

**CRUISING IN-BETWEEN IMMUNITY AND  
COMMUNITY:  
AN IN-APP ETHNOGRAPHY OF VIRTUAL CRUISING IN  
ISTANBUL**

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## Abstract

Community and cruising have been salient topics in the past of the queer and LGBTQI studies and politics. Since the beginning of 1990s, as a result of the rapid virtualization of social relationships, this time many scholars intended to explore the new status of the community and cruising in relation to virtuality. Especially after the introduction of the first Geosocial Networking Application (commonly known as “dating/hook-up app” or GNA), *Grindr*, for gay men in 2009, the discussions on the virtual community and virtual cruising became very popular both amongst scholars and within the LGBTQI “community” itself. Nevertheless, the existing literature on these topics could not go beyond establishing an unfruitful dichotomy: cruising virtually and forming a virtual community by means of GNAs are either celebrated uncritically or denounced moralistically. By drawing on Roberto Esposito, this thesis reveals the inseparable relationship between cruising and community, provided that community is understood as a relation that breaks people free from their boundaries. In addition, it shows that virtual cruising and virtual community are always threatened by homo- and heteronormative “immunization” of GNA users. By analyzing 300 online user profiles and conducting 40 in-app interviews, this thesis demonstrates in which ways a particular GNA, *Hornet*, simultaneously strengthens and undermines the emergence of a virtual community, i.e. a virtual relation, which is capable of decreasing the isolation and solitariness of gay men, bisexual men, trans\* women and (MTF) cross-dresser individuals in Istanbul, Turkey. Hence, this study contributes to the literature by revealing the intricate and paradoxical operation of GNAs and by elucidating the agential potentials of a non/human actant in re-shaping socio-cultural reality.

**Key words:** *GNA, virtuality, cruising, homonormativity, community, immunity*

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## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>I</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>II</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1. THE “REVOLUTION” OF VIRTUAL CRUISING (?) .....	3
<b>2. METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>8</b>
2.1. AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY.....	8
2.2. “IN-APP” NETNOGRAPHY .....	10
2.3. NETNOGRAPHY OF HORNET .....	11
2.4. “AM I JUST A RESEARCH OBJECT TO YOU?”: <i>IN-APP</i> INTERVIEWING .....	16
<b>3. CARTOGRAPHY OF THE “VIRTUAL GAY COMMUNITY”</b> .....	<b>18</b>
3.1. DE-CONSTRUCTING THE ‘VIRTUAL COMMUNITY’ .....	20
3.1.1. <i>The Beginning or The End of The ‘Virtual Community’?</i> .....	20
3.1.2. <i>Whose “Community”?</i> .....	22
3.2. IS GRINDR WHAT THE USERS MAKE OF IT? .....	23
3.3. VIRTUAL CRUISING IN THE TIMES OF “LIQUID MODERNITY” .....	25
<b>4. REMAPPING COMMUNITY AS A RELATION</b> .....	<b>27</b>
4.1. COMMUNITY, IMMUNITY AND CRUISING .....	30
4.1.1. <i>Transgressing the Barriers While Cruising</i> .....	32
4.1.2. <i>Reconstructing the Barriers</i> .....	35
<b>5. VIRTUAL (QUEER) COMMUNITY IN ISTANBUL</b> .....	<b>38</b>
5.1. “I HAVE NO CHANCE TO MEET GUYS OTHER THAN APPS” .....	39
5.2. “YOU DO NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE OUTSIDE” .....	43
5.3. WELCOMING THE VIRTUAL OTHER.....	46
5.4. “NO ONE TREATS YOU LIKE A HUMAN ON HORNET” .....	48
<b>6. HOMONORMATIVE IMMUNITY</b> .....	<b>51</b>
6.1. VIRTUALLY IMMUNE.....	51
6.1.2. <i>“Be anything but feminine”</i> .....	53
6.1.3. <i>“I don’t want someone manly; I want a man”:-#nofem</i> .....	55
6.1.4. <i>“Types in good conditions”: #sportyonly</i> .....	59
6.1.5. <i>“The curse of middle-class”</i> .....	62
6.2. HORNET AS ANOTHER REGULATORY MECHANISM: NON-HUMAN AGENCY .....	63
6.2.1. <i>The Story Behind the Software</i> .....	64
6.2.2. <i>“Pictures-under-glass”</i> .....	66
<b>7. CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>68</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>74</b>

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of ‘chat rooms’ that appeared first in the 90s has changed the experience of people with non-heteronormative sexualities, gender identities and desires dramatically.<sup>1</sup> Those who can access a computer and the Internet connection could find potential sexual partners and create a safe environment where they are not excluded or stigmatized. Cruising in spaces such as bars, parks, public toilets and baths were not replaced but supplanted by virtual cruising rapidly. The internet did not only provide an opportunity to encounter “people like us” without any geographic limitations, but also helped many to find out they were not sick, abnormal or alone. In 1994, AOL (American Online) announced the top ten chat rooms - three of which were used by ‘men who seek men’ (MSM)<sup>2</sup>. Given the societal and institutional control and surveillance, the Internet had facilitated social and sexual encounters without fearing homo- and transphobic violence. The virtual environment, in fact, was considered revolutionary for the novel forms of social interaction it has made possible –specifically, virtual cruising with the intent of finding sex dates, long-term relationships or friendships.<sup>3</sup> Yet, this was just the beginning of the so-called online revolution.

In the early 2000s, with the advent of software technology, chat room lost its significance to an important extent as the new trend was to reach people through websites. Gaydar, the first of its kind, was launched in 1999 and transformed the online dating culture for good. The most radical change that came with Gaydar was the opportunity to upload profile pictures instead of using impersonal avatars, which led more people to use online dating in tandem with the

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Grov et al., “Gay and Bisexual Men’s Use of the Internet: Research from the 1990s through 2013,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 51:4 (2014): 391, accessed February 10, 2016, doi: 10.1080/00224499.2013.871626.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, men-who-seek-men (MSM) will be used if it is not known how the people self-identify themselves and/or when the population mentioned might consist various identity groups. MSM might refer to gay men; men who seek social and sexual relations with other men without necessarily identifying as gay; bisexual men; and, trans\* men. Also, even though *Hornet* is considered as an MSM GNA, it should not be forgotten that it is used by (MTF) trans\* and cross-dresser individuals.

<sup>3</sup> Grov et al., “Gay and Bisexual Men’s Use of the Internet,” 393.

widespread increase in the use of new computer and Internet technology, such as the emergence of Web 2.0.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the website become so popular that the metaphor ‘gaydar’ – one’s radar to differentiate between gay and straight men - have become a really popular term, although it was in use before. As a result of the proliferation of dating websites the Internet transformed into the primary mean to meet other people and changed the social and sexual lives of MSM significantly.<sup>5</sup>

A very significant part of the new dating culture is indebted to the introduction of iPhone in 2007. Smartphones have influenced the life styles of modern subjects radically: they became an inseparable part of how we manage our relationships with others. They are not merely technological artifacts but an integral part of our (inter)subjectivity. In 2008, when the application (app) market was launched for iPhone, it became clear that a smartphone is not solely a phone, but it can be used in creative and unforeseen ways.<sup>6</sup> The popular saying “there’s an app for that” is not a rhetoric exaggeration; there is indeed an app for almost everything beyond one can imagine: such as an app that prevents you from dialing your ex partners when you are drunk and another one that assesses your sex performance.

As it is expected, it did not take too long until the software designers realized the potentials of smartphones to create new forms of communication. Grindr, the first Geosocial Networking Application (GNA), was introduced in 2009, only two years after iPhone was put on the market. The app made use of Global Positioning System (GPS) to allow the users to find out on real-time the distance between them and other users (the reason why they are called ‘geosocial’ applications). It was no surprise that the first GNA was designed for gay men so soon. More specifically, gay and bisexual men with relatively higher visibility and social and economic

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<sup>4</sup> Grov et al., “Gay and Bisexual Men’s Use of the Internet,” 395.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 160; Rodney H. Jones, “‘You show me yours and I’ll show you mine’: the negotiation of shifts from textual to visual modes in computer-mediated interaction among gay men”, *Visual Communication* 4:1 (2005), 71.

