The glocalised telenovela as a space for possible identifications for diaspora girls in Northern Belgium?
An audience cum content analysis of Sara

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Abstract

Because research on glocalised telenovelas in Western Europe is absent in literature and telenovelas seem highly popular among diaspora girls from Moroccan descents living in Northern Belgium, this paper studies the embedded themes and identification possibilities of telenovelas and explores its thematic interest and meanings for diaspora girls. By means of an audience cum content analysis on the case study Sara, text and audience are combined. Sara is predominantly a 'Cinderella story' with a clear 'love' and 'class and social mobility' discourse where emotional identification is triggered through different parameters. Belgian girls from Moroccan descent mainly watch the Sara for reasons of entertainment and escapism. They negotiate between lived and telenovela-created experiences and consequently formulate aspirations and dreams for future partners, gender roles, careers and (family) life.

Keywords: Telenovela, glocalisation, identification, audience cum content analysis, thematic interest, Northern-Belgium

Introduction

Telenovelas have a long established history and presence in Latin-American countries, yet in Northern-Belgium (Flanders) the telenovela format is only recently explored and developed with 'homemade' productions like *Emma* (VRT[1] 2004) *Sara (*VTM 2007-2008*), Louislouise* (VTM 2008-2009) and *David* (VTM 2009-2010). Previous quantitative research (Adriaens, 2009) has shown that this 'new' format is very frequently watched among teenagers and in particular among second generation diaspora[2] girls (age 14-20) living in Northern Belgium. Most girls highly ranked these programmes in their ultimate 'top five' of favourite and most frequently watched television shows.

Originally, telenovelas were produced in Latin-America and deeply rooted in historical forms of authentic local fiction. Scholars spoke of a 'braziliation' of TV content where telenovelas were known to provide possibilities for the construction of 'diasporic identities' due to the embedding of the theme in the text (cf.

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[1] VRT is the Flemish public broadcaster
[2] As the use of the concept 'diaspora' has proliferated in the last decade, its meaning has been stretched in a variety of directions. In this article, we choose to use the concept 'diaspora' instead of 'ethnic minority'. Rather than to speak of 'a diaspora' as an entity, an essence, a bounded group or ethno demographic or ethno cultural fact, we refer to diaspora as a claim or a way to identify with broader diaspora (Barker, 2005) and prefer to talk about 'diasporic practices', in this case for example 'diasporic television consumption practices' (Brubaker, 2005, p. 12-13).

Hall, 1996). But nowadays, in the context of increased globalisation and international flow of television formats, this authenticity of telenovelas seems to dissolve into a neutral, hybrid, universal export formula (Mazziotti, 1996; Biltereyst & Meers, 2000, p. 397). Moreover, next to globalisation processes, a proliferation and expansion of locally produced 'glocalised' telenovelas emerges. In literature, European studies on the reception of these glocalised products in a European context are absent. That is why in this article, we study whether glocalised telenovelas offer identification[3] possibilities for its audiences by means of an audience cum content analysis. More specifically, we will take an in-depth look at the recently produced Flemish telenovela *Sara* and the identification possibilities[4] embedded within the text. Furthermore, we will explore the reasons of this telenovela's popularity, how it is thematically interpreted and appropriated in the everyday life of Belgian girls from Moroccan descent. *Sara* is a locally produced adaptation of the Columbian *Yo Soy Betty la Fea* (RCN) and the American *Ugly Betty* (ABC) and is broadcasted on a commercial Flemish channel (VTM). It immediately gained high viewer and popularity rates and invoked a real *Sara* hype in Northern Belgium.

Prior to the actual analysis of *Sara* as a space for possible identifications and its reception among Belgian girls from Moroccan descent, we will give an short overview of earlier research on media consumption of diaspora youth and focus on literature concerning telenovelas. More specifically, we will elaborate on the origin, research traditions, genre characteristics and dominant discourses of telenovela texts.

TV consumption of diaspora youth in Northern Belgium

Previous Belgian and European research (e.g. d'Haenens, et al, 2004; Sinardet & Mortelmans, 2006; Devroe et al, 2005, p. 135; Adriaens, 2009; Tufte, 2001, Milikowski, 2000) refutes the common assumption that diasporic minorities are strongly focussed on their 'own' ethnic media because the watching behaviour and channel preferences of diasporic adolescents are similar to those of 'majority Flemish' viewers. Consequently, channel preference is less related to ethnicity than to school year and type of education. Ethnicity is mobilized when watching television but only in a marginal context. As for programme preferences one main tendency becomes clear which is the extreme popularity of global, American, mainstream content (Dhoest, 2009; Hargreaves & Mahdjoub, 1997). This tendency is salient for ethnic minority as well as for majority groups (Belgian viewers) which again suggests that age and life stage are

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[3] A central element in the construction of identity is representation and it is very likely that representations have an impact on someone's sense of identity (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 1). From social-constructionist point of view, identity is *"produced, consumed and regulated within culture-creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation about the identity positions we might adopt"* (Woodward, 1997, p. 2). Following Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 2) who consider the concept of 'identity' as *"too ambiguous, too torn between 'hard and 'soft' meanings, essentialist connotations and constructivist qualifiers, to serve well the demands of social analysis"* and therefore not useful as an analytical category, we prefer to use the concept 'identification' and talk about possibilities for 'identification' instead of 'identity construction'.

[4] By focussing on diasporic viewing, this text may suggest an 'us' versus 'them' opposition. In this paper, ethnic identity is not perceived as fixed or an essence but needs to be considered on the intersection with other social classifications such as gender, class and age for example.

