



Reclaiming agency in the digital neighborhood: an ethnographic exploration of ethno-religious minority youths' performances of the masculine self

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Abstract

Self-presentation has been identified as a key practice within digital youth cultures. The scholarship on youths' self-presentation has extensively investigated how young people negotiate affordances in ways that optimally support their transitions into adulthood. However, the scholarship's focus on identity development and technological affordances risks constructing a homogeneous, de-contextualized, and media-centric representation of digital youth cultures. To unveil how self-presentation practices are embedded within a broader socio-cultural context, I conducted a 15-month hybrid ethnographic study with 23 ethno-religious minority young men living in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The observations illustrate that these young men attempt to reclaim agency over their identity representations by performing "masculine ideals" of the self in response to racialized discourses. Overall, the results underscore the necessity of adopting an intersectional perspective that considers the interplay between self-presentation on social media and the threats and opportunities within youths' (digital) neighborhoods.

Lay Summary

Social media hold a central place within digital youth cultures as they enable young people to present their identities in creative ways. Ample studies show that youths appreciate the ability to disclose information about themselves through text, pictures, and videos. This scholarship, however, does not sufficiently take into account the socio-cultural context of young people. Consequently, we risk portraying digital youth culture as a monoculture. In this study, I conducted 15 months of hybrid ethnographic fieldwork among 23 ethno-religious minority young men living in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. More specifically, I took up the role of a volunteer youth worker to gain an understanding of these youths' online and offline everyday lives. The results illustrate that these young men predominantly present themselves in typical "masculine" ways. Taking into account their socio-cultural context, the study found that they engage in these disclosures to challenge racist and discriminatory narratives that represent them either as victims or as perpetrators.

Keywords: affordances, masculinity, self-presentation, social media, youth

Introduction

Caleb, a 17-year-old young Syrian refugee currently living in Flanders (Belgium), is posing with his friends in front of the train station. Being the impromptu photographer for this group of friends, I received very specific instructions on how to take the picture. Seemingly annoyed by my lacking camera skills, Caleb comes over and shows me the right angle and distance from which the picture should be taken: "*Brother, you shouldn't be so close and try to squat a little. The angle is better like that.*" The young men in front of my smartphone camera do not look particularly happy. After taking the picture, however, big smiles appear on their faces. Later that day, Caleb posts one of the pictures on his Instagram profile and accompanies it with a short text: "*My niffos [literally meaning cousins] are the toughest.*"

This interaction with Caleb and his friends might strike one as rather unsurprising and ordinary in the context of digital youth cultures. Indeed, it is well-established that young people appropriate the affordances of digital spaces to take control over their identity expressions (Michikyan et al., 2014; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021). In light of this, it is argued that self-presentation is the process in which youths experiment with their various

identities and social roles to support their transitions into adulthood (Goffman, 1959; Michikyan et al., 2014). In the case of Caleb's example, then, his efforts to disclose images that are conducive to his overall Instagram profile appear to contribute to the development of a coherent self.

The scholarship on youths' self-presentation has been successful in unveiling how adolescents and emerging adults perceive and appropriate affordances in ways that support their transitions into adulthood (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Nonetheless, scholars increasingly warn that a focus on identity development and technological affordances produces a homogeneous, de-contextualized, and media-centric understanding of young people's online self-presentation (Goggin, 2013; Sabry & Mansour, 2019; Stevens et al., 2017; Vanden Abeele, 2016). More specifically, the literature has been criticized for not sufficiently addressing heterogeneous socio-cultural contexts and for predominantly including White and middle-class youths from the Global North (Stevens et al., 2017).

According to critical scholars, it is paramount to acknowledge that identity markers beyond age complicate youths' ability to exert agency over how their identities and social roles are represented (Driver & Coulter, 2018; Marwick & Boyd, 2018). Agency in the context of self-presentation can be

defined as one's sense of autonomy over how they are being perceived by others in a given social setting (Goffman, 1959). Following Giddens (1979), it is equally important to explore how socio-cultural structures afford and/or constrain youths' agentic opportunities and threats for self-presentation. For Caleb and the other young men in this study, it is thus important to understand the power dynamics underpinning their navigations of both physical and digital neighborhood spaces (cf. Stevens et al., 2017). The (digital) neighborhood of Flemish ethno-religious minority young men is arguably shaped by racist and discriminatory narratives that construct them as the "ultimate other" (De Cleen et al., 2017). This raises the question of whether and how Flemish ethno-religious minority young men position themselves with regard to these racist representations.

As such, I argue that it is essential to adopt a perspective that conceptualizes youth as an intersectional category that is at least partly informed by socio-cultural discourses on age (cf. Driver & Coulter, 2018; Durham, 2017). Such a perspective explores how gendered and racialized hegemonic norms and values about the lifespan disproportionately marginalize ethno-religious minority young people (Sabry & Mansour, 2019). In particular, this article takes into account how hegemonic masculinity (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2005) in Flanders constructs ethno-religious minority young men as the "ultimate other" who are at risk for developing "deviant," "weak," and "unintelligent" masculinities (De Cleen et al., 2017; Durham, 2017; Fedele, 2016). Specifically, I conducted a 15-month hybrid ethnographic study among 23 Flemish cis-male ethno-religious minority youths to map how they navigate their (digital) neighborhoods in ways that challenge and/or reinforce experiences of marginalization.

In what follows, I will first outline the theoretical framework: It elaborates on the dominant perspective of the scholarship on young people's self-presentation, introduces the concept of the digital neighborhood, and provides information on the intersectional context of ethno-religious minority young men in Flanders. Afterward, I will discuss the approach, positionality, and data collection of the study, followed by an in-depth analysis of how Flemish ethno-religious minority young men attempt to reclaim agency in the digital neighborhood through self-presentation practices.

Theoretical framework

Identities in flux

Youth is believed to be a critical phase in human development in which people are consolidating their identities (Erikson, 1968). The socio-psychological frameworks underlying this belief assert that young people's identities are "unfinished," "malleable," and "in flux" due to biological (e.g., cognitive development) and social (e.g., expanding peer networks) processes associated with adolescence and emerging adulthood (Darr & Doss, 2022; Davis, 2011; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). As such, youths are said to be preoccupied—more so than adults—with formulating a "unified sense of self" and with constructing a "coherent and stable identity" (Michikyan et al., 2014, p. 55). In the process, young people strive to reconcile various narratives of the self in response to their current and future social roles (Birnholz & Macapagal, 2021). According to the socio-psychological tradition, visible presentations of the self are salient within youth culture due

to the stresses and strains stemming from identity development (Michikyan et al., 2014; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021).