<sup>6</sup> “App Store Downloads,” accessed April 01, 2016, <http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2008/07/14iPhone-App-Store-Downloads-Top-10-Million-in-First-Weekend.html>.

privileges in comparison with lesbian women and trans\* people had generally dominated the online dating scene. Even today, regardless of the appearance of new apps for lesbian women (*Datch* in 2013) and heterosexual people (*Blindr* in 2011), gay men constitute the largest portion of the population using GNAs.<sup>7</sup>

This brief historical overview is provided to indicate that MSM Geosocial Networking Applications –popularly known as “dating apps” or “hook-up apps”- did not appear suddenly, out of nothing, but they are products of a long and ongoing process of technological development and social transformation. However, this does not imply some gradual shift; one can argue for radical alterations engendered by the emergence of GNAs especially in terms of easy and fast cruising. GNAs eradicated the necessity of both going to public spaces to cruise or staying home to log into a dating website that is only accessible through computers; as long as one has a smartphone, GNAs made it possible to cruise and find sex dates without spatial limitations. In fact, when I first saw in Istanbul and, then, in San Diego that gay men started to use GNAs even while they were in gay bars, dancing and flirting, I have noticed that cruising virtually has become an irreplaceable way of life for many.

### 1.1. The “Revolution” of Virtual Cruising (?)

Right after the releasing of Grindr in 2009, buying a smartphone became almost obligatory for most of the gay men I know, including myself. The reconfiguration of sexual (inter)subjectivity as a result of the structures of neoliberal consumption and selfhood ensured that the new way to cruise was through GNAs. Rumor had it that palmy days of complete liberation for gay men were on the horizon - *freedom was just a click away for what we understood from freedom was being able to have sex*. In Turkey, Istanbul (the “gay capital” of the country”), my friends and I were, hopelessly and fervidly, seeking a cheap way to get a smartphone even though many of us used to believe that they were completely useless money traps. Nevertheless, if the price of freedom was a smartphone, then we were more than willing to pay

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<sup>7</sup> Mary E. Gordon in Grov et al., “Gay and Bisexual Men's Use of the Internet”, 399

that. We rushed to get our smartphones and downloaded the application even before we took the gelatin out and inserted a sim card: there was no time to waste with such details when the issue at stake was ‘sexual freedom’. After only a couple of minutes, there it was: the virtual paradise on earth, bunch of men online looking for dates and/or sexual encounters. Grindr, back then, meant allegedly no more cruising in dangerous and limited public places, no more violent reactions when someone’s ‘gaydar’ malfunctions, safe access to more sexual encounters, more partners, and, the possibility of a larger and stronger community building. Now, seven years later, we are (able) to answer the question: Have we been finally able to leave behind the heavy societal and institutional control over and discrimination against our sexual and social life in Turkey?

Well, we did - at least to some extent. Yet, it seems we got carried away by the promise of the new technology when dealing in the idea of ‘complete freedom’ focused only on sex, neither were we aware of the fact that building a ‘stronger’ community within and through dating applications could result in stronger exclusions and discriminations amongst gay men insofar as this community’s borders is reduced to a virtual space shaped by the spectacle and consumption of bodies and which can be accessed only by those who are economically and socially privileged.

Therefore, within the scope of this study I will tell the story of my awakening from the liberatory dream of “sexual freedom” after I experienced at first hand the effects of Geosocial Networking Applications (GNA) in engendering, reiterating and strengthening socio-economic inequalities and discriminations amongst gay men, leading to more effective forms of surveillance and normalization of bodies. Yet, this is only part of the story I want to narrate here. The (queer) potentials of GNAs in blurring the public/private dichotomy, producing non-normative relationalities, and extending the symbolic and physical space of recognition for non-heteronormative individuals will constitute another central axis of this study. The particular purpose of my thesis is to evade mainstream accounts of GNAs –which posit them



either as the ruiner or liberator of the so-called “gay community”- and to produce a complex reading of the effects of this new media device. I will provide a queer critique of the GNAs’ potentials that resist heteronormativity and homonormativity, as well as their limitations that must be reconsidered both by producers and users. I believe there is an immediate need for a constructive critique of GNAs; however, this must be done without appealing to moralizing arguments that - unintentionally, yet, inevitably- push non-normative subject positions and desires further towards the margins.

The central question/concern of this thesis is: *How do (MSM) GNAs paradoxically subvert and re-affirm heteronormativity and homonormativity at the same time?* In order to provide a detailed response to this question I shall follow the following outline: First of all, in the Methodology Chapter, I will explain the rationale for choosing the particular GNA -*Hornet*- and the particular urban area where it is used, i.e. Istanbul. I shall also reflect on and discuss the implications of the “in-app” interviewing research method, which I used for this study. In Chapter 3, I will focus on the academic and popular discussions around MSM GNAs to show what has been said until now, with a specific focus on the problematic aspects of the existing literature, and what has been forgotten, ignored or erased in relation to the GNA’s role in the re/articulation of sexually non-normative relationships. In the following chapter, I will establish my theoretical framework, which, I believe, will be the backbone of this study. Here, I will provide several conceptual tools that I borrow from Roberto Esposito for studying the paradoxical operation of MSM GNAs. The concepts *community* –a relation that connects previously detached people- and *immunity* –a relation that separates them- will be explained and developed to demonstrate how they help to adopt a discerning approach to analyze MSM GNAs in Istanbul, Turkey and how closely they are linked to MSM (*virtual*) *cruising*. That is why, until this point in my thesis, I will be using the term “community” always in quotation marks.

In the first analytical chapter, *Virtual Community*, the affirmative and potentially queer consequences of Hornet in Istanbul will be addressed as a means for providing a common “public” space where bisexual and gay men, MTF (male-to-female) cross-dresser individuals, and trans\* women can have individual and collective experiences. On the other hand, in the second and last analytical chapter, *Homonormative Immunity*, I shall explore the negative and potentially destructive consequences of Hornet -both because of its software and visual design and because of its re-production of exclusionary and discriminatory hetero- and homonormative ideals. Finally, the topic of post-human agency in the case of GNAs will be addressed here. It is highly crucial for my purposes to recognize that GNAs are neither inert objects that take whatever the shape they are used in nor their consequences are determined by their use by humans.

Following the abovementioned steps, I will argue that MSM GNAs are capable of providing safer opportunities for cruising to MSM, trans\* women and (MTF) cross-dresser people residing in Istanbul, Turkey; yet, at the same time, they actively re-produce the homonormative repudiation of “effeminate” and “unfit” bodies. By criticizing the theories on MSM cruising coming from the USA, I will prove that MSM cruising –virtual or not- is not only about a happy encounter between the self and the others; instead, it might make way for extremely unpleasant encounters between them. I will also demonstrate that the public/private distinction made by North American queer theorists cannot fully account for the local reconfiguration of space in Istanbul.

What is the relationship between the increasing possibility to have sex and being liberated/freed”? How are the limits of cruising is re-negotiated and re-defined as a result of the real-time virtualization of cruising? How can GNAs performatively contribute to the commodification of particular human bodies (read as ‘masculine, muscular, and abled’) and to the abjection of others (read as ‘effeminate, unfit and disabled’)? What agency can be ascribed to a

techno-cultural *actant* in re-articulating the social, individual and political dimensions of same-sex desire? What subversive potentials do GNAs have in Istanbul to challenge the institutional and societal discrimination, violence and exclusion against LGBTQIs? What potentialities do GNAs (Hornet) have to reconfigure the constructed-cut between public versus private, personal versus social, human agency versus non/human<sup>8</sup> non-agency, and to refute the artificial ontological separation between actual versus virtual, and online versus offline? How does the possibility to contact and reach people without any geographic limitation through a GNA impact the urban planning of the cities, which isolate and segregate certain marginalized groups such as trans\* sex workers in Turkey? These are the primary questions that I seek to answer in this study.

Given the academic and political purposes of this study, I hope to contribute to several fields of scholarship. I believe that the focus of this study and the particular theoretical approaches it employs can provide useful analytical and theoretical tools to cultural studies – especially, to (social) media and technology studies- LGBTQI and queer studies and masculinities. Especially the emphasis put on class dimension of cruising would fill an important gap in mainstream queer theory, which suffers a lot from class-blindness. Also, the local re-configuration of “homonormative gay masculinities” –which admire, assume and perform the norms and ideals of hegemonic masculinity- in Istanbul would provide a critical insight to the field of masculinity studies. In addition, the methodological approach adopted here can importantly contribute to socio-cultural anthropology and ethnography studies in virtual environments.

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<sup>8</sup> I prefer to use the slash between “non” and “human” in order to refute a strict ontological separation between what is come to be known as human and nonhuman, and, to indicate their interpenetration to the extent that sometimes it is not attainable to distinguish between them.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct this research successfully, I employed a methodological triangulation to establish a valid and reliable analysis: an auto-ethnography; a digital ethnography –or “netnography” in Kozinets’s<sup>9</sup> terms –; and *in-app* interviews with other users. This triangulation is sought to take into consideration the immanent dynamics of a virtual space, the personal experience of its members, and the impact of the researcher. Although this research is exclusively focused on the use of GNAs in Istanbul, it was still essential to address the intertwined relationship of *online* and *offline* by means of in-depth interviews. On the other hand, the fact that I actively use GNAs since 2009 made it necessary to recognize my own position and its impacts on this study.