more relevant sources of identification in this context than ethnicity. American fiction, such as *Friends, Prison Break, My Wife and Kids, 24,* etc., is perceived to have better images, higher quality, better acting, larger budgets, better humour, more suspense etc. Comedy is the overall preferred genre among ethnic minority youth. Dhoest (2008) refers to American fiction as a 'lingua franca', a shared point of reference by Flemish and ethnic minority viewers. American series comprise an essential part in global media culture thus creating a common ground for the constitution of social relations among teenagers regardless their background albeit meanings attached to the programmes may vary (Nikunen, 2008). In contrast to the extreme popularity of American programmes, studies often mention the paucity of references to programmes of the country of residence, (Dhoest, 2008). These programmes, especially soaps, very often evoke negative evaluations. They are perceived to be too boring, too uninteresting, too different from their world, containing too little humour and action and incorporating bad acting capacities (De Bruin, 2005; dHaenens, 2004; Tufte, 2001). Against the grain of previous studies (cf. supra), our quantitative explorative audience research among 110 second generation adolescents (age 14-19) with Moroccan background indicated that 'domestic' (in our case: Flemish) fiction and more in particular, Flemish soaps such as *Familie* (VTM)[5] and especially the telenovelas *Sara* and *Louislouise* (VTM) are frequently watched, recurrently talked about among friends and highly ranked in a top 5 (Adriaens, 2009). When we asked our female respondents about their favourite programme ever, *Sara* (VTM) was indicated most repeatedly. But not only female respondents regularly and preferably watch telenovelas, the genre also appeals to our male respondents which is in line with international audience research on telenovelas indicating a broad audience across gender and age lines (Vink, 1988). De Block and Rydin (2006) pointed to the importance of television fiction as a helpful tool for social relations. Teenagers talk a lot about television programmes (e.g. soaps, telenovelas) and in this way, negotiate between their own 'identity'[6] and meanings within the programme, ethnicity seems to play a role in these negotiations (Gillespie, 1995, p. 24). We can thus expect that the telenovelas (e.g. *Sara, Louislouise*) watched by our respondents will provide identification possibilities and space for negotiation. Rather than being directly influenced by characters, representations and storylines, diasporic viewers will use the telenovelas for their own purposes. Both gender and ethnicity are expected to play an important role in the ways in which viewers interpret the content (De Bruin, 2008, De Leeuw, 2005; Barker, 1997).

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[5] Not only Flemish soaps, but international ones as well (e.g. *Days of our lives, Home and Away, The Bold and the Beautiful*) are very well-liked.
[6] 'Ethnic identity' is conceptualized as fluid and as only one axe of multiple overlapping axes of identification (Gillespie, 1995).

Telenovela: a genre?

i.   **Origin, Evolution and Academic research**

The roots of the Latin American telenovela go back to the US radio soap operas, to the serialized novels published in the local press whose origins date back to the sentimental novel from 18th century England, and to 19th century French "feuilletons". Nevertheless, the proliferation of telenovelas was substantially influenced by the rise of radio novelas in the late 1930s in Cuba. During the 1950s, the beginning stages of telenovelas in Latin America, Cuba was an essential exporter of the genre to the region, providing actors, producers and also screenplays. Additionally, multinational corporations (e.g. *Unilever, Colgate*...) and advertising agencies from the United States were active in disseminating the new genre in the region. Direct control of the United States on the growth and expansion of telenovela subsides after the mid-1960s and the genre gradually evolved in diverse directions in different countries. By the late 1960s local markets started producing their own stories, bringing in local influences, incorporating socio-cultural messages in the texts and shaping the narratives to particular audiences. At present the principal telenovela producers in the region are *Televisa[7], Venevision*, and *Globo[8]*, respectively the leading networks in Mexico, Venezuela and Brazil. These networks not only produce telenovelas for the local market but also export to other Latin American nations and to the rest of the world.

In the 1980s, the influx of telenovelas in Western Europe increased substantially because of the decline of public broadcasting monopolies and the proliferation of commercial broadcasters that were looking for cheap serial entertainment to attract large audiences and enhance advertisement venues (Biltereyst & Meers, 2000, p. 400-401). Since 1990 telenovela producers in the Latin American region participated in co-productions with other nations (Spain and Italy for example), to guarantee better access to the global market. Very recently, next to globalisation processes, a proliferation and expansion of locally produced telenovelas emerges, a process that is called 'glocalisation'. These telenovelas are most of the times inspired by existing Latin American telenovelas (Curran & Morley, 2006, p. 39). *Sara* (VTM) in Flanders and *Lotte* (Tien) in the Netherlands, based on *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea* but adapted to the regional context, can be categorized as *'glocalised'* products of popular culture. Because of this adaptation, these 'regional' telenovelas are closer to everyday life thus offering '*cultural proximity'* (Straubhaar, 1991).

Telenovela studies have become a rich and growing field that first developed in Latin America, but later on expanded to the United States and Europe. In the 1980s, the first two important studies on telenovelas were published (Da Silva, 1985; O'Leal, 1986). Afterwards, the field developed and numerous reception (e.g. McAnany & La Pastina, 1994; Fadul, 1993) and genre studies (e.g. Martin, Barbero & Munoz, 1992;

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[7] *Televisa*, for instance, is the primary provider of telenovelas to the Spanish-speaking market in the United States.
[8] In spite of the fact that mass communication is commercially and privately owned in Brazil, the major players, such as *Globo*, had always been and continue to be closely related to the political circles and to the government. Censorship and self-censorship are still regular practices (La Pastina, 2002, p. 83).

Geddes-Gonzalez, 1993), a limited number of ethnographical studies (e.g. La Pastina, 2004) and studies on production and flow were published (Straubhaar, 1982 and 1998; Biltereyst & Meers, 2000). In Belgium, Mattelart (1989) explored the generic development and economic and institutional settings of telenovelas. In his influential multi-method work, Vink (1988) linked perspectives of social change in Brazil to the genre and the consumption of telenovelas and concludes that *"novellas might offer the working class audience models of social change, at any rate of resistance to repression"* (1988, p. 247).

Genre characteristics: production and consumption

Categorizing telenovelas within genre theory is useful because 'genre' is important to explain the accordance between the way stories are told and listened to (Hall, 1974). A genre can thus never be characterized by the text alone, the interplay with both production and reception is important (Neale, 1980). Some genres, such as the melodramatic genre, facilitate their ability to be shared across very diverse cultures due to its common underlying structure, formulas and archetypes that cover many cultures. Telenovela can be categorized as a subgenre of the melodrama genre which suggests that it can be easily exported to other cultures (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, p. 271).

A telenovela is not the equivalent of a soap opera (Tufte, 2000; Acosta-Alzuru, 2003). Although the narrative structure of telenovelas and soaps is basically the same, the difference lies in the production of meaning and the impact on the audience (Belik, 1989). On narrative level, soaps do not have a definite end whereas telenovelas have a predetermined duration, a climatic close and a clear end point. A telenovela contains approximately 180-200 episodes which equals six months of broadcasting. Moreover, class conflict and social mobility are major themes (cf. infra) within telenovela discourse while soaps stay ignorant for these themes (Vink, 1988; Tufte, 2000). Besides the emphasis on class, other main characteristics of telenovelas are: the presence of suspense and emotion, the love story, the colloquial language, the bipolarity between good and evil, the significance of music and the use of close-ups in creating emotional identification, the use of actual events in the plot, the interaction with the surrounding society, natural acting and improvisation (Tufte, 2000, pp. 87-121; Acosta-Alzuru, 2003).

