Networked gift-giving: Ethno-religious minority youths' negotiation of status & social ties in a society of distrust

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Abstract

The reciprocal exchanges of messages, likes and pictures on social media are typical expressions of mobile youth culture. After all, it is well-established that young people's disclosure practices support their efforts to maintain relationships, gain autonomy and, by large, consolidate a place in the world. What is often missing, however, is an exploration of how the specific socio-cultural contexts of ethno-religious minority youths shape and are shaped by social media appropriations. Therefore, we conducted a 15-month ethnographic study among Flemish ethno-religious minority youths in which we investigated networked gift-giving practices. We stress the notion of 'networked' because the results illustrate how these young people appropriate the amplified visibility of their relational maintenance behaviors on social media in order to negotiate status and social ties. The paper connects these findings to the concept of a 'distrustful society' as the participants hold a general distrust in the majority population and institutions due to systemic experiences of racism and marginalization.

Key words: distrust; ethnography; gift-giving; minorities; mobile youth culture; social media

Introduction

Arman, a young man wearing black Adidas sportswear, poses on the staircase of an apartment building. He covers his face with his hand, attracting attention to his golden watch that stands out in the dimmed and blurry surroundings. This selfie picture is posted on the Instagram stories of the 17 year old Syrian refugee who currently lives in Flanders, Belgium. Arman asks his followers to rate his picture through an edited slider containing a fire emoji. These ratings are subsequently reposted by Arman. He accompanies them with highly affectionate, personalized commentary*: "Thx habibi [used among friends and significant others, literally meaning 'my love'], I miss you wollah [I swear by Allah].* In turn, the friends who rated the picture repost Arman's commentaries on their respective stories.

To an outside observer, these reciprocal exchanges between Arman and his friends are likely to be interpreted as typical expressions of contemporary youths. Indeed, the ubiquitous role of networked technologies such as Instagram in youth's lives has led to the observation that there is a global mobile youth culture (Castells, et al., 2007; Vanden Abeele, 2016). According to scholarship in this field, young people appropriate the affordances of such technologies in ways that support their efforts to establish and maintain relationships, gain autonomy, and by large consolidate a place in the world (Campbell & Park, 2008; Kaseniemi & Rautiainen, 2002; Ling, 2010; Yan, 2018). The social affordances that allow youths to communicate anytime anyplace through the exchange of texts and imagery appear particularly appropriate to support young people's developmental trajectories and social emancipations into society (Campbell & Park, 2008; Vanden Abeele, 2016). In the case of Arman's example, for instance, the reciprocal – and even ritualized – exchanges of 'public' disclosures appear to create a strategic mood of sociality, which presumably strengthens his friendship ties as well as enhances his cultural capital.

To fully understand youth's negotiation of status and social ties, we argue, it is paramount to take into account their specific socio-cultural contexts. This is especially true if we do not want to unrightfully portray young people's experiences as merely a monoculture (Goggin & Crawford, 2011; Goggin, 2013; Haddon & Vincent, 2009; Vanden Abeele, 2016). Indeed, the category of youth is often used as a homogenizing force, lumping different kinds of young people together by effectively ignoring gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and socio-political position for the sake of analyzing experiences through the lens of age (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2005). Adopting such a socio-cultural lens implies not falling into the pitfalls of what some of the scholarship on MYC has been critiqued of, namely to infer from predominantly white and middle-class samples how young people's networked practices are mainly a collective expression of developmental trajectories into adulthood (Goggin, 2013; Steven, et al., 2017; Zhang & Leung, 2014). The experience of 'being young' is furthermore constituted of a *"here-and-now-moment"* (Wullf, 1995) in which youths navigate their glocalized socio-cultural contexts (De Leyn, et al., 2019; Goggin & Crawford, 2011; Sabry & Mansour, 2019). As such, it is argued that the 'condition of youth' is not just the result of developmental processes but also constructed by, among others, racialized and gendered assumptions on age (De Leyn, et al., 2019; Sabry & Mansour, 2019)

In our study, we strife to understand ethno-religious minority youth's social media use from their here-and-now-moments and aim to situate these understandings at the nexus of youth culture and societal assumptions on ethno-religious minority youth. To that end, we draw from data gathered via a 15-month ethnographic study among ethno-religious minority youths living in Flanders. Before introducing the fieldwork, however, we first sketch the socio-cultural context

of these young people by situating their experiences against the notion of a society of distrust, and by linking relational maintenance in such a society to networked gift-giving practices.

