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Media, visibility and sexual identity among gay men with a migration background

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Since the start of what is now called 'gay liberation', Western¹ discourses about homosexuality have stressed the importance of visibility. Beside coming out as a strategy for social visibility and acceptance, media presence has become a key endeavour as media representations have the potential to reach society at large. Growing up in a heteronormative society where heterosexuality is still the taken for granted norm, for lesbians and gay men² themselves such media visibility is also of key importance (Barnhurst, 2007; Gross, 2007). Particularly before and during the process of sexual exploration and coming out, leisure activities such as media use help to develop a sense of personal identity and self-esteem (Kivel & Kleber, 2000; McKee, 2000; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013).

Despite the widely accepted importance of media for sexual minorities (Gross, 2001), empirical research on sexual minority media users is relatively limited (Haslop, 2009). Moreover, in this research there is a persistent focus on people belonging to the ethnic-cultural majority in Western countries, which is why this paper shifts the attention to other media users. After a brief review of the literature, this paper empirically explores the role of media in the process of sexual identity exploration among a group of ethnic-cultural minority gay men with a migration background living in Belgium. Drawing on in-depth interviews, the aim is to explore their access to and assessment of mass and online media in relation to issues of sexuality and visibility. In particular, the analysis focuses on

issues of identification along the lines of 'Western' identity models made available through media.

Sexuality and media, old and new

The lesbian and gay movement in the US and other Western countries gained momentum from the late 1960s, a period when mass media such as film and (increasingly) television were key sources of representation. As discussed among others by Larry Gross (1991), media invisibility was a key problem at that time. While the amount of representations started to rise from the 1970s, these did remain negative and/or stereotypical. From the 1980s, this negativity gradually shifted to more positive representations, although the AIDS crisis prompted a backlash (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). From the 1990s, lesbians and (mostly) gay men further gained in media visibility, also in mainstream genres (Harrington, 2003). Lesbian and gay characters became more numerous and prominent, with the gay protagonist in the sitcom *Will and Grace* (1998) as a milestone. However, mainstream media visibility came at a price, as these gay and lesbian characters were predominantly white, urban, young and 'upscale' (Becker, 2004). Moreover, heteronormativity pervaded these representations as heterosocial relationships took central stage while homosexual intimacy and sexuality were marginalised (Fejes, 2000; Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002).

Beside increased representation in mass media, from the 1990s the Internet has even more fundamentally changed the situation for lesbians and gay men. From the start, the Internet was identified as an important medium for minorities, including sexual ones. It was seen as providing potential for

friendships and group formation for scattered minorities (Gross, 2001), giving access to a wealth of information and connectivity, and offering the opportunity to explore identities (Alexander, 2002a). More generally, as discussed by Döring (2009), the Internet was seen as empowering sexual subcultures by providing an accessible platform for establishing contacts, ameliorating social isolation, facilitating social networking, strengthening self-acceptance and self-identity, helping to communicate practical information, and encouraging political activism.

Research has confirmed how the Internet in its various guises plays a variety of roles for sexual and gender minorities. For instance, homepages and coming out videos provide spaces for self-presentation (Alexander, 2002b; Alexander & Losh, 2010), while mailing lists can act as a tool to share information, promote participation and provide a place to socialise (Mehra, Merkel & Bishop, 2004). Specialised websites act as a social support system, providing a virtual community and access to potential partners (Hou & Lu, 2013). Moreover, the Internet is an important source of porn, which for sexual minorities is often less available elsewhere (Gross, 2007). Gay men are also avid users of dating and profile sites oriented towards (mostly offline) sex (Kama, 2007; Döring, 2009). Increasingly, these take the form of mobile applications with geo-location, such as Grindr and Scruff (Mowlabocus, 2010; Roth, 2014). Most recently, the use of social network sites (SNS) by sexual and gender minorities was added to the research agenda. For instance, Fox and Warber (2015) discuss how the affordance of visibility on SNSs (information being visible to one's entire social network) necessitates visibility management (for instance hiding one's sexual orientation on SNSs).

Much more could be said about the manifold roles, opportunities and risks of the Internet for sexual minorities, but I would like to elaborate on two points. First, as in the literature on film and television there is a tendency to prioritise textual analysis of representations, so more research remains to be done on the role of the Internet in everyday life (Karl, 2007). Second, much like the mass media discussed above, the users of online media which are studied in (English-language) academic literature predominantly belong to the ethnic-cultural majority in Western countries. Nevertheless, the Internet plays a key role in spreading texts and images of homosexuality across the world (Murray, 2002). Internet users worldwide are acting as 'interpretive communities' who interact with and negotiate these mostly Western notions of sexuality (Mitra, 2010). Boellstorff (2003) conceptualises these interactions with and transformations of Western sexual subjectivities as a process of 'dubbing', referring to the contingent and fractured yet influential relationship between globalization and subjectivities, where a set of fragmented cultural elements from mass media are transformed in unexpected ways in the local context.

