Dutch-Moroccan youth engaging with online discussion forums: triangulating findings on popularity, gender specificity, and purposes

**Introduction: why online discussion forums?**
In the Netherlands, Dutch-Moroccan youth are often seen as unassimilable others. Veiled girls are seen as unemancipated and backward (Ghorashi, 2010), while boys are dismissed as extremists or troublemakers. The focus in the present study is on how Dutch-Moroccan youth engage with everyday digital media practices and re-articulate marginalized positions. Earlier studies suggest that online discussion forums are especially popular among Dutch-Moroccan youth (e.g. Boumans, 2002; Brouwer, 2005 & 2006; Brouwer & Wyma, 2006; Borghuis et. al. 2010).

**Research questions**

RQ 1: Do Dutch-Moroccan youth engage in online forum discussions more in comparison with Dutch youth?

RQ 2: Is there a gender specificity in online forum discussion engagement among Dutch-Moroccan youth?

RQ 3: What are the purposes of online forum discussions among Dutch-Moroccan youth?

**Methodology: triangulation**
Our methodology consists of a triangulation of large-scale quantitative, and small-scale qualitative approaches. We conducted a survey among 1408 students across all school levels of secondary education in the Netherlands. Subsequently, from 343 Dutch-Moroccan survey respondents, 30 youth (15 boys and 15 girls) aged between 12-17 years old participated in in-depth interviews. Of these, 13 girls and 5 boys were forum users.

**RQ1: Dutch-Moroccan youth use forums more**
Do Dutch-Moroccan youth engage in online forum discussions more in comparison with Dutch youth?

A). **Yes, Dutch-Moroccan girls are more active on forums** Dutch-Moroccan girls participate more in forum discussion than Dutch-Moroccan boys. 29% of girls reported to participate 4 days or more, while just 12% of boys participate 4 days or more (Bivariate correlation is significant at .01 level).

**B). Yes, Dutch-Moroccan girls are more attached to forum discussions in comparison with boys.** Dutch-Moroccan girls would miss forum discussion more than Dutch-Moroccan boys. 18% of Dutch-Moroccan girls reported they would miss it ‘very much’, while only 4% of boys reported they would miss it ‘very much’. (Bivariate correlation is significant at .01).

**RQ 2: forum engagement is gendered**
Is there a gender specificity in forum discussion engagement among Dutch-Moroccan youth?

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**RQ3: forums for community & asserting voice**
On forums, ‘people tell stories, or they want comparisons. Saying they want to identify with Moroccan culture through the internet, like “do you also have it that your father eh complains about this and that?” Everyone responds: “yeah, yeah, me too”.’ - Boy, 15 yr.

As interviewees told us, Marokko.nl and Chaimala.nl are sites where especially Dutch-Moroccans can be found. Users post mostly in Dutch, interspersed with Arabic and Berber words. Our informants ‘feel at home’ and gather to ‘give their opinion’, ‘often about things that are familiar’ to them. ‘The people there are like you, that is nice’. Some start new romantic relationships, some share jokes, or conduct political discussions:

In Dutch newsmedia, there is ‘often negative talk about Moroccan youth’, on the forums, there are ‘often counter voices’. There, ‘they are allowed to show it is not like that’, ‘they also look from good perspectives, about good things, instead of only bad things’. ‘Topics that are not discussed everywhere’. ‘There are also many topics about racist people etc. Also many about Geert Wilders’. ‘Most of the time they don’t dare it in real-life, than they just do it on the internet. I think that is a good thing’.

Most are aware some Dutch people do participate, but others add ‘there is almost no-one who reads it, only the Moroccan youth themselves, so that does not help’. Conflicts also take place on the boards, for instance sometimes people get jealous of popular users. ‘That is often the case with people who have many reactions, because they get hacked most often’. Dutch-Moroccan girls oriented boards and rubrics are praised as places where girls enjoy discussions ‘among ourselves’, about cooking, fashion, but ‘honestly speaking mostly they are about romantic stories’. Taboo topics are addressed, which is appreciated because sometimes ‘you cannot discuss them at home, but you can discuss them there’.

**Conclusions: forum as ‘subaltern counter public’**
Byrne likens ethnic forums to ‘hush harbors’, referring to spaces where slaves could speak freely away from their masters (2008). Similarly, Dutch-Moroccan youth appear to turn to discussion boards because there, some feel more free to assert their gendered voices. By gathering, a community is formed: a parallel, online ‘subaltern counter public’ that speaks back at the dominant public sphere (cf. Fraser, 1990, p. 67 and Habermas, 1962/1989).

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