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| Young, Female and Turkish in Europe Today: Questions of Ethnicity, Gender, Class and the New Media |
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**Young, Female and Turkish in Europe Today: Questions of Ethnicity, Gender, Class and the New Media**

How do new media and technology influence the gender relations in immigrant youth groups? Based on a sample population of migrant youth in Vienna, Austria, this paper explores the Internet and new media exposure of the second generation (children of guest-workers). With immigration status (refugee, immigrant, denizen etc.), religion, ethnicity and class, gender appears to be a key variable affecting both the use of **new media and the identity construction of the young individuals**. For example, while young men and women of Turkish descent use new media for identity construction and management and entertainment, there are large gender differences regarding the use of social network sites, such as **Facebook** and Netlog.de.

However, this gender-based difference disappears with other new media use, such as watching videos and listening to music on YouTube or online gaming—and through the rise of Facebook.

Both boys and girls play the **same computer and video** including the soccer game FIFA, and the first-person shooter games Counter-Strike and Call of Duty and casual games on the Internet. Thus the effects of the new **virtual environments on gender and integration are complex and not unidirectional**. Focusing on the intersection of **gender, religion (tradition) and ethnicity** this paper will analyze the new media use of immigrant youth in a central European metropolis.

While there is a distinct gender bias in the preferential choice of social network sites and the use of these sites in general, this preference disappears when total online behavior is taken into account. The media behavior of young migrant teens depends more on their class background than their ethnicity, gender or citizenship. However, intersectionality reinforces certain behavior patterns—in particular youths’ consumerism as opposed to the use of new media in active, creative ways.

This paper falls into 5 parts. The first part explains the methodology used in the project briefly. The second part elaborates on ethnicity and religion as central variables of youth identity formation. The third and fourth parts of the essay focus on gender variations and the use of social network sites and MMORPGs. Finally the last section focuses briefly on questions of intersectionality.

Methods and Research Design

Concerning intersectionality and in contrast to inter-disciplinary studies, trans-disciplinary studies apply theories, concepts or methods across disciplines aiming at generating an overarching synthesis (Repko 2008). Our current research project Serious Beats followed a problem- and actor-oriented approach, not only different disciplines (social sciences, game research and applied computer science) but also different segments of society like academic experts from different disciplines, field practitioners (street workers, coaches and teachers), industry partners (game programmers), migrant and non-migrant technology users and representatives from other relevant professions (such as international studies, social network analysis and music-ethnology) are involved.

This paper is based in part on 48 so-called media interviews conducted between March and June 2011 with 24 male and 24 female teenagers living in Vienna. The interviews are the first component of the transdisciplinary project “Serious Beats”, centered at the University of Vienna's Institute for Media and Communication Studies and the Vienna University of Technology's Institute of Design and Assessment of Technology. Representing the largest ethnic groups in the state, 16 youths (between the ages of 14 and 17) of each Austrian, Turkish, and South-east European and North African (mostly of Yugoslavian) background were interviewed in nine youth centers, schools and other similar institutions. Media interviews (interviews in front of the computer), ego network analysis and action research (the participation of 24 youths in the video game YourTurn!) allowed us to triangulate our research methods. After a game period of 3 months, all 48 interviews will be repeated in the spring and early summer of 2012.

To answer the central research question “Can an online social music game allow Viennese teenagers to change their understanding of cultural diversity in order to overcome cultural and ethnic boundaries?” the research group designed the online game YourTurn! The Video-Game. YourTurn! is a social network game allowing gamers to create video mash-ups with other players to foster social interaction among youth minority groups in Vienna.

*Ethnicity and Religious Variations*

Religion is important for 48% and unimportant for 27% of our interviewees with ethnic roots in Turkey, Austria, the Former Yugoslavia and other regions. However, among the youths of Turkish background 87% see religion as relative or very important element in their lives. This percentage is significantly higher than among the other two groups: 75% of the young people of Yugoslav and other ethnic background believe religion is somewhat or very important for them, whereas only 56% of Austrian teens feel this way. This result is independent of gender, age and education variables, and the possession of the Austrian citizenship.

