470). In the 1990s scholars recognized that instant messaging software was used as a supportive technology in the workplace. However, since the start young people have also used IM. They became space invaders as they appropriated the technology to further their own goals (Grinter & Palen, 2002). IM became a regular evening activity among adolescents when it “replaced the long telephone conversations between friends that used to be so frequent in adolescence” (Albero-Andrés, 2004, p. 112). 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” in groups and engage in various “friendship-driven” activities.
By logging on to IM, young people are able to connect with groups of friends who are “always-on” (Baron, 2008).

Being a fundamental part of everyday communication, IM has been studied from a variety of perspectives (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011a, 2011c, 2012). CMC scholars argue that “computer mediated written language often has speech-like characteristics” (Hård af Segerstad & Hashemi, 2006, p. 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. Unlike the hypervisual dynamics of Facebook and Hyves (see Chapter 4), IM is mainly about typed narratives. Journalists, teachers, policy makers 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). Discussions of IM by educators and journalists conflate “language change” and “language decline” when arguing that IM is “destroying language” (Baron, 2008, p. 161). IM is not leading to “linguistic ruin” and more importantly this digital practice can be acknowledged for “its own unique style” (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008, p. 3). Appropriating the digital space, youthful users constitute alternative language norms that differ from official norms imposed by the state and accepted ways of speaking (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 45).4 From the perspective of performativity of self, the question is not whether IM is detrimental to language, but rather, what process of meaning making lies behind its unique style for youth, and young people with a migration background in particular? Messaging users “don’t just ‘send’ messages as an action (‘message’ as verb) they are a system of messages (‘message’ as noun); they are both constituted by and productive through messages” (Hartley, 2010, p. 23). Therefore I am interested in the meanings that can be attributed to the dynamic, expressive culture circulating in IM; for instance, that of the display names that appear in friend lists of users. Additionally, IM expressive culture includes sending short messages, exchanged by users to express themselves, using a

---

4 Pierre Bourdieu noted that official languages are linguistic laws that are bound up with state-formation processes: “Obligatory on official occasions and in official places (schools, public administrations, political institutions, etc.), this state language becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured” (1991, p. 45).

---
“full range of variants from the speech community – formal, informal, and highly vernacular” (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008, p. 24).5

Scholars in the new literacy studies (NLS) tradition have examined digital literacies that have evolved in IM. Eva 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, p. 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, p. 202). In the first mode of adolescent connectivity, teenagers 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.). 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” which is a second mode of adolescent connectivity. “Crucial to their social identity formation,” this allows adolescents to express their “connectedness to a group that creates a feeling of group belonging” (Boneva et al., 2006, p. 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 Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical understanding of the everyday theater of the performance of self (1959), Gloria 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, p. 13). The distinction between what is collectively made visible onstage by IM users such as display pictures and

5 As is also apparent from the excerpt of the IM conversation between Khadija and Nadia included at the beginning of this chapter, conversations have specific compositions that may be seen as a new genre of writing. The transmission style of messages includes the breaking up of single utterances into several lines of chat. Naomi Baron gives three reasons why users employ this particular style. Her first reason is technological. To maintain the attention of the interlocutor, utterances are often broken up into smaller pieces. By pressing enter while continuing to write an utterance, the conversation partner can begin reading the message, while the sender types the remainder. Her second reason refers to the readability of the message. Conversations are easier to follow when messages consist of short lines instead of larger chunks of text appearing on the screen. Finally, users reported to her that in their division of utterances over multiple turns “they are consciously attempting to make the results visually resemble a poem” (2004, p. 417).
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 Deirdre Kelly, Shauna Pomerantz and Dawn Currie learned from their interviews with Canadian girls (2006, p. 3). In the onstage, IM can be used to signal affiliations and claim memberships. Thus, IM is to be considered as “multi-voiced,” as it can be taken up to “perform a version of self” that can be shifted for different audiences (Lewis & Fabos, 2005, p. 493). These findings are, however, mostly based on the study of North American white, middle-class teenagers.

Recently, scholars have begun to focus on IM practices of American minority young people. Youngjoo 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, p. 123). 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 contacts 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 might have been overlooked.

As I have noted in the prior chapters, with an intersectional lens I aim to make visible the ways the informants are differentially positioned and position themselves in specific ways in particular situations, because gender, generation, diaspora, religion and youth culture as well as issues of stereotyping complicate their processes of coming-of-age. This way, I consider the multilayered identification and complex intersecting journeys of children of immigrant groups. 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” (Ghorashi, 2010, pp. 75-81). In the introductory chapter I have set out how gender and other categories of difference such as age, generation, diaspora and youth culture, are material, representational and affective acts. In this chapter I consider intersecting symbolic grammars of difference as constituted through performative instant messaging practices.

Within the structure of IM, performative acts of, for instance, age, gender, ethnicity, generation and diaspora in instant messaging include the updating
of one’s display name, display pictures and abiding by IM speech conventions of emoticons, exchanging short utterances and using opening and closing conventions. By acknowledging the fluid and complex dynamics of socio-technological networks like IM I once more underline my theoretical aligning with feminist technoscience approaches that go beyond “gender essentialism” and “technological determinism” (Wajcman, 2007, pp. 294-296). Employing this perspective, as Meenakshi Gigi Durham posited: “The Internet then can be seen as an ‘unformed place,’ which depends to some degree on its use to find its structure. It is at the interface of user and technology that socialization instills order to the disorder of the Internet” (2001, p. 37).

