

# VESTLANDSFORSKING

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## ETHNIC MINORITY YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN NORWAY

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## **FORWARD**

This research project: '*Ethnic minority youth participation and consumption of social media in Norway*' from 2010 to 2011 looked at how ethnic minority immigrant youth in Norway not only use social media but also how they negotiate issues of identity, self-representation and public discourse on migration and minority concerns.

Our gratitude goes to the Norwegian Media Authority (Medietilsynet) and Rådet for Anvendt Medieforskning (RAM) who through financial support made this investigation possible. We also wish to thank the youth that participated in the investigations by giving us access to their digital platforms and who graciously responded to our questions.

As researchers, being able to access the realms of media practices of the subjects of this study has provided us with better understanding of how young people work out the issues of their identities through texts, images and audio-visual presentations shared with peers across diverse contexts. For us, it has been rewarding to see media as arenas of struggle and reward continually negotiated through constant engagement with audiences.

Sogndal, 01.05. 2011

Carol Azungi Dralega

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## ***SUMMARY***

This study investigates the ways in which immigrant youth in Norway engage with social media and how they make sense of the media content they consume and produce. The study addresses issues related to new media, youth, representation, self-presentation, identity, migration, and participation.

The investigation offers an empirical and theoretical analysis of immigrant youth's relationship with the public sphere, civic engagement, and what participating means for them in the first place. It uses approaches derived from what is commonly termed "British Cultural Studies". As such it is not only concerned with what these youth do on the Internet or the dynamics of their relationship with digital and online media, but most importantly, the social and interpersonal processes through which they construct and define the meanings of everyday life and of the society they live in through the process of production and consumption. The study is equally concerned with issues of empowerment, agency, and change.

The study provides insights into the in-between spaces where young people work out the unique contours of their identities, as they communicate their orientations in texts and images shared with others across diverse contexts. Through the young people's experiences, we see media as sights of struggle where the subjects continually negotiate the different aspects of their individual and collective selves. The study reveals that (social) media – as liberating as often conjectured in theory - is not always a story of ultimate freedom, but rather a process, which varies between avoiding, resisting and succumbing to fixations and essentialisms.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This project lies at the intersection of two areas of interest that are impacting the Norwegian nation-state: contemporary migration and the entry of immigrants into an increasingly multicultural society on the one hand; and the proliferation of digital and online media on the other.

There has been a remarkable change in Norway and other Scandinavian communities caused by the growing number of immigrants and refugees. One of the biggest challenges for the Norwegian state that until recently has been rather culturally homogenous is how to integrate its immigrant minorities – politically, socially and culturally. Chief among these challenges is how best to create possibilities for all members of the population to participate politically, socially, and culturally, in public life – in other words, opening spaces especially for the voices of marginalized to be heard and acknowledged in society. With non-western immigrant youth<sup>1</sup> as is our focus, the challenges are mainly double fold. Firstly, they are at a crucial stage in life between adolescence and adulthood where they are in search for an identity, and where they have to define their role in society. In addition, as young migrants they belong to a social category that is often constructed in dominant media, socio-political discourses as a constitutive “Other” that is excluded from an “Us” that designates a Norwegian national identity. As other youth in general they are often excluded from arenas of power such as the media and politics, where discourse about them is constructed. They are often “spoken about” rather than given a public voice of their own.

The second development that is defining change in the Norwegian society is the proliferation of digital and online technologies often referred to as “Web 2.0”. These (social) media are opening avenues for young people to create, share, publish and deliberate on media works. Social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook, blogs, online journals, and media-sharing sites such as YouTube, are all examples of sites that enable Norwegian youth to engage in everyday creative media production. Commentators are beginning to consider this new ecology’s potential to reshape the conditions under which young people engage with media and culture, moving youths from positions as media consumers to more active media producers.

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<sup>1</sup> We are looking beyond the generational disparities between first, second or 1.5 generations as this narrows and convolutes the focus. Instead we are treating immigrant youth as those with a non western background. More on these choices see methodology section below.

Henry Jenkins (2006) describes this as a “participatory culture” where budding creators can develop their voices and identities as media creators through ongoing interaction with peers and wider audiences (Jenkins 2006). Since these new technologies have become accessible to most youth in Norway today, including immigrant youth, one can argue that these technologies can potentially open up new spaces for immigrant youth to participate in a Norwegian public sphere, from which they have in the past largely been excluded.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This project contributes theoretically and empirically, to three main areas within contemporary social and cultural studies: media and migrant/diasporic communities, youth and the media, and youth and politics.

Firstly, ‘ethnic minorities and the media’ has for long been an established area of research in European and North American contexts and is fast becoming so in Scandinavian countries. In Scandinavia, research on immigrants and the media has mainly focused on two areas: the representation of immigrants in the mainstream media, the use of both mainstream and diasporic media by minority groups (see Christiansen, 2003; Nikunen, 2007, Tufte, 2002; Alghasi, 2007; Mainsah, 2009). Research on ethnic minority representation in mass media in Scandinavia highlights the ways in which minorities are portrayed in mainly stereotypical, negative, and essentialist ways. Research on ethnic minority media consumption has revealed the complex manner in which they negotiate cultural identities, a sense of belonging and connectedness between ancestral home and host nation. By contrast, there is very little documentation and research on immigrants as media producers.

Earlier research on media consumption has established the importance of the media in young people’s life experiences (see Buckingham 2006; Fisherkeller 2002). While there has been increased attention internationally in research on young people and social media (see Boyd 2007; Stern 2008), there has been relatively little documentation in Norway on young people as media producers and of youths’ interpretations of the meaning of their media products. Some media educators such as Chàvez and Soep (2005), Goodman (2003), Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2004) have pointed out that media production can lead to youth empowerment through the development of self-expression. The belief is that by shifting youth identity from a media consumer to media producer is an important tool for developing youth voice, creativity, agency, and new forms of literacy in ways inconceivable in other circumstances or through



traditional media. Secondly, this project revisits the debate on youth, politics, and the public sphere. Discussions about young people's relationship with politics have often reached pessimistic conclusions as evidence about declining levels of conventional knowledge and participation typically lead observers to conclude that young people are merely ignorant, apathetic, and cynical. Such assertions are frequently articulated as part of a broader concern for the apparent decline of "civic virtue and "social capital" prominent in Western countries (e.g. Pippa 2001; Hart, 1994; Putnam, 1995; Buckingham, 1999). Research in the UK suggests that young people's use of, and interest in news media is minimal. Only 6%, according to the same research, of young people watch TV news, while their reading of newspapers focuses largely on entertainment, features, and sports pages (Harcourt & Hartland, 1992). Other similar research repeats the findings that young people express a low level of interest in media coverage of political affairs (Cullingford, 1992; Buckingham, 1996).

However, some critics have turned the coin around, suggesting that young people are not as apathetic or irresponsible as portrayed, but rather that they are positively disenfranchised (Bhavani, 1991; see also Buckingham, 1999; Dralega, 2009; Dralega, Due & Skogerbø 2010). They argue that young people's apparent lack of interest in politics is merely a rational response to their sense of powerlessness and sometimes suppression of freedom of expression. They see no point or have no choice in participating in an arena in which they feel they have no influence. These debates are in many ways linked to discussions surrounding Habermas' (1962/1989) treatise of the public sphere, which assumes a literate, informed, and rational public willing to deliberate and recognize the position of others.

Habermas argues that while some types of marginal voices do have a legitimate place in the "wild life" of the political public sphere, they need to be translated into the institutional and neutral language of formal state bodies in order to be taken up in policy and regulation agendas (Habermas 2006). In Norway today, the voices of youth in general, and immigrant youth in particular do not have a self-evident location in the public sphere. They are scarcely represented in the arenas such as traditional mass media and politics, where dominant discourse about their situation is constructed and articulated.

The 'hypothesis' underlying this research is based on the belief that, the current proliferation of new forms of digital media production and consumption (notably social media) can provide a platform for reframing these long-standing debates about media, youth, migrants, public participation, and representation. Afterall, what is unique about the current media ecology is

not only that it has become easier to create and distribute media texts, but that it avails to youth, the potential to create new spaces where they can communicate their ideas and feelings among their peers and possibly to a wider audience. Social media opens up the potential for youth to speak, for their voices to be heard and be able to express minority concerns often overlooked in mainstream discourses.

### **3. AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The project focuses on the use of digital and online media by immigrant youth in relation to participation in the Norwegian public sphere. The aim is to provide a description and produce a typology of ways in which immigrant youth participate in public spaces on the World Wide Web, to explore the limits and potential of the Web as an inclusive public space within the Norwegian context. The following research questions derive directly from the above-cited aims:

1. In what ways are ethnic minority youth participating in the production and consumption of social media in Norway? What cultural discourses do they articulate in their creative productions and discussions? To what extent and in what ways are these related to the dominant discourse on immigrants and on their own situation?
2. To what extent (and in what ways) do young immigrant media producers find an audience for their digital productions and what potential do they have of being heard and acknowledged?
3. To what extent and in which ways do they participate in the broader civic public sphere context?

To answer these questions, the study draws information obtained from a series of data methodologies described below. These methods were aimed at gaining insight into the micro processes of daily uses, actions, interpretations and reflections, as they engage with information and communication technologies<sup>2</sup>.