### 2.1. Auto-ethnography

The nature of knowledge produced by this study will be “situated”<sup>10</sup> and partial in that I myself am a gay person who has been using several GNAs for many years mainly in Turkey, but also in the United States (New York, Florida, San Francisco, San Diego) and Spain. Having used various applications in different contexts, I did not only become intimately familiar with the similarities and differences of virtual cruising between rural/local and metropolitan/global contexts. As a result of countless experiences I had through GNAs, I also became closely connected to them. Considering this intimate affective relationship between the researcher and his subject, the *researched* and the *researcher* here cannot/should not be rigidly separated. The very idea to produce this study has emerged as a result of my own lived experiences. In fact, my coming out story as a gay person in 2008 dates back to my first discovery of a virtual platform (*Planetromeo*) designed for gay men. Back then I realized that I was not the only gay person in

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<sup>9</sup> Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (SAGE, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99, doi:10.2307/3178066.

town and, maybe, being a gay was not as exceptional as I thought it was. During the period between 2009 and 2013, I had countless sexual and social encounters through various GNAs. I had exclusive relationships couple of times with people I met online and I deleted the apps “for good” as a sign of commitment. Yet, after every breakup, I downloaded them once again, hoping that there was someone else waiting for me; and yes, there was always someone on the apps.

Of course, the experience was not all pleasant and I have faced rejection and exclusion many times for not being “manly enough” or not having a fit body. Yet, I did not give up. I started going to the gym to build a “better” body, then took new pictures and uploaded them. I learned which angles were the best to display biceps and how to hold my breath to reveal my not-so-visible abs. Every picture I took of myself back then was assessed on its potential to be my new profile or private picture on an app. Knowing that beauty ideals were socially constructed did not make them less important for me - I had to play the game according to its rules if I did not want to be disqualified.

Nevertheless, as I became more aware of the structural and symbolic inequalities amongst LGBT individuals and as the discrimination amongst GNA users became more aggravated (or, maybe, I started to see them better), my experience on GNAs has transformed from “nice-looking-partner” to “looking for someone who is not misogynist, homophobic, transphobic or racist”. I have almost met no one on any GNA since around 2013 – in fact, I have barely met anyone in general as it was not quite easy to find a partner outside of a GNA for me. The idea of this study emerged exactly at this (personal) point: I wanted to talk about my own experience and show that it was not “my own” at all.

On the other hand, auto-ethnography constituted an inextricable part of this study not only because of “my” previous experience but also because of the nature of the current investigation. For conducting my digital ethnographic research and reaching potential interviewees, I used Hornet not only as a researcher (as it would not be ethically correct) but also as a user. I opened a new profile with my personal pictures (ones that I also used before) and

explicitly stated I was doing a research and needed help. Although Kozinets suggests leaving the researcher identity behind and acting as a member while doing a netnographic research, it was not appropriate in my case since the platform I study is extremely intimate.<sup>11</sup> This hybrid identity of researcher/user, as expected, presented some issues, yet, unexpectedly, it improved the research process as well. I will be talking about this in details in Section 3.4.

## 2.2. “In-App” Netnography

“Online communities form or manifest cultures, the learned beliefs, values and customs that serve to order, guide and direct the behavior of a particular society or group”

Kozinets, V. Robert (2010: 12)

Digital ethnography constituted the backbone of this qualitative case study both as an entrance point to the field and as the primary means through which the data is collected. I did a close observation of GNA users, partly to collect data and partly to make decision about whom to contact out of the actual users. The data obtained throughout the research is categorized into three groups: archival data, elicited data, and field notes.<sup>12</sup> The archival data comprises the information gained through a discourse and visual content analysis of user’s profiles. The analysis of a user profile concentrated on three basic elements: the pictures uploaded; profile name; and personal information/statements shared on the profile page.

Even though I do not know the exact number of profiles I saw while doing my netnographic field work – mostly because I transgressed many times the blurred line between *researching* and *cruising* – I ended up analyzing 300 profiles in total and I have conducted in-app interviews with forty of them. I have also had five unsuccessful attempts to realize face-to-face interviews with the owners of the profiles that I have analyzed. The elicited data, on the other hand, is the information personally acquired from users through in-app interviews. In total, I talked to 40 users who were primarily gay and bisexual men, but also two trans\* sex workers and

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<sup>11</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography*.

<sup>12</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography*, 95-117

two (MTF) cross-dresser persons. Although many users volunteered to help me to conduct my research, I also personally contacted users in order to prevent a self-selecting sample. I was especially cautious to reach people with different gender and/or sexual identities and from distinct parts of the city. Finally, field notes were part of my auto-ethnography, above all due to my hybrid position as a researcher/user.

Nevertheless, netnographic research was not enough for my purposes here to explore the impacts of a non/human techno-cultural actant's interactions with society and interpersonal relationships. However crucial it was to interview users and analyze their profiles, it was not adequate to account for how the visual and software design of an application is extremely influential on the ways it is used. Hence, to treat technological artifacts/software as a text that can be read and deconstructed, the so-called "walkthrough method"<sup>13</sup> is used to compensate for the shortcomings of a netnographic method. "A core component of this method is a technical walkthrough that interrogates a platform's technological architecture, examining features, buttons, and user activity flows."<sup>14</sup> In other words, this approach aims to unfold how the users, visual content, and the software intra-act with each other, generating counterintuitive situations, such as the way *twitter* – unexpectedly – is also used in Turkey to facilitate sexual encounters.

### 2.3. Netnography of Hornet

Above, it is imperative to address the focalization of this netnographic research on Hornet and users from Istanbul. San Francisco-based *Hornet*, which was released back in 2012, is one of the most popular GNAs on a global scale and claimed to have more than 7 million users (Figure 1).<sup>15</sup> Hornet is also the most commonly used application in Turkey and it reflects the mainstream MSM GNAs to a very large extent both in terms of design and user activity.

<sup>13</sup> Duguay, Stefanie, "Is Being #instagay Different from an #lgbttakeover? A Cross-Platform Investigation of Sexual and Gender Identity Performances." (SM&S: Social Media and Society 2015 International Conference, Ted Rogers School of Management, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2015), <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/85139/>.

<sup>14</sup> Duguay, Stefanie, "Is Being #instagay Different from an #lgbttakeover? A Cross-Platform Investigation of Sexual and Gender Identity Performances," 5

<sup>15</sup> "Hornet," accessed May 05, 2016, <https://angel.co/hornet>

Especially, after the legal ban on Grindr in 2013 as a “protection measure”,<sup>16</sup> Hornet became the most popular application in Turkey.<sup>17</sup> All of my respondents confirmed this and explained why Hornet is actually better than other options:<sup>18</sup> it allows uploading more pictures including private ones; it is more user friendly; has less spams and advertisement; and, it provides the option to change one’s location. Besides its popularity, this last feature has been also particularly decisive on the decision to focus on Hornet. This enabled me to virtually travel to any other location I wish and see various geopolitical reconfigurations of the app. In addition, the launch of “Hornet for Web (Beta)” in September 2015 facilitated the research process immensely. The Beta version is simply Hornet for computer, which I used to realize my netnographic field research. This version did not only help me in terms of overcoming the difficulties of doing a research through a smartphone. Additionally, I was able to search for any profile name or hashtag thanks to the ‘search box’ on Hornet Beta.

The popularity of Hornet also derives from its simple and user-friendly interface that requires a minimum amount of activity to cruise: swipe, click, zoom in, zoom out, write, send pictures, share location, add to favorites or block (Figure 2). On the other hand, creating a profile for cruising is also effortless. A feeless profile on Hornet includes the followings: a user nickname up to 18 characters, a *headline* up to 33 characters and an “*about you*” section up to 128 characters. Users can also share their age, race, height, weight, position (top, bottom, versatile, vers-bottom, vers-top), relationship status, what they are looking for (chat, date, friends, networking, relationship), HIV status and their distance if they want to. A premium profile, on the other hand, provides options to *filter* the users –according to height, weight, position, HIV status and relationship status- one can access. Free account only offers two filters that are age and, quite interestingly, race. Also, although one can only upload up to four public and four

<sup>16</sup> Akpınar, Ömer, “Grindr Ban in Turkey Taken to Constitutional Court,” *KaosGL*, March 27, 2015, <http://kaosgl.org/page.php?id=19064>.

