The relationship between media discourses and experiences of belonging: Dutch Somali perspectives

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between media discourses and experiences of belonging. Studies on Muslims and the media have suggested that there is a largely negative discourse about Muslims in Western countries. As a result, the 'othering' processes that occur in the media may impact how Muslim citizens experience their individual attachments to society. We use excerpts from focus group interviews with Somalis in the Netherlands[1] to investigate how they look upon, counter or internalize media discourses that seem to depict them in a negative way, particularly because they are Muslims. The findings indicate that discriminative discourses create a plurality of outcomes for our participants. Whereas all perceive a negative debate, some discursively 'join' a global Muslim community as a result, while others try their best to avoid association with a worldwide Muslim alliance and emphasize within-group variances. Though the opposing reactions might seem contradictory, we argue that both responses counter the same problems: 'othering' and victimization. Thereby we give voice to Somalis who are not often heard, while at the same time adding to the theoretical understanding of 'othering' processes.

Introduction: Discourses on Muslims

Over the past few decades, there has been considerable academic attention given to the position of Muslims in West-European media. A substantial number of media reports and commentaries have focused on the assumed divergence between

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archetypical Islamic and Western worlds, and on anti-Muslim sentiments, which seem to have been fuelled by global tensions (Modood, 2005; Poole, 2002; Poole and Richardson, 2006; Saeed, 2007).[2] This divergence reappeared from an ages-old Orientalist discourse in which the Middle East and Muslims are described as uncivilised, irrational and potentially violent, whereas Western European countries (and the US) are pictured as civilised, rational and therefore superior (Said, 1978). Hall (1992) argues that a particular 'discourse' on Muslims is dominant in a large part of the western media. Huntington's (1996) statement that there is a 'clash of civilisations' and that it would be impossible to bridge the supposedly dangerous gap, caused another revival of this thinking. This negative discourse was further strengthened worldwide after 11 September. A discourse developed in which some political actors, members of anti-immigrant or right wing groups, legitimised by intellectuals and selected 'worried' citizens increasingly interpreted the aggressive character of Al-Qaida and ISIS as something that is related to cultural and religious rules in Muslim areas. The idea that problems could spread and Western values and freedom of speech had to be defended, led to a 'politics of fear' (Afshar, 2013; Ekman, 2015; Nussbaum, 2012). Ekman (2015: 1988) explains how this 'islamophobia' can be seen as a cultural variant of racism. Whereas racist exclusionary reasoning starts from biological characteristics, 'islamophobic' exclusion starts with assumptions around religion, and the roots are similar.

The debate intensified in several West European countries as a result of local events. In the Netherlands, the violent death of Dutch filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, in 2004 accelerated changing emotional and political attitudes to Muslims (Coenders et al., 2008; Eyerman, 2008). Differences on the basis of cultural or religious affiliations have become 'core issues' in Dutch public and political debates, with a strong focus on Islamic groups—the Moroccans and Turks in particular (Coenders et al., 2008: 272). Simultaneously, loyalty to, and identification with, the Netherlands has, more and more, come to be seen as an essential component of integration (Ersanilli and Koopmans, 2010).

Through negative categorisation and a continuous problem-focused approach, Muslims are—individually and collectively—portrayed as a tangible threat to the 'western' way of life, and commonly associated with oppression, religious fanaticism and terrorism (Hopkins, 2011; Kundnani, 2007; Poole, 2002; Richardson, 2004; Saeed, 2007; Shadid, 2005). Even though counter-voices and nuances are also present in the discussion, the appeal to fear (possible terrorism) easily attracts the attention of the public. This very visible discourse creates rigid boundaries between 'us' and 'them', and generally constructs an image of Muslim citizens as 'Others' (Cottle, 2000; Devroe, 2004; Güney, 2010; Hopkins, 2011; Tufte, 2003). In this manner, media contribute directly and indirectly to the distribution of negative perceptions of immigrants and (ethnic) minorities (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Shadid, 2005; Van Dijk, 2000). In the Netherlands, Jaspers et al. (2009) found that attitudes towards Muslims have deteriorated significantly in the last two decades. Van der Valk (2012) gives an overview of public and

islamophobic political expressions in the Netherlands, including violent incidents towards mosques and discrimination against Muslims. It seems likely that the kind of reporting has impact on how minorities are perceived by the general public. On the other hand, the views of the public might also be reflected in the media. It is not clear where this starts, but altogether a vicious circle can develop.

Although the debate on Muslims might have impact on social opinions and interactions, media outlets often fail to take the voices of their Muslim audience into account. Koomen and Van Heelsum (2013) confirm that, while Muslim organizations in Europe do attempt to provide a counter-voice in the debate, often 'more is said about Muslims by non-Muslims than by Muslims themselves'.[3] They show that, in the period from 1998 to 2008 in the Netherlands only 16% of those who made claims or statements on subjects related to Muslims or Islam in newspapers articles are themselves Muslims, compared to 32% in the United Kingdom. Representatives of Muslim organisations may react by sending letters to newspapers and joining discussions in television talk shows. But for moderate Muslim organisational leaders it is not as easy to be heard in the debate as it is for non-Muslims. In addition, not everyone desires to be positioned as a public target. One consequence of these developments is that Muslim minorities are assigned identities that do not necessarily correspond with their own perceptions, as they are subjected to a discourse that often simplifies any ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences (Aly, 2007; Hopkins, 2011). As they are labelled and categorized as certain groups and actors, they must increasingly defend their position in society by proving where their loyalties lie. As a result, the constant 'othering' processes that occur in Western media can have an impact on how Muslim citizens perceive their own identities and senses of belonging (Güney, 2010; Hopkins, 2011; Sharify-Funk, 2009; Yildiz and Verkuyten, 2013).

