

**This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:**

Connections that matter : the relative importance of ethnic-cultural origin, age and generation in media uses among diasporic youth in Belgium

**Reference:**

Dhoest Alexander.- Connections that matter : the relative importance of ethnic-cultural origin, age and generation in media uses among diasporic youth in Belgium  
Journal of children and media - ISSN 1748-2801 - (2015), p. 1-17  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/17482798.2015.1022562>

**Connections that matter:**  
**The relative importance of ethnic-cultural origin,**  
**age and generation in media uses among diasporic youth in Belgium**

Alexander Dhoest

*Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium*

Sint-Jacobstraat 2

2000 Antwerp

Belgium

+32 479 577226

alexander.dhoest@uantwerpen.be

**Author bio**

dr. Alexander Dhoest is associate professor in communication studies at the University of Antwerp (Belgium), specializing in popular culture, television studies and audience research. He is particularly interested in the connection between media uses and issues of national, ethnic-cultural and sexual identity among young people. He has published widely on these themes in edited volumes and international journal such as *European Journal of Communication* and *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

## **Connections that matter:**

### **The relative importance of ethnic-cultural origin, age and generation in media uses among diasporic youth in Belgium**

Most research on diasporic media use in Flanders (Belgium) focuses on second generation adolescents belonging to the two largest non-European groups of migrants, Moroccans and Turks. This leads to a limited knowledge of the broader diasporic population and makes it difficult to ascertain how media use is related to age and generation (both in terms of migration and in terms of digital media access), independent of belonging to a specific ethnic-cultural group. To explore these issues, 30 adolescents from 16 national backgrounds and their parents were interviewed. Despite their diverse cultural backgrounds, clear generational differences were found, the younger participants demonstrating shared media uses and preferences (e.g. focusing more on entertainment and less on the country of origin). While ethnic roots are important, age and generation are primary factors for understanding media uses and preferences among diasporic audiences, which cautions against an exclusive focus on ethnic-cultural identity in research.

Keywords: diaspora; second generation; adolescents; TV viewing; internet use; age; generation.

One of the reasons why both academics and society at large are so interested in the media uses of young people, is because childhood and adolescence constitute a key period in life, when identities are formed. It is considered as a particularly important and formative period, when people find their place in the world. For similar reasons, young people are often studied in research on migration and ethnic-cultural identification. While some researchers study the media uses of young people who migrated with their parents (the so-called “first generation”), many focus on the “second

generation": young people who are raised by parents who migrated, and who are negotiating between two cultures. As will be developed below, media are often identified as a key site and tool for such negotiations, providing representations and connections, both to the parents' home culture and to the country of residence.

This paper aims to contribute to this literature at the intersection of studies on children and young people, migration and diaspora, and the media, by critically reflecting on the relative importance of ethnic-cultural identity as compared to other connections. While media undeniably play a role in processes of ethnic-cultural identification, I contend that research in this field has tended to overemphasise the significance of this aspect in the overall media use of second generation diasporic audiences. As will be argued and illustrated below, such research often focuses on particular ethnic-cultural groups, looking for shared media uses and the role of media in creating connections to their families and ethnic-cultural communities in the country of residence as well as the country of origin (e.g. Peeters & d'Haenens, 2005; Elias & Lemish, 2008). Although other dimensions of variation, such as gender and age, are often discussed in such research, I would argue that ethnic-cultural identity is generally prioritised throughout the research process and therefore tends to get disproportionate weight in interpretations of media uses. Based on my experiences in several projects on the media uses of diasporic youngsters, I contend that their ethnic-cultural backgrounds and identity negotiations are relevant and salient in certain contexts, but less so in many others. To get a sharper view on this issue, this paper first offers a critical review of the literature on this topic. Subsequently, it discusses the findings of a project on the importance of ethnic-cultural identification in relation to the participants' age and generation.

## **Media in the lives of diasporic youngsters**

One of the burgeoning fields in media research explores the importance of media and communication in diasporic contexts. While migration as such is arguably as old as humankind, there is a general sense that processes of human relocation have become more prominent in the current era of globalisation, and that they are connected to and affected by other processes of border-crossing in such fields as economics, legislation, technology and communication (Appadurai, 1996; Sinclair, 2004). Electronic media, in particular, are considered to play a key role in processes of identity and community construction across and beyond national boundaries, because of their central position in everyday life and their ability to bring distant cultures close (Georgiou, 2006).

Particularly for adolescents, the processes of coming of age and of ethnocultural identification go hand in hand (Durham, 2004). In line with more general arguments about identity construction in the age of globalisation, media are considered as a resource providing material which is appropriated in processes of identity construction (Kellner, 1995; Barker, 1999). Particularly - but not only - in a migration context, national cultural identities and imagined communities are increasingly replaced by more complex, culturally hybrid identifications (Kraidy, 1999; Georgiou, 2006). Research on the importance of media in a migration context consistently identifies their double function of maintaining connections with the country of origin and the ethnic-cultural community, while also establishing connections with the country of residence and its culture. For instance, Elias and Lemish (2008, 2011) discuss this as “inward” and “outward” integration respectively, while Peeters and d'Haenens (2005) use the terms “bonding” and “bridging” to conceptualise similar processes.