Theoretical framework

Society of Distrust

The socio-cultural context of the ethno-religious minority youths that this ethnographic study focuses on has to be situated within long-standing discourses on migration, ethnicity and religion in Flanders. Overall, these discourses are informed by an imagined national and European majority identity that is shared by white, Dutch-speaking 'autochthones' (De Cleen et al., 2017). Ethno-religious minorities are identified as 'allochthones' who are ascribed the agonistic role of 'being a threat' to cultural homogeneity, national security and economic stability (De Cleen et al., 2017). Arguably, being categorized as allochthones confronts ethno-religious minority youths with experiences of discrimination and racism on both an individual and institutional level. We therefore consider it important to deconstruct the value-laden notion of 'the allochthone' in order to understand how ethno-religious minority young people are positioned vis-à-vis the dominant culture.

According to De Cleen and colleagues (2017), the notion of 'the allochthone' draws from three racist tropes about ethno-religious minorities. First, it intrinsically connects ethnicity to religion as it is oftentimes used in a stigmatizing fashion to identify and construct citizens with 'non-European' origins and Muslim identities as 'the other' (De Cleen et al., 2017; De Wolf et al., 2021; Agirdag et al., 2017). In other words, ethno-religious minorities are looked upon with suspicion and are expected to 'integrate' in order to maintain the imagined harmonious character

of Flemish society (Ceuppens, 2006; Zienkowski, 2014). Second, ethno-religious minorities often face more severe socio-economic hardships and therefore constitute a comparatively large population of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Agirdag et al., 2017; Schuermans et al., 2015). As a result, the white and middle class majority attributes urban crime and general feelings of unsafety to the presence of allochthones in urban centers (De Cleen et al., 2017). Moreover, 'Islamic' extremism that caused a wave of terrorist attacks around the globe have magnified the image of ethno-religious minorities as a security threat (De Cleen et al., 2017; Sabry & Mansour, 2019). Finally, the white majority fears that ethno-religious minorities are detrimental for economic prosperity. This fear is shaped by the belief that the costs associated with migration and asylum will become unbearable (De Cleen et al., 2017). In addition, it is assumed that the lower socio-economic status of allochthones is caused by 'failed' integration or the sheer unwillingness to participate in society (De Cleen et al., 2017). Instead of recognizing the structural constraints that a large part of Flemish ethno-religious minorities experience (e.g. discrimination and intergenerational poverty), these tropes draw from neoliberal notions of responsibilization (Agirdag, 2017; De Cleen et al., 2017).

In the case of ethno-religious minority youths specifically, then, it is noteworthy that the allochthony discourse intersects with what Peter (2003) calls the institutionalized mistrust of youth. This mistrust is informed by societal anxieties over young people's pathways towards a normative notion of adulthood (Peter, 2003; Durham, 2017). In Western countries, youths are often believed to be impulsive and therefore susceptible to engage in 'dangerous' behavior (De Leyn, et al., 2019). In light of this, urban public spaces (e.g. parks, train stations, public squares) are deemed increasingly inappropriate for 'youthful' recreation and socialization due to associations with delinquency (e.g. drug use, gangs, vandalism – Pleysier & Deklerck, 2006;

Moris & Loopmans, 2019). This has resulted in the creation of 'appropriate' publics for young people (e.g. after-school activities, youth centers – Mathijssen, et al., 2014; Moris & Loopmans, 2019). However, these 'youthful publics' have been found to be only limited accessible to ethno-religious minority youths in Flanders (Mathijssen, et al., 2014; Moris & Loopmans, 2019). Therefore, urban spaces remain the most important sites for ethno-religious youths to socialize which in turn increasingly subjects them to the discriminatory gaze of white middle-class urban dwellers (De Visscher, 2008; Moris & Loopmans, 2019; Stevens et al., 2017).

The intersection between racist notions of allochthones and moral panics about young people hanging out in public produces a general distrust towards ethno-religious minority youths in Flanders. This distrust has been found to result in tangible experiences of marginalization: ethno-religious minority youths are often the target of police aggression, of exclusion in general public life and of educator's prejudices (Agirgdag, 2012; Jacobs & Rea, 2007). It is not unlikely that these experiences lead young people themselves to also develop a distrust towards societal institutions and the majority population. In other words, systemic experiences of discrimination and socio-economic exclusion may give rise to a society of distrust (cf. Giordano, 2006) in which ethno-religious minority youths seek to consolidate a place for themselves.