### **4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

Given that the project focuses on participants' everyday use of the Internet, we needed to produce a research design that could permit us to examine all relevant contexts or sites of

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<sup>2</sup> The research questions, methods and publication activities have slightly been modified (compared to those in the original application) in accordance to the budgetary reduction and subsequent time constraints.

interaction. Instead of following a specific field site, we decided to make our participants the central point of focus of the study. We took an approach similar to that of Nicola Green (1999), who argues that Internet technologies are best studied through a flexible method where the researcher follows people and the stories about and by them. Therefore, our approach consisted of identifying a group of individuals that fit our constructed category of “immigrant/ethnic minority”, following them back and forth through different online contexts joining and participating in the online communities they were part of while taking into account the wider socio-cultural context in which our research subjects were immersed.

Three main methods were used to address the research questions: in-depth interviews, analysis of online input referred here from as texts (i.e. texts, videos, pictures, etc) and online participant observation. The in-depth interviews aimed to provide reflective constructions of identity, information about the practices and ideological production taking place within the media contexts in which the participants took or had taken part. The textual analysis aimed at examining the ideological constructions embedded in the texts the subjects of the study produced on the Internet. While the observations helped to better take note of and understand the flows, state of mind and developments within the participations online activities. Below is some more depth to the approaches.

#### **4.1. PARTICIPANT SELECTION**

The data for this study was drawn from a sample of 20 young individuals who were 16-20 years old. This sample was based on two main criteria: they had to be users of digital online media for either social networking or self-expression; and secondly, they identified themselves partly or entirely with an ethnicity or nation other than Norway. Participants were recruited from physical locations as well as online, i.e. some of the participants were recruited at recreational centres for youth and other after-school meeting places in Oslo and Sogndal. Others were recruited from popular Norwegian social networking websites or personal blogs.

The participants came from different parts of Norway. Thus the sample consisted of participants from both urban and rural areas. Throughout this report we refer to the research subjects as either ethnic minorities or immigrants. It is important to point out that terms such as ethnic minorities or immigrants are in fact constructed categories. By choosing to refer to the research subjects as “immigrants” or “ethnic minorities” we recognize that we might face the danger of reproducing the same discourse that reifies their identity and lived experience, in

contradiction with empirical evidence. Ethnicity is a vague construct that has a range of meanings varying from skin colour, culture, language, religion, place of birth, behaviour, making it impossible to define. In the Norwegian context it usually depicts those that do not belong to the predominant ethnic Norwegian majority population, which is white. This discourse of otherness raises a fundamental question, that is: How long must a person live in Norway for them to be, to feel or to be seen by others as nothing else but “Norwegian”? Nevertheless, our participants characterized themselves as not being entirely “Norwegian”,

The composition of our sample was not representative of the diverse population of ethnic minorities in Norway. Consequently, the results from this study can be said to be culturally typical, rather than universal. Rather than opting for a statistically representative sample, we selected a sample that would enable the study to examine the issue of media and cultural identity adequately.

## **4.2. THE INTERVIEWS**

In order to examine the reflections of ethnic minority youth on how they experience the process of expressing themselves on the Web and what it means to them, we carried out in-depth interviews with the 20 participants. The interviews lasted approximately an hour each. The research methodology was informed by the need to ensure that we adequately “give voice” to the research participants. Drawing also from cultural studies approaches, this study operated on the principle that each person’s voice and their reflections on the meanings of their actions matter. Thus it was not sufficient to just study the actions of the participants and analyze the texts they produced. Interviews provided information and reflections about the participant’s choices, motivations for their experiences on these sites and what these meant to them. For the purpose of anonymity, we used pseudonyms in place of real names, and we tried to leave out all kinds of personal information that might lead to a direct or indirect identification of informants.

Before each interview we gave the participants information about our research, our contact details, and sought their consent in addition to explaining issues of confidentiality and anonymity.

## **4.3. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

Given that the concern of this study was linked to users’ online experience, it was necessary to go online in order to gain familiarity with the cultures and discourses of users’

online activities. We devised a method that centred on individuals' engagement with online spaces rather than the online spaces themselves. This methodology enabled us to focus on the individuals' online activities in a biographical manner. The immediate methodological outcome of this approach is the necessity to identify and gain access to the different contexts in which the participants were active.

The observation of the participants' online activities took place from June to September 2010. The nature of such sites required that we become participants ourselves, as access is gained through site registration with a username, password and email address and by creating a user profile. Since we wanted to understand the context of the different activities we were observing, we indicated on our profiles on each site our status as researchers, and the purpose of our presence at the site, and we requested people to tell us stories about their experiences. In addition, we sent messages directly to potential participants, inviting them to tell us about any interesting online experiences, and also to give permission to observe their personal profiles. We became "friends" with all the recruited participants, which gave us full access to their sites. In addition to the participants' profiles we also looked at the participants' other profiles in each of the sites they used, so as to understand the different contexts in which the participants' online activities took place.

#### **4.4. ANALYSIS OF ONLINE TEXTS**

We collected samples and conducted a textual analysis of the archives of the participants' personal profiles or blogs. Since some participants each had profiles in several social networking sites, we chose one blog or profile for each interviewee from the site they used most.

Prior to the analysis we organized print-outs of screen shots into categories, such as written text, photos, videos, and graphics. Since the purpose of the analysis was to understand how identity was constructed on the profiles, we categorized the range and character of discourses represented in word meanings, metaphors, and cultural references. In the analysis of the profiles from the Norwegian site, the focus was on how the profile users positioned themselves in relation to the ascribed *Otherness* characteristic of dominant discourses about immigrants. We also focused on the multiple orientations and cultural influences represented in the different elements of the profiles.

#### **4.5. THE RESEARCHERS**

*Henry Mainsah* completed his doctorate at the Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo in 2009. His thesis explores the use of the Web and digital media by ethnic minority youth in Norway in relation to identity construction and the formation of transnational social networks. He has previously done research on media use by African immigrants in Norway. He has administered and taught the course: "Media and Globalization" at the department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo.

*Carol Azungi Dralega* completed her doctorate at the Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo in 2009 and now works as a researcher with Western Norway Research Institute (Vestlandsforskning) in Sogndal. Her Phd was in the area of ICT and marginalisation, the digital divide and implication for social change. She is currently involved in several other related projects with topics revolving around: digital public service delivery for marginalised citizens, ICT and empowerment, multiculturalism and e-learning. All the projects are collaboration efforts between research, public and private sectors.

In addition *Ingjerd Skogseid* has been the scientific advisor *in the project*. She has a dr. scient. And currently works as a researcher at Vestlandsforskning. Her doctor degree is in informatics from the University of Oslo addressing rural innovation systems and development of information infrastructures (Skogseid 2007). Since starting at WNRI in 1995 she has been involved in project management and research in national and international projects. The projects are addressing a wide variety of topics, working with public sector, private businesses and civil society.

#### **5. CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SELF-REPRESENTATION**

One of the aims of this project was to examine to what extent the participants in this study draw on cultural sources such as nationality, ethnicity and popular culture – and most importantly to what extent their self-created online personas serve as platforms for either reproducing, resisting and transforming the ascribed identities that are usually attributed to immigrant youth through public discourse.

There has been a lot of public debate and indeed research in the area of immigrants or ethnic minorities and the media in Norway and in other Scandinavian countries. In all these discussions there has been a consensus that the mass media is one of the main

culprits in relations to the way in which immigrants and ethnic minority groups were portrayed in public discourse in Norway. In these reviews, the media's discourse on immigrants and ethnic minorities is often described as negative, sensationalistic, essentialist, and stereotypical. Moreover, the dominant discourse on the Norwegian multicultural society operates on a divisive notion that separates an imaginary "us" (white, ethnic Norwegian) from a "them" (particularly immigrants of non-Western origin). This discourse places them in the same category of individuals who all have one thing in common; that is that they come from a nation state or an ethnically defined district in another country than the one they live in, and that they are "different" from the natives. In this construct, terms like "immigrants", "Muslims", "Africans" or "Thai" carry normative recipes on how to view "them" as different from "us", the natives. It is within this context that the young individuals in this study have to negotiate a sense of self, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity.

There has been a lot of research on ethnic minority audiences in Scandinavian countries; how they consume the mass media of their host country, how they relate to the mass media discourse on immigrants and immigration, and how they construct their identities in this context. The advantage of studying minority youths' use of social media in particular and the Internet in general, is the fact that it allows us to examine them not just as consumers of media messages, but as media producers as well. An examination of such digital cultural production can serve as entry points for studying identity, for it is at least partly through the process of interacting with and through technologies that identities can be tested, experienced, shared and de/reconstructed.

In order to address these issues we have undertaken a textual analysis of personal profiles authored by the participants in this investigation on Norwegian social networking sites. In the analysis we have examined textual input such as screen names and introductory messages, as well as visual elements such as photographs and video clips. All these features constitute the main building blocks in creating an online persona on the site.

## **5.1. MEANING BEHIND SCREEN NAMES**

When creating a profile on a social networking site, one of the first things users are asked to do is to choose a screen name. Our main argument for studying screen names, as well as other elements of the profile, is that users consciously choose them and that these names

reflect the users' knowledge of the social relations and the contexts in which they live.

