

2. Voices from the margins on Internet forums

It is a sort of support. As a process of feeding [your emotions], by sort of reacting to each other. You'll have everyone who backs you up. It's like everyone is on the same side. You kind of become more sure of yourself. You just know, yes look we are not the only ones who think this way and so on. Thus you can express your opinion and just put everything up and you hear that others are similar to you.

– Ilham, a thirteen-year-old girl

In this chapter, Internet forums as frequented by Moroccan-Dutch youth are considered as safe arenas to form counterpublics and exert agency. Ilham eloquently described the emotional support she receives from being able to secure speaking power on the online discussion forum Marokko.nl. Message boards, also known as Internet forums, are digital spaces where users can engage in conversations by publicly posting messages in response to each other. Ilham shared her self-confidence grows from being able to publish her opinions and connect with other like-minded people. She has the agency to publish her own opinions, in contrast to being positioned in certain ways by others elsewhere. On the forum, she can speak for herself and see others positively acknowledge her presence. This way, she can self-consciously claim membership in an alternative supportive community consisting mostly of second-generation migrant youth like her. Feeling heard, she receives confirmation that other Moroccan-Dutch peers share her joys, doubts and frustrations of negotiating contradictory youth cultural, ethnic, gendered and religious discourses. Forums show how a “digital architecture” may “promote particular forms of storytelling and invite others to listen in through specific practices” (Papacharissi & Easton, 2013, p. 178).

In Latin, the word “*forum*” refers to the open, public space at the center of Roman cities. This space functioned both as a marketplace and gathering place. In particular, I consider the online formation of Internet forums as digital “subaltern counterpublics” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Nancy Fraser developed this notion in extension of Jürgen Habermas’s ideal-type of the “bourgeois public sphere.” In Habermas’s philosophy, society resolved around a singular, all-embracing public sphere. Fraser rightly posits this conceptualization does not allow one to capture the reality of contemporary

stratified societies. Rather, she recognizes that a multiplicity of competing publics provide arenas for subordinated groups. By circulating “counter discourses” these people can engage in “discursive contestation” (1990, p. 62). Online discussion forums provide subordinated groups with particular counterpublics, away from the mainstream they can be seen as safe “hush-harbors” where hegemonies can be scrutinized and group cohesion can be fostered (Byrne 2008, p. 222). I argue Moroccan-Dutch youth appropriate the medium-specific particularities of Internet forums to shape counterpublics, through which they forge community relations and establish their own shared space to counteract, subvert or engage with dominant spheres of state-based secular culture, defiant public media reports and parental versus peer expectations with their imposition of dictums and norms about proper behavior. Online discussion forums allow for the proliferation of alternative voices in the digital public domain. More specifically, I focus on how online forums are taken up among the informants as counterpublics to (re)construct their identities at the crossroads of ethnicity, gender and religion. Motivated by the heuristic perspective of space invaders to consider digital spatial power relations as simultaneously enabling and restricting, I also scrutinize how forum discussions remain subject to disciplinary processes of regulation and control.

Although in everyday life experiences axes of differentiation operate simultaneously, for analytical purposes I separate out digital ethnic, gendered, and religious identity performative practices in my argumentation. First, focusing how ethnicity is renegotiated I observe the dynamics of “digital multiculturalism” on forums (Leurs, Midden & Ponzanesi, 2012). Countering mainstream negative news framing, I map the powerful feelings informants experience while voicing their alternative opinions about the Moroccan-Dutch community. However, this does not mean these pages are immune to negative exposure by intruding non-Moroccan-Dutch outsiders. Secondly, I consider how informants renegotiate gender relations to stake out their own individual gendered positionality. Discussing issues such as love, relationships, marriage and sexuality, the reflections the informants shared reveal how they navigate the expectations of their peers, Islam, Dutchness, Western European stereotypes and “*hchouma*” (Skalli, 2006, p. 96), the gendered moral order of their parents and the wider migrant community. Third, I analyze the workings of “digital postsecularism” (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2014c) by considering how religiosity is renegotiated on Internet forums. Internet forums are used as a space to negotiate between “halal” (codes of conduct allowed in Islam) and “haram” (conduct forbidden in Islam) practices.

The chapter is structured as follows. I first introduce the use of forums among Moroccan-Dutch youth. Additionally, I introduce the discussion boards that informants most frequently visit: Marokko.nl and Chaima.nl. In Section 2.2, I theorize the ways in which message boards may function as counterpublics for minority groups. In the remaining empirical part of the chapter, I analyze three different forms of digital counter practices, focusing, respectively, on ethnicity, gender, and religion.

2.1 Internet forum participation among Moroccan-Dutch youth

In the Netherlands and worldwide, scholars have argued online discussion forums hold a specific appeal to ethnic and religious minority groups. Over the last two decades, they have remained popular among minorities including Moroccan-Dutch youth (Brouwer, 2011; Borghuis et al., 2010; Byrne, 2008; D’Haenens et al., 2004; De Koster, 2010; Elahi, 2014; Geense & Pels, 2002; Mamadouh, 2001). Wired Up survey findings corroborate this distinct preference: Moroccan-Dutch youth reported visiting online discussion boards more than ethnic-majority Dutch youth. Moroccan-Dutch respondents also reported a higher level of attachment to online discussion boards than ethnic-majority Dutch youth. Additionally, Moroccan-Dutch girls participated more in forum discussion than Moroccan-Dutch boys (Leurs, 2012, pp. 123, 327; Wired Up, 2011). Also, Moroccan-Dutch girls reported feeling more attached to the communicative space than Moroccan-Dutch boys did (see Table 4). This distinction was also evident from the interviewing phase; out of the total of forty-three interviewees, seventeen girls and five boys included Internet forums in their Internet maps and spoke to me about their use of these forums.

Table 4: The importance of online discussion forums in the lives of Moroccan-Dutch youth (percentages, n = 344)

Would you miss online discussion forums if you could not use them any longer?	Completely not	Somewhat	Very much	Total
Girls	58.6%	23.2%	18.2%	100%
Boys	76.7%	19.0%	4.3%	100%

Marokko.nl and Chaima.nl

*Marokko.nl is a website where especially Moroccans come, so to say. You talk about all kinds of things – for example your Eid or just nonsense or politics or something like that. Those kinds of things are discussed and you see how others think about things.*¹

– SouSou, a fifteen-year-old girl

For SouSou, Marokko.nl is a space to hang out with other Moroccan-Dutch teenagers away from the mainstream of Dutch society. She finds others to share in celebrating Eid, the conclusion of the fasting-month of Ramadan. Also, she expresses her views on political issues. But most of all discussants get the chance to anonymously put forward what SouSou calls “*just nonsense*.” “Just nonsense” topics can in fact be of great importance in the lives of the young people, as in practice, these include personal prosaic experiences, trivial thoughts, banal ideas and everyday issues that all enable peer-verification as users learn what others feel about their personal meanderings. Through collaboratively sharing these conversations with the whole public of the site, youth establish a distinct Moroccan-Dutch community. As Naoul, a sixteen-year-old girl, notes: Marokko.nl is a community, “*it is your own circle, with all those Moroccan things*” that are discussed, and “*the people there are like you, that’s nice*.” Similarly, Inas, a thirteen-year-old girl, explains: “*You have the feeling you get nearer to each other, you feel connected. For instance, someone from Amsterdam posts something about fashion, and I like that posting. Subsequently I will start speaking with that person, with her or him.*”

Moroccan-Dutch people first established Internet forums in the late 1990s to express dissatisfaction with the one-sided coverage of their demographic in Dutch media (Geense & Pels, 2002, p. 13). Ranging in interests and incentives, a wide variety of forums – such as Amazigh.nl, Bladna.nl, Chaima.nl, Maroc.nl, Maroc.nu, Maghreb.nl, Maghrebonline.nl, Marokko.nl, and Zoubida.nl have been created and are frequented by second-generation Moroccan-Dutch youth. Marokko.nl was recognized as “the most popular online discussion board among allochthonous young people” (Knijff, 2009); it was also the most popular forum among the interviewees.

1 Eid ul Fitr: festivities to celebrate the conclusion of the dawn-to-sunset fasting month of Ramadan.

This chapter focuses on Marokko.nl and to a lesser extent Chaima.nl, because those twenty-two informants who spoke about their engagement with Internet forums all reported frequenting Marokko.nl. Five girls mentioned they also turned to Chaima.nl. Using gender-stereotypical terms, thirteen-year-old Amina distinguished the two as follows:

There is one site, which is called Marokko.nl, and I'm serious it's buzzing with Moroccan youth there. Also people from other cultures and origins, but Moroccan youth are the majority. They have founded the site themselves. It is very active, everyone goes there to talk to one another, and there is something for everyone there.

Chaima.nl, that is a very pleasant site as well. It's for girls. The site is made up completely in pink, with [discussions] about nails and those kinds of things. It offers you a space where only girls gather, but sometimes also boys go there to [talk about] sensitive topics and explore what girls are up to. For instance, topics like fashion are discussed, and love and marriage. You'll read about girls who are about to get married. I believe a Moroccan[-Dutch] girl also founded the site. But also others are welcome, you know.

On September 30, 2014, on Marokko.nl almost 207,000 accounts were registered, 1.3 million topics were opened and 36.6 million comments were left. On Chaima.nl 62,000 accounts were set up, 120,000 topics and 3.4 million comments were published. The amount of lurkers (anonymous readers who do not post) is expected to be much higher. Marokko.nl is estimated to reach a remarkable 75% of Moroccan-Dutch people in the age category between 15 and 35, roughly one-third of the total Moroccan-Dutch population visit the site on a weekly basis (Knijff, 2009; Motivaction, 2007). Anyone with access to the Internet can read messages that are posted; however, in order to contribute one has to become a member by registering with an e-mail account and one's date of birth.

