Mirror mirror on the wall. Investigating heterosemiotic contrasts on Facebook[1]

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In this paper I will explore how multi-ethnic teenage girls in Antwerp negotiate heteronormative expectations of femininity (Cameron 2006; Jackson 2006), in both verbal and visual communication on Facebook. For this purpose, and relying on data collected during a long-term sociolinguistic ethnography (Creese 2008; Rampton 2007), I will introduce and discuss what one might call 'heterosemiotic' computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC), or contrasts between image and text on a Facebook 'wall'. Before I amplify on the ethnographic context and offer a first and explorative analysis of a sample of Facebook-data, an explanation of the different frameworks underpinning the analysis, i.e. CMC studies, multimodality, and (hetero)sexuality studies, is in order.

1. Framework

1.1. *Computer-mediated communication studies*

Since its earliest contributions in the 1980s, the field of CMC studies has seen significant developments. Early language-focused CMC scholars questioned whether CMC was more like speech or writing (Foertsch 1995; Maynor 1994), and concentrated on the structural and medium-specific aspects of digital communication. CMC was considered the use of a "new variety" (Collot & Belmore 1996), a "register" with "unique features of its own, such as the use of

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"emoticons" (smiley faces composed of ascii characters) and other graphics, as well as special lexis ("lurking", "flaming", "spamming") and acronyms (FAQ, IMHO, RTFM)" (Herring 1996: 3), or even a "new linguistic medium" assigned the name "Netspeak" (Crystal 2001: 239; see also Georgakopoulou 2003; Herring, Stein & Virtanen 2013).

From the middle of the 1990s, various authors have argued for a shift to a more contextualized and user-related view of CMC (e.g., Baym 1995; Georgakopoulou 1997; Paolillo 1999). Influenced by pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse studies, these scholars describe CMC as socially situated discourse rather than as the use of a distinct variety, and as a discourse that must be seen in relation to a larger set of (both on- and offline) practices with which it stands in mutual interaction (Androutsopoulos 2006, 2008; Georgakopoulou 2003).

In recent times, the rise of the Web 2.0, with particular qualities such as semiotic complexity, dynamic content, and intensified user participation (Androutsopoulos 2011) has induced some language-focused CMC scholars to recognize the important role of visuals and the growing interaction of verbal and nonverbal semiotics on social network sites (Androutsopoulos 2010, 2011; Leppänen et al. 2009). As Androutsopoulos (2011: 279) argues:

> [I]n contemporary Web 2.0 environments […] language comes integrated in visually organized environments, verbal exchanges tend to be more fragmented and dependent on multimodal context, and meaning is constructed through the interplay of language and other semiotic means.

By and large, however, these approaches continue to focus on combinations of and contrasts between different types and uses of *language*, frequently referring to Bakhtin's concept of 'heteroglossia', originally defined as "the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth" (1981: 291) (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2011; Leppänen et al. 2009; but see Boellstorff 2008; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Pearce & Artemesia 2009 for discussions on verbal *and* visual communication in 3D online ethnographies). Nevertheless, to discuss expressions of heterosexuality on Facebook it may be useful to bring in other semiotic modes as well, and to talk of 'heterosemiotic' contrasts. Founded on Ivanov's (2001: 95) definition of heteroglossia, the concept of 'heterosemiotics' could be defined as "the simultaneous use of different kinds of [semiotic modes],

the tensions between them and their conflicting relationships within one [communicative event]."[2]

1.2. *Multimodality*

As is suggested by its definition, the concept of heterosemiotics is indebted to the (relatively new) 'tradition' of a social semiotic approach to multimodality, "extend[ing] the social interpretation of language and its meanings to the whole range of modes of representation and communication employed in a culture" (Bezemer & Jewitt 2010: 183; see also Bezemer et al. 2012; Kress 2010; Van Leeuwen 2005). The theory of "social semiotics" (Halliday 1978; Hodge & Kress 1988) focuses on the ways in which people use (socially shaped) semiotic resources in the context of specific social practices; modes are "organized sets of semiotic resources for making meaning (with)" (Bezemer & Jewitt 2010: 184). A social semiotic approach to multimodality assumes that all modes that are present in a communicative event interweave to produce meaning.
In what follows I will focus on the interaction between two specific modes, namely text and image, particularly mindful of Van Leeuwen's (2004) seventh reason "why linguists should pay attention to visual communication":

> [Linguists] need to take account of nonverbal as well as verbally realized discourses and aspects of discourse, and of image as well as text, because these often realize quite different, sometimes even contrasting meanings. (15)

The verbal and visual data treated in this paper express different discourses of femininity, and must be understood in a context of heteronormativity, to which I will now turn.