Similar to other platforms, everyday exchanges on MSN are bound but not fully determined by interfaces, algorithms, corporate interests and discursive norms. Technological, linguistic and social norms give order to the performance of self in IM, but also leave room for resignification in the ways individuals and collectives of users adopt the medium (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011a, pp. 206-208; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2012, pp. 440-441). In sum, in my analysis of IM, I combine CMC and digital literacy perspectives and remain aware of symbolic grammars of difference that intersect in our interviewees’ performance of self in the digital realm (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011c, pp. 58-62).

Everyday discussions of personal issues, emotional support, fights, gossip and flirting took place on MSN. Such activities generated a fascinating window into the private and personal engagements of teens with their peers mediated through the performance of self in a digital space. However, as I discussed in Chapter 1, entrance to this private space was not straightforward (Jacobs, 2005; Thiel-Stern, 2007). I believe this is why in-depth studies examining the expressive culture of instant messaging including What’s App, BlackBerry Messenger and Snapchat are scarce, while the more publicly accessible platforms such as social network sites like Facebook and microblogs such as Twitter have attracted scholars from a wide variety of disciplines. Below I firstly focus on the various ways ethnic-minority youth negotiate their ownership and perform the boundaries of their personal space. Secondly, I analyze the more public micro-politics of updating display names and display pictures.

3.3 The private backstage

The importance of being able to negotiating ownership over IM can only be understood when considering what was discussed there. The IM transcript below is an example of boy talk. Seventeen-year-old Fatiha was in conversation with her twenty-two-year-old Somalian-Dutch classmate Owsark. Owsark
makes sure that nobody can eavesdrop on the conversation by asking Fatiha whether she was sitting behind the computer all by herself. Once they are both convinced that they had the privacy to talk, the girls turned to the sensitive topic of boys. This IM gesture can be compared to offline settings when it sometimes is desirable to make sure nobody can overhear a personal 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
owsark says: hha well
i was at fatima
on the laptop
and i saw a photo
in her pictures folder
guess who
Show remorse!!.......Allah (swt) will accept it from you and inchAllah will offer you goodness!! says: who?
owsark says: that one guy i told you about
i told her what are these photos doing here
Show remorse!!.......Allah (swt) will accept it from you and inchAllah will offer you goodness!! says: which ones?
owsark says: she know him
the guy in school
our the one you interviewd
Show remorse!!.......Allah (swt) will accept it from you and inchAllah will offer you goodness!! says: oooh khalid
hahahaha
owsark says: yes that one
wallah saw [wollah: with Allah, for extra emphasis]
a picture of him

The exchange was 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. It appears from the text that Owsark got somewhat jealous. She wanted to know from Fatiha how she thought the photographs got there. She quickly fired a series of short questions about the girl: does “she know him,” “the guy in school” and “the one you interviewd”? In this section I first discuss the main conversational topics informants discussed in IM. Next I analyze how informants became gatekeepers over their own,
networked territory in their use of physical and digital processes of boundary making. Subsequently I assess the risks and opportunities involved when using IM to get to know boys and girls without having to meet face-to-face.

Conversational topics

When I asked what fifteen-year-old Inzaf and her friends usually do on IM, she reported that girls gossip “mostly about boys with whom they are in love with or about other people,” while sixteen-year-old Naoul added, “girls talk about

![Diagram 6: Topics Moroccan-Dutch youth report to discuss (graph shows percentages, n = 344)](image-url)
things such as shopping, school and some girls talk about boys." In the Wired Up survey, respondents were asked what topics they prefer to talk about online rather than face-to-face. The three most frequently mentioned topics among Moroccan-Dutch girls are “homework,” “friendships” and “music, fashion, pop stars and film.” Moroccan-Dutch boys list “friendships,” “what happened in the neighborhood” (38%) and “homework” most frequently. Furthermore, important topics for both girls and boys are “relationships and love,” “what happened today,” and “what happened 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 topics of “sexuality,” “making money and buying things” and “new gadgets and applications” more often than girls. One out of every three boys and girls list the topic “relationships and love.” It shows that using MSN to make appointments and dates is mentioned by almost 40% of Moroccan-Dutch girls (see Diagram 6).

Topics such as “friendships” and “relationships and love” resonate with private self-identity formation, the first of 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 Erving Goffman’s use of theater metaphors to describe everyday interaction (1959), Jacobs argued that “backstage behavior,” 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, pp. 8, 31). With these characteristics, IM appears to be used as a playground for establishing (romantic) relationships.