A number of interviewees mention religion as a relevant identity marker (1 male North African, 2 Turkish women, 2 women without migration background). For example, Günay[[1]](#footnote-1) answered the question “What makes you Turkish?” the following way:

My own religion, where I come from, but just for myself. Other people should not be interested.

Similarly, Ali answered the question “What makes you an Egyptian, what makes you an Austrian?” in this manner:

Well, an Egyptian … that I belong to Islam, I listen to my religion. […]”

Regarding diversity in Vienna, some interviewees (1 Yugoslav man, 1 male without migration background, 2 women of Yugoslav and Turkish background) mention religion—either by mentioning it in a positive way in reference to the city’s religious and cultural diversity, or linking religion to racism. Fitore explains:

There are many cultures and you can see the different cultures, the different religions and everyone teaches you something else […]

Answering the question “What could be done against racism?” Nesrinexplains

I think a lot of racism results from different religions and maybe there could be […] some kind of museum, where the most common religions of the world are presented. So that not everyone misunderstands these religions […].

As an identity marker, religion is of importance for almost all cohorts of teenagers in Vienna, specifically for young Turks. In addition young people tend to see religion and ethnicity as key indicators of Vienna’s diversity.

*Gender Variations and Social Network Sites*

In relation to religion and internet activity, there are gender differences concerning the use of Facebook and other social networking sites. This data was very clearly influenced by our Turkish sample. Social network sites are good examples for identity creations and their social expressions. Male teenagers prefer to use either Facebook or Netlog.de, which also functions as an online dating site. Young men in particular use Facebook playfully, creating their own profile sites, with lots of detail and work invested in portraying a cool image, often with the help of uploaded pictures. The Hip Hop attitudes used by these adolescents are striking. The sites also include self-composed texts and “rhymez.” Youth uses social network sites for identity construction and management, and also to improve their reputation: the more friends the better; the more blond women among their friends the better![[2]](#footnote-2)

Based on data from our pilot project, a number of young men actually went on dates with some of these Netlog acquaintances. The young Turk Abdullah explains:

Yes, I’ve met many. All girls. I’ve met all of them in reality [in person]. At least two or three times. I even had one longer relationship. It lasted 2 years.

Others elaborate their descriptions:

Yes, I’ve met many via Netlog. About 15 people I’ve met personally. It was good [“eh gut”]. It was fun to be out with them. I’m still in contact with about 10 people. Most of them are also second generation from Turkey. Some are from Serbia.

Mikail, the 18 year old Turkish DJ with a part-time job in a grocery store, describes what happened with his social network acquaintances in the following casual way:

I’ve met people over the Internet. Sometimes I write to them, sometimes they write to me. I’ve met 6 ladies. Some called every day. I was picky and cheeky. I meet a few in person. With one I had sex. The sex was okay [“eh gut”]. I met a 30 year old Austrian; and also a Croatian and a Polish woman.

The 20 year old Ibo, also a teen with Turkish background, who is currently in a short-term vocational training course explains his experience with Netlog:

I found one girlfriend on Netlog. Our relationship lasted 6 or 7 months. It was a 27 year old woman from Vienna. She worked as an A1 [cell phone company] manager. We wrote to each other for 2 weeks and then we exchanged numbers. Then she called me. We went to the Millennium Tower for a romantic dinner with red wine and spent an amorous night together. I like only older women. They have more experience. Not only sexual but in general. With the younger ones there are always problems.

While it remains unclear how much of these stories is true and how much represents the machismo of the young Turks, none of these relationships based on Netlog were intra-ethnic between second-generation male and female young Turks but rather all of them were cross-ethnic. None of them resulted in longer relations. These kinds of weak ties are pragmatic and culture dependent, because Turkish/Muslim girls are not reachable for the young men. Usually, young male Turks are not able to create relationships with their female counterparts prior to marriage. Thus they engage in relationships and affairs with women of other ethnic backgrounds to learn about and experiment with inter-gender friendships, relationship and sexual affairs.