In this article, we will examine how Somalis in the Netherlands respond to discriminative discourses in the media, in order to contribute to a greater understanding of the relationship between media coverage and Muslim minorities' experiences of belonging. Maliepaard (2012) found that a considerable number of Muslims in the Netherlands consider Dutch people to be excessively negative about Islam. Yet there has been little qualitative research on how Dutch Muslims interpret or counter discriminative discourses. Here we use excerpts from focus group interviews with Dutch Somalis to examine how these participants 'belong' in a space and time in which belonging for Muslims living in the West is often 'discounted, denied, symbolically retracted and pushed out of reach' (Skrbiš et al., 2007: 262).

Belonging and the effect of 'othering'

While the notion of belonging has generated many different perspectives and approaches, most scholars concur it should be regarded as processual, dynamic and situational. According to the definition put forth by Anthias (2008), it is 'about experiences of being part of the social fabric and the ways in which social bonds

and ties are manifested in practices, experiences and emotions of inclusion' (8). It entails feeling 'at home', on account of emotional attachments to both a physical space and the larger imagined community space (Antonsich, 2010). Investigations into belonging often focus on migrants and their experiences, as these show how it is possible to belong in many different ways and on different scales (Wright, 2015). Measuring migrants' level of 'belonging', Valentine et al. (2009) have argued, has become an important determinant of integration. Additionally, migrants' stories also highlight how belonging is constructed in relation to people's particular inter-sectional social location, depending on a background of class, gender, religion, ethnicity and transnational ties (Anthias 2008; Antonsich, 2010; Valentine, 2007; Valentine et al., 2009; Wood and Waite, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2006). While belonging has often been coupled—and at times equated—with the term 'identity', the two notions do have a different emphasis. Whereas identity is best understood as a set of claims or narratives about oneself, and involves 'presentation and labelling, myths of origin and myths of destiny with associated strategies and identifications' (Anthias, 2008: 8), belonging is about *experiences* and emotional attachments (Anthias, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006; italics added).

It is generally the recognition and acceptance of a particular self-identity by a wider community that helps to build a sense of belonging (Valentine et al., 2009). However, various studies indicate that questions of belonging regularly materialize because people feel that they 'cannot gain access, participate or be included within the dominant society' (Anthias, 2008: 8). It is the experience of being different, or strangers, that causes a feeling of 'not belonging' (Noble, 2005; Wood and Waite, 2011). Understanding belonging as the emotional experiences of inclusion thus also requires a focus on what may be the opposite of belonging, that is to say, the emotional experiences of exclusion (Wright, 2015). Media play a particular role in such negotiations of social power between majority and minority. Sharify-Funk (2009) discovered that Canadian Muslims feel they have to construct their identities in contrast, or in opposition, to conventional media images and messages. Güney (2010) found that 'othering' processes in the British media have a fragmenting effect on Muslim youth in the UK who, as a result, have diminishing feelings of attachment to Britain and increasing empathy with the struggles of Muslims worldwide.

Though the second generation is probably more vocal in their protest and more eager to defend itself than the first generation, this does not automatically mean that all second-generation youngsters weakly identify with the country in which they live. As Van Heelsum and Koomen (2016) show, both religious, ethnic and national identification of the second generation (Moroccan) Muslims in five European countries gets affected by the negative tone of the debate in the papers, but the second generation take their 'right' to be Dutch or French, Belgian, German or Swiss as more natural compared to the first generation.

Individuals may react to stigmatization and exclusion by emphasizing both their ethnic and religious backgrounds. Yet Gordon Allport, in his seminal

work on prejudice and responses to victimization (1954), argued that there are 12 devices individuals can use to protect themselves, which roughly fall into two categories:

> In the first instance the victim *blames* the outer causes of his handicap; in the second he tends, if not actually to blame himself, at least to take the responsibility upon himself for adjusting to the situation. (Allport, 1954: 160)

Numerous authors followed up on Allport and broadened his reasoning (see Dovidio et al., 2005 for an overview). James Jones (2005) provides a list of additions and developments in the field and recently Lamont and Mizrachi (2012), who brought together considerable research in several countries about responses to stigmatization in a special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, distinguish between three modalities of response. The subjects who feel addressed unfairly can sometimes negotiate, for instance by actively and openly discussing the problem and making others aware that their actions make them uncomfortable or by undertaking political action. Others prefer a conflict-deflecting strategy—believing that it is the best to ignore, forgive and walk away, even though that might lead to growing feeling of frustration. A third group favours a mixed strategy (Fleming et al., 2012).

In research that specifically relates to Muslim migrants in Europe, strengthening of in-group ties is mentioned as a defence mechanism (Karimshah et al., 2014; Sirin and Fine, 2007; Verkuyten and Yildiz, 2007; Yildiz and Verkuyten, 2013). Conversely, other studies show that discriminative discourses lead minorities to distance themselves from members of their in-group. British Muslims have actively asserted themselves in exposing the existing discourses by challenging the secularist, liberal and feminist assumptions (Modood, 2005). In a study on young Somali women in London, Phoenix (2011) found that in the climate of the 'War on Terror', these women deconstruct their devalued social position as Muslims by distancing themselves from more recent migrants from Somalia and by pointing out that Muslim 'Asians' (such as Pakistani) are much more affected by negative discourses than they are. Stigmatization can thus also lead to the creation of new ethnic hierarchies (Hagendoorn, 1995; Phoenix, 2011).

In the Netherlands, Somalis make up a relatively new and distinct Muslim population, next to the already established Moroccan and Turkish communities. Somalis might be victims of double discrimination—being both Muslim and black. While they also constitute a small Muslim minority, they are found to internalize their faith strongly and experience it as an important part of their identity (Griffiths, 2002; Moors et al., 2009; Nijenhuis and Van Liempt, 2014; Van Doorn, 2011). Our study addresses the impact of discriminative discourses on how they consider themselves to be positioned in society, in the context of living in the Netherlands as a Muslim refugee of colour more generally.