**Boundary making**

_I do have a laptop of my own, but my brother has changed the password, so I can't log in. He only lets me use it for school. He controls what I have done; he looks at the [browser] history, which he forbids me to delete. He checks whether I only do school work, instead of going on Hyves or so on. But I also have the Internet on my phone. Mostly I use my BlackBerry, because my brother doesn’t allow me to go on sites like MSN, that’s why I use my mobile._

– Ziham, a fourteen-year-old girl

Ziham revealed that she strategically negotiates access to her IM contacts by logging in on her BlackBerry smartphone. This way she circumvented
the restrictions her brother placed on her Internet use. The backstage was consciously safeguarded from unwanted onlookers. Sixteen-year-old Naoul made sure she talks to the right person by phoning her friend: “It can always also be someone else on MSN, so if I call her I know for sure it is her.” Surveillance by older brothers and sisters also can be denied said sixteen-year-old Nevra: “My brother sometimes comes and takes a look at what I’m doing. But I click everything away.” She considered IM as a space of her own. When he wanted to check her online behavior, she closes “every screen. It is none of his business. He does not need to know.” Various informants, similar to Soufian in Figure 11, engaged in IM conversations using the web-based messenger service eBuddy.com. Conversing with IM contacts with this service has its advantages over the standard Windows Live Messenger as it did not leave traces of personal conversations stored on the computer, so they did not have to worry about conversation histories being read by family members or siblings. Thirteen-year-old Inas logged on to IM when she knew her parents were away:

I usually do it when they are not around, otherwise they will look at what I’m doing. And I don’t like that. Because when I’m, for instance, talking to a boy, I do not want my mother to be standing behind me, you know? My mother will know what I say to that guy.

American adolescent girls in Shayla Thiel-Stern’s study considered IM a private space where adults 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 (2007, p. 52). The American teenagers in Rebecca Grinter and Leysia 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” (2002, p. 26). Much the same, my informants described their MSN conversations as very intimate and personal; as thirteen-year-old Midia claimed, IM “is for yourself. Nobody sees who and how many contacts you have in your list.”

On the platform itself, territories were also digitally bounded and maintained by codes and conventions. The lack of visual cues of regular face-to-face communication in IM has lead users to be creative and develop a cultural repertoire with a distinct writing style that includes smileys to convey emotions and manage impressions. Linguistic practices become
meaningful for users themselves and others through a citation and reconstitutions of norms and repertoires. IM requires skills that are not fixed or pregiven. These skills demand continuous investment, as the norms are not static. Midia explains that “you see by the way someone talks on MSN whether he always uses it or sometimes.” As the excerpt included in the beginning indicates, among our informants, IM writing style includes interethnic language use. In the opening of a conversation Midia asked Soad how she felt:

I am Crazzy in love with you ♥️.. my feelings for you cannot go away 😁 says: Eey, darling whatsup??
Checkmate sweetie says: hmdl with youu sweetyy? [hmdl: short form for Praise to Allah]
I am Crazzy in love with you ♥️.. my feelings for you cannot go away 😁 says: good good hmdl keep it tat way hea zinaa xxxx [zina: beauty]

Midia “hmdl” felt good and Soad responded with “hmdl,” she was okay. Midia wished Soad “hmdl” kept it that way, sharing “xxxx” for her “zinaa.” With the abbreviation “hmdl,” the word “alhamdoelilah” was inserted, which can be translated into “all praise is due to Allah.” “Zina” is a word used in Moroccan-Arabic and Berber that can be translated as “beauty.” Thus, Soad wished that Midia with the help of Allah would keep healthy, called her a beauty and offered her kisses.

Such dynamic language and social norms served as exclusionary and inclusionary mechanisms, determining who is part of the in-group and who is not. The desire for personal autonomy during adolescence might partly explain the medium-specific appeal of platforms like IM. Karen Bradley explains, “adolescence is marked by the desire for autonomy and independence” and recognizes that “the Internet offers adolescents social, moral, recreational, and intellectual experiences that are not mediated by adults” (2005, p. 62). Beyond the control of adults IM users have an active say over their space, as Faruk, a sixteen-year-old boy, described:

MSN is something different. You can say many things there that you do not easily say in the streets, because you might be embarrassed. For instance, when there is a girl standing in front of you, you can blush and so on. While on MSN, you can just type without her seeing it. On the Internet, you can actually be yourself more, than outdoors. You can talk freely and be a bit looser.

A sense of greater autonomy seemed to result in feeling less inhibited about expressing one’s intimate feelings and approaching potential partners.
Faruk was of the opinion that you could “be a bit looser” while on MSN. Having to type emotions is experienced as easier than sharing them otherwise. Fourteen-year-old Mehmet agrees: “On MSN you dare a lot more, you dare to do and say more.” It should be noted that IM was not primarily used to get in touch with strangers. The majority of informants only spoke to people they knew from elsewhere and learned more about them using IM. Using IM, Moroccan-Dutch youth note feeling less easily embarrassed, as using text to communicate does not show whether one is blushing or not when talking about sensitive and personal topics. According to fifteen-year-old Kamal “when you are typing, difficult things can be said more easily” because “the words don’t have to come out of your mouth.” One can keep up one’s appearance: “On MSN you also never stutter, and when you make a mistake you can correct it, for instance, when you have typed something wrong” (sixteen-year-old Amir). This was not only true for boys. Fourteen-year-old Sahar agrees she sometimes felt ashamed when talking about relationship issues away from the computer “but on MSN, you do dare to say it. Because you are just on your own, and you do it more quickly.” Fifteen-year-old SouSou explained IM “usually makes it easier to talk” and she felt less inhibited because “you don’t have to look at each other” face-to-face. This observation also may help to understand why in one study on young people in the US, over one-third of participants reported having said something over IM they would not have said elsewhere (Lenhart, Rainie & Lewis, 2001, p. 22). Youthful users thus dare to share more on private platforms like IM, as they feel less inhibited sharing their feelings.