A society of distrust is characterized by the widespread belief that institutions and 'the other' will act in a way that is mostly beneficial to themselves and the social groups they belong to (Giordano, 2006; Pearce, 2015). This belief is rooted in "*past negative experiences that are reconfirmed by current similar new experiences on the one hand, and reactivated by a group's collective memory mechanism on the other hand"* (Giordano, 2006, p. 483). In such a society, the public sphere is perceived as alien, dangerous and hostile (Giordano, 2006). Consequently, people who find themselves in a distrustful society will turn towards their – extended – network

in order to (re)build social worth, find support and gain 'symbolic' (e.g. status) and 'material' (e.g. job opportunities) resources (Giordano, 2006; Pearce, 2015). Therefore, relational maintenance – and in particular strategic maintenance behaviors – are considered to be an indispensable strategy to alleviate some of the tensions stemming from navigating a society of distrust (Pearce, 2015). These latter strategic relational behaviors are *"intentional and planned for relational maintenance"*, instilling a norm of reciprocity and indebtedness between the people engaging in these behaviors (Pearce, 2015, p. 3).

Networked gift-giving

People living in a society of distrust value relational maintenance and consider their network as the most reliable source of symbolic and material resources (Pearce, 2015). In light of this, gift-giving in particular has been found to be an effective practice that strengthens social ties (e.g. Lampbel & Bhalla, 2007; Skageby, 2010). The concept of gift-giving first emerged in the anthropological studies of Malinowski (1922) and Mauss (1954) which documented how reciprocal exchanges of gifts are the building blocks of community because they materialize the mutual bond between individuals. In other words, gifts are symbolic messages that convey the desire to nourish cherished relationships. It is important to note that gifts do not necessarily hold monetary value but are bestowed with personal meaning, affection, sympathy and morality (Chakrabarti & Berthon, 2012; Komter, 2007; Mauss, 1954). The significance of a gift therefore lies in the fact that *"to give something is to give a part of oneself"* (Hassen, 2019, p. 21).

Because gifts are imbued with personal identities, the relational maintenance performed through gift-giving rituals can bring benefits such as social support and status for both the giver

and the receiver (Komter, 2007). On the one hand, gift-giving leads to a continuous understanding that both parties can count on each other (Sherry, 1983). On the other hand, gift-giving is intrinsically tied up with self-representation practices that may elevate status because exchange rituals are oftentimes performed in front of others (Hassen, 2019; Schwarz, 2010). However, these benefits are not automatically transferred when a single gift-exchange occurs: it is expected of the receiver to 'return the favor' because failure to do so may be perceived as the rejection of a shared identity, thereby rupturing the social tie between both parties (Marcoux, 2009; Mauss, 1954). Indeed, reciprocity is crucial for gift-giving in order to consolidate and maintain continuous and symmetrical relationships (Hassen, 2019; Mauss, 1954). This is especially true for gift-giving in societies of distrust as not reciprocating symbolizes that the receiver may utilize the relationship to further its own agenda without considering mutual benefits (Pearce, 2015).

Traditionally, gift-giving has been studied in relation to how the reciprocal exchange of material objects (e.g. presents) contribute to relational maintenance. However, social exchange lies at the hearth of networked technologies and as such it is argued that 'the digital' provides new opportunities to participate in gift-giving rituals (Lewis, 2015; Pearce, et al., 2015). More specifically, networked technologies bring forth affordances that facilitate the reciprocal and visible exchange of information (boyd, 2010; Lambert, 2013; Vanden Abeele et al., 2018). Therefore, we coin the term 'networked gift-giving' to account for how affordances simultaneously facilitate and constrain ethno-religious minority youths' relational maintenance behavior on social media. Although we do not consider 'offline' and 'online' to be two separate realities (cfr. Miller & Horst, 2012), we argue that it is important to highlight the networked nature of gift-giving practices on social media as various affordances such as visibility,

scalability and replicability do cause specific dynamics (boyd, 2010). In light of this, we identify three interrelated dynamics that inform networked gift-giving.

First, social media, which are currently consumed predominantly on mobile devices, allow people to communicate with each other anyplace, anytime through the *"consumption, production and interaction with streams of user generated content"* (Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 157; Jenkins, 2006; Vanden Abeele, et al., 2018). This way, the gifts extended through such technologies oftentimes take on the form of reciprocal exchanges of messages, pictures, comments and likes (e.g. Lee & Lee, 2017; Mansson & Myers, 2011; Schwarz, 2010; Taylor & Harper, 2002; Tong & Walther, 2010). Second, social media incentivizes people to explicitly affirm social ties which are in turn displayed on profile pages (boyd, 2010; Ellison, et al., 2007; Ellison & boyd, 2013). The act of accepting a friend/follower request and extending the same invitation to the other party has been found to be a gift-giving practice that does not only materialize the social bond but that also directly increases perceived status through the visibility of connections on social media platforms (Goode, et al., 2014; Schwarz, 2010). Finally, the affirmation of diverse social connections may amplify the value of gift-giving because of the heightened visibility of gifts being exchanged (Pearce, et al., 2015; Lampbel & Bhalla, 2007). However, several scholars warn for how this dynamic complicates one's abilities to evaluate the appropriateness of the information disclosed through such exchanges (cfr. context collapse, see Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012), potentially instills feelings of loneliness (Kross et al., 2013) and even pressures people to engage in labor-intensive social interactions (Hassen, 2019).