From a linguistic point of view, the screen names revealed a varied mix of languages and styles. Some of the names comprised of a mix of different languages like Spanish, English, or French, for example, in such screen names as Maroc-Senorita, Loco-boy). In the first example, the user mixes Maroc, which is French for the country Morocco, and Senorita, Spanish for young lady. In the second example, the user mixes Spanish Loco (crazy), with the English name Boy. There were equally some screen names that we found difficult to interpret because they were drawn from other languages such as Urdu (Mirchi, and Aap Ke Liye), or Eritrean (Binjam).

Another group of screen names indexed broad regional or cultural collective entities (Latina4life, Persian, Mama Africa and Afroman), in which reference is made to Latinos, Persians, and Africans. Others such as (Afghan4Life, Iran 707, ColumbiaFARC, LittleFilipino) referred to nationalities. In addition, a number of screen names, like LaNeGrita, Mocca, BrownSugar, and Chocolate, Blackdoll drew on racial references by associating screen names to physical features such as skin colour. So in the case of names such as BrownSugar, Chocolate, and Mocca, the users draw on references from the African American community in the US, where "brown sugar" and "chocolate" are expressions depicting brown skin.

Among some of the screen names we found interesting configurations that draw on typical teenage gender stereotypes such as in AngelGurl, MissHotty and Queenie, Dudesosexy or even Blackdoll. Remarkably, gender is also expressed in screen names in combination with ethnicity and race, as in Pakiz Darling, Maroc Girl, and African Princess.

Besides references to gender, ethnicity, and race, we found other categories of screen names, which were inspired by popular culture. In screen names such as JoeRastaman, Ghetto Queen and BigPimpin we found a pattern of indexation of popular references from HipHop and Reggae subcultures. Screen names such as Fremmed for example meaning stranger in Norwegian are reflective of perceptions of oneself as an outsider.

What all these screen names gives us is an indication of how these young immigrants position themselves in relation to how they are defined and perceived in the Norwegian collective consciousness. The screen names analysed were quite distinct in style compared to other screen



names belonging to young ethnic Norwegian users. Examples of some of screen names chosen by ethnic Norwegian teens were names such as Tina, Sondre, Tonye, or Steffen. Such screen names, which in essence are expressions of personal identity, lie in contrast with those of minority teens analysed above, which expressed rather collective identities like ethnicity, and race.

## 5.2. INTERPRETING INTRODUCTORY MESSAGES

In most social networking sites there are spaces allocated for users to write introductory messages describing themselves, their interests, and whom they would like to connect with. As such, this provides an opportunity for profile page owners to expand the categorical presentation of information provided by the template to include their self-descriptions in narrative form. Self-introductory messages were one of the significant textual modes of identity construction on the site. For most of the participants, the question “where are you really from?” was central to the process of self-introduction on the site.

In the following example, the user cited below introduces herself as follows:

I was born in and currently live [in] Oslo but I am from Chile and I bear a part Chile in my heart. In my free time I am usually together with my best of friends and mi amor Lotte. I don't know what I would have done or become if I hadn't met you. Tu eres mi luz !!! I love you so much dear. ha. Love you very much, my bitch... if you have a question just write on my guest book or send a message.

(Retro Chilean, 17-year-old girl) (Translation of Norwegian text)

Retro Chilean uses her introductory message to enact socially situated identities.

In the phrase “I was born in and currently live in Oslo but I am from Chile and I bear a part of Chile in my heart” she expresses an important component of a double consciousness evident in her divided affiliations between two nations, Norway and Chile. In Retro Chilean's self-presentation, her Chilean heritage seems to be a central part of her presented self, since she starts off her self-presentation by mentioning that. For Retro Chilean, ethnic origin is prioritized as a means of introducing herself. Through the description of daily activities he also indexes a local identity linked to a particular place in the Norwegian context.

While in the examples given above the ethnic minority profile authors prioritized the personal and individual over the communal, in the cases in this section, communal belonging is more prioritized. The following example is an illustration of this.

### **Bosnian pride**

Bosnian pride is what u see

Bosnian pride forever i'll be.

On top is where we stand.

A true Bosnian born is what I am!

I know where I'm at, so step aside, people near

and far. Know not where and what we

are. Look here, I got one more thing to say:

**BOSNIAN PRIDE TILL THE DAY ILL DIE!!!!**

(Bosniangurl, 17-year-old female) (Originally written in English).

Here we see another style of self-introduction that is figurative, rather than literal. In contrast to Retro Chilean who introduces herself by presenting biographical information, Bosniangurl uses a popular poem copied from the Internet. The poem is nationalistic, patriotic, and celebratory in relation to Bosnian identity. Coupled with her screen name Bosniangurl's self-introductory message serves as a potent symbol of her cultural identity. She uses poetic text to express and convey her loyalties to her Bosnian identity. As the examples presented later will show, the internet provides these youth with easy access, and possibilities for appropriating a variety of online resources thus making the process of self representation fun, creative, personal and easy.

We also see how some of the participants routinely switch between different languages. The example below further illustrates how code choice and language mixing are mobilized to articulate identity through self-presentation.

Er halv Italiensk – halv Perser

Venner r noe man aldri skal miste!!!

To in donya chizi mesle doste khob nist

Glad I alle dere!

Amo italiano le ragazze...

(Persian, 19-year-old boy)

Am half Italian – half Persian

Friends are what one should never lose!!! (Line 1-2 in Norwegian)

In this world, there isn't anything better than that (Persian)

Love you all! (Norwegian)

I love Italian girls (Italian)

In this excerpt we see how the user makes use of different language codes to reflect his cultural origins. He identifies himself as half Italian-half Persian, a fact that is reflected, in his self-introductory message written partly in Norwegian, partly in Persian, and partly in Italian. The social language of his introductory text is not “pure” in the sense that he mixes his language varieties in complex ways for specific purposes. Persian’s introductory message is a metaphorically creative exercise in code switching, mixing social languages drawn from Italian, Persian and Norwegian.

### **5.3. THE USE OF IMAGES FOR SELF REPRESENTATION**

Another means through which the participants represented identity in online spaces was through the creative use of images. Two main categories of images are referred to in this analysis; the profile photos, or other personal photos, on the one hand, and on the other hand all other *images and videos copied from external sources*. Although the common practice was to use self-portraits as their profile photos, some users used other types of images for their profile photos.

In the profile photos of some of the participants they used objects such as national flags, and pictures of celebrities. On Turk 92’s profile photo, there was a child kissing the Turkish flag wearing a cap with the word “Turkey” written on it. On one of Lina’s pictures she is wearing a dress printed with Africa maps and is pointing both thumbs to her chest. Cmasta (originally from Iran) has several pictures of herself with darker skinned friends. On some of the profiles we observed the use of the pictures of celebrities such as Tupac Shakur, Christina Aguilera, Willow Smith as well as Nollywood, Bollywood and Arab pop stars, as profile photos. The use of symbolic images like flags was one of the many ways in which the participants expressed ethnic identity and belonging. The use of celebrity pictures as profile pictures was a means of conveying to other users an interest in the same popular culture phenomena that are common to young people all over the world.

Social network sites are environments par excellence for the practice of cultural bricolage, in the form of copying and pasting of images and text, in a conscious act of selection,

manipulation, and appropriation of popular images. This practice of copying and pasting images and text from many different sources is at the core of many teenagers' individual expression, as was evident on the profiles of the participants. An example of the creative copying can be seen on the profile of 16-year-old Sissy Palestinian. In her written self-presentation she does not really say much about herself besides mentioning the fact that she was of Arab origin.

Apart from this brief introduction, most of what the investigator learns about the owner of the profile is through the images and graphics she has placed on her page. In one of the images, she has not only copied graphic signs but has re-fabricated them to give it a personal touch. In the image in question she copies media objects from another website (a pink heart and animal footprints) and incorporates them into a blank image frame where she had pasted pictures of herself together with two of her friends. She subtitles the image thus: "Princesses of Arab – ha ha my work of art".

In another picture, which she embeds on her profile, the user gets a hint of her political views. In this picture there is a hand with two fingers raised in a sign of peace with a Palestinian flag in the background, with the caption "Free Palestine". Similar to the previous profile analysed in this section, the author has placed a picture of the Egyptian singer, Tamer Hosni. Both of these images suggest that the author takes an interest in other Arab voices. It is through such connections that the user develops a sense of the author's identity and her position as a node within various extended communities (Miller and Mather, 1998, cited in Leung, 2005). In the middle of her profile she has posted a verse from the lyrics of a song titled, "Long time coming" by the British artist, Oliver James. This interest in youth popular culture shows multi-dimensionality in her cultural repertoires.

The indexing of symbols and icons of hip-hop is a recurring feature in many of the other profiles observed in this study. The profile of Sugardaddy, an 18-year-old male user, for example, is saturated with references to hip-hop. In his self-introductory statement, he writes in typical hip-hop slang: "What's really good ya'll? It's ur boy Suga so holla if you wanna". This is typical of hip-hop slang whose syntax includes alternative expressions (e.g. holla – call), alternative spellings (e.g. suga -sugar), alternative pronunciation, and conjoined words (e.g. wanna -want to). At the end of his self-introduction he makes reference to ethnicity with the word "ERITREA" written in capital letters. Besides the use of language, the images on the profile make reference to hip-hop culture in a variety of ways. On his picture gallery, there is a

picture of the Harlem-based hip-hop group Dipset and of an American rapper named Jim Jones. On his profile picture and in other pictures in his gallery, the user is seen wearing a loose-fitting hooded sweatshirt, typical of hip-hop fashion. On the profile picture, he is seen sporting cornrows, which are a traditional style of hair grooming typically used by people of African ancestry in many different regions of the world, and also popular within the hip-hop culture.