Somalis in the Netherlands

The Somali presence in the Netherlands largely came about as a result of the 1991 revolution in Somalia. A coalition of armed forces overthrew then-president Siad Barre, after which the Islamic Court Union (ICU) rose to power (Hoene and Luling, 2010; Lewis, 2002, 2008). The ensuing events eventually led to a civil war that continues to this day. Subsequently, numerous Somalis fled their home country to take refuge, first in neighbouring countries, and later also in Western countries (Horst, 2004, 2006; Lindley, 2010; Moret et al., 2006; Nielsen, 2004; Valentine et al., 2009). The largest Somali communities outside Africa are to be found in Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy and the UK (UNHCR, 2014; Van den Reek and Hussein, 2003; Van Heelsum, 2011;).

On the first of January 2015, there were almost 40,000 Somalis in the Netherlands (according to the website Dutch Statistical Office www.cbs.nl visited on 15 March 2015). Somalis were then one of the four largest refugee groups in the Netherlands (Dourleijn and Dagevos, 2011). Dutch Somalis are not a homogenous community. Although many Dutch Somalis tend to live in areas with a high percentage of immigrants (such as in cities like Rotterdam or Amsterdam) due to refugee placement, Somalis are more dispersed than other immigrants (Van Heelsum, 2011). While the earliest wave of Somalis consisted mostly of educated individuals from high socio-economic classes who were able to flee their war-torn country, the latest influx of Somali refugees are less educated, as their education has been disrupted by the prolonged war in Somalia (Moors et al., 2009; Van Den Tillaart and Warmerdam, 2010). But across refugee waves, Somalis in the Netherlands generally hold relatively unfavourable socio-economic positions. About one-third of the Dutch Somali workforce is unemployed, and nearly half receive social benefits (Dourleijn and Dagevos, 2011; Klaver et al., 2009; Klaver and Van der Welle, 2009; Moors et al., 2009). The Dutch context shows structural discrimination (Andriessen et al., 2014, 2015). For instance, unemployment levels of most immigrant groups, including the second generation, are systematically higher than those of Dutch (Lamberts et al., 2013). Dutch Somalis also do not fare well in the education system. They tend to end up on the lower levels and move upward less than Dutch children. According to the study by Moors et al. (2009) these issues, in combination with experiences of racism, mean that many Somalis regard their position in the Netherlands as substandard. Several studies further indicate that Dutch Somalis generally view their Muslim and Somali identity as more important to them than their Dutch identity (Dourleijn and Dagevos, 2011; Moors et al., 2009; Nijenhuis and Van Liempt, 2014).

After 2001, the Somali population in the Netherlands reduced in size for a period of time due to 'secondary migration' to countries like the UK. Research on the phenomenon provided various explanations that were centred on social, economic and political motives (Moors et al., 2009; Van Den Reek and Hussein, 2003; Van Heelsum, 2011; Van Liempt, 2011a, 2011b). Some were driven by better job opportunities available to them in the UK, whilst others were encouraged by

family members to join them. Importantly, the political climate after 9/11 was also seen as a stimulus to leave the Netherlands (Van Liempt, 2011a, 2011b). Many Somalis felt that people in the Netherlands had started to show a decrease in tolerance towards Muslims and found that the UK had more room for cultural difference. We will examine whether such sentiments still apply to our participants and what role they believe the media play in them.

There are many additional factors that influence the position of minorities in Dutch society in particular ways. Other research, for instance, has focused on the effect of the shift from a multiculturalist to an assimilationist policy (Entzinger, 2006; Vasta, 2007) or on the negative effects of the long asylum procedure (Pels and De Gruijter, 2005: 58). The context of structural discrimination in the country more generally is highly relevant (Andriessen et al., 2014, 2015; Lamberts et al., 2013). As the Open Society Foundation (2015) concluded after studying Somalis in Sweden, Finland, the UK and the Netherlands, 'Discrimination in employment, education and housing contribute towards socio-economic exclusion which in turn further undermines the sense of belonging and identity with the wider society.' (27). The earlier-mentioned ideas about feelings of superiority among Western Europeans and the existing fear of 'the other' seem to lie behind these attitudes.

Our objective, however, is to examine how Dutch Somalis look upon, counter or internalize media discourses that depict them as typical Muslims. What role does media coverage play in their overall sense of belonging? By understanding how Dutch Somalis negotiate the friction 'between self-invention and external definition' (Phoenix, 2011: 315), we will show that negative media discourses on Muslims have a plurality of effects on Somalis in the Netherlands and their sense of belonging. First, however, we will contextualize their position in the Netherlands.

Somalis in Dutch media

Research on media reporting of Somalis in the Amsterdam local newspaper *Het Parool* established that the main category found in relation to Somalis was 'piracy', consisting of news about Somali pirates and the contribution of Dutch marines to combating this phenomenon (Nijenhuis and Van Liempt, 2014: 110).[4] In second place, however, came reports on terrorism at an international level. A particular terrorist group that Somalis are associated with is Al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab ('the youth' in Arabic) was established around 2006, when radical young militia splintered off the Islamic Courts' Union as a result of the Ethiopian army's invasion of Somalia (Vidino et al., 2010). While Ethiopia was already regarded as Somalia's historical enemy, many Somalis also perceived the country as acting as a proxy for the United States. According to Vidino et al. (2010), the resulting mixture of anti-Ethiopian, anti-American, anti-western, nationalist and Islamist sentiments, 'both within the African country and in the diaspora' (220), was the setting in which Al-Shabaab emerged. Since then, the organization has established itself as one of the most feared terrorist organizations in Africa, carrying

out a coordinated series of (suicide) attacks on government offices, consulates and UN-sanctioned agencies (Hansen, 2013). In 2012, Al-Shabaab's leadership pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda, a terrorist grouping with a long active history in Somalia whose presence has worried western forces for years (Riedel, 2007; CNN Wire Staff, 2012). Western media have covered these developments extensively, but especially turned their attention to Al-Shabaab after the 2013 Westgate attack in Nairobi. Numerous news stories covered the attack that resulted in 67 deaths and scores injured, many of whom were western expats living in Kenya.