To give an impression of the topics, the following discussion rubrics are most active on Marokko.nl: "Moroccan youth and current events," "Tea lounge," "Nonsense corner," "Moroccan youth, love and relationships," "Fashion and beauty care," "Moroccan weddings in the Netherlands and Belgium," "The world of the Moroccan woman," "Islam and I," "Sports," "Moroccan pop culture" and "Story rubric." On every page on the forums of Marokko.nl, the slogans "virtual community" and "*La maison du Maroc*" (French for "The home in Morocco") appear. Upon opening the site, one of a number of

different background images appear, including romantic pictures of deserts, ancient cities and beaches that appeal to its visitors' image of Morocco. The site owners make use of the Dutch "*Kijkwijzer*" rating system to indicate that information on the site might be considered offensive. Developed by the Netherlands Institute for the Classification of Audio-visual Media, *Kijkwijzer* is a media classification scheme that makes use of pictograms to characterize media content. Prominently on the bottom-right of Marokko.nl, pictograms are placed as cautionary reminders indicating discussions may include violence, fear, sex, discrimination, drug and/or alcohol abuse and coarse language.

Initially launched in June 2006, Chaima.nl is a more modest site that targets Moroccan-Dutch girls, in particular. The main color used in its interface is pink, and other stereotypical feminine symbols appear, such as pictures of roses, high heels, nails, jewelry, dresses, and make-up. Showing some overlap with Marokko.nl, the following rubrics are most active there: "News," "Introduce yourself," "Chill corner," "Fashion and clothing," "Love and relationships," "Marriage and engagements," "Quran, Hadith and prayer," "Music club," "Poems," and "Stories."

When registering on Chaima.nl, users have to agree "to refrain from posting obscene, rude, sexually oriented, hateful, threatening or messages that are otherwise forbidden by law," and accept "Chaima.nl's right to delete, manipulate, move or close any discussion" (Chaima.nl, 2011). Upon registration to Marokko.nl, users have to accept that the board owners forbid "disrespectful messages, including racism, sexism, dirty language or swearing," "user advertisements," "publishing personal contact details" and "pornographic materials." Should they encounter any discrimination on the site, users have the duty to actively report it. Moreover, the site outlines its code of conduct as follows: "the language of communication is Dutch. Messages in English, Arabic and/or Tamazight are accepted. Messages in other languages are not allowed, except for when they add to the discussion and users explain them in Dutch." The site also forbids certain usernames: "Sharon, Bush, bin-laden, el_qaida, terrorist, or something which smells of it are not allowed." Users also have to accept that "they transfer ownership over all messages published on Marokko.nl to Marokko.nl." In terms of age requirements, the site requires users to guarantee that they are at least sixteen years old, or that they have parental permission (Marokko.nl, 2011a).

In contrast to the volunteer-based model of Chaima.nl, Marokko.nl's owners display an apparent commercial incentive. The forum users and the user-generated content circulating on the site are exploited as a niche

market with great potential for advertisers. The site also holds a particular appeal to government agencies. The content is owned by a company called Urban Connect, which specializes in “ethnic marketing, online communication with urban youth, market research and intercultural advertisements” (Urban Connect, 2011b). The company sells advertisers access to 50,000 youth who visit Marokko.nl on a daily basis, selling announcements that can appear next to the 50,000 messages and 1,500 topics that are left each day (Urban Connect, 2011a). In its branding, Marokko.nl presents itself as “virtual community,” that

is frequently visited by 75% of all Moroccan-Dutch youth and it has a great societal and commercial value. A virtual community offers an accessible opportunity to discuss all sorts of topics. But we offer you more. From the discussions that take place themes arise that our visitors often encounter, such as the care for their parents or questions around Islam and sexuality. We offer online services directed on our target group, that they may be able to employ in their real life to avoid problems. (Urban Connect, 2011b, my translation)

The company strategically sets up a distinction here between the “virtual community” and “real life,” selling corporations access to a relatively untapped market of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. Additionally, governmental institutions are invited to buy into the opportunity to manifest themselves on the forum, to be able to connect with a specific target group who might otherwise not be reached but who need governmental assistance to avoid real-life problems.

On both message boards, users can perform their identities in distinct ways. Users can choose a nickname and add a signature they like (although they do have to abide by the protocols of the platforms). Common nicknames include age, gender, ethnicity, diaspora, religion, race, youth cultural and sports affiliations. Fourteen-year-old Sahar describes the Moroccan affiliations in nicknames: *“people, for instance, add little Moroccan, or their name, or a town in Morocco, where they are from.”* Amina, a thirteen-year-old girl, notes that on Marokko.nl, users add distinct signatures to their posts *“they add their whole life-story, or write about the people that they miss. Or people just write about what they are like.”* Individuals have the opportunity to include text-based and visual signatures to their postings, often consisting of a religious saying or a reference to contemporary events. Also, users can include an avatar, a small graphic that represents something about a user’s character. Eighteen-year-old Safae attests that

these are chosen “*to get people’s attention, to get them to react on your postings. When you add a nice photo you get more attention from the people you don’t know.*”

Finally, users can create a personal profile page on both sites using text boxes where they can write about their “biography,” “interests,” or “occupation/education.” On Marokko.nl, “gender” and “roots” are also available categories through which users can describe themselves, while Chaima.nl provides a box for “city of residence.” Distinct reputation management systems are at work in these profile options. For example, numbers of posts users have contributed to the sites as well as the date of registration indicate their standing in the community. Also, users can give other posters credits if they like their contributions to the site: the more credits users receive, the more green lights appear under the poster’s nickname shown next to every comment posted. On Marokko.nl and Chaima.nl, users themselves can flag messages as inappropriate, and subsequently site moderators decide whether to remove the comment and ban the user from accessing the site. In the next section, I theorize how user contributions can lend Internet forum discussions the status of (counter)publics.

2.2 Theorizing Internet forums as subaltern counterpublics

A community will evolve only when a people control their own communication.

— Frantz Fanon (cited in Kahn & Kellner, 2007, p. 17)

In this section, I map the academic debate on minorities’ and migrants’ use of Internet forums for voicing their identity, forming publics and counter-publics. Internet forums began as digital replacements for physical bulletin boards, used to provide notices and information, announce events and advertise things for sale. Originating in the early 1990s, message boards are a web-based technological evolution of the 1970s dial-up bulletin board system (BBS), newsgroups and electronic mailing lists. Currently a great variety of Internet forums are used by millions of people across the globe. They are set up to cater to the different, and specific, interests of groups of users, ranging from hacking and activism, to white-supremacy, computer games and anime. Famous examples of forums include 4chan.org, a site where users can post images anonymously (members of the international hacktivist group Anonymous are said to gather there); stormfront.org, a

white-nationalist and supremacist neo-Nazi Internet forum; steampowered.com, an online game community; and gaia-online.com, a forum dedicated to anime videos.

"The social structure in society tends to be reflected in the social structure of the Web forums" (Van Stekelenburg, Oegema & Klandermans, 2011, p. 257). Marianne van den Boomen explains that message board communities are engrafted onto real-life communities, besides geographical affiliations, they may be based on "biographical identities: women, parents, gay's, children, elderly, handicapped, ill, blacks" (2000). In contrast to early cyber utopian expectations, it was first noted in the study of Internet forums that race is made as relevant online as it is offline. Byron Burkhalter countered the revolutionary expectations of technology by noting that in Usenet (a predecessor to contemporary Internet forums), in the absence of physical cues, race was textually "achieved, maintained, questioned, and reestablished" similar to the offline world (1999, pp. 63-64). In sum, as online discussion forums can be used by majority and minority subjects to define their own identities in their own space, forums constitute "highways" and "byways" across digital territories (Franklin, 2003, p. 486). Over the course of the last decade, scholars have sought to explain the popularity of message boards among migrants through various case studies including Internet forum use among Polish migrants in the UK (Galasińska, 2010); Chinese in the UK (Parker & Song, 2006; 2009); Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans and African-Americans (Byrne, 2008); Indians in the US (Mallapragada, 2006); South Asian women (Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Watts, 2002); migrants in Germany (Androutsopoulos, 2007); and Russian LGBTs and queers in Israel (Kunstman, 2008).

In the United States, AsianAvenue.com, MiGente.com, and BlackPlanet.com are online discussion boards that represent Asian-American, Mexican-American, and African-American digital "public spheres" (Byrne, 2008). A shared racial identity serves as a common ground and determines who can participate in these spaces (Byrne, 2008, p. 18). These sites are frequented by millions of users. Its evident there is a great demand for such "dedicated sites," Byrne writes, because these spaces are sources for a sense of collective identification and ethnic pride. Online discussion boards highlight how "ethnic communities construct, stabilize, modify, and challenge individual and community senses of identity over a relatively long period of time." Besides identification, she adds, forums are used to develop and promote alternatives to mainstream, institutionalized ideologies. Also, they allow for the development of a shared insider

consciousness of “racially, and often gender-appropriate behaviors” (2008, pp. 17, 29-31).

The Indian diaspora in the United States gathers on forums such as Drumnation.org, Madhavi Mallapragada observed how middle-class, Hindu-centric “gendered nationalism” is constructed, but she also noted users performed “alternative ways of imagining identity, belonging and community in their current location in the US” (2006, p. 225). SAWNET, a website for women of South Asia, has been argued to enable dispossessed individuals “to find a voice in the public sphere” (Mitra, 2004, p. 492). Forums arguably enable migrants to voice themselves, by doing so they might be enabled to contest biases in the “traditional structures of speaking power,” through digital practices they might find “a place at the table” (Mitra & Watts, 2002, p. 489).