Unstable boundaries: Risks and opportunities

Perhaps informants felt less inhibited because they could maintain the boundaries to IM themselves by deciding who is added to and banned from their contact list. Fatiha described negative experiences with boys who demanded that she show herself on her webcam; she said that IM turned bad “when the other directly asks whether you can turn on your cam,” leading to an avoidance of those contacts. Midia spoke 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 enabled users to keep out unwanted outsiders. Furthermore, female informants noted they could verbally counter boys better on IM than offline.

For example, thirteen-year-old Inas typed it is easier to talk back to guys on IM: “When I’m in a fight with someone, I don’t go to him, but I go on MSN. I like that better [than] to quarrel with someone. It’s easier there. Maybe I regret
it later on, but it is easier on MSN.” Fourteen-year-old Kenza similarly felt IM allowed one to be more outspoken: “When you say something personal, you maybe have to cry. On MSN you don’t really have to cry.” This, however, lead fifteen-year-old Meryam to note: “Things can get pretty rough on MSN”; it is not all rosy “because you can type whatever you like and nobody will stop you.” Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie studied adolescent girl practices in Canada and learned these girls stop boys and men from harassing them by blocking them off their friend lists (2006). 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, Pomerantz & Currie, 2006, p. 22). On the micro-political level of negotiating gender relations, girls may seize the opportunity to counter mean boys. However, IM is not a realm disconnected from real life, and intimate conversations spilling outside of the space of IM may have very serious consequences.

There remains a danger of exposing oneself in the backstage of IM because the Internet is not a social vacuum. In the case of IM, the line between private and public was unstable. Most informants noted the danger of private conversations getting copied and pasted to other contacts. Fourteen-year-old Mehmet Ali explained: “When you talk to someone about personal things, that person can copy and paste and show it to everyone.” During the interview with Inzaf and Naoul, 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 undressing, 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. After their relationship ended, the boy broke the codes and conventions of MSN space and circulated outside of the space the webcam images he saved. The images became a new instrument of power, used to seek revenge.

Koen Leurs: Do you see any dangers or unpleasant things in MSN?
Naoul: Yes the webcam
Koen Leurs: Why do you feel it’s dangerous?
Naoul: For girls that have lots of contact with boys, they can do things they will regret later. For instance, they will go camming and the boy will press printscreen. A girl I know she did a really stupid thing with a boy and the boy pressed printscreen and sent it to the whole city. This will make you get a reputation. That is really dangerous and you have to be really careful....
Naoul: Parts of her body, she showed to the cam and that boy took a picture and he sent that to everyone in our city. And at a certain point it got to her nephew, and he beat her up badly.

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

Naoul: 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.

Inzaf: She showed me her bruises [pointing to her neck and shoulders].

Naoul: She really got hit in the neck.

The exchange over “camming,” slang for webcamming which often implies cybersex, 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 continuing attachment to IM can be explained by taking into account again that within their families, Moroccan-Dutch girls are sometimes more restricted in their movements than boys, as they are perceived as gatekeepers of “the family honour” (Pels & De Haan, 2003, p. 61). Inzaf, for instance, noted that her parents were worried over her conversations with members of the opposite sex on IM: “my parents do know what MSN is, but they say, ‘Yes, you should not have too many boys in your list and this and that,’ but [I don’t mind].” In the introduction I argued that contradictory gender discourses circulate in youth cultures and informants’ family circles.

Requirements from the two domains can clash. In some families values such as honor and chastity prevail and are especially expected of girls. Familial social norms require some informants to remain modest in their contacts with boys. Such differential expectations also color their digital practices. My study of Internet forums has revealed how public digital spaces are taken up collectively to relatively anonymously nuance and counter gendered, religious and ethno-cultural expectations, and IM offers further insights on how personal digital spaces are assumed to meander between contradictory assumptions. Fourteen-year-old Loubna mentioned she protects her reputation by deleting digital traces of her exchanges in IM: “You can always have the conversation history retrieved by someone in your home.” IM was used by some interviewees to extend the parameters of their physical and social worlds, although they recognized the dangers of being found out (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011c, pp. 70-71).

Fourteen-year-old Mehmet Ali thought that MSN was more popular among girls than among boys, as he felt girls are more confined to the
home “as a girl when you are not allowed to go out, you can still talk with your friends.” IM enables young people to be connected away from adult supervision, while being confined to their homes; IM is a “quiet technology” that can be “used to talk with friends outside the times that would be allowed either by natural constraints or by socially-determined constraints” (Grinter & Palen, 2002, p. 26). 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” (Brouwer, 2006a). Sixteen-year-old Bibi illustrated that MSN is appealing for Moroccan-Dutch girls to get in touch with boys, away from the watchful eyes and scrutiny of her community:

In any case you are at home. You are in your room. Nobody from the community is around.... For instance, concerning the topic of love, when I like someone I don’t dare to say to someone at first things like, “Yes, I love you.” On MSN it is easier, because that someone is not standing in front of you.