Al-Shabaab's growth from a localized terror group to one with a sophisticated international PR operation used to recruit people from the Somali diaspora has become a major concern for both neighbouring and Western governments in recent years. According to Vidino et al. (2010), some Somali diaspora members are drawn to Al-Shabaab because of the greater ideological context, as they see the conflict in Somalia as part of the imminent clash between Islam and the West. They report that between 2007 and 2010 at least 122 young men from Western Europe were found to be somehow connected to Al-Shabaab, either suspected of having travelled to Somalia to fight or having been arrested for terrorist-related offences (Vidino et al., 2010: 226–227).[5] In the Netherlands, the General Intelligence and Security Service, AIVD, has over the years also kept a close eye on Somalia as a jihadi destination and on Dutch Somali citizens who might be interested in fighting there (AIVD, 2010). It is feared that Dutch Somalis will be sensitive to radical interpretations of Islam, due to their general low socio-economic position in Dutch society and possible experiences of discrimination (Moors and Jacobs, 2009). In our study, the backdrop of news stories on terrorism and Al-Shabaab will therefore be of importance, as it is a specific part of the debate on Muslims that our participants feel associated with.

As mentioned earlier, the overarching purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between media discourses and experiences of belonging. After the above overview of literature, we can now employ two more specific sub-questions: (1) Do Dutch Somalis experience the current debate to be as excluding as the literature would suggest? (2) To what extent does the debate affect Dutch Somalis' sense of belonging? In the first section of the results we will thus discuss how participants reflected on the Dutch media debate, while in the second section we will demonstrate how the participants believed this impacted on their personal sense of belonging in the Netherlands.

Method

In this article we draw on three focus group discussions held with 20 participants from the city of Delft.[6] These three focus groups consisted of young Dutch Somali men and women aged 18 to 30, most of whom had spent the largest part of their lives in the Netherlands. Participants were recruited through the network of one of the authors and by approaching community centres where Somalis are known to socialise. We focused on one city within the country (Delft), as this helped facilitate the

gathering of useful resources and connections. The focus group approach allowed conversation with several individuals at a time, which also encouraged participation from people who felt reluctant to be interviewed on their own (Kitzinger, 1995: 299). While the sample size is limited, and not representative, the results give insight in the way in which 'othering' works in the lives of this group.

The bulk of the discussions were held in Dutch, with sometime a few words in Somali, and on average the focus group meetings lasted three hours.[7] Culturally sensitive key factors such as age and gender were taken into account to place the participants within the different focus groups. This structure allowed participants to express their views as freely as possible on a range of topics. The meetings were meant to be conversational, so rigid questioning was avoided. Participants were assessed on whether they encountered any negative representations of Muslims or of Somalis in the media, and on how they identified themselves and their position in Dutch society. They were encouraged to challenge each other, which resulted in a plurality of opinions and perceptions. Most participants in the study were pleased to have an opportunity to voice their feelings and stated that they hoped that the study will provide a better insight into the Somali community in the Netherlands. After transcribing the interview, we analysed the data in order to answer the two sub-questions. We classify 'belonging' into three types, from a 'high' to a 'low' sense of belonging.

Media discourses: On being 'others'

We will now consider the results related to the first sub-question, namely: Do Dutch Somalis experience the current debate to be as excluding as the literature would suggest?

The Dutch Somali participants in our study described themselves as heavy consumers of news. The most popular media among them was the Internet, though the majority answered that they also read at least one newspaper a day. More than half of the participants preferred to read free national weekday newspapers such as *Spits* and *Metro*. The recurrent news on Muslims since 11 September was something all participants had noticed. Several respondents referred to this trend as 'Muslim shaming'—a stream of constant bad imagery of Muslim communities and Islam. While some argued that negative media attention had primarily been given to the Moroccan and Turkish communities, others indicated that the negative framing of Muslims in Dutch media involved Somalis as much as any other ethnic Muslim community. They argued that news segments, articles and TV continually suggest how different the west and Muslims are from each other. One woman asserted the following:

> Do you know how many times I read in newspapers about what a bad thing a Muslim person has done? I only know that because the article is persistent in letting their readers know that he is a Muslim. The same treatment is never applied to any other religion. (Female, aged 29)

As her statement shows, respondents believed that the approach of the media to Muslims was different. Most participants downplayed the prominence of Somalis in such stories. But nearly all expressed having observed negative, albeit infrequent, media portrayals of Somalis. According to them, newspapers' stories usually appear very one-sided and frequently frame Somalis in a narrow box that depicts them as violent and barbaric. According to one female participant, aged 22, as newspapers always depict Muslim communities negatively, it should come as no surprise that the same is happening to the Somali community: 'We are Muslims, right? That usually will be enough to get you a bad headline.' Naturally, having different feelings towards their community they strongly felt that Dutch media do not fairly depict Somalis. Discourse that reduced them to simplistic categories such as 'criminals' and 'terrorists' was found to be inaccurate and insulting.