1.3. *(Hetero)sexuality studies*

Up to the 1990s, studies of (language and) sexuality focused almost exclusively on sexual minorities, leaving heterosexuality as the invisible, taken-for-granted norm (Cameron 2006; Jackson 2006; Richardson 2000; but see Rich's (1983) essay on "compulsory heterosexuality"). The publication of Butler's influential *Gender Trouble* (1990), however, was one of the first signs of a larger paradigm shift in the field (Cameron 2006). Butler famously described gender as "the

[2] Original definition: "the simultaneous use of different kinds of speech or other signs, the tensions between them and their conflicting relationship within one text".

repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990: 43). This performative approach to (gendered or sexual) identity legitimized the question of how any sort of identity, including a heterosexual one, is performed (Cameron 2006), and since then, many researchers have been acknowledging the dominance of heteronormativity in Western society and have been paying attention to its "double-sided social regulation", i.e., the fact that widespread images of heterosexuality impose significant constraints on the liberty individuals have for constructing their sexual identity, be it hetero- or other-sexual (Jackson 2006: 105; Ingraham 2005; Ward and Schneider 2009). These scholars have pointed out hierarchies among heterosexualities, and considered normative heterosexuality as not only having an impact on "normative sexual practices" but also on a "normal way of life" (Jackson 2006: 107; see also Eckert 2011; Renold 2005).

Recent studies on (pre)adolescent girls and boys confirm the important role of heteronormativity in their daily interactions and friendship relationships (Eckert 2011; Morris-Roberts 2004; Renold 2005; Ringrose 2013; Youdell 2005). In the final years of primary school and the first years of secondary school, relations between girls and boys, but also within same-sex friendship groups, are thoroughly shaken up by their entering the "heterosexual market" (Eckert 1994, 2011). Tweens and early teens reorient their relationships "around the norms of heterosexuality and the status hierarchy these norms create" (Cameron 2006: 175). This affects not only youths who desire a heterosexual relationship, but also girls and boys who don't have a marked sexual preference or identity (yet) (Cameron 2006; Eckert 2011). The girls in the above-mentioned studies are doing, discussing and regulating many different heterosexualities, most of which can be broadly located on opposite sides of the corresponding dichotomies between "whores" and "virgins" (Youdell 2005), "hyperfemininity" and "traditional femininity" (Paechter 2006: 255), or "(hetero)sexual attractiveness" and "(heterosexual) domesticity" (Jackson 2006: 114), which are rooted in religious discourses of (im)moral femininities (Youdell 2005: 260). This dichotomy is also strongly present in the Facebook data I will discuss later on in this paper.

2. Ethnographic context: teenage girls in Antwerp

2.1. *Data and fieldwork*

The data I draw on in this article come from long-term ethnographic fieldwork (October 2011 – December 2012) in a youth organization in Antwerp that aims at reaching socially vulnerable children and adolescents. The young people who frequent the organization have diverse ethnic origins; on average, half of them have Moroccan roots, followed by Turkish, East European, Flemish, African, Middle Eastern, Latin-American, Asian, and Assyrian roots. This composition was largely confirmed in the group of teenage girls (ages varied from 13 to 15) that I have followed closely. From the 15 girls who took part in the activities of the youth club on a regular basis, 8 have a Moroccan background, 3 a Turkish, 2 a Flemish, 1 a Cape Verdian, and 1 an Iranian background.[3]
The girls were free to participate in a weekly, organised activity (e.g., going for a swim, cooking together, watching a movie, etc.), guided by two youth workers and myself – during the fieldwork, I participated in the role of youth worker, but all girls were informed of my researcher status.[4] The data-collection involved participant observation (field diary, 104 pp.), interviews (5 h., 89 pp.), individual (audio) recording and group (audio) recording (57 h., 462 pp.), and Facebook-data (1.400 pp.).[5] Although the discussion in this paper focuses on the latter type of data, it is important to take the offline data into account as well, since both are strongly correlated (Androutsopoulos 2008; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Georgakopoulou 2003).