The concept of self-presentation refers to goal-directed strategies people employ to display expressions of the self that are congruent with what they perceive as appropriate within a given social interaction (Hollenbaugh, 2021). To date, Goffman's (1959) metaphor of self-presentation as a dramaturgical performance remains influential in our understanding of how individuals perform social roles in front of various audiences. In particular, people establish multiple "frontstage" as well as "backstage" personas through the process of selective information disclosure (Goffman, 1959). Self-presentation thus entails a conscious consideration of the public/private nature of the social setting in order to decide which aspects of the self are (dis)advantageous to disclose and/or to conceal (Michikyan et al., 2014). For young people specifically, experimentation with selective information disclosure is an essential prerequisite for the development of a "coherent self" that integrates their public and private identities (Michikyan et al., 2014; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021). In particular, heightened self-presentation considerations during adolescence and emerging adulthood can be understood in the context of youths' efforts to gain autonomy over how their social positions and identities are expressed (Michikyan et al., 2014; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011).

Over the past decades, research on young people's self-presentation has shifted from face-to-face contexts to digital spaces (Hollenbaugh, 2021). For youths from neoliberal societies in the Global North, digital spaces have emerged as a significant site for identity experimentation, as "unsupervised" physical public spaces are increasingly viewed as unsuitable for youthful socialization (boyd, 2014). Indeed, societal anxieties over the "risky nature" of public spaces seem to have curtailed youths' freedom to autonomously play with their identities in the physical realm (Stevens et al., 2017). In this context, the networked nature of digital spaces harbors new opportunities for young people to construct and consolidate their identities (boyd, 2010). In particular, it affords social interactions in the form of editable text-generated and audio-visual content that occur asynchronously in time and space (Hollenbaugh, 2021).

However, it is important to not overestimate the degree of agency that digital spaces afford for self-presentation (Marwick & boyd, 2018). The varying degrees of anonymity, persistence, visibility, and temporality afforded by networked environments equally provide challenges for young people to self-determine their identities (Birnholz & Macapagal, 2021; Darr & Doss, 2022; Hollenbaugh, 2021). Different than face-to-face contexts, for example, digital spaces are characterized by collapsing contexts and information that is persistent, easily searched, and copied (cf. Duguay, 2016). As such, studies illustrate that youths ought to be continuously reflective over the prevailing norms and values of their imagined audiences and over the blurry boundaries between "the private" and "the public" when deciding which representations of the self are appropriate to share on a given platform (Balley & Coll, 2017; Birnholz & Macapagal, 2021; Boczkowski et al., 2018; Darr & Doss, 2022; Uski & Lampinen, 2014; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021). Moreover, several scholars have investigated how the perpetual social comparison afforded by social media can have a profound impact on young people's self-esteem and well-being (Darr & Doss, 2022; Meeus et al., 2019; Michikyan et al., 2014; Perdini & Hutahaeen, 2021).

Overall, scholarship has been making significant advances regarding our understanding of the agentic opportunities and threats afforded by digital spaces for young people's self-presentation. Despite these valuable insights, however, the underlying socio-psychological framework increasingly attracts criticism over the fact that it overemphasizes—and even “naturalizes”—the “universally experienced” transitional nature of youth (Goggin, 2013; Sabry & Mansour, 2019; Stevens et al., 2017; Vanden Abeele, 2016). By doing so, the scholarship easily overlooks how the agentic opportunities and threats afforded by digital spaces are unequally distributed among young people across identity markers beyond age, such as gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and sexuality (Marwick & Boyd, 2018). Moreover, most studies on youths' self-presentation draw from White and middle-class populations (Stevens et al., 2017) and do not sufficiently address how power dynamics shape digital youth cultures (e.g., Hjetland et al., 2022; Kapidzic & Herring, 2014). In light of these critiques, this article aligns itself with critical scholars such as Driver and Coulter (2018) and Lane (2018) by acknowledging identity markers beyond age to situate how Flemish ethno-religious minority young men's self-presentation practices are embedded within their heterogeneous socio-cultural contexts.

Identity work in the digital neighborhood

A growing body of research is addressing how the interconnection between physical and digital spaces gives rise to specific agentic opportunities and threats for minority youths' self-presentation (e.g., Lane, 2018; Pearce et al., 2018; Stuart, 2020; Trysnes & Synnes, 2022). In these studies, it is acknowledged that the institutionalization of youth in the Global North is gendered and racialized, which disproportionately marginalizes minority young people (Durham, 2017; Stevens et al., 2017). Stevens et al. (2017), for example, argue that minority youths experience a particular problem of place due to the fact that gathering spaces in urban centers are mainly designed with the majority populations in mind. Consequently, marginalized adolescents and emerging adults are oftentimes left to experiment with their identities and social roles within neighborhoods that are either unsafe or subject these youths to police surveillance and the disapproving gaze of White and middle-class urban residents (De Cleen et al., 2017; Stevens et al., 2017). As such, “the digital” can provide refuge for minority young people through the cultivation of networked communities in which they are able to (re) define their identities and social roles (Moran, 2022; Moran & Mapedzahama, 2022; Stevens et al., 2017).

However, studies on these networked communities found that digital spaces tend to mirror and reinforce the dynamics of minority youths' physical neighborhoods (Lane, 2018; Stevens et al., 2017; Stuart, 2020). To investigate the intertwinement of physical and digital spaces in the lives of minority young people, Stevens et al. (2017) emphasize the notion of the digital neighborhood. The digital neighborhood captures how digital spaces cross and transcend geographic neighborhood dynamics, relationships, and subject positions (Lane, 2018; Stevens et al., 2017; Stuart, 2020). While digital spaces can provide minority youths with new opportunities to claim agency over their expressions of the self, it equally can reproduce and even amplify experiences of marginalization related to one's minoritized subject positions (Lane, 2018; Mainsah, 2011; Stevens et al., 2017; Stuart, 2020). Therefore,

an investigation of—minority—youths' self-presentation in the digital neighborhood should be attentive to how expressions of the self are situated within ascribed identity positions that are being constructed through discourses of inclusion and exclusion (Mainsah, 2011; Trysnes & Synnes, 2022).