This raises the complex issue of the 'internationalization' or 'globalization' of Western sexual identities (see Altman, 2001), which is heavily criticized as the gay movement is seen to impose its models on non-Western cultures, in the process 'producing' lesbians and gays fitting the Western identity model while repressing other forms of same-sex desire (Massad, 2002; Martin et al., 2008; Kong, 2010). However, the issue also arises within the Western countries where these identity models originated, in relation to sexual minorities with a migration background. Indeed, Manalansan (2006) identifies similar processes in the context of migration, cautioning against the uncritical

application of sexual labels such as 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'homosexual' to migrants and asylum seekers, and drawing attention to the culturally specific inflections of such labels, syncretic processes creating alternative sexual politics, cultures and identities. As discussed by Luibhéid (2008), queer migration scholarship questions heteronormativity in migration studies, focusing on the construction of sexuality in migration contexts while questioning the straightforward identification of sexual minorities as 'LGBTQ'. Thus, queer migration scholarship 'insists on recovering, theorizing, and valorizing histories and subjects that have been largely rendered invisible, unintelligible, and unspeakable in both queer and migration studies' (Luibhéid, 2008: 171).

While sexuality in a migration context gains increasing scholarly attention,³ the role of media in these processes has not been studied extensively. Research on media uses among sexual minorities, as in LGBT and queer studies at large, has mostly focused on ethnic-cultural 'majority' media users. As a consequence, our knowledge about the role of media in spreading particular models of sexual identification among more culturally diverse users is limited.

Studying 'gay' men with a migration background in Belgium⁴

The remainder of this paper discusses a project explicitly devised as a response to the literature and issues discussed above. First, the focus is on media uses rather than representations, as a response to the tendency of textualism. Second, beside film and television the focus is primarily on the Internet, to explore its relative importance, advantages and drawbacks in terms of identification and visibility. Third, the focus is on 'gay' men with a migration background, aiming to

remedy the limited attention to and knowledge about these particular individuals within the LGBT community. The overarching question guiding this exploratory analysis concerns the role of (online) media in the construction of sexual identities among 'gay' men with a migration background in Belgium.

The participants in this research were recruited drawing on personal contacts, e-mail and Facebook, in particular targeting LGBT associations and associations oriented towards refugee and ethnic-cultural minority LGBTs in Belgium. I also attended their meetings, talking to organisers and inviting participants. While all these activities were oriented towards men and women, a research profile was also created on the gay male dating site GayRomeo, which led to 5 participants out of the total of 35. Only 6 participants were female, which partly reflects the sample procedure but also the more difficult and 'invisible' position of women in this group (Çavaria 2009). Because of important differences between the men and women, and as it is impossible to do justice to both groups in this article-length analysis, I will restrict this account to male participants.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that because of their invisibility as a group and the recruitment methods used, these male participants are probably not representative of the wider range of sexual minorities with a migration background in Belgium. In particular, the participants all identify relatively strongly as 'homosexual' or 'gay', which indeed is also the label most of them are very comfortable with.⁵ This issue was addressed at the very beginning of the interview, where I asked about their own self-definition in relation to sexuality. So, despite their background outside Europe, these 'Western' categories are what they identify with most strongly, which justifies the use of

this term but also raises questions in relation to the globalization of this model of sexual identity, as will be discussed further on.

The 29 men constitute a very diverse group, with roots in 21 different countries across the world. To allow for sufficient contextualisation, I will focus on two subgroups here. First, there are nine first generation migrants, a group I will call 'sexual refugees' because all (felt they) were forced to escape their country of origin, mainly because of their sexual orientation.⁶ All but one come from non-European countries where same-sex sexual practices are criminalized (Burundi, Chechnya, Irak, Morocco (2), Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone, but also Brazil) and all felt they could not live their sexuality freely there. In Belgium, this group has been growing in number over the past years, partly due to the relatively high acceptance rate of LGBT asylum seekers and partly to the increasingly homophobic legislations in Sub-Sahara Africa where most candidates come from (Çavaria 2013). Despite their diverse national, ethnic-cultural and religious backgrounds, these participants share similar experiences of sexual oppression in their home countries, and they occupy a similar position in Belgium. All moved away from their home country and family, travelling individually and keeping a distance from their ethnic-cultural community in Belgium. In terms of national identification, all the sexual refugees feel strongly attached to Belgium because of the sexual liberty it offers them, but they often also feel strong (if contradictory) attachments to their countries of origin which they had to leave.⁷

