

Living like a hetero: Southern homonormativity in Istanbul

Sexualities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Cenk Ozbay** 

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Abstract

Research on homonormativity in the Global North has burgeoned in the last 20 years as there have been developments to include sexual minorities as equal members of society. However, little is known about the emergent forms of homonormativity in the Global South where in most cases the improvements in terms of sexual rights and citizenship in the Global North did not echo. Despite the lack of the legal, economic, and cultural infrastructure, an inchoate Southern homonormativity unfolds among gay men through their gender performances, bodily presentations, class positions, and neoliberal aspirations. Southern homonormativity is a cultural formation that takes place in settings where there is no institutional change and legal reforms to define, recognize, and embrace the gay citizens (and families) as equal, legitimate, and respected members of society. By using interviews and ethnographic home visits in Istanbul, Turkey, this article explores how homonormativity is contextually driven and flexible, and how privileged gay men understand and navigate homonormative precepts in a context within the Global South.

Keywords

Homonormativity, gay men, masculinity, class, turkey

Introduction

Research on homonormativity in the Global North has burgeoned in the last 20 years (Brown, 2012; Croce, 2015; Lovelock, 2019; Puar, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2009) as there have been serious legal, economic, political, and cultural developments to include sexual

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minorities as equal members of society. However, little is known about the emergent forms of homonormativity in the Global South, where, in most cases, the improvements in terms of sexual rights and citizenship in the Global North did not echo, despite cultural transformations and shifts in state discourses around the incipient gay life as a sign of global modernity and neoliberal ideals concerning the values of flexibility and diversity took place in different contexts of the heterogenous Global South. Discussing the peculiar relations of cisgender, upper-middle-class gay men¹ with other sexual minority members, heteronormative institutions, and the heterosexual majority, this article examines the situation in Istanbul, Turkey, where no legal steps were taken concerning sexual minorities and the social and cultural discrimination against them persists. Regardless of the lack of legal, economic, and cultural infrastructure, an inchoate Southern homonormativity unfolds among gay men through their gender performances, class positions, and neoliberal aspirations. The article demonstrates how contemporary urban Turkish gay identity is renegotiated under shifting social conditions, desires, and distinctions in conjunction with Southern homonormativity. Class privileges and conventional gender (masculine) displays play a crucial role in the formation of this homonormative politics of respectability. Contributing empirically to the recent calls for a “sociology of gender in southern perspective” (Connell, 2014) and “theorizing homonormativity differently” (Brown, 2012) by using interviews and ethnographic home visits, this article explores how homonormativity is contextually driven and flexible across contexts, in which ways the nature of homonormativity varies, and how privileged gay men understand and navigate homonormative precepts in a context within the Global South.

Homonormativity

Homonormativity is a political, logic, and moral framework that encourages the transformative queer social movements to turn into mainstreamed, de-radicalized, majoritarian cultural actors while it produces the appropriate sexual minority subjects to govern their lives through the promise of inclusion, respectability, and normalcy. It is a form of sexual politics “that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2002: 179). Studies on homonormativity concentrate on the two main contexts in which the concept is reified: (a) the kind of homonormativity that is instituted within the sites of queer culture (i.e., activism, the bar scene, and online communication) to engender the desirable, proper gay identity (Brekhus, 2003; Jeppesen, 2010; Noble, 2006) and (b) the ways that homonormative governmentality enables the normalized and acceptable gay men to emerge through notions of individual freedom, consumption, depoliticization, and homonationalism (Ghaziani, 2014; Puar, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2009). Both instances of homonormativity take place through unceasing bargaining with normative values and reinscribe the “aspirational normativity” (Berlant, 2011: 167) of the neoliberal ethos.

Homonormativity sets a hegemonic skeleton that hails the gay-identified individuals and couples to live according to a set of social, moral, sexual, and spatial principles that

are in accord with an imagined (hetero-) normality. It allows access for some proper gay subjects to the realm of permissible social presence via exalted normativity as it distinguishes them from multiple sexual others, who are not “good,” “proper,” or “decent” enough to be contained. In their attempt to fulfill this promise, gay men reposition themselves closer to the respected heterosexual majority. This adaptation to heterosexual primacy may dismantle some of the critical democratic gains in the lives of sexual minorities (Duggan, 2002: 190). Acclimatizing to homonormative principles provides material benefits, cultural advantages, and affective prospects (e.g., being “happy,” see Lovelock, 2019) to a privileged group of gay individuals, but it creates a hindrance to community formation for solidarity, progressive minority action for social justice, and resistance against oppression (Dave, 2012; De la Dehesa, 2010; Puri, 2016; Savci, 2016; Ward, 2008).

Heteronormativity ideologically guarantees and promotes heterosexuality as the only imaginable, normal, legal, and healthy sexual identity (De Oliveira, 2013). The more sexual minority subjects think, look, and act like ordinary straight people and families, the more they are normalized, assimilated, and respected. Recently, straight and gay identities are contested, blurred, and more entangled than before (Anderson, 2014; Ozbay, 2017; Walby, 2012; Ward, 2015). However, homonormative perimeters position gay men not necessarily within a framework of desiring or fetishizing straight masculinity or developing more fluid sexual identities, but of living a heteronormative lifestyle as they become culturally closer to heterosexual men from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Having and preserving social invisibility (i.e., passing as “normal” and “straight,” being accepted and not marginalized, being safe from ridicule and harassment, and unperturbed by criticism), an unmarked presence with layers of class privilege and politics of respectability, and indifference to social inequalities are the core elements of this homonormative logic.