Scholarship mapping social media's affordances thus illustrates how networked gift-giving may bring opportunities and constraints to relational maintenance and the 'public' representation thereof. However, Pearce and colleagues' study on relational maintenance in

Azerbaijan illustrates that the affordance perspective warrants further investigation on how people's socio-cultural contexts in particular inform networked gift-giving: *"The affordance perspective has not considered cultural, economic, and political contexts as well as it could, and future research that contextualizes findings in such a way is needed"*. (2015, p.9). Answering this call for more in-depth contextualization of relational maintenance on social media, our study therefore aims to connect Flemish ethno-religious minority youths' networked gift-giving practices to their experiences of exclusion and racism in a society of distrust.

Methodology

This study draws from a broader ethnographic research project that aimed to address, understand and contextualize Flemish ethno-religious minority youth's perceptions and practices both online and offline. The principal researcher participated as a volunteer youth worker in a community organization located in an impoverished neighborhood from September 2019 until January 2021. It was not always possible to be physically present due to COVID-19 restrictions. However, relationships with the participants were maintained through social media during the two major lockdowns in Flanders (March 2020 – June 2020 and October 2020 – January 2021). In what follows, we will sketch the fieldwork site and methodology, reflect on the positionality of the principal researcher, and finally stipulate how we ensured the ethical integrity of the project.

In order to gain access to the everyday lives of ethno-religious minority youths, we chose to contact a community organization that is known for providing support to minorities between 14 and 30 years old. The organization consists of a team of youth workers who create a safe space for socialization and recreation, serve as intermediaries between the young people, their

families and societal institutions (e.g. schools, municipality, legal actors), and overall act as confidants. After consultation with the youth workers in charge, the principal researcher was granted access to this fieldwork site under the condition that he would take up the role as a volunteer youth worker himself. This way, we were able to carry out participant observations and informal interviews among informed and consenting participants over an extended period and in a natural setting. While volunteering as a youth worker brought several benefits (e.g. access, blending in), it is equally important to note that the principal researcher first and foremost experienced an embodied position as 'being a youth worker' (cfr. Seim, 2021). This means that we were able to get close to the everyday lives of ethno-religious minority youths while simultaneously being restricted in our access to field sites outside the context of the community organization. Moreover, the privileged position of the principal researcher (being a white, middle-class male) arguably further shaped the context in which the research results were produced.

A regular fieldwork week consisted of three participant observation days: Tuesdays for homework support, Wednesdays for recreational activities and Fridays for organized evening parties. The number of youths attending these activities varied over the course of the fieldwork, ranging from 5 to 50 attendees. Moreover, the organization employs an open structure meaning that some young people attended activities only once or twice a year while others can be considered regular visitors. Although all these young people inspired the research, we mostly draw from a group of 23 ethno-religious minority youths with who the principal researcher most frequently interacted (see table 1, appendix A). The raw data (notes) gathered during these participant observations were transformed after each fieldwork day into more elaborate texts. Next to the 'physical' fieldwork site of the community organization, we also observed and

participated with these ethno-religious minority youths on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and Snapchat. In this paper, we specifically focus on Instagram as networked gift-giving practices were more visible here in comparison to the other platforms. We did not capture screenshots but documented social media content in an observational manner (e.g. writing out interactions, descriptions of pictures). Over the entire course of the fieldwork, the ethnographic data were regularly consulted and connected to the literature in order to identify themes and patterns. In order to triangulate our findings, we further discussed these topics both with youth workers and the participants themselves.

The ethical integrity of this ethnographic research project was ensured in close collaboration with the community organization and according to the research department's ethical guidelines. Before the start of the fieldwork in September 2019, the principal researcher met with the youth workers in charge to develop ethical and practical guidelines. To protect the anonymity of the participants and the community organization, it was agreed upon to not only pseudonymize the participants' names but also to not disclose the city in research output. In terms of participants' informed consent, the organization deemed it important to approach this in a processual manner: both the principal researcher and the youth workers negotiated the participants' consent over the course of the project. Furthermore, it was expected from the principal researcher to attend a 'socialization weekend' organized by the organization in order to provide adequate support to the young people. In light of this, we agreed that research activities should never obtain priority over the everyday workings of the organization. These agreements and further ethical reflections on the project were formally approved by the department's ethics committee (IRB code 2019-31).