IM was used to circumvent restrictions placed on Moroccan-Dutch girls by parents and siblings, enabling users to get in touch with other people. Wired Up survey findings showed that almost 40% of participating girls use IM to schedule meetings and dates. The interviewees reported that girls can, for instance, exert agency in setting up dates. Inzaf is hesitant about it: “I don’t know but I think there are many girls who think it is easier.” Midia on the other hand told me: “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, Naoul found “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 seemed to be used as a space to get acquainted and develop a bond. These findings add another layer to the study by Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie who argued 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, pp. 3, 20). Having the blocking feature at hand, IM was 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 felt IM remained a safer option: “It is a greater risk to approach a stranger on the street just like that. You never know what that person is like — he could be aggressive.” If the
conversation goes wrong, or a contact demands intimate webcam images, the interviewees reported that they will block and delete the contact from their buddy list. Naoul told me about what can go wrong, but she still used instant messaging “because it is a fun way to spend your free time.” Perhaps this distinct preference can be explained because, “women participate more actively and enjoy greater influence in environments where the norms of interaction are controlled” (Herring, 2003, p. 209). The different ways users take pleasure in staking out their own private communicative space resonates with the notion of “jammer girls.” Debra Merskin claimed that, facilitated by sociological and technological changes and informed by third-wave feminism,6 “jammer girls” negotiate their worlds by making use of Internet applications to “enjoy a sense of freedom and a sense of control” over their own communication in order to securely be able to “validate their feelings” (2005, pp. 57, 64). Notwithstanding dangers that remain, part of the power of IM is that it was a space where young people, away from unwanted onlookers, were found to have fun, rehearse personal identifications and experiment with intimate relationships. In the next section, I discuss the onstage of IM use, where informants performed their identities by actively remixing different cultural affiliations.

3.4 The more public onstage

Besides a key topic of IM conversation, love and affection was also commonly expressed in the display names that interviewees and their friends use. For instance, Souad, Midia’s thirteen-year-old girlfriend, used the display name “I am Crazzy in love with you 😊... my feelings for you cannot go away 😜” to share her crush with her friends. Fifteen-year-old Inzaf also shared that she wrote “short poems” in her display name “When I, for instance, am in love with someone, I will create those.” Achmed, Fatiha’s twenty-one-year-old conversation partner, went by the display name of “Only when the fiish stop swimming I will stop looking for giirls;-).” In this section, I shift my focus from the backstage of private one-on-one IM communication to the second important mode of adolescent connectedness of one-to-many social identification. Besides publishing romantic feelings, “onstage” IM behavior accommodates different ways of being. Display names and display

---

6 Moving away from essentialism and embracing ambiguity, third-wave feminism is concerned with the micro-politics of multiple oppressions, but also the opportunities for agency in the everyday life of women (Mack-Canty, 2004).
pictures are “a way to take the stage for a select audience” and they can be dynamically used to perform various versions of themselves (Jacobs, 2003, p. 26). In updating display photos and articulating display names, digital labor is performed to gain status and grab the attention of peers. Below, I first interpret display pictures by locating them in the context of youth cultural industries. Second, I explore display names as a form of multilayered bricolage and discuss how being able to include interethnic language use in IM cultural repertoires is significant for the informants.

**Display pictures and gender stereotypes**

Display pictures, which are often distinctly gendered selfies, are important means of performing an onstage presence (as is also elaborated in Chapter 4 where display pictures on social networking sites are analyzed). Kamal, for instance, wanted to look “cool” in his MSN display picture while Khadija wants to appear “friendly” and “fashionable” in hers. Inzaf suggested that girls show “most of the time pictures of their lips or of themselves,” while boys show “pictures of themselves with their friends and sometimes of their six-pack.” Seventeen-year-old Fatiha added that girls use “mostly nice sensual or emotional images,” while boys used “mostly tough looking pictures.” These remarks indicate a dominant localization of commercialized global youth discourses: a perpetuation of the dichotomy of clear-cut masculinity versus complementary femininity as sensuality and emotionality versus rough-and-toughness. Salima, a thirteen-year-old girl, confirmed “a girl I know added ‘sweet’ in her name, while a boy named himself ‘coolboy’,” thus “guys want to act tough, something like ‘I am the best,’ while girls want to look nice in pictures, so everyone will like them.” Used as digital self-portraits of their bodies, display photos as such can be seen as virtual real estate for marketing the self, in an ongoing verification of complementary feminine and masculine conventions. Young people sell their gendered selves to each other in their gendered peer attention economy (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011a, p. 208). Furthermore, the fragmentation of the body into sexualized objects – showing seducing lips for girls and well-muscled abdomens for boys – reflects idealized stereotypical images of adolescent girls and boys. Preoccupations with physical beauty myths are typical for Western adolescents and their consumption of perfect sexual body discourses. These, for instance, find resonance in the literature on American adolescent girls’ messenger use (Thiel-Stern, 2007; Durham, 2001). American adolescent girls have been found to consume ideals of culturally defined female identities on IM: “IM is a space as guided by corporate and commercial discourses as any magazine.
or television show” (Thiel-Stern 2007, p. 97). Throughout my virtual ethnography, in the months of January and February 2010 I especially looked at the “MSN today” pop-up screen that automatically appears when signing in. The pop-up screen provided an overview of newsworthy articles for MSN users. It can be seen as a piece of virtual real estate used by corporations to attract IM users to their advertisements, with common topics such as dieting (“lose wait like Beyonce”), celebrity gossip (“Brad and Angelina break up,” “Dinand honest about cheating”) and sex-tips (“Prima Donna's in porn”), all of which play into stereotyping gender, sexuality and body-myths. Corporations are seeking entrance to the private space of IM. Pop-ups, IM bots (automated IM partners added to one's contact list offering information about banking, shopping, etc.) and commercials appeared within the personal space (Thiel-Stern, 2007, p. 100). As another invocation of culture jamming, informants generally reported paying little attention to these advertisements in MSN. Fatiha, for instance, told me: “I ignore those commercials and they do not bother me.”