Telenovelas and soaps do not reflect the same social and cultural needs and aspirations. Soaps are broadcasted in day time whereas telenovelas are aired in prime time. The target group for day-time soaps are 18-49 year old women whereas for telenovelas broader audiences across age and gender lines are targeted because telenovelas are mostly watched within a family context. The Latin American telenovela, with its massive daily presence, plays a much larger social and cultural role in the everyday life of Latin Americans than soaps operas do in the lives of Americans (Tufte, 2000, p. 109-110).

Telenovelas are typically stories told to a national audience (Kottak, 1990; Tufte, 2000, p. 57; Acosta-Alzuru, 2003). A 'nation' is not only a political entity, but also a cultural entity where individuals can identify with (Desaulniers, 1987: 151-152). Concepts of nation and national 'identity[9]' are ideological constructs that are mainly constituted and constructed through collective memories which are deeply rooted in the past. Telenovelas are thus closely linked to collective memories of viewers where cultural (related to everyday life of people) and national (transcends everyday life) identifications are embedded in. Telenovelas are attuned to local, regional or national culture where not only language but also other cultural elements characterize its local focus (e.g. dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humour, ideas about story pacing, music, religious elements...) (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, p. 274). In a Belgian context, one can speak of a regional, 'Flemish[10] identity' that is partly constituted by talking about and picturing the Northern Belgium region. TV programmes offer every day representations of Belgium which enhance cultural identification through processes of recognition (Dhoest, 2005).

ii.   'A Cinderella story': love and class conflict

Telenovelas always comprise two dominant discourses. The first discourse involves personal and private relations where gender, love, marriage and family are central. The second discourse entails social classes and relations, social mobility and stratification (Vink, 1988, p. 182; Acosta-Alzuru, 2003). Here, we take a closer look at how these discourses are constructed.

Firstly, the 'personal relationship discourse' has six sub-themes: love drama, women's roles, family, community, taboos and humour. The central love drama is fundamental to the narrative and success of a telenovela and invites for identification and involvement with the characters, which the other subthemes reinforce (Tufte, 2000). In telenovelas, love between a man and a woman is the primary theme. This love is often made impossible because of the different social class of the protagonists, that is why telenovelas are often referenced to as *'Cinderella stories'* (cf. Infra). In addition, the ideal of romantic love is the exclusiveness for one person and the belief that it will last forever. It is often illustrated by the detailed representation and celebration of wedding ceremonies in the text (Vink, 1988). Novellas never show explicit sex, it is only suggested by kisses, embraces and pregnancy. Homo- or bisexuality is frequently mentioned but either with the 'effeminate male as socially female' or very subtle and indirectly. More recently, a new kind of homosexuality is shown where the aim of the queer characters' desire is to live together with his or her beloved which is made impossible by the environment or society (Benavides, 2008, pp. 76-77; Vink,

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[9] Many scholars claim that, despite commercialisation and globalisation, national identity and national television are still a very important aspects in television land (Morley, 2004; Van den Bulck & Sinardet, 2005; Dhoest, 2005).
[10] Flanders is no independent state, but can be called a 'subnation' in the Belgian context because of its regional independence on political, economical and cultural level.

1988). This implies an embedded critique on the conservative mores and values regarding queerness and gay marriage that are still present in Latin-American society.

Next to the centrality of the love theme, gender roles and relations are important driving forces in teleserials where a reversal of traditional gender roles becomes apparent. In *'Living with the Rubbish Queen'* for instance, a very popular Brazilian telenovela launched in 1990 by Globo, females have a realistic mix of traits as some female characters are represented as strong, extravert, independent, career women whereas traditional female roles as housewives or mothers are also given space to within the text (Tufte, 2000: Acosta-Alzuru, 2003). Furthermore, the importance of the (nuclear) family and community is a central issue within the telenovela text. Virtues like concern, responsibility and loyalty towards family or community members are chief concepts. Moreover, parents are often represented as determining or disturbing factors in the partner choice of their children. Besides 'traditional' representations of the family, many non-traditional social norms are also exposed as well: family instability, extramarital sex, female empowerment, 'broken' families and the opposition between rural and city communities. The single mother for example is a regularly and recurrently appearing character (Vink, 1988; Tufte, 2000).

Resulting from the increased competition between telenovela broadcasters (e.g. *Rede* and *Globo+*) and the process of democratisation that opened up spaces for social liberalization, an increasing amount of taboo themes are making their way into the telenovela text (e.g. love affair between married woman and priest, abortion, domestic violence,..). These issues question and challenge the norms and values upon which individual relations in Latin American societies are based. From reception research (Tufte, 2000) it seems that issues in telenovelas are good to initiate debates amongst women as they are embedded within identifiable settings. However, in some cases, controversial intimacy touched upon transgresses the normally accepted codes of behaviour provoking strong feelings and rejection (Tufte, 2000). Finally, humour in telenovelas is often employed through comic elements in language and dialogues which can be categorized as mild slapstick (Tufte, 2000). Telenovela humour often ridicules the objectification of women and other negative representations of females (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003).

Secondly, the 'class and social mobility discourse' adds social stratification to the previously discussed categories of emotional involvement and personal identification. Based on Bourdieu's (1984) concept of social class, class discourse is not only defined by the material 'economical' capital (e.g. consumption pattern, income) of the protagonists, but also by their cultural (knowledge, skills and education), social (relations and networks), symbolic (prestige, status and reputation) and linguistic (acquirance of language and dominant culture) capitals implicating immaterial characteristics (Bourdieu, 1984; Tufte, 2000). Settings and props are used to connote social class and show a big discrepancy between spaces where the high versus the lower social classes live. Subsequently, many novellas are built round two or three dramatic

nuclei (Tufte, 2000, p. 197). In telenovelas, the raise of economic capital is mainly achieved by male characters who work very hard in the industries of their partners or families. But lately, also female characters possess high-income jobs. Here it must be noted that a higher position can also be achieved by increasing cultural capital (Vink, 1988) or improving physical appearance (Machado-Borges, 2003). In telenovela texts, working classes are represented as communities that are very aware of the importance of cultural capital. They believe that working hard guaranties an improvement of the social, economical position and status (Elasmar, 2003, p. 102). According to Vink (1988, p. 189), the upper classes in telenovelas symbolize the capitalist system refusing to take up any form of social responsibility.