2.2. *Dina and Sarah*

Due to the ethno-cultural background of the majority of socially vulnerable people in Antwerp, and the fact that in many cultures, after a certain age, boys

[3] In this paper, 'Flemish' refers to the ethnic background of white 'indigenes'. However, all of my participants have the Belgian nationality, and most of them are born in Flanders.
[4] During the first meeting I told the participants that I intended to study the language use and attitudes of Antwerp youths, and was interested in the various ways in which the girls speak (see Mercelis 2012). In the course of January 2012, I also became Facebook-friends with the girls who have an account on the social network platform. I sent each of them a FB-message, in which I explained that I would like to study their FB-data too, and if they agreed, they could make me their friend. In both cases I clearly stated that if anything of their productions would be used, this would be strictly anonymous.
[5] I stored the FB-pages of the girls concerned into PDF files. In line with Androutsopoulos (2008) and Leurs (2012), I consider logs from publicly accessible Facebook pages as public domain data, but I anonymised the photos if the teenagers themselves were not aware of being displayed.

and girls are not allowed to do activities together, the youth organization counted more male than female persons among its regular participants. In order to reach more girls, the organization arranged girls-only activities and created separate girls' groups – such as the group of my participants. The subject of their womanliness was such a recurring topic of discussion to the girls that it became a major theme in my dataset, and, like in many studies on girls of the same age group, sexual regulation was a marked theme as well (Hey 1997; Kehily 2002; Renold 2005; Ringrose 2013). I will now zoom in on two girls of the group from whose Facebook profiles I selected the data that will be discussed in the next paragraphs: Dina (14, Moroccan background) and Sarah (14, Flemish background).

Dina occupied a rather marginal position in the group of participants. She and her two close friends Meryem and Selin, participated almost every week in the activities of the youth organization, but during the meetings they mostly stuck together and remained in the background. When Dina was asked about her relationship with the other girls of the group in an interview, she said that she would like to spend more time with the girls from the core group, "because they are funny", but that they were not really concerned with her. Dina has an Islamic working class family background, and the youth workers and several of the other girls considered her father to be very severe on her (although she would herself describe him as "just really worried about me"). She wasn't allowed to go to the youth organization when the group would go for a swim or play a game in a nearby forest, or when an activity was planned together with the teenage boys' group. Moreover, she wasn't permitted to return home from the organization on her own in the evening, so one of the youth workers used to accompany her.[6]

Unlike Dina, Sarah held a central position in the group of girls. She was part of the core group of girls who participated in almost every organized activity, and often saw each other outside the youth organization as well. Sarah always made her presence in the group felt – to the extent that Selin, herself a very shy girl, declared in an interview that she was "afraid" of Sarah, because of her "loud" personality and her "exaggerated" way of behaving. Sarah is a catholic-born, working-class girl, and, contrary to Dina and some of the other girls, she was allowed to participate in every organized activity (including going out camping with the teenage boys). Furthermore, on several occasions she indicated that sexually connoted language use was not a taboo in her family – at least not when used jokingly. For instance, she once told the group that her father laughingly called her a "street whore" after seeing her new dress, whereupon another girl stated that if *her* father called her something of the sort, she would cry.

[6] The activities of the teenage girls' group generally took place on Fridays from 5.30 pm to 8.00 pm.

Both Dina and Sarah dressed in the same way when going to the youth organization: sneakers and skinny trousers paired with an often-colourful top. Sarah was the only girl in the group who wore a lot of make-up, for which the other girls frequently teased her. In my dataset there are not many examples of confrontations between the two girls – they are not best friends, but they never expressed a dislike for each other either. However, at least at one time both girls were involved in an explicit case of sexual regulation. At a certain moment I noted in my field diary that Sarah entered the youth organization and "shouted at Roos [youth worker]: 'Wow, Dina looked like a whore at school, she was wearing suuuuch high heels' – *she shows the height with her hands*." Dina (to whom I gave an audio recorder just before this moment) was not in the room, but one of her friends told her what Sarah had said, after which she was upset and went to the youth workers to say that she did not want to participate in the planned activity anymore. Thus, by wearing high heels, a commodity that is widely recognized as stereotypically associated with heterofeminine attractiveness (Gill 2008: 37; Gleeson and Frith 2004: 105), Dina seems to have transgressed the norm of what was considered – by Sarah, and in the context of the peer group – as 'appropriate' heterosexuality.
Similar considerations about feminine attractiveness and too sexual, and thus "whorish" or "sluttish", behaviour occurred on the Facebook walls of both girls. The two opposite sides of the whore/virgin binary were usually expressed in different modes, namely image and text, as I will now explain.