<sup>17</sup> Renay, Murat, “Sosyal Sorumluluk Sahibi Gay Dating Uygulamasi: Hornet.”

<sup>18</sup> Almost half of my respondents indicated that Hornet is not the only application they use, but it is the one they most frequently use. Amongst other applications that were mentioned Grindr and PlanetRomeo are the most commonly used ones after Hornet.



private pictures on a free account, premium version has no limitations in this regard. In addition, users can see “who checked their profiles” and who are new on Hornet if they subscribe to premium option, and cruise *invisibly* so that the other premium users cannot see when their profiles are visited.

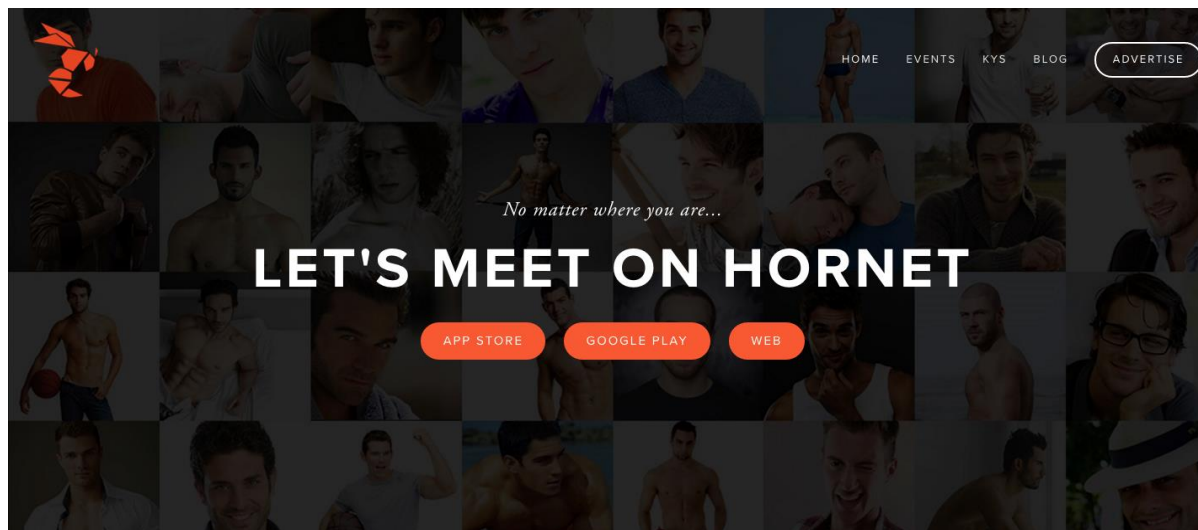


Figure 1: No matter where you are... Let's meet on Hornet<sup>19</sup>



Figure 2: User interface of Hornet<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Retrieved from <http://love.hornetapp.com/>

<sup>20</sup> Retrieved from <https://itunes.apple.com/md/app/hornet-gay-social-network/id462678375#download>

MSM virtual cruising through GNAs has always been easier for it allows skipping long lists of personal questions about who we are and what we are looking for. Virtual cruising on GNAs has also been a real-time experience for MSM since a user can only see and contact online profiles or who has been recently online. The ease and immediacy of cruising convinced many people that MSM GNAs solely aim “hook-ups” as opposed to dating websites for heterosexual people who seek “serious” relationships.<sup>21</sup> Even the first GNA for heterosexual people, *Blendr*, - designed also by *Grindr*'s creator who advertises it for being less focused on sex than *Grindr*- requires users to answer questions about their hobbies and interests. Likewise, Sean Howell, the CEO of Hornet, is insistent that their aim is to enable to connect marginalized sexual identities and facilitate their encounter, which should not be exclusively sexual.<sup>22</sup>

I think this situation is telling in that it duplicates the mainstream representations of “gay promiscuity” and “heterosexual chastity”. In fact, Weigel argues that the success of MSM GNAs is directly related to the fact that these applications are built on the “pre-existing institutions of sexual subcultures”.<sup>23</sup> Although I agree with her to some extent, I would like to reformulate her argument: MSM GNAs are not hook-up oriented because non-heterosexual and gender nonconforming people should be inherently more “promiscuous” (not that there is something wrong about promiscuity), but because they are imagined to be like that from the perspective of long-lasting heteronormative ideals, grounded in the ideal and institution of the nuclear hetero-family and monogamy. Also, I would like to add that there is nothing that makes an MSM GNA necessarily sex-oriented only, as many people use them to find long-term partners or friends.

In addition, heteronormative understanding of sex and sexuality is also manifest within the “User Guidelines” provided by Hornet. Hornet guidelines list the “Obvious and Not-So-

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<sup>21</sup> Rupert Neate, “Welcome to Blendr, the Straight Dating App Following in Grindr’s Footsteps,” September 12, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/sep/12/blendr-straight-dating-app-grindr>.

<sup>22</sup> Renay, Murat, “Sosyal Sorumluluk Sahibi Gay Dating Uygulaması: Hornet,” *Radikal Blog*, 2014, <http://blog.radikal.com.tr/lgbt/sosyal-sorumluluk-sahibi-gay-dating-uygulamasihornet-46273>.

<sup>23</sup> Moira Weigel, “Why Isn’t There a Grindr for Straight People?,” *The Guardian*, May 22, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/may/22/hook-up-apps-grindr-tinder-gay-straight-people-dating>.

Obvious” restrictions and “Borderline Areas”, which I was not aware of until quite recently.<sup>24</sup> When I discovered these guidelines I shared them with some of my friends on Hornet and we were all bemused as we know that every single item on the list was violated by users, including us. Amongst the most commonly transgressed rules of conduct are the followings: using nude pictures displaying genitals, erection, crotch or pubic hair, posing with firearms or weapons, displaying sex toys and sexually explicit images, profanity and curse words, texts referring to genital size, racial remarks and escorting. Supposedly, all of the profiles and pictures on Hornet need to be reviewed and approved in order to protect the “discretion” of Hornet and its partners, *Apple* and *Google*.<sup>25</sup> In fact, such restrictions are common amongst MSM GNAs, yet, unlike the other GNAs, Hornet does not implement them as strictly. For instance, on *Grindr*, user profile pictures are not visible until they are approved, whereas on Hornet there is no such preliminary screening.

Finally, regarding my choice of location, Istanbul was saliently the most appropriate city to focus on for several reasons. First of all, Istanbul is *considered* (since there is no actual data on the subject) as the city with the highest visibility of LGBTQ individuals in Turkey. Probably, this is both because of the high number of local LGBTQ organizations and because of the city’s perception as the “gay capital” of the country.<sup>26</sup> Especially important for me was the fact that there were many more users on Hornet in Istanbul than in other big cities in Turkey where LGBTQ populations are relatively higher than in the rest of the country.<sup>27</sup> Second, within the confines of this study, I also sought to reflect on the re-definition of “public” and “private” in regard to use of GNAs (See Chapter 5). Because Istanbul is the city with the greatest amount of spaces considered “public” such as gay bars, clubs and cafes, it offered a germane field of analysis for me. Of course, it should be remembered that “the gay capital” is also one of the cities where

<sup>24</sup> “Hornet Usage Guidelines,” accessed April 04, 2016, <http://love.hornetapp.com/usage-guidelines/>

<sup>25</sup> Renay, Murat, “Sosyal Sorumluluk Sahibi Gay Dating Uygulamasi: Hornet.”

<sup>26</sup> The list of LGBTQ organizations in Turkey can be accessed through this link: <https://lgbtnewsturkey.com/list-of-lgbti-organizations-in-turkey/>

<sup>27</sup> Before making the decision I checked the overall number of users located within 100 km in Istanbul, Izmir, Bursa and Ankara, which are the biggest cities in Turkey. The number of users on Hornet was at least two times higher in Istanbul than in the other places.

homo- and transphobic violence happens most frequently, which is a significant point for the analysis of the affirmative potentials of GNAs.<sup>28</sup>

#### **2.4. “Am I just a research object to you?”: *In-app* interviewing**

As a researcher I have neither preferred nor enjoyed doing in-depth face-to-face interviews due to the unequal power relations between the researcher and “researched”, which is ideologically called “interviewee or respondent” in most scholarly works. The idea of “collecting” data from a person, thus, objectifying her has always been an academic kind of exploitation (amongst many others) for me.<sup>29</sup> For that reason, I have always tried to avoid any necessity to conduct interviews. However, this study required to do interviews and the only way to reach the people was through Hornet: an application where MSM usually connect to find sex partners and share their most intimate information, both written and visual.