As already briefly mentioned before, telenovelas are often 'Cinderella stories' that implicate a class conflict and a love affair between socially unequal partners. Love is depicted as a central motivation and source to help the poor lover to climb the social ladder and improve his or her social position, therefore increasing his or her economic, cultural or social capital. This does not entail that the central message of telenovelas is that love can overcome social inequality since novellas sometimes offer warnings suggesting that love and marriage between different social class partners is difficult or even impossible. That is why several alternative closures are possible: Firstly, the poor hero remains poor. Secondly, the poor person marries a rich partner by using dishonest means and has no guarantee for happiness. Thirdly, the meeting between the poor heroine and the rich hero is facilitated by a temporary setback in his life. Finally, the unequal partners marry and live happily ever after. Here, marriage ultimately symbolizes the union of people from different classes (Vink, 1988, p. 165-195). What recurrently results from the class conflict is the fundamental violation of human dignity, respect and pride of the lower class protagonist. Humiliation and suffering are elementary and explicit discourses in most telenovelas. This 'underdog position' makes identification and emotional involvement easy and understandable for low-income and often religious female audiences (Tufte, 2000).

iii.   The reception of telenovelas

Telenovelas have the potential to motivate strong processes of identification among its viewers. These processes are not simply caused by the 'cultural proximity' of the text (most people tend to prefer national programming when it is available) but by complex sets of proximities and attractions (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). Since viewers' negotiated and constructed meanings of telenovelas depend not only on the represented text and its embedded discourses, but also on their cultural and social capital and contextual factors, it is relevant to take a closer look at studies regarding reception and viewing contexts. Given that studies on the reception of locally produced, glocalised telenovelas in European contexts (e.g. *Sara, Lotte* (Netherlands), *Verliebt in Berlin* (Germany), *Maria i aschimi* (Greece)) lack in literature, we

briefly discuss three audience studies that focus on the Brazilian context. Vink (1988) postulates that the novella audience is being perceived as typically female, but in reality it is mixed. TV is watched in the home, within a family context by women but by men as well. More importantly, social class appears to be a basic variable in understanding telenovela watching. It became obvious that the upward mobility theme in telenovelas corresponds to the working class family life as an attempt at upward mobility. Other variables interfering in this decoding process such as gender, race, age or religion, depend on this basic one (Vink, 1988). By means of an ethnographic study, La Pastina (2004) studied how rural viewers in Macambira appropriated telenovelas in their everyday life and how they assigned meanings to the texts according to their own value- and belief system regarding relationships, gender roles and sexuality. She found that the geographical isolation and local patriarchal culture from the rural communities mediated the process of reception and interpretation of telenovelas. Moreover, she found gendered differences in watching novellas. Women watch telenovelas because they perceive them as romantic texts that can cause moments of escapism and represent an alternative to the gender norms that order local life whereas men (who constitute 40% of the audience) watch because they are attracted to the historical, realistic and rural themes within the texts. Interestingly, although telenovelas are popular among male viewers in rural Brazil, they are perceived as a threat to the established patriarchal *'machismo'* order. Tufte (2000, p. 199-226) linked his textual analysis to the reception of telenovelas among working class women in Brazil. He argued that love drama is the entry point to identification and involvement in the narrative and interests women the most. Telenovelas, although they can be seen as overdramatized and distorted depictions of family life, do in fact touch some central cores of women's personal experienced life. The media constructed experience of family life enters into their own self-narrative, becoming their inspiration in unfolding their own identity as family members. The women thus navigate between lived and media-created experience and consequently formulate their aspirations and dreams for future family life. Two central elements characterize the class discourse in telenovela texts and readings: on the one hand the women live in one of the worlds' socially most polarized societies, on the lowest step of the social pyramid, but on the other hand, they watch telenovelas every day which show a standard of living that is at the very least rather better than theirs. It is in this dichotomy between a class polarization experienced in everyday life and their personal dreams of social mobility and change that we find a significant part of the explanation as to why so many low-income women daily watch three of four telenovelas. Conclusively, a significant part of the popularity of telenovelas lies in the dream of social mobility and love among its viewers.

Watching *Sara*: Methodology

Since research on glocalised telenovelas in Europe lack in literature, this papers wants to fill in this gap by focussing on production and reception of the Northern-Belgium case-study *Sara* (VTM 2007-2008). This case was selected because previous research (Adriaens, 2009) has indicated its popularity among young diaspora audiences. By means of an audience cum content analysis (Jensen, 2002), we study themes and identification possibilities within the text and explore its meanings for a specific audience.

The textual content analysis will indicate if *Sara* can be considered as a 'glocalised' cultural product (incorporating both universal and regional elements) offering identification possibilities because of the cultural proximity and recognition (Dhoest, 2008) or the universal love drama it comprise. In addition, it will check if discourses on love, class and social mobility are dominant, how they are represented and if they embed identification possibilities for its audiences (Vink, 1988: Tufte, 2000; La Pastina, 2004), Textual content analyses try to understand latent meanings embedded within the text and are therefore in general qualitative and hence interpretative (Larsen, 2002, pp.117-120). The textual analysis of *Sara* is mostly based on the narration and explores the content and representational strategies which are used in the audiovisual text to articulate the different characteristics of telenovelas (Van Kempen, 1995:80-169; Van Bauwel, 2005:141-149). TV texts are never closed, but polysemic and consequently spaces for alternative and multiple readings although a built-in preferred reading can often be discovered (Fiske, 1987, p. 84). Considering the numerous episodes (198) the series contains, only the 'unequal' episodes and 'unequal sequences' were systematically analysed. Based on the textual analysis, an exploratory reception analysis was performed with a group of five female *Sara* fans from Moroccan descent living in Belgium between the ages of 14 and 17 years old. The focus group aimed at exploring the reasons for this telenovelas popularity, the thematic interest and perception among the girls and the appropriation of the series in everyday life. Because of the small number of respondents, this paper does not intent to analyse the identification *process* of respondents. Using a topic list as guidance, specific questions were formulated about *Sara* and the interpretation of its specific themes (retrieved from the textual analysis). By using open questions, respondents were encouraged to tell their own stories (Cf. Van Zoonen, 1994, pp.136-137). The interview was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. All informants were assigned pseudonyms. The transcript was analysed using codes derived from the themes retrieved from textual analysis. In what follows, results from textual analysis are linked and illustrated with results from the focus group.