Another dimension mostly observed with small town dwellers<sup>3</sup> involves the immigrants sharing pictures, text and videos anchored to Norwegian contexts: these pictures include dudiesosexy's citizenship ceremony involving him and family on the occasion the mayor awarded them the Norwegian citizenship. Another involves Fremmed showcasing the beautiful sogne fjords and mountains in the background or Lina's video with her attempting to ice skate with two ethnic Norwegian friends holding her on both sides. Cmasta has a pictures showing 'waffles + litago=sant'. These texts are indicative of the multi layered lives the young immigrants live. They are not completely divorced from Norwegian social reality, they do have friends and enjoy what one would refer to as typical Norwegian culture – in addition to identifying as "others" that is not Norwegian.

In this section we have shown the different ways minority youth use to express their identities ranging from screen names, self-descriptions in the "about me" column and photos to other multi-media formats. Some identify themselves as mostly Bosnian or Egyptian (or whatever the country of origin of their parents), some as something between; some identified themselves as fans of transnational trends like hip-hop; a few chose not to express attachment to any collective identity but rather made self-descriptions related to personal identity. The analysis of screen names showed a dominance of names among young ethnic minority users that in one form or the other indexed ethnicity. In the self-introductory texts, the images and videos copied from other websites and pasted on their profiles indicate that ethnicity is a central theme in self-presentation online.

In this manner, the individuals whose profiles are analysed possess a certain cosmopolitan consciousness, the ability to manoeuvre in and between different cultures. The fusion of styles is also evident in the way in which they use language. The language practices involve the

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<sup>3</sup> Geographic differences between big and small towns played no significant role in access and use, rather our analysis suggests – immigrants in small towns experienced strong socio-cultural differences or bullying compared to our more urban dwellers. These strong physical experiences were clearly reflected in their web narratives.

mixing of different language styles and language codes including Norwegian, English, home country languages, urban Norwegian slang, and hip-hop slang. When all the profile elements analysed in this study were put together, each profile became a metaphor that bears testament to the ability of these youngsters to navigate across a range of different frames of reference in their process of identity work. The identities presented by the profile authors are multidimensional and complex as they combine a range of issues such as ethnicity, gender, local and global modes of identification and belonging. To a certain extent, the identities articulated on the profiles contrast with the dominant discourses about ethnic minority youth in politics and media that often view them through the lens of cultural extremes. In portraying multidimensional selves these youngsters create the potential for new “ethnicities” or new ways of imagining identity.

## **6. AUDIENCES AND AGENCY**

In this section, we look at some of the ways in which participants use their personal sites to express their thoughts feelings and perspectives about issues that preoccupy them. Keeping in mind, the period of adolescence is a time when young people devote to mapping out personal beliefs and values, and searching for who they are and how they fit within their social surrounding. Personal sites are one of the meaningful spaces where adolescents give a voice to such issues.

### **6.1. EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES**

Evidence from the interviews and the contents of the personal sites of the participants indicated that their inputs and activities were carefully chosen and followed up - especially for the very active users. Take for instance Lina, who is a self confessed online addict. She has about 150 fast readers and over 200 followers going through her blog on a frequent basis. She posted on her blog every single day (apart from one time during this study when she experienced “writer’s block”. She thus wrote a short note: “Sorry dear readers, today I will not post on my blog because I am in low spirits”. According to her, it was important to update ones profile on a regular basis and keep it aesthetically attractive to recruit new and maintain “old friends”. It was also important to visit others’ sites and post comments especially on her regular readers’ websites to encourage them to return comment on hers – ‘quid pro quo’.

The evidence indicated that the young immigrants’ sites served as spaces where they expressed and thought through issues related to their life experiences. One example is that of 17-year-old

Malian who posts a love poem titled “A place in my heart” on her profile page on a popular Norwegian social network site. At first glance, the poem seems like any other poem or song lyrics that teenagers have the habit of posting on their personal profiles to manifest their musical or lyrical tastes. However during the interview Malian reveals another special significance that this poem had for her. She had in fact posted the poem in memory of her friend who had died in an accident

Interviewer: Did you write “A place in my heart” by yourself?

Malian: Yes, but I wrote it together with a friend of mine who died last year...

She and a friend went for a bicycle ride on her birthday. Then a boy ... came driving with high speed and drove them over. Her friend was not hurt but she ...is her name, lay dying. She lay in a coma for three days and they had to decide she couldn't lie in a respirator anymore...she was only ... years old...so what I wrote I actually wrote together with her, so one can say this is in memory of her.

The posting of the poem on her profile suggests that the profile serves as a space, which Malian uses to deal with the traumatic experience of her friend's death. In this way, as evidence in several other platforms, personal sites are reminiscent of private diaries, where users also engage in processes of self-examination. Although Malian posted this poem on the blog section of her profile that is meant for soliciting commentary from the public little indicated that she wished to share the deeper meaning the poem had for with the general public. Because the public nature of personal sites, it is easy to overlook the personal significance they might represent for their owners. What is important in this case is neither whether the public can read the contents of her site or not, nor whether she gets any response, but process of self-examination and catharsis that might be triggered by the mere act of simply posting something that gives voice to a personal experience.

Among the many other images posted in her photo gallery was a black-and-white picture of a couple running on a grass lawn, photographed from behind. Inscribed into the picture were the words, “I'm never gonna leave you”. Besides the picture, Malian had posted a poem titled “Boy of my dreams”. The poem is about a boy that calls his girl beautiful all the time, who lies awake watching her sleep, and who always holds her hand in public. Below the picture, Malian had written, “Such a boyfriend I want to have”. Below this picture there were many comments written by other users. There were comments such as “My man is like that”, “I have already

found my dream man”, and “you can have me”. At the end of the page Malian posts a response to these comments: “Most guys are not like that. Many of them are such that they can hardly hold your hand, or say to their buddies ‘this is my girl’. Some of them just say, ‘I have found me a girl’ and nothing more. Only that, kind of”.

It was evident from this and other items on her profile that what Malian spoke about were all issues related to her life experiences. She speaks about these experiences in a coded manner with the meanings engraved in poetry, and images. This example illustrates some of the ways in which the Web provides these young people with diverse means of constructing and fashioning their expressions through images and words. The Web provides them with a space where they can speak out to an audience that identifies with them, acknowledges them and understands them.

Another way in which some of the participants used their personal profiles as a space for dealing with personal experiences could be seen in the cases of 17-year old Marius and 18-year-old Salman. On his profile page Marius describes himself as “Half-African, half-Norwegian”. His mother was ethnic Norwegian and his father from a country in West Africa. Marius was also deaf. During the interview Marius describes how due to his appearance and his physical disability he had suffered from a lot of bullying in school. On his profile page there was written a passionate announcement in strong condemnation of the practice bullying in secondary school. When I inquired during the interview about this announcement he revealed that it was related to real life experience:

This is because I support those who have been bullied by other pupils and because this happens a lot in secondary school. Just because my friends and me are deaf we are often bullied (Marius, 17).

Salman had also been victim to bullying in school. He described himself as shy in nature but found it easier to make friends and socialize on the social network site where he has a profile. On his profile he had also posted an announcement similar to that of Marius that condemned the practice of bullying. When asked why he posted the announcement he replied that it was because he wanted all the bullying to stop and he described the practice of bullying as “totally meaningless and a waste of time and energy”. Examples like these signal that in online spaces such as these where individuals such as Salman and Marius are free of external social pressures easily gain the agency to speak in such a way that they might not be able to within everyday social contexts.



Besides speaking out about experiences and everyday life issues, documenting cultural preferences is another role that personal profiles played for the participants. On her profile in an international social network site 16-year-old Halima posted music videos and poetry of the late African American rapper, Tupac, which she had downloaded from the Internet. During the interview she described the special relationship she had to the lyrics:

Tupac was a rap artist as well as a poet, really powerful poems. When I read them I feel “yes, this is true”, “this is what happens in the world”... When I listen to Tupac’s songs I feel strongly. I can relate with the texts. My favourite song is Dear Mama, where he thanks his mother for being a strong woman who managed to raise two boys. He honours his mother, in a way (Halima, 16).

Comments such as this show that these young people sometimes attach a personal significance to the images and music they post on their sites and that these provide meaning and value. On personal sites, images of celebrities and cultural icons can symbolize connections with particular subcultures or lifestyles. Besides denoting cultural preoccupations and aesthetic preferences, the use of cultural icons on personal sites as seen in the example above might provoke a process of self-reflection about participants’ life situation. While the issues that have been discussed here do not fall within the areas that have gained the attention of scholars that have studied the issue of voice in communication theory, it can be argued that the underlying focus is the same. The personal sites of the participants in this study serve as spaces where they could express themselves on issues that matter to them to a public comprised of their peers in a similar life situation. Their personal sites offer the possibilities of making public perspectives, and versions of reality that in other social contexts, might otherwise likely be discounted or discredited. The ability of having such a voice might be of particular significance during the period of adolescence, a time in life when young people consciously are in search of who they are and how they can fit within their fragmented social worlds.

