ABSTRACT
This dissertation centers around the following understudied research question: what makes people feel politically represented? This study applies a novel research design to investigating how Flemish Muslim youth feels politically represented. The group oriented methodology consists of two consecutive rounds of focus group discussions with the same respondents, complemented with discussions on Facebook group pages (digital ethnography of groups). Contrary to the ways in which social group representation has studied so far, mostly by focusing on the roles and activities of representatives and/or the representation of group interests, the study shifts the focus to those represented in an inductive and explorative manner and furthers our understanding of how people motivate their feelings of not being politically represented.

Among other reasons, the case of Flemish Muslim youth is relevant to addressing this because it concerns an increasingly politicized group; their religious identity is at the center of numerous political debates. This case also taps into the dynamics of ethnic minority representation. This is a field of research that is garnering increasing scholarly attention given our increasingly ethnically diverse societies. Having employed this group-oriented research strategy, which accommodates the practice of political representation as one that revolves around groups rather than individuals, I find that the respondents feel, rather unsurprisingly, dissatisfied and disillusioned with the representation they receive. The reasons why they do not feel politically represented do provide novel insights, however. I discuss these themes in three different empirical chapters.

The opening empirical chapter introduces the notion of political misrepresentation. Embedded in undercurrents of intolerance and anti-Islam sentiments in political debates, which are seen to permeate the representational process, the respondents’ main concern did not revolve around being numerically underrepresented, challenging what much of the literature on social groups suggests, but rather around being subject to misrepresentation of their Muslim identities. The perceived presence of mechanisms of misrepresentation, such as stereotyping or scapegoating of the group, undermines the transformative potential that descriptive representatives could bring about in the political inclusion of the group.

The second chapter presents a threefold typology of ethnic minority representatives: the fair-minded trustee (autonomous yet loyal to the group), the tokenistic delegate (responsive to ethnic/religious issues, but perceived as reductive), and the deceptive trustee (a sell-out
to anti-immigration or anti-Islam politics). Central to these typologies are representatives’ exclusive and reductive focus on ethnic issues, which the respondents reject, as well as perceived loyalties and disloyalties to the group. Finally, the third chapter engages with the importance of representatives’ embodied symbols, such as group-specific rituals, cultural customaries and religious attires. In some cases, it does not suffice what representatives do or who they are, but rather what they do (perform) with who they are. The respondents partially rely on how representatives instrumentalize their bodies as a political medium of symbolizing and validating their link to the group. With these findings, the chapters altogether challenge the role of group interests in the literature on social group representation and highlight the overlooked role of group-specific inventories and majority and minority group fault lines in the representational process. Notwithstanding the case, this research shows that similar logics and dynamics may apply on other minority groups in dominant majority contexts and that this research strategy can be employed to the study of a variety of groups. The findings also urge the scholarship on social group representation to attend to subjectively informed accounts for assessing the representation of historically disadvantaged groups.