Homonormativity represents homosexuality and heterosexuality as mutually exclusive and consistent identifications. Nevertheless, just as heterosexualities, homosexualities have also been theorized as “multiple, variable and not reducible in any simple way to the norm,” (Dean, 2014: 19) and research has documented the complexity and differences within homosexualities and other forms of queer desire, identities, and practices (Butler, 2011; Ghaziani, 2011; Merabet, 2015; Plummer, 1991; Weeks, 2012). Homonormative structures disregard and delegitimize this variety while there has been an undeniable diversity of sexual minorities, their lifestyles, and the situations in which they strive to lead meaningful social lives. Recognizing these divergent circumstances requires us to examine the conditions through which gay men modify themselves to homonormative prescripts. Duggan (2002) reflects upon the metropolitan areas of the USA in the 1990s for her original conceptualization of homonormativity. Theorization and research on homonormativity have rightly concentrated in similar settings where democracies, social institutions, and neoliberal markets have expanded toward the inclusion of sexual minorities as legitimate citizens, employees, consumers, and families (Brown, 2009, 2012; Croce, 2015; Puar, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2009). What might be the situation in contexts where there are no state-sanctioned legal reforms, institutional policy changes toward diversity, and subsuming market relations have remained understudied.

Southern homonormativity

The regulative framework and ideological means of homonormativity, in which power is reconfigured through productive, normative, and marginalizing discourses, are moveable and adaptable to various locations and historical contingencies not only in the Global North but also across the Global South. In this sense, homonormativity is flexible and not “a homogenous, global external entity that exists outside all of us and exerts its terrifying, normative power on gay lives everywhere” (Brown, 2012: 1066). It is produced, circulated, appropriated, and challenged by people when they think, cite, act upon, and give consent to the boundaries it draws through the increasingly prepotent neoliberal “order of things.” This article shows that the upper-middle-class, cisgender gay men, whose cultural intelligibility and the level of acceptance they find in social situations are dependent on their adaptability to the homonormative logic in the neoliberal environment in Istanbul, actively negotiate and experience homonormativity.

Southern homonormativity is a cultural formation that takes place in settings where there is no institutional change and legal reforms to define, recognize, and embrace the gay citizens (and families) as equal, legitimate, and respected members of society. With certain differences and similarities to the ascendant homonormativity framework as argued in the literature, Southern homonormativity can (and does) emerge in a less inclusive, adverse geography based on an intersection of existing hierarchies such as class, gender, citizenship, race/ethnicity, and the body (Allen, 2011; Merabet, 2015; Moussawi, 2018; Ozby, 2017; Savci, 2016). It operates through both multiscale changes (e.g., gentrification and urban transformation, national politics, and global networks) and the minuscule details of urban gay culture.

Here, Southern does not refer to a neat geographical zone, but it means the complicated relations of “authority, exclusion and inclusion, hegemony, partnership, sponsorship, appropriation” (Connell, 2007, ix; see also Brown, 2010; Connell, 2014) outside the Global North. Hence, Southern homonormativity signifies a different kind of relation between the heteronormative state, economic and moral structures, and cultural imperatives than it has been formulated in literature. Rosenfeld (2009) made a distinction between the postwar (which prioritizes gender conformity², the closet, and politics of passing) and the neoliberal (with an emphasis on exalting heterosexual values and institutions) homonormativity (see also De Oliveira, 2013; Richardson, 2005). An understanding of Southern homonormativity offers to integrate the postwar and neoliberal versions of the concept as it simultaneously emphasizes the significance of gender and class entitlements and contemplates the multidimensional relations with heteronormative structures and logic.

This article and the concept of Southern homonormativity build on the recent body of research about sexualities outside the Global North. A conventionally displayed, gender-conformist, cisgender masculinity and class-racial privileges, neoliberal subject-making processes³, and symbols of privatized, domestic lifestyle become central themes in the making and uses of Southern homonormativity. Kong, for example, demonstrates a new configuration of masculinity among young Chinese gay men and the emergence of the gendered subject of neoliberalism: “Infused with neoliberal values, the new hegemonic

masculinity specifies particular criteria for being gay: being straight-acting, having a gym body, forming a depoliticized, domestic, coupled relationship, and embracing a consumption-led, middle-class lifestyle,” (Kong, 2020: 1015). Young men who adapt themselves to this form of “good” homosexuality, “accomplish heterosexual masculine ideals in the public sphere of education and work but embrace gay masculinity in the private sphere of intimacy” (Kong, 2019: 12). This sort of recalibrating and blending different masculinities strategically in relation to a set of neoliberal values and notions (i.e., responsibility, respectability, and success) across the shifting public and private spheres constitutes the core of Southern homonormativity through which the aspiring gay men can establish themselves as good and proper subjects who are ready to be included, accepted, and respected.

