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In search of a cool identity: how young people negotiate religious and ethnic boundaries in a superdiverse context

In this paper, we aim to study how young people navigate a super-diverse majority-minority context, and how they negotiate bright religious and ethnic symbolic boundaries. Our study is based on 40 in-depth interviews with young people from various ethnic, social and religious backgrounds in the super-diverse city of Antwerp. Our analysis shows that young people generally draw on a cultural repertoire of commonplace diversity to navigate various peer relations and present diversity as a normal element of everyday life. However, our analysis also shows how respondents experience bright ethnic and religious boundaries, where minoritized youth need to navigate social exclusion processes. A cool identity is constructed by our respondents to maintain, rework and negotiate these symbolic boundaries. Majority youth draw upon cultural repertoires of ethnic purity and ‘normal’ youthfulness to maintain their dominant position, while minority youth rework bright boundaries by inverting their othered position and redefining coolness through a repertoire of ethnic hybridity. Subsequently, our analysis shows how white majority youth face new challenges as their previously taken-for-granted dominant position becomes questioned and contested within a super-diverse setting. Our results raise the important question of how white majority youth can manage their changing social position in super-diverse settings and on which cultural repertoires they can draw, without the need to use racist white identity politics.

Introduction

Zoë is a 19-year old white, non-religious Belgian-Flemish girl who is just finishing her last year of secondary education in a school in Antwerp, Belgium’s second biggest and super-diverse city. In her interview, the researcher asks her how she experiences this diversity in her everyday life. Zoë explains that she has diverse peer groups and emphasizes she “gets along with everyone” and is “open and willing to learn about every culture”, in line with a repertoire on commonplace diversity (Wessendorf, 2014). Yet, while she is “so happy” to be able to navigate between various friend groups, which enables her to claim a cool identity, she also expresses group boundaries along ethnic and religious lines between her friend groups. To illustrate this, she gives the example of organizing two different birthday parties, one for her “native Belgian friends” and one for her “foreigner friends”. She also stresses that “when I look at my friends who are Muslim, I think ‘poor you’. Because they are limited in their way of thinking. I think if they didn’t have their religion, that they would be able to form their own opinion.” In comparison, she sees herself as “creative in my way of thinking”. She explicitly relates ‘traits’
such as ‘autonomy’ and ‘creativity’ to her Belgian-Flemish, non-religious, white identity (and peers), which is still the dominant and mostly taken-for-granted and normative majority identity in Belgian society. However, she also discusses how in the super diverse city of Antwerp this dominant and normative majority identity does not remain uncontested. White students are referred to by minority and majority students as “tattas” or “flamands”. Respondents explain that tatta is a label used to describe “real Belgians” who are “used to nothing” and “are the white children, who have money, who have it too good, for whom life is easy and who are ignorant about other cultures”. The term ‘tatta’ is then used both by minority and majority students to criticize and question the taken-for-granted, normative and privileged position of white majority youth, and to negotiate the othered position of minority youth.

Seemingly contradictory quotes like these encouraged us to further explore processes for negotiating group boundaries within super-diverse majority-minority cities. Like many other cities over the world, the Belgian city Antwerp – where the current study has been conducted – has become a majority-minority city, where there is no longer a dominant numerical ethnic or racial majority group (Author I, 2017; Crul, 2016). Within this specific urban context, the dominant majority has itself become a numerical minority. While in the past the ‘national imagination’ was often the dominant guiding narrative and cultural repertoire for organizing society and its institutions, now in super-diverse cities, relying upon a narrowly defined ‘national imagination’ may be less relevant, and even problematic. Thus, in recent decades processes of diversification have encouraged scholars to rethink assimilation and integration theories (Crul, 2016; 2018; Jimenez, 2017).

In this paper, we engage with various strands of literature and analyse how young people in a super-diverse urban context navigate and give meaning to their diverse peer relations, on which cultural repertoires they draw on to negotiate and rework bright ethnic and religious symbolic boundaries (Fleming et al., 2012; Lamont et al., 2016; Ryan, 2011). Our study is based on 40 in-depth interviews with young people from various ethnic, social and religious backgrounds, aged between 16 and 19, in the third grade of two secondary schools, in the super-diverse city of Antwerp.

We will focus on how minoritized individuals are confronted with othering and social exclusion, and how they challenge dominant repertoires about race, ethnicity and religion by inverting their stigmatized identities. By questioning existing power relations and demanding
equal recognition, these minority young people are arguably contributing to new cultural repertoires emphasizing non-discrimination and the empowerment of the socially and culturally disadvantaged.

From a different perspective, this societal transformation requires white majority groups to position themselves in relation to these new cultural repertoires. For decades, it has been self-evident that the ethnic majority group could, through its policy makers and societal institutions, ask ethnic and religious minorities and migrants to ‘integrate’ or ‘assimilate’ into the mainstream. However, in super-diverse societies with stronger bottom-up movements, and more specifically in super-diverse majority-minority cities, fundamental questions are being put to ethnic majority groups; they are urged to adjust to the new diverse social realities and to recognize minoritized voices and their demands for change (Crul, 2016). This development raises urgent questions as to how white majority young people make sense of their changed position and integrate into these diverse majority-minority settings (Jiménez, 2017; 2018). Considerable attention has been paid in the literature to coping strategies of ethnic and religious minorities (e.g. Lamont et al., 2016), while less attention has been directed to how ethnic majority groups have become a numerical minority in contexts such as superdiverse cities and how they deal with this loss or change of social status. We will follow Crul (2018) and Jiménez’s (2018) call to further develop the idea of a ‘paralyzed white identity’, which emerges from a fear of losing its dominant position and an apparent inability to react to these changes and challenges stemming from a diversifying context.