One of the key issues in this literature concerns the position and conceptualisation of ethnic-cultural identities. The general tendency is to question

notions of fixed identities, dismissing them as inaccurate and essentialist. Instead, more dynamic concepts such as that of the “diaspora” are privileged to describe processes of transnational identification (Brah, 1996). It is important not to conceptualise diasporic communities as homogeneous, particularly in the contemporary context of “super-diversity”, where migrant populations are increasingly diverse not only in terms of their countries of origin but also in other respects such as language, religion, migration channel and immigration status, gender and age (Vertovec, 2007, 2010). In relation to media, this leads to a fluid and complex set of cultural responses, based on multiple subject positions or “positionalities” (Cottle, 2000). Many researchers working in the field point out the danger of essentialising ethnic minority audiences. For instance, Ross (2000) talks about the tendency, in reporting on ethnic minority media uses, to focus on shared characteristics and thus to create an imaginary collective. In a similar vein, Sreberny (2000) discusses the danger for research on ethnic “communities” to actually create the idea of such coherent communities. Gillespie (2000) warns about the tendency to focus on and thus essentialise cultural differences, and Ogan (2001) describes this as a form of “othering”. As an alternative, Gillespie (2007) proposes the model of multiple, overlapping and fluid axes of identification, which are accentuated in certain contexts and recede in others. Some authors, such as Silva (2010) and El Sghiar (2011), suggest to leave the concept of identity altogether, instead proposing the more dynamic notion of identification as a continuous process.

Despite this theoretical stress on the fluidity and multiplicity of identifications, in empirical research it is hard to avoid essentialising overtones. For instance, much of the research in this field tends to focus on single ethnic-cultural “communities”, that is: people sharing a particular country or region of origin. For instance, in her classic study Gillespie (1995) studies television uses and identification among Punjabi adolescents

living in London. While she does draw attention to the importance of differences in terms of gender, sexuality, class and region, and describes identity not as an essence but as positioning (Gillespie, 1995: 11), Harindranath (2005) criticizes the persistent reification of race and ethnicity in this and other texts in the field. He is particularly critical of one of the foundational studies, Liebes and Katz's *The Export of Meaning* (1990), which compares readings of *Dallas* across different ethnic groups. According to Harindranath (2000, 2005), such research presupposes strong, fixed boundaries between groups and essentialises race and culture: "Highlighting the apparent commonalities of experiences of cultural consumption across a diverse community grouped predominantly by their ethnic or racial aspects belies the complexity of the cultural and social formations of such communities." (Harindranath, 2005)

What is at stake here, is the focus on shared readings and experiences, suggesting homogeneity within ethnic-cultural communities as well as differences from others, either implicitly or explicitly by comparing ethnic-cultural groups. This seems to be mostly unintentional, and is partly a side-effect of the methodological set-up of research. Paraphrasing and extending the notion of "methodological nationalism", conceptualised by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) as the assumption that the nation is the natural social form of the modern world, we could talk here about "methodological essentialism", the tendency for relatively fixed ethnic-cultural groups to be seen as the natural constituents not only of contemporary society but also of research. As observed by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002), diaspora studies tend to relate dispersed populations back to a national homeland and to focus on the idea of transnational, nation-like communities. Drawing on Brubaker (2003), this can also be described as "groupism", the tendency to take sharply bounded putatively homogeneous groups as basic constituents of social life. As Slettemeås (2013) points out, the primary

focus on ethnic categories tends to reproduce essentialist interpretations, “inscribing cultural and biological characteristics on individuals which subsequently provide explanations for behaviour” (Slettemeås, 2013: 41).

As indicated above, it is hard to avoid such essentialising accounts when analysing media uses in a diaporic context. A first fruitful avenue, also explored by Slettemeås (2013), is not to focus on particular groups but on migrants from different countries of origin. A similar approach was used in the project discussed in this paper, which is a response to earlier research on ethnic-cultural minority media uses in the Low Countries, i.e. the Netherlands and Flanders (northern Belgium). The past decades have seen an upsurge of research on media uses in the larger migrant communities, particularly those of Turkish and Moroccan origin (e.g. Devroe, Driesen & Saeys, 2005; Peeters & d'Haenens, 2005; Sinardet & Mortelmans, 2006). While very valuable in exploring this field, this research could be criticized for focusing only on a few groups and for overly prioritizing their ethnic-cultural roots and identifications, essentialising them in the process. Instead, the research presented here studies young people with a multiplicity of ethnic-cultural backgrounds, not focusing on particular ethnic-cultural identifications but rather discussing shared diasporic experiences.

As a second strategy to get away from essentialising tendencies, this project does not prioritise a single source of identification (the ethnic-cultural) but instead explores its intersection with the dimensions of age and generation. As developed in feminist research, the concept of intersectionality draws attention to the interaction between different social stratifications (Crenshaw, 1989; Choo & Ferree, 2010). While the original focus was on multiple forms of discrimination, in research on diasporic media uses it is (also) used more neutrally to draw attention to the interconnectedness of ethnicity and race with other dimensions such as class and gender: “Diasporic identities

are always positioned and dialectically shaped in relation to other identities, such as gender, age, class, generation and sexuality.” (Georgiou 2006: 58) In the Low Countries, as in the international literature, research often focuses on diasporic youth as a particularly interesting age group in relation to identity exploration and negotiation (e.g. de Bruin, 2005; Devroe, Driesen & Saeys, 2005; Sinardet & Mortelmans, 2006; Adriaens, 2012; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2013). However, only studying young people makes it hard to ascertain to what degree their media uses are connected to their diasporic background and to what degree they are age-specific. Indeed, research also including older diasporic audiences consistently - and not unexpectedly - identifies important differences between younger and older audiences (e.g. Peeters & d'Haenens, 2005; Elias & Lemish, 2008).