A second group is constituted of eight second-generation migrants, born in Belgium from parents born abroad (two each from China, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey). Culturally speaking, in this group too there are important

differences, in particular between the Asian participants and the others, who share Muslim backgrounds. However, as in the group of refugees, there are important parallels in their migration history and current social context. All of their parents migrated in the 1960s and 1970s. Turkish and North-African migration at that time was organised and primarily economically motivated, the Belgian state inviting 'guest labourers' to work in the booming industries (CGKR, 2009). Chinese migration was more small-scale, the parents of these participants having escaped communist China for political reasons. Contrary to the first-generation migrants, these participants all describe how they are surrounded by their families as well as tight and quite conservative ethnic-cultural communities in Belgium, which provides them with a social network but also strong social control. In terms of national and cultural identification, these participants were born in Belgium and have the Belgian nationality, hence feel even more Belgian than the sexual refugees, but at the same time they have strong and on-going connections to their ethnic-cultural community in Belgium as well as their (parents') home country. ⁸

It is worth reflecting on the specific Belgian context for this research, as it is one of the forerunners worldwide in terms of sexual minority rights and legislation (including anti-discrimination laws, same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples; see Borghs and Eeckhout, 2009). At the same time, acceptance of sexual diversity in society is uneven and homonegativity does remain a problem (Versmissen, 2011). Similarly, despite anti-discrimination laws people of non-European origin are generally disadvantaged, particularly in terms of education and employment. Racism, which is officially forbidden, is still

rampant on an everyday basis, as recent discussions (particularly on social media) indicate.⁹

With these groups and in this context, in-depth face-to-face interviews were used to discuss a wide range of issues related to media and identity. The interviews were done in the language the participant was most comfortable in (Dutch, French or English) and were semi-structured, addressing a set list of topics but aiming for a relatively natural conversation in which the participants could talk, in their own words, about the media that mattered to them. The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed using the qualitative software NVivo. The argumentation in this article was developed 'bottom up', through various rounds of analysis aiming to identify key experiences, attitudes and discourses in relation to sexual identity and media. This account will be structured according to the three main functions of media as identified in the interviews: representation, information and connection. Before discussing these topics, however, it is necessary to briefly reflect on sexual identity and coming out.

Identifying and coming out as 'gay'

As indicated above, all participants identify relatively strongly as 'homosexual' or 'gay'. The importance of this sexual identification as 'gay' was also discussed, including the issue of coming out. In their interviews, the *sexual refugees* invariably consider their sexual orientation as a key aspect of their identity. They tend to be relatively out and proud in Belgium, as their sexual orientation is mostly the reason why they moved away from their country of

origin, where they had to keep their desires hidden. As a consequence, they were generally not 'out' there, and if they were the reactions it provoked forced them to leave. Most sexual refugees I talked to referred to threats and physical violence, often within the family sphere. While it is hard to ascertain to what degree and in which terms they identified as 'gay' in their home countries, it is striking how they all draw on variations of the 'born this way'-discourse in retrospectively reconstructing their sexual orientation at the time. For instance, when asked how he identifies, Alain, a 30-year-old activist from Burundi, says: "I'm gay, one hundred per cent." When subsequently asked how long he has known this, he answers: "For a very long time, since I was a child." ¹⁰

When asked for their opinion about coming out, most sexual refugees state that it is important and liberating to come out, if possible, but also to take into account and assess the possible repercussions – so not to come out at all costs, particularly in countries where same-sex sexuality is penalised. For instance Peter, a 29-year-old sexual refugee from Nigeria, describes his sexuality in this way:

I'm gay, openly gay to some extent. Openly gay in the sense that I embrace my sexuality, I don't have problems with it, I don't live in denial, so I totally understand what sexuality is all about, I'm OK with it. Sometimes I want to be identified as gay, and sometimes I like my privacy also in the sense that I understand the kind of community or the kind of world we live in, where people are not comfortable in terms of sexuality.

For the *second generation* participants, coming out is less evident and hence also more questioned as a model. All state that they had issues with their

families and communities while exploring their sexual orientation. Coming out, for them, is a carefully negotiated process, as they tend to be partly dependent on their families and communities. At the same time, most of them feel the need at some point to stop living a double life and partially come out, which generally leads to negative reactions. For instance Jalil, a 33-year-old second generation migrant with Tunisian roots, discusses how he came out to his parents:

I did my coming out when I was 18 and half an hour later I was on the sidewalk, I was really kicked out. (...) I thought: OK, they will be hysterical, which was the case, and that's going to cool down after a couple of months, but that wasn't really the case.