Making sense of diversity: cultural repertoires and symbolic boundaries

To capture the multiple ways in which our youth respondents make sense of the super-diversity around them, this study will draw on the related concepts of ‘cultural repertoires’ (Swidler, 1986) and ‘symbolic boundary making’ (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Small et al., 2010). Cultural sociologists have defined ‘cultural repertoires’ as the available schemas, frames, narratives, and scripts that actors draw on to make sense of a particular situation (Lamont and Small, 2008; Swidler, 1986). These cultural repertoires are made available to individuals through the education system, media, but also through socialization processes in the family and peer groups (Grusec and Hastings, 2014). Yet, repertoires are not just ‘passively’ transmitted, but actively used, and sometimes reworked; they are commonly seen as ‘sets of tools’ which people can draw on to manage their social world (Swidler, 1986). The idea of a ‘toolkit’ highlights the non-deterministic character of cultural repertoires which enable and constrain
individuals rather than prescribe patterns of thought and behaviour. This means that young people can actively draw on various (elements of) repertoires, and creatively combine them, to make sense of a particular situation or problem. Furthermore, since different young people are socialized in different cultural environments, they do not have the same set of – or the same access to - repertoires. Ethnic minority youth, for instance, have a different array of repertoires of action from ethnic majority youth and therefore have other ways to manage situations of difference and diversity. Previous research showed, for instance, that ethnic minorities are more likely to use universalist cultural repertoires to justify their claims to equality, which includes pointing to common characteristics as “children of God,” or to the universality of human nature (e.g. Lamont and Fleming, 2005). Other research showed that experiences of racism and discrimination have an impact not only on the repertoires minority youth have access to, but also how they make use of, or relate themselves to, e.g. dominant (white) identities in society (Author VI, 2020). Even if certain repertoires and tools are available to youth, the relation with these repertoires might differ for different groups depending on their social location. Hence, the concept of cultural repertoires emphasizes the heterogeneity of cultural tools and the varying availability of these tools between different groups such as those defined by ethnicity, gender, class or age.

This also connects the concept of cultural repertoires with the concept of symbolic boundaries. The meanings individuals derive from existing repertoires enable them to (symbolically) include or exclude others from their group (in whatever terms this group might be defined) but also allow them to attach (more or less) value and moral worth to others (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Small et al., 2010). While the symbolic boundary-making (or ‘boundary-drawing) approach has been used across a wide range of topics and disciplines (see Lamont et al. 2015), we employ it here to analyse how young people draw group boundaries and construct a dignified group identity for themselves by making implicit or explicit comparisons with other young people. By distinguishing ‘people like us’ from ‘people like them’ young people draw symbolic boundaries between groups and orient themselves in their superdiverse social environment. The concept of symbolic boundary making allows us to draw attention to multiple dimensions of difference (e.g. ethnic, religious or class differences). While symbolic group boundaries are social constructions that can be changed through processes of interaction, previous research has shown that the group membership created by symbolic boundary work, over time, can become highly consequential (Wimmer 2013; Lamont et. al. 2015). When boundary-making processes persist through time and involve cultural and social hierarchies,
symbolic boundaries can reinforce social (material) boundaries, normalizing who is within or outside a group through legitimization or stigmatization (e.g. Author, XX).

It is hence important to investigate whether and how young people can redraw group boundaries to demonstrate their own (and potentially others’) moral worth. This is in line with previous research such as Khabeer’s study (2016) on how Muslim youth in the US construct a Muslim cool identity to oppose and confront a racial hierarchy, and with Herding’s study (2014) on youth cultures and constructions of a Muslim cool identity among youth in Western Europe. Vasquez and Wetzel (2009) argue that racial minorities (Mexican Americans and Potawatomi Indians) emphasize ethnic authenticity, providing them with opportunities to re-evaluate their group’s status and invert stigmatization, which is a strategy that has also been identified among Muslim youth in Europe (Simsek, Tubergen, Fleischmann, 2022).

**Young people navigating super-diverse societies**

Generally, two main trends seem to be emerging in super-diverse contexts where the vast majority of young people have a migration background, and interethnic and intercultural contacts are part of everyday life. Some scholars see a ‘commonplace’ approach towards diversity, where diversity is experienced and perceived as a normal part of social life (Wessendorf, 2014). Youth from various backgrounds feel at ease with super-diversity and are able to navigate such contexts without many difficulties. Researchers show how, for example, children in super-diverse schools tap into cultural repertoires where diversity is discussed as a commonplace and self-evident element of everyday life (Author IV, 2020; Wessendorf, 2016).

Yet, at the same time the widespread use of the term ‘superdiversity’ should not make forget that there is a broad variety in how people, including urban youth, perceive and practice diversity (Author III, 2019). One cannot overlook, for instance, the massive support for extreme-right social and political movements across the world, also among youth in super-diverse cities (Miller-Idriss, 2018). This is leading to an enduring stigmatization, discrimination and marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities across Europe (Barwick and Beaman, 2019; Beaman, 2017; Fleischmann and Phalet, 2018; Trittler, 2019). Researchers argue that this is, among other things, due to the enduring salience of ethnic and religious boundaries, often marked by structural inequalities (Author II, 2018; Foner and Alba, 2008; Trittler, 2019). In some cases, this even leads to (re-)emerging repertoires on ‘reclaiming society’ from a white perspective and claims that there is a mono-ethnic, mono-cultural and mono-religious core to European societies (Crul 2018; Sadeghi, 2019). Indeed, (sub)national identities continue to be
(more often than not) defined in quite monocultural and exclusive ways, only minimally recognizing minorities’ equal place in society (Crul, 2018).