## **6.2. CRITICAL SOCIAL DEBATE**

For some of the participants in this study, social networking sites and blogs served not just merely as a means of self-presentation and networking with friends. In the examples below, we see how participants used the spaces of their blogs as a forum for actively confronting the question of racism.

During the interviews one of the participants, expresses her hatred for racism and how she takes every opportunity whenever she can to write against it. On one of her blog posts she

writes:

Cmasta: Racists are ignorant bastards. Because of their ignorance they think all non-ethnic Norwegian looking people are criminals, poor, or lesser than themselves... this is outright unacceptable... (Cmasta 17).

Cmasta did receive comments on her post with an ethnic Norwegian commentator quoting statistics of criminals in Norway being non-Norwegian. This discussion goes back and forth with these two disagreeing on whether immigrants are good or bad for Norway and addressing the question of stereotypes being perpetuated by the media. During our interview, Cmasta who also belongs to the associations "Stop Bullying my Friend: SOS Racism" admits that she hates the media and prefers to use her blog to fight negative stereotypes perpetuated by the media.

Another example involves Lina who writes a series of blog entries that ranged from sharing experiences and impacts of racism at school and seeking online advice, raising awareness about racism and addressing the problem of stereotyping against immigrant. On a blog post headline, that she placed under the category "serious issues", titled "*Black or White, Same shit*" she writes (original headline in English, text in Norwegian):

I am a girl with dark skin. I am slightly lighter than you. But I need help with two things: one. I am being bullied and hated because of my skin colour. I am being called words like monkey or nigger and many have began to use it as a banner in my presence...Almost no one in class wants to sit near me in class, the gym or anywhere at school.... they laugh when I do something...people look at me as if I am *shit* because of my skin colour... I am proud of who I am but it is so difficult. I have no friends because I don't trust anyone, every one hates me and I am bullied almost everyday.... So, what can I do to make this stop or can you tell me what can help? ... Once when I entered class someone said loudly, I smell a nigger and everyone laughed. The teacher asked the boy to stop such behaviours. It did but after a few days the teasing continued...

I don't want to talk about it home and no one know about it... (Lina 16)

What is significant about these examples is the fact contrary to a lot of abstract discussions by celebrity commentators about racism that we see in the Norwegian mass media, Lina and Cmasta approach the issue from the perspective of personal experience. The testimonies in these blog posts affirm a salient problem in society especially in their lived experiences as minority ethnic youth in Norway. As pointed out earlier, the more severe experiences appear in the smaller towns where there may be fewer immigrants living in homogenous communities.

Personal experience contributes inherently in granting Lina and Cmasta's perspectives credibility and authenticity. In addition, when Lina says "I don't want to talk about it at home and no one knows about it", we see that this is an issue that she does not feel comfortable discussing with her parents at home. Her blog, on the other hand, seems to Lina a safe place where she can freely talk about issues related to her everyday life and where she can find people that would understand.

By using question phrases "I need help with two things" and "what can I do to make it stop", she adroitly employs rhetorical devices to not only testify to her personal experience, but to draw her audience to debate as well. In fact Lina does point out that she had received several positive feedback from her peers who like her were of immigrant origin and who looked at her as a role model because of what they termed her "powerful aesthetics, style and strength in dealing with challenges of racism". Lina's questions are answered among others by a friend who affirms how proud of her she is and how strong and wonderful Lina is and how she should not bother herself with the bullies. She describes the response from her audience as follows:

Lina: Now I've read through all the emails I've received from all you readers. It's been slow but sure, and I have answered all of them! But there was a letter that stood out a bit from the others. The letter written by a girl who is bullied because of her skin colour. Almost like myself when I started on undomskulen! So I asked her if it was okay that I made a post of her letter, and luckily I got permission to do so. Therefore I will now write a post on the topic bullying and racism. Here the letter she wrote to me...

On other occasions, however, she has drawn negative comments to her posts: For instance one comment to her self introductory picture received a comment: "what a large, ugly and nasty nose"; another comment to her picture of herself, some one commented: "this picture is too dark for me to see" – and this was not because this particular picture was dark at all, it was because she is dark skinned. And yet another comment to one of her videos was; "nice". She explained to this researcher that 'nice' was a derogatory term used by youth in her circles which means something like: "So she thinks she is so cool when she really isn't". Had she not explained this, I would have thought it was a complement.

By posting about experiences, awareness raising and generating discussion directed against racism, these youths are taking control and ownership of their own identity quagmire and raising their voices and also giving voice to other victims of racism – in what we refer to as a process of struggle and reward.

The results of the investigation thus show that the participants used online spaces to discuss a variety of issues ranging from personal to public and wider societal issues. One of the participants, Jonathan, wrote the following entry in a blog post titled “Women’s Day” on his profile:

Women’s day is the most unserious and screwed up days in the whole world. Who the hell gave these women women’s day anyway? Traitor. Women go around complaining about how bad they have it, and being all self-important...Just go on and have your women’s day but remember the rest of the 364 days are ours.

When we asked Jonathan why he wrote such an ‘anti-feminist’ blog entry about the Women’s Day he admitted that the text did not really reflect his real opinion about the issue. He had intentionally written it in a provocative manner in order to stir up debate. As the following excerpts from audience comments show, the provocation tactic seemed to have worked because he received a flood of comments, some of which were strongly opinionated:

Falcon 18 year female:

No! It is not in all sectors that we have equality between men and women. This is precisely why we have a women’s day. Besides it’s always nice for us to have a day where everyone can congratulate us and be nice to us.

Kari 18 year old female:

Are you joking? ...simply because you have a father that beats up his children and spits on his wife, this does not mean that is how things are in Norway...

Tomas 20 year old male

I agree totally!! They complain about earning less, meanwhile in cases when women have a better salary than men, men do not complain.

During the interview Jonathan gave the impression that he was particularly hurt by some of the negative comments such as the ones made by Kari above, which bordered on personal attack. Jonathan was born and bred in Norway of an Iranian father and a Norwegian mother. However, because of Jonathan’s Persian looks Kari seems to assume that he is an immigrant from a violent patriarchal culture where violence against women is a norm. This taps into one of the most common stereotypes against immigrants and immigrant cultures in Norway. During the interview, Jonathan revealed that he was surprised by the volume and voracity of

the response to his blog entry and that things seemed to have got out of hand.

This illustrates one of the important roles online spaces can play for youth in society. Online spaces can be seen as a context that promotes a form of civic literacy in the sense that it teaches young people what public debate is all about and how to negotiate one's way through it. Besides the use of written text our study also reveals other ways in which youth online spaces to engage in public discussions.

In other instances, we see that the participants also used other multimodal features of their sites to initiate discussion about a range of different issues. This could be observed on 17-year-old Afran's profile page. The photos on her photo gallery are distinctly different from the usual personal photos usually found on the pages of other teenagers. Above her photo gallery she addresses a sort of invitation to other Kurdish youth inviting them to look at the photos:

“Kurdish youth call themselves Peshmerga! Support one party over the other! But do you, fucking know what you are getting into?! Why hate PKK, PUK, or PDK? Don't they all work for a free Kurdistan?!...Take a look on the pics before u decide to call urself peshmerge again!”

The first three photos on her gallery are of the late Pakistani leader, Benazir Bhutto, one where she was alone, and the other were old photos of her besides her father Ali Bhutto and the former Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi. The next photo is that of the dead remains of a female suicide bomber with half of her body blown to pieces lying on a morgue table. The rest of the pictures are of dead soldiers slain in battle. Judging from her introductory note, the gruesomeness of some of the photos was aimed as a rhetorical device to demonstrate to the audience how much sacrifice has been put into the Kurdish struggle, and thus the need for unity in fighting for the cause. Through the picture one also senses an indirect feminist statement because the pictures depict female leaders and fighters. The photos reflect her strong affiliations and affinities for the Kurdish cause. Through these images Afran attempts to initiate a conversation about the political situation of the Kurds. The presence of numerous comments written by other users on some of these photos is evidence of the fact that her call was answered. On the photo of the dead and mutilated female suicide bomber there were a series of comments written by other users:

Solsiden said 12. Mar: Seriously speaking? Do you believe this is the way to go to get your own country...? I know I can't understand how it can feel not to have your own country, but do you think you ever will be able to get it this way...?

Afran said 11. Mar: ...Kurdistan has never been a country on its own, so far as I know. What do you suggest? Oral communication? Pssst

Oldebo said 10.mar: Is this not simply nasty? P respect (;

Afran said 09 mar: This is a Kurdish martyr, all respect to her -that I agree on. I am just trying to show people how far Kurds have gone to get their own country. Of course this provokes reactions. It is the whole point...I am a Kurd myself and I just want people out there to understand what it means to be a martyr and to know more about the Kurdish people's burning desire for their country

Maren said 08. Mar: \*\*\*\* Nasty

Res said 08. Mar: Wtf (what the fuck)? Æsj (translated from Norwegian)

Afran uses photographs and comments as an eloquent means of articulating and exploring who she is as a diasporic Kurd living in Norway with significant political and emotional ties to Kurdistan. She also uses images to provoke a conversation about these issues. In this manner her personal profile provides a space where she can seek to be heard and acknowledged. It appears that Mariama and Afran are not only using their personal sites as a platform to speak, but judging from the comments posted by other users, they are being heard as well. However the question to ask is who exactly is listening to their call. While the potential for exposure to a large-scale audience and for expansion of one's networks on social network sites is considerable, in practice, the audience of these youths' sites is mostly limited to their peers with whom they share similar interests.