Taking a closer look at these differences, we can identify three related, partly overlapping dimensions. First, there is the issue of age, which does not simply determine media use but which corresponds to a certain life stage. Adolescence, in particular, is identified as a period of identity exploration, when certain media content is particularly attractive. This leads to shared media tastes, also among diasporic youth, for instance the predilection for “global” (often but not always American) television identified by several researchers (de Leeuw, 2005; Nikunen, 2008; Elias & Lemish, 2008). Second, the youngsters studied in recent research belong to a specific generation, particularly in relation to the availability of digital media. If generations are based on the sharing of certain experiences, especially during adolescence, then it is crucial to situate the media uses of current diasporic adolescents in their belonging to what is variably referred to as the group of “digital natives”, the “net generation” or the “digital generation” (Bolin & Skogerbø, 2013). As developed by Aroldi and Colombo (2007), generational belonging in media terms can be conceived as a sort of subculture playing

a role in media diets, frames of interpretation of media texts, and a certain predisposition to the domestication of communication technologies. Recent research on the digital media uses of diasporic youth confirms this generational dimension which sets them apart from their parents (e.g. Leurs & Ponsanezi, 2013; Vittadini, Milesi & Aroldi, 2013).

Third, the diasporic youngsters which are often studied, generally (but not always) belong to a different generation of migration than their parents, which has consequences for processes of adaptation and acculturation (Rumbaut, 2004). Research comparing media users of the first and second generation consistently finds important differences, the first generation generally keeping closer ties with the country of origin while the second generation is more oriented on global media (e.g. Hargreaves & Mahdjoub, 1997; Peeters & d'Haenens, 2005). Like the media generations described above, the borders of these generations are not clear-cut, here in particular because of the different ages of migration (Rumbaut, 2004) as well as internal fractures by gender, class and race (Anthias, 2012). In terms of media use, beside generational differences there are also intergenerational exchanges and communal media uses within the family context (Elias & Lemish, 2008; Georgiou, 2010). Nevertheless, generation of migration remains a useful heuristic device, if we don't conceive these generations as homogeneous and fixed groups - much like the ethnic-cultural groups discussed above.

### **Diasporic media uses in Flanders**

Putting these insights into practice, the remainder of this paper will discuss the results of a research project in Flanders, the northern, Dutch speaking part of Belgium. More specifically, participants for this project were recruited in and around Antwerp, the largest and most ethnically diverse of the Flemish cities, with people of 169 nationalities in 2014 (Stad Antwerpen, 2014). This project draws on 60 in-depth semi-

structured interviews, 30 of which were with adolescents aged between 15 and 18 years old, and 30 with adults.<sup>1</sup> As indicated above, one of the aims of this project was to extend the scope beyond the usual larger (mostly non-European) ethnic-cultural minorities. To ascertain a wide diversity of participants, the adolescents were recruited through different schools as well as snowballing based on personal contacts. The final sample contained people with 16 different ethnic-cultural backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> There were 17 boys and 13 girls, who illustrate the complicated picture in terms of generation: while the majority belong to the second generation (17 participants), 6 have one parent born in Belgium which technically makes them part of the 2.5 generation, and 7 moved to Belgium themselves but were very young at the time, so they're part of the 1.5 generation. To better ascertain the importance of age and generation, for each adolescent one of their parents was also interviewed (11 men and 19 women), using the same topic list. While most belonged moved to Belgium as adults, 4 were born in Belgium so technically they are second generation migrants.<sup>3</sup>

The overarching question guiding this research was: 'What are the similarities and differences in the uses of, and meanings attached to, media among diasporic adolescents and their parents?' Hence, the analysis focused primarily on similarities and differences between the two age groups, which represent an identical range of ethnic-cultural backgrounds. As discussed above, their responses will not be analysed through the perspective of their particular ethnic-cultural backgrounds, but primarily through the lens of age and generation in a diasporic context.

The interviews were based on an elaborate interview guide, first addressing the participants' familial situation, ethnic-cultural background and cultural identifications, then moving on to questions about television use and preferences, to finish with questions about internet uses and preferences. The interviews were fully transcribed and

analysed using the qualitative software package NVivo, looking for similarities and differences within and between the groups of adolescents and parents. While the analysis was essentially qualitative in nature, aiming to identify particular uses and meanings in both groups rather than count them, recurrences (that is: multiple occurrences of certain uses and meanings) were used as an indicator of tendencies and patterns within and across the two age groups. For the sake of precision, concrete numbers will be added where possible, but as the sample is relatively small and not randomly selected these numbers do not (aim to) provide an accurate measurement nor do they imply claims about the broader diasporic population. Similarly, the participants' statements about quantity are not to be considered as exact measurements, but rather as subjective assessments of the recurrence and importance of certain media uses. Due to space restrictions, the account below only contains limited quotations, which are used to illustrate the occurrences or recurrences discussed in the analysis. For the sake of anonymity, the participants' names are not disclosed, but to contextualise the answers their gender (M/F), age group (Y/O for Younger/Older) and country of origin will be included.

To start, it is worth reflecting on the cultural backgrounds and identifications among the participants. Reviewing their migration backgrounds, it is clear that our sample reflects the “super-diversity” discussed above. Parents moved to Belgium from across the world (see footnote 1), in a wide range of periods (from the 1960s to the 2000s) and for a variety of reasons (mostly work or family reunification, love and marriage, but also studies or war). Due to the recruitment through their (mostly) second-generation children, the parents have been in Belgium for a long time (from 10 to 43 years, mostly around 20 years), which is worth remembering when we analyse their media uses. They have a wide range of educational and employment profiles, which

complicates the widespread image of Belgian immigrants as lower-educated labourers who came to work in industrial jobs.