In this paper, we aim to analyse how urban youth from various ethnic and religious backgrounds navigate super-diverse contexts. Our study contributes not only to literature on how ethnic minority youth negotiate and manage their minority status (e.g. Fleming et al., 2012; Herding, 2014; Lamont et al., 2016; Phalet et al., 2013), but also to the more recent literature on ethnic majority youth (e.g. Crul, 2018; Kraus & Crul, 2022). By analysing how young people use and rework certain cultural repertoires to negotiate symbolic boundaries between peer groups, while at the same time using repertoires to negotiate their own (and potentially others’) moral worth, we aim to provide more in-depth empirical insights into how urban youth re-imagine their social identity in a super-diverse majority-minority setting.

Method

We draw upon 40 one-on-one in-depth interviews with students in the third grade of two secondary schools. The interviews were conducted between January and March 2019. The first author presented the research in class and students could register to participate. Thereafter, students were randomly selected, taking into account variations in gender, educational track, ethnic background and religious identification. The names of the respondents are anonymized throughout the article.

Participants and research context

The sample consists of 25 girls and 15 boys, 16-19 years old. All respondents expressed multiple and intersecting identifications and students were from various ethnic, religious and educational backgrounds. We selected students in two secondary schools in the super-diverse city of Antwerp. Antwerp displays a high degree of cultural and religious diversity (Author I, 2017) and is an example of a majority-minority city (Crul, 2016). As 29.6% of children and young people aged 10-19 have no migration background in Antwerp, youth regularly engage with people from diverse ethno-cultural, social and religious backgrounds. Although research indicates an acceptance of these diverse settings (e.g. Author II, 2018), particularly research in Antwerp has indicated salient and strong ethno-religious boundaries (e.g. Author II, 2018; Author V, 2020; Author VII, 2021; Phalet et al., 2013), partly due to the greater success of right-wing political movements and anti-immigration discourses. Indeed, research in Flanders demonstrates the continuing presence of discrimination based on racial, religious and linguistic markers, e.g. in educational settings (Bourabain et al., 2020; Van Praag et al., 2016; Vervaet et
al., 2016). Therefore, Antwerp is an important research site for analyzing and understanding how young people experience and negotiate group boundaries in a super-diverse setting.

Two secondary schools were selected from a previous survey in seventeen schools, which was part of the research project. School 1 is located in the city centre in the super-diverse neighbourhood of Antwerpen-Noord. This neighbourhood consists of 70% inhabitants with a migration background (Stad in cijfers, 2019). School 2 is located in the centre of the residential neighbourhood of Wilrijk. This neighbourhood consists of 31.1% inhabitants with a migration background (Stad in cijfers, 2019). The schools had differing ethnic compositions, measured by the Flemish Ministry of Education by the home language of the students. School 1 has 73.5% of students with another home language next to Dutch. School 2 has 14.2% of students with another home language next to Dutch (AGODI, 2019). However, these numbers do not present the respondents’ overall experience and perception of diversity. School 1 was often described by respondents and teachers as a school “without Belgian ‘native’ students” and with 70 different nationalities” and school 2 was often described as a “fifty-fifty” school. Both schools were selected as they offered academic (ASO), technical (TSO) and vocational (BSO) educational tracks.

**Data collection**

Our semi-structured interviews (1h30m – 2h) took place at school in a private classroom. The researcher asked about the respondents’ free time, their reflections on their school career and future ambitions. Further, their multiple identity constructions were discussed and how young people perceive themselves and feel perceived by others. The researcher probed into respondents’ friendship networks, peer and teacher relations, how they negotiate various friend groups at school and how they experienced and negotiated group boundaries. We asked questions such as:

- How has your school career been?
- Who are your circle of friends (inside and outside of school)?
- With whom do you like to hang out? With whom do you feel most comfortable?
- Where do you feel less comfortable?
- Respondents get an exercise where they place various social identities in a circle around them: how do you identify? What do these identities mean to you? How do others perceive you?
• Do you have an experience where you felt unfairly treated by teachers? Have you seen others being unfairly treated by teachers?

Data analysis
Conducting the interviews, analysing the data and constructing interview questions were done in a cyclical process. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author, who became familiar with the data by reading through the interviews several times. Initial codes were then created by using open and axial coding (using NVivo).

The analysis started with broader proposed theoretical concepts such as symbolic boundaries and cultural repertoires. Following grounded theory (Walker and Myrick, 2006) we also coded inductively to detect new codes and concepts that emerged from the analysis. The analysis started by understanding how respondents themselves discussed their multiple identifications and belongings, and their discussions of their friendship networks and how they relate to other peers at their school. From this initial reading, it became clear that although respondents discussed the normality of their super-diverse school setting and peer relations, group boundaries along ethnic and religious lines emerged as bright; young people discussed various ways in which young people rework and negotiate symbolic boundaries. Codes such as coolness, pureness, hybridity, reverse racism, identity threat, etc. emerged from the analysing the interviews and we returned to the literature on these concepts to further understand the cultural tools or repertoires our respondents draw to negotiate group boundaries. In our previous work on religious identity and religious individualism among youth, we discuss other codes that emerged from the data such as free choice, reflectivity and autonomy (Author VII, 2021).

Researcher’s position
The interviews were conducted by a white female researcher and it is important to reflect on the position of the researcher, and how symbolic boundaries are also constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. For example, when she asked one of the respondents (from a minoritized group) what identifications are important to him, he wanted to say he identified as Belgian, stopped himself and said “I don’t know if I am able to say that, do you think I am Belgian?”. He asked the researcher who is part of the dominant white majority group to acknowledge his belonging to the dominant group. Another respondent told the researcher how she felt she was unable to express her experiences and viewpoints to e.g. her white teachers, pointing out the unequal power relationship between them (Vähäsanteranen and
Saarinen, 2013). However, this also indicated the established trust and openness between the interviewer and interviewee.