Under these circumstances, it was not ethically correct to create an impersonal user profile with hidden research purposes. Yet, however preferable using a personal profile could be, it was still risky given the dominant purpose and content of interaction in the app. And, this turned out to be one of the most important factors that affected adversely my attempts to make face-to-face interviews. In total, I have conducted 5 interviews in the first stage of my research. Except one, the other four interviewees implied or directly stated that they would like to continue the interview “at their place”, even though I have explicitly written on my profile and repeated it during preliminary conversations that my purpose (this time) was only doing research. Yet, if you talk to someone on an app and then meet that person, due to the multiple positioning of the situation, it is still open to the assumption that it is not only for work but probably for a ‘sex date’ as well. It became crystal clear during my last interview in this face-to-face part of my field research that doing interviews, by the force of the logic of the apps, are always potentially open

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<sup>28</sup> KaosGL, “2014 Yılında Türkiye’de Gerçekleşen Homofobi ve Transfobi Temelli Nefret Suçları Raporu (The Report of Homophobic and Transphobic Hate Crimes that Occurred in Turkey in 2014)” (KaosGL, June 2015), [http://www.kaosgldernegi.org/resim/yayin/dl/2014\\_nefret\\_sulari\\_raporu.pdf](http://www.kaosgldernegi.org/resim/yayin/dl/2014_nefret_sulari_raporu.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> In fact, this topic has been brought up many times by feminist methodologies. Therefore, in my future work, I would like to develop this point further by incorporating feminist methodology into my work.

to this kind of failure, but sometimes on actual encounters they fail so strongly that it is better not having them at all.

When my final interviewee accused me for treating him “like an object of study” because I just considered him as a participant for my research but refused him as an object of desire, it became evident that the erotic power dynamics of this field research required a less immediate way of interacting with people. Hence, after my fifth interview, I started to contact people for interviews through Hornet and, surprisingly, it was a very pleasant experience of doing mediated interviews that are then less likely to be cross-cut by hierarchical power relations. In a way, I applied the same Deleuzian ontology here as well. Claiming that the quality of an interview is unassailably higher if it is face-to-face than on in-app would be the same as claiming that virtual is not real, it is less of it. Following this logic, in-app interview is not necessarily worse than face-to-face ones and, in fact, it can even help to at least ease the problematic relationship of ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ to a significant extent – especially when the erotic of power and the power of erotica is present.

After making the decision that I should give up on *interviewing* people face-to-face I started simply to have casual conversations on Hornet itself, similar to the ones users are accustomed to having on the virtual space of the app. I first explained them my purposes and we exchanged our private pictures as usual. Then, we had conversations that lasted between half an hour to a bit over an hour. Although the content was not common on Hornet, the style of the conversation reflected most of the conventions of Hornet. Most importantly, it was no different than any other conversation on Hornet in that at the end of a conversation there is never an obligation to meet that person and/or have sex. In-app interviews, thus, could almost erase the exploitative and objectifying impacts of face-to-face interviews arranged via the app thanks to the casual and mediated nature of a conversation on a platform where both of the individuals are equally vulnerable and naked (literally and metaphorically) and due to the fact that they both use the same app for at least partially similar purposes.

### 3. CARTOGRAPHY OF THE “VIRTUAL GAY COMMUNITY”

Although still under-studied, GNAs are becoming an important object of knowledge production in many different fields from cultural studies to sociology, technology studies to psychology, and media studies to public health<sup>30</sup>. However informative the existing studies might be, they fail to grasp the complexity of the subject, presenting either a euphoric or an apocalyptic image. The former tendency has been to embrace GNAs for their contribution to the production of a safe space where non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities can meet free from societal and institutional oppression.<sup>31</sup> In the same line of thought, it has also been argued that online dating tools may pave the way for a “virtual community” where there is no exclusion or discrimination and where ‘sexual minorities’ can come together.<sup>32</sup>

These studies seem to forget or ignore the exclusions and discriminations that are pervasively re-produced *within* and *through* GNAs. The exclusively Western view of point manifest in the investigations of Rheingold, Reynolds and Gudelunas, for instance, does not take into account the ways in which GNAs can be used to hunt MSM users in countries such as Russia and Egypt.<sup>33</sup> Finally, even though I agree with their argument about the production of a “community”, one has to be caught in the position of the socially privileged in order not to see that these apps-based “communities” are replete with numerous forms of inequality and discrimination. We will come back to this issue in when I approach the question of “virtual community” discussing both its manifest limitations and potentials.

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<sup>30</sup> Grov et al., “Gay and Bisexual Men's Use of the Internet”

<sup>31</sup> Robert Reynolds, “Imagining Gay Life in the Internet Age or Why I Don't Internet Date,” *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society* 6:1 (2008); Lynne Hillier and Lyn Harrison, “Building realities less limited than their own: Young people practising same-sex attraction on the Internet,” *Sexualities* 10:1 (2007)

<sup>32</sup> Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1993); David Gudelunas, “There's an App for that: The Uses and Gratifications of Online Social Networks for Gay Men,” *Sexuality & Culture* 16 (2012), accessed February 10, 2016, doi. 10.1007/s12119-012-9127-4.

<sup>33</sup> “You will be jailed for gay propaganda,” accessed April 02, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2554971/You-jailed-gay-propaganda-Hackers-threaten-thousands-men-Russian-version-hook-app-Grindr.html>; “Egypt's police using social media,” accessed April 02, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/egypts-police-using-social-media-and-apps-like-grindr-to-trap-gay-people-9738515.html>.

On the other hand, the apocalyptic tendency, announcing the death of “the gay community” has been equally limited for disregarding the queer and subversive potentials provided by GNAs. Public health studies lead the way in this approach, blaming GNAs for increasing the risk of HIV and STI transmission.<sup>34</sup> The mere increase in social and sexual encounters through GNAs is argued to be enough to suspect, or, even, see GNAs as the cause for a public health crisis. Another technophobic claim is usually made by gay men who used or are still using GNAs. Gross is but one example of many gay men condemning any kind of GNA for commodifying the human body and sex, while he himself recognizes that “gay urban life has always been a meat market”.<sup>35</sup> As if cruising and queer relationships have been necessarily different before GNAs in terms of the isolation of people and commodification of body and sex, Gross says:

[C]ruising, unlike shopping, requires a buyer to also make himself a seller. And selling yourself online, unlike selling yourself in the meat markets of bars and clubs, requires you to create a sexy image that stands separate from your physical self. You must create, in other words, a pornographic version of yourself, a thing that represents you but is not you.<sup>36</sup>

What is surprising for me though is not the moralizing arguments themselves but rather the fact that even a queer theorist like Dean might be caught so easily in the same discourse that resonates a lot with the moralizing arguments coming both from the LGBTs and hegemonic heteronormative discourses right after the AIDS epidemic in the USA.<sup>37</sup> Dean critiques and disagrees with ‘online cruising’ on the pretext that it privatizes the sex whereas “public cruising”

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<sup>34</sup> Sheana S. Bull and McFarlane, “Soliciting sex on the Internet: What are the risks for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV?” *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* 27:9 (2000); Alex Carballo-Diequez et al., “Cybercartography Of Popular Internet Sites Used By New York City Men Who Have Sex With Men Interested In Bareback Sex,” *AIDS Education and Prevention* 18:6 (2006)

<sup>35</sup> Gross, Michael J., “Has Manhunt Destroyed Gay Culture?,” *Out Magazine*, August 4, 2008, <http://www.out.com/entertainment/2008/08/04/has-manhunt-destroyed-gay-culture>.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Joseph Gross, “Has Manhunt Destroyed Gay Culture?” *Out Magazine*, August 4, 2008

<sup>37</sup> Tina Takemoto, “The Melancholia of AIDS: Interview with Douglas Crimp,” *Art Journal* 62, no. 4 (2003): 81–90, doi:10.2307/3558492.

brings the sex into “public space” and enables cross-class contact.<sup>38</sup> What he does not question, though, is the unlucky distinction between public and private on which he builds his entire argument (See Chapter 5).

### 3.1. De-constructing The ‘Virtual Community’

Both euphoric and apocalyptic views are inadequate to account for the intricacy of GNAs, their use and consequences. Turning a blind eye to the severe re-production and obdurate reinforcing of inequality and exclusion through GNAs, I believe, is an extremely dangerous sign of the wide lack of awareness of the socio-economic disparities amongst LGBTQ people. The moralizing arguments, on the other hand, deny any potential or positive aspect of GNAs and articulate the MSM as “deathly” either literally by linking it in a cause-and-effect relationship with HIV or more symbolically, seeing it as an object of profound dehumanizing commodification. In what follows, I will develop how this study is meant to overcome the current inadequacies in the literature by adopting different theoretical frameworks in regards to *power*, *class* and *agency*.