3. Analysis

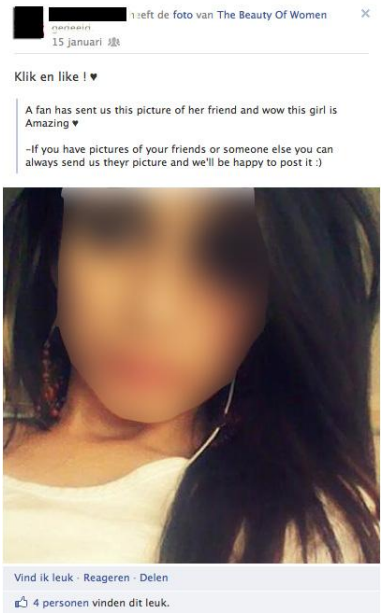

Fig. 1: "The Beauty Of Women"

Fig. 2: "High heels"

The analysis provided here is a first exploration of a minor part of the collected Facebook-data. The examples below are selected because they are illustrative of recurring negotiations of heterofemininities in the peer group. Be that as it may, a popular practice on Facebook among the participants of my research consists in sending photos of friends to publicly accessible groups or pages like 'Mokkes Van Antwerpen' ['Hotties from Antwerp'], 'Mooiste tiener van Vlaanderen' ['Most beautiful teenager of Flanders'] or 'The Beauty of Women'. After selection and approval of the administrators, the submitted photos are posted on the page and people can subsequently comment upon them – without consent of the girls (or, much less frequently, boys) who appear on the photos in question. It is to the administrators of one of these pages, 'The Beauty of Women', that one of my participants, 14-year old Dina, sent photos of two friends. The administrators selected the pictures and posted them on their page, after which Dina 'shared' them on her Facebook wall, accompanied by the message "click and like" (Fig. 1). As observed by De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013: 575-576) the act of commenting on 'threads', and thus claiming a voice in online public discussions, can be seen as a disruption of "passive femininity", while the content of these threads still continuously puts forward "a highly romanticized heterosexuality". By portraying a heavily made up girl who looks seductively into the camera, the example ties in with the "form of dramaturgical, glamourized femininity" that Paechter (2006: 255) defined as "hyperfemininity". Another example of a performance of hyperfemininity on Dina's wall is found in a picture of stiletto shoes she started using as her profile picture a day after the above-mentioned incident at the youth organization in which Sarah called her a whore (Fig. 2).

Strikingly, however, the previous examples contrast with the texts (or images) that figure on the same Facebook wall but which express a type of heterosexual femininity that is located towards the opposite side of the dichotomy between hyperfemininity and "traditional" femininity, such as this text 'post' in which

Fig. 3: "I heard this at school"

Fig. 3b: *translation*

Dina reproduces a conversation she says she heard at school (Fig. 3). In the exchange one girl calls another one prudish, since she has not had any boyfriends yet. The other girl retorts that having no boyfriends at all is still preferable to being seen as having too many of them. In her Facebook post, Dina indicates that she sympathizes with the latter girl, by stressing that this is a "true fact".[7] In contrast with the above-mentioned visual presentations that capitalize on heterosexual attractiveness, this textual presentation constructs an image of "prized feminine virginity" (Youdell 2005: 260), and thus creates a heterosemiotic contrast.

This contrast is further developed in a cartoon on Dina's wall that captures, juxtaposes and comments on two images of heterosexual femininity (Fig. 4). On the right side of the picture we see two girls wearing make-up *and* a headscarf. One of them is passing a moral judgment on the third girl in the picture, by saying: "*wallah* she's not ashamed! she goes outdoors without wearing a headscarf?! humph!" The left side of the picture shows a girl without headscarf but wearing a long dress and no make-up. She holds a book (of which the mosque in the background could imply that it is a Quran). The comments above the picture suggest that it is the latter woman who is more preferable, although (i) she does not at all live up to heteronormative western images of feminine attractiveness, and (ii) she lives up to certain Islamic images of inappropriately sexual behaviour (by not wearing a headscarf). Dina calls the woman with the book the "good" girl as opposed to "the whores with headscarf". The smaller text opposes "the woman […] who is on track to Islam" to "a make-up doll with tight clothes and a big mouth". Thus, Dina is using a juxtaposition of feminine styles in a cartoon to disavow of a particular heterosemiotic combination ("the whores with headscarf") and to praise another ("the good girl without headscarf"), while this latter style (and her approval of it) contrasts significantly with her celebration of heteronormative attractiveness in various other, visual Facebook posts. Unlike the former examples, where text and image each express a particular performance of heterosexuality in a monomodal way and where the contrast is produced by their concurrence on Dina's Facebook wall, here the cartoon in itself forms a complex heterosemiotic conjunction of the same contrastive discourses.

[7] However, Dina was not always this decidedly negative about having boyfriends. At one time, when I was accompanying her homewards, she told me that she had had "only" one boyfriend. I asked if the other girls had had so many more of them, and she answered resolutely: "Yes. Normally you have your first boyfriend in fourth grade."