The researcher tried to be attentive of the unequal power relationship between her and her conversation partners who are part of a minoritized group. First, she tried to establish a safe(r) space where she acknowledges that she is unable to take on a ‘neutral’ as well as an insider position. However, she assures the respondents that their opinions, experiences and stories count and that she is here to listen to their stories. Second, she aims to construct perceived similarities and gain an independent position (Beaman, 2017) by clearly distinguishing herself from teachers and the school. As she is young herself, the researcher and respondents talk in informal conversations prior to the interview about youth culture such as music, clothing, social media, etc. As the researcher is also brought up and lives in Antwerp, she is familiar with the dialect and words used by the respondents. Third, throughout the conversation, when respondents discussed experiences of othering and discrimination, the researcher explicitly expressed she is aware of dominant racist discourses in Belgium and specifically Antwerp, and acknowledged their feelings and experiences. Lastly, at the end of the interview, the researcher made sure to have time left to talk about the interview off record and make sure if respondents had felt comfortable.

Furthermore, in relation to respondents that are part of the dominant white majority group the researcher was perceived as an ‘insider’. Respondents seemed better able to use, for example, discourses of identity threat and reverse racism, with the expectation that the researcher understood where they were coming from. The researcher often had to probe into the answers of respondents, as they frequently responded with ‘taken-for-granted’ answers, e.g. “you know what I mean”. The same strategies as discussed before (establishing a safe(r) space, informal conversations, etc.) were also applied in these conversations.

**Results**

How do young people give meaning to diverse peer relations in a super-diverse context, and on which cultural repertoires to they draw to negotiate and rework bright ethnic and religious symbolic boundaries? We will first discuss how our respondents navigate a super-diverse context by applying a cultural repertoire of commonplace diversity. However, a more in-depth analysis shows how our respondents experience clear group boundaries along ethnic and religious lines, and how minority youth need to navigate othering and social exclusion processes e.g. in the school environment. Second, we discuss how a cool identity is constructed among
youth to negotiate and rework bright ethnic and religious symbolic boundaries. Strikingly, majority youth construct and claim a cool identity based on repertoires on ethnic purity and youthfulness to maintain a dominant position, while minority youth rework bright boundaries by inverting their othered position and re-evaluating what it means to be cool through a repertoire of ethnic hybridity. Subsequently, our analysis shows how white majority youth face new challenges as their previously taken-for-granted dominant position becomes questioned and contested within a super-diverse setting, and how it seems that they lack cultural tools to negotiate their contested identity. In the first part we discuss the context wherein young people need to navigate group boundaries, while in the second part we analyse identity processes and boundary work on an interactional and individual level.

Navigating a super-diverse city and school context: commonplace diversity and experiences of social exclusion

“This is just normal” – a cultural repertoire on commonplace diversity

How do youth navigate peer relations and everyday interactions within a super-diverse context? Most respondents draw on a cultural repertoire of commonplace diversity (Author II, 2018; Author IV, 2020; Wessendorf, 2014).

Mauro (ethnic and religious majority, school 2): “I get along with everyone. Surinamese, Turks, Moroccans, Belgians, it doesn’t matter. If you can laugh together and you get along, we can be friends. My best friend has another religion than me, comes from another country and has another skin colour, but we aren’t concerned with that stuff. We just talk about the same stuff, such as school, music and the environment. […] We are brought up with Moroccans, Muslims… in class. Just let that be. Society is going to find it normal that there are different cultures and religions. The younger generations grow up with different cultures together and we find it normal. My father, to be honest, he votes for Vlaams Belang\(^1\). But I don’t of course, because I have friends from different cultures and I’m more realistic than my father.”

Mauro points out how religious and ethnic diversity is experienced as a normal and realistic part of social life. Many respondents express this normalcy of their peer groups, as well as their school and city, being super-diverse. Not only do respondents stress this normalcy, they also state that it is “cool” to have super-diverse friend groups.

Samira (ethnic and religious minority, school 1): “Of course there are various cliques, but in these groups, there is a lot of diversity. For example, in my own group there is a Belgian, a Moroccan, an Algerian… there is a lot of variation and that’s cool.”

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\(^1\)Extreme right-wing populist party with anti-immigrant policy viewpoints.
Generally, respondents will express an appreciation of these super-diverse environments (Author II, 2018; Jiménez, 2017) and describe it as something good, interesting, normal, cool and a “sign of the times”. Thus, our respondents navigate a super-diverse context by using a repertoire on commonplace diversity to blur group boundaries. However, bright symbolic boundaries might at first seem absent in the lives of young people, in the following section we will show how bright ethnic and religious boundaries emerge when navigating their peer relations and school environment.

“I do feel a bit excluded” - experiences of group boundaries and social exclusion at school
While most respondents evaluate their super-diverse environments positively, they also describe the existence of group boundaries, which manifests in “cliques” and social closure of friend groups, along ethnic, religious or social lines.

Robbe (ethnic and religious majority, school 2): “I don’t know if it’s a coincidence but all of my friends are Belgian. But I do think that I can get along with people from another culture, it’s not that I act differently towards them. But it is often that they are standing together, and that the Belgian boys are standing together [at the playground].”

Robbe continues by explaining he feels more comfortable in a friend group with whom he shares a similar ethnic background, without evaluating his friend group as better than the other. Zoë (ethnic and religious majority), on the other hand, does have diverse friend groups. She navigates between two separate groups where one is described as “the Belgian white group” and the other as “the foreigners group” (she feels a bit uneasy describing groups like that). She switches her self-presentation according to her friend group and the activities they do. With her ‘Belgian’ group she drinks alcohol as part of the fun they have, while with her ‘foreigner’ group she watches movies and “goofs around” (but the group doesn’t consume alcohol). While she expresses she “gets along with everyone”, she does indicate hereby clear group boundaries. As expressed in the introduction of this paper, she does seem to value her identity as white-Flemish and non-religious as ‘better’ than the identity of her Muslim friends, by indicating that they are “not free in their thinking”.