#### 3.1.1. The Beginning or The End of The ‘Virtual Community’?

In order to understand the complexity of GNAs and cut across the polarizing and polarized approaches in the literature, one has to locate them at the intersection of power and resistance and see them as an ongoing process of negotiation. Therefore, I suggest that a Foucauldian understanding of power would be quite enlightening in order to understand how GNAs can contribute to heteronormative power relations and discourses by re-producing them, yet, at the same time, resist them by providing new tools that are not yet caught within hegemonic power relations.<sup>39</sup> Failing to pay enough attention to the intertwined relationship between power and resistance is what prevents the one-sided euphoric and apocalyptic accounts from being successfully explanatory. Power relations are never exclusively empowering/liberatory

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<sup>38</sup> Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacies: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009)

<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage, 1990).



or debilitating/enslaving, yet always ambiguous. Due to the very fact that resistance does not happen outside of the hegemonic power relations, they will be always directly and dialectically related to each other. Yet, however, it can never be known a priori if this dialectical encounter between resistance and hegemonic power will resolve or it will remain *ironic*- that is, they will exist together in a way that they can both challenge and/or re-affirm each other simultaneously.

Hence, what is at stake here is not an either/or question but the simultaneous and radically inseparable existence of normative power and subversion that makes them both mutually possible. In that sense, any optimistic account that suggests the emergence of a ‘virtual community’ without acknowledging its perilous limitations is destined to fail to account for the situation. To have a general idea of the situation, it must be known that the most commonly welcomed profiles on Hornet belong to users with “young, abled, masculine, muscular, athletic and sporty” body whereas “old, disabled, effeminate and unfit” ones are warned to “stay away”. In Chapter 6, I will focus profoundly on the femme-, homo- and transphobic attitudes of Hornet users. On the other hand, any reference to the negative consequences of MSM GNAs without considering their affirmative and queer potentialities is equally restricted. Consequently, in Chapter 5, I will discuss the production of a public space by means of Hornet in Istanbul, where LGBTQ people are denied the safe and equal access to public spaces. According to a survey conducted in 2015 with the participation of 2875 individuals, the percentage of LGBTQs who complained about the lack of safe public areas is 57.9 (1631), demonstrating how crucial a technological tool might be to produce a relatively more accessible and safe space.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Yılmaz, Volkan and Göçmen, İpek, “Türkiye’de Lezbiyen, Gey, Biseksüel ve Trans Bireylerin Sosyal ve Ekonomik Sorunları Araştırmasının Özet Sonuçları (Survey Results of the Research on the Social and Economic Problems of LGBTQ Individuals in Turkey),” *ResearchTurkey*, June 2015, <http://researchturkey.org/tr/summary-results-of-the-social-and-economic-problems-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transsexual-lgbt-individuals-in-turkey-research/>.

### 3.1.2. Whose “Community”?

According to the same survey, 987 participants (35%) indicated that their income is insufficient to meet their basic needs.<sup>41</sup> On considering the formation of a virtual community of GNA users, therefore, the first question that comes to one’s mind is who can afford a smartphone to upload the application on. As widespread as they are, it will be highly problematic if it is assumed that one does have access these to technological tools. Neither is a smartphone sufficient to use MSM applications without additional expenses, such as subscription fee for internet usage.

Therefore, assuming a monolithic and homogenous gay community disregards the fact that the term ‘community’ conveniently disregards and mystifies deep-seated divisions, erasing irreducible differences of financial position. The idea that MSM GNAs provide a safe and accessible space can be equally problematic if it does not recognize the requirements of entrance to and permanence in virtual community.<sup>42</sup> Hence, the argument that MSM applications contribute to gay sexual liberation obliterates the class inequalities to an important extent.<sup>43</sup> Such dismissal of class relations not only masks the poverty and economic inequalities, but it also reduces the chances of interventions for an equal redistribution of resources by creating a chimerical sense of a “uniform gay community”.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, it would be appropriate to say that GNAs do provide invaluable opportunities for sexually marginalized people as long as they can afford them. For these reasons, in Chapter 4, I will offer a different way of interpreting community and explain how it applies to the case of MSM GNAs.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Reynolds, Robert, “Imagining gay life in the internet age.”; Hillier, Lynne et. al., “Building realities less limited than their own.”; Rheingold, Howard, *The Virtual Community*.; Gudelunas, David, “There is an App for that.”

<sup>43</sup> Reynolds, “Imagining Gay Life in the Internet Age or Why I Don’t Internet Date”; Gudelunas, “There’s an App for That.”

<sup>44</sup> Maskovsky, Jeff, “Do We All ‘Reek of the Commodity’?: Consumption and the Erasure of Poverty in Lesbian and Gay Studies,” in *Out in Theory: The Emergence of Lesbian and Gay Anthropology*, ed. Lewin, Ellen and Leap, William, 1999, 264–86.

### 3.2. Is Grindr What The Users Make of It?

“Society and technology”, says Latour, “are not two ontologically distinct entities but more like phases of the same essential action”.<sup>45</sup> In the same line of thought, Aronowitz and Menser invites us to adopt a theory of *complexity* according to which society and technology are not separable dimensions, yet they constitute, reflect, and alter each other.<sup>46</sup> This position implies that neither technology nor the virtual spaces it creates are less real or important than what has come to be known as “actual”. According to Deleuze, the actual is something that is already real while potentiality is something that can be real, but it is yet to be. In this relation virtuality is posited as a step further than potentiality: something which is not actual but real.<sup>47</sup>

In this regard, one of the most important gaps in the literature on GNAs and virtual cruising is directly related to the narrow understanding of agency in case of a technological non/human artifact. GNAs are either considered as inactive objects or, oppositely, as independent agents, falling short of a more elaborated analysis that would successfully reveal the intra-actions between human agent, non/human actant and socio-political context. In Chapter 6, however, I will establish a more promising discussion in regard to non/human agency which is always closely connected to context they are used in but never determined by it.

Although Simkhai, the creator of the first GNA, thinks that Grindr *is what the users make of it*,<sup>48</sup> technology has been at the center not only of critiques directed against GNAs, but also that of a more prevalent “cybersex moral panic”<sup>49</sup>, revealing a general tendency to associating an entire range of supposedly negative consequences of online cruising with the technology and its artifacts. “Many critiques blame the apps,” complains Woo, “but neglect to attribute enough

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<sup>45</sup> Latour, Bruno, “Technology Is Society Made Durable,” in *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination*, ed. Law, John (New York: Routledge, 1991), 129.

<sup>46</sup> Stanley Aronowitz and Menser, Michael, “On Cultural Studies, Science and Technology,” in *Technoscience and Cyberculture*, ed. Aronowitz, Stanley et al. (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 7–30.

<sup>47</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 148-152.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, Joe, “Grindr Boss Says Dating Apps Are NOT Killing Gay Scene · PinkNews.”

<sup>49</sup> Dennis D. Waskul, “Internet sex: the seductive “freedom to””, in *Handbook of the New Sexuality Studies*, eds. Seidman, S. et al. (New York: Routledge, 2006)

responsibility to the men using the app.”<sup>50</sup> His point is not to posit GNAs as inanimate objects that can be put to good or bad use, nor does he argue that humans should be victims of the apps.<sup>51</sup> Instead, his central concern is with the fully determinist blindness shared by both stance that cannot grip the infinite number of possibilities created by assuming a shared agency in the course of the interaction between humans and non/humans.

GNAs are neither what the users make of them nor free agents: both positions fail to provide the complexity of agency. In my opinion a non-binary approach can be developed within the new materialist formulation of agency as continuum.<sup>52</sup> Such an approach would not only take into account the agential capacity of the non/human “actants”, but it would also consider the whole act as a perplexed process which has *many* human actors –producers, designers, users etc.- involved at the same time. The analysis of a GNA divorced from the continuum where it operates is always an inadequate attempt because of the limited understanding of agency: that is, it does not address that *there is no* [single] [human] *doer behind the deed*, but the interaction of *human and non/human doers*.

As a corollary to this move, it is crucial to underline that non/human “actants”<sup>53</sup> are not reduced to the material artifacts, i.e. GNAs and phones, in this study but implicate discursive practices and diverse normalizing mechanisms –such as hetero- and homonormativity-, as well as institutional and informal regulations –such as constraining state interventions and societal aggression. Therefore, the agency will be considered here as that of the “assemblage”<sup>54</sup> in which there are numerous non-hierarchical forces simultaneously co-operating, strengthening or undermining one another.