Focusing on Beirut, Moussawi spotlights the practical significance of difference and inequalities *within* queer people as the “gender-normative, cisgender, secular and middle-to-upper-class” sexual minority members’ granted access to the cosmopolitan social and physical spaces is interwoven with a number of hierarchies and “queer exclusions” (2018: 175). Moussawi also notes that “Gender normativity plays an important role in people’s experiences of both public and private spaces” (2018: 184). These experiences and representations are framed, regulated, and given meaning by centralizing the notion of gender conformity in accord with class identity and privilege. Southern homonormativity entrenches and enables the good gay subjects that spurn male effeminacy and exalt the straight-acting, gender-normative displays of masculinity. A seemingly global “sissy-phobia” or “femme-phobia” (Benedicto, 2014; Bergling 2001; Moussawi, 2011) unfolds as negative comments against the effeminate or “overtly feminine” (Merabet, 2015: 219) gay men exceed interpersonal encounters and become a very part of the Southern homonormative habitus. Working with the concept of Southern homonormativity not only allows us to deconstruct and reterritorialize “the third-world queer,” (Benedicto, 2014: 12) located in the Global South, but it also facilitates documenting how the existing diversity among sexual minority members in these contexts are juxtaposed, represented, and hierarchized by the undisguised and clandestine logic of Southern homonormativity.

Gender and sexualities within the Global South are not homogenous and every society experiences its own historical circumstances (Brown, 2010). There are legal steps taken toward equal sexual citizenship in some parts of the Global South, such as decriminalization of homosexuality, recognizing official partnership, or the right to marry for same-sex couples, as in the cases of South Africa (Tucker, 2009) and India (Puri, 2016) although these emancipatory moves are inconsistent and limited with certain racialized sexualities—excluding Black Africans in South Africa and hijras and Muslims in India. Turkey is not one of these countries. Most of the time, existing laws, heterosexist dispositions, homophobia, and discrimination against queer people converge (Erol and Ozbay 2018; Ozegin 2015; Savci 2016). Recently, for example, the Constitutional Court has approved the firing of military personnel and public servants because of their homosexuality (Bianet, 2018).

As the “sexual politics of neoliberalism” (Duggan, 2002) alongside middle-class values and whiteness (Kennedy, 2014), the construction of homonormativity in the Global North came after achievements of social movements and cultural transformation and is

shaped mainly through economic forces and legal factors, whereas Southern homonormativity is formed upon social distinction and performances related with gender, race/ethnicity, class, and cultural capital. It works as a mechanism to secure and consolidate the privileged gay men's social position, whereas it undermines the already disenfranchised sexual minority members as well as those who may problematize and challenge homonormativity. As the interviews indicate, when there is no legal recognition, workplace diversity policies, or cultural inclusion even for the privileged gay subjects, Southern homonormativity is organized exclusively around normative gender embodiment, furtive and unstated sexuality as well as class, ethnic, and racial (white) supremacy.

Method

Taking the existing differences within the cisgender gay men such as age, class, race-ethnicity, and the body into account and using an intersectional lens that highlights the specificity of the group of men, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 individuals and four couples of cisgender gay men (total 29) aged 30 to 65, between 2016 and 2018. 19 interviews were recorded and transcribed. I took extensive notes immediately after six interviews where the respondents rejected being recorded. The respondents were all relatively well-off and had "comfortable" lives during the time of the conversation. I paid ethnographic visits to 16 gay homes—apartments and houses in which gay men live alone or with another gay man. Nine of the interviewees were men whom I had previously met, and they led me to the rest of the respondents as I followed the principles of the "snowball sampling" technique (Paly, 2008). I intended to visit all of them in their homes, but I could not find the opportunity every time: some of their places were not available; for some, their living conditions did not match the criteria; and some simply did not want to have me. I met four of the men at cafés for the first time and after building rapport, they invited me to visit their homes. One man declined to be interviewed at home after meeting with me outside. I also went to four private gatherings in these homes (with six to 14 guests) and spent time with the respondents in different public spaces by their invitation.

I started asking questions specifically about the locations and histories of their residential choices, stories of their homes, furniture, objects, and domestic lives. Using this knowledge as a departure point, I posed questions about their class and sexual identities, political orientations, experiences of Istanbul's urban culture, and the macro sociopolitical situation of Turkey. The interviews started to be about homes and ended up being about the interviewees' lives as upper-middle-class cisgender gay men. I strove not to lose focus on their living arrangements as well as the political implications of their seemingly ordinary choices and attitudes—in other words, their upper-class gay habitus informed by homonormativity.

Even with men whom I happened to know before, it was difficult convincing them to create time for me in their places and, if possible, for talking about the most intimate aspects of their lives. Researchers have noted how it is more challenging to conduct a study with people from the upper classes (Hertz and Imber, 1995). In addition to this seemingly universal difficulty, these professional and tactfully "normalized" gay men,

most of them on the more senior side, were rather unwilling to expose their private lives. As a result, several men found this idea strange and rejected talking to me right away, while another group gave vague answers and eventually evaded me for an interview.

Embodying southern homonormativity in Istanbul

We are sitting in the spacious and elegantly decorated living room of Berk's⁴ seafront apartment in an upscale neighborhood in Istanbul. An accomplished physician, Berk is a tanned, energetic, and self-confident man in his late fifties. He admits how "lucky" he has always been, coming from an affluent family and having attended the nation's most prestigious private high school, which provided him a tolerating environment that he had always been "out" before knowing what the term meant: "I was never in the closet, I never hid who I was." However, Berk does not relate the autonomy and freedom he has had to the broader socioeconomic conditions or the outcomes of collective struggles. He states that gay men's fight against heteronormativity and homophobia should be within the limits of personal life but not related to political or communal efforts, that is, aiming to transform society in solidarity or engaging in party politics: "Do whatever you can [for] yourself. You don't need a community to change things. I, for one, have never needed that."