Respondents who are part of a minoritized group also discuss how they experience group boundaries and observe social closure of groups.

Referring to friend groups in different educational tracks: ASO (academic), TSO (technical) and BSO (vocational). For this paper, we have chosen to focus on ethnic and religious diversity.
Samira (ethnic and religious minority, school 1): “In my previous school, I had this feeling that the ‘autochtonen’ consciously didn’t hang out with the ‘allochtonen’, I don’t know why. We, the ‘allochtonen’, just got along with everyone and we were just laughing and stuff, but I felt that the ‘autochtonen’ weren’t involved with us. They separated themselves from us. But why? Were we too social? Too loud?”

Both majority and minority young people often describe minority youth as “foreigners”, “allochtonen” and the “others”, while youth from the dominant majority group are referred to as “autochtonen” or “natives”. Here, Samira wonders why ‘autochtonen’ (dominant white majority youth) do not want to hang out with ‘allochtonen’ (youth with a migration background) and expresses a ‘we’ vs. ‘them’. Other respondents discuss how they feel possibly socially excluded based on their ethnic or religious identity when navigating their peer groups.

Sarah (ethnic and religious minority, school 1): “I have my friend group from my previous school who are mostly non-religious, and I have my friend group here at school [who are mostly Muslims]. I don’t talk too much about my religion with my non-religious friends, because they don’t understand it, they try to understand it, but I don’t want religion to be the reason we can’t be friends anymore so I try to hide it a little bit.”

Sarah switches her self-presentation according to her friend groups and hides her religious identity with her non-religious friends, in fear to be excluded from the group. Likewise, Bilal discusses how his non-Muslim friends go out and drink, and respond to him negatively when he does not want to participate. He worries that his friends, because of his Muslim identity, would not invite him anymore.

Bilal (ethnic and religious minority, school 2): “I don’t talk about my religion too much with them because I don’t want them to think ‘he is probably not allowed anything, so we won’t invite him anymore’. I do feel a bit excluded by my friends.”

Not only do minoritized youth experience (possible) social exclusion from friends, they can also experience othering due to being treated unfairly by their teachers in comparison to students who are part of a dominant white majority.

Tijs (ethnic and religious majority, school 2): “I think teachers underestimate Moroccan and Muslim students more than Belgian students. They also are punished harder when they do something wrong. [...] In class, we had pulled the plugs on the computers [as a joke]. The teacher didn’t even look at me. At that moment you do notice ‘ah, they only look at the allochtonen’.”

3 ‘Autochtonen’ refers to ‘native’ born white majority youth, while ‘allochtonen’ refers to youth with a migration background.
Tjüs notices he is treated better by teachers than other boys of his class. Liliana points out then that it is more comfortable to hang out with other minoritized students, as she feels they share the same experiences of discrimination.

*Liliana (ethnic and religious minority, school 2):* “At school I tend to hang out more with the ‘allochtonen’ than with the Belgian people. Just because we understand what it is to be discriminated against [e.g. by teachers].”

Looking at the various quotes of our respondents, it is clear that their experiences differ according to their school context. Robbe, Tjüs, Bilal and Liliana (school 2) indicate clear group boundaries within their school, which is described as a “50-50” school (referring to the percentage of students without and with a migration background). Most of them run their whole school career in that school. Samira and Sarah (school 1), on the other hand, mostly reflect on experiences of social exclusion and tensions between groups in their previous schools. Their school is described as a school “without Belgian ‘native’ students” and with 70 different nationalities”. Therefore, some of the respondents believe there is less discrimination by teachers, and therefore less tensions between students.

*Ahmed (ethnic and religious minority, school 1):* [about his relation with this teachers] “There is no discrimination at this school. At another school, they would perceive a Muslim differently. But not here, because there are so many different cultures.”

In addition, this school is characterized by students who come from other schools. Most of the respondents therefore reflect on experiences in their previous schools and discuss bright group boundaries along ethnic and religious lines, relatable to how Bilal, Liliana, etc. talk about group boundaries within their school.

Thus, our respondents navigate their super-diverse context by on the one hand emphasizing a repertoire of commonplace diversity and thus blurring group boundaries. However, on the other hand, bright ethnic and religious symbolic boundaries emerge, which varies according to different school contexts, where minoritized youth feel ‘othered’ and socially excluded.

**Constructing a cool identity: negotiating and reworking symbolic boundaries**

In the previous section, super-diversity and having friends of various background was already referred to as “cool”. Coolness is an important identity among young people for navigating their social relations (Bucholtz, 2010). Indeed, all respondents shared the desire to be perceived as cool by their peers. In this section, we will discuss how ethnic and religious boundaries also emerge as bright when it comes to constructing coolness and claiming a cool identity, and how
our respondents participate in boundary work to maintain, rework and negotiate group boundaries.

**Maintaining a dominant position: repertoires on ethnic purity and youthfulness among majority youth**

How do majority youth navigate a majority-minority context, where they are numerically not the majority anymore? On the one hand, our respondents’ identities and positions remain often taken-for-granted, unquestioned and uncontested.

*AD: “What does it mean to you to be Belgian and Flemish?”*

Robbe (ethnic and religious majority, school 2): “Actually nothing. That’s what I am, but it doesn’t really matter to me. I don’t necessarily feel Belgian.”