Studies on self-presentation within digital neighborhoods aptly illustrate the complex ways in which the intersection between socio-cultural contexts and networked technologies challenge as well as reproduce experiences of marginalization. On the one hand, it has been found that minority youths (re) claim agency over their racialized representations in the digital neighborhood. They do so either by disclosing “counter-narratives” that reconfigure their ascribed individual and collective identities (e.g., Grasmuck et al., 2009; Moran, 2022; Moran & Mapedzahama, 2022) or by drawing from high-status markers within their peer culture (e.g., Lane, 2018; Stevens et al., 2017; Stuart, 2020). On the other hand, however, these self-presentation practices can reinforce racialized stigmatization as they double down on homogenizing representations of minority youths' neighborhood lives (Mainsah, 2011; Lane, 2018; Stuart, 2020). Moreover, some studies show that stigmatizing discourses about ethno-religious communities amplify minority young people's anxieties over their invisible audiences on social media (e.g., De Wolf et al., 2022; Trysnes & Synnes, 2022). This suggests that minority youths who experience discrimination in everyday life also experience more severe agentic threats to self-expression in networked environments (Marwick & Boyd, 2018). In other words, the digital neighborhood prompts minority young people to be even more reflective over how affordances might subject them to institutional and interpersonal acts of discrimination (e.g., Pearce et al., 2018).

Following the research efforts that explore self-presentation within digital neighborhoods, I argue for a perspective that recognizes youth as an intersectional category that is not only a developmental transition phase but also an ascribed subject position. It is thus equally important to address how the intersection between the lived experience of “being young” (vs. becoming adults) and other identity markers, such as ethnicity, gender, religion, and socio-economic status, shapes online self-presentation practices (cf. Driver & Coulter, 2018). An intersectional lens (cf. Crenshaw, 1991) draws attention to how the power dynamics underpinning young people's digital neighborhoods cause unequal agentic opportunities and threats for self-expression. To date, these dynamics remain underexplored in the scholarship on youths' self-presentation. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the digital neighborhood literature by exploring how the intersectional nature of Flemish ethno-religious minority young men informs self-presentation practices.

Intersectional identities of ethno-religious minority young men in Flanders

Exploring Flemish ethno-religious minority young men's self-presentation in the digital neighborhood first warrants an understanding of their racialized and gendered representations in public discourses, stemming from Belgium's colonial and migration history (cf. De Cleen et al., 2017). To justify the exploitation of Congolese resources and citizens, the Belgian colonial state instilled “*hierarchical masculine spheres, where the European dominant white one is fed and built through the brutalization and humiliation of the African one*” (Fedele, 2016, p. 38). The cultural—and “evolutionary”—superiority

of White men was reinforced through stigmatizing representations of African men as primitive unintelligent beings (De Cleen et al., 2017). After World War I, the Belgian state embarked on a project to recruit migrant workers in Eastern Europe, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Morocco for exploitative jobs in its industry and coal mines. The lives of these migrant workers were characterized by unsafe working conditions, low wages, and growing racism (Miri et al., 2020). The European refugee crisis has intensified anti-migration and racist discourses since 2015, which led to right-wing conservative parties occupying important positions related to migration (De Cleen et al., 2017; Miri et al., 2020).

These events construct Flemish ethno-religious minorities as “the ultimate other,” which subjects them to interpersonal and institutional acts of racism and discrimination (De Cleen et al., 2017). In the case of ethno-religious minority young men specifically, hegemonic ideals of manhood in Flanders exclude them from obtaining a social position that is associated with “proper” citizenship (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity encompasses both “masculine practices” (e.g., heteronormative relationships, taking risks, pursuing competitive careers) and “masculine embodiments” (e.g., physical strength, independence) that are being defined by dominant groups (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2005; Dhaenens & De Ridder, 2015). These dominant male ideals are not universal but differ within and between contexts (Fernández-Álvarez, 2014). Hegemonic masculinity enforces and justifies the structures of patriarchal society that ascribe inferiority onto women and onto men who lack the socio-cultural capital to perform normative male ideals, such as ethnic minorities, low SES men, and queer men (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2005). It is not a fixed identity but an idealized representation of masculinity that men can draw from to position themselves as “superior” in relation to “lesser” men and women (King et al., 2021; Messerschmidt, 2018). As such, hegemonic notions of masculinity in Flanders are continuously being constructed in relation to “non-white” and “non-European men” (Fedele, 2016). These notions are reflected and reproduced in two dominant racist narratives that portray ethno-religious minority young men in Flanders as either disempowered victims or as deviant perpetrators.

First, victimization narratives portray ethno-religious minority young men as helpless, speechless, and non-agentic beings who are deeply impacted by war, violence, displacement, poverty, and racism (Malkki, 1996; Young, 2021). These narratives both draw from and reproduce the representation of youth as an exceptionally critical and vulnerable phase of human development (Honwana, 2012). Arguably, the stereotypical representation as victims is more pronounced for ethno-religious minority girls, who are oftentimes portrayed as subjects who ought to be saved from an oppressive patriarchal culture according to discriminatory discourses (Korteweg, 2008). However, victimization narratives can be weaponized to exclude ethno-religious minority young men from hegemonic markers of manhood (Fedele, 2016). These narratives perpetuate a paternalistic perspective that represents them as passive products of their environment and thus downplays how they (self-)socialize in society through agentic practices and already existing support networks (Young, 2021).

Second, ethno-religious minority young men are oftentimes believed to engage in deviant and violent behavior (De Cleen et al., 2017). The racist trope underpinning this belief is that

“their culture” and “their religion” are excessively shaped by aggressive and misogynistic male ideals (Archer, 2001). In this discourse, “Middle-Eastern,” “African,” and “Muslim” socialization structures are thought to promote “unmodern” domination of women, aggression toward queer identities, and Islamic radicalization among young men (Fedele, 2016). Another popular narrative is that ethno-religious minority young men are easily convinced to participate in criminal networks as they “inherently” desire a life that is characterized by power, money, and risk (Fedele, 2016). Interestingly, the racist representation of ethno-religious minority young men as “natural” perpetrators is built through “deviant” variations of dominant male ideals.