Watching *Sara*: Analysis

Before outlining the results of the analysis, it is worthy to note that *Sara* does not portray ethnic minority characters. All protagonists are born and raised in Northern Belgium. This absence implicates that *Sara* does not represent a multicultural society. Following literature (Dhoest, 2009; Sterk, 2006), it is expected that ethnic minority viewers will not find enough space for identification in this telenovela and will plea for a better diversity of representations. But since *Sara* is so popular among its diasporic viewers, other narrative and filmic elements should be providing space for identification and explain its popularity among its viewers?

i.   *Sara*: Production and consumption context

As previously mentioned, *Sara* is inspired by the Colombian *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea* which had remakes all over the world (e.g. Germany, India, Russia, The Netherlands, United States...). *Ugly Betty*, the American version, was broadcasted in more than 130 countries (Dhoest, 2007). *Sara* has a lot of references to *Ugly Betty* although some characters were eliminated and the number of scenes was accelerated (Van Laere, 2009). *Sara* is written by a team of six writers and two editors. The series contains 198 episodes that were daily broadcasted on week days and from which 178 were broadcasted in access prime time (18:30-19), attracting 34,6% of the total share of television viewers, and 19 episodes (including the pilot and the final episode) in prime time, attracting 49% of the total share of television viewers (Van Laere, 2009). *Sara* is a successful television programme with high visibility and commercial success. It has been valorised by numerous awards (e.g. *Best Flemish television programme, Telenet Kids Award*...) and evoked a real *Sara* hype (e.g. a *Sara* fan day, *Sara* commodities such as: perfume, wedding dress, clothing line, ...).

A broad audience across gender and age lines is noticeable as figures (CIM- Centre for information about the media, 2010) indicate that 61,8% of the *Sara* viewers is female whereas 38,4% is male (cf. La Pastina, 2004). All age categories are represented however the 55+ group is overrepresented with 44,4% of the total share probably due to the early hour of broadcasting. When looking at social group related figures[11], an obvious overrepresentation of the two lowest social groups is found. 36,3% of the viewers of *Sara* comes from social groups seven and eight, 27,2% from social groups five and six, only 14% and 22,5% of social groups one and two and respectively three and four is represented among *Sara* viewers. It is therefore assumed that *Sara* is predominantly watched by lower social classes[12].

Sara tells the story of Sara De Roose, a young woman from modest Flemish descent. She is a brilliant economic, has a heart of gold but is physically unattractive and therefore often invisible. Because she only

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[11] These figures are based on the education level and profession of the primary income provider of a family which leads to a division of television viewing audiences into eight categories (1: highest social group, 8: lowest social group). (CIM, 2010).
[12] This division of social groups needs to be interpreted with caution because it is only one possible way (CIM) of dividing a population in social groups.

has had negative experiences with men, she does not believe in love anymore. Everything changes when she applies for a job at a large fashion company in Antwerp where she immediately falls in love with Simon Van Wyck, the son of the director. She accepts a low-profile job that is way below her education level, but in that way, she can be close to Simon, who barely pays attention to her. When she proves that she is a very competent employee, she gets one promotion after the other. Besides providing Simon with successful ideas, she also invents cover-ups for his flirts and lovers which he tries to hide for his fiancé Helena. Due to the hard competition between Simon and his rival Alexander, the company is often in danger. More than once, it is Sara who actually prevents the company from bankruptcy. After a while, Simon becomes aware that Sara is his most capable staff member, but stays blind for the woman in her. In her small office, Sara dreams of a life filled with happiness, love and romance. Despite all expectations, this physically unattractive girl will harvest successes in a world of glamour and fights for the dream and love of her life. The story ends with Sara and Simon getting married. *Sara* is a modern fairy tale about an ugly duck that transforms into a beautiful successful swan (http://www.vtm.be).

ii.   *Sara*: a glocalised telenovela ?

The textual analysis indicated that the romantic love story *Sara*, as every telenovela narrative, has a climatic close, which is the gradual transformation of the protagonist Sara from an ugly insecure girl to a beautiful, self-secure woman, and has a clear ending point, which is the marriage between the two main characters Sara and Simon. On the level of the characters, a bipolarity and even a Manichean view of 'evil versus good' can be remarked. The 'good' (e.g. Sara, Hans, Lut, Ester Leon,...) characters can be clearly opposed to the 'bad' ones (e.g. Britt, Alexander, Koen...), in between these two opposites, more 'hybrid, neutral' characters that are neither one-dimensionally good or bad can be distinguished (e.g. Helena, Simon, Lieven, Thomas, Ann...). Furthermore, suspense and emotion are main characteristics of the narrative as every episode ends with a cliff hanger to trigger viewers to watch the next day. Emotion is evoked through a lot of parameters. Firstly, the voice-over (which is Sara's voice) creates emotional identification because viewers are able to identify with Sara as her perspective on the story is told. Secondly, the scenes where Sara writes in her diary, create an emotional sphere as are Sara's daydreams that are supported by soft-focuses, blurred images and romantic music. Thirdly, close-ups are often used to enlarge the emotional effect. In a lot of scenes, close-ups of Sara's face often show her grief when she feels rejected or her happiness when she finally gets recognized by Simon. Additionally, music is a significant element in creating emotion and identification with the characters. Also prominent is the frequent use of Spanish and Portuguese music which can be considered an association with the original telenovela roots. Belgian and Flemish singers (who are principally affiliated with the commercial broadcaster VTM) are also given space

to in the series (e.g. *Natalia, Clouseau, Sandrine*...). Other examples illustrate the local, regional character of Sara : the employ of local language dialect (accent from Antwerp), the numerous references to typical (Northern-)Belgian products and services such as French fries, beer, chocolate toffees, *De Lijn* (bus company), *Q-music* (a Flemish radio station, affiliated with VTM), the use of classic Dutch names (Roger, Hans, Sara, An...), Northern Belgian 'archetypes' such as keeping your wage a secret, being modest, maintaining a 'hard-working farmers' mentality', etc... Besides these numerous local elements, *Sara* incorporates more universal, 'global' features and themes (e.g. fashion industry, love drama, humour, status, class conflicts...) as well. This hence implicates that *Sara* can be labelled a *'glocalised'* cultural product providing a universal love story that is attuned to local culture. As a result, the text provides elements of cultural proximity and therefore embeds possible spaces for identification for its viewers.

iii.   *Sara*: A romantic fairy tale?

Scholars distinguished two dominant discourses in telenovela texts: a personal and private relations discourse and class and social mobility discourse (Vink, 1988; Tufte, 2000; La Pastina, 2004). One of the central story lines in *Sara* is structured around the personal and intimate relations and romantic love dramas between different (socially unequal) characters. The main love drama is the one between Sara and Simon that at first is platonic and unidirectional from Sara's perspective but then alters when Simon starts to recognize her capacities and inner beauty. Correspondingly with the features of the telenovela genre, the love between Sara and Simon is depicted as a source of inspiration and help for the 'poor' lover to work hard to improve his or her position (economically, culturally, socially) in order to get attention from the other. In the beginning this 'poor' lover is Sara who desperately wants to be recognized and loved by Simon but near the end of the series, Simon experiences some huge setbacks in life and eventually becomes the one who has to fight for Sara's love and attention. The marriage between Sara and Simon ultimately symbolizes the union of people from different classes (cf. Vink, 1988). Other romantic relationships between characters are to be found between for example: Helena and Simon, An and Thomas, Hans and Lut, Britt and Alexander. Remarkable is that personal, romantic and passionate relationships are always structured by 'triangles' which means that a dualistic relation between two characters always gets interrupted by another, third character that tries to disrupt or interfere the original relationship (cf. Bueno & Caesar, 1998, p. 70). Helena (Simon's fiancée) and Simon's relationship gets disrupted by numerous fashion models, Brenda (the fashion journalist Simon sleeps with), and in the end Sara.