Robbe described a ‘nothingness’ when it comes to discussing his ethnic identity and does not express a particular emotion related to it. As his identity is the dominant norm, he does not have to justify or explain it, and thus never have to say he is ‘ethnic’ (Perry, 2001). This is the same for students who identify as non-religious.

On the other hand, respondents discuss how they notice they are a numerical minority.

*Merel (ethnic and religious majority, school 2): “I feel that Belgium somewhat starts to get taken over, and I just think that’s a shame and you feel like a minority. Here at school, if you would separate between the pure pure Belgians and the rest, then we are so few in comparison to the rest and then we don’t stand a chance.”*

Instead of describing a ‘nothingness’ like Robbe, Merel responds to the super-diverse minority-majority context by marking her ethnic identity as “pure” in relation to “the rest”. Other respondents use labels such as “pure” and “real” as well. She continues with explaining what we can understand by ‘pureness’.

*Merel: “Muslim girls feel ‘high class’ towards us. I think that is bad because they are still in our country, we are... well, they are probably also born here, but they have different roots than us, we are mostly pure, so it bothers me that in our own country we are seen as less.”*

Merel claims pureness by referring to ‘blood and soil’, and in this way marks her ethnic identity to maintain a dominant position in a context where she is not part of a numerically majority group anymore. She expresses feelings of ethnic competition and threat (who is ‘better’, ‘cooler’ or in her words “high class” and “seen as less”), and thus further brightens ethnic and
religious boundaries (Scheepers, Gijsberts and Coenders, 2002). By doing so, she claims an authentic ‘pure’ self, while others who are born in Belgium with “different roots” cannot.

Further, our respondents often focus on religion – and to be more specific Islam – to construct coolness and to mark group boundaries through repertoires on ‘normal’ youthful behaviour. As secularity and non-religiosity is perceived as the norm in Belgium (Author VII, 2021), religious young people in general are perceived as “weird”, and non-religious youth perceive students’ religiosity as “going too far”, “unfree” or “limiting”. Zara, a Flemish-Belgian white student who is Christian (school 2), discusses how she is seen as weird as she is expected to be non-religious.

Zara: “I am Christian and I believe. [...] the people in my class are brought up as Christian, but not like me. They did their baptism and communion and that’s it. I do go to the church once in a while and other people who are Christian always find it weird that I go to church, and that I find it important. I don’t feel embarrassed, when the teacher asks ‘who is still really a Christian?’ then I put my hand up and I don’t care if others think ‘she is weird’.”

Zara feels that Christian and Muslim young people are more able to understand each other in, for example, discussions on religious topics and therefore become allies as ‘religious others’. However, respondents do not problematize a Christian identity as much, as it is seen as a part of Belgian (European) cultural heritage and most Christian respondents participate in cultural practices such as going out and drinking alcohol, which is perceived as ‘normal’ and ‘cool’ youthful behavior.

It is mostly Muslim students then who are depicted as “un-youthlike”, “unfree” and “uncritical” and who experience othering related to their religious identity, which often coincides with their ethnic background.

Tijs (ethnic and religious majority, school 2): “In my football team there are a lot of ‘allochtonen’. You can’t ask them ‘come party with us’ because you know the answer: ‘no because it’s with alcohol’, that’s against their religion and they take it more seriously with praying and stuff. But I think they should be able to decide for themselves, the Quran says it’s not allowed, but we are in a modern society now and I do think they can just get over it. I do think they could say ‘Ok, I’m in’. Just join us, just drink (laughs).” [...] I think the reason I have mostly Belgian friends is because they don’t come party with us and I feel more comfortable among Belgians because you do more stuff with them. If you want to talk about partying and just the stuff we do at our age, you can’t talk about that stuff with Muslims.”
Not only are young Muslims depicted as ‘un-youthful’ because they don’t “do the stuff we do at our age”, they are also seen as lacking personal autonomy and agency (Amir-Moazami, 2010; Author VII, 2021). It is also Sarah’s experience that Muslim youth are perceived as ‘normal’ if they would (just) participate in this ‘youthful’ behaviour of e.g. going out, while at the same time not mentioning or expressing their religion.

Sarah (ethnic and religious minority, school 1): “In my previous school, there were Moroccans and Turks that just participated with the Belgians, thus they actually were ‘Belgianised’ Moroccans and Turks, they just went along, for example not talking about their religion, they went partying, that was perceived as normal among the youth.”

These repertoires on ethnic purity and ‘normal’ youthful behavior, which stems from dominant repertoires on cultural citizenship and ethnic authenticity, are used to maintain a racial or ethnic hierarchy, assert group boundaries and maintain dominant power relations. Minority youth who are also Belgian citizens, are not treated as full citizens (due to their ‘roots’) and are assigned an ‘otherness’ and ‘uncoolness’ as minorities due to their cultural and religious practices (Beaman, 2017). So, how do our minoritized respondents negotiate their othered position and claim a cool identity?

Inverting othering: repertoire on ethnic hybridity among minority youth

As minority youth have to relate to ‘pure’ Belgians and ‘normal’ ‘youthful’ behavior, they, in turn, embrace an ethnic authenticity by emphasizing ethnic hybridity as cool.

Ayoub (ethnic and religious minority, school 2): “Being in between, I actually experience it as special. Because if I were only Turkish, then I wouldn’t know how it feels to be Belgian, and now I have an idea of both. I am mixed. So that is kind of special, I feel good about that. I feel proud to be a mix of Belgian and Turkish.”

Being ‘ethnic’ or religious is seen as something “special”, something “extra” and something to be proud of.

Wiam (ethnic and religious minority, school 2): “I am a little bit proud to be Muslim, because you have something extra than only being Belgian, so that’s good. You have something more special. You are something else, more than just a Belgian.”