Male teenagers use Facebook and Netlog and similar platforms mostly to represent themselves and to get to know women. Female teenagers of Turkish descent are much more careful with the distribution of their data. Sibel, a 15 year-old teenage girl of Turkish descent, for example explains: “I cannot go where my brothers are.” Their main argument against Facebook or Netlog is the fear that their private data (including pictures, feelings, and relationships) will become public and that their family would find out that this information is posted on the Internet. The 14 year-old Naghian insists: “Boys only want one thing! They cannot be friends.” Naghian implies that she cannot trust young male Turks because “they only look at the photos, everything centers on women—never mind whether she is pretty or ugly, as long as she is a woman.” These young women know to create a profile on one of the public social networks could lead to dangerous conflicts with their male relatives, who feel that their daughters and sisters should behave in accordance with the honor and behavior codex of their Turkish culture. For example, the 15-year old Irma discusses her media situation at home: “We have one computer for the entire family. I cannot use that one when I want to. Therefore I really want my own laptop.” Concerning social network sites a number of young female teens of Serbian and Croatian background are also vigilant. For example, the 17-year old Iskra explains “I once had a profile on Facebook but deleted it because I didn’t like it and everybody said it’s dangerous.” The 16-year old Svetlana concurs “I believe Facebook is very dangerous for young girls. They should not publicize their personal data.” These young women do not trust Facebook and similar social networks applications. Even if they have a Facebook page many are very cautious on the social network site and use it for the website’s instant messaging rather than identity formation functions: “I have about 19 friends on Facebook. I know all of them personally and no strangers. I chat with my [female] cousin.” However, most apparently stay away from this new medium, Svetlana clarifies: “I have only one [girl]friend who is on Facebook.”

Young women prefer the use of chat rooms, email contacts, and the cell phone. The 14 year-old Sedika explains “I mostly chat with my friends in MSN. But not on real chat-sites and only with persons that I know.” Many young women of Turkish descent who decide to create their own personal page, however, prefer to cover their faces in the depictions of themselves that they put on the Internet. In an interesting contrast to their male compatriots who dominate the German social network sites, including the German Facebook, many of these young women frequently surf Turkish Internet dating sites like “Charismatic” and “Cingene” where they use pseudonyms as in the chat rooms. Young women also like to show themselves in enigmatic and mysterious photos or to use pictures of stars rather than themselves. Their real photos only get to be exchanged in person-to-person meetings.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, young male Turks profit more from Facebook and social networking sites than girls, for they might improve their life experience (new relations, alternative locations, sex).

We speculate that social network pages might have a liberating influence because they make creative identity creations such as gender-swapping possible. (Gender-swapping is for instance possible in online games or anonymous chats, where you create anonymous avatars or icons, but nearly impossible on social networking platforms, where most youngsters use their real names. Because if they want to get or keep in touch with friends, mates, colleagues or even strangers, their “real identities” must be recognizable for their friends and acquaintances.) The changing identities appears of little interest for our group. Neither members of the male nor female cohort have used that option. Thus, while the Internet has the potential of aiding in overcoming real-life gender dilemmas these options are not popular with either gender.

However, only 4 of 48 interviewees for our Serious Beats project do not use Facebook at all. Many interviewees use the platform exclusively for online chatting. The Use of MSN is mentioned by three Turkish girls (one of whom does not use Facebook) as well as three girls without migration background and two boys each with Turkish, North African and without migration background. Also, Skype and Netlog are mentioned, but to a much lesser extent.

Overall, we found one key difference in Internet use is based on gender: young men and boys are much more open and forthcoming with information they provide on social network sites whereas young women and girls of various backgrounds, including Ex-Yugoslavs but particularly of Turkish origins are much more cautious with the distribution of their personal information on such sites. Young men use photos and personal information for identity creation and management in such forums. This is not the case for young women. Their photos would make them visible in the Internet, thus these young women prefer to hid their identities behind pictures of famous actresses and in texts and chats.