These two narratives take away the agency of Flemish ethno-religious minority young men as they reproduce and reinforce the oppressing effects of hegemonic masculinity, racial inequality, and the subordination of youth. It effectively excludes ethno-religious minority young men from obtaining the privilege associated with “being a man” in a patriarchal society, both on a socio-cultural level (e.g., constructed male ideals of the majority population) and on a socio-economic level (e.g., difficulties providing a livelihood due to discrimination in the labor market). Combined, these narratives constrain Flemish ethno-religious minority young men from obtaining social markers of adulthood within the majority society as well as within their own communities (cf. Durham, 2017; Honwana, 2012), which arguably has detrimental effects on these youths’ sense of agency and self-worth.

Studies on the self-presentation of minority men have shown that they challenge such a marginalized position in society by adopting features of “hyper-masculinity” in their frontstage self-presentations (e.g., Archer, 2001; King et al., 2021; Young, 2021). However, how ethno-religious minority young men’s presentations of the “masculine self” take shape within the context of the digital neighborhood warrants more in-depth exploration (cf. Lane, 2018; Stuart, 2020). This study therefore addresses how the socio-cultural structures of the digital neighborhood shape Flemish ethno-religious minority young men’s performances of masculinity.

Methodology

This study presents the results of a 15-month hybrid ethnographic research project that aimed to address, understand, and contextualize Flemish ethno-religious minority youths’ digital culture. I gained access to the field site by participating as a volunteer youth worker in a community organization that is located in a “traditionally” impoverished neighborhood of a medium-sized city in Flanders (Belgium). In this section, I will elaborate on the study’s approach, reflect on positionality, provide details about the context and participants, describe the data collection and analysis, and explain the steps taken to ensure the ethical integrity of the project.

Approach and positionality

Following Liu (2022), Lane (2018), and Markham (2017), I adopted a hybrid ethnographic approach to situate young people’s disclosure practices on social media within their socio-cultural contexts. In accordance with the digital neighborhood concept, it makes less sense to perpetuate a strict “online-offline divide” (Stevens et al., 2017). The interconnectedness of physical and digital spaces for how youths experience marginalization warrants a conceptualization of the field

site as “*more or less mixing, interconnected virtual and physical settings*” (Liu, 2022, p. 4). As Lane (2018) reports, conducting a hybrid ethnography is essential to understanding what young people are doing, discussing, and experiencing.

Furthermore, I deem an ethnographic approach useful to the study of youths’ self-presentation as it allows for “serendipity”: Long-term engagements with participants spur discussions about practices, perceptions, and events that the researcher did not anticipate (Herzfeld, 2014). While it is not possible to truly leave one’s assumptions behind, the serendipitous nature of ethnography involves a processual research cycle in which delineated research questions develop through participant observations (Markham, 2017). By navigating physical and digital spaces together, I hoped to uncover which opportunities and obstacles ethno-religious minority young men in Flanders experience to self-determine their identity representations. Moreover, engaging in conversations over an extended period of time generates thick descriptions in which the researcher and the participants construct a mutual understanding of the studied phenomenon (Herzfeld, 2014).

In light of the personal nature of this ethnography and the inclusion of marginalized young people, it is paramount to be transparent about my own positionality (cf. Young, 2021). First, my own subject position in Flanders is characterized by considerable privilege as I am a White, middle-class man in my late 20s. Second, I identify as gay which means that I occupy a minority sexual identity. Especially during the first months of the fieldwork, I was confronted with how my own identity complicated my interactions with the participants. On the one hand, my gay identity undeniably made me more sensitive to the issues of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. On the other hand, my privileged position as an ethnic majority potentially exacerbated my sensitivity toward these issues, as it would be naïve to assert that stigmatizing discourses would be absent in my initial assumptions of these young men’s self-presentation practices. Looking back, I believe that my long-term engagements with the participants were necessary to move beyond stereotypical or unidimensional interpretations of their self-presentation practices.

Participants and context

By contacting a community organization that provides support to minority youths between 14 and 30 years old in Flanders, I was able to perform participant observations among a traditionally hard-to-reach—or rather hardly reached—group of youths. Adhering to a socio-cultural perspective on youth (cf. Durham, 2017), I did not define age boundaries prior to conducting the study. Rather, I followed the community organization’s framework of youth as this was the primary context in which the study took place. This article mainly draws from a group of 23 young men between 15 and 22 years old who are the key participants of the project (see Table 1). I interacted most frequently with these young men and, as such, they had a significant impact on the results. Certainly, my interactions with the other young people who visited the community organization also inspired the research questions of the study. However, they are not explicitly included in the results as I was less able to build truly trustful relationships with them.

In terms of demographics, there is heterogeneity among the participants regarding their ethnicities. The participants identified themselves with ethnic groups from the Middle-Eastern, North-African, West-African, Central-African, East-African,

Table 1. Overview of participants

| Name (pseudonymized) | Age (over fieldwork period) | Ethno-religious identification |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Abdirahim | 15–16 | Somali, Muslim |
| Yassin | 16–18 | Syrian-Kurd, Muslim |
| Safouane | 16–18 | Syrian, Muslim |
| Dzhamal | 17–18 | Chechen, Muslim |
| Gildas | 17–18 | Congolese, Christian |
| Zaïd | 18–19 | Syrian, Muslim |
| Emir | 15–16 | Somali, Muslim |
| Arman | 16–17 | Syrian, Muslim |
| Ider | 18–20 | Moroccan, Muslim |
| Suleymaan | 18–20 | Iraqi-Kurd, Muslim |
| Abdel | 19–20 | Iraqi-Kurd, Muslim |
| Hadar | 20–22 | Iranian-Kurd, Muslim |
| Nabil | 16–17 | Syrian, Christian |
| Hassim | 15–16 | Moroccan, Muslim |
| Erjon | 16–17 | Albanian, Muslim |
| Besart | 16–17 | Albanian, Non-religious |
| Caleb | 15–17 | Syrian, Muslim |
| Farid | 17–18 | Algerian, Muslim |
| Mazaa | 17–19 | Ethiopian, Christian |
| Ife | 17–18 | Nigerian, Muslim |
| Halimah | 18–19 | Nigerian, Muslim |
| Rayan | 16–18 | Iraqi-Kurd, Muslim |
| Yusuf | 15–17 | Moroccan, Muslim |