Results

Navigating a society of distrust

Various observations point towards how ethno-religious minority youths' everyday experiences of exclusion and racism give rise to a society of distrust. One example took place on the first Wednesday of June 2020, when the COVID-19 lockdown measurements were partly lifted. We invited the youths to come by and discuss which activities they wanted to see organized over the summer holiday. *"The bastards removed our benches!*" said the 19 year old Suleymaan who lead the group of young men marching towards the designated area of the community organization, which is located in a communal city park. When Suleymaan and his friends arrived in the park, they noticed that the benches on which they regularly hang out were removed. Unsettled by this discovery, the young men voiced their disdain for the city's governmental body, the police and the neighboring residents as they saw this action as an attempt to erase their presence from the park:

Suleymaan: *"They all hate us, why do you think they removed exactly these two benches. These were the ones we used to chill. It's just bullying, I'm sure they have informers keeping an eye on us and knowing that we chill there, they wanted it gone."*

Researcher: *"Do you really think they hate you? Why would that be?"*

Suleymaan: *"Why do you think? Because we are black. Muslim. Guys like you [white] just don't see it."*

The removal of the benches that Suleymaan and his friends use as a hangout spot is indicative for how these ethno-religious minority youths experience discrimination and exclusion in everyday life. On several occasions, the participants in this study voiced frustration over how they are perceived and treated in public spaces. For example, police interventions following alleged complaints of selling and abusing drugs, of theft and of being a general 'disturbance' have been a

regular experience shared by all participants. Moreover, several youths narrated how women clutch their purses when they walk past them. Some young men even claimed that they have been denied access to public transportation due to bus drivers deliberately ignoring them at a bus stop. These experiences are in line with previous research that found how ethno-religious minority youths in particular are being subjected to the disapproving gaze of white and middle-class urban dwellers (Moris & Loopmans, 2019; Stevens et al., 2017). According to Gildas, a 18 year old with Congolese roots, navigating public spaces as a black young man entails being suspected of engaging in criminal behavior:

Gildas: *"They [white, middle-class people] see me, a black guy in a tracksuit, walking around the train station and they think that I'm going to rob someone or steal something in a shop. Yesterday, the cops came over when I was sitting on the stairs in front of the main building. They asked for my ID and did a body search because someone supposedly saw me steal something. I don't know if someone did [report on me] or whether the cops just used it for justification because they don't want me to be there for too long."*

What is apparent in these testimonies is how the intersection between racism (e.g. De Cleen, et al., 2017; Schuermans, et al., 2014) and moral panics surrounding young people who 'simply' hang out in public (e.g. Moris & Loopmans, 2019; Stevens, et al., 2017) produces tangible experiences of marginalization. As a result, the ethno-religious minority youths in this study report to hold very little trust in the intentions of the majority and especially in institutions (e.g. education, legal system). In the cases of Suleymaan and Gildas for example, it is striking how 'other' people are perceived as untrustworthy in general due to pervasive experiences with the disapproving gaze of white middle-class adults. In a similar vein, the 18 year old Dzhamal confessed that he found it difficult to trust the principal researcher as he was wary of undercover cops keeping tabs on him and his friends:

Dzhamal: *"Don't take this the wrong way but you really look like a cop."*

Researcher: *"What makes me look like a cop?"*

Dzhamal: *"It's not something specific, but you could be one. You're not someone who would hang out with us. And you're also not really the type to be a youth worker. I had to be sure that you're not one of them so I talked to Mehmet [one of the youth workers] and I feel more comfortable talking to you now."*

We found how institutional surveillance and experiences with stigmatizing discourses shape ethno-religious minority youths' everyday lives. As a result, these youths seek to reach their aspired ambitions outside of 'mainstream' society. While they rely on their – extended – family for certain resources (e.g. future employment within family businesses), they equally gain support from their broader social networks. Similar to Pearce and colleagues (2015), we found how our participants appoint great importance to expanding and 'nurturing' their network in order to alleviate shared hardships. This is also the case for the 18 year old Rayan who grew up and attended education in a small village. In his old school, Rayan experienced troubles forming relationships as the only non-white student. Moreover, he felt that some teachers did not treat him equally due to his Muslim identity. When Rayan turned 16 in 2019, he got acquainted with the Instagram page of the community organization through one of his nephews' stories. He started to follow some of the youths who regularly attend the organization's activities and were connected with his nephew. Reflecting on the importance of building a network within a society that did not readily accept him in its social fabric, Rayan expressed a recurring sentiment among the ethno-religious minority youths:

Rayan: *"After a while I decided to join my nephew to the [organization's] party on Friday. It was great to meet so many people who don't look at you differently, who aren't narrow-minded. I wish I had heard of [community organization] earlier because I know a lot more people who understand me now."*

