NETWORKED GIFT-GIVING: ETHNO-RELIGIOUS MINORITY YOUTHS' NEGOTIATION OF STATUS AND SOCIAL TIES IN A SOCIETY OF DISTRUST

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

Distrust, ethnography, gift-giving, minorities, mobile youth culture, social media

Reference format:

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Introduction

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

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

sociality, which presumably strengthens his friendship ties as well as enhances his cultural capital.

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

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

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

Theoretical framework

Society of Distrust

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Networked gift-giving

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

Because gifts are imbued with personal identities, the relational maintenance performed through gift-giving rituals can bring benefits such as social support and status for both the giver and the receiver (Komter, 2007). On the one hand, gift-giving leads to a continuous understanding that both parties can count on each other (Sherry, 1983). On the

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

Traditionally, gift-giving has been studied in relation to how the reciprocal exchange of material objects (e.g. presents) contribute to relational maintenance. However, social exchange lies at the hearth of networked technologies and as such it is argued that 'the digital' provides new opportunities to participate in gift-giving rituals (Lewis, 2015; Pearce, et al., 2015). More specifically, networked technologies bring forth affordances that facilitate the reciprocal and visible exchange of information (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Vanden Abeele et al., 2018). Therefore, we coin the term 'networked gift-giving' to account for how affordances simultaneously facilitate and constrain ethno-religious minority youths' relational maintenance behavior on social media. Although we do not consider 'offline' and 'online' to be two separate realities (cfr. Miller & Horst, 2012), we argue that it is important to highlight the networked nature of gift-giving practices on social media as people's perceptions and appropriations of various affordances such as visibility, scalability and replicability do cause specific dynamics (Costa, 2018). In light of this, we identify three interrelated dynamics that inform networked gift-giving.

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

Scholarship mapping social media's affordances thus illustrates how networked gift-giving may bring opportunities and constraints to relational maintenance and the 'public' representation thereof. However, Pearce and colleagues' study on relational maintenance in Azerbaijan illustrates that the affordance perspective warrants further investigation on how people's socio-cultural contexts in particular inform networked gift-giving: *"The affordance perspective has not considered cultural, economic, and political contexts as well as it could,*

and future research that contextualizes findings in such a way is needed". (2015, p.9). Moreover, social media scholars are increasingly advocating to take into account offline contexts as these provide essential contextualization of online interactions (e.g. Lane, 2015). Answering this call for more in-depth contextualization of relational maintenance on social media, our study therefore aims to connect Flemish ethno-religious minority youths' networked gift-giving practices to their experiences of exclusion and racism in a society of distrust.

Methodology

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

Participants

In order to gain access to the everyday lives of ethno-religious minority youths, we chose to contact a community organization that is known for providing support to minorities between

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14 and 30 years old. The organization is located in a medium-sized city that has experienced considerable gentrification over the past decades. Consequently, public space has become increasingly unavailable for young people – and especially for those with ethno-religious minority backgrounds – to 'hang out' due to pervasive surveillance structures aimed at maintaining affluent middle-class families' sense of safety. However, the city remains an important hub for numerous youths because it is the main 'educational center' of the larger area. Therefore, the community organization consists of a team of youth workers who provide support to young people who find themselves in the margins of society. More specifically, the youth workers create a safe space for socialization and recreation, serve as intermediaries between youths, their families and societal institutions, and overall act as confidants.

After consultation with the youth workers in charge, the principal researcher was granted access to this fieldwork site under the condition that he would take up the role as a volunteer youth worker himself. This way, we were able to carry out participant observations and informal interviews among informed and consenting participants over an extended period and in a natural setting. In this study, we mainly draw from a group of 23 key participants (see table 1). We consider this group to be our primary participants because these ethno-religious minority youths interacted most frequently with the principal researcher and therefore had a profound impact on the direction of the ethnographic research project. Other youths who frequented the organizations' activities only sporadically or with who the principal researcher was less able to establish truly trustful relationships inspired our ethnographic study but their quotes and social media content are not directly used in the results section.

In terms of demographics, the participants describe themselves in relation to ethnicities from the Middle-Eastern, North-African, West-African, Central-African, East-

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African and Balkan region. Moreover, most of them explicitly identify as Muslim albeit that the extent to which they adhere to Islam religious practices vary widely. With regards to the participants' SES, it is noteworthy that the young people were uncomfortable disclosing clear information about their families' livelihoods. Although we do not want to conflate a low-SES with 'being an ethno-religious minority', various conversations illustrated how these young people experience obstacles related to a lower SES (e.g. relying on food from the organization, difficulties securing a stable income after high-school, unable to purchase laptops required for distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic).