Most of the respondents share Berk's individualistic and anti-political attitude. These views are relevant to the choices they make about where they live. Homonormative ideals not only make them dismiss political opposition or activism, but they also detach them from urban unpredictability or encounters with unwanted sexual and class others. Neither the *crème de la crème* neighborhoods nor the gated communities they chose to live in have queer-friendly, or pro-diversity, reputations. It seems more important for the upper-middle-class gay men to maintain their class position, privilege, and entitlement than to play up their sexual identity through where they live. As Metin (51, advertiser) puts it, "in Turkey, we signal our [class] position to people we meet by saying where we live. It's the first image you have in others' eyes." Homonormative gay men like Metin choose to reside in exclusive and esteemed urban locations over the bohemian or culturally diverse neighborhoods to signal others that they were respected and yielding individuals who do not desire alternative and challenging lifestyles outside heteronormativity.

Southern homonormativity denotes a systemic set of endeavors to have social invisibility and an unmarked comfort zone against the marginalization and disempowerment of the stigmatized "out" members of the gay community in Istanbul. The upper-class gay men, who embody homonormative living, do not want to risk what they have for the sake of the public recognition of "a sexual identity" that they do not put into the center of their lives. In this way, they decenter and unlearn the place of gay identity in their lives. As Harun (38, human resources expert) puts, "I am gay. But as a person, I have many other identities and qualities. Being gay is not more important than others." The gay selfhood and social identity is transformed from a game-changing personal-political matter to a cultural detail that only matters as long as it can help the homonormative self to establish himself as unmarked, accepted, and successful.

I think a man should exercise, go to the gym. The equation of being a gay person and a feminine, frail body and attitude is passé now. I am gay, but I am also a man. I love masculinity. So, yes, a normal man, and a normal gay man, should do sports, drive, make money, and be knowledgeable about culture and food. This is my idea of a good life. (Haluk, 51, businessperson)

Among my interlocutors, being a respected, admired, and “cool” man translates to becoming conventionally masculine, in control, and not extravagant. The homonormative self is the one that was able to learn the rules, calibrate his gender identity, and play the game smartly without harming his interests. In this sense, interviewees stated that they have a likelihood to redefine “coming out” as a gay man as it is common in other parts of the Global South (Merabet, 2015; Ozyegin, 2015; Tucker, 2009). “How is it any good for me, to come out? That’s what I calculate. I’m not living to fulfill an identity. Nobody should know if it doesn’t work for me. If it works better for me not to be known [as gay] that’s fine, I will be in the shadows” (Suleyman, 44, lawyer). The respondents claimed that being always and totally “out” under all circumstances decreases their ability to navigate relations with self, others, and space as they strategically oscillate between gay identity and the ideal neoliberal citizen that homonormativity hails. As Suleyman elucidates above, coming out is understood not as a linear development that ends somewhere related to triumphant identity politics, but as a circular, repetitive, and rationally managed process that belongs to the individual’s autonomy, decision-making capacity, and choices. Hence, the self-responsibilized homonormative gay men’s stance differs from politics of passing (Ginsberg, 1996) that is built on disguising and pretending and enables them to expose their sexual identity when they reckon it is for their advantage even in heteronormative institutions and social situations as Berk exemplifies above.

When we were talking about his everyday routine, Berk says, “I am living like a hetero. From home to work, from work to home; dining out with my friends, or staying in. Other than the occasional [sexual] action, you can even say that I am not gay. I am not annoying anyone, and I definitely don’t want to be disturbed by society.” Here, the expression “living like a hetero,” denotes concentrating on run-of-the-mill issues and distancing one from queer culture, promiscuity, and even active sexual life. “Living like a hetero” indicates the underlying logic of an inoffensive, dutiful, and reticent homonormative life. As I visited homes and interviewed gay men of a certain social status and age, I came across the same self-absorbed position that concerns exclusively with one’s own space, freedom, lifestyle, body, and financial well-being. Most of my interlocutors said, “let sleeping dogs lie” (*bana dokunmayan yılan bin yıl yasasin*) and Halil (46, media agent), for example, articulated this attitude, “I am not interested in anything that is not touching my life.” They prioritize and seek a highly individualized and classed form of liberty—sexual or otherwise. And, as long as they have the freedom to find a place for themselves, they are indifferent to society even though they think it was oppressive, homophobic, sexist, and biased.

The upper-middle-class gay men I talked to emphasize the gender-conforming cultural codes and conventionally masculine impression-management principles. By reiterating this boundary-making statement, “living like a hetero,” they also meant that they were doing gender in a normatively masculine way—incorporating its esthetic dimensions,

interactional style, mannerisms, and performative repertoire. This includes sexual discretion: the components of erotic and intimate life should be undisclosed and carefully disguised in public to be accepted and respected by other people. A home-centric, domestic lifestyle, an orientation for “serious” partnership, and the notion of “family life” are highlighted in the interviews.