### **6.3. TRANSNATIONAL RELATIONS**

The Internet is a prominent type of transnational social network that link migrants between their countries of residence and their homeland. To this end, the Internet is an excellent medium, since it transcends time and territorial boundaries in its production and reach. As a medium of connectivity through services such as instant messaging, chat rooms, and IP telephony, immigrants can be connected with family, friends and relatives situated in their home countries and those spread all over the world (diaspora). Diasporic online communities can serve to bring together diasporic individuals in virtual community. They can also serve as spaces where all members of a diasporic group can share information. One of the main functions of the Internet for young minority Norwegians is to seek, develop and maintain personal relationships through Instant Messaging, chat-groups, and social network sites. A large portion of this form of communication takes place with relations already established in

real life, which means communication with friends and family in Norway and abroad or with persons with the same interests, such as music, sports, and movies.

### *Ambivalence towards homeland community*

For many of the participants, connecting with kinship networks and diasporic community was something more of concern to their parents than it was for them. For example, communicating with relatives living abroad was a sort of ritual that they performed together as a family, often at the instigation of their parents, as Amir and Habid's accounts demonstrate below:

...we call almost on a monthly basis to hear how they are doing...the world has now become very small because of globalization, the telephone and SMS, so you can get answers back. So we call averagely once a month and whenever this happens, we are together with the family so we all get to talk. (Amir, 18).

It is such that when we can't travel to Iran that often, for example, we meet with my father, for, example at my mother's eldest brother's house to make calls. They either call us or we call them and then we talk. (Habid, 16).

While talking about how they kept in touch with their families in their parent's homeland, Amir and Habid both used the term "we", which indicates that this was a collective activity. They both explained during the interviews that their parents received phone calls from family members abroad, they would often make all the children talk to these relatives. Thus maintaining a connection with the homeland was more a preoccupation of their parents than it was for them.

Like all diasporic individuals, the participants in this study maintained family and other personal networks between their parents' home countries and other points of the globe. Online services such as instant messaging served to bind such personal networks transnationally, especially among family and friends of the same generation:

Interviewer: But these your MSN contacts, are these people from Oslo?

Halima: Yes, Oslo, London...my aunt and my cousins. I also have my sister and my uncle in Spain. Also in Ghana I have my cousin and former schoolmates. In Norway there is Oslo and Lillehammer, just friends from different places...

Interviewer: So you also have people in Ghana on MSN?

Halima: They go say to a Cybercafé so we can chat, and I say "hi, how are

you doing?” “What is happening?” what we are up to and things like that

In these youths’ online communication with personal networks, the issue of generation plays a major role. The participants indicated that the co-nationals they were more inclined to interact online with were family and friends of the same heritage who were in the same age group as them and with whom they had more in common.

Other types of transnational contact were often carried out at the instigation of their parents using the phone. Internet forums and other types of diasporic websites have been perceived as being important new arenas where transnational migrants can engage in social networking, information sharing, and expression. Such arenas might serve to bind communities and can also help shape imagined national communities on the Web. In this study however, only few of the participants professed any significant interest in participating in such spaces. There was a generational dimension to this issue because many of these diasporic websites usually focus on disseminating homeland news and discussions about politics. Such issues rarely resonate with youth, as the comments of one of the participants, Lidi illustrate.

Interviewer: Do you also read news from Eritrea?

Lidi: I often hear of it from my father because he always reads news and such.

Interviewer: Where does he get news?

Lidi: On the Internet. They have their own site on the Internet

Interviewer: Do you also visit this site?

Lidi: No. I don’t like the music there. It is like different types of music on the site...It is also kind of about political problems and such things do not interest me. I don’t really care. It is the mostly grown-ups that care about such things.

However within social networking communities popular among youth such as MySpace, Facebook these youth professed a particular interest in joining the “groups” that were about issues related to the homeland of their parents.

Interviewer: What type of groups have you joined (on Facebook)?

Dilek: There are many. Out of interest, I have joined the Turkish group of course. I have joined the...group. I don’t remember which. It is sort of a nationalistic thing may be



as...the group was formed by a Turkish man who... His group, "Turkish football", I am fanatical about it. I love it. I got it I believe from my father, football stuff and a little bit of jokes.

It is however important to point out that although the participants joined these homeland-related groups in social networking communities as means of articulating or feeling a sense belonging, they rarely participated actively in them. When we asked another informant why she joined a homeland group on Facebook she simply responded: "I really just wanted to show that I was a member there. It does not have any particular goal". This is comparable to a common practice within social network sites that scholars have highlighted - the articulation of relationships and cultural orientations. It is important to point out that articulations of "friendship" on these sites are not equivalent to real friendships in the normal sense. In other words, people might say they are friends on these sites without ever communicating with each other or engaging in any other form of meaningful relationship. In the same way, the informant quoted above might be joining her homeland to articulate group identity, rather than engaging in any concrete form of transnational networking or community.

They use the web to connect with family and friends across the world. However, although they might articulate group identity online, they showed little interest in actively participating in the different forms of imagined national community on the web where individuals of the same heritage gather, network, share information, and discuss about the homeland.

#### *Other communities of interest*

Although online relationships are usually a continuation of offline ties, the Web can also sometimes act as a meeting place for young people both for ephemeral encounters and continued exchange of experience, interests, and attitudes with new acquaintances. This was reflected in the comments made by Alam, a 20-year-old informant in appreciation of an international social network site she was a member of:

"The whole world is on Hi5. You can speak with the other people from the whole world and see what type of interests they have and what type of people they are and what they do in their free time. All this is interesting to hear"

People generally form ties more easily when they share a common interest. The young people

exchanged information and commentary sometimes on things such as poetry, music, dance, politics and humanitarian issues. These weak ties on the Web enforce the possibility of engaging in a multitude of networks according to immediate interest and curiosity. An illustration of the variety of interests and aspirations pursued by the participants was the case of Angela (20), a student dancer, for whom the social networking site, Myspace served as a means of widening her horizon of contacts who shared her interest for music and dance. She saw the international social networking sites as means of broadening her social horizons beyond Norway. She explains in the following exchange:

Interviewer: Why are you not on any of the popular Norwegian social networking sites similar to Myspace?

Angela: Because I would rather be on an international website. I like to meet people from all over the world, not only Norwegians

Interviewer: Don't you have Norwegian friends?

Angela: Yeah, I got some, but most are from other countries...I just got a lot of African, Asian, Latin American friends. Can't explain it. But I also got Norwegian friends too. We're one big colourful family...My friends are like my sisters and brothers cuz I don't have any family.

These sites enabled these youths to engage with different types of social networks and communities simultaneously. Thus it is important to underline the fact that the Internet provides the opportunity to build and maintain different types of relationships that reflect the different facets of the participants' identities. Social relationships are built on factors other than a claim to common culture, peoplehood, or history given by ethnic category. The case of one of the participants interviewed, Mira (21) was an illustration of such an orientation. She was a practising evangelical Christian who used the Internet to connect with people all over the world to discuss issues of faith. She had a specific goal to connect with people from different parts of the world. She commented:

...I am a God-fearing person, so as a Christian I discuss spiritual issues with non-believers...I have a profile on Vibesconnect. I get friend requests there all the time, then I can chose to add them or reject them, some of them write a message giving me a comment about my profile and they wanna be my friend etc. but what I do is that I check their profile first and then only add a few of them as my friend based on what is written on their profile, – and where they come from. If I already have a friend from Italy I don't add any other person from Italy because my goal is to maybe have one from every area of the world. But

I haven't had time to do all that – it's only one person I am working on one from Africa who was actually a Muslim, but I gave him some advice about some problems he was facing and used the word of God. Now he is very much interested in hearing more about the Bible. (Mira, 21).

Mira's online activities are reflective of similar practices that have been documented among African Pentecostal/evangelical Christians in the diaspora (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007) who consider the Internet as a medium for Christian outreach in the fulfilment of divine mandates to capture the world for Christ. These religious formations are known to maintain extensive global networks and they are inclined towards increased following, visibility, exposure, influence, and public presence. It is significant that evangelical churches do not identify themselves by the cultural or national identity of their members, or to any home nation but they rather situated themselves within a global Christian mission. Religion sometimes can help create solidarity and a sense of belonging that goes beyond directly connected social networks. The participants tended to be more active in other communities of "interest" online, rather than in so-called diasporic online communities.

On sites such as MySpace and Facebook, they networked with other peers who shared similar interests. They exchanged information and commentary sometimes on things such as poetry, music, and dance. However there was little to indicate that such relationships and forms of community were sustained over time. They tended to be superficial with non-personal relations and these lacked deeper meaning or thought. These weak ties on the Web enforce the possibility of engaging in a multitude of networks according to immediate interest and curiosity without necessarily requiring sustained engagement.

## ***7. PARTICIPATION IN BROADER PUBLIC SPACES***

The other aim of the investigation was to find out perceptions on participation in diverse and broader online public spheres. As argued in the conceptual framework earlier, having access to alternative spaces is particularly important for those marginalized in the mainstream cultural public spheres of society. Having a voice in any public space is dependent on the ability to be fluent in the tools of expression in that space, feeling secure, and having a sense of control or influence.