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<sup>50</sup> Jamie Woo, “Grindr, Part of a Complete Breakfast,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2:1 (2015), 66.

<sup>51</sup> Woo, Jaime, “Grindr,” 62.

<sup>52</sup> Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)

<sup>53</sup> Latour, Bruno, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*.

<sup>54</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1987), 407.

### 3.3. Virtual Cruising in The Times of “Liquid Modernity”

I end this chapter by emphasizing that my aim is not to reveal something specific about “gayness”, “being gay” or “gay relationality” in the context of MSM GNAs. My objective is to look at the societal influences of GNAs, first and foremost, by analyzing the relationships between them and the socio-economic context in which they are reproduced, popularized and used. With the help of my case study, Specifically, I wish to demonstrate the embeddedness of heteronormative ideals and norms within GNAs in order to unfold that many phenomena observed in those spaces are not exclusively related to the “virtual gay culture” but are indexical of mainstream socio-economic conditions. In fact, there is nothing that can be defined as ‘merely gay’, let alone the matter of some ‘gay culture’.<sup>55</sup> Since my data is predominantly GNA generated interaction, when it comes to the GNAs and virtual cruising it has to be highlighted that the type of connection and communication observed in virtual spaces does not derive from a ‘gay culture’ either: to (assume to) know the identity of the user does not automatically mean that whatever they do should therefore be seen to be gay.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, many critique inter-personal communication within MSM GNAs for being shallow, instrumentalist and unfriendly,<sup>57</sup> turning a blind eye once again to the fact that the form of communication they criticize is the general condition of modern societies, having nothing to do specifically with MSM GNAs or their users. Bauman argues that the *liquid* lives of modern subjects necessitate and generate new platforms and strategies of communication that facilitate not only connection, but also disconnection at the same time.<sup>58</sup> The Internet according to Bauman, therefore, provides the possibility to *go offline* easily back into the private live, while maintaining a great many amount of superficial relationships rather than profound ones.<sup>59</sup> Note that although Bauman’s argument holds true in many respects, I will not agree with the statement

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<sup>55</sup> Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick, *Language and Sexuality*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2003).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*.; Gross, “Has Manhunt Destroyed Gay Culture?”

<sup>58</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*, (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2004).

that going online necessarily indicates a decrease in the profoundness of inter-subjective relationships. In Chapter 5, I will indicate that a virtual/online encounter can be the only form of public encounter in Istanbul and it might not be necessarily more superficial than an offline relationship.

## 4. REMAPPING COMMUNITY AS A RELATION

As discussed in the previous chapter, the scholarly discussions hitherto established about “community” and virtual MSM cruising fail to account for the paradoxical and ambiguous operation of Geosocial Networking Applications. What I seek to demonstrate, though, is how Hornet simultaneously subverts and supports homo- and heteronormativity, therefore, ameliorates and worsens the conditions of marginalized people with non-normative gender and/or sexual identities and preferences in Turkey, Istanbul. At first glance, Hornet provides a novel and “easy” way for gay and bisexual men and (MTF) cross-dresser individuals, and trans\* women to socialize and reach potential partners without facing public or institutional pressure. This could have been read not only as a way of transgressing the homonormative boundaries of the so-called “queer community”, but also as a means of challenging the heteronormative regime in Turkey, which violently isolates and excludes *marginalized* (not marginal) groups from public spaces and, therefore, eradicates the means through which people at margins can express or experience their identities, desires and practices.

Yet, on the other hand, Hornet also (re)produces other ways of exclusions and discrimination amongst users, engendering regulatory mechanisms of surveillance and control that are not exactly different from that of the heteronormative regime, which normalizes and protects normative gender and sexual identities, while discriminating against the non-normative others. For instance, trans\* people, sex workers and “effeminate” men are not only excluded from the institutionally and socially recognized space of normalcy, respectability and acceptability in Turkey, but also from the virtual space of GNAs.

In Roberto Esposito’s words, GNAs enable *community*<sup>60</sup> (1) for decreasing the isolation of marginalized people –that is, for increasing the potentials for them to have an individual and collective life- by providing a common space; (2) and for enabling the self to expose itself to

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<sup>60</sup> Roberto Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics,” trans. Zakiya Hanafi, *Angelaki* 18, no. 3 (2013): 83–90.

others. However, on the other hand, GNAs buttress *negative immunization*<sup>61</sup> for strengthening the socially and virtually set boundaries of the self that will reject any kind of connection to non-normative others. Remember that in the previous chapter I have discussed the inadequacies of the existing literature on MSM GNAs that either assumed the emergence of a virtual “community”<sup>62</sup> or announced the end of the “gay community”<sup>63</sup>. In other words, in either case, the authors not only claimed the existence of some sort of a “community” but they also insistently formulated their arguments one-sidedly, failing to do justice to the sophisticated nature of the subject at hand. Esposito’s concepts, however, are very useful here because they allow understanding the specific nature of the paradox embedded in GNAs in terms of producing both positive –communitarian- and negative -immunitarian- consequences –the very paradox which constitutes the central concern of this study as it is believed to reveal the complexity of the subject at hand.

In addition, in Esposito’s formulation of *community* and *immunity*, both concepts seem to be in a close –but, controversial- relationship with *cruising*, which, according to Bersani, Dean and Roach, is about lessening (immunity) of the self that is in an *impersonal* connection to others.<sup>64</sup> “Often understood simply as the pursuit of new sex partners,” writes Dean, “cruising entails a remarkably hospitable disposition toward strangers.”<sup>65</sup> Given the fact that virtual cruising is what at stake in the case of GNAs, Esposito offers important theoretical tools to comprehend the byzantine operation of GNAs and the idiosyncrasies of virtual cruising.

Furthermore, especially significant for me is the capacity of Esposito’s concepts to bring light upon the intra-actions between the normative regulatory mechanisms, and immunity and

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<sup>61</sup> Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics.”

<sup>62</sup> Gudelunas, “There’s an App for That.”; Reynolds, “Imagining Gay Life in the Internet Age or Why I Don’t Internet Date.”; Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*.”

<sup>63</sup> Gross, Michael J., “Has Manhunt Destroyed Gay Culture?”; Bull and McFarlane, “Soliciting Sex on the Internet - What Are the Risks for Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV?”; Carballo-Diéguez et al., “Cybercartography of Popular Internet Sites Used by New York City Men Who Have Sex with Men Interested in Bareback Sex.”

<sup>64</sup> Bersani, Leo, “Sociability and Cruising,” *Umbra(a): Sameness* 1 (2002): 9–23; Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*; Roach, Tom, “Becoming Fungible: Queer Intimacies in Social Media.”

<sup>65</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 176.



community. Understanding the integrality of “homo- and heteronormativity”<sup>66</sup>, on the one hand, immunity and community, on the other, is crucial to grasp the paradoxical working of MSM GNAs. Esposito says, “if community breaks down the barriers of individual identity, immunity is the way to rebuild them, in defensive and offensive forms, against any external element that threatens it.”<sup>67</sup> To this respect, I read Esposito through Butler to suggest that “barriers of individual identity” are constructed as a result of identifying with, embodying and performing normative ideals (of sex, gender and class in our case) that allow the subject to create an illusionary unitary self by abjecting -in other words, by excluding and repudiating- both the non-normative ideals and others, which threaten its stability and coherence. Butler beautifully says, “The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of “sex” [or, of gender], and this identification takes place through a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge.”<sup>68</sup> The abject other, thus, becomes not only a dangerous figure that must not be identified with, but also a threatening virus that shall not be welcomed or desired because it both deviates from the norm and reveals its weakness. Butler continues, “This is a repudiation which crates the valence of “abjection” and its status for the subject as a threatening spectre.”<sup>69</sup>

Given that identification with (homo)normative ideals is what renders certain subjects normal and acceptable, immunization of homonormatively identified subjects against the non-normative ones is what is at stake in the case of Hornet users. *Homonormative immunity*, therefore, implies the “barriers of individual identity” amongst Hornet users and how these barriers are reproduced and strengthened by Hornet. However, this is only the immunitarian dimension of

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<sup>66</sup> Berlant and Warner define heteronormativity as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged.” See: Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–66. Homonormativity, though, a term coined by Duggan, calls attention to the uncritical reproduction of heteronormative ideals especially amongst gay men under neoliberal settings. See: Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Beacon Press, 2004).

<sup>67</sup> Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics,” 85.

<sup>68</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, 1 edition (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 3.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

virtual cruising on Hornet. On the other hand, Hornet also contributes to community which does not only break the subjects free from their homonormative barriers -because *virtual community* can reduce the social and virtual distance between normative subjects and abject others- but also transgresses the heteronormative socio-political restrictions, since it refutes homo- and transphobic discrimination against non-heterosexual and gender nonconforming subjects by providing a non-heteronormative common space.