### *Cultural identifications*

At the beginning of the interviews both the adolescents and their parents were asked about their cultural identifications. The adolescents say they identify more (9) or at least equally with Belgium (10) as with their parents' country of origin (7).<sup>4</sup> Explaining their connections to their parents' country of origin, they refer for instance to the cuisine and traditions such as celebrations, and sometimes to (mostly Islamic) religion, but overall these ties are limited. These adolescents primarily know their parents' country of origin through holidays, and most don't know its language very well. Almost all adolescents state that their mixed cultural roots are not something they are preoccupied with - which is a first indication that we should be cautious in approaching them as belonging to particular ethnic-cultural groups, which is not necessarily how they think of themselves.

Q: How important is Polish culture for you?

A: Hmm, I don't know... When I hear Polish people talking, I feel like I'm sort of part of it. But it's not that I'm going to tell people 'I'm Polish'.

V: And how important is Flemish or Belgian culture for you?

A: Very important. I grew up here, it's the only thing I know.

V: And is this something you're preoccupied with, those different roots?

A: Not a lot, no. (F, Y, Poland)

Not unexpectedly, their parents more strongly identify with their country of origin. It's where most of them were born and where many of their family and friends still live. They generally speak its language fluently and are attached to its traditions and religion. While only one (second generation) parent says she identifies more strongly with Belgium, 7 say they identify more strongly with their country of origin. However, most parents (17) talk about an even mix of attachments to Belgium and their country of

origin, and some (5) prefer to describe themselves as Europeans or “citizens of the world”. More than their children, they display the transnational connections and cultural negotiations associated with the diaspora.

Q: Do you think you're rather Flemish or Belgian, or Polish?

A: I'm something in between I think. I feel Polish, but because of migration, your horizons broaden. (...) You learn a new mentality and a new culture and so you change a bit. So I am Polish and I feel Polish, but I actually love two cultures now, it's something of a mix. When I'm back in Poland I miss Belgium, and when I'm here I miss Poland. (F, O, Polish)

At the same time, like their children the parents admit that their mixed roots are not something that preoccupies them a lot on an everyday basis - except when other people remind them of it (which, ironically, is very much what the interview did).

Q: Are you preoccupied a lot with these different roots?

A: No, not really, but you are confronted with it daily here in Flanders, they constantly remind you of it. You are actually classified as Moroccan. And when I go to Morocco with my family in summer, there they say: you are a Belgian. (M, O, Morocco)

Overall, the cultural background of these parents seems not to be very salient, which may be specific to this group of participants and set them apart from more recent migrants or migrants who are confronted with more intolerant attitudes. Keeping these cultural identifications and backgrounds in mind, I will now discuss the (self-reported) patterns of media use and preference.

### ***Media access and uses***

The majority of the households (21) in the sample have multiple television sets and about half (13) also have a satellite dish which gives them access to channels from the country of origin - which, consistent with other research (e.g. Devroe et al., 2005), is

mostly used by the parents, testifying to the importance of generations of migration. More than half of the adolescents (17) watch TV content online, which is consistent with quantitative patterns among the broader population of Flemish adolescents (57.6%, in Adriaens, Van Damme & Courtois, 2011) and very much related to their generation in media terms. All households have access to the internet on at least one shared computer, mostly complemented by a personal laptop for the adolescents (25) - which again testifies of their belonging to the “digital generation”.

In terms of media uses, there is a clear distinction between the adolescents, whose estimate of the daily time spent watching television (2 hours on average) is much higher than that of their parents (less than 1 hour on average). Among other things, this reflects the importance of age as it is related to life stages, the parents often commenting that they simply don't have a lot of free time to watch television. At the same time, this also reflects a different generational approach to television, as the parents tend to switch on the television set to watch particular programs, while the adolescents report they often simultaneously do other things and use other media while “watching” television, the process of media multitasking which is also reported across Flemish adolescents by Adriaens et al. (2011). Not surprisingly, this often includes surfing on the internet, which the adolescents report to do much more (on average 3 hours daily for the boys, and 1.5 to 2 hours for the girls, outside of school) than their parents, who report estimates between 0.5 and 1.5 hours a day (outside of work). Beside a clear indication of different media generations, this also reflects different life stages as parents, again, report they don't have the time on weekdays to use the internet for private purposes a lot, while in the weekend they prefer to stay away from the internet, which many associate with work. This is also one of the instances where gender differences (particularly among the adolescents) seem to be equally important in explaining patterns

in the interviews. For instance, the boys report average daily internet uses of 3 hours, while the girls say they are online between 1.5 and 2 hours, which is in line with wider findings about gender differences in media use among Flemish adolescents in general (Adriaens et al., 2011).

### ***Media preferences***

When asked which TV channel they most watch, most adolescents (25) mention commercial channels, while the parents say they watch public channels more (8) or as much (15) as commercial channels. The interviews don't disclose exact numbers in terms of preferred genres, but it is clear that the adolescents prefer entertainment. When asked which genres they mostly watch, almost all mention films and TV series in the first place, while documentaries are also popular (in particular with boys), as is reality television (mentioned by about half of the adolescents). Their parents are less oriented on entertainment and give equal importance to information on television. When asked which genres they mostly watch, film is the most mentioned genre (mentioned by almost all), followed by documentaries and news (mentioned by about half), while only two participants state they like to watch reality TV - again an age-related taste pattern.