Wiam shows that she has something more than “only being Belgian”, and this establishes her uniqueness and assertiveness in contrast to taken-for-granted white identities (Crul, 2018). A repertoire on ethnic hybridity relates to a broader neoliberal cultural repertoire on expressive
individualism, which is a dominant repertoire within Western societies (Cortois, 2018). Expressive individualism refers to ‘self-expression’ and ‘being true to yourself’, where each individual is unique which definitely resonates with a super-diverse context.

As a consequence, minoritized youth can redefine cultural practices such as going out and drinking, as “boring” instead of cool.

Abdel (ethnic and religious minority, school 1): “Belgians really have a dry sense of humour. It’s just... boring, it’s just so dead simple, what do they talk about? What they did at home, that they went drinking, and smoking weed, and that’s it.”

Respondents discuss then how it is perceived to be cool to hang out with people who have a migration background.

Sarah (ethnic and religious minority, school 1): “It used to be cool to be Moroccan, you know, and I started to behave more like that and I wanted to participate. I used to give a negative connotation to being Belgian.”

AD: What was cool then?

Sarah: “Just hanging out with Moroccans and stuff, the cool groups were the Moroccans and people who came from another country. The Belgians were ‘tattas’ or ‘Flamands’. So if you wanted to be cool, then you had to hang out with people from another background.” [...]

Hanging out with Belgians can subsequently also be seen as uncool. It must be noted that Sarah discusses that this used to be the case when she was younger, and she expresses she does not belief this to be cool anymore. As boundaries can vary and shift according to contexts, they can vary over time as well.

Imaan explains how her friends from minoritized groups describe her as “Belgianised” as she hangs out with her Belgian majority friends and being “too Belgian” is seen as uncool.

Imaan (ethnic and religious minority, school 2): “Sometimes I get the comment that I am ‘too Belgian’ because I have many Belgian friends. They [her friends from minoritized groups] would come and ask ‘why do you still hang out with them’. [...] They would say ‘I thought you were really ‘Belgianised’, but actually you are really cool’. They would say that after they have spoken to me. But that doesn’t sound nice ‘Belgianised’, like you have changed your culture and it is also a bit hurtful because what does it mean ‘Belgianised’? Is it something positive or negative?”
Thus, minority youth can rework and negotiate ethnic and religious boundaries and invert their othered and ‘uncool’ position by drawing on a cultural repertoire of ethnic hybridity. By re-evaluating what coolness means, they can re-identify with a new positive self-image through which they can change the normative ethnic or religious, and thus change their socially excluded position (Goffman, 1963; Wimmer, 2013; Lamont et al., 2016; Modood, 2019; Vazquez and Wetzel, 2009).

Managing a contested and paralyzed white identity: a lack of cultural repertoires

In this minority-majority context, it seems that identities of majority youth become contested and questioned as well, as they are referred to as “tattas” and “Flamands”.

Sarah (ethnic and religious minority, school 1): “A tatta or Flamand is used for the people who are the so-called real Belgians, and who – how do I put this – are used to nothing, the white white children, the people who have money or who have it too good, anyway something negative. Who have it easy and who know nothing about other cultures and are just busy with themselves.”

The labels “tattas” and “Flamands” are ways to describe and mark the previously taken-for-granted ethnic (and non-religious) identities of white majority students, and point out their privileged position.

Zoë (ethnic and religious majority, school 2): “I get comments such as ‘you aren’t a tatta’. I have a friend, she is Bosnian, and she told a couple of people in class ‘I don’t want to be seen with you, they are tattas’, then I am like what... They call us ‘Flamands’ and ‘tattas’ and if I hear it, I get mad, it is just as bad as ‘negro’, so don’t do it. I already felt bad about it. It hurts me when someone says ‘she is such a Flamand’, then I almost feel bad for being white and Belgian.”

As Zoë describes, she “almost feels bad for being Belgian”, as a Belgian identity becomes contested and associated with ‘uncoolness’. So, how does she manages her identity that now becomes questioned in a super-diverse context? White being the norm against which minority youth had to profile themselves for such a long times, seem to have resulted in many boundary strategies such as inverting otherness as described above and vibrant and resilient ethnic and religious identities among minoritized youth. This raises the question of how white majority students themselves integrate into super-diverse majority-minority settings. On which cultural repertoires do they draw to negotiate their contested white identity?

We discuss what Crul (2018) calls a paralyzed white identity - paralyzed because of losing – or the fear of losing – its dominant position, and the apparent reactive, defensive and/or inability to react to the changing circumstances. Respondents can try to distance themselves from ‘being
a tatta’ by expressing a relational assimilation, i.e. the back and forth adjustments in daily life by minority and majority young people as they come into contact with each other (Jiménez, 2017). Zoë discusses how she makes an effort to learn and educate herself more about different cultures and religions.

Zoë: “I tried to understand Islam. I want as much information as possible, I want to talk to Ayoub (her classmate) and understand what he is talking about. Islam is getting bigger and bigger, even bigger than Christianity. I think it is going to be very important in the future, so I want to understand it and I even want to learn the Berber language.”

However, Crul (2018) argues that this so-called relational assimilation only goes so far, and that members of a dominant majority group tend to stick to and maintain an internalized position of privilege, which Jiménez (2017:194) calls ‘the ability of privilege to reinvent itself’. Indeed, Zoë continues:

“I am super interested, but I don’t want to change my own stuff for that. There is a certain limit.”

If we look further at how respondents deal with these challenges, it is noticeable that they seem to have difficulties overcoming nativist thinking and forming their arguments and opinions in line with their self-proclaimed inclusive and open-minded perception of diversity. Discourses such as reverse racism are expressed where minority youth are seen as those who discriminate.