Instead of cooling down, his parents continued to strongly condemn him and at the time of the interview he only had very limited contact with his mother and none with his father.

Overall, 'Western' identity models are not radically questioned but to a certain degree negotiated among both groups of participants, the second generation group in particular questioning the centrality of sexuality to one's identity and the need to come out. While for the sexual refugees I talked to, their sexuality is very salient as a dimension of identification that was repressed, forced them to leave their home country and break all ties with their ethnic-cultural communities, for the second generation participants sexuality is generally a source of identification they aim to combine with continued attachments to their ethnic-cultural communities, hence taking a less prominent position in their lives.

Finally, it is also necessary to reflect on my own identification and position in this research. As a Belgian-born gay-identified researcher I was partly an 'insider' (in terms of sexuality) and partly an 'outsider' (in terms of ethnic-cultural identity). Although I did not disclose my sexual orientation from the start, it often came up through the interview and seemed to put participants at ease, making them less uncomfortable to discuss their sexuality which, for some, was still somewhat of a taboo topic. It is hard to assess how this affected their self-presentation and 'performance' of sexual identity in the interview process, but their accounts did suggest that their sexual identification was invariably a key issue in their everyday lives. As I perceive it, I did not (overtly) impose Western 'gay' categorisations upon my participants, but those people who did choose to participate in this research did identify quite clearly as 'gay' to start with, which is why they were comfortable and willing to discuss their sexuality and its connection to media uses with me.

Representation

In the discussions on media uses, the interviews confirm the importance of media as a source of images and representations of homosexuality. Film and television fiction play a crucial role in making homosexuality visible for this group of gay men, but many of the problems discussed above persist. Firstly, many participants refer to the virtual *invisibility* of same-sex sexuality in film and television in their (or their parents') country of origin. This is particularly the case for the *sexual refugees*, in whose country of origin same-sex sexuality is mostly criminalised: most report that there were no or very few representations

of same-sex sexuality around when they grew up. *Second generation* migrants grew up in Belgium where mainstream representations of homosexuality are more freely available. However, this is quite recent as older second generation participants remember hardly seeing any representations of homosexuality during adolescence either, which cautions against setting up a simplistic opposition between Belgium and their (parents') home countries.

Secondly, many participants point out that the few representations of same-sex sexuality they had access to were very problematic. Again, the distinction with the current situation in Belgium is gradual rather than absolute, as most participants across both groups identify similar (if often less outspoken) problems in Western media. Thus, all *sexual refugees* say how the very few representations of same-sex sexuality they had access to in their home countries were *negative*, but quite a few participants also refer to the tendency of Western gay films to have unhappy endings. For instance Maga, a 35-year-old sexual refugee from Chechnya, states: 'I never watch gay films, they always end badly. (...) I always read the content, and if that person dies, I don't watch.' A related problem concerns *stereotypes* of gay men, images of (what they call) 'effeminate' men serving as a code for homosexuality, which was identified by both groups. For instance, when asked if TV series from his country of origin portray gay characters, Khalid, a 29-year-old *second generation* migrant from Morocco, answers:

Not that I know. I don't really watch Moroccan series, but when I'm with my mother and she watches... You have the hairdressers, they don't really... It's a bit like, what's the name of the British show, in a department store?

Q: *Are You Being Served?*

Khalid: There, they didn't really ever say: he's gay, but that was clear. You sometimes notice that with Moroccan series, the hairdresser or the man who's a bit more effeminate.

Note how 'Western' representations are taken as a point of reference here, as in most interviews: this is clearly the prime source of mass media representations of same-sex sexuality for most participants. Many also comment on the continued stereotypical representation of gay men as effeminate yet funny in these Western media, referring to shows such as *Will and Grace* and *Modern Family*. While these comments primarily regard the one-sidedness of media representations, there are also some wider-ranging gender-normative undertones, dismissing femininity and preferring (what they call) 'normal' guys, which quite a few associate with other shows such as *Queer as Folk*.

A third point of critique concerns the *lack of non-White and non-Western representations*, showing experiences in their countries and cultures of origin. While most participants are critical of the fact that the images available to them are predominantly of white, Western men, for many this isn't such a big issue as these also evoke a degree of recognition, particularly in a context of limited representation. This is particularly the case among *sexual refugees*, for whom any representation is a major improvement to the situation they knew before. Similarly, among the *second generation* there is a mixture of criticism and acceptance. For instance, Jalil, the 33-year-old second generation migrant from Tunisia mentioned above, says:

I really love to watch gay films. You feel it talks to you: recognition, representativity, ...