Our five respondents were asked how they would react if a third person is in love with their partner and tries to interfere in their relationship. All girls agree that if the other girl really tries to steal away their boyfriend, they would talk to the interfering person first before they would talk to their boyfriend. Karima

makes a nuance as she says that: *"it all depends, if the girl is really seducing my boyfriend but he doesn't respond, than I would go and talk to her, if on the other hand, he does respond to her seduction, like Simon did, I would go talk to him first."* This example illustrates how the 'triangle' theme in telenovela texts is used to talk and negotiate about personal relationships in daily life.

In the romantic and personal relationships in *Sara*, faith and loyalty are considered extremely important. Especially female characters tend to attach more importance to exclusiveness and loyalty within romantic relationships whereas male characters (Simon, Lieven) commit more adultery. When our respondents were asked about their opinion on the unfaithful behaviour of the male protagonist Simon, all girls morally condemn his behaviour and stress the importance of faith within relationships. Spontaneously, Najat indicates gender differences as she states that: *" I really think that men are much more unfaithful in relationships then women"* which is counter argued by Amina and Latifa who point at the fact that women and men do not differ and are equally unfaithful in relationships. Najat replies that in the context of cheating, besides gender differences, cultural differences are important as well: *"WE would never cheat on our boyfriends, but other groups, other than us, would definitely do this".* By emphasising 'we', Najat negotiates between the representation of faithfulness in *Sara* and her own gender and cultural identities (cf. De Bruin, 2005).

In *Sara* sex is regularly insinuated, mentioned and discussed but never explicitly shown which probably can be explained by the early broadcasting hour. Homosexuality is present in the character of Marnix (the fashion designer) but it is only superficially touched upon and is stereotypically represented. Marnix is visualised as a 'camp' whose femininity is exaggerated and magnified, moreover, he is never shown in a relationship.

In the beginning of the series, traditional, stereotypical role divisions are salient as female characters are represented having 'typical female' traits (Van Bauwel, 2005; Smelik, 1999). They are naive, in search for ideal love, emotional, caring, motherly, also they are judged on their 'outer beauty' and are often represented as objects of the male gaze (e.g. Simon slaps Sara on her ass, Sara cannot work at the reception desk because of her ugliness). At professional level, female characters execute typical 'female/soft' functions such as secretary (Ellen, Britt, An and Sara), caterer (Lut), fashion journalist (Brenda) or model whereas male characters perform in managerial high functions (Simon, Lieven, Alexander, Leon), creative functions (Marnix) or 'labouring' functions (Hans, Thomas, Arne). Exceptions are Helena and Margot who are members of the managerial board of the company and are represented as strong career women with a mix of typically female and male traits. Men are portrayed as rational, analytical, cool, ironic and unfaithful, they are judged by their professional capacities not by their looks. Remarkably, as the story evolves, a shift is apparent as female characters get more empowered (mobility,

cf. Infra) and grow towards self-secure, strong and independent women whereas male characters face numerous power losses, professional setbacks and are represented displaying emotions.

Diaspora girls from Moroccan descent have clear opinions when it comes to gender roles. Amina states that she finds it very important to study well in order to find a good job later on so that she will not be dependent of her husband, she thus implicitly attaches a lot of meaning to cultural capital and independence. Latifa points to the distorted picture 'Belgium people' have of gender role divisions in Muslim families: *"I personally think that a woman has the same rights as a man and vice versa to take up a job. Men should help in the household as well… The image of the woman in the kitchen and the man outside the home does not exist anymore, even though that is the image Belgian people have of Muslim families."* Najat, Amina and Jihane agree with the stereotypical image people have of what Najat calls 'the Moroccans' and value female independence.

Throughout the whole series, gender role reversals are noticeable: Hans, Sara's father, for instance is pictured as a considerate, caring man who manages all the housekeeping and is very concerned with his daughter. This is only one example of the importance of the nuclear family (and the broader community) in telenovelas. Concern, responsibility and loyalty among and towards family members is central. In line with Liebes and Katz (1990, p. 72) who found that Moroccans (and Arabs) pay more attention to family aspects in soaps than viewers from other descents, this focus on the family is also extremely prominent among our respondents as they frequently and repeatedly point at the importance of their families. Najat refers to Sara's family situation as a recognizable, warm environment and opposes it towards Simons situation, who does not make time for his family and rather goes to a bar. Latifa gives the example of Simon who is reluctant to visit his sick father in the hospital on which Amina replies *"I really don't understand this, family is the most important thing in life!"* Jihane and Latifa reply by associating the given examples to their own experiences. Latifa: *"My grandmother was in the hospital last week, and before I even knew what illness she had, I already started crying, she is so important to me."*

The meaningful and often restraining role parents play in their children's partner choice is exposed in *Sara* (cf. Vink, 1988, p. 185). In *Sara*, Simons mother wants to prevent that Sara and Simon end up in a relationship. Our respondents acknowledge the magnitude of their parents', and especially the father's approval in their partner choice. All girls agree that if their parents would dislike their boyfriend, they would leave him or at least start doubting about their relationship. Najat and Karima explicitly say that their fathers would disapprove bringing a Belgian boy home. Latifa and Jihane utter that at their home, it is not about the boy's nationality, but about his religious belief and as long as their boyfriend is willing to convert to the Islamic faith, their parents would not make a problem. Amina refers not only to religion but also to the cultural customs and rituals that are attached to it: *"Even if I would fall in love with a Belgian boy, I*

would always follow my parents. I don't see myself with a boy who has not converted. Because, he would have different rituals and habits: they eat even differently, he would eat things that I cannot eat...I think it is important that to start a family, traditions and habits are the same".