Similarly, the internet uses of diasporic adolescents are quite similar to those of Flemish and other European youngsters (see Adriaens et al. 2011 for Flanders). When asked what they mostly do online, social network sites and particularly Facebook are most mentioned, only 3 boys not having a Facebook account. A second important use of the internet is to watch online video and listen to music, mostly on YouTube. If the adolescents say they look for information online, which is rare, it is mostly for school. In stark contrast, almost all of their parents state they primarily use the internet for practical purposes and to find information, including news. Like their children, they also

use the internet to communicate and socialise, 13 having a Facebook account, but most say they don't use it a lot.

### **Media and culture**

While the above account is necessarily sketchy as these qualitative interviews are not a reliable source of quantitative information, the overall sense is that the reported media uses and preferences are very similar to those of the general, “ethnic majority” population. Rather than a particular ethnic-cultural background, a combination of age, media generation and generation of migration seem to explain most of the similarities within and differences between the two groups. This is not to suggest that ethnic-cultural origins don't matter, but it does make the point that only or mostly analysing media uses from that perspective tends to overemphasise its importance. In what follows, I will discuss instances where ethnic-cultural identifications are more clearly relevant and salient, but again, it will become clear that age and generation are important mediating variables in this process.

### ***Television from the country of origin***

A first field where ethnic-cultural backgrounds are evidently relevant, is in relation to television viewing. Above, it was mentioned that the adolescents preferred commercial channels, and it is important to add that these are predominantly Flemish channels. Again, the qualitative interviews do not allow for exact quantification, but vtm, the main commercial channel, was most mentioned by the adolescents. Other Flemish channels were also mentioned, as were a limited number of international channels such as Discovery Channel and MTV. On all those channels, the preferred programmes are American series, films or reality shows. In contrast, interest in television from the parents' country of origin is limited among the adolescents, who mention limited

knowledge of the language as the most important reason not to watch. While other researchers report the pressure of parents to watch television from the country of origin, also to learn the language (e.g. Elias & Lemish, 2008), hardly any of the adolescents in this research report such pressure. However, even without such pressure some mention they occasionally watch together with their parents, which helps them to learn the language.

Q: Do your parents think it's important you watch Bosnian television?

A: No, not really. That has never been a topic of conversation so I guess they don't really care.

Q: Do they watch it themselves?

A: More than me because they have more memories of it. They also watched it more in their youth and they watch it again now, but before I didn't understand the language enough yet and I couldn't really follow. Now I'm older that goes perfectly so I often watch along because there's some really good programmes. (M, Y, Bosnia)

As suggested in this quote and also found in other research in Flanders and abroad (e.g. Peeters & d'Haenens, 2005; Elias & Lemish, 2008), first generation migrants tend to be more oriented on TV from the country of origin, particularly to watch news and information programmes. For instance, one parent mentions watching a lot of Moroccan and Arabic channels:

Yes I do, because I still have family in Morocco. That's my country of origin so I want to know about the situation there. It's not because I live here in Belgium now that's it's not important for me. (M, O, Morocco)

Culture, in particular film and music, is also mentioned as a reason to watch TV from the country of origin.

I also have Romanian TV, I also watch the news there and occasionally a film, that's also a bit of nostalgia for the past. They often broadcast films from the time when I was young and that evokes a certain nostalgia. (M, O, Romania)

Talking about her favourite programmes, another participant mentions music programmes on channels from her country of origin.

That's what I grew up with and those are memories about the good old times. For instance, I don't think much of the music that younger people listen to now. Everyone loves music from when they were young, when they were twenty. (F, O, Bosnia)

Both quotes illustrate the importance of generational experiences, cultural tastes being formed in one's younger years and leading to nostalgia in later years. Language is also an important reason for this orientation on television from the home country.

I can understand everything in my mother tongue, that's much easier for me. I can't say that about Belgian TV. Belgian programmes are not always clear and I really have to concentrate to understand something. (F, O, Poland)

While parents are more oriented on media from their country of origin than their children, it is important not to overemphasise this. All these parents have lived in Belgium for a long time and report an equally strong or even stronger orientation on Belgian or Flemish news and culture.

Q: The news you watch, is that Belgian news?

A: Yes of course, from Belgium and Europe. We have been here 22 years, so the interesting things are the things that happen around us. Congo is far away. (M, O, Congo)

A few mention they don't even have access to TV from their country of origin, because they don't (want to) have a satellite dish.

Q: Do you ever watch programmes about or made in Algeria?

A: No. Well, if there was a documentary I would certainly watch it, but I'm not specially going to look for those programmes or get a satellite dish. (F, O, Algeria)

Again, exact quantification is impossible but most parents say they predominantly watch Flemish channels, which they understand well. Flemish television is actually mentioned as a way to learn as the language upon arrival in Belgium:

In the beginning I watched those programmes a lot to learn the language, by listening. In the beginning you have to listen a lot. Learning the language at school was one thing, but just talking and listening to people is totally different. (F, O, Poland)

Particularly for the few second generation parents, Flemish television is much closer to their own experiences, as it is for the adolescents.

Overall, it is clear that ethnic-cultural backgrounds do play a significant role in the orientation on TV from the country of origin, which evidently sets these diasporic audiences apart from ethnic majority viewers. However, first of all this is strongly dependent on the generation of migration, second generation children and parents being mostly oriented on Flemish or global media. Second, even for first generation parents Flanders is often the key point of reference in television terms, which cautions against only or primarily focusing on their culturally specific media uses.

### ***Online connections***

When asked about online connections to their parents' country of origin, the adolescents, again, report very limited culturally oriented media uses. For instance, they seldom discuss the internet as a means to look for news or information about their parents' country of origin, and if they do it's mostly for school.