Procedure

According to Lane (2015, p. 4), *"being an ethnographer on the ground and in the media"* is paramount for gaining in-depth knowledge of how contemporary youths' social media practices are situated within their particular socio-cultural contexts. Indeed, an online/offline ethnography is an appropriate methodology to amplify participants' voices while simultaneously mapping how their experiences are embedded within social, cultural and technological structures (cfr. Markham, 2017). Through the ongoing process of exchanging perspectives and co-experiencing 'the everyday', the researcher and the participants construct a mutual understanding of the studied phenomenon (Herzfeld, 2014). The principal researcher engaged in this ethnographic process by taking up the role of a volunteer youth worker. By playing games, listening music, cooking, making homework or simply hanging out together, we were able to capture how these ethno-religious minority youths appropriate social media when navigating their socio-cultural contexts.

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A regular fieldwork week consisted of three participant observation days: Tuesdays for homework support, Wednesdays for recreational activities and Fridays for organized evening parties. The raw data (notes) gathered during these participant observations were transformed after each fieldwork day into more elaborate texts. Next to the 'physical' fieldwork site of the community organization, we also observed and participated with these ethno-religious minority youths on social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and Snapchat). We did not capture screenshots but documented social media content in an observational manner (e.g. writing out interactions, descriptions of pictures). In this paper, we specifically focus on Instagram as networked gift-giving practices were most visible on this platform. As we will argue below, Instagram constitutes an environment that affords increased visibility of relationship maintenance behaviors which in turn can be appropriated for self-presentation.

While volunteering as a youth worker brought several benefits (e.g. access, blending in), it is equally important to note that the principal researcher first and foremost experienced an embodied position as 'being a youth worker' (cfr. Seim, 2021). This means that we were able to get close to the everyday lives of ethno-religious minority youths while simultaneously being restricted in our access to field sites outside the context of the community organization. Moreover, the privileged position of the principal researcher (being a white, middle-class male) arguably further shaped the context in which the research results were produced.

Data analysis

We adopted a processual approach (Markham, 2017) to interpret the ethnographic data. First, meetings were regularly set up to discuss the fieldwork texts and the principal researchers'

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main experiences and observations. This way, we identified the overarching themes of participants' distrust towards society and reciprocal relationship maintenance behaviors on social media. Consulting the literature, we connected these themes to the concepts of a society of distrust and networked gift-giving. Finally, we designed a code scheme (see table 2) based on the literature and on our initial reading of the ethnographic texts that in turn was used to organize the ethnographic data. In order to triangulate our findings, we further discussed these topics both with youth workers and the participants themselves.

Over the course of the fieldwork, the ethnographic data were regularly consulted and connected to the literature in order to identify themes and patterns. In order to triangulate our findings, we further discussed these topics both with youth workers and the participants themselves.

Ethics

The ethical integrity of this ethnographic study was ensured in close collaboration with the community organization and according to the research department's ethical guidelines. Before the start of the fieldwork in September 2019, the principal researcher met with the youth workers in charge to develop ethical and practical guidelines. To protect the anonymity of the participants and the community organization, it was agreed upon to not only pseudonymize the participants' names but also to not disclose the city in research output. In terms of participants' informed consent, the organization deemed it important to approach this in a continuous manner: both the principal researcher and the youth workers negotiated the participants' consent over the course of the project. However, we were not able to obtain parental consent. According to the youth workers in charge, relationships with parents are

oftentimes difficult to establish, limited and sensitive. Therefore, they deemed it important to reserve these communications for matters that directly impact youths' well-being. Furthermore, it was expected from the principal researcher to attend a 'socialization weekend' organized by the organization in order to provide adequate support to the young people. In light of this, we agreed that research activities should never obtain priority over the everyday workings of the organization. These agreements and further ethical reflections on the project were formally approved by the department's ethics committee (IRB code 2019-31).

Results

Navigating a society of distrust

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

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

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

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

The removal of the benches that Suleymaan and his friends use as a hangout spot is indicative for how these ethno-religious minority youths experience discrimination and exclusion in everyday life. On several occasions, the participants voiced frustration over how they are perceived and treated in public spaces. For example, police interventions following alleged complaints of selling and abusing drugs, of theft and of being a general 'disturbance' have been a regular experience shared by all participants. Moreover, several youths narrated how women clutch their purses when they walk past them. Some young men even claimed that they have been denied access to public transportation due to bus drivers deliberately ignoring them at a bus stop. According to Gildas, a 18 year old with Congolese roots, navigating public spaces as a black young man entails being suspected of engaging in criminal behavior:

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

What is apparent in these testimonies is how the intersection between racism and moral panics surrounding young people who 'simply' hang out in public produces tangible experiences of marginalization. Consequently, the ethno-religious minority youths in this study report to hold very little trust in the intentions of the majority and especially in institutions (e.g. education, legal system). In the cases of Suleymaan and Gildas for example, it is striking how 'other' people are perceived as untrustworthy in general due to pervasive experiences with the disapproving gaze of white middle-class adults. In a similar vein, the 18 year old Dzhamal

confessed that he found it difficult to trust the principal researcher as he was wary of undercover cops keeping tabs on him and his friends:

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

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

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

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

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

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Promoting: gaining status through amplified visibility

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

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

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

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

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

Considering the prevalence of promoting among the young people in this study and the status attached to being perceived as well-connected, it is no surprise that most participants had thousands of followers on Instagram. However, the ethno-religious minority youths did not report to be particularly bothered by the possible privacy complications stemming from such a large audience. Zaïd for instance stated that being visible on Instagram is in fact desirable as *"it is the place where I only share my best pictures anyway so I like it when a lot of people see it."* On the contrary, the contents shared on Snapchat were considered to be more personal,

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spontaneous and *"only for good friends"*. Similar to Zaïd, most participants did consider Instagram to be a platform suitable for explicit self-presentation practices.

The gift of compliments

Next to the practice of 'promoting', we observed how ethno-religious minority youths engage in the reciprocal exchange of messages on Instagram Stories that oftentimes take the form of compliments. More specifically, our fieldwork suggests that the participants visibly display these exchanges to present a desired high-status to their – imagined – audience. The case of Suleymaan is illustrative in this regard. Suleymaan calls himself a member of the *"9To boys"*[2] [referring to the city's postal code]. This group of young men is rather notorious for claiming a specific park to be their territory. According to Suleymaan, both the city's governmental body and 'rivalling groups' want to see him and his friends gone. Next to claiming the public space around the park by spraying graffiti tags on benches and neighboring buildings, Suleymaan narrates that a public exchange of messages between the different members of the 9To boys is equally import to exert their influence on the urban environment:

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

For Suleymaan and his friends, the reciprocal exchange of messages thus seems to function as a digital reminder that their group will not back down from claiming presence in the park. The disclosure of these exchanges on Instagram Stories is an extension of their offline representation in the park as a group of close friends who are able to withstand both institutional discrimination by law enforcement and peers that are being perceived as rivals. For example, Hadar posted a picture of himself during the summer in which he is pointing his

finger to the camera while standing on the basketball court of the park. On his Instagram Stories, he asked his followers to like and comment on the picture. In turn, Hadar reposted the comments of his friends and 'repaid' them with a reply. In these messages, the young men complimented each other's physique and made references to how 'others' should be careful when provoking their group:

Reposted message: *"Ooof don't mess with this Kurd [flex emoji]"*
Answer Hadar: *"Thx bro, biggest tug I know!"*

Although Suleymaan and his friends do not extend these 'gifts' to members outside their group, the gift-giving ritual of reposting received compliments is a shared activity among all the youths in this fieldwork. We argue that these rituals play an important role in the self-presentation practices of the participants. The gift of receiving compliments and returning the favor raises the self-worth of these youths as it conveys to others that one is being appreciated by its social network and is able to nourish friendships. The affirmation of social connection that stems from gift-giving practices is especially valued by people who navigate a society of distrust.

When asked to reflect on these practices, however, most participants found it difficult to voice why they engaged in these rituals. For them, the reciprocal exchange of gifts in the form of public compliments seems to be something that is 'expected' and has even become a form of routinized behavior. This provides further evidence that gift-giving normalizes the norm of indebtedness, making it a necessary ritual to conform to in order to maintain relationships. Nonetheless, our observations illustrate how youths perceive certain gifts to be more valuable than others. For example, 'standard' compliments on pictures are oftentimes

reposted against a black background and accompanied with general commentaries that thank and/or reciprocate the compliment. For example, Zaïd responded on Instagram Stories to most compliments on his latest picture with the same line: *"Spass bra [thank you brother], you too."*. Out of the 30 reposted compliments, however, 5 got a more enthusiastic reaction and were accompanied with a particular song and picture of Zaïd with – supposedly – the friend who gave the compliment. This shows that the participants make a distinction between strong and weak ties. A gift being given by a strong tie is considered to be more valuable and therefore repaid with a gift that reveals the identity of the initial giver.

Gift-giving rituals between weak ties seem to be mostly strategically employed in order to project a 'general' popular image towards the outside world. We found that the exchange of compliments between strong ties, however, is also able to mitigate the potential devastating effects of experiencing racism in everyday life. The case of the 20 year old Ider is illustrative in this regard. When Ider was 17 year old, his girlfriend invited him over at her parent's house. When her parents came home, the mother started crying while the father angrily shouted that his daughter would never date a 'filthy Moroccan'. The argument got heated when the father claimed that Ider probably stole money. In the end, the police was called to intervene. Now, his close friends always respond to his pictures with cryptic reactions containing emoticons of handcuffs, police cars and money bills. For Ider, this traumatic incident has become a running joke with his friends from which he reports to gain strength. What this illustrates is how ethno-religious minority youths sometimes conceal hidden meanings in their gift-giving practices which are only decodable to them and their close friends (cfr. social steganography; see boyd, 2014).