In the nexus informed by Southern homonormativity, gay men’s normatively masculine gender identity/performance and class habitus play a crucial role as they construct what is thinkable, doable, and sayable through the lens of what they deeply know, conceive, and feel. The normalizing forces shift and expand through what is acceptable and plausible in the respondents’ minds and the way they speak about it. Their performance of masculinity and class is shaped by and in return affects their evaluations and reactions in the social situations they encounter. The gender project of Southern homonormativity as the interviewees unpack it covers a (re-)masculinized, straight-acting gay man that comes with a list of naturalized and otherwise unnoticed masculine distinctions between what is good, acceptable, appropriate, and not. In this sense, Southern homonormativity involves an effort to make-believe, prove, and claim that the upper-middle-class, cisgender gay men are the “normalized,” equal, ordinary citizens that diligently refrain from any radicalism, debauchees, and marginality, just like the responsible, modern, and esteemed heterosexuals. The men I talked to made it clear that they are “normal” citizens with “normal” jobs, homes, social relations, and forms of intimacy. As this enthusiasm to become and be seen as “normal” to repudiate difference prevails, the questions of who can and cannot be “normal,” and thus be happily invisible and untroubled, and what is normalized for gay men in terms of class become critical in an attempt to decipher Southern homonormativity.

Tuna (41) works for an advertising agency and lives in a remodeled apartment in a “hip” neighborhood. He says “there are thousands of people outside and the only common thing between me and them is our sexual preference [sic]. I wouldn’t want to talk with most of the gay people in this city, even for ten minutes.” What is the “normal” for Tuna became tangible in my eyes when he invited me to a gathering of his closest friends at his home. These eight men (aged between 25 and 50) looked quite similar not only in terms of their white and black t-shirts, tight designer jeans, expensive sneakers, and gelled hair, but also through their choices of colleges, jobs, neighborhoods, and circle of friends. The conditions of a homonormative living were predominant among these men. During the soiree, as we were able to hold a conversation, I got more or less similar answers to my questions. For example, they said it was unlikely for them to face discrimination at work because of their sexual orientation as they were the “secular and modern Turks, the rightful citizens, who were equal in front of the law,” (Cihan, 35) “good people, having good jobs, homes, and money,” (Kaan, 38), and “neither drug dealers nor smugglers, not walking the streets, or harassing people,” (Ali, 40). Homophobia and their sexual difference from the heteronormative assumptions were disavowed in their answers to create exceptionalism. As they were able to adapt themselves to homonormative precepts and embody the respected, “responsibilized,” normative gay men, they thought they would achieve inclusion, equality, and full citizenship (i.e., having the same rights and duties as heterosexuals).

In this homonormative discourse, the subject “we” are the upper-middle-class professionals; legitimate sexual citizens, proper moral individuals, while the others were the unwanted, immoral outsiders in the midst of increasing precarity. Sexual orientation (or identity) is not framed as a difference that matters; it is not a valid point to imagine, categorize, or criticize society. Heteronormativity and homophobia are not the problems that “we” have to negotiate with: these problems belong to the past and the exceptional “we” are beyond them now. Homonormative thinking imposes that these men were free from homophobic assaults and discrimination not because of legal, economic, or social infrastructures of homonormativity but because of their sense of entitlement, superiority, and privilege that is interlaced with class position and gender display.

At this point, relations with “other sexual others” get complicated and the gay men, who design their lives according to the codes of homonormativity, engage with a form of borderwork (Thorne, 1993) to underscore the difference between the appropriately normative gays and the improper, unfitting sexual minority members.

Homonormative borderwork and difference

A resounding theme in the interviews centers on the reconfiguration of neoliberalism as a discourse of individualism and a form of relating to others. When articulated by the upper-middle-class cisgender gay men, who are dedicated to maintaining their lives in the way it has always been, discourses of individualism are positioned against radical sexual activism or destabilizing cultural performances. The discourses on individual responsibility, intelligence, embodiment, and domesticity reject discrimination, oppression, and violence as the defining features of the formation of sexual minorities. Instead, homonormative connotations encourage the respondents to deem their hidden contribution to and underrated value for society, which at the same time they dissociate from and do not want to be “disturbed” by it. As Henderson argues, “contemporary neoliberalism killed queerness and with it the fantasy of queer transformation,” (2013: 2). My interlocutors, who navigate their lives according to homonormative precepts, “just want to be perceived as ‘normal’ citizens, who wish to be fully integrated into society as it is” (Croce, 2015: 10-11), without challenging or changing it. In this sense, enacting normative masculinity and reassuring class distinctions turn into a regulative apparatus for the interviewees to bolster Southern homonormativity while they downplay differences and draw attention to similarities with the rest of the society.

Osman drives me to the gym he goes to every day. Although the gym is three blocks away, he wants to drive his SUV and not to walk there, answering my question with an impetuous “nobody walks here.” We are in a district next to the busiest highway junction in Istanbul, reserved for opulent residential projects, skyscrapers, shopping malls, and the deserted streets between them. Osman says he feels happy in this “void.” In his late forties, muscled, and self-identified as “party-goer” and “night-wolf,” Osman works as a product manager in a global fashion company and “works a lot.” He spends all his money to “indulge” himself with designer clothes and accessories, gym membership and exclusive trainers, and other self-care expenses. When we chat about relationships he says, “My lifestyle matters to me. I am not open to anyone who does not meet my standards.” In the

upper-middle-class gay habitus of Istanbul, affect and sociability are translated into class, and class into consumption and bodily practices as they are quite noticeable in Osman's life. He is not unique in his endeavor for rearranging his life, body, and socio-sexual relations for ostentatious consumption and upward mobility. His "normal" requires a well-paying job, a nicely decorated apartment in a gated community, a new car, knowledge on men's fashion, and an intensive amount of "practices of the self," while the ethnic and racial (Turkish, from Istanbul), gender (masculine), and class privileges remain hidden.