and Balkan regions. While all these identifications point toward an ethnic minority status in Flanders, it is important to note that the youths varied with regard to migration trajectories (e.g., recent refugees vs. children of immigrant parents). Moreover, most—but not all—participants identified as Muslim. I was not able to capture clear information on the participants’ socio-economic status as they conveyed a strong aversion for talking about this topic. Although it is problematic to conflate a low socio-economic status with an ethno-religious minority identity, various observations illustrate that they frequently experienced obstacles related to a lower SES in society. Finally, it also remains unclear whether some of the young men had a non-normative sexual identity. Due to the heteronormative nature of the field site, conversations about sexuality were oftentimes eschewed.

The participants reported visiting the community organization for seeking support (e.g., educational support, conflicts within households), meeting up with friends, and making use of its infrastructure (e.g., Wi-Fi). The organization manages two buildings in a medium-sized Flemish city that underwent considerable gentrification in the 15 years before the fieldwork took place, due to the proximity of universities and major business centers. Consequently, the neighborhood in which the buildings of the organization are located has been steadily transforming into a residential area for young affluent families. Navigating the city together with the participants and listening to their stories reveal that this process of gentrification had a profound impact on their everyday lives. While they report feeling relatively “safe” in comparison to urban neighborhoods in other cities, they frequently lament how they feel unwanted, underrepresented, and disproportionately targeted by police surveillance.

Participant observation, data analysis, and ethical considerations

In this ethnographic project, I participated in the everyday lives of and conducted informal interviews with Flemish

ethno-religious minority young people by taking up the role of a volunteer youth worker myself. By doing so, I was able to gain an understanding of how the participants experienced their intersectional identities as ethno-religious minority youths in Flanders. All the participant observations were carried out during the operational hours of the community organization. A regular fieldwork week consisted of three participant observation days after school hours and lasted between five and eight hours. During school holidays, a fieldwork week could consist of up to five days, depending on the planned activities. The conversations with the participants were held in Dutch, the official language of Flanders. The “physical” participant observations were complemented with digital fieldwork on social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook. This way, I was able to connect the participants’ digital youth culture to their everyday socio-cultural realities (Lane, 2018). Both the “physical” (field notes) and “digital” (e.g., pictures, interactions) ethnographic data were captured in an observational manner and text-transformed into more elaborate texts. Screenshots of social media content were not captured.

Following a processual approach to ethnography (cf. Markham, 2017), I analyzed the data in a cyclical manner. This means that I first conducted an open-ended reading of the ethnographic data which led to the identification of self-presentation, masculinity, racism, and privacy as relevant themes and topics. These observations were then discussed with youth workers, the participants themselves, and colleagues of my department before going back to the literature to further refine the identified concepts. Finally, I employed NVivo12 to formally organize the data for this article. As I did not capture screenshots of social media content, I was not able to conduct a formal content analysis of the images that the participants disclosed. Therefore, I uploaded my detailed descriptions of the images in NVivo12 and coded them according to stylistic descriptions and displayed activities. During this phase, I revisited these social media contents when they were still available on the participants’ profiles.

The project’s ethical guidelines were constructed in collaboration with the community organization’s youth workers and formally approved by the department’s ethics committee (IRB code 2019-31). To protect the anonymity of the participants and the community organization, I have pseudonymized the ethno-religious minority youths’ names, social media screennames, and references to the postal code of the city. Moreover, I decided to not disclose the name of the city as this could result in the identification of the community organization. With regard to informed consent, together with the youth workers, I frequently communicated about the intentions of this study and, as such, obtained consent. Finally, taking up the role of a volunteer youth worker entailed that I was also held responsible to provide adequate support to young people and to follow the rules set by the community organization.

Results

Personalizing the (digital) neighborhood

A first set of observations illustrates that the ethno-religious minority young men carefully crafted their screennames to signal their intersectional identities. In particular, screennames on social media, such as Instagram and TikTok, are constituted by the participants’ first names, ethnic identifications,

peer associations, and places of residence. This identifying information, however, is oftentimes constructed in a cryptic fashion. Abdirahim, for example, crafted his screenname “*AbdiSomali_9k*” in a way that positions himself with regard to his Somalian identity. Asking Abdirahim why he chose to include his Somalian identity in his screenname, he responded: “*Because I am. I’m not just black or African, I’m Somalian bro.*” What this suggests is that young men such as Abdirahim challenge the dominant discourses that reduce ethno-religious minorities to homogeneous categories, such as “African,” “Arab,” and “Muslim.” By including their specific ethnicities in screennames, ethno-religious minority youths regain—to some extent—control over their ethnic representation within digital environments.

Moreover, the fieldwork suggests that explicit references to ethnicity, religion, and social belonging are perceived as visible tokens of one’s strength, pride, and fearlessness in the context of discrimination. Ider refers to his Moroccan ethnicity and to his group of friends in his screenname “*Ider9k_MocroCartel*”. In his short biography on Instagram, he also reveals his Muslim identity through the Arabic word for Muslim, “*مُسلِم*,” followed by a prayer emoji. When asked about these references to his identity, Ider expressed that he is aware of racist discourses in Flemish society but that his father taught him to be proud of his background and religion:

Ider: “*For me, it’s about showing that I’m proud of my background and religion. One of the things that I actually appreciated is that my dad always said that I should never be afraid or ashamed to be Moroccan and Muslim.*”