David Parker and Miri Song studied Britishbornchinese.org.uk and Barficulture.com, forums set up by British-born Chinese and South Asians. They read these sites through the notion of “reflexive racialization,” highlighting the ability taken up by migrant users “to host a self-authored commentary on the issues faced by racialized minorities in a multicultural context” (2006, p. 583). In another study, the authors examined BritishChineseonline.com, arguing that such sites serve to pluralize senses of civic cultures. They recognize the imperative among second-generation British Chinese “to speak for themselves for the first time,” while rearticulating their cultural inheritance to British and Chinese aspects of their backgrounds (2009, pp. 600-601). Jannis Androutsopoulos concerned himself with German-based diasporic websites, arguing these are instances of “media activism,” as people who claim membership of specific ethnic groups assume responsibility for “maintaining a public space for fellow diasporians.” He, however, also notes the commercialization of diasporic websites, as banners and advertisements are included to promote “products and services related to the respective ethnic group” (2007, pp. 343-344). In her ethnography, Adi Kunstman’s highlights how forum discussions of queer Russian migrants in Israel displays the “performance of borders” (2008, p. 270) through which unwanted others are excluded.

From these case studies, we learn that Internet discussion forums are spaces where minorities can assert their voice, contest speaking power and assert alternative ideologies and identities. Online, I see voice as the material, representational and affectively embodied process of “giving an account of oneself” (Butler, 2005). Voice matters, because it reveals reflexive agency: although unevenly distributed, voice remains “irreducibly plural,”

allowing people to emerge as subjects who make sense of their life as it is embedded in multiple settings (Couldry, 2010, p. 7-10). Those who feel excluded may appreciate forums for resistance and intervention in their forming of “alternative public spheres and oppositional subcultures” (Kahn & Kellner, 2007, pp. 18-19). Digital self-representations constitute a complex genre with many elements co-shaping the ways in which users can tell their own story and speak for themselves (Thumim, 2012).

These dynamics can be theorized further by drawing on Nancy Fraser’s notion of “subaltern counterpublics” (1990). She theorized that minority subjects may form alternative publics in response to the dominant public sphere, in “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1990, p. 67). This notion extends Jürgen Habermas’s ideal-type of the “bourgeois public sphere.”² In Habermas’s view, society revolved around a singular, all-embracing public sphere. Fraser rightly recognized that a multiplicity of competing publics provides arenas for subordinated groups (1990, p. 62). I approach the public sphere as performative, which is as much about discussion as it is about voicing a cultural style through which one imagines the self and demarcates one’s own group.

For example, Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg, Dirk Oegema and Bert Klandermans counted the number of words dedicated to immigration and integration issues that were published after major news events on

2 In 1962 Jürgen Habermas assessed conversations taking place among members of the bourgeoisie in Britain’s coffee houses, France’s salons and Germany’s *Tischgesellschaften* in the eighteenth century as the idealized conception of a “bourgeois public sphere” at the interface of society and government: “between the two spheres, as it were, stands the domain of private persons who have come together to form a public and who, as citizens of the state, mediate the state with the needs of bourgeois society” (2002, p. 95). Fraser updates this notion of the public sphere by grounding it in reality, recapturing its value as an analytical lens to assess contemporary developments. I briefly describe three assumptions Fraser reconsiders that indicate the relevance of the concept for the argument in this chapter. First, she critiques Habermas’s idea that interlocutors in the public sphere would speak “as if” they were equals. By merely bracketing difference, Fraser argues, inequalities are not eliminated, and bracketing difference mainly works to the disadvantage of subordinates (1990, p. 64). Moreover, in his conceptualization of the public sphere, he equated the public with being male. To foster participatory equality, Fraser notes, social inequalities need to be addressed in order to be dissolved. Secondly, she saw that a singular view on public deliberation obscures the view on alternative, competing publics constituted by subordinated groups. Thirdly, Habermas restricted the public sphere to discussions of “public matters,” however, according to Fraser, distinctions between private and public matters made by the majority do not necessarily acknowledge minorities’ interests, and only “participants themselves can decide what is and what is not of common concern to them” (ibid., p. 71).

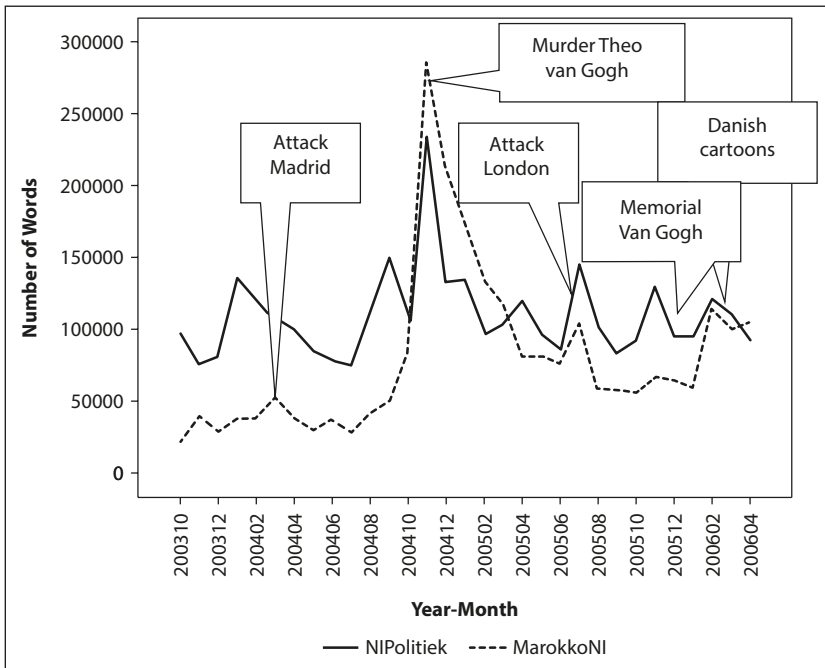


Diagram 5: Attention for major news events on nl.politiek and Marokko.nl (adapted from Van Stekelenburg, Oegema & Klandermans, 2011, p. 263)

both Marokko.nl and the ethnic-majority Dutch-oriented Internet forum nl.politiek. Diagram 5 captures how these forums serve as platforms to actively contribute one's voice in public debates. Events plotted include the Islamic extremist March 11, 2004, train bombings in Madrid and the July 7, 2005, bombings in the public transport system in London, and the controversy over the publishing of cartoons of the Islamic prophet of Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, which all spurred substantial debate. But above all, the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh sparked considerable discussion. Shortly after Van Gogh directed his polemic film about the repression of Muslim women by Muslim men, he was murdered by a young Moroccan-Dutch extremist and in revenge, right-wing racists burned Dutch mosques and Islamic schools. Reflecting this turmoil, the graph shows a peak of words published dedicated to integration and immigration issues on Marokko.nl. In the sense that young Moroccan-Dutch people were able to share their voices on the matter, Marokko.nl appears as a space to air frustration and learn to cope with these developments.

In everyday practice, the forums show how Moroccan-Dutch youth embed themselves in a local community of young people who share ties with Morocco: "what these websites keep together is not the transnational but the national network of Dutch Moroccan youth" (Brouwer, 2006b, p. 1167). Both "roots" and contemporary "routes" identifications (Gilroy, 1993a) take place. On the one hand, Internet discussions among second-generation Moroccan-Dutch youth "can be seen as a virtual way of keeping alive the image of Morocco" (Brouwer 2006b, p. 1153). Similarly, Maroc.nl, a predecessor of Marokko.nl, was described as a digital, communal "Moroccan living room." The makers of that site were convinced forums were also of great value for ethnic-majority Dutch people, as reading forums offered them a glimpse of Moroccan-Dutch life that would often "test and unmask their prejudices" (Stichting Maroc.nl, 2001, p. 9). On the other hand, the boards offer rich resources for identification processes that allow youth to attune themselves not only to Moroccan affinities but also to Dutch everyday realities (De Waal, 2003). The main language used is, for example, nearly always Dutch, but posters do make use of Berber and Moroccan-Arabic insertions. As in offline speech, these insertions "function as a mode to express bilingual identity," but they are also markers of "style" (Dorleijn and Nortier, 2009, pp. 137, 140).

The medium-specific, relatively anonymous character of message boards is said to hold a specific appeal for Moroccan-Dutch youth: "young Dutch Moroccans are more likely to discuss and dispute Moroccan and Dutch traditions in the safe encounter of quasi-anonymous forums than in face-to-face contacts with relatives, peers or teachers" (Mamadouh, 2001, p. 271). This is not unique to migrant users, as similar relevant merits are recognized in Internet forum participation among other disenfranchised groups. For instance, in his study on sexual minorities (Dutch orthodox Protestant homosexuals), Willem de Koster noted a comparable double function. For those "struggling with stigmatization" in offline life, Internet forums are appreciated as a "refuge." They provide a "springboard" for those learning to improve their offline lives by digitally negotiating practical everyday questions about being gay and faithful in the context of orthodox Protestantism (2010, p. 572).

The two-fold dynamic of "ethno-cultural positioning," as a process of both position allocation and position acquisition (Van Heelsum, 1997), is an entry point to understand the performative construction of a subaltern counterpublic. On the one hand, bottom-up position acquisition refers to "the extent to which members of a given group look upon themselves primarily as members of a specific group and/or act as such," while on the

other hand, top-down position allocation refers to “the extent to which (the bulk of) society considers them primarily as representatives of a specific group and/or treat them as such” (ibid., p. 24). Next to ethnic positioning, the dynamic of position allocation and acquisition also holds true for and is intrinsically connected with gender, sexuality, youth culture and religious positioning. In every offline and online setting, a particular configuration of material, representational and affective structures orders the available youth cultural, religious, ethnic, sexual and gendered subject positions. However, there is always room left for the stretching, negotiation and subversion of these allocated positions, through processes of bottom-up position acquisition on message boards (Leurs, Midden & Ponzanesi, 2012).