Southern homonormativity is entwined with neoliberalism and individualism: as long as the individual is deemed successful and responsible (as my interlocutors claimed to be) neoliberalism is the name of the game they intend to play. Social inequality and discrimination (including homophobia) are justifiable, normalized, and permissible especially when the "victims" or the "losers" do not do their homework, prepare themselves for what comes next, and act wisely. The upper-class, cisgender gay lives were impenetrable as long as they know "their place" and are aligned with social normativity, mainstream values, and nonextremist views. Osman, for example, asserts, "I don't like politics. I don't even look at the newspaper. It gives me a headache." Ogun, an engineer in his early forties, is more elaborate on this, "I created my protected life space. People, who didn't do this, are not my concern." Such a neoliberal and simultaneously self-responsibilized, self-made, and self-absorbed view that the respondents articulate in a consistent manner requires the utmost attention to one's own lifeworld, while it creates multiple social distinctions and symbolic boundaries that they use to exclude and estrange themselves from the otherized, unwanted gay men and communities.

The "other" gay men who fell outside of this homonormative framework or intend to challenge it are being rejected by the respondents, who instead think that being responsible and normative is desirable and "cool" (and, at the same time, "hot"). Exclusionary dynamics can expand toward those who disinvest their future; do not take their education, jobs, and careers seriously; and seek short-term emotional or bodily satisfaction instead of establishing long-term, "serious" relationships as a result of the rational decision-making process. When they refer to anyone from these groups, the interviewees frequently repeat that they "were not like that" ("ben oyle degilim"). By verbalizing this, they construct complex gender, sexual, and moral boundaries between themselves and the perceived multiple others: the disenfranchised; the marginals; and the "losers," who failed to become normative gay men and project their lives in harmony with homonormative rules. It is a hierarchy of and within the sexual minorities. The interviewees incorporate, reproduce, and reinforce the logic of homonormativity either by stating their attachment and loyalty to living "normally," *like a hetero*, or by highlighting their difference and disapproval of the other ways of being a gay person, as put by Ismail (50, finance):

I cannot understand what they want to do in their lives. I respect but also pity those gays who cannot overcome their effeminacy. I mean putting on some make-up and wearing ridiculously tight clothes, especially when you get older, do not look good; it is ludicrous. Nobody would find them attractive and they make themselves more fragile and weaker. I wonder, can't they see it?

Homonormative thinking functions in two directions. First, it puts a group of homosexuals closer to heteronormativity; rendering them more assimilable, socially invisible, and docile to the sexual politics and cultures of neoliberalism. My informants' narratives of monetary success, professionalization, credentials, and upward mobility are some palpable moments that reveal their strong aspirations for a more enclosed, isolated, privatized life, which they learned to navigate. Second, homonormativity works as a mechanism to further, systematize, and legitimize the exclusion of gay men, who cannot afford or refuse to adapt to middle-class values and the idealized lifestyle that is seen as "normal." Those who are located outside the safe zone of respectability cover a wide range of social groups, including the working class, the racialized categories of ethnic minorities, migrants and refugees as well as the "too effeminate" gay men, trans bodies, and the sexual rights activists.⁵ Relations with the "other" gay men that they disapprove and abject require a form of borderwork, in which "boundaries [...] created through contact as well as avoidance" (Thorne, 1993: 64). Homonormative borderwork in this context does not only forbid interactions between these two groups but exhorts disavowal as Serdar (38, culture industry) recounts:

If you have good friends at higher positions in society, they will eventually pull you up. You should befriend people better, richer than you, and they will help you grow. [H]ang out with decent people, not with the losers. Especially loser gays. They are the worst.

In a similar example of homonormative borderwork, Levent (47, tourism) asserts

One thing that I am uneasy with is uncontrolled effeminacy. You can call it 'genderless' or 'fluid' with scientific terms. I respect these people, but it destroys my perception of what it means to be gay. And if this is me thinking this way, you can imagine how heteros would see it. How can [these people] ask to be taken seriously?

The way the respondents talk about the queering of sexual identities and acts and the instances of subversive gender politics reveals a transfiguration from the self-monitoring and policing attitude regarding the dangers of homophobic violence, shame, discrimination, and humiliation to a sense of self-government that calculates the risks in advance and manages aspirations for acceptance, respect, and normative living. Queering the public in terms of gender, sexualities, or politics of the nation, thus harms their self-image as proper and respected gay citizens. As the interviews show, Southern homonormativity orchestrates class habitus, politics of distinction, and social status to come before the sense of belonging to a sexual community and shared minority identity in the self-making practices of these gay men.

The symbolic significance of where one lives is connected with where else one goes, when, and for what purpose. Berk, for example, says he does not visit gay clubs frequently: "once a year, at very late hours, and for brief periods. I could never learn to like it.