It is noteworthy that this particular self-presentation practice is not exclusively performed in the digital realm. The participants also inscribed their screennames onto the material body of the city in the form of graffiti tags. When I entered the “physical” field site, I was immediately greeted by the cryptic tag “*9To*” that was sprayed on benches and buildings as colorful graffiti. In most cases, these tags were identical to the ethno-religious minority young men’s screennames. As such, the graffiti tags also contained personal first names, ethnic identifications, and peer associations (e.g., *Suley9k1o_Cartel*, *Hadar_Kurd9To*). In the first weeks of the fieldwork, however, I did not yet meet the young men behind the screennames and tags. Intrigued by these symbols, I asked Emir if he knew who made the graffiti tag “*9ToHalim*” that we came across when walking toward a shop to buy drinks and snacks:

Emir: “*Haven’t you met those big guys who are always smoking behind the basketball court? They call themselves 9To cartel, you know because [city’s postal code is] 9010 and they kind of own the park. If you see something with 9To, you know it’s them.*”

What is interesting in this regard is how the screennames and graffiti tags intrinsically connect these young people’s online and offline self-presentations to each other. More specifically, this connection amplifies the young men’s “claim to the neighborhood,” as entering these graffiti tags on Instagram results in numerous public profiles displaying images and videos of the group “hanging out” in the area. Furthermore, my conversation with Emir revealed that he perceives the “*9To group*” rather positively and as possessing a certain authority over the neighborhood. Indeed, the participants who were not

part of the 9To group reported looking up to these young men because of their “style,” “fitness,” and strong friendships.

While the “9To group” leaves the impression of being agentic and strong young men on their peers, the neighboring urban residents regularly voiced concerns to the community organization over how these youths come across as intimidating and threatening. The youth workers were engaged in various conversations with the “9To group” about this negative representation. In these discussions, the young men expressed that they did not desire to purposely intimidate other urban dwellers, although they did confess to intentionally portraying that, as Suleymaan puts it, “*the park belongs to youths like us.*” Furthermore, the youth worker Aylan, who has been subjected to extensive surveillance himself due to his Kurdish-Turkish identity, frequently warned the young men about how the identifying information in both the graffiti tags and the screennames might subject them to increased police surveillance. The participants, however, dismissed Aylan’s worries, as they believe that they are already being disproportionately targeted by law enforcement regardless of the connection between graffiti tags and their screennames.

Performing hyper-masculinity

Over the course of the fieldwork, I observed that the participants perceived Instagram—and to a lesser extent TikTok—as a networked “frontstage” that affords self-presentation in creative and stylistic ways. My conversation with Farid about a picture that he posted on Instagram is illustrative in this regard. In the picture, Farid and his friend pose in a narrow and grim-looking alley. They both assume a “masculine” pose by standing tall with their legs slightly spread and by holding their hand in front of their chest while extending their index finger. As a result, the golden watches adorning their wrists take central stage in the picture. The image was furthermore intensified by blurring the environment and increasing the lighting on Farid and his friend. In the comments, Farid’s connections reinforce the “masculine” status attached to such a performance of the self through linguistic references (e.g., Ice braddaaaa, gangsta, mafia bros). When asked to reflect on the process of sharing this picture, Farid expressed how he takes the size of his—invisible—audience into account and therefore only purposefully discloses pictures on Instagram that present himself as “looking good”:

Farid: “*I’ve now about 950 [followers] or what? So yeah sure you know, I’m not just going to post everything. Ok I look good in this picture and it shows my new watch so let’s put a filter on it and that’s it. Put it on my Instagram stories and look bro, 30 comments in no time. Everyone does it like that.*”

A closer look at the participants’ (semi-)public social media profiles reveals that they construct and curate their networked frontstage personas in very similar ways as Farid. The young men mainly post pictures and videos of themselves in which their bodies are highlighted as muscled, fit, and strong. They achieve this by taking photographs from low and further-away angles, by assuming “normative” masculine poses (e.g., standing tall, stern and non-emotional look), and by using famous clothing brands and cars as “photo props.” Hadar, for instance, regularly posts pictures and videos of himself driving

his car. In these images, he is sitting in the driver’s seat in a leaned-backed manner, holding the steering wheel with one arm and thereby clearly displaying the BMW logo and the speed at which he is driving. In a similar vein, Abdel’s Instagram profile consists of nighttime pictures in which he sits nonchalantly on top of the back of a car. Abdel is oftentimes holding a shisha pipe and blowing out smoke that partly covers his face, which attracts attention toward his masculine pose and designer clothing.

It is thus striking how the networked frontstage personas of these young men seem to predominantly draw from “hyper-masculine” ideals. They deliberately share such images within their extended peer networks on their more public social media accounts. Moreover, they amplify the visibility of performances of the masculine self through reposting their own content, and those of their friends, on Instagram Stories. Contextualizing these self-presentation practices, it is noteworthy that this imagery resembles in many ways the poses and activities of popular French, Belgian, Dutch, and German hip-hop and R&B music artists (e.g., maes_packm and Boef). For the Syrian and Kurdish refugees participating in this study, how they posed in front of the camera was also very similar to the pictures that they proudly showed of male family members who were fighting against the terrorist organization ISIS. Overall, the participants perform “hyper-masculine” identities to consolidate a narrative of themselves as being accomplished men despite their structural position within the majority society.

Having access to the “offline” everyday lives of ethno-religious minority young men furthermore illustrates how these performances of the self are not expressions of static and unidimensional identities. While there is no stark disconnect between their online and offline self-presentations, the physical realm provides more nuance and context to these performances. In particular, I was able to uncover how young men protect boundaries around their more intimate and private selves by selectively disclosing “masculine” content on social media profiles with a large audience. Through my interactions with the Syrian refugee Yassin, I observed how he perceives his disclosures on Instagram as a public persona that is an amplified component of his intersectional identity. On several occasions, Yassin granted me access to his private photo albums on his smartphone. In these digital archives, Yassin kept pictures of family members, childhood memories, and non-stylized images of playful interactions with friends and youth workers. Going through these archives together unveiled intimate, affective, and emotional layers to Yassin’s identity that are not visible on his social media profiles. For Yassin, these contents are highly personal and therefore not suitable to share on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok:

Researcher: “*These are great pictures, I’m wondering now why you don’t seem to like sharing them on social media?*”

Yassin: “*These are [my memories] and I don’t mind them sharing with friends. I don’t see why it should be on social media. My real friends know me so it doesn’t really matter that I post these [pictures on social media]. Why do you ask?*”

Researcher: “*I was just curious because I never saw these images on your Instagram and TikTok. I mean these profiles almost show a totally different Yassin!*”

Yassin: “Well yeah, hopefully! These [pictures] wouldn’t fit my Insta.”