Promoting: gaining status through amplified visibility

Consistent with previous research on MYC, the participants appropriate various networked technologies in ways that facilitate relationship establishment and maintenance. As the above example of Rayan illustrates, Instagram played a pivotal role in having access to like-minded others for the young people in this study. More specifically, our observations suggest that these ethno-religious minority youths mostly use Instagram to perform strategic relationship maintenance (Pearce et al., 2015). We found that participants deliberately helped friends and acquaintances 'collect' Instagram followers through the gift-giving ritual of 'promoting'. When someone is being promoted, a recent picture with a tag to their account is posted on the Instagram stories of the promotor. According to Zaïd, promoting leads to a cascade of new connections for both parties:

Zaïd: *"I posted this picture of Safouane last week and I said something like, go like his picture and follow him. I knew that he would appreciate that and we both got 20 new followers out of it. Because he reposted my story also and that's how it goes."*

In the ritual of promoting, 'the gift' is constituted of the exchange value attached to social connections. On Instagram, young people such as Zaïd perceive the follower's count to be a visual indication of one's connectedness. Having a small amount of followers is considered to be detrimental to one's reputation because it suggests that you are unable to establish and maintain a broad network. This 'concern' became apparent, for example, when the 16 year old Abdirrahim added the principal researcher on Instagram: *"You only have 250 followers? I expected someone from your age to have a lot more followers, now it looks as if you don't really know a lot of people."* In order to 'solve' this issue, Abdirrahim suggested to help by promoting the principal researcher. After being promoted, it was expected from the principal researcher to 'return the favor' by publicly thanking Abdirrahim on his Instagram stories[1]. As with most gift-giving

rituals, it is imperative that the receiver ‘gives the gift back’ in order to maintain the relationship (cfr. Marcoux, 2009).

It is noteworthy that the act of promoting is not a stand-alone interaction between two persons but a reciprocal exchange that is being presented to a wider public. Therefore, this practice is highly valued by the participants as it brings at least three benefits to both parties. First, the relationship between ‘the giver’ and ‘the receiver’ is publicly (re)affirmed which strengthens the friendship tie between both. Second, a higher amount of followers increases engagement with one’s Instagram profile and further amplifies the visibility of gift-giving rituals. Finally, the amount of followers seems to be linked to representations of one’s status as being well-connected both online and offline (cfr. Scwarz, 2010). The gift-giving ritual of promoting, thus, is performed to amplify the visibility of ethno-religious youths, whose self-presentation practices in turn produce symbolic resources (e.g. perceptions of popularity).

The strategic relational maintenance performed through promoting sometimes moves beyond mere symbolic resources that increase status. In a distrustful society, disenfranchised citizens will seek out alternative resources due to their belief that traditional societal pathways will not lead to success (cfr. Pearce et al., 2015). Over the course of the first COVID-19 lockdown in Flanders (March – June), the 18 year old Yassin reposted numerous advertisements of a pizza company in his stories. Yassin did not know the owner personally but he found out through mutual connections that the company was set to recruit new delivery couriers. Yassin attributes his recruitment mostly to how he utilized his network on Instagram to his advantage by extending the reach of the company’s advertising. In a similar vein, Abdel and Hadar perceive the reciprocal exchange of promoting each other’s profiles as a way to succeed in their ambition of becoming popular music artists. Having experienced different migration trajectories before

arriving in Flanders, both Abdel and Hadar made a significant amount of connections in different countries:

Abdel: "*I stayed for a year in Germany while Hadar lived in Turkey for a few years. When we both share each other's music or profiles, we obtain some listeners over there also. In Belgium it's always the same people who like or comment on your music so it's nice to gain a following over there [Turkey]."*

Considering the prevalence of promoting among the young people in this study and the status attached to being perceived as well-connected, it is no surprise that most participants had thousands of followers on Instagram. However, the ethno-religious minority youths did not report to be particularly bothered by the possible privacy complications stemming from such a large audience. Zaïd for instance stated that being visible on Instagram is in fact desirable as *"it is the place where I only share my best pictures anyway so I like it when a lot of people see it."* On the contrary, the contents shared on Snapchat were considered to be more personal, spontaneous and *"only for good friends"*. Similar to Zaïd, most participants did consider Instagram to be a platform suitable for explicit self-presentation practices. In contrast to offline public spaces in which they are being marginalized by the disapproving white middle-class gaze, ethno-religious youths construct their Instagram profiles as a strictly curated 'front stage' on which they perform high-status identities through strategic relational maintenance (cfr. Goffman, 1959; Ellison et al., 2010; Schwarz, 2010).