I am not a part of the bar community.” Alp (42, manager) tells me that frequenting queer spaces “is not a part of [his] normal life.” He adds, “It is my crazy side and it hardly surfaces. When I go there, I feel as if I were in another country, somewhere in the Middle East; smelly, smoky, and dirty. It is fantastic. Not real, not me.” In this strictly demarcated homonormative spatial–temporal framework, visiting gay commercial institutions is perceived as exceptional forms of surreal sociability, delimited with early hours of weekend mornings, neatly detached from their everyday lives and normative selves, sort of “guilty pleasures” that are exoticized in discourse. In this sense, homonormativity not only culturally legitimizes where these men are supposed to live and play, but also where else they can be at, when, under what conditions, and how to justify, or conceal, it. The boundaries of normative homosexuality are drawn meticulously through this discursive effort. The respondents incorporate an imagined (homo-)normality as they reformulate and adopt heteronormative values and practices to gain legitimacy, cultural approval, and respect in the social domain as they actively distance themselves from the “disturbing” effeminate bodies and “obstreperous” gender/sexual performances. Radical acts that destabilize gender conformism are deemed to belong to the lower classes, “those who don’t have anything to lose” (Pamir, 60, commerce). According to their understanding, the respondents were able to know how to construct and sustain the “right” gender and sexual identity unlike those who could not properly manage it, like those who “go to the gay bars every weekend night, start to know everyone, get drunk, and expose their illicit desires,” as Pamir notes.

For most of the time, the respondents did not state their objections, or condemnation, in explicit words; instead, they referred to in euphemistic terms and said, “it does not make sense,” that they found it “inappropriate,” or wished to take a distance from the situation that they dislike. When, for example, they come across flamboyant behavior or sexually explicit language, they become reticent and withdraw, they say they find these situations “strange,” “misplaced,” or “meaningless,” and they could not imagine themselves in the same position. They cannot see themselves doing something that threatens their well-rooted gender identity and class position. Homonormativity is built around their habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) that not only forms what is deemed normal and guaranteed, but also subtly imposes what is unlikely and superfluous.

Ogun lives in a one-bedroom apartment on the 32nd floor of an exorbitant residential tower. He says, “This is my fourth place in the last eight years. I always pick the newer, nicer, and more luxurious one.” He shows me the building where the technology company he owns is located through his living room window. Like the gym Osman drives to, it looks like a walkable distance to me, but Ogun says he does not walk either. He admits that he never left the building without his car since he moved there. During the time I spent with him that day, I noticed how much importance he gives to traveling abroad (once a month on average) and communication with foreign people, including sexual encounters. Most of the respondents stated that traveling abroad regularly and interactions with strangers constitute the core of their modern, global, and Westernized lifestyle. Regarding the emphasis on cars that most of my interlocutors put, class materializes as “variegated relations to forms of mobility,” (Benedicto, 2014: 14) and Southern homonormativity repositions the unwanted, abjected gay men that are “marked not only as

feminine and lower class but also as local and immobile” (2014: 15). Ogun continues: “I don’t think I can be with a Turkish guy; I am a better fit for foreigners. They need to be as modern-looking as I am. The Western type of guys.” In this conundrum, the abjection aspect of homonormative borderwork expands towards locality and immobility, and Southern homonormativity incorporates and reproduces the power and superiority of the modernized classes over the nonmodern and traditional ones in Turkey (Kandiyoti and Saktanber, 2001; Ozyegin, 2000). Performing a modern gay identity in a Westernized, globalized sense (i.e., out, proud, and gender-conforming) has always been associated with class and ethnic privilege in Turkey (Bereket and Adam, 2006; Ozbay, 2010). Ogun’s entitlement is mediated by such an interpretation of modernity, rested on the existing power inequalities, and confirmed by his transnational contacts. Therefore, he succeeds at being accepted into the world of globalized modern gay culture which enables him, once again, constructing himself within homonormative tenets and disowning the local and immobile gay subjects. The imagined gay modernity shares other elements as Ogun speaks of a strong nationalist and racist sentiment against the Kurdish minority in Turkey. He says, “If I talk to this guy on the [gay dating] app, I ask him which languages he speaks. If he says Kurdish, I immediately block him. I am not against Kurdish people, but I don’t want to have a personal relationship with one of them.” Like Osman’s passion for the bodily displays of class, Ogun’s anti-minority racism is an extreme example although it represents a shared disposition among the men I interviewed. In Turkey, Kurdish men are racialized as “wilder, more animalistic and unfettered, and more masculine” and represented as a “lack or failure, not being modern enough, the non-performance of whiteness, middle-classness, or Turkishness” (Ozbay, 2017: 35), and some of the homonormative gay men I talked to virtually reproduce this form of racism.

My interlocutors connect class with ethnic identity, political and religious views, and a conformist gender posture to reach the silhouette of the “idealized [gay] guy.” This ideal simultaneously constitutes a standard for themselves to achieve and maintain and for potential sexual partners to desire. The ethnic/racialized, poor or working class, trans or “too effeminate”, and devout (“not modern”) bodies converge with the gays who do not or cannot enact the properly normalized, “right” masculinity and constitute the abjected “other” that my informants define themselves against and actively exclude from their lives. To this end, they reorganize their homonormative lives to avoid encounters with such unwanted sexual, gendered, class, and racial others.