As expressed by Yassin, the participants thus seem to tailor their online self-presentation in ways that do not give away more private and intimate aspects of the self. Rather, they perform an outspoken masculine identity in front of their extended peer networks and the world at large. Keeping the victimization narratives in mind, one could argue that performing “hyper-masculinity” is a strategy that the participants employ to cope with and overcome their representations as lacking status, agency, and control. This argument was validated by Mehmet, one of the regular youth workers from a Moroccan background who once sought support himself from the organization when he was a teenager:

Mehmet: “I found it humiliating to think of myself as someone who is just a victim of racism. And that I needed support from an organization like this. It’s nobody business what their day-to-day lives actually look like. I have to admit that I think that what [these young men] post can be silly and annoying at times. I mean, it sometimes comes across as posing but they don’t harm anyone with it.”

However, Mehmet and the other regular youth workers did voice concerns over audiences who lack the socio-cultural knowledge to contextualize the young men’s performances of the masculine self. The youth worker Aylan was especially sensitive about this topic as he experienced multiple instances of discrimination throughout his life due to his Kurdish-Turkish identity. On some occasions, Aylan visibly disapproved of the images and videos the young men disclosed on social media because he deemed these performances as reinforcing harmful stereotypes about ethno-religious minorities (e.g., drug gangs). During these conversations, the participants reported that they are aware that both police actors and members of the right-wing political youth movement in Flanders are part of their social media audiences. Instead of being worried, however, the young men seemed to enjoy the idea that these actors would be offended by their presentations of the self. According to Suleymaan, he is not bothered by “racist bastards” taking offence to his performances of the self. On the contrary, he proudly claimed that he would wear it as “a badge of honor” if a right-wing youth tweeted about him.

Positioning oneself in opposition to “Non-Masculine” others

Finally, the results show that ethno-religious minority youths’ imaginations and performances of the masculine self are also being constructed in relation to “others.” For example, the young men regularly joked about and even condemned young women who shared images of activities that they considered to be “typically masculine.” On several occasions, Farid disapprovingly showed me TikTok videos of his older sister that he described as haram [forbidden on religious grounds]. However, the activities performed by his sister on TikTok cannot be considered haram in the strict religious sense (e.g., consuming alcohol, eating pork meat). When Farid disapprovingly showed me a video in which his sister was enjoying a shisha pipe with her friends, I asked him why he thought it was inappropriate for her to share this video while he regularly discloses similar content on Instagram. During this

conversation, Farid mainly alluded that posting these images on public platforms such as TikTok is not appropriate for young women:

Farid: “Habibi [used among friends], why does everyone need to see this? No wonder she’s still single. Acting all tough on these silly TikToks. I don’t know, it’s just annoying – girls who act like this.”

Next to making disapproving comments about young women participating in perceived “masculine” self-presentations, I also found that the participants actively avoided visible associations with those who do not represent a “masculine” identity. For example, the men who identify with the 9To “gang” refused to be in pictures with some of the younger teenagers who attended the social activities organized by the youth workers. According to Mazaa, these younger teenagers look like “little weak children” who do not deserve to hang out with them. Moreover, the young men did not disclose images with the ethnic Flemish male youth workers on social media, although they themselves regularly captured pictures and videos of such interactions. Considering that the participants actively conceal any information that could represent them as victims, it is possible that they wanted to minimize connections to the community organization. Nonetheless, Gildas revealed that the appearance of youth workers is incompatible with the general image on social media that he wants to portray:

Gildas: “It’s not personal, but the way they [youth workers] dress is just not our style. A jeans and a sweater like everyone else, or this kind of alternative trash. Bro, imagine what people would think if they saw us with them on Insta [directed at a friend].”

Another interesting observation regarding the presentation of the masculine self in relation to “others” is how the participants position themselves toward their “younger selves.” The observations illustrate, for example, that the ethno-religious minority young men strictly limit the available content on their social media profiles to just a handful of pictures and videos. It is noteworthy that this content is oftentimes not older than one year. Asking Rayan about this practice, he explained that images of his younger self do not correspond anymore to who he is now and who he wants to be. In other words, he proactively avoided being “embarrassed” by content that he disclosed at a younger age. Considering the importance of performing masculine identities, it is possible that the participants aim to restrict access to content that portrays younger—and therefore less strong and autonomous—identities.

Conversely, some of the young men participated in the TikTok trend “show you then vs now” in which three old pictures are rapidly followed by three recent pictures. For instance, Dzhamal chose to first include three pictures in which he was slender looking, eating ice cream, and sitting in a go-cart during a weekend trip to the seaside. The three recent pictures that followed, then, showed how Dzhamal is working out in the gym, driving a car with friends, and smoking a shisha-pipe. Through this trend, the ethno-religious minority young men present themselves in ways that emphasize their “transformation” from young boys into men. According to Leia, a Flemish ethnic majority female youth worker who

oftentimes served as an intermediary between the community organization and the youths' parents, it is important for ethno-religious minority young men to come across as strong and "adult-like," as this grants them access to hierarchical status within the family and the peer group:

Leia: "In most of their families, the father is still the person everyone has to listen to. We noticed that young teenagers mostly respect their dads because of their age and the greater strength they have. However, when they grow older, they start to challenge the authority of their fathers. And at the same time, they also become a kind of authority figure in the household that should protect their sisters and mother."

Discussion

How do ethno-religious minority young men navigate networked environments as a "digital neighborhood," and how are these navigations connected to their everyday "offline" lives? Through an ethnographic exploration of 23 young men who experience marginalization due to their ethno-religious minority identity in Flanders (Belgium), this study has investigated how these youths attempt to reclaim agency over their identity expressions within the digital neighborhood. Moving beyond a socio-psychological framework, the results illustrate that performances of the self on social media are not only expressions of young people's identity experimentation. Rather, the participants turned to networked environments with the purpose of constructing a frontstage persona that challenges experiences of marginalization.