*Gender Variations in Massive Multiple Online Role Playing Games*

Although both social networks and MMORPGs allow for the construction of new identities, they do so in very different ways. Social network pages encourage individual expression through the postings of pictures, description of feelings, situations, and events on one’s wall through text, music and video. Overall, we understand teenagers’ use of social network sites predominantly for self-expression and identity management. In contrast, we see MMORPGs as tools for more interactive and creative engagements which could lead to the development of complex collaborative strategies and interpersonal skill sets (e.g. in clans or guilds Wimmer/Quandt/Vogel 2010). Games can clearly aid in the socialization of players (Kuhn 2009, Götzenbrucker 2001, Utz 2001, Götzenbrucker/Köhl 2009). The long-term engagement in MMORPGs and other online games can provide the gamer with both the social capital and the skills needed to succeed in integrating into various aspects of the mainstream society and the virtual meta-society. Digital relationships potentially can also become serious friendships. Cheryl K. Olson (Interview in theGap 09/9) emphasized the positive learning effects of games exactly because young people can “try out” other identities and experience what it feels like to be, for example, stressed or powerful. In these group games players can learn how other gamers behave in certain situations, and how their friends act in certain circumstances (usually young people like to play with acquaintances and friends). In virtual gaming environments, experimental acting/probing is possible without risk.

Easily established and informal, digital games allow for the creation of social networks beyond and outside of the usual in-groups where members of the second generation typically mingle. Participation in digital games is a low-cost practice: computers are very common in Austrian households (80% own a PC), and Austrians have an Internet access potential of 80% (ORF Medienforschung 2009). An increasing number of online games are free. However, even the monthly US$ 10 rate for games like “World of Warcraft” is low compared to the cost of cinema tickets or DVDs.

The premise of these games is based upon establishing group relations. Online gamers usually build communities or guilds that have common goals, characteristics, and attitudes. These features promote equal status among the players. Gamers have similar socioeconomic profiles, for example, they have congruent interests (mastering difficult tasks), similar hobbies (like reading adventure stories), and even similar lifestyles (young, urban).

An additional advantage could be that the social costs are reduced, because the lack of social context clues restricts potential discrimination (the names, dialects, facial features of the players remain concealed) as well as self-expression (like mime, gestures, language, look, and style in face-to-face meetings). The establishment of social relationships is voluntary, which might help to overcome gender-related restrictions and ethnocentric bounds. The media-related construction of identities could help overcome one’s real-life shortcomings. Even gender-swapping is possible and gender-overlapping friendships, in certain ethnic groups an absolute impossibility, could be easily established in game environments; other authors found that online gaming enhances IT and language skills (Horx 2007) as well as social skills and social learning (Gee 2007, Olson 2010, McGonigal 2011, Klimmt 2009).

Also, more than all other activities in the virtual world, gaming provides ample opportunities to expose second-generation and native-born Austrian youth to each other within *one* digital environment: the virtual world of the game. In these encounters the playing field is leveled: the rules of the game further enhance equality by forcing cohorts to act according to certain codices and conventions, and eliminating ethnic and other advantages (because of the relative ease with which identity markers can be cloaked). In such an environment, we assumed that friendships might develop more easily between the second-generation and Austrian youth. Friendship practices between immigrant cultures and the host culture might in turn reduce prejudices like fear of crime or the “cultural takeover” by an immigrant culture. Thus, Internet activities, such as Online Role Playing Games, can be seen as platforms for cultural approximation and as settings for different ethnic groups to meet and interact in.

We found that the young people with immigrant background demonstrate a rather limited usage of the Internet in general and of gaming in particular. While they frequently use the Internet, they are more interested in entertainment, communication and socializing, than higher-level engagement and creative investments as necessary for playing MMORPGs. This does however, not mean that young migrants do not play online games at all. A survey of Moser (2009) found similar Internet habits exist in Switzerland where Google, Netlog, YouTube, and MSN were the most popular features/services; watching videos, chatting and downloading music were the most popular activities among young migrants (originating from various countries of descent)—which were not significantly different from youngsters without migration background in Switzerland. The young migrant cohorts in Vienna customarily use the Internet for visual stimuli, music consumption, and low-level chat as well as for shopping. What we discovered in our group of 48 interviewees was that restricted codes and marginal media literacy are not a problem of ethnicity—or gender—but of social class.