Labelling Somalis as 'terrorists' bothered participants in particular. At the time of the focus group discussions it had been little over a year since the Westgate attack in Nairobi and several other incidents worldwide that had involved Al-Shabaab. As such, the participants had noticed an increase in news stories about the organization. They strongly opposed the way certain news stories associated Al-Shabaab's terrorist activities with the wider Dutch Somali community. Several people, such as the following woman, complained about the lack of knowledge people in the Netherlands had about Dutch Somalis:

> People don't know much about us as a community, so instead of getting to know us they just call us whatever helps them to identify and categorize us as a group. (Female, aged 26)

Even if participants found that newspapers were accurate in describing what Al-Shabaab was, they disagreed about treating them as fellow Muslims. Several participants argued something in line with one young man's statement: 'I would never classify Al-Shabaab as Muslim. What they are doing is not in the name of Islam.' Participants stressed that the behaviour of Al-Shabaab members was quite far from what people within the Somali community would ever associate with:

> How can they compare me with what a member of Al-Shabaab in Somalia does? I have never seen Somalia; what they fight for and what I consider important are worlds apart. It makes me frustrated that people generalise so easily without thinking of how others may feel. (Female, aged 25)

By emphasizing the difference between Somalis in the Netherlands and affiliates of Al-Shabaab, participants effectively distanced themselves from this stigmatized group. By doing so, they simultaneously aimed to deconstruct the link between Islam and terrorism: their distancing from Al-Shabaab helped create a discursive boundary of who should and who should not be considered part of their community. This suggests that one way of dealing with negative media imagery is to

construct a particular group identity that is inherently opposite to media portrayals (Sharify-Funk, 2009; Yildiz and Verkuyten, 2013).

The narratives in this section confirm that Muslim citizens are commonly constructed as 'others' in the media (Cottle, 2000; Devroe, 2004; Güney, 2010; Hopkins, 2011; Tufte, 2003). Respondents experienced the overall tone of the coverage on Muslims to be largely negative, and believed that 'western' and 'Muslim' values are generalized and put down in the debate in a dichotomizing way. Terrorism, it furthermore appeared, is dubbed in the media as an inherently 'Muslim' phenomenon. For the participants in our study, this means that the discourse used in the media is an example of the ways in which Muslim citizens are excluded from society. Considering that media discourses are often not in line with how people perceive themselves and their community—which the debate on Al-Shabaab showed—Dutch Somalis must sometimes construct their Muslim and Somali identity in opposition to commonplace media messages. The next section will examine how the focus group participants discuss the impact of media characterizations on them and their sense of belonging.

Countering media representation

The second sub-question, on what the media debate on Muslims meant for the participants' personal sense of belonging, was a complex matter for most of the individuals. While the majority said they considered themselves Somali first, then Muslim, and lastly Dutch, most said they generally felt safer in the Netherlands than in Somalia. However, many indicated that, to truly feel to 'belong' in the Netherlands, one has to be completely accepted on many different levels. In addition, individuals emphasized different matters that were of significance to them.

To operationalise the concept 'belonging' we have classified three dimensions from a 'high' to a 'low' sense of belonging. As we explained earlier, a strong sense of belonging means to experience a clear feeling of inclusion and to hold emotional attachments to both a physical and imaginative space (Anthias, 2008). A low sense of 'belonging' indicates an absence of these feelings and a focus on experiences of exclusion (Wright, 2015). The dimensions that we have distinguished are not static, but roughly belong to one of three sentiments that individuals hold in response to media messages. First, there were those individuals who emphasized their belonging despite media messages; second, people who argued that their sense of belonging fluctuated; and third, participants who indicated an absence of experiencing belonging. We will argue that the three dimensions all exhibit different mechanisms of coping with the negative discourse in the media.

Explicit belonging in spite of media messages

In comparison to the rest, the participants clustered in this group actively asserted their membership in the Netherlands, despite discriminatory discourses. While they

agreed that there is a negative media discourse on Muslims, they asserted that they did not feel personally affected, for a number of different reasons.

Some of these participants simply did not believe that negative depictions of Muslims affected them as Somalis, or that there were recurrent negative depictions of Somalis. Like many of the other participants, they regarded Al-Shabaab as a terror organisation that had nothing to do with them. When asked to what extent media reports have an impact on other Somalis feeling 'at home' in the Netherlands, these participants did not believe that media had such a big influence. Instead, some counter-positioned themselves by stressing how much they personally belonged in the Netherlands, despite media discourses. According to one young woman:

> For me Holland is home, I can't picture myself anywhere else. I have never been to Somalia, so I can't really say much about it. But I feel more Dutch when I am with my aunties and uncles. I celebrate the national holidays, my friends are Dutch and I am accustomed to this life. Negative things will be said about my community, but in all honesty stuff like that doesn't affect me at all. I suppose I am more Dutch than I ever thought and I am fine with that. (Female, aged 22)

As the above quote indicates, this particular participant defined her 'Dutchness' by her proximity to (ethnically) Dutch people and her willingness to participate in the 'Dutch way of life'.

Other participants stated that they do not pay attention to negative representation in newspapers, simply because they do not feel these depictions are true. They found news stories about young Somali people who seemingly aligned themselves with Al-Shabaab ideology hard to believe. One woman argued:

> I don't know about young people joining Al-Shabaab, I don't know anyone within my community that has. I really do think it's something that has been made up by the media. (Female, aged 22)

The latter statement illustrates the discrepancy between what people believe to be accurate about their community and what they find in the media. Several participants made clear that more nuanced coverage on Muslims does exist. Nonetheless, they complained that this coverage is rather niche, being either broadcast late in the evening or appearing in media that does not have a broad reach.

By stressing both the irrelevance and inaccuracy of news segments, these focus group participants disengaged from the debate that signifies Muslims as 'others'. This type of response de-victimizes their unfavourable position and challenges the boundaries put forth in media discourses (Aly, 2007; Lamont et al., 2012). Claiming a sense of inclusion despite media message is furthermore a powerful way to emphasize one's right 'to belong' and thus to counter exclusion.

Fluctuating belonging: Intersections of class, religion and ethnic hierarchies

The second group comprised individuals who showed a 'fluctuating' sense of belonging. They talked about feeling estranged from Dutch society at times, yet feeling 'at home' at other times. Participants had a number of different arguments to explain their point of view.