Overall, the study found that ethno-religious minority young men engage in selective information disclosure to further amplify idealized notions of masculinity. These masculine performances take shape at the intersection of a youth culture that idealizes "strong" and "powerful" men (cf. [Dhaenens & De Ridder, 2015](#)), and a majority society that constructs them as "the ultimate other" ([De Wolf et al., 2022](#); [Mainsah, 2011](#); [Trysnes & Synnes, 2022](#)). The hybrid ethnography has observed how this intersection gives rise to three interrelated self-presentation practices. First, including ethnic identities and social belongings in "digital" screennames and "physical" graffiti tags not only de-homogenizes these youths' societal representations but also amplifies their "claim" to public spaces. Second, the young men strategically perform a "hyper-masculine" frontstage persona in order to conceal more intimate, personal, and "vulnerable" information. Finally, the value attached to such performances of hyper-masculinity is consolidated by delegitimizing similar self-presentation practices of "non-masculine" others.

The main contribution of this article lies in the fact that acknowledging the dynamics of minority youths' digital neighborhoods yields contextualized and nuanced results in self-presentation practices. In particular, the results show that these young men's selective information disclosures are informed by negotiations between "the self," group culture, and racialized discourses across physical and digital spaces (cf. [De Wolf et al., 2022](#)). While the creation of identity messages in screennames and graffiti tags are rather clear examples of agentic behavior, [Moran \(2022\)](#) rightfully notices that the "pressure" to perform anti-racism counternarratives places a "burden on proof" on minorities within the context of

"neoliberal ideologies of white multiculturalism" (p. 20). Moreover, the performances of hyper-masculine ideals do provide young men with a sense of agency and status among peers but can equally reinforce the system of oppression that marginalizes them (cf. [Stuart, 2020](#)). The Flemish White majority, for example, could see the masculine portrayals as a confirmation of stigmatizing perpetrator narratives. In turn, these biases might further intensify police surveillance and could even lead law enforcement to use the young men's social media content displaying expensive items as "evidence" that they are involved in local criminal networks (cf. [Lane et al., 2018](#)). Moreover, these hyper-masculine portrayals raise the question whether dominant male ideals among the participants become hegemonic, thereby causing secondary marginalization for non-normative men and women within these young men's peer networks. I argue that such identity work within digital neighborhoods warrants further exploration to grasp whether and how performances of the masculine self truly contribute to a reclaimed sense of agency among ethno-religious minorities.

Second, the results illustrate that performances of the self are at least partly informed by intersectional identities beyond the general categories of "adolescence" and "emerging adulthood." By overemphasizing identity development as the most important feature of "being young," we risk developing a monolithic perspective on how youths perceive and appropriate social media's affordances ([Stevens et al., 2017](#)). Rather, the young men in this study seem to attribute what [Marler \(2022\)](#) calls "connective ambition" to social media platforms as they seek to overcome exclusion and stigmatization through the amplification of "masculine" networked identities. In particular, the participants do not believe in the "traditional pathways" (e.g., education) of attaining a livelihood and overall societal recognition due to experiences with racism and a distrust in the Flemish majority society ([De Leyn et al., 2022](#)). In this sense, performances of "hyper-masculinity" in the digital neighborhood are both expressions and reinforcements of neighborhood activities aimed at elevating one's position within extended peer networks. While some of these performances might directly mirror neighborhood "threats" (e.g., criminal gang activities), social media allow these youths to emulate "high-status" masculine identities without necessarily partaking in violent and illegal practices. Nonetheless, how marginalized young men act on the connective ambition of social media ([Marler, 2022](#)) cannot be properly understood without considering these physical neighborhood opportunities and threats. Therefore, this study concurs with the argument made by [Pearce et al. \(2018\)](#) that affordance approaches should consider the heterogeneous socio-cultural contexts in which people's engagements with media take shape.

Finally, this study found that the participants actively engaged with the temporality affordance of social media to consolidate their "present" selves as masculine. Specifically, these young men perceive their younger selves as less agentic and therefore less masculine. Consequently, they consider the opportunities and constraints afforded by temporality on social media to construct a frontstage persona that renounces younger representations. While some young men achieved this through social media trends (e.g., "show you then vs. now"), the majority aimed to diminish the potential of "time collapse" by frequently removing "outdated" content (cf. [Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018](#)). Time collapse refers to how the

persistence of online content can lead to adversary effects later on (e.g., embarrassment). The notion of time collapse, however, remains underexplored in opposition to the dynamics underpinning context collapse (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018). Moreover, this observation warrants further exploration of how young people who struggle with obtaining social markers of adulthood (cf. Durham, 2017; Honwana, 2012) might respond to networked temporality to position themselves as adults.

Although the study sheds light on how online self-presentation is embedded within the digital neighborhood, it remains necessary to interpret the results and implications with caution. First, the study was not entirely successful in applying a holistic intersectional approach, as access to information regarding household dynamics, migration trajectories, and sexuality was limited. Second, I was less able to carry out participant observations within peer networks that are less accessible to youth workers. For example, the participants considered Snapchat to be a more private space and did not easily allow youth workers within these networks. Moreover, the young men concealed aspects of their lives that they felt were “unsafe” to disclose to youth workers. While there were indications of detrimental neighborhood dynamics beyond racism and discrimination (e.g., inter-group violence, drug use), the current study lacks nuanced insights on these matters to fully include them in the discussion of self-presentation. Finally, it is important to note that the results do not mean that the ethno-religious minority young men exclusively used social media in a strategic way. Similar to “other” youths, they equally engage with these platforms for a variety of reasons (e.g., entertainment).

That being said, the observations of this study illustrate the value of an intersectional perspective that considers the interplay between self-presentation on social media and the threats and opportunities within youths’ neighborhoods. Indeed, it does make less sense to predominantly attribute these performances of the self to the socio-psychological development of a “coherent” male identity. Rather, the young men in this study seek to reclaim agency over their societal representations in the context of racism and discrimination within their (digital) neighborhoods. Nonetheless, the risk exists that intersectional perspectives will produce knowledge in disciplinary silos. Rather than conceptualizing youth in one way or the other, I argue that it would be fruitful to explore how we can reconcile cultural and psychological frameworks to better understand young people’s experiences within digital neighborhoods.

Data availability

The data of this study are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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