Q: You recognize yourself in certain things?

Jalil: Mostly in themes, not in characters because they are mostly white.

Like Jalil, most participants are aware of the Western bias in the media they have access to but rather than dismissing these images they 'make do' with what's available to them.

Despite the limitations discussed above, for most participants film and television fiction is a key source of representations. Mass media visibility is important to them, but it isn't as self-evident as the literature on changes in Western media representations suggests. While they are confronted with 'old' issues such as media invisibility and what they consider as stereotypical and negative images, in a context of social invisibility (in their home countries and/or ethnic-cultural communities in Belgium) the images they do have access to tend to be important to them. At the same time, these images tend to be mostly Western, and while we cannot simply assess their 'influence', it is telling that the representations these participants can draw upon in their process of identification are in accordance with Western models of homosexuality.

While these representations are classically associated with mass media such as film and television, the interviews draw attention to the increased importance of the Internet. For one, the films and TV shows discussed by the participants are not necessarily watched in the cinema or on TV but quite often on the Internet, through downloading or streaming. For many this is just an easier way to watch particular shows, as it is for the (younger) population at

large. Partly, there is also a language issue at play, some preferring to watch in a particular language (often French or English), or subtitled or dubbed into their mother tongue. The Internet also helps to find specific, less mainstream films or TV series. Finally, there is also a privacy issue at play, as the Internet allows to watch LGBT-specific content privately, as opposed to watching television in the family living room or films in a public setting.

These motivations to watch audiovisual content online may not be unique to this group of men with a migration background, but they are differently inflected, in particular for those who live(d) in homophobic contexts and/or only have limited access to mass media representations of same-sex sexuality. In a context of limited social and mass media visibility, online media become the primary or even only source of representations. This was particularly the case for the *sexual refugees* in their home countries, where they not only had very limited access to mass media representations of same-sex sexuality but also often had no access to the internet at home, so they mostly had to turn to cyber-café where they had to be very cautious and secretive.

The Internet is also the key source of pornography, often the first representations of homosexuality many male participants came across. Even the *sexual refugees*, in their countries of origin where homosexuality was taboo, often sought and found access to pornographic imagery on to the Internet. Some participants mention that they actually started realising they were attracted to men through (straight) porn, particularly among the *second generation* participants. Again, younger participants who had early access to the Internet more easily found representations of homosexuality, including porn. For instance, Fatih, a 22-year-old second generation Turkish participant, describes

how he realised he might be gay: 'Actually like most men, I started watching (straight) porn, and then I watched other kinds of porn, then I turned back from them, they I returned... Eventually that became more.' Like some other participants, he stresses how he had no idea he could be attracted to men before seeing gay porn online.

These findings confirm the crucial position of online porn as discussed in the literature review, but it is important to point out that I did not raise porn as a theme myself, as this could be a delicate topic for some to discuss with a (relative) stranger. The fact that many participants spontaneously raised the topic is an indication of its importance, and it is safe to assume that Internet porn is much more important to the participants than the interviews suggest.

Information

While mass media such as newspapers, TV and radio are important sources of news and information about homosexuality, particularly in a context of migration these are often or even mostly accessed through the Internet, which more generally acts as the key source of information. For many participants, the Internet was a place where they could explore their sexual orientation in a context of social invisibility, in several ways. Particularly for the *sexual refugees*, in a context of criminalisation and social taboo, the Internet - if and when it was accessible - was often the only way to information during the process of self-exploration in their country of origin. For instance, Mounir, a 38-year-old Iraqi refugee, is quite clear:

Q: Were there other places you found information, or only the Internet?

Mounir: Only the Internet.

Q: But no films in Iraq?

Mounir: No, forbidden.

For some participants, it was also a way to know about LGBT, equal rights or sexual health organisations. Activists, in particular, used the Internet to find information and international connections.¹¹ For instance Peter, the openly gay Nigerian sexual refugee mentioned above, explains how he used the internet to explore his sexuality as well as activism:

Q: So you were exploring what it meant to be gay?

Peter: Yes, I was really exploring what it meant to be... because I started activism just like a child's play. (...) We didn't have any training to be able to give education on HIV stuff, we just went on the Internet, trying to look for stuff, what it means when someone is infected, what are the symptoms, signs and all that.