Scholars have conceptualized and empirically grounded the possibilities for using the Internet to develop a public sphere (Dahlberg & Siaper, 2007; Papacharissi, 2009). I provide more nuances in the debate by considering how migrant youth use Internet forums as an alternative counterpublic sphere. The literature suggests that message boards are taken up by migrants to articulate their voices and identities in an attempt to stake out a community on their own terms. Seizing the opportunity to speak for themselves on message boards, ethnic-minority forum users self-consciously claim membership to an alternative public, while using ethnicity as a marker to determine who is entitled to participate. I intervene in the debate by exploring how norms of gender, generation, nationalism, diaspora and religion intersect with ethnicity in users’ articulation of voice and identity (Leurs, Ponzanesi & Midden, 2012).

Furthermore, earlier research has failed to address how outsiders – who do not meet ethnic identity norms – perceive Internet forums set up and frequented by minorities. Scholarship so far has stopped at the “euphoric celebration of this emergence of voice from thus far marginalized groups” online, and has not yet considered fully their impact on existing power structures (Gajjala & Birzescu, 2010, p. 74). Although documenting how Moroccan-Dutch youth become space invaders – as they assert themselves in Internet forums and articulate alternative normative ways of being that subvert the digital status quo – is important, scrutinizing how their processes in turn are accepted or contested in the wider context of existing power hierarchies is more relevant. Below, I first assess the ways in which Moroccan-Dutch youth seek to acquire alternative ethnic positions using Internet forums. Second, I explore how the informants negotiate gender issues on message boards. Thirdly, I analyze how Islam is dynamically performed in these spaces.

2.3 Digital multiculturalism: “Not all Moroccans are the same”



Fig. 7: “Average Moroccan boys look like this,” forum user Macro_s contesting Moroccan-Dutch masculinity (Macro_s, 2007a)

It's all negative. But there are also Dutch people who do so [commit crimes] and why aren't they mentioned in the news? It's only the Moroccans. Okay, they are right in the sense that there are a number of Moroccans who do it [break the law] – we are not hypocrites. All right, but not all Moroccans are the same. Because you have it in every culture, there is also a part that is not – there are good, nice people. There are the ones who do things like stealing and so on, but with what they say about someone, they judge a group of Moroccans. They form an opinion about the whole community, the whole Moroccan culture, seeing it only this way and they just shouldn't do that. [On Marokko.nl] you can discuss the topic, like “I think it's this way,” or, “No, I don't think you are right.”... Thus, you express your own opinion and so on. Do you get my point?

– Bibi, a sixteen-year-old girl

Bibi emphasized she felt Moroccan-Dutch individuals who break the law in Dutch are painfully over exposed in mainstream press. She shared she felt the whole Moroccan-Dutch community is dominantly framed as one homogeneous criminal group. One bad apple receives all the attention, ruining the whole bunch. Bibi and other interviewees felt bad that only this side of the story gets told. The focus on the small minority of criminals collapses the category of Moroccan-Dutchness, even though of course not all Moroccan-Dutch people are the same. Informants reported that Marokko.nl is better suited to match their interests of voicing other narratives. I illustrate with Figure 7 that a great deal of discussion is about the stereotypes and counter-positioning of Moroccan-Dutch youth in the Netherlands. A boy is shown who meets the stereotype of the young Moroccan-Dutch rascal boy. A smoking, bearded young man wearing a cap and sports clothes is depicted to extend a greeting in Moroccan-Arabic, "*Ewa sahbi*." He also asks whether someone wants to smoke a "*shisha*" or waterpipe. In addition to not speaking Dutch, the boy can be said to signify alterity, as he is wearing clothes and sneakers in the colors of the red and green Moroccan national flag. However, as a symbol of peace the boy is making a V-sign hand gesture, making an attempt at conciliation.

Moroccan-Dutch youth are often seen as irreconcilably different from homogenous white, secular Dutch culture and identity. In response to such narrow framings of difference, it is urgent to reconsider multiculturalism by rethinking "difference" (Modood, 2007). As Bibi's statement indicates, cultural differences are not just constructed from within a minority group, but also from the outside group, resulting from its treatment and representation. As a result of being treated differently, minority groups are perceived as different. From this perspective it is important to note that people who are collectively targeted as others, may logically respond as a collective as well. Or to put it differently, following Tariq Modood there are two forms of difference at play in multicultural societies: "negative difference" (stigmatization, racism and discrimination against groups) and "positive difference" (identifications and the understandings that groups have of themselves) (2007, p. 37). Moroccan-Dutch youth navigate this double-faced character of difference on a day-to-day basis. Negative difference refers to how they are seen as incompatible Others by, for example, right-wing politicians, while Bibi's narrative illustrates an example of positive difference that can be found in how Moroccan-Dutch youth digitally voice themselves on message boards. The question arises whether positive difference can be actively foregrounded to counter the negative difference they experience resulting from the racialization of their religion that singles out Islam as

outside of the frame of modernity (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991). This question remains pertinent, considering, for example, the feelings Soufian, a twelve-year-old boy, shared: *"I think that nonbelievers, not all of them, are very much discriminating in their thinking and talking about my belief, and that makes me very sad."* He added, *"We live in a multicultural society and I am of the opinion you should accept every human being as he or she is and treat his [or her] religion with respect."*

Users appreciate discussion sites such as Marokko.nl because they can communicate with their own circle of people and share or hear alternative voices regarding Moroccan communities in the Netherlands. Eugenia Siapera observes that "the existence of minority media reflects the exclusion of minorities from the mainstream media, and to some extent it reflects the need for minorities to have their own mediated space" (2010, p. 94). Their corner of the Internet is often used to discuss and reframe dominant images circulating in news media. Echoing Bibi, thirteen-year-old Salima described mainstream news media in this way: *"They speak about Moroccans very often. If it would be a Turk or someone else, than it is not immediately news or so, but when there are Moroccans involved, it is immediately like: all right, these are Moroccans, instantly on the news."* Ideally, national news media reflect the broad dynamics of a society, including the multicultural dimension of that society, however, in the Netherlands, ethnic minorities feel as though coverage is skewed (D'Haenens et al., 2004, p. 69). Fourteen-year-old Senna remarked that, *"On Marokko.nl you also get news, news is discussed, it is more about Moroccan news and so on. That you do not find in de Telegraaf."* *De Telegraaf* is the largest daily newspaper in the Netherlands, especially known for its populist and sensationalist reporting. Sixteen-year-old Nevra found that *"different stories"* are shared on Internet forums, where *"there is often negative talk about Moroccan youth [in the newspapers]. I find that youth there can say what they want, showing it is not all bad."*

Away from the cultural hegemony of mainstream media, users can engage in ideological struggles through discursive contestation with mainstream media by speaking for themselves, instead of having to witness being spoken for again and again. Contestation of the black-and-white depiction is a key organizing principle of the forum. Online users realize this, according to Ilham, a thirteen-year-old girl: *"everyone is not the same, yes not all as one."* Young people feel safe enough to be able to disrupt stereotypes, *"because yeah, you can defend yourself and say whatever you want, it is your opinion, and you can just give your view there."* Moroccan-Dutch youth are critical consumers of Dutch-language news coverage, carefully assessing the information presented on issues relating to Morocco and the Moroccan

community (D'Haenens et al., 2004). As the narratives of the informants illustrate, they are dissatisfied with the news offerings of mainstream Dutch press, as they report to feel offended by the way news items are negatively framed. Online forums are seen as a viable alternative to discuss issues left uncovered there and positive cultural difference can be acknowledged and appreciated.

Hush harbors

Although message boards are in principle publicly accessible to all Internet users, the informants perceive Marokko.nl as a welcoming space to publish and read alternative voices. Fourteen-year-old Senna stated, *"I think that half of the [Dutch] people does not even know that it exists."* Message boards' perceived hidden character, tucked away from the mainstream, has been acknowledged as a main reason why minority groups become attracted to them. Dara Byrne describes message boards frequented by minorities "fly well below the mainstream radar" with the term "hush harbors," a notion previously used to describe spaces in which slaves gathered away from supervision from their white masters (2008, p. 17). Hush harbors are also important spaces in contemporary American society, semi-public spaces such as barbershops and beauty parlors provide safe spaces "where Black folks affirm, share, and negotiate African American epistemologies and resist and subvert hegemonic Whiteness" (Nunley, 2004, p. 222). As a space to negotiate unequal power relations, such hidden sites have played an important role throughout history for African Americans to be able to "untie their tongues, speak the unspoken, and sing their own songs to their own selves in their own communities" (Nunley, 2004, p. 223).

The hushedness of Internet forums is valuable for developing cohesion and a shared sense of belonging. Because a shared ethnicity is the organizing principle of ethnic forums, they are "relatively free of *mass* participation by ethnic outsiders" (Byrne, 2008, p. 17). In line with this principle, Bibi (sixteen years old) said she feels at home on the page, because there she says she can experience *"that really Moroccan atmosphere,"* as everyone, for example, uses *"those Moroccan words, you know."* In focusing on message boards as the digital formations of hushed counterpublics, it becomes apparent that informants recognize Internet forums as safe loci for discursive contestation in response to exclusionary practices prevalent in Dutch society.