Just as the first group, the individuals clustered in this group saw noticeable negative depictions in newspapers about Muslims and about Somalis. They criticized the association to Al-Shabaab and believed that this attention would worsen any negative opinions of Somalis. Nevertheless, these participants generally asserted that withdrawing from society on the basis of this would not be a sensible solution for themselves or for other Somalis. In addition, while negative depictions in the media do affect them, they argued that this was not to a greater extent than other factors of exclusion. As we explained earlier, Somalis in the Netherlands generally hold a poor socio-economic position as they face high unemployment and low educational success (Dourleijn and Dagevos, 2011; Moors et al., 2009; Nijenhuis and Van Liempt, 2014). The participants in this cluster elaborated on these issues. They expressed resentment towards Dutch society in regard to their perceived low position on the labour market and the general consensus that the Dutch education system is very tough for minorities. As Van Liempt (2011a, 2011b) also found, there was still a lingering perception that the UK might be a better place for Somalis in this regard. One female participant argued that her relatives in England all seemed to go to universities while she felt stuck in MBO (the Dutch MBO level is equivalent to US community college level; it is two levels lower than university). Her inability to find a decent job was a source of frustration:

> I try so hard to find a job that suits my qualifications, but I don't seem to succeed. My Dutch friend, who had lower results at school then me, had no problem finding one after we finished. It's not like I am not happy for her, it is just that I can't help myself thinking that she got lucky because she is Dutch. I am not just thinking that out of spite, I actually came across this article on Facebook that said that people who apply for work get discriminated on the basis of their foreign name. Can you imagine? My surname is Mohammed! (Female, aged 24)

The above statement echoes what many of these participants believed: while they might not be singled out personally, they do feel that the general public treats Muslims differently. There were more parts of their identity that are regularly questioned, they explained. For instance, they felt that their place in society is often challenged due to their obviously different skin colour. According to one participant:

> I would never feel comfortable to go around claiming that I am Dutch... Dutch people will always look at you funny and ask 'But no seriously, what are you?

What part of Africa were you born?' And [even when] I tell them that I was born here, they will still continue to ask 'what I am' as if I don't understand the question, until I have enough and just tell them that I am Somali. (Male, aged 18)

What they are 'not', or how they differ in relation to Dutch people, thus heavily influenced the way these participants spoke about their place in Dutch society. This, as was made clear, had to do with the persistent awareness of being 'different'. One female participant gave the example of a highly publicized incident concerning popular right-wing politician Geert Wilders. Wilders spoke at a congregation for his party and asked his supporters the rhetorical question if 'we' (presumably Dutch society) wanted 'more or fewer Moroccans'. A moment ensued where a large group of people repeatedly shouted 'fewer, fewer, fewer!' While the incident was highly controversial and deemed unacceptable by other politicians, the participant who brought it up argued that she nonetheless felt addressed by this episode. She explained that, while Moroccans might have been the target of the speech, she 'read between the lines' and felt that it was implied that there should generally be fewer Muslims in the Netherlands, and therefore also fewer Somalis. For her, such proclamations only continued to hinder a sentiment of feeling 'Dutch'. As she explained, 'I was once again reminded of being "the other" in the situation.'

The anecdote above indicates that the continuing portrayal of Muslims as 'others' discourages a feeling of being part of society. By being a platform where negative opinions about Muslims can take place, media outlets play a role in processes of exclusion. For these participants, however, such occurrences did not automatically mean that they always felt excluded from Dutch society. The reality can be complicated: especially those who grew up in the Netherlands can feel emotionally invested in the country. One young man explained:

My cousin who has left Holland for another country teases our Dutch customs, which in all honesty annoys me. I become very defensive when someone says something negative about us Dutch. I see it this way, I am allowed to bash them, and you are not. (Male, aged 18)

This fragment shows how someone can experience strong ties to Dutch habits and culture at certain moments. At the same time, the desire to be seen as fully Dutch—not only by one's cousin, but also by other Dutch people—may lead to a feeling of frustration. These participants also regarded their position in Dutch society in a more positive light in relation to the much more targeted Moroccan population. They believed that most Dutch people associate Muslims with Moroccans (or Turks), and felt that their relatively unfamiliar position aided them in a way:

We don't get talked about in the media as much as the Moroccans, who are more of a target group in Holland than we are... I suppose because not many know much about us we feel that the public is more welcoming and kinder to us Somalis. (Female, aged 29)

Within a context where both groups suffer discrimination in the labour market and in the educational system, comparing oneself with a worse victim provides a positive self-image (Lamont et al., 2012). Research suggest that, due to criminalized images of Moroccan youth in the media, both native Dutch and other major immigrant groups—including Dutch Somalis—place Moroccans on the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy in the Netherlands (Moors et al., 2009; Nijenhuis and Van Liempt, 2014). Our study furthermore indicates that participants compare circumstances to position themselves hierarchically above Moroccans, whose sense of belonging is also regularly challenged (Hagendoorn, 1995; Phoenix, 2011).

In comparison to the people clustered in the other groups, the participants in this second group experienced a complex sense of belonging. They feel addressed by the negative debate, but also experienced shifting feelings of belonging due to factors such as unemployment, low educational success, exclusion on the basis of their skin colour and the general different treatment of Muslims. All these issues hinder truly feeling 'at home' or 'accepted'. Simultaneously, these individuals did consider themselves part of Dutch society and negotiated their low social position by comparing themselves to more 'severe' victims, such as the Moroccan population. Their experiences demonstrate that belonging is a highly situational and dynamic process, and underlines that people's sense of inclusion/exclusion cannot be analysed without taking into account their social location (Valentine et al., 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Expressing a low sense of belonging