Q: Do you sometimes look for information about Morocco??

A: Well, I had to give a talk at school for French and we could choose a country where French was one of the official languages, and we had chosen Morocco because I am from Moroc... Well, because my parents are Moroccan. So I looked up things about Morocco recently.

Q: But if it's not for school, you usually don't do that?

A: No. (M, Y, Morocco)

This being said, it is important to mention that they do not report using the internet often to follow Belgian or other international news either. What they do occasionally refer to in the interviews, is an online search for music and movie clips related to their parental culture, paralleling their overall interest in online music. They also state they use SNSs to maintain connections with family (mostly cousins) and friends in the country of origin, as they do with family and friends (often with the same ethnic-cultural background) in Belgium.

Q: Do you sometimes use Facebook for your family?

A: Yes, the whole family has it so that's nice to see, because I don't know them very well and they live far, so it's cool when they post a little film to so I know how they are and whether I recognise the people and to keep contact. (F, Y, India)

While it is impossible to reliably quantify the many references to online media use throughout the interviews, overall it is clear that their parents report more culturally oriented internet uses, in particular looking for information about their country of origin. Like other adults in Flanders, they are more oriented on information than their children, which illustrates the importance of age and life stage. Beside information, they also look for culture (particularly music) and religious information online.

Q: Do you sometimes look for information about your religion?

A: Yes, to know when there are certain celebrations, to look up old customs, or to find recipes for certain dishes. (F, O, Ukraine)

They also use the internet to get in touch with family in the country of origin, which

reconfirms the importance of the generation of migration: more than their children, first generation migrant parents stay in touch with their family, which is logical but also reminds us that "ethnic-cultural identity" is all but a fixed and unified.

As with television, the online media use of the parents is clearly more oriented on the country of origin than that of their children, but it is important not to only focus on such culturally motivated uses. Reviewing all discussions of the internet throughout the interviews, it becomes clear that the parents' internet use is occasionally culturally motivated but most of the time it isn't. For them, the internet is primarily a practical tool to look up information of all kinds: opening times for shops, travel information etc.

### ***Representations of cultural diversity***

So far, the media uses of these diasporic audiences, particularly the adolescents, seem to be less culturally motivated than much of the research in the field suggests. This is not to say that their ethnic-cultural backgrounds are completely irrelevant; rather, it seems that they are often not very salient, that is: not a key dimension of identification that comes to fore during media use. However, there are some occasions when ethnic-cultural identifications become more prominent. As mentioned above, some of the participants mentioned that they were often "reminded" of their foreign roots. In media terms, this is most often the case when people of foreign origin are reported about (in news genres) or represented (in fictional and entertainment genres).

Based on multiple reports in academic literature about discontentment with such representations (e.g. Ross, 2001; de Leeuw, 2005), this topic was also explicitly raised during the interview. Indeed, the parents tend to be quite critical about the representation of cultural diversity on television. When asked if they think there are *enough* representations of people of non-Belgian origin on Belgian television, a majority (18) say they don't think so, while only a few (4) clearly state they do.

It's not well represented, because if you take Antwerp, let's say 30% of the people living here don't have the Belgian nationality. I don't think 30% are represented on television. (F, O, Morocco)

The remaining 8 don't have a clear opinion on the matter, which again confirms that these issues (even if raised by the interviewer) do not preoccupy all 'migrant' viewers.

When subsequently asked if these minorities are represented *accurately*, again more parents answered negatively (11) than positively (1). One critique concerns the representation of ethnic minorities as, or only in the context of, problems:

If they ask people to get on television, it's mostly about their supposed problems, about their problems as ethnic minorities. For instance, have you seen a Moroccan man or woman on TV being asked about global warming? Or environmental issues? No, it's always about supposed problems of ethnic minorities, and that annoys me. (M, O, Morocco)

Another point of criticism concerns the tendency to give limited and stereotypical representations of particular nations and regions, for instance Eastern Europe and Russia:

Q: When ethnic minorities are on TV, do you think they are accurately represented?

A: Sometimes you see them on children's programmes, a presenter, but in general, not really. It's not enough really, and I don't feel it's very positive. You know, what's the deal with those Polish women in prostitution? And if it's about other countries, it's typically about Albanian maffia and what have you. So: no. (F, O, Algeria)

A final theme that was mentioned was the negative representation of (predominantly Muslim) religion:

Q: Is there something that should get more attention on TV?

A: Religion, because I think that's still portrayed very negatively. If it gets in the media it's always negative. There's so many positive things but you never hear or see them. (F, O, Morocco)

Most (18) however, don't have an outspoken opinion about the accuracy of representations of ethnic-cultural diversity, which again suggests that ethnic-cultural issues may be less salient than is often assumed in academic research.

Talking to the adolescents, opinions are more mixed. When asked if they think *enough* people of non-Belgian origin are represented on Belgian television, 12 say they don't and 11 they do, while the remaining 7 don't have a clear opinion on this issue. For instance, one participant comments on the lack of diversity in the portrayal of Antwerp:

I think that a series or show has to reflect reality a bit and how society is in Belgium. If you portray a society with only real Belgians, that's not right. For instance, if you watch 'Zone Stad' (*police drama*) you almost never see ethnic minorities walking around in Antwerp. But if you would go to Antwerp now, most of the people you would see are ethnic minorities. (M, Y, Congo)

When subsequently asked if they think people of non-Belgian origin are *accurately* represented, fewer participants think they are (4) than not (10), but 8 are undecided and 8 more have no clear opinion about this issue, which again suggests that this issue is not as salient as is often assumed. Those who are critical give similar comments than the parents, for instance on stereotyping:

For instance in 'Dossier K' (*crime movie*), it was about the Albanian maffia, and it's really like that in that culture, 'You killed my father so I will kill you'. It's like that in that culture, but I think it's too extreme, they exaggerate it. And then many Belgians think 'Oh no, Albanians!' I'm not saying it doesn't exist, but there are also normal Albanians. (M, Y, Kosovo)

Despite these instances, even more so than among their parents, most adolescents seem not to care very much, which corresponds with their different generation of migration:

they feel less implicated by these portrayals.