The gift of compliments

As noted in the previous section, the reciprocal exchange of promoting sets the stage for other gift-giving rituals to be visible to a wider audience. The findings of our fieldwork suggest that

ethno-religious minority youths subsequently harness the amplified visibility to overcome experiences of marginalization through self-presentation practices that signal their desired high-status. The case of Suleymaan is illustrative in this regard. Suleymaan calls himself a member of the *"9To boys"*[2] [referring to the city's postal code]. This group of young men is rather notorious for claiming a specific park to be their territory. According to Suleymaan, both the city's governmental body and 'rivalling groups' want to see him and his friends gone. Next to claiming the public space around the park by spraying graffiti tags on benches and neighboring buildings, Suleymaan narrates that a public exchange of messages between the different members of the 9To boys is equally import to exert their influence on the urban environment:

Suleymaan: *"We always comment on each other's pictures and post these on Instagram because it shows that your bro's have your back. We are a tight group and if you start a fight with me, you will have to deal with all of us."*

For Suleymaan and his friends, the reciprocal exchange of messages thus seems to function as a digital reminder to 'rivals' that their group will not back down from claiming presence in the park. Although Suleymaan and his friends do not extend these 'gifts' to members outside their group, the gift-giving ritual of reposting received compliments is a shared activity among all the youths in this fieldwork. We argue that these rituals play an important role in the self-presentation practices of the participants. The gift of receiving compliments and returning the favor raises the self-worth of these youths as it conveys to others that one is being appreciated by its social network and is able to nourish friendships. The affirmation of social connection that stems from gift-giving practices is especially valued by people who navigate a society of distrust (cfr. Pearce et al., 2015).

When asked to reflect on these practices, however, most participants found it difficult to voice why they engaged in these rituals. For them, the reciprocal exchange of gifts in the form of public compliments seems to be something that is 'expected' and has even become a form of routinized behavior. This provides further evidence that gift-giving normalizes the norm of indebtedness, making it a necessary ritual to conform to in order to maintain relationships (Marcoux, 2009). Nonetheless, our observations illustrate how youths perceive certain gifts to be more valuable than others. For example, 'standard' compliments on pictures are oftentimes reposted against a black background and accompanied with general commentaries that thank and/or reciprocate the compliment. For example, Zaïd responded to most compliments on his latest picture with the same line: *"Spass bra [thank you brother], you too."*. Out of the 30 reposted compliments, however, 5 got a more enthusiastic reaction and were accompanied with a particular song and picture of Zaïd with – supposedly – the friend who gave the compliment. This shows that the participants make a distinction between strong and weak ties. A gift being given by a strong tie is considered to be more valuable and therefore repaid with a gift that reveals the identity of the initial giver.

Gift-giving rituals between weak ties seem to be mostly strategically employed in order to project a 'general' popular image towards the outside world. We found that the exchange of compliments between strong ties, however, is also able to mitigate the potential devastating effects of experiencing racism in everyday life. The case of the 20 year old Ider is illustrative in this regard. When Ider was 17 year old, his girlfriend invited him over at her parent's house. When her parents came home, the mother started crying while the father angrily shouted that his daughter would never date a 'filthy Moroccan'. The argument got heated when the father claimed that Ider probably stole money. In the end, the police was called to intervene. Now, his

close friends always respond to his pictures with cryptic reactions containing emoticons of handcuffs, police cars, money bills and the smiley with dollar signs in its eyes. For Ider, this traumatic incident has become a running joke with his friends from which he reports to gain strength. What this illustrates is how ethno-religious minority youths sometimes conceal hidden meanings in their gift-giving practices which are only decodable to them and their close friends (cfr. social steganography; see boyd, 2014).

Discussion

It is well-established that young people's disclosure practices on social media encompass typical expressions that give rise to a global MYC. However, empirical studies in the field of MYC mostly aim to explain the processes behind youth's networked behaviors by drawing from normative and middle-class samples (Goggin, 2013). What is often missing, is an exploration of how the specific socio-cultural contexts of ethno-religious minority young people shape and are shaped by social media appropriations. Therefore, our study draws from a 15-month ethnographic fieldwork to contextualize how ethno-religious minority youths in Flanders engage in reciprocal exchange rituals on social media, which we identify as networked gift-giving.