For *second generation* participants, too, the Internet was and continues to be an easily accessible source of information. Because of the relative silence on issues of same-sex sexuality in their countries and communities of origin, this information is predominantly of 'Western' origin or if it isn't, it is predominantly negative. Particularly in a context of social and/or mass media invisibility, the Internet acts as the primary or sometimes only source of information. However, it has to be noted that for most participants finding factual information or activism are not the key motivations to use the Internet in relation to issues of

sexuality. Other functions are more important: finding (sexual) images, as discussed above, and connecting to other gay men, as discussed below.¹²

Connection

One of the key functions of the Internet to all participants is to connect with other sexual minority members. Across both groups, social network sites are important and Facebook is the central one. Among the *sexual refugees*, only one participant does not have access to Facebook, which is related to his precarious socio-economic position. For the others, it is an omnipresent connection to the world. Peter, the Nigerian sexual refugee quoted above, is a good example in this respect: 'I'm on my Facebook 24 hours, yeah. I'm on my Facebook, and every little thing that happens, immediately I get it in a few seconds.' For most, Facebook connects different worlds, including friends and information related to sexual issues. For the activists, it is also a key tool to inform and be informed. Peter, for instance, when asked if he also uses Facebook for activism, states: 'Yes, we use Facebook for a lot of campaigns. We use Facebook, and when you go to my page, I have groups and these groups post things to people.'

While the sexual refugees tend to be quite open about their sexuality in everyday life in Belgium, they generally prefer not to be known as gay among peers in or from their country of origin. This raises issues of privacy, as 'likes' can disclose one's sexual orientation.

Peter (29, Nigeria): If you like a particular group, a lot of people see that you like. People want to try to see what you like. It could be positive, it could be negative, but people would be able to see what you like.

Indeed, Facebook is where different worlds connect: friends and family, work and play, straight and gay, Belgium and the country of origin. In such a context of 'collapsed contexts' (boyd, 2011), the affordance of visibility indeed brings along the necessity to hide one's sexuality online for people who are not (completely) out of the closet (Fox & Warber, 2015). Particularly for ethnic minority LGBTs social media are a paradoxical space, allowing some freedom but also necessitating visibility management (Peumans, 2011).

For some sexual refugees, who are more out to their family now that they are in Belgium, Facebook is a place where they don't censure themselves. For instance, Gustavo (38) who comes from a rural and very religious village in Brazil where he could not disclose his same-sex sexual attraction but who is out now, suggests he doesn't hide anything on Facebook, which he uses primarily to communicate with his family: 'My family is important for me, but I'm not changing my life because of them.' However, some participants are not out to their family and two even have separate profiles to keep their 'straight' and 'gay' lives apart. For instance, Ahmed, a 32-year-old refugee from Morocco, states:

Ahmed: I'll tell you something, I have two Facebook profiles. One for my family and one to... you know, relax.

Q: So it's dangerous for those two to overlap?

Ahmed: Yeah, to overlap, that would be complicated.

Issues of (in)visibility on social media are also a key concern to the *second generation* participants. For instance, two participants have some public visibility (in politics and broadcasting) and therefore prefer to keep their

Facebook profiles rather neutral, for instance by limiting the possibility to tag them or by giving some friends only restricted access. Beside their public roles, this is also related to the fact that they are not completely out to their extended family, both in Belgium and in their (parents') home country. Thus, 25-year-old Mehdi who has Tunisian roots, states:

Q: Do you also follow LGB associations on Facebook?

Mehdi (Tunisia): No, because I sometimes think: if I'm liking them, a cousin may see that.

Q: And tagging, how do you deal with that?

Mehdi: Only me I can see that, you can't tag me on Facebook.

Interestingly, two other second generation participants are not out to their family but do allow their gay and straight worlds to connect on Facebook, a strategy of 'peeking out' as described by Fox and Warber (2014): rather than telling they identify as gay, they signal it through linking to or liking certain groups and people. This is the case for Amir, a 39-year-old man with Moroccan roots:

Amir: I actually only have one account. Also a lot of gays, and I'm a member of Çavaria and Den Draak (gay association and bar).

Q: So you don't self-censor?

Amir: No. In my job I also get in touch with all kinds of people and they just have to accept it, without trying to find out: is he that way or isn't he?

It is clear that Facebook is an important way to maintain social connections, uniting the different communities the participants belong to. This often includes

the participants' affiliation to LGBT culture, which leads to different strategies of identity and visibility management, depending on the degree to which and the people to whom they are out.

Beside such social and activist connections on Social Network Sites, the Internet is also used for dating and finding partners. Among the *sexual refugees*, most say they have used or are currently using websites for chatting or dating. For many, it was a relatively safe way to get in touch with other gay men in their country of origin, although there were some risks involved, such as public exposure or blackmail.

Peter (29, Nigeria): GayRomeo and all that was used to hook up with guys, because that was the only way we could hook up with guys. It's not like in Belgium, I know sometimes when you walk on the streets, and when you see a gay guy who perceives you as gay, he tries to wink at you or tries to do some kind of signs. It's not the case in Nigeria, so the best for you to go is on the Internet.