Traditionally, when the issue of immigrants has been discussed in the Norwegian context, it has usually been in reference to their relative absence from the public spaces of the mass media such as national broadcasting, and on commentary sections in newspapers, and online

discussion forums. We explore the issue of immigrant voices beyond traditional and institutionalized fora to the other spaces where their voices might be produced.

The interest in this research was in what makes the Web space a suitable arena for production of a voice for minority youth. In discussing this, we argue in favour of including a strong sense of these individuals' perspectives and understanding and having a sense of ownership and control. There is a need to understand the parameters that contribute to agency and how context shapes the process of self-expression. As a starting point it is useful to consider some of the factors that make the Web a preferred space for self-expression for the participants in this study.

In a period of adolescence characterized by uncertainty about self, space and territory are regarded as crucial for the facilitation of social networks and for marking out individual and collective identities. In spite of the extensive academic literature focused on the significance of web genres such as "virtual communities", blogs or "citizen journalism" or "public" discussion forums as new vehicles for democratic participation, it has become evident that the online facilities most popular among young people are those such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, personal blogs centered around social networking, but which contain mechanisms for file sharing and online journal platforms. During the interviews, the informants were asked whether they participated in discursive spaces produced by traditional mass media and other "serious" websites, and their perception of such technologies. It was clear from the informants' utterances that these were not the favourite contexts where they chose to express themselves compared to the cultural terrain offered by the favourite social network sites of the participants seemed to be more accessible for social action and agency. One could discern this sentiment when one of the informants was comparing debates on television with what they did on Facebook:

Interviewer: Is it difficult for young people like you to participate in debates on TV?

Minneh: Yes, that's true because I feel I will not be taken seriously. I don't know, maybe what I have to say wouldn't interest them. You need to get higher up the social ladder for your voice to be heard. We youth have not come there yet...

Interviewer: Is it different on the Internet?

Minneh: Yes, on the Internet you can contact anyone and say what you think. Facebook is that type of site where you can start a group and get those interested to join, and then it just

bobbles over...on the site you can link to several other things, for example the dance group, Turkish radio and such. It is a wide specter.

Another interview with a 20 year old male living in Sogndal shares this:

Interviewer: Do you participate in public discussions on TV or radio?

Fremmed: Absolutely not. I have no power to influence any changes. To me politics and power in Norway is inaccessible, it is out there with those that are discussing the issues not down here with me. Besides I do not have the skills, know how and it is not my goal because it is not realistic". Besides, power does not lie with me – it lies with Norwegians and the politicians who debate ethnicity. I don't have the power to change anything.

Yet another 16 year old immigrant that is quite active with her blog had this to say about participating in broader online debates:

Lina: " Participating in those public discussions is very scary. I feel like it is me against everyone else".

For her part, Cmasta confesses that she hates the media for their stereotypes. But on her blog, she clearly announces and debates issues such as racism. She has this to say:

Cmasta: I hate racism, whenever I have something to say I say it on my blog and encourage others to do the same.."

For youths like these above, who lack the necessary resources or trust to confront a broader mostly adult panel, social network sites are a preferred option where they are able to speak in terms favourable to them. It is important to stress the importance of the safety and individual freedom afforded by personal spaces to young people's use of social network sites. Social network sites provided the informants with a space that offered greater levels of personal ownership and control than other mainstream public spaces. The knowledge that they were partially insulated from the constraints and expectations of the outside world provided a feeling of comfort. Contrary to other conventional spaces, social network sites were spaces over which the informants themselves could regulate access, allowing only who they wish to enter their space, and making these boundaries public.

It is precisely because these personal sites were spaces where users can exercise symbolic and practical control over that many of the other informants found them conducive for expressing

themselves. The growing availability of digital media-production tools combined with sites where individuals can come in contact with others with shared interests has created a favourable environment for youth self-expression. The sentiment that was reflected in many of the interviews was that the easy-to-use nature of the architecture of certain websites, and the availability of numerous possibilities for content creation and networking were very motivating factors for self-expression. Consider for example these excerpts of statements made by three of the participants:

Yes, on the Internet you can contact anyone and say what you think. Facebook is that type of site where you can start a group and get those interested to join, and then it just bobbles over...on the site you can link to several other things, for example the dance group, Turkish radio and such. It is a wide spectrum. (Minneh, 19).

Because it is easier on Facebook. There you can spread information faster and reach more people. I feel that the other websites are a bit “dead”, to put it like that. For example, you can just create an “event” and invite everyone you know...this is not possible on other websites. (Afran, 17).

On my blog I write and post what I want, when I want and how I want (Lina 16).

The fact that, according to Lina, Minneh and Afran, it is “easier”, and that you can “contact anyone and say what you think”, makes social networking sites potential spaces where these youth can produce a voice.

One the other hand, the idea of being in a space that consists of other individuals in a similar situation is a motivating factor in terms of youth expression. When asked why they joined the sites that they used, they gave similar answers. It was usually because that was where all their peers were. It was also in the online communities consisting of peers that they preferred to engage in discussions and express their thoughts and opinions. Consider Afran, for example, who wrote a blog and participated in discussions on two popular Norwegian websites that were particularly popular among immigrant youth. When asked why she chose these sites she replied: “There I meet people with the same background as I who live in Norway. These are people I have much in common with”. There was thus a sentiment that the ideal space for self-expression was in a context within which one feels a sense of belonging, and where one has the necessary social and cultural capital to speak.

In addition, the ability to speak was closely linked to how well these youth appropriated the online spaces in which they participated. In order to explain this we will apply the metaphor

of street-frequenting youth, as presented in Robinson's (2000) study. Robinson shows that for street-frequenting youth the primary organization of space was a division of places into those that they felt to be safe and affirming, and those that they viewed as negative or from which they felt excluded. An important way young people signalled involvement with certain kinds of people and places was to exclude others. This desire to set borders to public spaces of interaction was largely reflected in the attitudes of the participants in relation to the online spaces in which they interacted. The participants generally reacted negatively to the presence of those who they considered as "outsiders" in the online communities in which they participated. The participants were generally suspicious of those whom they saw as not belonging to their peer networks. This involved two groups of people: those whom they feared wanted to prey on them – marketers and predators – and those who wanted to control them – parents, older members of the ethnic community etc.

The websites most commonly used by the participants were social networking sites. On these sites there were structural boundaries to public access. On some of these sites users could choose whether they wanted their profile to be public or "Friends only". On others one could gain access to users' profiles only after having been accepted as a "Friend". In addition, it was also possible on some of these sites for users to block access to their profiles from anyone whenever they wished. Besides these structural means of controlling space on these sites, users could also appropriate space through social conventions and practices. On the participants' online networks, knowledge of such conventions were also a means of determining who belonged and who did not. Take the example of Alima (16). She describes the language she and her peers use online as "slang". This "slang" is very common among youth in the suburbs in the eastern part of Oslo, where there is a high concentration of immigrant populations. Alima explained that she could tell who were "outsiders" just by the way they wrote:

Interviewer: If you met someone on the Internet who writes like I do what impression would you have of that person?

Alima: Yes, I would think that you are a sort of person who is kind of "straight"<sup>4</sup>. If you write your entire sentences perfect and without slang I would think that he is a "straight" person, kind of...

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<sup>4</sup> The interview takes place in Norwegian. "Straight" is borrowed from English and is used in slang to describe someone as too proper, geeky, or uncool.

She explained that she was always suspicious whenever adult men visited her profile because she was afraid of predators. Thus the ability to create boundaries through conventions, such as language, is a contributing factor to creating a space in which these young people could feel secure.

It is important to stress the importance of the safety and individual freedom afforded by personal spaces to young people's use of social network sites. Social network sites provided our informants with a space that offered greater levels of personal ownership and control than other mainstream public spaces. The knowledge that they were partially insulated from the constraints and expectations of the outside world provided a feeling of comfort. Contrary to other conventional spaces, social network sites were spaces over which the informants themselves could regulate access, allowing only who they wished to enter the space, and making these boundaries public. It is precisely because these personal sites were spaces where users can exercise symbolic and practical control over that many of the other informants found them conducive for expressing themselves as could be illustrated by the comments of 19 year old Rabia.

Interviewer: Do you have a hidden or open profile?

Rabia: No. I have a limited profile so only those who are in my network can see, I believe. But my friends can see everything.

Interviewer: Why do you have a limited profile?

Rabia: Because. I don't want everyone to see all my pictures and stuff like that...

Interviewer: Have you posted many pictures on your profile?

Rabia: I try to be kind of neutral, because it is a bit dangerous with all the Turks that are checking all the time...there are a lot of Turkish boys who go into profiles to make friends. It is not so cool when Turkish girls put picture out there of themselves with cans of beer sort of. No, it is not popular. It does not worry me though. I stand for what I believe in, but it is only certain types of pictures that are appropriate.

For Rabia because she can control access to her personal site it thus becomes a space where she can escape from social pressures of the local Turkish community, which sometimes extend online. Her decision to use the "limited profile" seems to be linked to the fact that she wanted to avoid the scrutiny of other Turks that might happen to visit her profile. In this sense,



personal profiles have significance similar to that of teenagers' bedrooms as a " safe place to escape, to spend time alone, to 'chill out', relax, daydream or be creative in an environment somewhat separated from the social pressures or rules associated with collective or public space such as school, college or work.