For a few participants, the negative media debate seemed to cause a lot of resentment and concern. While the other respondents also believed the media presented dichotomizing stories, these participants felt more concerned with how bad imagery of Muslim communities and Islam affected them as individuals and as a community. In contrast to the participants in the other groups, they also made fewer distinctions between Somalis and other Muslim communities in the Netherlands. Because of their strong religious affiliation, they reasoned, if one Muslim is attacked, Muslims as a whole are attacked. For these participants, repeated negative discourses on Muslims were a clear indication that the Dutch were hostile towards them. For some, this was reason to actively disengage. According to one participant:

> When your culture gets mocked in the newspapers, day after day, you get fed up. You want to defend yourself by arming yourself with more knowledge, so that you can fight the discrimination that they throw at you. (Male, aged 26)

The participants clustered in this group agreed that a person cannot feel at home in a place where he/she is constantly looked down upon and criticised. For them, the media had a large role in perpetuating these negative feelings. Some male

participants explained that other specific events in their life had also made them reconsider their place in Dutch society. One such occurrence was when Dutch authorities started to profile the Somali community at airports. They shared anecdotes of how they were held for hours at an airport, only to find out that airport security wanted to know why they went to Kenya or Somalia. This group viewed being stopped and searched as a blatant form of racism. They confessed feeling anger and resentment, mostly because they felt discriminated against and targeted as Muslims by the Dutch authorities.

Significantly, some participants also stated that negative images of Somalis as Muslim extremists could lead to problems within the Somali community. One participant explained that if the media constantly produces negative stories regarding Dutch Somalis, then it will have an impact, not only on how the general public views them, but also on how Somalis view themselves:

> The Dutch will be apprehensive about us as they will see us as a threat to their society and their values. And then we have those within the Somali community who will feel powerless to counteract and instead become what they initially opposed. (Female, aged 24)

Several participants feared that teenagers would be particularly influenced by what is written in the media. According to them, the younger Somali generation already struggles with their identity as they have to navigate between their Dutch and Somali backgrounds. Simultaneously, their religion is misconstrued in the media. A number of participants thus worried that young people who feel increasingly isolated, partly as a result of the false representation of their community and religion, would turn to dangerous types of information to get a positive sense of belonging. According to one woman:

> We have older generations who don't know what to do with their children and younger generations who don't feel at home anywhere. We seek out ways to belong and in this day and age it's all about the internet. [Young] people don't know much about religion and instead of going to the mosque and getting the proper Islamic education; young boys and girls go on these internet forums and get the wrong information. Information that is harmful to their minds, because they become radicalised and everyone becomes their enemy in a path where they want to find themselves. (Female, aged 29)

Studies on Muslim radicalisation (Abbas, 2007; Moors et al., 2009; Moors and Jacobs, 2009) have suggested that there is a link between experiences of isolation and discrimination, a negatively charged discourse on Islam, and sensitivity to radical forms of Islam. Such findings coupled with the arguments by our participants suggest that exclusion—through the media and other mechanisms—can cause considerable emotional damage. One participant affirmed the emotional

strain, explaining that the more negative reporting on Muslims and Islam he experienced, the more disillusioned by Dutch society he felt:

> If someone asked me if I felt at home in Holland, I would say no. I don't even see myself living here permanently. My parents brought me here, but I am surely not going to die here. I honestly believe that my values are incompatible with Holland or any Western country. Eventually all of us Somalis will have to leave; the Dutch are becoming intolerant towards the Muslims. So it's either conform or be deviant, at this point I believe I need to be true to myself. (Male, aged 22)

The narratives in this last section indicate that, for some of the individuals who participated in this study, the media has a negative impact on feelings of belonging. In contrast to the other groups, these participants explained not only that they perceive the debate as excluding, but also that they want to distance themselves from mainstream Dutch society as a result. The difference with the other respondents can largely be explained by the fact that these participants respond to the negative discourse through asserting their religious, and not their Somali, background. As such, their stories illustrate that people may strengthen particular in-group ties in the face of the perceived discrimination and exclusion of their group (Allport, 1954; Nagra, 2011; Peek, 2005; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006; Rumbaut, 2008). While these participants are arguably the most critical of the negative discourse, they appear to challenge the dichotomous style found in the media the least, as they have seemingly adopted this way of thinking to a large extent themselves (Aly, 2007).

Conclusion

Over the last two decades, an increase in the number of news items on Muslims has occurred in West European countries (Vanparys et al., 2013). The Netherlands was in the past known as tolerant, particularly to religious newcomers, but as Lucassen and Lucassen (2015) describe, a 'strange death of Dutch tolerance' seems to have occurred. As we have shown above, academic work has confirmed a stronger focus on anti-Islamism and anti-Muslim sentiments, at first driven by global conflicts but further magnified through a reasoning of assumed divergences on the basis of cultural or religious affiliations (Meer and Modood, 2009; Poole, 2002; Poole and Richardson, 2006; Saeed, 2007; Van der Valk, 2012). The 'Orientalist discourse' that Said described in 1978 reappeared. Just like racism and xenophobia—exclusion based on physical characteristic or nationality—this recent anti-Islamism or islamophobia—exclusion based on religious characteristics—is rooted in a tendency to exclude supposed outsiders, i.e. 'othering'. In this article, we have focused on how the media influences the way minority groups relate to their respective societies. To explore this relationship, we have examined whether media discourses on Muslims impact on the way Dutch Somalis understand their sense of 'belonging' in the Netherlands.

We have assessed the relationship between media discourses and experiences of belonging by trying to answer two sub-questions: are media discourses indeed regarded as exclusionary by our Dutch Somali participants, and if so, what is the effect on their experiences of belonging? Using our empirical data, we have shown that participants were concerned by the discourse. They unanimously stated that news stories too often approach Muslim citizens as 'Others' and regularly associate them and their religion with fanaticism or terrorism. Dutch Somali participants regarded this discourse as degrading and not in line with how they perceive their own community. Our findings thus confirm that the current debate is predominantly experienced as negative and excluding in nature (Cottle, 2000; Devroe, 2004; Güney, 2010; Tufte, 2003; Van Dijk, 2000).