The main topic more concerns Geert Wilders and so on. He of all people can say things about Muslims. While we, for instance, cannot talk about the

Jews, because then we are the racists. About those things, we say "Why is he allowed to do it," and to be honest, everyone thinks he is a retard, a dog; we do not like him at all. (Bibi, a sixteen-year-old girl)

Interviewees shared heated debates over the controversial Dutch anti-Islamic Member of Parliament Geert Wilders on Marokko.nl. The informants feel Geert Wilders can say whatever he likes, while everything Moroccan-Dutch youth say is put under the microscope. Feeling enabled to share their stories on the forum, as creators and products of a habitus particular to this digital space, the interviewees feel more secure and confident to speak out. The counterpublic provides a sense of freedom from the tensions in society stirred up by the Party for Freedom (Dutch: Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV) and other examples of right-wing populism. Following the hush harbor rhetoric, the informants all assume that the white master is not present on the site. Fifteen-year-old Oussema, for example, said: *"I don't see Wilders having a look at the site, I cannot imagine that."* The absence of non-like-minded others makes the site feel more welcoming, fifteen-year-old Meryam described: *"there are very many youth, Moroccan youth, who go on Marokko.nl.... It is about Geert Wilders, for instance, and then everyone joins in and you can see reactions posted by others, how they think about it."*

The carnivalesque

Unlike the social networking site Hyves, which, as I note in Chapter 4, is characterized by a situation of "digital throwntogetherness" (Leurs, 2014b), as views from across the socio-cultural-political spectrum are expressed in one single space, Marokko.nl is considered as a hush harbor where people agree upon a shared set of assumptions. From the narrative of fifteen-year-old Inzaf it becomes clear that Marokko.nl can assist Moroccan-Dutch youth to cope with negative difference. She insists that unlike other digital spaces, on Marokko.nl members are bound together because they all dismiss the polarizing brought forth by Geert Wilders and the PVV:

We speak about various Moroccan things, but we agree about one thing. For instance, about Geert Wilders – all of Marokko.nl agrees that he is no good, or that he lost his mind. On Hyves it would be different; everyone would have a different opinion. You have very few people who have a totally different opinion. Everyone would think something like, "Yeah, if I see him on the streets, I will shoot him dead," and then you have a few people who would say something like, "No – Why? He is not doing anything wrong."

Seemingly perpetuating extremism, at first glance the statement by Inzaf demonstrates how forum contributors are complicit in perpetuating negative difference and the othering of the Moroccan-Dutch community as a whole. However, the statement is only a polemic mimicry of extremism. It should be understood in the interpretative context of the cultural repertoires of street language and hip-hop youth culture. Her way of expressing her feelings about the debate in the Netherlands can therefore be interpreted as a “diss,” in global hip-hop linguistics, “to diss” is short for dismiss, disparage and/or disrespect. Instead of an actual death wish, her statement is a strong carnivalesque polemic voiced in a context with its own conventions and community norms.

The carnivalesque refers to “peculiar folk humor that always existed and has never merged with the official culture of the ruling classes” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 474). It may include “ridicule of officialdom, inversion of hierarchy, violations of decorum and proportion” (Brandist, 2001). As a theatrical form of parody, carnivalesque acts may offer resistance to hegemonic form: “carnivalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language” as a political and social protest (Kristeva, 1986, p. 36). Inzaf’s statement is a part of a verbal duel expressed as a culmination of feelings of discrimination, injustice, and subordination. As physical battle is transferred to a verbal duel, “a substitutional relationship between real and verbal violence” is formed: this function has a long history in rap. In the global flows of hip-hop youth culture, “the-violence-as-verbal metaphor” is a significant example of a particular politics of language (Newman, 2009, p. 200).

For example, Inzaf statement may be seen as dialoguing with another example of carnivalesque ridicule: the controversial song “Hirsi Ali Diss” (2004) by the Moroccan-Dutch rappers DHC from The Hague. In the song, the Somalian-Dutch prominent Islam critic Hirsi Ali was similarly dismissed: “We are busy preparing for your liquidation / Bomba action, against Hirsi Ali / That is my reaction for the unrest she is making / Talking on TV about *integration*.” In this song coarse language of the street, assertive dissing and the demand for respect come together in a reaction on the Dutch debate on integration. Verbally threatening Hirsi Ali in the song is DHC’s way of forming a response to being mistreated (De Koning, 2005).³

3 During the interviews, the informants equated PVV perspectives with the mainstream. This view should be problematized, because the anti-immigration and anti-Islam stance of extremists is not the same as the Dutch political norm. Although it must also be admitted that the situation is complicated, as the party received 15.5% of the votes during the 2010 Dutch general election, giving them 24 of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives. And although the PVV formally was not a part of the governing coalition, the coalition depended on a Parliamentary Support

Inzaf shows how deep the feeling of being disrespected by right-wing extremists runs among Moroccan-Dutch youth. Her carnivalesque “diss” reflects on and expose her sense of the dominant power order. Symptomatic of the social injustice inflicted on the Moroccan-Dutch community, they reveal a great deal about their perception of the Dutch political and societal centers of power. Inzaf’s assertion can be seen as an “unspeakable” narrative that may only be voiced in a space perceived as safe and private. Moroccan-Dutch teenagers turn to message boards where they can express their – perhaps unconscious – feelings of oppression. Writing about his own sense of identity, Stuart Hall comments on the unspeakable in relation to identity by arguing: “identity is formed at that point where the unspeakable stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture” (1996d, p. 115). Resisting being muted and taking the opportunity to speak the unspeakable is of major importance: “hitherto excluded from the major forms of cultural representation, unable to locate themselves except as decentered or subaltern, [they] have acquired through struggle, sometimes in very marginalized ways, the means to speak for themselves for the first time” (Hall, 1997b, p. 183). The problem remains that, although masked in a carnivalesque narrative, the unspeakable gets asserted in public. The line between publicness and privateness is blurred online; the Moroccan-Dutch participants perceive the boards as private and hushed from the mainstream, while in fact they are publicly accessible.

Networked power contradictions

In articulating a self-defined ethnic identity in a self-contained space, migrant Internet forum users may be able to succeed “in overcoming some of the hierarchical structures of traditional broadcast media” (Karim, 2003, p. 13). Ilham thinks that ethnic-majority Dutch people do not mind these discussion boards as long as they are not bothered with them: *“I think they just say something like: If they don’t terrorize the Internet, so to say, just let them happily stick to their little corner, all Moroccans and so on.”* However, acceptance and normalization of alternative views and knowledge circulating on Marokko.nl is far from straightforward. The problem for Marokko.nl is that speech norms of different communities may collide, as the digital space is also accessible to non-Moroccan-Dutch participants.

Agreement with the PVV to reach a majority in parliament. The Dutch coalition collapsed in spring 2012, and losing twelve seats during the 2012 elections, the PVV also lost a substantial part of its influence.

In recent history, subaltern subjects have voiced themselves, inserting “alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” to the mainstream, while in response the mainstream “excoriated these alternatives” (Fraser, 1990, p. 61). Fraser further explains this process by stating, “unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles” (1990, p. 64). The troubling result is that when ethnic minorities find the opportunity to voice themselves, their contributions are marginalized. This process is also visible when considering how journalists and politicians frame Marokko.nl. Public news media link discussion sites frequented by Moroccan-Dutch individuals such as Marokko.nl to extremism and radicalism, with newspaper items such as: “Cut-and-paste Islam: How young Muslims in the Netherlands compose their radical worldview” (Oostveen, 2004). Forums are dismissed as the underbelly of the unknown, as segregated ghettos, and as grimy spaces disconnected from the mainstream: “Ghettos on the web: On the Internet, every group creates its own truth” (Hulsman, 2005). Carnavalesque disses like the one by Inzaf analyzed above are misinterpreted as examples of verbal abuse: “Forums where verbal abuse is allowed” (Pietersen, 2008). Possibly aiming to sell their messages to larger audience – through selling fear – such news items echo widespread Islamophobic us-versus-them discursive strategies. Marokko.nl site cofounder Khalid Mahdaoui criticized journalists for selectively taking quotes from the site, lifting them from their original contexts, in order to juice up news reports (Labovic, 2005, p. 27).

A recent governmental decision also signals how these contradictory power relations in the media have ramifications for sites like Marokko.nl. In his position as Dutch Minister of Housing and Integration Eberhard van der Laan cut funding for the site. He ironically stated this decision was not related to a study his department released accusing the site of publishing discriminatory statements that incited hatred (Rijksoverheid, 2009). Internet sociologist Albert Benschop expressed concerns about the research, wondering why only sites frequented by Moroccan-Dutch youth (Marokko.nl, Islamwijzer.nl and Maroc.nl) were included in the investigation, while right-wing populist sites like GeenStijl.nl were not included (Knijff, 2009). Mahdaoui states that Marokko.nl actively tries to discourage discrimination by deleting 20,000 comments and 150 members on a weekly basis. He admits that moderators are having difficulties assessing the daily flow of 50,000 messages, however, he adds that only around 5% of the messages cross the line of what is lawfully permitted (Pietersen, 2008). This small number of deviant postings should be seen in perspective. The increased monitoring and critique can be traced to the growth of extreme right-wing politics: with every demonstration, although very well organized, something offensive

is shouted. These remarks used to dissolve in the masses, however, once online, they leave material traces. Right-wing extremists tightly monitor the site in search for offensive behavior as “they have their eyes set on discrediting the site” (Benschop cited in Pietersen, 2008, my translation).

Furthermore, as the site has no control over who subscribes and posts, right-wing users are also present on the site. An estimated 20% of Marokko.nl visitors comes from the right-wing blog *Geenstijl.nl* or are supporters of the PVV, and Benschop notes: “Those visitors sometimes set up a profile like Mohammed21 and discredit the site with extremist statements,” after which, they will complain about the site (Knijff, 2009, my translation). The hush harbor, where users thought they could voice their views inaudible from the white master and other like-minded people, has thus been compromised. Whenever subaltern subjects are able to voice themselves online, their actions are often disciplined in return: “as the individual begins to feel empowered by the ability to speak up and back in such networks – there is a quick and simultaneous appropriation occurring that swiftly *places* this voice into a slottable position” (Gajjala & Birzescu, 2010, p. 77).