Beyond a stereotypical gendered performance of self, other axes of differentiation were also highlighted in display pictures. As already shown in Figure 11, Soufian included the Moroccan and Berber flag in his display name. Other informants similarly exerted affiliations with Morocco in their pictures. Fourteen-year-old Kenza signaled being proud of her ethnic background by showing the Moroccan flag: “I put the flag of Morocco there, so people will know that I am Moroccan.” Thirteen-year-old Tariq added that next to showing being proud, the flag is also a way to stake out one’s individuality: “I have chosen a photo of the flag of my country. It shows my descent. Not many people do that. I do it to show I’m proud of it.” Fourteen-year-old Senna noted that next to the Moroccan national flag the Amazigh flag is also used, because “it is a part of them, a Moroccan part” that Moroccan-Dutch Berber users want to show. Performing oneself as Moroccan was, however, not done by only publishing ethnic signifiers such as the Moroccan national flag or the Berber movement flag. For example, fifteen-year-old Meryam stated “I wear a headscarf, so when I put my picture up on MSN, others will know that I am Moroccan,” signaling religious markers indicating membership in the Moroccan-Dutch community are also in included in display pictures.

Display names and bricolage

The crafting of an appealing display name is another example of identity work that is communicated from one-to-many. These names not only appear in person-to-person conversations, but also in the buddy list of IM contacts. By double-clicking on someone's display name in one's list of friends, users
can start conversations. By making references to specific inspirations and showing orientations to friends, display names are similar to display photos used to demarcate and manage an online presence. And they are used to attract the attention of potential conversation partners. The young people who participated in the study of Cynthia Lewis and Bettina Fabos were constantly monitoring their buddy lists, as friends in these lists regularly changed their display names. They concluded that the buddy list is used as a means of surveillance (2005, p. 489). Young people keep an eye on the various ways in which their friends (re)author themselves. Analyzing display names in the gathered transcripts reveals that this naming is gendered but also displays hybrid forms of religious, ethnic, and youth cultural belonging.

In the words of interviewee Noual, a display name “as a matter of fact tells a sort of life story.” The interviewees remix various linguistic symbolic grammars of difference in their onstage display names. Thirteen-year-old Ilham was of the opinion that updating display names on IM is in a way similar to publishing Twitter status updates: “Sometimes when I’m, for instance, doing my homework, I will change my status to ‘ssht, I’m busy doing my homework.’ Actually that’s just like Twitter only I don’t use Twitter.” The updating of a display name can be understood as a digital ritual. Being increasingly online people turn to networked rituals such as updating display names, statuses and posting tweets to give order to their lives. Rituals, Kevin Hillis wrote, can accommodate different ways of being in the world: “ritual allows participants to performatively enact or rehearse strategies to cope with the crucial changes they may undergo” (2009, p. 56).

The habitual updating of display names covers one of its dimensions, its bricolage character highlights another. Jacques Derrida noted that readers of texts engage in bricolage. He recognizes readers actively participate in meaning production, and become engineers of texts by deconstructing language structures through their linking of them with concepts beyond and behind the text. In this way, readers decenter texts by recombining them with other materials (Derrida, 1978). Dick Hebdige, in his analysis of punk as a subcultural style, argues that bricolage refers to signature style elements that are used to mark distinctiveness: “it is basically the way in which commodities are used in subculture which mark the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations” (1979, p. 103). In the digital context, the concept can be taken to grasp the combination and juxtaposition of materials to create new meanings. Jannis Androutsopoulos commented 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” (2006, pp. 539-540).
Illustratively, fifteen-year-old Oussema explained that he lists his name, together with “mocro,” which he says “just means Moroccan boy” and as a second nickname he added a reference to the hajj his parents made “because I am proud that my parents have gone to Mecca, I typed ‘Mom and Dad have gone to Mecca’.” Fifteen-year-old Meryam articulated her nostalgic imagination of Morocco: “I always type ‘Morocco is the country to dream of.’ Because I think Morocco is really a beautiful country and I really would like to stay there all the time. But it’s impossible! This way people know that I am crazy about Morocco.” Display names in the corpus reveal affective 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.” Inzaf informed me such names are common. She told me, “mocro boy means I am from Morocco and I am a boy,” and she thought names such as these are written in English “to sound cooler.” Interestingly, migrant users in Germany have also been found to perform their ethnic identities through English language nicknames, mostly in combination with gendered expressions, “as in Persian Girly, PersianLady, prince of Persia, and sexy greekgirl, GreEk Chica, greekgod19” (Androutsopoulos, 2006, p. 540).