32 of our interviewees (20 male, 12 female) however, also frequently play online games that represent a relatively broader portfolio of the digital world. Some of these games arguably have the potential to lead to personal enrichment of the gamers and to expand the social networks of the individual players. This, in turn, could lead to habit-breaking experiences, for example, while searching for skills or tool enhancements within gaming environments, gamers of Muslim faith have no problem with entering Christian churches (instead of mosques), something they would never do in the real world. Others engage in habitual work in the game while being unemployed in reality. Habit-breaking experiences thus allow gamers to broaden their horizons and to begin thinking creatively about options and opportunities that exist outside of the obvious ones.

**Young women of immigrant background play the same online games** as their male counterparts do but do so less frequently. The girls are introduced to electronic games mostly by their male relatives, who mainly own the equipment or have privileged access to computers in Turkish more-child-families. Instead of MMORPGs, most young adolescent gamers play sports games such as FIFA 11 and race games such as Need for Speed, both of which have been in the Top Ten charts of the game market—as well as Grand Theft Auto and the Online Shooter game Counter-Strike. This data correlates with the gaming behavior of German adolescents, according to the 2011 JIM (Jugend, Information, Multimedia) Study. Of our interviewees, 19 play sports games (13 male, 6 female, including 14 playing FIFA und 2 playing Wii Sports); 13 play race games (4 male, 9 female [sic!], including 4 Need for Speed); 16 play action games (9 male, 7 female, including 4 Assassin’s Creed, 3 GTA); and 21 play first-person shooters (16 male, 5 female, including 8 Counter-Strike, 7 Call of Duty). Only 9 play role-playing games at all—online as well as offline (5 male, 4 female, 3 WoW).

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs)—in opposition to car racing or Shooter Games—are particularly popular among the young cohort with relatively high levels of technology ownership, correlating with educational advancement. However, our 48 interviewees are less likely to play games that cost money regularly, such as World of Warcraft, but are instead more likely to (illegally) download or buy games for their game consoles and computers or play free games that are also widely available on the web. In addition to the above-mentioned games 25 of our interviewees play a variety of so-called casual games on different platforms, including Facebook. The gender balance is remarkable: 13 male, 12 female interviewees play casual games.

Our interviewees also paid less attention to games based on SciFi and fantasy plots and were more interested in action that use humanoid avatars and sport games. For example, 8 interviewees frequently played Counter-Strike, an online shooter game that is played in teams. Each team (or “Clan”) consists of 4 to 7 persons. A number of authors (Lee, Peng and Park 2009; Buckley and Anderson 2006; Williams 2006; Bushman and Anderson 2009) have argued that these rather antagonistic and violent games lead to a rise in aggression and hostility, cultivation effects and a potential for isolation and seclusion. The counter-arguments are numerous as well: that these games actually might provide relief from daily frustrations, allowing the young people to learn to deal with their own feelings. Shooter games most importantly provide young people with laboratories in which different identities (Turkle 1998) and relationships can be tested.

Furthermore, gaming is considered a social activity that not only strengthens the circle of friends but also causes the gamer to move beyond his close-knit band of associates. The clan structure of some of these games compels players to leave the familiar group of friends and acquaintances in search for other, unfamiliar gamers. The game structure encourages players to get to know the new gamers they meet (at least in the online environment).

In online role-playing games such as RuneScape, Metin2, and Cabal, players can also establish relationships with a large number of previously unknown gamers. The configuration of the game supports group and community creation in the form of guilds because one player alone cannot perform many game activities. The potential depth of these kinds of online relationships can develop from a short-term strategic alliance to a long-lasting sincere (gaming) friendship.

Despite these hypothetical assumptions, our survey has shown that young gamers frequently restrict their games to playing with friends who live close by in the same region (Vienna and surrounding areas). Gamers also appear to prefer to play with friends that they know from school or the neighborhood and thus limit their social relations in the games to their own ethnic culture, and their social milieu.

**Intersectionality and Emanzipation**

Intersectionality means the consideration of more than one identity dimension when researching discrimination, oppression or inequalities. For example, outcome of feminist research and activism has been unsatisfactory if the specific situations of non-white, working-class women were ignored. Also, the dimensions of oppression do not just add but their intersections produce specific, different experiences (e.g. a Black woman is not only Black and a woman). Race, class, and gender are sometimes also referred to as “the big three” of intersectional studies. Additionally to race, class, and gender also other dimensions should be considered—depending on the precise field of research/activism. For example, sexuality, religion, age, (dis)abilitiesmay be useful dimensions (Brah/Phoenix 2004, Crenshaw 1994, Klinger/Knapp 2007).