Although the informants perceive the forums as safe zones where they can articulate alternative ways of being, their acts of invading digital space simultaneously remain subject to tight scrutiny and control. Reflecting on disciplinary mechanisms, Mahdaoui wonders whether Moroccan-Dutch youth are expected to make a greater effort than ethnic-majority Dutch people. He asks why Moroccan-Dutch people have to behave better than ethnic-majority Dutch people, and adds that after Theo van Gogh was murdered, Dutch ethnic-majority users were behaving very indecently on his forums: “As long as law allows it, it is allowed on our site. When someone shouts Bin Laden is his hero, we keep it online. It will spur discussion and that is valuable. The Internet does not cause radicalization, but it is an outlet” (Mahdaoui, cited in Labovic, 2005, p. 27, my translation).

Marokko.nl moderators are trained to consciously leave insulting messages in order to spur debate: “What is incredibly insulting for one, falls under the right of free speech for the other. We provide the space for discussions. We believe in the self-cleaning capacity of the community. This is the way it has been for years: they correct one another.” This way, Wilders’s followers that flock to his site also get the chance “to shout whatever they want,” he says. Furthermore, he concludes that journalists and politicians should not forget that a lot of members are fifteen or sixteen years old, and he asks, “What is scary about their writings?” (Mahdaoui, cited in Pietersen, 2008, my translation). In their search to attract corporate funds, the founders further began to commercially exploit the potential of the site by selling advertisers access to

a relatively untapped ethnic-marketing niche. Yet despite outsider scrutiny and this increasing commercial presence, the desire among Moroccan-Dutch youth to articulate their own position and claim speaking power persists.

2.4 Digital “*hchouma*”: Renegotiating gender

Figure 8 captures voicing gendered identity, the theme explored in this section. The figure shows a stylish, tidily clad girl carrying an expensive handbag in one hand and talking to her friend on her BlackBerry smartphone with her other hand. The girl shares that she is upset to have found out her boyfriend sent a message with a heart emoticon to another girl. Looking for vengeance, she set up a date with her ex-boyfriend. In the figure the girl speaks to her friend on the phone, stating:



Fig. 8: “Average Moroccan girls look like this,” forum user Macro_s contesting Moroccan-Dutch femininity (Macro_s, 2007b)

Hey Sam, it's me! My god, I'm angry! I had a fight with my boyfriend yesterday. He sent Amanda – you know, that cheap whore – a message with a heart. Idiot! Pff. I almost had to cry, I went crazy! Yes, I know it because 24/7 I'm logged in to the Hyves of my boyfriend because I have a BlackBerry. In revenge I will date my ex! Nooho, I won't kiss him.... Oh, he is here. I'll talk to you soon, Sweetie, love you. Kiss kiss.

Discussing issues such as love, relationships and sexuality happens in private, away from their parents' eyes. As shown in Diagram 2 (see p. 67) the majority of Moroccan-Dutch youth connect to the Internet from their bedrooms. Nearly three out of four Moroccan-Dutch girls, for instance, log on from their own room and connect to the Internet at their friends or families' homes. These findings suggest that Moroccan-Dutch girls might be able to enjoy a significant level of privacy while engaging with the Internet. During the interviews, informants also explained they can strategically negotiate more freedom in choosing where they log in to the Internet. Thirteen-year-old Soesie explains, *"It depends on where I take my laptop. When I am in my room, nobody will enter. When I'm sitting downstairs, on the couch, and my mother sits next to me she will occasionally have a glance [at the screen]."*

Online, anonymity-fueled disinhibition may grow when users feel they can violate norms without risking sanctions, repercussions or disapproval: "both because one is free of the expectations and constraints placed on us by those who know us, and because the costs and risks of social sanctions for what we say or do are greatly reduced" (Bargh et al., 2002, p. 34). Although anonymity of course also has its downsides, disinhibition fostered through anonymity has been recognized as a positive feature for Internet forum users. In "discussion threads, anonymity may provide a cover for more intimate and open conversations," and in addition the perception of anonymity may allow for more "experimentation with new ideas" (Bernstein et al., 2011, p. 6). From the safety of their own or their friends' bedrooms where parents are not allowed to enter, girls note they turn to discussion forums where they find it easier to discuss "*hchouma*" topics. Loubna Skalli defines this notion as setting the limits to "what may or may not be said, done, looked at, or even hoped for" in Moroccan gender relations:

Hchouma is a label applied to virtually everything considered transgressive, taboo, unconventional, provocative, or progressive by the cultural order in Morocco. Slightly more charged than the concept of "shame," *hchouma* is the master socio-cultural code into which the Moroccan

individual, and women in particular have been and still are socialized.
(2006, p. 96)

The *hchouma* mechanism is based on social obligations, Islamic rules of conduct and familial norms. This moral order governs reputations, disciplining subjects by installing in them a “fear of losing face in front of others” (Sadiqi, 2003, p. 67). The informants considered online discussion forums a good space to address gendered taboo issues that might transgress the limits of dominant community standards. Bibi (sixteen years old) reported that she turned to Marokko.nl to discuss issues of intercourse and sexuality in the context of marriage. She shared she would rather turn to the online community instead of bringing it up with her parents. With such topics, she shared, “*you don’t dare to go to your parents, because you find it really embarrassing*”:

Yes, for example, about [pause] sex or something and marriage and then they say... Yes, because in the Muslim faith, when you have [sex] the first time you are not to oppose your husband and [you should] just do “it.” And [about] these things I’m definitely not going to my parents[to ask], “Mom, Dad, listen, is that the case?” Yes, it is hchouma, you know. I am shy about [talking to] my parents about these things.

Participating in online forums, girls report experiencing a greater sense of freedom to discuss the sometimes-stringent social-cultural codes of socialization of their parents and wider community. Spending more spare time indoors, “Dutch-Moroccan girls are more restricted in their freedom of movement than boys, and thus, the internet widens their horizons” (Brouwer, 2006a). Moroccan-Dutch girls turn to message boards to engage with topics such as health, meeting new friends, intimacy, romantic relationships and sexuality (Leurs, Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2012).

Daring to break taboos: “I just want to know what ‘the real deal’ is”

You perhaps dare to say more on the Internet. You know, you do more; usually you are anonymous, if you want to at least, so you share your experiences. At home you can usually not talk about these things, otherwise you would have done that long ago. Then you can tell it online. And you see what people on the Internet have to say about it. And that might help you.

– Amina, a thirteen-year-old girl

Amina summarized the relevance of online message boards in the lives of Moroccan-Dutch girls. On Internet forums, some Moroccan-Dutch girls shared feeling less restricted and because of that they dare to bring up personal experiences they struggle with and cannot share elsewhere. Having a space to discuss issues that are difficult to broach in conversations with parents is of the utmost importance. This enables Moroccan-Dutch girls to express themselves and discuss behavior that is not possible in their usual social-cultural spheres. The barriers such as sanctions and repercussions to disclosing *hchouma* aspects of the self for family honor, for example, are not as strongly felt on message boards.

Sixteen-year-old Nevra holds a similar opinion: *"It is nice, because at home you cannot talk about them, and now you can talk about them [online]. Also, you can learn more about the topic."* New ideas and insights are shared that may benefit the personal development of the young persons involved. Fifteen-year-old SouSou describes, *"You have a special section about sexuality and those kinds of things [laughs].... Yes, these things – you normally don't talk about them."* Among the informants, message boards are used to discuss and share views on intimacy and sexuality. SouSou describes further: *"Especially when something has happened or so, yes you can talk about it, just as an anonymous person. You get all kinds of reactions and so on, that is fun [laughs]."* Issues that are difficult to discuss in face-to-face contexts are more easily considered in the digital realm. This holds true for conversations with parents but also with peers. On the message boards, as thirteen-year-old Inas thinks, girls are less inhibited in their conversations in comparison with discussing their experiences with friends outside of the Internet: *"If you have a problem, and you would like to talk about it with someone. I think it is easier than like [talking] with my girlfriend, because people usually give a different name.... [Online] they talk about these things more casually."*

For instance Loubna (fourteen years old) spoke about how one forum participant asked the community for help, asking support as to whether she dealt with domestic violence in the right way.

For real a girl revealed much about herself on Marokko.nl and said something like "Yes, my husband beats me," and so on. And "I am divorced," and everyone said "Yes, that is good," and so on. Than one girl said something like, "No, if your man was good and handsome, then you had to just stay with him." I don't know.... Yes, I did not really like that. Yes, I really found that.... [silence]. That was really stupid.

There is another dimension to the popularity of discussing *hchouma* aspects of the self on Internet forums such as Marokko.nl and Chaima.nl, as research has shown that Moroccan-Dutch teenagers do not always feel addressed by sex education initiatives in the Netherlands. Compulsory sex education in Dutch secondary school settings is not always considered appropriate by (religious) minorities and migrant groups (Borghuis, De Graaf & Hermes, 2010). Digital sex education initiatives aimed at Moroccan-Dutch youth miss their target as they “feel their voice is not heard; they cannot identify with the sites but rather feel repulsion and rejection” (Borghuis, De Graaf & Hermes, 2010, p. 235). Internet forums are taken up as an alternative space for circulating knowledge and education pertaining to sexuality. Bringing sexuality into the public digital space of discussion forums, they demonstrate how to successfully breach the dichotomy of masculine public and feminine private space that is noted to exist in Morocco (Mernissi, 1987; Graioudi, 2005; Sadiqi, 2003).

Ilham (thirteen years old) stated, *“It is fun to know for me what people have to say when I have put something online.”* But, learning from others is also of great importance, especially receiving peer-group verification from other girls, which is central during adolescence. Ilham explained, *“I just want to know what ‘the real deal’ is so to say, but, for instance, when I have put something on Marokko.nl I want to know what people think of it.”* Fellow discussion board participants offer advice, support, and information, all from the relative safety of their computer screens. They assist a number of our informants to decide upon action. *“If you want to get something of your chest, yes if you want to know something, than you just open [a topic]... and everyone reacts and they can give you advice”* (Loubna, fourteen years old).