References to ethnic ties were among 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. Inzaf told me she stumbled upon something similar on a website and she felt it was something for her so she altered her display name accordingly. She added that “it rhymes in English” and she felt it’s “nicer to say it in English than in Dutch.” Explaining its significance she shared: “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 represented her attachment to the city of Al Hoceima in Morocco: “I was not born there but my father is from El Hoceima.” Her father supported her identity performance, Inzaf mentioned, "When I was using it, he saw my name and he thought it was good" (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011c, p. 73).

In the introduction I argued that identification among diasporic subjects concerns an ongoing marking of difference and sameness, as people in

---

7 Hajj refers to the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. As the fifth pillar of Islam, hajj is a religious duty for every Muslim who can afford it. Hajj is the largest pilgrimage in the world (Raj, 2007, p. 137).
changing settings affiliate with where they came from in combination with what they want to become (Gilroy, 1993a; Hall, 1990). These junctures are also digitally mediated, in this case through the bricolage of display names in IM by Moroccan-Dutch youth. Fourteen-year-old Kenza, for instance, said, “this way I show people what I am like.” The display name of Inzaf displayed the emotional influence the migration experience of her father had 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, p. 35). For instance, in my research, I came across the display name of a girl who crafted a netspeak translation of the Arabic name Nour, “♥ n O u я я ♥,” and also the display name of a boy consisting of both Latin and Arabic characters, “Mø محمد BadBoy.” In the latter netspeak, Mø, is combined with Arabic alphabet characters to write the name Mohammed. The name also integrates a connection to mainstream global hip-hop culture by referencing Bad Boy Records, the American record label set up by the rapper Sean “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. These display names appear on the screen over and over, every time a new line is typed and the enter button is pressed. By choosing to name themselves in these specific ways they come into being as gendered, ethnic and youth cultural beings in the context of IM. Through a repetitive performance of these names, IM installs the user’s differential identity.

Besides netspeak and English, the informants also tapped into Latinized Arabic. Khadija in the conversation excerpt included at the beginning of the chapter listed “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!!” During my interview with Khadija, she made 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 Quran.” Similarly, sixteen-year-old Nevra logged in with the display name “Allah ou akhbar.” Fourteen-year-old

8 Here, “swt” is the acronym for “Subhanahu wa ta’ala” meaning “may He be glorified and exalted.”
Senna noted that Moroccan-Dutch IM users might “have something Moroccan in there, a word. For instance, ‘Ana Maghrabia’.” “Ana Maghrabia” can be translated as “I am from the Maghreb” in Dutch. The interviewees thus not only turn to English to express their affiliations. Display names that include Moroccan-Arabic written in the Latin alphabet appear widely.

A funky, informal writing style

By writing Arabic while using the Latin alphabet, IM users can claim membership to specific peer groups, but also enjoy this “funky” everyday informal writing style that generates “peer-group prestige” (Palfreyman & Al Khalil, 2003). David Palfreyman and Muhamed al Khalil analyzed the representation of Arabic in IM conversations in the United Arab Emirates. Similarly to the examples discussed here, their interviewees, female university students, combined characters from the Arabic alphabet with characters from the Latin alphabet to write Arabic in their IM exchanges. They found that employment of the Latin alphabet instead of the Arabic alphabet is shaped by “linguistic, technological and social factors.” The influence of the American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII) on online communication can partly explain why young people engage in this digital practice. Palfreyman and Al Khalil recognize ASCII as “a kind of lingua franca of the Internet” (2003). Globally, the ASCII computer character set is the technological default. There is a general lack of support for Arabic script in keyboards, computers, and operating systems. The standard mainly covers Latin letters, which are most commonly used in European languages, and excludes Arabic script (among other non-Latin scripts).

However, the practice of using Latinized Arabic, dubbed “ASCII-ized Arabic” (AA) by Palfreyman and Al Khalil, is not only shaped by constraints of computer character sets. ASCII-ized Arabic has also been taken up as an everyday informal writing style. In their casual IM conversations with peers, the students participating in the study by Palfreyman and Al Khalil wrote in ASCII-ized Arabic because of its “ease of typing.” However, they also reported using it because of privacy concerns (their parents would not be able to follow the conversation) and because they were interested in “writing in an unusual script” (2003). Among Moroccan-Dutch youth,

---

Typing in ASCII-ized Arabic, students in the United Arab Emirates were seen to negotiate between localized, linguistically specific vernaculars and Modern Standard Arabic. Linguistic vernaculars in the United Arab Emirates were previously only used for genres such as poetry and cartoons. In their use of IM, these vernaculars are now actively transferred and translated
this writing style has likewise grown into an informal and generationally specific symbolic resource invested with shared meanings. The style is used to articulate a bounded collective identity with an in-group that recognizes its principles, and allows its users to exclude outsiders such as teachers and other adults. In a similar vein, Yi noted that his Korean-American interviewee Mike came to think of reading and writing Korean as “cool” after his 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, p. 108). IM was also a significant safe space for our interviewees to find acknowledgement of their heritage language as a positive, empowering resource.