Main results & reflections

Over the course of the ethnographic fieldwork, it became clear that the participants' socio-cultural context is characterized by a mutual distrust between them and Flemish society. Being frequently subjected to institutional surveillance and to everyday racism, the ethno-religious minority youths in this study reported a lack of faith in the intentions of 'unknown others' who

they mostly identify as white and middle-class urban dwellers. Similar to what previous research on societies of distrust found, these young people therefore turn towards their – extended – networks for 'symbolic' (e.g. emotional support) and 'material' (e.g. job opportunities) resources (Giordano, 2006; Pearce, 2015). In light of this, we argue that it is necessary to move beyond developmental frameworks of MYC which primarily situate youth's relational maintenance behavior on social media within a 'natural' quest for greater autonomy (e.g. Campbell & Park, 2008; Kaseniemi & Rautiainen, 2002; Ling, 2010; Yan, 2018). Our results reveal how expanding and maintaining one's network is a practice through which ethno-religious minority youths draw support for navigating a society of distrust. In particular, we observed how participants' networked gift-giving rituals build communities of connections – containing both strong and weak ties – on Instagram which in turn are displayed to a wider audience.

The importance of being able to materialize and present connections on Instagram was highlighted by the ethno-religious minority youths in this study. They consider a significant amount of followers to be a visual marker of status as being well-connected symbolizes one's popularity (e.g. Schwarz, 2010). Being able to present themselves as popular is especially valuable for these ethno-religious minority youths due to their ascribed position in the margins of Flemish society. Collecting followers is thus not an expression of an assumed narcissistic and superficial desire of young people. On the contrary, we found how 'following each other' has become a gift because the value for the participants lies in the opportunity to experience inclusiveness and to present themselves as being surrounded by a broad and positive social network. Moreover, the connections on Instagram were also harnessed by some participants to further general ambitions in life (e.g. career opportunities). The intrinsic value attached to – visible – connections on Instagram arguably shapes the gift-giving ritual of 'promoting' in which

ethno-religious youths tag each other's profiles in their stories. This practice does not only display the social tie between both parties, but also leads to new connections and further amplifies the visibility of gift-giving exchanges.

In a similar vein, we observed how the gift-giving ritual of posting received and given compliments on Instagram stories is a relational maintenance practice that ethno-religious minority youths employ to position themselves within a supportive and inclusive community. However, the ascribed value of compliments does not only stem from the opportunity to display a well-connected image to the outside world. The results reveal how participants make a distinction between strong and weak ties when reposting compliments on their stories. While exchanges between weak ties are more general and contribute to the overall presentation of popularity, gift-giving rituals between strong ties hold the potential to overcome hardships stemming from discrimination and exclusion. In the case of reciprocal exchanges between strong ties, the disclosures are more personal and oftentimes contain 'coded' messages which are linked to personal events in the ethno-religious minority youths' lives (cfr. boyd, 2014).

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The results shed light on how Flemish ethno-religious minority youth's networked gift-giving practices are situated within a society of distrust. However, it is paramount to acknowledge that the experiences of our participants are not necessarily shared by all ethno-religious minorities in Flanders and elsewhere. Similar to the variability that is present within the category of youth, we should also be cognizant of how ethno-religious minority youth's socio-cultural contexts may differ in terms of household dynamics, specific migration trajectories, gender, sexuality, socio-

economic status and so on. Moreover, framing the practice of networked gift-giving as an exclusive expression of ethno-religious minority youths who navigate a society of distrust would be equally undesirable. Although our study reveals how these practices are embedded in the participants' specific socio-cultural context of a distrustful society, it is necessary to recognize that they also appropriate social media for entertainment purposes as – young – people in general do, and that majority youths equally embrace social media for networked gift-giving practices (cfr. Ito et al., 2009).

Finally, we deem it necessary to reflect on how the results seem to portray a rather positive view on networked gift-giving. During our fieldwork, we mainly found how ethno-religious minority youths perceive and experience it as an opportunity to cope with their marginalized position in Flemish society. However, it is important to note that these practices do not fundamentally change systemic and institutional experiences of racism and socio-economic exclusion. Moreover, on rare occasions we observed how unmet expectations of reciprocity were the catalyst of arguments between participants. While these observations were rather uncommon during our fieldwork, we argue that the anyplace anytime connectivity afforded by networked technologies can exacerbate expectations of reciprocity which in turn may increase feelings of loneliness and indebtedness (cfr. Hassen, 2019; Kross et al., 2013; Vanden Abeele et al., 2018). These findings warrant further research that explores potential detrimental consequences of networked gift-giving for relationship maintenance and well-being.

Notes

1. The principal researcher was confronted with the ethical dilemma whether it was appropriate to create an Instagram story in which Abdirrahim's profile was tagged. Although this was clearly an expectation from Abdirrahim's part, creating such a story could compromise his anonymity in the research project. The principal researcher explained this and suggested to send private messages expressing gratitude for being promoted that Abdirrahim could repost on his Instagram stories if he wished to do so.
2. Similar to the names of the participants, the group *"9To*" is also a pseudonym and does not refer to the actual postal code of the city.

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Appendix A

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