## **Conclusion**

Reviewing the participants' responses, and connecting them back to the theoretical discussion, I hope it has become clear that we should be careful in how we approach media uses among diasporic adolescents. While earlier accounts have disclosed differences among particular ethnic-cultural groups of adolescents in Flanders (e.g. Devroe et al., 2005), an approach that includes members of more and other ethnic-cultural groups highlights the overarching similarities across this age group and generation. Moreover, by moving beyond a single age group, it becomes clear how these media uses within the same ethnic-cultural groups vary greatly according to age and generation. While in some instances, ethnic-cultural identifications clearly come to the fore in media use, most of the time they are not very salient.

As already mentioned, more large scale and quantitative research is necessary to corroborate the differences between diasporic parents and their children identified above and to situate them within media uses among the broader population. The main point I want to make is less about the specifics of this research and more fundamentally about the ways in which our theoretical and methodological approach, as researchers, has a great impact on what we “see”, particularly - but not only - in qualitative research. Media research about ethnic-cultural minorities, young and old, tends to mostly be *about* their ethnic-culturally motivated media uses. Ethnic-cultural minority audiences are mostly approached *as* ethnic-cultural minorities. Paralleling the comment that ethnic-cultural minorities are mostly presented as a problem and as ethnic-cultural minorities in the media, research may be iterating this “framing”. By mostly setting ethnic-minority audiences apart rather than including them in general research projects, we may be contributing to the “othering” processes we, as researchers in this field, tend

to be critical of in media and society at large. In our research, we often put the spotlight on ethnic-cultural identity matters, which we explicitly raise as an issue with participants we specifically selected as members of ethnic-cultural minorities, so it is not surprising that our research generally confirms the importance of ethnic-cultural connections.

While such research is valuable, in order to identify specific media uses among diasporic audiences, it is important to also see the bigger picture. Ethnic-cultural minority audiences are not fundamentally different in their patterns of and motivations for media use. Just as they are among the population at large, their media uses are structured by age and generation, as they are by gender, class and a multiplicity of other intersecting variables. To me, this implies that in research on diasporic audiences, we should more systematically focus on other aspects beside the ethnic-cultural. Similarly, in research on young people it is important to ascertain a level of ethnic-cultural diversity in the sample, even if the focus is not on diasporic experiences.

## References

- Adriaens, F., Van Damme, E., & Courtois, C. (2011). *Screenagers: Een onderzoek naar het mediagebruik bij jongeren in Vlaanderen (CIM-rapport 2011/1)*. Gent: UGent.
- Adriaens, F. (2012) *On mute: Diaspora youth. A transdisciplinary and multi-method audience study into using, consuming and doing television among diaspora youngsters*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Gent: UGent.
- Anthias, F. (2012). Transnational mobilities, migration research and intersectionality: Towards a translocational frame. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 2(2): 102-110.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Aroldi, P. & Colombo, F. (2007). Generational belonging and mediascape in Europe. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 6(1): 34-44.
- Barker, C. (1999). *Television, Globalization and Cultural Identities*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Bolin, G. & Skogerbø, E. (2013). Editorial: Age, generation and the media. *Northern Lights 11*: 3-14.
- Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Brubaker, R. (2003). Neither individualism nor 'groupism': A reply to Craig Calhoun. *Ethnicities*, 3(4): 553-557.
- Choo, H. Y. & Ferree, M. M. (2010). Practicing intersectionality in sociological research: A critical analysis of inclusions, interactions, and institutions in the study of inequalities. *Sociological Theory*, 28(2): 129-149.
- Cottle, S. (2000). Introduction: Media research and ethnic minorities: Mapping the field. In S. Cottle (ed.) *Ethnic minorities and the media: Changing cultural boundaries* (pp. 1-30). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Crenshaw, K.W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989: 139-67.