These insights allow me to intervene in two scholarly debates. In the Netherlands, youngsters with a Moroccan background have been recognized as linguistic trendsetters in creating and distributing slang (Vermeij, 2004). Lotte Vermeij, however, added that their language-crossing practices are very limited and that interethnic language use is chosen as a way 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, p. 164). In MSN expressive culture, apart from signaling religious and ethnic affiliations in display names, non-Dutch words are also used in IM conversations, for instance, to express liking each other (“zina”), thanking one another (“besaha,” “hmdl”), doubt (“swia swia,” “ze3ma”) and, for instance, to talk about preferred drinks (on MSN seventeen-year-old Fatiha invited her friend to come over for “3assir,” a fruity drink). The analysis of the corpus displays that interethnic language use is quite rich; it is interspersed in everyday conversations to establish a shared common ground and to symbolize gender, diasporic and youth cultural affiliations. Second, earlier research established that boys use more slang in their everyday speech than girls (Gordon, 1993). In Moroccan-Dutch young people’s use of IM, however, slang is not restricted to the male domain; girls are avid slang producers in the conversations and display names I analyzed.

The display pictures and display names discussed above indicate how the lived experience of difference among Moroccan-Dutch youth – who are sometimes made hyper visible as absolute Others – is not always an oppressive one, but can also be an empowering “positive difference” (Modood, 2007, p. 37). I observed the ways informants take the stage to gain solidarity from various peer groups by foregrounding various community memberships,
belongings and loyalties. Becoming active agents over their own representation, the interviewees go beyond a singular onstage articulation of identity; rather they perform a multiplicity of selves by remixing diasporic, gendered, youth cultural, Internet culture and religious affiliations.

3.5 Conclusions

Instant messaging has been immensely popular among young people since the 1990s. IM goes back to the purely text-based roots of the Internet, but outside of use in the workplace it has remained a relatively understudied and undertheorized social media technology because it is not straightforward to gather data within this private space. In the chapter, I opened up this private space. Although MSN Messenger, the field site considered as a case study for this chapter, does not exist anymore, the analysis does shed light on contemporary instant messaging practices taking place on Facebook Chat, Skype and especially smartphone apps like What's App, iChat and BlackBerry Messenger.

IM was shown to provide a window into the private engagements of teens with their peers that includes interaction with private/public spaces, interethnic language and slang use in the construction of selfhood, the negotiation of friendship and the production and consumption of sexuality. Focusing on performativity of self, remaining aware of how users adapt to the environment and by taking into consideration how the applications’ interface, restrictions imposed by dominant computer character sets, and commercial incentives inscribe themselves upon the users’ performance of self, I unraveled how in IM Moroccan-Dutch youth actively (re)position themselves in their personal networks. Together with survey and interview findings, the transcripts Fatiha, Naoul, Midia, Kamal, Khadija and Inzaf shared offer a glimpse of how that relatively safe backstage space is negotiated and how differential social belongings are communicated.

I analyzed two kinds of identity work IM is used for. MSN is taken up as an opportunity to perform diversified selves onstage and iterating a personal identity backstage resulting from multiple forms of negotiations with technical skills, digital literacies, net speak along with consuming and bending stereotypical gendered discourses, youth branding and localized forms of global connections. Moroccan-Dutch young people and especially girls, in their quotidian interaction with the digital realm, carved out a communicative space of their own. The interviewees maintain their own private networked territory as they themselves control its boundaries. Gatekeeping
is done physically – offline – as well as digitally – online. 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. Said Graioud similarly found that female chatters in Morocco build relationships with males and females with less fear of losing face, illustrating once more the impact digital media use has on spatial regulations of gender and social relations (2005, p. 84).

I have argued that for Moroccan-Dutch boys and girls instant messaging offered a space to negotiate these issues backstage and become active agents over their own multiaxial representations onstage. Despite all existing constraints that are related to gender restrictions, often disenfranchised family backgrounds, religious dictums, surveillance by parents, siblings and peers, and stereotypical youth cultural gender ideologies, which effect Moroccan-Dutch boys and especially girls in specific ways, IM was found to be a unique space for exerting their agency in playful and intimate ways. In tandem with discussion forums, using IM informants find themselves in a safe enough space to circulate self-narratives and appreciate their cultural and gendered trajectories. Unlike publicly accessible forums, in their own networked territory they are able to limit their communication to a self-chosen audience of friends. However, IM is no social vacuum disembedded from offline power relations. The example of sexual harassment raised by Inzaf and Naoul indicates girls remain susceptible to male domination in their personal territory. The relationship between IM and the offline world remains intricate and complex; at certain points, both worlds overlap and sometimes collide, at others they diverge and provide autonomy. In the following chapter the focus shifts from the mostly text-based space of IM to visually oriented social networking sites.