However, our data also showed that a negatively experienced media debate does not affect everyone in the same way. A large group upheld attachments to both their Dutch and Somali backgrounds, and regard belonging as a situational matter that is affected by media discourses as well as by other factors. This confirmed the dynamic, intersectional nature of belonging and underlined the importance of social location (Antonsich, 2010; Valentine, 2007; Valentine et al., 2009; Wood and Waite, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Interestingly, our data also uncovered that opposing reactions can ensue in regard to the negative discourse: we found instances of both the denial of victimization and the strengthening of in-group ties (Allport, 1954). Within the former group, the participants stressed belonging in the Netherlands despite the negative discourse, and downplayed their Muslim background by favoring their 'Dutchness'. In contrast, participants within the latter group strongly affirmed their group's distinctiveness and emphasized that reporting in the media displays how being Dutch and being Muslim are incompatible. The variation in responses means that, while the debate is generally considered as excluding in nature, experiences of belonging are affected in various ways. Whereas all participants perceive a negative debate, some figuratively and discursively 'join' a global Muslim community as result of this and classify themselves as a group despite many within-group differences. Others try their best to avoid association with a worldwide Muslim alliance and emphasize within-group variances, such as with the Moroccans (creating new ethnic hierarchies in the process).

While this might seem contradictory, we have argued that these conflicting reactions are not as opposed as they seem to be. In the theoretical section, we outlined Allport's conception that people commonly respond to exclusion by either opposing the group that supposedly discriminates, or by finding a way to narrow the gap between the two conflicting groups (Allport, 1954). The results of our study illustrate both of these mechanisms, as they clearly show how the conflicting reactions aim to counter the same problems: 'othering' and victimization. This perspective, we found, has thus far not been discussed sufficiently in studies of Muslims and the media. Many studies focus on the opposition to exclusion, or follow Allport's basic idea in treating the two responses as being largely independent from one another. In contrast, we aim to show that there is added value in treating them together and in light of each other. The strengthening of in-group ties revealed that questions of

belonging assume salience when people feel that they are not truly included in society; consolidating in-group bonds can be used as a defensive response (Allport, 1954; Güney, 2010). In many ways, our study therefore supports other research on minority stigmatization that posits that exclusion often leads to increased group solidarity and the affirmation of ethnic or religious bonds (Güney, 2010; Nagra, 2011; Peek, 2005; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006; Rumbaut, 2008). On the other hand, we have also argued that constructing oneself as unaffected by debates in the media and distancing oneself from the in-group (in this case, Muslims *and* sometimes other Somalis) may seem counter-intuitive, but that this enables people to dissociate themselves from simplistic coverage of their identities (Aly, 2007; Hopkins, 2011; Phoenix, 2011). Disengaging from the discourses that signify them as 'others' gives participants the opportunity to challenge the boundaries that are used within this medium (and beyond), and by claiming recognition, they find possibilities to belong (Lamont et al., 2012). By taking into consideration the varying responses to the same problem, our qualitative analysis was able to highlight the many complex ways people are able to maneuver around an excluding discourse and come to grips with belonging.

The variety of ways with which minority subjects can negotiate unequally distributed social power means that there is no straight answer to how Dutch Somalis interpret media discourses on Muslims. Yet the use of the concept of belonging in this case helps us to see that there is a complex relationship between excluding forces and 'feeling part of the social fabric' (Anthias, 2008: 8). Our research findings illustrate that, while media discourses impose boundaries from the 'outside', these boundaries can be either reproduced or reconstructed from the 'inside'. Considering that the 'othering' of Muslims in the media is unlikely to cease in the near future, upcoming scholarship could take into account some more of the social consequences that excluding processes in the media can bring about. Racist, xenophobic and islamophobic reasoning in the public sphere, can lead to justification of discriminatory and violent acts in other social fields which, in the end, can even undermine more general human rights. It is becoming increasingly urgent to stand up against such developments.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. We focus on grown-up Somalis between 18 and 30 years old in the Netherlands. At the time of the fieldwork, spring 2014, there were about 37,500 first and second generation Somalis in the Netherlands. Most of these Somalis are recent refugees arrived after 1996

and were born in Somalia. A second generation born in the Netherlands (30% of the total) is growing up. Of all, 99.7% of Somalis are Muslims. The young adults in this study mostly arrived as kids and grew up in The Netherlands.

2. The difference between an Islamic and a western world only exists in terms of discourses. The cold war between East and West was replaced by contradictions between religious/traditional Muslim and former Christians who are supposed to have become modern and progressive (rich countries in Western Europe + the USA and Canada). In reality parts of Europe might be very similar to the Middle East, and the differences within the Middle East are huge. Israel can be classified on the modern side and on the religious side, depending on one's political views. And with the establishment of Al Jazeera-English the dividing line between 'western' and Middle Eastern media has become less clear.

3. Koomen and Van Heelsum (2013) compared the opinions of Muslim populations and their leaders in Germany, The Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Belgium and the UK, to the tone of the debate in these countries. Depending on the country, only 15% to 32% of the actors were Muslims in the newspapers. Their research shows that Muslim leaders of organizations often feel they have to defend Muslims in the debate.

4. On behalf of *The Open Society Foundation* Nijenhuis and Van Liempt examined 74 news items containing 'Somalia', 'Somalis' and 'Somali' between 14 October 2012 and 14 April 2013.

5. The figures are combined numbers of records from the UK (around 100), Denmark (2) and Sweden (20).

6. There were four focus group discussions held for this research. In this article, however, we have left out one discussion with Somali men and women between the ages of 35–65. Their exposure to coverage on Somalis in The Netherlands differed heavily from the younger participants, who primarily use Dutch media sources. In contrast, the older generation preferred to use or consult media from their own country of origin more often.

7. All focus group discussions were organized and chaired by Ibtisaam Ashur.

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