- de Bruin, J. (2005). *Multicultureel drama: Populair Nederlands televisiedrama, jeugd en etniciteit*. Amsterdam: Otto Cramwinckel.
- de Leeuw, S. (2005). Television fiction and cultural diversity: Strategies for cultural change. In L. Højberg and H. Søndergaard (Eds), *European film and media culture* (91-111). Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Devroe, I., Driesen, D. & Saeys, F. (2005). *Beschikbaarheid en gebruik van traditionele en nieuwe media bij allochtone jongeren in Vlaanderen*. U.A. & L.U.C: Steunpunt Gelijkekansenbeleid.
- Durham, M. G. (2004). Constructing the "New Ethnicities": Media, sexuality, and diaspora identity in the lives of South Asian immigrant girls', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 21(2): 140-161.
- Elias, N. & Lemish, D. (2008). Media uses in immigrant families: Torn between 'inward' and 'outward' paths of integration. *International Communication Gazette*, 70(1): 21-40.
- Elias, N. & Lemish, D. (2011). Between three worlds: Host, homeland, and global media in the lives of Russian immigrant families in Israel and Germany. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(9): 1245-1274.
- El Sghiar, H. (2011). Debating diversity and conceptual purity: Reflections on identification as a meaningful concept for diasporic minority research. *The International Communication Gazette*, 73(5): 440-458.
- Georgiou, M. (2006). *Diaspora, identity and the media: Diasporic transnationalism and mediated spatialities*. Creskill: Hampton Press.
- Georgiou, M. (2010). *The media in the family, across Europe. Special focus: Diasporic families and media consumption. EF8 report for Family Platform*. London: LSE.
- Gillespie, M. (1995). *Television, ethnicity and cultural change*. London: Routledge.
- Gillespie, M. (2000). Transnational communications and diaspora communities. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *Ethnic minorities and the media: Changing cultural boundaries* (164-178). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hargreaves, A.G. & Mahdjoub, D. (1997). Satellite television viewing among ethnic minorities in France. *European Journal of Communication*, 12(4): 459-477.
- Harindranath, R. (2000). Ethnicity, national culture(s) and the interpretation of television. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *Ethnic minorities and the media: Changing cultural boundaries* (149-163). Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Harindranath, R. (2005). Ethnicity and cultural difference: Some thematic and political issues in global audience research. *Particip@tions*, 2(2).
- Kellner, D. (1995). *Media culture: Cultural studies, identity politics between the modern and the postmodern*. London: Routledge.
- Kraidy, M. (1999). The global, the local, and the hybrid: A native ethnography of glocalization. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 16(4): 456-476.
- Leurs, K. & Ponzanesi, S. (2013). Bits of homeland: Generational and gender transformations of Moroccan-Dutch youth using digital technologies. *Observatorio (OBS\*) Journal, Special Issue: Introducing media, technology and the migrant family: Media uses, appropriations and articulations in a culturally diverse Europe*: 89-110.
- Liebes, T. & Katz, E. (1990). *The export of meaning. Cross-cultural readings of Dallas*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nikunen, K. (2008). Emerging transnational sensibility among migrant teenagers: Lessons learned doing media research in multiethnic classrooms. In I. Rydin & U. Sjöberg (Eds.), *Mediated crossroads: Identity, youth culture and ethnicity - Theoretical and methodological challenges* (153-170). Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Ogan, C. (2001). *Communication and identity in the diaspora. Turkish migrants in Amsterdam and their use of media*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Peeters, A. & d'Haenens, L. (2005). Bridging or bonding? Relationships between integration and media use among ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. *Communications*, 30(2): 201-231.
- Ross, K. (2000). In whose image? TV criticism and black minority viewers. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *Ethnic minorities and the media: Changing cultural boundaries* (133-148). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Ross, K. (2001). White media, black audience: Diversity and dissonance on British television. In K. Ross & P. Playdon (Eds), *Black marks: Minority ethnic audiences and media* (3-14). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Rumbaut, R.G. (2004). Ages, life stages, and generational cohorts: Decomposing the immigrant first and second generations in the United States. *International Migration Review*, 38(3): 1160-1205.
- Silva, K. (2010). Brown: From identity to identification. *Cultural Studies*, 24(2): 167-182.

- Sinardet, D. & Mortelmans, D. (2006). Between Al-Jazeera and CNN: Indicators of media use by Belgian ethnic minority youth. *Communications*, 31(4): 425-445.
- Sinclair, J. (2004). Globalization, supranational institutions, and media. In J. Downing (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of media studies* (65-82). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Sletteameås, D. (2013). The dynamics of localizing home in foreign territories: Perspectives on home-making and media-related practices among migrant households', *Observatorio (OBS\*) Journal, Special Issue: Introducing media, technology and the migrant family: Media uses, appropriations and articulations in a culturally diverse Europe*: 33-59.
- Sreberny, A. (2000). Media and diasporic consciousness: An exploration among Iranians in London. in S. Cottle (Ed.), *Ethnic minorities and the media: Changing cultural boundaries* (179-196). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Stad Antwerpen (2014). *Stad Antwerpen in Cijfers*  
(<http://www.antwerpen.buurtmonitor.be>, accessed 9 April 2014).
- Vertovec, S. (2007). Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(6): 1024-1054.
- Vertovec, S. (2010). Towards post-multiculturalism? Changing communities, conditions and contexts of diversity. *International Social Science Journal*, 61(199): 83-95.
- Vittadini, N., Milesi, D. & Aroldi, P. (2013). New-generation ties: Identity, social relations and digital technologies among 2G migrants in Italy. *Observatorio (OBS\*) Journal, Special Issue: Introducing media, technology and the migrant family: Media uses, appropriations and articulations in a culturally diverse Europe*: 61-88.
- Wimmer, A. & Glick Schiller, N. (2002). Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation-state building, migration and social sciences. *Global Networks*, 2(4): 301-334.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the students of the 2013 research seminar on media use and identity formation at the University of Antwerp for their help in the collection of data.

---

<sup>2</sup> The countries represented are Algeria (1), Bolivia (1), Bosnia-Herzegovina (3), Congo (1), France (1), India (1), Kosovo (1), Morocco (7), Poland (4), Rumania (1), Spain (2), Turkey (3), United Kingdom (1), Ukraine (2) and Vietnam (1).

<sup>3</sup> These parents were not excluded from the sample, as they belong to the same age group and generation in media terms as the other parents. However, where their generation in terms of migration makes a difference they will be discussed separately.

<sup>4</sup> As mentioned before, these numbers do not imply claims about the broader population but specify the tendencies observed. Often, the numbers do not add up to 30 per age group, because participants did not always provide (unambiguous) information on each topic.