An imagined comfort zone atmosphere established by anonymity and moderation contribute to the experience. In the words of fourteen-year-old Senna, especially, *“Chaima.nl is for girly girls. You won’t find any boys there. If you look at the names there, all you see is girl, girl, girl.”* Ilana, a sixteen-year-old girl, confirmed: *“It is a good thing, to have all those girls together so they can really talk about girlish things.”* Khalid Mahdaoui, cofounder of Marokko.nl states that the majority of visitors are female: 60% (Van der Zee, 2006, p. 53). Some overestimated the absence of boys: *“In my opinion there are almost no guys on Marokko.nl. I think it is more something for girls”* (Meryam, fifteen years old). The bottom-line, however, is that girls feel comfortable enough to discuss very serious issues on the site. As such, Internet discussion forums as a form of anonymous Internet communication may also lead toward forming personal relationship and greater intimacy among contributors. As Amina notes:

Yes, you also make new friends there. Even though you don't know them. Most of the time they are girls. You don't trust them immediately or something like that. But you get a bit closer by also sending private messages to each other. "Hey, how are you?" "Which school do you go to?" "How old are you?" and so on. I have met girls who were similar to me like that.

Everyday sexual practices and experiences are discussed from the bottom up. Online message boards make it possible for young Moroccan-Dutch girls to discuss and ask questions not just about sexuality in general, but also in connection to Islam. The forums provide participants with a supportive vehicle to renegotiate their relationship with their sexualities and their Islam, as Meryam (a fifteen-year-old girl) attests:

There are also many stories about Moroccan girls who behaved badly and who have improved their behavior, who have returned to their faith, Islam, and they have worked very hard to achieve that.

These statements corroborate the assumption that message boards are especially popular among Moroccan-Dutch girls to voice the struggles they experience in their efforts to "demonstrate counterviews toward the dominant Western image of Muslim women as well as to their own communities" (Brouwer, 2006a). Girls may find in message boards a space with particular socio-cultural dynamics that allow for acquiring new positions vis-à-vis certain notions (of gender relations) upheld by their parents or fellow community members and in dialogue with both Western and mainstream Dutch conceptions of sexuality and relationships. Articulating an in-between position, subaltern subjects can find agency to mark out "an interstitial future" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 313). Online discussion forums assist Moroccan-Dutch youth in staking out a position in-between claims of rooted familial, religious and community norms and routed youth cultural expectations. The next section considers this process further by analyzing how informants perform their religiosity.

2.5 Digital postsecularism: Performing Muslimness

Figure 9 introduces the third theme: the performative renegotiation of Islamic codes of conduct. A fashionable headscarf-wearing girl is depicted wearing pink lipstick and carrying a handbag. The girl confidently states



Fig. 9: Forum user Mocro_s contesting Moroccan-Dutch religiosity (Mocro_s, 2007b)

she feels attractive and smart but criticizes fellow Muslim girls who do not cover their hair. Also she feels smoking cigarettes cannot be reconciled with the principles of the Muslim faith, gossiping about Asma as a “*Tfoe kehba*” (Moroccan-Arabic for “dirty whore”) because she saw her smoking with Mo. A text balloon presents us with her thoughts:

Long live public transport. I'm still in MBO, but that does not matter? I feel hot and I am smart. I have EVERYTHING. I hate those showing their curly hair by not wearing a headscarf. *Tfoe*. What kind of Muslims are they? I never gossip. Oh, by the way, do you know Asma? Yes her from [Amsterdam] West,. She SMOKEs. Yes, I swear it. I saw her yesterday with Mo!!!!!!! *Tfoe kehba*.

This section explores how forum discussions are used among like-minded Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth to connect and insert in the public sphere alternative configurations of believing. Like elsewhere in Europe, in the Netherlands, democracy and Islam are often presented as “irreconcilable discursive categories” through emphasizing a binary view between secular “good people” and postsecular Muslim “bad people” (Sunier, 2010, p. 125). Digital practices provide insights on how postsecularism is actually lived and experienced. These practices can be taken to counter the conservative reactions in contemporary debates on the revival of religion, which tend to isolate Muslims as the locus of the return of religion as a challenge to democracy, secularism, and progress. Contesting the association of religion with backwardness, or straight foreignness, Moroccan-Dutch youth appropriate Islam, not an essentialized and static category, removed from other markers of identity and belonging. Participating in online forums fosters agency through a democratization of belief systems and religious authority and resisting hegemonic renderings of Moroccan-Dutchness and Islam. On forums, being Muslim is a public and private everyday practice that is deeply embedded in digital affordances (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2014c).

During our interview, fifteen-year-old Meryam mentioned the habits of her parents were “*just very old-fashioned*.” They were raised much “*stricter*” in terms of religion. In contrast to how her parents learned about Islam through copying “*the stories of their parents*,” she “*looks up things about Islam herself*.” Meryam also spoke about *Het Handboek voor Moslimvrouwen* (*The Handbook for Muslim Women*), a book that she had in her handbag. She shared that she liked to keep a book like that with her at all times. “*I read those, because it gives you a lot of rules and how you can do your best to become a good Muslim woman*.” These books give her something to hold on to, offering guidance in making everyday decisions. For similar purposes, she turns to Marokko.nl to read about personal stories that people have shared. The book, she notes, was bought “*at the mosque and it gives you rules to abide by*.” While “*on Marokko.nl, I type ‘Islam’ and many different pages appear. And I look at those. Some rules are not in the book, but they might be available on the Internet*.” Meryam added how she “*noses around*” in forums

on Islam. Meryam's narrative illustrates how Moroccan-Dutch youth engage in forum discussions to align "strict Muslim demands placed on them with liberal youth culture" (Brouwer, 2006a). The tension between being provided with meanings by authorities such as the imam and her parents and taking the opportunity to articulate personal religious interpretations themselves lies at the heart of this section on digital postsecularism and performative Islam.

Internet forums frequented by religious people have been recognized as manifesting the tension over religious authority. Online discussion forums such as Marokko.nl have been likened to "digital minarets" (Brouwer, 2002). The site includes an image of a minaret in its logo. The minaret is a sign which conveys its meaning as a distinct element of Islamic architecture. It has become a universal symbol of Islam and Muslim community but it also provides a vantage point for making the call to prayer (Bloom, 1989). By using a logo with a minaret, Marokko.nl signals it also provides vantage points for Islamic prayer as well as giving a visual cue for congregating Muslims.

Digital reconfigurations of religious authority

Though the relation between religion and media (both old and new media) has received attention in recent studies (Couldry, 2003; Højsgaard and Warburg, 2005; Hoover, 2006; Nynäs, Lassander, and Utriainen, 2012; Sedgwick, 2015), the link to (new) media studies, and the way in which "religion" is manifested and reconfigured online, has not been sufficiently elaborated upon. In her recent *Digital Religion* (2012), Heidi Campbell argues, for example, that different religious communities negotiate complex relationships with new media technologies in light of their history and beliefs. This begs the question of how religious practices, are lived, articulated, and performed online, responding to public debates as well as to intimate needs.

Collaborative, bottom-up, peer-to-peer networking through social media "has led to a complex reconfiguration of religious authority models" (Bunt, 2009, p. 17). Digital media, it is argued, fragments religious authority in the Muslim world in the Middle East by opening up "a marketplace of ideas, identities, and discourses" (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003, p. xii). And this process goes beyond metaphor: "It is a reality that decisively shifts forms and resources of such discourse and its practices in favor of middle-class actors" and it "feeds into new senses of a public space that is discursive, performative and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities" (2003, p. 2). Charles Hirschkind observed an Islamic counterpublic in Egypt that is partly fed by cassette-sermons as an

alternative to the televisual and press media promoted by the state (2006). The recent revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa have also partly been attributed to the distinct role of digital technologies to organize protests and air alternative voices (Allagui & Kuebler, 2011). Nadirsyah Hosen identifies a democratization of religious authority in Indonesia as middle-class Muslims actively “shop around” in locating Islamic guidance and legal opinions (“*fatwas*”) they find suitable to their lifestyle by browsing different Islamic websites (2008).

Such practices can lead to a subversion of the top-down authority over interpreting Islamic principles and practices. Carmen Becker acknowledges, “a broader decentralizing tendency within Islam” in Europe, as she notes Salafi Muslim activists in Dutch online spaces engaged in “meaning-making activities that tell people how to behave and how to ‘be in the world’” (2009, p. 79). Moroccan-Dutch youth are said to turn to message boards to guide themselves through the maze of Dutch norms and values with Islam as a frame of reference (Van Summeren, 2007, p. 291). Furthermore, medium-specific disinhibition may provide a valuable “opportunity to submit sensitive questions about Islam to a cyber-Imam or to peers” among Moroccan-Dutch youth (D’Haenens, 2003, p. 411). In sum, a diversity of performative Islamic practices are made visible to other users, opening up visibility on the multiplicity of ways Muslims connect with Islam beyond the parameters of traditional networks and communities.

Voicing Muslimness

Marokko.nl is easy. You can easily find out about things when you want to know something. On the site, there are many Moroccans, most of them are Muslim – just almost everyone, I believe. Thus you can really read their stories and you can really express your sincere interests.