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Discussion

The aim of this study was to contextualize how ethno-religious minority youths strategically present gift-giving practices on social media. The socio-cultural context of these young people is characterized by a mutual distrust between them and the white middle-class majority (Giordano, 2006). Similar to what previous research on societies of distrust found, these youths turn towards their – extended – networks for 'symbolic' (e.g. emotional support) and 'material' (e.g. job opportunities) recourses (cfr. Pearce, 2015). More specifically, they harness the amplified visibility of social media platforms to present themselves as being an appreciated member of an inclusive network of connections. Therefore, we coin the term of networked gift-giving to denote the reciprocal exchange of user-generated content that amplifies the visibility of relationship maintenance and self-presentation in networked environments.

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

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With regards to the connection between self-presentation and relationship maintenance, the gift-giving practice of posting received and given compliments contributes to the construction of a 'front stage'. In contrast to offline public spaces in which ethno-religious minority youths are being marginalized by the disapproving white middle-class gaze, publicly extending compliments is a performance of desired high-status identities. Indeed, the presentation of multiple and mutual compliments conveys to audiences on social media that these young people are popular and appreciated members of a larger network.

Implications & recommendations

The scholarly tradition on mobile youth culture mainly analyses young people's practices through a developmental lens (cfr. Vanden Abeele, 2016). Consequently, relationship maintenance and self-presentation are oftentimes attributed to youths' developmental and socialization needs. However, heterogeneous socio-cultural contexts are equally important to consider (Goggin, 2013). In this study, we argue that networked gift-giving is a particular useful strategy for youths who find themselves in the margins of society. More specifically, the semi-public portrayal of positive connections challenges racist discourses and tangible experiences of socio-economic exclusion. Therefore, we suggest future studies to take socio-cultural contexts of minority as well as majority youths into account when exploring the dynamics of mobile youth culture.

Zooming in on how the participants mainly employed Instagram Stories for networked gift-giving, this study also contributes to the burgeoning literature on ephemeral social media content. This body of work has mainly focused on Snapchat as an idiosyncratic platform that limits persistence (e.g. Nashmi & Painter, 2018; Handyside & Ringrose, 2017). Research

results in this tradition suggests that ephemerality stimulates more open disclosures while diminishing self-presentation concerns (Koefed & Larson, 2016). The ephemeral character of Instagram Stories, however, is less explored (Bainotti et al., 2020). Our study contributes to the literature by illustrating how ethno-religious minority youths employ Instagram Stories for networked gift-giving. In particular, the observations suggest that the ephemerality of Instagram Stories does not diminish self-presentation concerns as opposed to Snapchat. As the participants state, Snapchat is mainly used to send imagery that is considered to be only appropriate for a few friends to see while Instagram Stories are appropriated as a strategic self-presentation tool.

Finally, the results on networked gift-giving illuminate how maximizing one's audience does not necessarily lead to a loss of privacy. In privacy research, it is often argued that it is paramount to take – invisible – audiences into account in order to counter privacy turbulence (Livingstone, 2018). From this vantage point, it could be easily misconstrued that the ethno-religious minority youths this study draws from are not concerned about privacy as they seem to deliberately amplify their visibility. In these gift-giving rituals, however, the context and the concrete relationships are not always clear to an outside observer. Through social steganographic practices, ethno-religious minority youths make sure that the general meaning conveyed in networked gift-giving does not reveal personal and intimate details (cfr. boyd, 2014).

Limitations

The results shed light on how Flemish ethno-religious minority youth's networked gift-giving practices are situated within a society of distrust. However, it is paramount to acknowledge

that the experiences of our participants are not necessarily shared by all ethno-religious minorities in Flanders and elsewhere. Similar to the variability that is present within the category of youth, we should also be cognizant of how ethno-religious minority youth's socio-cultural contexts may differ in terms of household dynamics, specific migration trajectories, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status and so on. Moreover, framing the practice of networked gift-giving as an exclusive expression of ethno-religious minority youths who navigate a society of distrust would be equally undesirable. Although our study reveals how these practices are embedded in the participants' specific socio-cultural context of a distrustful society, it is necessary to recognize that they also appropriate social media for entertainment purposes as – young – people in general do, and that majority youths equally embrace social media for networked gift-giving practices (cfr. Ito et al., 2009).

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

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Notes

1. Creating a story in which Abdirrahim's profile is tagged could compromise his anonymity in the research project. Therefore, the principal researcher explained this and suggested to send private messages expressing gratitude for being promoted instead. In turn, Abdirrahim could repost these messages on his stories if he wished to do so.
2. *"9To*" is a pseudonym and does not refer to the actual postal code.

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Table 1. Participant overview

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