Like other telenovela texts, *Sara* starts with a situation of social harmony at the family level which gets disturbed by numerous difficulties and is re-established in the end. Non-traditional social norms are exposed such as family instability, extramarital sex and affairs, broken families, single mothers. Leon for example does not want to talk to his son Simon because he abused Sara and betrayed the family business, Ellen is a single mother who raised her son Thomas alone, Britt decides to raise Alexander's child on her own, etc...Taboo themes such as abortion, bullying at work, murder, fraud, stealing, borderline... can be discovered and are mainly situated within personal or criminal spheres . The humour in *Sara* is mildly slapstick and is mostly caused by the clumsiness of Sara and often supported by suitable music.

iv.   '*Sara*' or 'Cinderella'? Social class and mobility

Social class and social stratification are principal discourses in *Sara*. Referring to Bourdieu's (1984) concept of social class; class discourse comprises the material economical condition of the characters such as their consumption pattern but also their immaterial condition. Three social classes are manifest within *Sara*: a high social class (e.g. Van Wijck family, Delanoye family), a middle class (e.g. Lieven, Niels, Ellen...), a lower working class (e.g. De Roose family, Lut). Firstly, the economical capital of the characters in Sara shows clear differences in social class. These differences are related to their professional function (e.g. secretary versus manager, working class versus middle and higher management) but are linked to their consumption pattern as well. Sara and Hans De Roose for instance require a loan to pay off their second hand car or take the bus to go to work in contrast with Simon who has an expensive cabriolet or Leon Van Wijck who collects cars and even has a sailing boat. Secondly, immaterial situations such as human qualities, cultural capital, symbolic goods, societal status, aesthetics, taste and social lifestyle, characterize social class (Bourdieu, 1984; Tufte, 2000, p. 197). Settings and props show big discrepancies between the higher versus the lower class characters. The modest small house of Hans and Sara located in the rural suburbs of the city for instance reflects 'bad' taste, and has an old-fashioned furniture and look. The daily products used (e.g. milk, cornflakes) come from discount supermarkets, the clothing looks cheap and is not fashionable. In addition the places they visit for leisure purposes (e.g. *'Dansing Chocolat'*) are modest and uncomplicated, they do not go to restaurants but bring their lunchboxes to work, they cook simple dishes at home, drink beer or coke, eat French fries from a take-away place. Contrastingly are the giant villa with swimming pool owned by Leon and Margot and the hypermodern, design lofts in the city centre of Simon and Helena. Besides a visibly higher living standard, these characters wear expensive designer clothes,

always eat in fancy restaurants, go to upscale bars (e.g. *De Koopvaardij*), golf clubs, high society parties and beauty salons, they drink Champaign and eat lobsters. Despite their modest lifestyles and small economical capital, lower social classes in telenovelas are happy because of their rich social capital (e.g. friendships). And although the higher social classes have more economic, cultural and symbolic power, their social capital remains poor and high class protagonists are often depressed and family fights are numerous. Moreover, they symbolize a capitalist system with no space for social responsibility towards the lower social classes (cf. Meade, 2009, p. 17; Vink, 1988, p. 190).

For our respondents, the difference between rich and poor is mainly visible and defined through material, economic and symbolic conditions: they use examples from *Sara* and refer to Simon's expensive car, Helena's fashionable versus Sara's worn-off clothes, protagonists' leisure time (e.g golfing, sailing), settings (small versus big houses) and lifestyle. It is clear that they perceive the De Roose family as lower social class and the Van Wijck and Delanoye families as high social class. Remarkably, by pointing at the unrealistic and exaggerated character of the class representation in *Sara*, they immediately critically evaluate and deconstruct this representation. Karima remarks that in real life not all rich people show off their economical power and she illustrates her statement with an example from a rich girl in her class: *"I have a rich girl in my class, she has horses and expensive stuff...but in her house, they don't have 'real' coca cola all the time, they, just like us, go the discount supermarkets such as Lidl and Aldi."* The respondents point to the relativity of economical capital and wealth. They articulate that, on the contrary, lower class families are more grateful and the familial atmosphere is much warmer and cosier than within higher class families. In this context, the girls refer to the fact that Simon never eats at home but always in fancy restaurants. Here again, the importance of family becomes salient:

Najat: *"Rich people eat more at restaurants, Simon for example, he never eats at home"*

Amina: *"That is the same in real life, people with a lot of money go to restaurants much more often"*

Najat: *"I don't like going out to restaurants. Ok, it can be nice to go once in a while, but contact with the family that is so important. In restaurants, you don't have that kind of contact that you have at home (...). But at home, everyone eats together and talks during dinner, even my brother sits with us!"*

Jihane: *"That's true, At Simon's place, it is much 'colder'"*

From previous conversation it is clear that, in line with literature (Meade, 2009, p. 17), lower class families, such as the 'De Roose' family, are represented and perceived as happier than higher class families. For this reason, it is clear that our girls sympathize and identify with lower class families such as the 'De Roose family'. A quote of Karima illustrates the tendency to dissociate from higher social classes: *"Just like Sara, I like to go to my usual bar where I know all people. But when you go to a fancy restaurant or bar where*

they drink champagne all the time, I wouldn't feel comfortable because you sit there with all those rich people… I really wouldn't feel at ease."

As became already clear from the meaning our girls attach to study well in order to be independent (cf. Supra), our respondents value cultural capital (next to social capital) over economic or symbolic capital. All girls believe in the necessity of education and skill development to get a good job and to climb the professional ladder. But they realize that in times of financial crisis, you cannot be too picky if you want to work, so they would, just as Sara did in the series, accept a job inferior to their education. Though, Jihane says that in order to be happy, the most important thing is not the job an sich, but the fact that you like doing your job. Najat uses a deconstruction strategy when discussing the unrealistic representation of social mobility as she says: *" there are people who get promoted and get better functions in companies, but in Sara, this is really exaggerated! The differences between rich and poor, successful and unsuccessful, beautiful and ugly are too big!"* Amina refers to the unlikely character of the telenovela text an sich: *"In Sara, everything is unrealistic and exaggerated. Sara's desk for instance, no one in real life gets an office that has no windows at all!"*

Correlated with the social class discourse is the theme of 'humiliation and suffering' which is prominently present in *Sara*. The protagonist Sara is often bullied and humiliated by her co-workers and managers (e.g. Britt, Lieven, Alexander, Simon, Marnix), chiefly because of her ugliness but also because of her social status. Britt for example regularly refers to Sara as 'the awful ugly one', Marnix literally forbids Sara to come near his models because she might 'affect them with her ugliness', Simon or Lieven often ignore her when they meet her in the street for instance. Sara's human dignity, respect and pride is recurrently tested and violated in different ways. Other 'lower class' characters are sometimes humiliated as well, not due to their appearance but because of their class or lifestyle choices. An and Thomas for instance are often treated disrespectful due to their low professional status within the company. From literature, it is expected that Sara's underdog position makes identification and emotional involvement easy and understandable for viewers that are often from lower income groups (Tufte, 2000). From the reception analysis, it is clear that the girls recognize and condemn the fact that Sara gets bullied repeatedly, especially because of her ugliness. All girls value character and personality over physical appearance. They all admire Sara's warm character and ability to give people who bullied her a second chance. Karima says: *"Sara doesn't judge people in terms of rich, poor, ugly, pretty….and even though she is bullied, she still finds the courage to give these people good advice and help them…"* Respondents state that men attach more meaning to physical appearance for women that women do: *"Outer beauty is much more of importance for a man, men are too proud, they like to show off their girlfriends"* (Amina) or *"I think that a man has more chance to fall*

in love with a pretty but poor woman than with an ugly rich woman" (Jihane). The girls thus indicate that women are much often judged on their appearance than men.