– SouSou, a fifteen-year-old girl

The informants assess the value of being able to discuss one’s interpretation of Islam in various ways. Some informants note that the Internet has enabled them to learn about topics that used to be left untouched. As Amina, a thirteen-year-old interviewee, describes it: “*religion – for that I often go to Chaima.nl and I am also active on the topics about Islam. Where people [discuss] how they see Islam, and how I see Islam, so to say. This way you also make the differences smaller.*” She pointed toward the positive potential of social media, as people can draw upon personal religious interpretations

of other individuals they encounter online. These processes of knowledge production and consumption have been described as a form of “cut-and-paste Islam,” highlighting its eclectic character where people shop around for their religious preferences (Buitelaar, 2008, pp. 248-249). As different views on Islam are brought together in one space, a generational-specific “Islamic habitus” or way of life and set of “Muslimness” dispositions may be coshaped at the crossroads of top-down and bottom-up performances and socializations (Sedgwick, 2015, p. 3).

Being able to articulate and narrate a personal relationship with Islam is highly relevant as Buitelaar and Stock learned in their interviews with Moroccan-Dutch Muslims. They feel externally pressured in Dutch society to take sides: “the spatial metaphor ‘to take sides’ occurs frequently in the narrations of our interlocutors.” They feel “caught between a Muslim and a non-Muslim ‘camp’ that both claim definitional power” over them (Buitelaar & Stock, 2010, p. 170). Public TV is not considered as a solution in bridging those two camps, as apart from the negative framing of Moroccan-Dutch boys as rascals and thieves informants noted the lack of recognition of Islam as a viable institution in the Dutch mainstream press. “*Yes, public broadcasting is there for everyone, but it doesn’t focus on, for instance, Islam [in a positive way]*” (Ilham, a thirteen-year-old girl).



Fig. 10: Cartoon *Overvaren* (in English: *Sailing Across*) (Rafje.nl, 2011)

Forums offer an alternative. In my interview with Rafje, an artist whose provocative statements are published on Marokko.nl regularly, he shared he aims to capture the tendencies and ambivalences in Dutch multicultural society. Noteworthy is his reworking of a traditional Dutch children's song and play in which toll has to be paid to a skipper who will take people across one of the Dutch rivers (see Figure 10). Rafje clearly renders visible the hermetic division – instigated by “Skipper” Wilders and his followers – between good (read secular) people and bad (read Muslim) people in this statement: “Wilders, will you let me sail across? Yes or no? If so, should I hate Islam? Yes or No?”⁴ Away from the Dutch mainstream, message boards are used to acquire a self-narrated religious position.

As another invocation of a (counter)public sphere our informants report engaging in similar religious meaning-making activities. Sixteen-year-old Ilana states that in the rubric “*Islam and me, many things about Islam are discussed also the rules of Islam.*” Sahar, a fourteen-year-old girl, also participates in this rubric and adds people exchange ideas, “*about things you should and you shouldn't do.*” Informants told me that when negotiating the (sometimes strict) Muslim demands with Dutch liberal youth culture, many people discuss whether certain things are “halal” (allowed in Islam) or “haram” (forbidden in Islam).⁵ Ferran, a fourteen-year-old boy, provides an example: “*whether you may have a boyfriend and so on.*” Not everyone appreciates bottom-up interpretations of what is haram or halal. Some see disadvantages in online performances of religion. As Nevra (sixteen-year-old girl) observes: “*You now see that people who are engaged with their faith, they actually make a personal version of their faith. They do things that they aren't allowed to do, because many people do them [and share their actions online]. They say, you can do it, too.*” Inas, a thirteen-year-old informant, also voiced her skepticism about online discussions on Islam: “*I do not try to find too many things about it.*” She chooses to uphold her own conceptions about Islam. “*That's my own opinion. And someone else should not change my opinion.*” Nonetheless, fifteen-year-old Inzaf notes that converts might

4 “Skipper, will you let me sail across, yes or no? Do I have to pay toll, yes or no?,” as originally in Dutch: “*Schipper, mag ik overvaren, ja of nee? Moet ik dan ook tol betalen, ja of nee?*” The children's play centers around one child, the skipper, who sets the terms for other children in the play to cross a path she or he chooses.

5 “Halal” and “haram” form the twofold distinction between what is seen as lawful and what is seen as forbidden. Eating ritually slaughtered beef is, for example, halal while consuming alcohol is considered haram. There are three intermediate categories between the two poles that complete a five-part scale: “*mandub*” for what is recommended, “*mubah*” for a neutral permissible and “*makruh*” for what is objectionable and repugnant (Leaman & Ali, 2008, pp. 46-47, 72).

find in Marokko.nl a space of support: *“Those who have converted to Islam ask about what they should do, where they should go. The people on the site help them and say what they can do best.”*

In their contribution to forums, together with references to Islam, for instance, Bibi chose a picture of the Amazigh flag, while Nevra includes a photo of her hands covered in henna and Meryam includes Taourirt, her nickname, and also the town where her parents were born in Morocco. Performing one's Islam through discussions, nicknames and avatars is a personal, micro-political example illustrating how definitional power may be appropriated beyond the camps of mainstream Dutch society and religious authorities. Prior research shows Moroccan-Dutch youth use signatures and nicknames to perform religious affiliations on Maroc.nl, one of Marokko.nl's predecessors. To signal their belonging and gain further recognition among other participants, Maroc.nl posters used nicknames such as “Dutch Muslim” and “Muslima25” and signatures such as “Servant of Allah” or “May Allah give a heart to the heartless and then fill the hearts of the people with peace, brotherly love and tolerance” (Van Summeren, 2007, p. 285). Religious positions are acquired on Internet forums, and defining oneself by expressing “I am Muslim” for many Moroccan-Dutch youth has become a more positive way to articulate one's individual identity as opposed to an ascribed ethnic identity such as “You are an allochthone” or “You are a Moroccan cunt”. Next to hip-hop, urban and the like, Muslim youth can choose to be “Muslim” online (Buitelaar, 2008, pp. 244-247). As I show in more depth in Chapter 3, interviewees combine religious, youth cultural and ethnic affiliations in their instant messaging nicknames and avatars.

2.6 Conclusions

In this chapter I focused on how young Moroccan-Dutch become space invaders by using Internet forum discussion pages. Marokko.nl and Chaima.nl are the national networks of Moroccan-Dutch youth. Discussing how informants digitally renegotiate multiculturalism, gender relations and postsecularism I gave three examples of how Internet forums can function as counterpublics. Although performed in commercial, socio-cultural structures of power, informants feel they can publish narratives of “positive difference” (Modood, 2007, p. 37) in their digital space, instead of being identified as a member of an imposed group. In this way, the agency of Moroccan-Dutch youth becomes apparent. This form of agency must be seen in the light of the politics of difference, recognizing how individuals

are located in multiple positions of subordination. Doubly marginalized Moroccan-Dutch girls may work against both simplistic stereotypes of Muslim girls as being passive and oppressed that persist in Dutch society while they also negotiate their individual gendered positionality in the context of the sometimes strict demands of Islam, their parents and their families.

The struggle over allocated and acquired subject positions can be further explained by considering Michel Foucault's writings on power and knowledge. As two sides of the same coin, he distinguished two sides to the organization of power. On the one hand, Foucault writes, people are inscribed and subjected to power, as their range of action is restricted, for instance. On the other hand, individuals are the subjects of power as they have the ability and capacity to make changes (Foucault, 1982). Knowledge acts as a regulatory mechanism, those in power exercise their command by defining, labeling and categorizing people. In a similar vein, Moroccan-Dutch youth are allocated subordinate positions. Moroccan-Dutch contributors use Internet forums to exercise their speaking power and narrate their self-acquired positions. In voicing themselves they are able to strategically foreground alternative collective ethnic, gender and religious identities and voice the essentials of their belongings in their own terms (Spivak, 1990, p. 11). The grasped opportunity for resignification is a significant form of agency. By voicing themselves, they take the opportunity to speak for themselves, instead of being positioned by Dutch societal, Moroccan-Dutch community and familial social norms as well as religious authorities. Forums are perceived also a safe space to practice piety and alternative forms of religious agency, not necessarily in conflict with the dictums of the secular host society which label religion, and Islam in particular, as blocking youth from integration and girls, in particular, from their path to emancipation.

Moroccan-Dutch youth will not be able to overthrow the unequal power structures in Dutch society by voicing themselves on message boards, however, such actions give hope for future change. They might feel empowered when they feel safe enough to voice their in-between identities, as they expand the discursive space beyond the "negative difference" (Modood, 2007, p. 37) of top-down allocated gender, ethnic and religious positions circulating in the settings they move through. Although imagined as a "hush harbor" where informants feel safe, my discussion of journalists' ghettoization and politicians' regulation of Marokko.nl reminds us of the disciplinary and control mechanisms that remain at play both online and offline. If these acts of repression would get the upper hand, Moroccan-Dutch youth

might be left with feeling excluded and unwelcome. Informants, however, felt they have the final say over their space and their position in digital practices of multiculturalism.

Although Moroccan-Dutch youth become the majority, thirteen-year-old Ilham invites ethnic-majority Dutch youth to visit their space: *"It is dot NL, not something like dot Morocco, so it is for everyone – everyone is marʒhabikoum [welcome], everyone can come."* Most importantly, as fifteen-year-old SouSou notes, message boards like Marokko.nl are spaces where one can feel heard and feel appreciated by like-minded people: *"You can pleasantly talk with fellow Moroccans about all kinds of stuff, where you can read beautiful stories. There, you can just be with other Moroccans."* The narratives of the informants showcase how they give an Islamic touch to their everyday digital practice without resorting to violence or public defiance. At the same time, Islam is revisited from new perspectives. Judging from how they appropriate discussion forums as a safe and supportive digital counterpublic, Moroccan-Dutch youth show they aim to renegotiate multiculturalism, gender dictums and the postsecular revival of religion to eventually coshape a more inclusive, cosmopolitan public sphere attuned to the everyday needs of a growing multicultural youth generation.