From an intersectional point of view, the most surprising finding of this study was the obvious importance of class inequalities. Our interviewees are homogeneous regarding class (meaning, they are all working-class and educationally disadvantaged), but heterogeneous regarding ethnicity and gender. Still, their narrations of interests and experiences lack any big differences. That is why we think class inequalities are most significant for their every-day lives. True, our interviewees with migration background commonly talk about racism they experience on a daily basis. It is also true that girls are more disadvantaged than boys. Yet, regarding their chances as adults—in the Austrian labor market and society—our interviewees without migration background are just as disadvantaged.

Class inequalities, mainly linked to educational inequalities are a result of the Austrian education system where children are separated at the age of 10 (after only 4 years in common middle school). Even though the separation is meant to be according to talent, in fact it happens along class boundaries. Children of working-class parents who are themselves educationally disadvantaged hardly ever manage to achieve a higher level of education than their parents. Of course--and that is why intersectionality is so important as a scientific perspective--children with migration background may be even more affected if their parents do have a higher level of education that is not accepted in Austria. Those children may be forced to finish school education after nine years (the minimum), because teachers and society treat them as working-class despite their parents’ level of education. In addition, in Austria, girls are often pushed into a certain (less-paid, low prestigious) sector of jobs, regardless of their immigration and ethnic background.

Conclusion

We argue in this paper that the intersectionality of class, gender, religion and ethnicity encourages young people to create their own identities and Internet games and other new media allow for various expressions of these identities if they provide what young people perceive as save environments. In addition, class remains a major identity marker which, according to our preliminary findings, supersedes gender and ethnicity in various forms. Gender differences seem to be of less importance than class similarities: The disadvantages young people experience because of low socio-economic class have to be dissolved, too. Only then will measures against gender inequalities become effective in this immigrant community In other words, the more they are economically and socially empowered, the more likely members of this cohort will get into a position enabling them to consciously experience and even fight gender discrimination. Ethnicity on the other hand, might not be as influential as commonly thought. We found that working-class youth without migration background is as underprivileged as migrant youth. (However, some migrants might be part of the working-class only because their education attained abroad is not accepted in Austria, often forcing them to work below their qualifications.)

Class inequalities, as reflected especially in the Austrian education system, have to be taken into account when researching migrant youth. Working-class youth without migration background is just as much in need of “integration” or inclusion—meaning their chances of a successful, self-determined adult life depend to a large degree upon the achievement of skills and competencies and consequent opportunities to use and enhance these abilities. However, the structure of the current educational system in Austria promotes this inclusion only for youth in the so-called “bildungsnahen Schichten” (the cohorts that have historically had better educational opportunities). Regarding (Turkish) girls, we also must not focus just on their gender and ethnicity but look at class to fully understand the disadvantages they experience in every-day life. Measures taken to support those children have to consider all three dimensions—race, gender and class.

Our research on serious games has opened up a diverse spectrum of approaches from provocative game art to game-based learning and the genre of positive impact games. In addition, we found that serious games have great potential to raise awareness for various issues and have short and mid-term impact on player behavior. However, little is known about the long-term influence on players (e.g. see Clark, 2007; Klimmt, 2009; Kato et al., 2008 and Peng et al., 2010). Thus our project started a collaborative game design process, involving not only game designers, usability researchers and programmers, but also social sciences and social network researchers—to grant gender fairness, privacy, non commercial contents and empowerment—and create collectively a most suitable “positive impact game” (McGonigal 2011) for our 48 migrant and non-migrant Viennese teenagers.

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1. All names were altered due to anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This segment of the paper is based on our pilot project conducted in Summer and Fall of 2009. Correct Gerit? Please see Franz and Götzenbrucker (2012) for details. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Personal conversation with Ivana Martinovic, journalist for “das Biber,” an Austrian monthlywhose readers are immigrants and immigrant children of Southeast European descent, as well as academics and public policy activists. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)