The social mobility theme was already briefly discussed in relation to the love 'mobility' Sara experiences with Simon. In addition, mobility in terms of economic, cultural and symbolic capital can be discovered as well. Sara gradually steps away from the underdog position by improvements on professional (cultural capital) and consequently on the other levels (cf. Elasmar, 2003, p. 102). In the beginning of the narrative, Sara works very hard in order to get attention from Simon, she gets the one professional success after the other, she gets a raise, she even manages to start up her own company 'Ecomoda' (that is initially a cover for the losses Présence suffers), gradually she gets more responsibilities until she reaches the point when she actually leads Présence and becomes general manager (after numerous obstacles). These professional improvements go hand in hand with progresses on economical (she can afford the down payment for the car, she buys a new kitchen), lifestyle (she goes to more upscale restaurants and bars, she gets entrance to the golf court), physical (she transforms into a beautiful, well-managed woman with a good taste of clothing and style), and emotional (she gets more self-secure, strong and independent without losing her modesty) level. Not only the protagonist, but some other 'lower and middle class' characters experience class and social mobility as well. Arne who is at first a barkeeper with a university degree, gets promoted to vice-president of Presence, An climbs from secretary to directory secretary. The telenovela *Sara* is therefore more than just a 'beauty make-over' programme or a simple 'love drama'. And although physical appearance is an important weapon to achieve and reinforce upward mobility (cf. Machado-Borges, 2003), *Sara* also presents an empowering message that social mobility can be achieved and economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital can be acquired through working hard, being honest and modest.

When the girls were asked if they felt inspired by the social mobility theme embedded in the text, they actually were not aware of its presence and had not considered it yet. Only Jihane says that, through watching Sara, she believes that is possible to improve your position by studying and working hard. Amina stresses that she watched Sara because it is a fairy tale with a romantic story but that she is aware of the unrealistic nature of the story. Moreover, she pones that she only watched Sara because she found it exciting. Likewise, Karima and Najat watched Sara for reasons of entertainment *"When I watch Sara, I'm not the person to start dreaming and believing in things that happen. I watched it like I watch films... I don't go home and say 'ohh, if I were that girl...' I just watch because I really enjoy it!"* (Karima). Najat and Amina point at the constructedness of the telenovela and prove they are media literate viewers. Amina for instance refers to the cliff hanger technique to create tension and to motivate viewers to watch the next day : *"Every episode ended with an exciting moment, you just HAD to watch the next day!"*

Conclusion

Because research on glocalised telenovelas in Western Europe is absent in literature and telenovelas seem highly popular among second generation diaspora girls in Northern Belgium, this article studied embedded themes and identification possibilities of telenovelas and explored its meanings for diaspora girls living in Northern Belgium. By means of an audience cum content analysis on the case study *Sara*, text and audience were combined.

The telenovela genre developed as a complex cultural product with generic, social and cultural roots far back in Latin American history (La Pastina, 2005; Tufte, 2000, pp. 71-80). But recently, a proliferation and expansion of locally produced telenovelas, adapted to the regional context emerged. *Sara* can be typified as a 'glocalised' product of popular culture since it entails local Flemish elements but is at the same time based on the 'globalised' *'Yo Soy Betty, La Fea'* or *'Ugly Betty'*. Because of its 'Northern Belgian identity', *Sara* provides elements of cultural proximity and recognition to its audiences but at the same time remains universal enough to appeal to broad audiences. *Sara* is predominantly a 'Cinderella story' with a clear 'love' and 'class and social mobility' discourse where emotional identification is triggered through different parameters. Emphasis lies on the dream of romantic exclusive love, the importance of the family, professional, social and class mobility and humiliation of the protagonist. In addition, some empowering alternative gender representations were exposed (cf. Vink, 1988; Acosta-Alzuru, 2003, Tufte, 2000). The telenovela *Sara* is more than just a criticism on the celebration of a beauty culture or a plain 'love drama'. It represents an empowering message that social mobility can be achieved and that in life, cultural and social capital are the most important things. Since representation can provide identification possibilities, it is expected that diaspora youth who frequently and preferably watch *Sara* identify with elements from this telenovela. Since ethnic minority characters in *Sara* are absent from the screen, other elements must be providing identification potentialities. Because of the small sample of our focus group, we cannot discuss the identification *process* an sich, but we can say, that our respondents use the telenovela *Sara* for their own purposes. The girls assigned and negotiated meanings to the embedded themes according to their own value and belief system. Here, gender, ethnicity, cultural and religious differences and social context play an important role in the ways respondents appropriate meanings to the series. 'Gender' and 'cultural' identities came into play when talking about the representation of faithfulness, gender roles and the importance of physical appearance in *Sara*. When talking about partner choice, the girls negotiated between the *Sara* text, their religious belief system, the significance of their parents' opinion and their own value system. A general tendency among our respondents is the high validation of family as a theme in television texts and they repeatedly emphasise the importance of their own family in their everyday life. This finding is in line with Liebes & Katz (1990) who found that people from Moroccan and Arab descent

pay the most attention to family aspects in television series. As is embedded in the text, the girls attach more significance to social and cultural capital than to economical or symbolic capital. They emphasise the necessity of education and skill development and repetitively mention the value of their social environment in everyday life. As was expected from literature, the girls sympathise and identify with lower class families such as Sara's family mainly because they are perceived as being more familial, warmer and grateful than high class families. Our respondents perform as media literate viewers because they frequently point at the constructedness and unrealistic character of the telenovela. Entertainment and escapism seem to be the main motivations to watch *Sara,* but the romantic love story is an explanation for the telenovela as well. Only one respondent indicates that she likes the dream of social mobility in the text. Conclusively, when watching *Sara*, Belgian girls from Moroccan descent navigate between lived and media-created experiences and consequently formulate aspirations and dreams for future partners, gender roles, careers and (family) life.

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