This raises important issues about the effectiveness of cyberspace as an arena for free expression. We have shown above that the preferred spaces for self-expression and interaction online for the participants are those whose boundaries they can control.

Some would argue that because the spaces that these youths carve out on the Internet are autonomous spaces, that are hidden, unnoticed, and unconnected to the wider public sphere of the Norwegian society, it would be difficult for anyone to talk of being able to speak and be heard under such conditions. Thus one would ask whether that is possible, in this case, in online spaces such as those of the participants, which, some would argue, are isolated from the wider public sphere.

In response to this point it is worth asking the following question: when individuals speak, whom do they want to listen to them? For children of immigrant diaspora groups, teenage life is a particularly complex juncture, calling for a sophisticated grasp of cross-cultural dialectics. At these stage in their lives the desire to commune with – as Afran above puts it, "people with the same background" and people with whom they "have much in common" – is central. From listening to the participants, the feeling was that, whenever they wanted to speak about issues related to their everyday lives, they chose to do so in the spaces where there were people in the same situation as them who would understand. If one views these spaces on the Web in which these youth interact as uniquely isolated from the main public sphere, one might be losing sight of the fact that there are several public spheres rather than a single one. The public sphere, which in reality never was singular and homogenous, consists of a variety of public spheres and publics, which sometimes are in direct opposition with each other. Drawing from this, one can thus conceive the participants' online networks more as digital publics, among a variety of other publics, all of which are constitutive of the society they inhabit; rather than as isolated publics separated from a wider single public sphere.

## **8. CONCLUSIONS**

The main research questions this project aimed to address were:

1. In what ways are ethnic minority youth participating in the production and consumption of social media in Norway? What cultural discourses do they articulate in their creative productions and discussions and to what extent and in what ways are these related to the dominant discourse on immigrants and on their own situation?
2. To what extent do young immigrant media producers find an audience for their digital productions and what potential do they have of being heard and acknowledged?
3. To what extent and in which ways do they participate in the broader civic public sphere context?

The analysis revealed that reference to ethnicity and race were central elements of the self-presentation strategies of the profiles that were analysed. Reference to ethnicity and race were found in screen names such as Brown Sugar, Fremmed, Afghan Mafia, and African Queen. There were also references to ethnicity in the self-introductory messages, where many of them would start off by phrases such as, “Hi everyone, I am from ...”, referring to their country of origin. There were also other representations of ethnicity on the participants’ personal profiles, such as in national flags, poetry texts, and music videos of homeland artists. However, in addition to ethnicity, there was evidence of other cultural references such as videos, photos and song texts of international celebrities and personalities in global youth popular culture.

This is interpreted partly as evidence of a certain cosmopolitan consciousness, the ability to manoeuvre through different cultural universes. This is also revealed in the way in which the profile authors mixed different language codes and styles, ranging from Norwegian, English, home-country languages, urban Norwegian slang, and hip-hop slang, on the texts on their profiles. In a certain sense, the multifaceted identities articulated on these profiles signify a contestation of the often reductionist identity discourses on ethnic minorities that are constructed in the Norwegian public sphere. However it was also clear from the analysis that the self-presentation strategies on the participants’ profiles were framed by an awareness of an ascribed status as the *Other*. The dominant discourses in the Norwegian public sphere largely defined the boundaries within which these young people negotiated their identities. Their references to ethnicity were interpreted partially as an articulation of difference, recognition by the participants of the fact that they perceived themselves as the *Other*, in a community dominated by ethnic Norwegians.

The data from this investigation shows that the ability to speak was closely linked to how well the youth appropriated the online spaces in which they participated. An important way young

people signalled involvement with certain kinds of people and places was to exclude others. This desire to set borders to public spaces of interaction was largely reflected in the attitudes of the participants in relation to the online spaces in which they interacted. The participants generally reacted negatively to the presence of those who they considered as “outsiders” in the online communities in which they participated. The participants were generally suspicious of those whom they saw as not belonging to their peer networks. This involved two groups of people: those whom they feared wanted to prey on them – marketers and predators/criminals – and those who wanted to control them – parents, older members of the ethnic community etc.

On some of these sites users could choose whether they wanted their profile to be public or “Friends only”. On others one could gain access to users’ profiles only after having been accepted as a “Friend”. In addition, it was also possible on some of these sites for users to block access to their profiles for anyone whenever they wished. Besides these structural means of controlling space on these sites, users could also appropriate space through social conventions and practices. On the participants’ online networks, knowledge of such conventions were also a means of determining who belonged and who did not.

Some would argue that because the spaces that these youths carve out on the Internet are autonomous spaces, that are hidden, unnoticed, and unconnected to the wider public sphere of the Norwegian society, it would be difficult for anyone to talk of being able to produce a meaningful voice under such conditions. However it is important to point out that for children of immigrant diaspora groups, teenage life is a particularly complex juncture, calling for a sophisticated grasp of cross-cultural dialectics. At these stage in their lives the desire to commune with – as Ashiq above puts it, “people with the same background” and people with whom they “have much in common” – is central.

From listening to several of the participants, the feeling was that, whenever they wanted to speak about issues related to their everyday lives, they chose to do so in the spaces where there were people in the same situation as them who would understand. The argument pursued here is that in viewing these spaces on the Web in which these youth interact as uniquely isolated from the main public sphere, one might be losing sight of the fact that there are several public spheres rather than a single one. The public sphere, which in reality never was singular and homogenous, consists of a variety of public spheres and publics, which sometimes are in direct opposition with each other. Drawing from this, one can thus conceive the participants’ online networks more as digital publics, among a variety of other publics, all of which are constitutive

of the society and physical realities they inhabit and experience in their day to day lives; rather than as isolated publics separated from a wider single public sphere.

The second and third questions are particularly interesting and inter connected because one of the main problems in relation to ethnic minorities identity discourse and representation in traditional mass media that has been raised in previous studies is the fact that minorities are often spoken about but yet are given little room to speak. Given the many opportunities offered by the Web to create, publish and share content, it was particularly interesting to examine to what extent it could provide a voice for ethnic minorities.

We argue that there were three main reasons why the Web could be seen to provide a suitable space where ethnic minority youth can express themselves and find an audience. The first was the fact that the sites used by the participants had easy-to-use tools, which the participants could manipulate to produce, publish and share their own multi-modal texts. On these sites, not only was it possible to speak, it was also possible to elicit a response as well, through interactive and audience response mechanisms. The second reason was related to the nature of the audience. It is often easier for youth to express themselves in a context where they feel their audience identifies with and understands them. These sites provide access for minority youths to a community of peers who were in a similar situation, and with whom they can easily identify. Thirdly, the structural and conventional mechanisms on these sites made it easier to control access and to structure the boundaries of this public space. We suggest that all these factors make these young people feel a sense of control, thus facilitating free self-expression.

In short, the report shows the different ways in which the participants used the Web to express themselves, how they seek an audience to whom they might address, and the overall significance of this experience. In the report, we share examples of how the participants articulate everyday life experiences varying from teenage romance and tackling the topic of bullying, patriotism, to relating to global celebrities. Others used pictures posted on their sites to provoke discussion. There were also examples showing participants using their personal sites to post poetic texts evoking the stereotyping against black people in Norway. One of the most salient characteristics of the expressions to emerge across the cases is the fact that they use a language to express themselves that is particular to youth in the same condition. The cases show how these youth communicate across multiple modes, media, and language forms to speak about issues related to their lives. Through their online expressions these youth discuss varying perspectives views and interests.

Most importantly, the project shows that not only are these youth able to speak out, they are able to elicit a response from the audience as well. There was ample indication that these youth derive great deal of value from receiving such acknowledgement from their peers. We saw in the example how Mariama perceived the response from her online friends as “stimulating and encouraging” and she achieves a sense of fulfilment for being able to make her audience “feel”, to “take them on a journey”, or to “get a piece of people’s minds”. And how Lina was elated on being referred to as a role model for other youth.

However, there was little indication that the participants in this study were able to reach a wider audience beyond their closed circle of friends. However, by trying to appeal to audiences and soliciting feedback, the youth in this study are slowly learning how to negotiate the contours of public discussion in a ‘public’ socio-political terrain, in which the Web is increasingly becoming a vital arena. This type of literacy is significant at a time when youth authorship on the Web is increasingly important in our media-dominated world, where fewer and fewer spaces exist where people can gather and explore shared cultural concerns.

With regard to the issue of diasporic cross-boarder communication patterns, there has been a tendency in previous studies of migrant transnationalism to depict the transnational social networks of immigrants as spanning solely between the host nation and the homeland, which has been too reductionist. The nature of the networks/audiences, the participants in this study maintained through the web did not fit such bipolar scenarios. Although they were assertive in their articulation of their diasporic identities, they did not maintain any significant social networks with their homelands. They also showed little inclination to participate actively in traditional diaspora communities, whether offline or online. Although the participants were fervent in articulating their ethnic identities on the Web through different symbols used in self-presentation, they showed no interest in participating in diasporic online communities, or other forms of connectivity with their homelands. The project suggested that this could be explained by the fact that since most of the participants’ lives had been lived in Norway, they had very little social ties with their countries of origin. Another explanation was their cosmopolitan disposition. The Web provided access to new possibilities for establishing new ties and forming communities based not only on shared origins, but also on a wide range of cultural, religious, social, and political interests.

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