Zoë: “If they call others ‘tatta’ then that’s discrimination as well. You hear stuff about racism so much. Just that word. But I’m like the Belgians… they don’t, no racism. If someone says something bad about a Moroccan than immediately, that’s racism. But if someone says something about a Belgian than that’s ‘funny’. Moroccans are supposedly oppressed by the whites, but I have the feeling it is the other way around?”

We already discussed how Merel responds in a defensive way to the minority-majority context by applying a repertoire of ethnic purity and thus preserving her dominant position. However, it is difficult to apply these discourses in a super-diverse context, where most minority students are born in Belgium. She stumbles with her words when she tries to use the argument that Muslims should adapt to the Belgian context, realizing that their peers are often also born in Belgium.

Merel (ethnic and religious majority, school 2): “Muslim girls are in our country, we are here... well, they are probably born here as well, but they have different roots than us.”
Tijs stumbles in the same way when he thinks that Flanders “should be ours” but realizes that it actually “belongs to everyone”. Respondents tend to construct unclear and incoherent arguments; Tijs, for example, mixes up various right-wing arguments, even those which are not of direct importance for him as a teenager (e.g. referring to pensions). He ends his comments by saying he would never vote for those right-wing parties, showing his unclear stance.

*Tijs (ethnic and religious majority, school 2):* “I don’t really think it is a problem that there is a little bit of everything in Flanders. But I do think that they should adapt to us and that they shouldn’t straight away say that we are racist if we say something about it. If you keep hearing ‘you are racist’ then you start to feel like ‘ah no, if they keep acting like that, then they shouldn’t come here anymore’. If they keep on saying that, they are creating hate. [...] There are many cultures and nationalities in Flanders, but I do think that Flanders is a little bit ours... Well, it belongs to everyone... but it should remain a bit ours. [...] I think Muslims, Moroccans and Turks are a bit in conflict with Flanders, and by that, I mean our rules and laws. For example with slaughter without stunning, that stuff and yeah also with refugees and that they... well, our pensions are low while they then... they come to our country. [...] So I do agree with the right-wing parties on that stuff. And you see Dries Van Langenhove⁴ on the news, and I do think that some of us... not that you agree but... I do think some of us think ‘ok he has a point’ if you check his clips on Facebook. But I wouldn’t vote for them, I would vote for ‘Groen’⁵, I think.”

Thus, youth from a dominant majority group seem to express great difficulty choosing which cultural repertoires to draw on to negotiate their emerging contested white identity (and thus a shifting racial/ethnic order and loss of status), which leaves them prone to reactive discourses such as identity threat and reverse racism. While Tijs does not necessarily identify with extreme-right wing parties, he does starts to discuss how he thinks they may have a point and he tells the researcher how he and his friends distribute stickers of the extreme-right youth movement ‘schild & vriend’ in school “just for fun”.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we have shown how majority and minority youth in a super-diverse city and school context blur group boundaries by applying a cultural repertoire of commonplace diversity and stress the normalcy and coolness of their super-diverse peer relations and school context (Author IV, 2020; Wessendorf, 2014). However, a more in-depth analysis shows how ethnic and religious symbolic boundaries emerge as bright, where minority youth need to

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⁴ Member of Vlaams Belang, Extreme right-wing populist party with anti-immigrant policy viewpoints.
⁵ Left wing green party
navigate othering and social exclusion processes. Minority youth are often depicted in contrast to majority youth, where the latter are part of the dominant, normative and taken-for-granted majority group.

We looked at how a cool identity is constructed among youth to negotiate and rework these ethnic and religious boundaries. Our analysis shows how majority youth claim a cool identity and maintain their dominant position by using a cultural repertoire of ethnic purity, where minority youth are described as ‘the other’ in relation to ‘pure’ Belgian youth. In addition, minority youth are depicted as ‘uncool’, ‘abnormal’ and ‘unyouthful’ in relation to the dominant (white) perspective on coolness and youthfulness. A cool identity is constructed that maintains a racial or ethnic hierarchy and dominant power relations. Minority youth, at their turn, rework and negotiate these bright ethnic and religious boundaries by re-evaluating and re-defining a cool identity through a cultural repertoire of ethnic hybridity. By doing this, they invert their othered position, re-identify with a new positive self-image and challenge the normative ethnic or religious hierarchy (Modood, 2019; Wimmer, 2013).

Although white identities are often taken for granted, our analysis shows that majority youth in an emerging super-diverse majority-minority setting (Crul, 2016) are increasingly confronted with a contested white identity. Less attention has been paid in the literature and empirical research to how majority groups in a super-diverse society need to reimagine their position in society, something previously often a burden felt only by minoritized individuals and groups (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015; Jiménez, 2017). Our results show that majority youth seem to lack tools to negotiate these group boundaries and to integrate into these super-diverse majority-minority settings. They express a paralyzed white identity, paralyzed by the fear of losing its dominant position and the reactive and/or inability to react to these changing circumstances (Crul, 2018). These young people tend to use repertoires such as ethnic purity, reverse racism and identity threat, and are prone to voicing right-wing populist arguments to feel acknowledged in their identity threat, rather than drawing on repertoires such as critical self-reflection, intersectionalism and anti-racism. Our results are in line with studies increasingly looking into the spread of extreme ideas and ideologies of far-right populist groups among young people, and the impact of large-scale commercialization of their symbols, codes and divisive messages on the radicalization of white youth (Bucholtz, 2011; Crul, 2018; Miller-Idriss, 2018). This trend raises the important question of how white young people can develop and draw upon tools and repertoires to manage their changing social position, without the need to call upon racist white identity politics. It also raises the need for schools and other educational
institutions to develop and disseminate non-reactive discourses that are better adapted to the super-diverse contexts in which young people currently find themselves.

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