Often, the Internet was only available in public places such as cyber-café. Despite the dangers of exposure, for many there were no alternatives. Now that they are in Belgium, most sexual refugees continue to use online chat and profile sites to find partners. While some participants comment on negative aspects of these sites (for instance that they're all about sex, not relationships), the overall appreciation is positive as it is a relatively easy and discreet way to get in touch with people. For instance, Maga (35) from Chechnya says he only dared to act upon his same-sex sexual interests once he had his Belgian passport, and he used

the Internet for this purpose, first watching porn and then registering on Gaydar and GayRomeo, two gay dating sites.

Although they grew up in a country where it is supposedly easier to be gay, many *second generation* participants equally explored their sexuality on online chat and dating sites. For them, like for the sexual refugees, chat sites provided a safe and anonymous introduction to gay life and peers. Anonymity was particularly important for participants who weren't out of the closet.

Q: What's the advantage of the Internet for you?

Amir (39, Morocco): Things like chatting, you can more easily make contact. And it's also anonymous.

Q: Because you weren't out of the closet then?

Amir: Right, and to go out then and to stay somewhere all evening, of course you have the chance to be seen.

As mentioned above, second generation participants are mostly surrounded by ethnic-cultural communities exuding a lot of social control, so for them (like for the sexual refugees when they still lived in their home country), the Internet provides a relatively safe way to date without being publicly visible.

To conclude this section, it is clear that online chat and dating sites form one of the key uses of the Internet in relation to sexuality. In a context of social invisibility and a taboo on same-sex sexuality, online platforms offer the (relative) security of anonymity, that is: getting in touch with other gay men without the risk of exposure. As with porn, however, the importance of this topic in the interview context is an indication of its even greater importance in reality, as most participants were reluctant to discuss their sex lives in depth, so more

focused research would be necessary to further explore these issues. The same is true in relation to mobile apps such as Grindr: while these were not explicitly raised by the researcher and only a few participants mentioned them spontaneously, it is safe to assume that many others also use them.

Similarly, based on the interviews it is hard to assess to what degree the internet allowed the participants to connect across ethnic-cultural boundaries, as this issue wasn't raised by the participants. However, I did raise racism as a topic and while overall, the participants had limited experiences with racism 'in real life', some – particularly the Moroccan participants – mentioned experiences both of negative stereotyping (being considered as thieves of prostitutes) and of sexual exoticism (their skin colour arousing erotic interest). Again, however, more research would be necessary to further explore these and related issues concerning sexual desires and racism.

Conclusion

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that media were important sources of gay representations, information and connections for the participants, particularly before and during the process of sexual exploration and eventual coming out. While many of the observations echo the literature discussed above, the focus on gay men with a migration background indicates the particular inflections of these issues in specific cultural and social contexts. For the participants in this project, representation of homosexuality in mass media such as film and television is particularly important because of the lack of social visibility in their countries of origin and/or ethnic-cultural communities in

Belgium. At the same time, they identify many of the problems discussed above: media invisibility, negativity and stereotyping.

As indicated in the literature review, the Internet has indeed become a key source of same-sex sexual representations, information and connections, particularly in the context of social and mass media invisibility experienced by the sexual refugees and to a lesser degree the second generation migrants in this project. At the same time, the affordances of the Internet, particularly in terms of visibility on social network sites, create new challenges for people who negotiate between social, cultural and national contexts in which same-sex sexuality is more or less acceptable. Hence, while it is generally easier for sexual refugees to be open about their sexuality in everyday life, as they moved away from their family and country of origin, in online interactions they have to be equally careful as the second generation participants, who tend to more discreet about their sexual orientation in everyday life. Most participants do not radically question coming out as a model, but they consider it as a gradual and context-specific process. As a consequence, social media – collapsing social contexts which are separate in real life – may incite self-censorship or the creation of double profiles, both cases creating a virtual closet.

This study illustrates the value of empirical research on media users, looking beyond the technological and textual affordances of media to consider how diverse people deal with them in their particular contexts. It also confirms the importance of looking beyond the ethnic-cultural majority 'Western' media users which are often studied or implied in work on LGBT media. Although this study does not allow comparison with other groups, it seems that the Internet is particularly important for sexual minorities with a migration background, as it is

for others growing up outside of Western urban centers (Gray, 2009). For these groups, social invisibility is a persistent problem, while access to offline LGBT media is limited so online media are often the prime source of representations, information and connections.