Conclusion

‘I am living like a hetero,’ was something I kept hearing from the respondents during the interviews. This recurring utterance invites further questions that this article aims to respond: What does it mean to live like a hetero? Or, in contrast, to live like a gay man? What does it take for a gay man to live like a hetero? Who is left outside? And, who might be a normative gay man in the Global South without legal protection and neoliberal appraisal as is the case in most of the northern democracies?

In 2018, Turkish president Erdogan declared “those marginals, who appear in the streets of Beyoglu, can stay in this country as one of its colors if they remain within the moral boundaries. If they would undertake oppression, intolerance, attack, or violence towards those who aren’t like them; no offense, but we would throw them out to where they belong,” (Cumhuriyet, 2018). The Beyoglu district houses the Taksim Square, where queers want to celebrate the LGBT Pride Parade as they were able to do before 2015. Although Erdogan did not pronounce it as such, it is possible to read the president’s words as a warning against queers who demanded equal rights and visibility. Such an interpretation would encourage my interlocutors to be homonormative subjects, who would not challenge or disrupt heteronormativity, accept to be a “color” among the diversity, and respect the boundaries of public morality: a group whose existence is tolerated as long as they act unassertively and accommodatingly. Consequently, the case of Istanbul, Turkey substantiates that “the nation not only allows for homosexual bodies, but also actually disciplines and normalizes them; the nation is not only heteronormative, but also homonormative” (Puar, 2007: 50) and the “sexual states” (Puri, 2016) tend to govern and regulate sexuality to accentuate their relevance, power, and capacities over certain minorities and communities within the imagined nation by racialization and sexualization in order to render them inappropriate, dependent, and thus more vulnerable.

Since its inception, homonormativity has been theorized as a state-endorsed, institutionally strengthened process in terms of equality for, acceptance, and inclusion of sexual minorities. This article presents a case from Istanbul, Turkey, about what happens in a society when there are no legal sanctions, economic consolidation, or cultural approval, but a form of homonormative logic, aspirations, and practices still surface and affect the lives of gay men. Even though homosexuals do not have constitutional recognition or rights, they are encouraged to become self-responsibilized and normalized and are thus tolerated—if not fully accepted or embraced. As a response, the gay men I interviewed invoke class privileges and perform conventional masculinity as a foundation for Southern homonormativity.

Indications of Southern homonormativity through everyday practices, interactions, and affective tendencies differ from homonormativity. For example, the construction of a cohesive, “out, loud and proud” homosexual identity and community (Wood, 2005) works in significantly different ways in the two frameworks. However, the class-coded residential choices and lifestyle practices, the marginalization of the non-normative gay men and other queers, the approval of mainstream values and compliance with neoliberal principles, and the distance from transformative politics operate in similar directions through the conceptualizations of both homonormativity and Southern homonormativity, as the case of Turkey demonstrates.

My research suggests that Southern homonormativity invigorates hierarchies and justifies inequality between the members of sexual minorities, while it distinguishes some of them and situates them near the respected heterosexual citizens. It is a legitimating tool for the privileged homosexuals to see themselves as proper and right and those who cannot afford or reject to match the homonormative standards as the unintelligible, moral

failures, and “losers.” Taken together, the interviews show that homonormative gay men take the side of the state, its institutions, and heteronormativity, which retains its normative and hegemonic position, as long as it ensures and enables their existence within the perceived normativity. They simultaneously reject, criticize, and otherize the rebellious, angry, disobedient gay men, who reject *living like a hetero* and exist outside the homonormative thinking and assumptions. Southern homonormativity thus produces a collective identity, different from the post-closeted Northern person, among the respondents along the lines not only of sexuality but of class, gender, and race/ethnicity.

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Notes

1. In this article, I use the term “gay men” to call the respondents following their way of self-identification. I use “queer” when I try to mention the cultural/political codes and movements as well as the broader constituency of sexual minorities living outside heteronormative frames.
2. Here, I use the concepts “gender conformity” and “gender conforming” in the way that Moussawi (2011, 161) utilizes them to point “any mannerism, ways of talking, dressing or presenting oneself that does not necessarily conform to the gender ideals of a specific culture.” In addition to the constant seeking for heterosexual intimacy, normative masculinity in Turkey may signify being patriarchal–breadwinner, opinionated in politics, militaristic and nationalistic, interested in football and cars, recalcitrant and keen to fight, resolute, and self-confident in different situations (Ozbay and Soybakis, 2020; Ozyegin, 2015).
3. The construction of an “autonomous, individualized, self-directing, decision-making agent” (Bondi, 2005: 501) through which the neoliberal subject is “responsibilized as self-sufficient moral agent and social problems become failures of the individual, which require individual, ‘private’ solutions, not collective, public solutions” (England and Ward, 2016: 57).
4. All names are pseudonyms.

5. LGBTQ sexual rights activists are stigmatized by some of the interviewees as “leftists,” “communists,” “extremists,” “anarchists,” “terrorists,” and “terrorist-lovers.” Homonationalism is at play here in defining the queers who are ready to be embraced by the nationalist and racist ideologies of the state and those who are labeled as anti-state, the enemy of the state, or terrorists (see Puar, 2007).

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