Fig. 4: "who do you think is better"

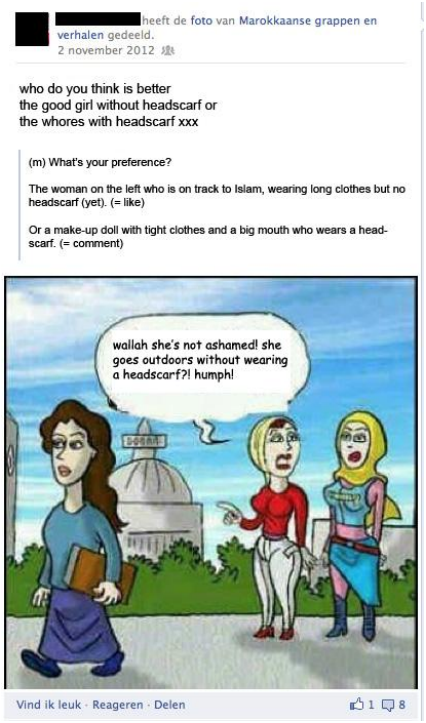

Fig. 4b: *translation*

In addition to the previous examples, it is clear that the cartoon gives a religious dimension to the contrasting images of femininity and that, to Dina, sexuality and religion are related in a complex way. In fact, by criticising the 'whores' with make-up and no headscarf, and by insinuating that one can doubt their devotion, Dina – herself a Muslim girl who doesn't wear a headscarf (yet) – is not only engaging in 'slutshaming', but also in 'Muslimshaming'. Sexual regulation of this kind is not exceptional: various authors have argued that it is practised especially by girls, like Dina, whose parents would not let them date boys, often for religious reasons (Ringrose 2013; Weekes 2002) – though, as the above-mentioned anecdote showed, this did not prevent Dina from being a victim of slutshaming as well.

Fig. 5: "be the happiness of your husband"

Fig. 5b: *translation*

This doesn't mean, however, that the above-mentioned heterosemiotic contrasts are only to be found on the Facebook wall of an Islamic girl. The same contrastive discourses of "hyperfemininity" and "traditional femininity" figure on the wall of Sarah. Contrary to Dina, Sarah did not seem to submit photos of her friends to the above-mentioned groups, such as 'The Beauty of Women'. However, on her Facebook wall, she regularly posted 'selfies' that expressed very similar performances of heterosexual attractiveness, by making herself up and adopting poses that are typical of fashion models – to which, among others, Dina replied that she should present herself to a modelling agency. But, mostly in textual threads, Sarah juxtaposed this image of hyperfemininity with performances of a more traditional heterosexuality, such as a text comment in which she stated: "you should only offer a boy your heart when you're sure he doesn't collect them [girls' hearts]" – thus creating an image of "lifelong monogamy" (Jackson 2006: 105). The same heterosemiotic contrasts are also displayed within a single image Sarah posted on her wall (Fig. 5). The figure shows Sarah taking a picture of herself with her smartphone, striking a basic model pose with her arm behind her head, and in this way portraying the young independent and sexy-looking woman as promoted by many advertising campaigns. But the text that is typed on the picture expresses a more traditional image of a woman in function of the family, producing a heterosemiotic contrast between heterosexual attractiveness (image) and heterosexual domesticity (text).

4. Conclusion

Similar to previous research on Western girls of the same age group, the teenage girls who participated in my research increasingly have to deal with, and situate themselves in relation towards, various, and often conflicting, heteronormative expectations of femininity. My data illustrate that their negotiations with iconic heterofemininities are not only played out 'offline', in the context of the peer group, but that also online environments are a major arena for such negotiations. In fact, their Facebook walls appear to be sites where girls like Dina and Sarah find the space for navigating different femininities and for living up to ideals of heterosexual attractiveness that they simultaneously curtail with a discourse that disavows of "slutty" behaviour and that promotes a more conservative discourse of domesticity.

A vital requirement for analysing the negotiations on these girls' Facebook pages, I have tried to show, is to take into account not simply verbal, but verbal as well as visual, semiotic elements. As is clear from the examples above, the visual posts on Facebook mostly expressed performances of hyperfemininity, whereas the textual comments seemed to be used as expressions of "traditional" femininity - although the cartoon on Dina's wall showed a heterosemiotic conjunction of the dichotomic discourses as well. Approaching the glossic elements in this dataset in semiotic isolation would stand in the way of dealing with the double bind of important prevailing discourses of heterosexuality in these girls' daily lives.

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