In the current project and based on what the participants told me, it seems that media do act as an agent in the globalization of Western identity models. Not only were 'Western' media one of the only sources of representations and information they had (in their youth, in their home country) and still have access to. Moreover, despite the 'whiteness' of the media images and characters available to them, many participants say they recognise themselves in, and even identify with, these representations. While the Internet, in theory, allows for the exploration of more fluid and culturally differentiated forms of sexual identification, in the interviews it comes across mostly as a way to connect to other gay men, socially and sexually, not as a way to question sexual identities. So overall, while authors such as Boellstorff (2003), Manalansan (2006) and Luibhéid (2008) stress the importance of negotiation and culturally specific inflections of Western identity models, the interviews in this project point at a relatively strong adoption of these models, more in line with Altman's (2001) arguments about the globalisation of Western gay identities, however problematic one may find this tendency.

However, some caution is in place. First, it is hard to ascertain to what degree the media 'caused' the participants to adopt these models. Second, it is important to remember that these findings may be particular to this sample of men, who all identify more or less openly as gay. Third, and most importantly, the lack of resistance to Western identity concepts may at least partly be related

to the nature of the interviews, which did not focus on nor probe for resistance, and which were conducted by an ethnic-cultural majority researcher. More in-depth discussion of these issues, led by a researcher sharing their cultural background, may have lead to a more fine-grained picture as well as more instances of negotiation and resistance, which surely do occur.

To conclude, I want to stress that this account is merely exploratory, touching upon many dimensions that deserve further discussion. First, the participants in this research have a broad variety of cultural backgrounds, which cannot be sufficiently explored in the context of an article and based on such a small sample per country of origin. While further research would certainly bring to light culturally specific particularities, for now it is interesting to note how similar the experiences within both groups are, despite their vastly different cultural and religious backgrounds. Particularly among second generation participants, there were striking parallels between the Chinese and the Arab participants, which highlights the importance of (generation of) migration and the social context.

A second issue which deserves further exploration is gender. The responses by the female participants were not discussed in this text but suggest important differences, particularly in relation to sexual identifications, which were more fluid, and attitudes to media, which were more critical. A third dimension that needs to be elaborated regards age and generation. Based on this limited set of interviews, it seems that younger people – whatever their cultural and migration backgrounds are – share the experience of early and relatively easy access to the Internet during the process of sexual exploration, which has made things easier for them. This echoes the findings by Gudelunas (2012), who

connects different social experiences to generational differences in identification and media uses. This also implies that the similarities observed across different cultural backgrounds may even increase in the years to come, as the Internet further spreads Western – but hopefully also increasingly alternative – models of sexuality.

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¹ I use 'Western' as a shorthand to refer to Europe, the US and other English-language countries such as Canada and Australia.

² In each case, I try to use the most precise term to refer to sexual and gender minorities, and/or the one that is used by my sources (literature or participants). None of these terms presuppose the existence of a clear group or identity, but they refer to some widely used discourses and categorisations: lesbian and gay, LGBT (as the most commonly used umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities) and queer (only used here to refer to queer theory and its analyses).

³ For a guide to this research, see <http://queermigration.com> (last accessed 3 December 2014).

⁴ The term 'gay' is used provisionally here, hence put between quotation marks. As will be explained, the use of this label seems justified as the participants use it themselves.

⁵ The actual term depended on the language of the interview: 'homo(seksueel)' (Dutch), 'gay' (English), 'homo(sexuel)' or 'gay' (French).

⁶ Asking about legal status is delicate, so I only registered information they volunteered. At the time of the interview, four participants were recognised refugees, one was in the asylum procedure, one other had married a Belgian man, and three others seemed to have no residence permit.

⁷ For a more elaborate reflection on the intersection between ethnic-cultural and sexual identifications among this group, see Dhoest (2015).

⁸ A third group of male participants, twelve voluntary migrants who chose to move to Belgium for studies, work or love will not be further discussed here.

⁹ See, for instance, this Facebook page on daily racism:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Daily-Racism/406742619487273>, and this blog entry by Bleri Lleshi: <https://blerilleshi.wordpress.com/2014/10/21/im-not-a-racist-but/>

¹⁰ All quotes are literal transcriptions if the interview was done in English. If the interview was done in Dutch or French they are literal translations by the author. For the sake of anonymity, the names of participants are replaced by names used in their (parents') country of origin. To identify them some more, their country of origin and age group are mentioned.

¹¹ In this context, I define 'activist' as those who were or are active in associations for LGBT rights, and/or have made media appearances to talk about these issues. 3 of the 9 sexual refugees and 3 of the 8 second generation participants were activists in this sense.

¹² This echoes the findings of Kama (2007) in the Israeli context.