In the rest of this chapter, I will demonstrate how the inseparableness of community and immunity offers a critique of the theories on cruising and MSM GNAs, which tend to overlook the sex, gender and class based immunitarian paradigm that became the central aspect of contemporary cruising.<sup>70</sup> However effective (virtual) cruising can be to generate a complaisant disposition towards otherness, it needs to be approached with caution in order to not to repeat the same errors committed by euphoric accounts of MSM GNAs and cruising.

#### 4.1. Community, Immunity and Cruising

“[...] community is not a common ‘being,’ but, rather, the being ‘in common’ of an existence that coincides with *exposure to otherness* [...]. (emphasis added)”

Esposito, Roberto (2013: 88)

“The pleasure of sociability would not be merely that of a restful interlude in social life. Instead, it would be the consequence of *our being less than what we really are.*” (emphasis original)

Bersani, Leo (2002: 11)

“Ethics of cruising is a matter of not of how many people one has sex with or what kind of sex one has with them (bareback or otherwise) but of how one treats the other and, more specifically, how one treats his or her own otherness. Ultimately the ethics of cruising is an ethics of the stranger in the modernity.”

Dean, Tim (2009: 177)

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<sup>70</sup> Timothy Campbell, “‘Enough of a Self’: Esposito’s Impersonal Biopolitics,” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2012): 5.

If community is not a common being for Esposito – that is, “not an entity, nor a collective subjects, nor a group of subjects”<sup>71</sup>- and if it cannot be understood in identitarian terms either -for the construction of identities relies inevitably on the *othering* and the artificial separation of the self from the other- then, what is it? According to Esposito, community “is the *relation* that makes them [people] no longer be individual subjects”<sup>72</sup>. In other words, community is neither what is common/proper to a group of people nor a common territory where they get together; rather it is *the opening of the self to other(ness)*<sup>73</sup>; the weakening of the walls that are politically built between self and other, who are in fact not two distinct entities, yet radically embedded in and mutually constituting each other. Community, therefore, is the kind of relation that trespasses the *constructed-cut* between the self and the other, enabling their mutual encounter through gradual opening.

Community is necessary both because it is the “condition of our existence”<sup>74</sup> –it is only through the opening of the self to the other that the subject comes into being beyond its merely biological existence- and because it is the “very meaning of our existence”<sup>75</sup> –life can be rendered meaningful only within the common; the other is necessary for the subject to make sense of its life. Community is also necessary for it is the only mean through which a potential future for “affirmative biopolitics *of* life and no longer on life”<sup>76</sup> can arise- that is, a future where “life would no longer be the object but somehow the subject of politics”<sup>77</sup>; where life is fostered through the opening of the self to the other, obliterating the arbitrary division between the two; and, where exclusion and discrimination would be mitigated as a result of the enhancement of individual and collective life.

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<sup>71</sup> Roberto Esposito, “Community and Nihilism,” *Cosmos and History: Journal of Nature and Social Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2009), <http://cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/124/234>.

<sup>72</sup> Esposito, “Community and Nihilism.”

<sup>73</sup> Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics,” 84.

<sup>74</sup> Roberto Esposito and Rhiannon Noel Welch, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*: (Fordham University Press, 2012), 11

<sup>75</sup> Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics,” 85.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

Community, as formulated by Esposito, can be obtained if there is a “common sphere” where the subjects can encounter and expose themselves to each other.<sup>78</sup> The production of a common space and lessening individual boundaries through Hornet will be discussed later in detail in Chapter 5. Yet, before, it must be understood that (virtual) cruising can play a pivotal role in the emergence of (virtual) community as it encourages becoming more permeable. Having said that, in the following, first of all, the potentiality of cruising to breach the individual barriers and, thus, to contribute to community will be explained. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that as promising as (virtual) cruising is, it must never be taken at face value without considering the wide range of boundaries and exclusions that are notoriously present in the case of cruising. Hence, the second step will be to prove the incapability of theories on cruising to account for the difficulty of breaking down the individual barriers. This is not to say that (virtual) cruising essentially hamstrings community, but to emphasize that the opening of the self is never as easy as it is considered. Note that the central concern of this thesis is to reveal MSM GNAs’ potentialities as much as their limitations.

#### **4.1.1. Transgressing the Barriers While Cruising**

Bersani defines cruising based on Simmel’s work, “The Sociology of Sociability”.<sup>79</sup> According to Simmel, sociability implies, first, a relation in which there is an absence of [clear] subjective interest in and expectation from other(s).<sup>80</sup> Second, and more significant to Bersani, is that within sociability “we leave ourselves behind” and we become “less than what we really are”.<sup>81</sup> In fact, it can be noticed that both points are highly interrelated, referring to the decrease in the individual frontiers and expectations within and through the act of welcoming the other. That is why, says Bersani, “cruising is sexual sociability” in that it includes a relation based on the leaving the self behind and opening to otherness without strict expectations.<sup>82</sup> Bersani writes:

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>79</sup> Bersani, Leo, “Sociability and Cruising.”

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 11, 17.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 21.

Cruising, like sociability, can be training in impersonal intimacy. The particularity that distinguishes it from sociability is, of course, that it brings bodies together. [...] Simmel, we remember, speaks of the coquette not being quite herself. She is, as we all are when we are sociable according to Simmel, somewhat less than herself; the game goes on only if her passions and practical interests stay out of the game [at least to some extent].<sup>83</sup>

What is manifested here is how cruising contributes to community by enabling the self to break through its well-established boundaries and to become more penetrable in all senses of the word. The opening of the self and weakening of the individual barriers –which is what community as relation implies according to Esposito– also happen to be defining features of the relation enabled by cruising according to Bersani. Similarly, Roach describes cruising as the following: “For cruising, if anything, is not about personal investment, attachment, or possessiveness. Rather, it is a *scattering of the self* among superficial acquaintances or strangers (emphasis added).”<sup>84</sup> Of course, the question that comes to minds now is whether virtual cruising enabled by GNAs also play a part in the production of community.

Drawing on Roach, it can be claimed that MSM virtual cruising engenders further possibilities for connecting users to each other since it provides a noteworthy decrease in the personal limits of individuals by enabling an “impersonal intimacy”.<sup>85</sup> According to Roach, “connection-as-such”<sup>86</sup>, rendered possible by MSM social media, has a potentiality to rupture the barriers between individuals in two ways: first, Roach suggests that users become “fungible goods” within online platforms.<sup>87</sup> This is by no means to say that user profiles are equal to each other. Rather, he refers to the equivalence of countless profiles in a way that virtual space is

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Roach, Tom, “Becoming Fungible: Queer Intimacies in Social Media,” 67.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 59.

transformed into a “sea of similitude”<sup>88</sup> where “difference evaporates”<sup>89</sup>. On the other hand, Roach states that shattering of the self -or put another way, opening of the self to other- is reinforced by the kind of impersonal communication that is intrinsic to the MSM social media. Accordingly, the second dimension of connection-as-such is “free indirect discourse” which, according to Roach, also allows impersonal relationality:

The chatting someone in the online cruising forum speaks in the register of free indirect discourse, a rhetorical form whose effect is that the subject of an utterance is unclear and the mysterious speaker’s words occupy a middle ground between the author and character (or, in this case, between the self and avatar).<sup>90</sup>

In addition, Roach asserts that the usual content of a conversation on MSM social media is barely personal: the parties of the conversation are not personal *identities*, but *types* such as “leather, twink, and bear” that do not disclose anything unique or revealingly personal about the user.<sup>91</sup> For Roach, when the encounter happens between types but identities, the connection becomes easier since the parties of the encounter do not feel the burden of their personal identities. “For an online presence is not a direct expression of an individual’s ‘inner self’ that one can ‘truly know,’ but rather a highly mediated aestheticization of that self seeking connection in similitude” says Roach.<sup>92</sup> At this point, based on Bersani and Roach, it becomes almost irresistible to consider virtual cruising through MSM GNAs as the perfect means to produce community that enfeebles the homonormative boundaries amongst/of users. Nonetheless, I have tried to make it crystal clear from the beginning that Bersani and Roach exemplify nothing but a *cruel optimism*, for not being sufficiently critical.<sup>93</sup> Such an optimism is cruel because it relies on the illusionary expectations from cruising which are not sustainable and, maybe, which have never been. “Cruel

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>93</sup> Even so, to do justice to Bersani and Roach, I have to admit that they do recognize the problems that might adversely impact the opening of the self. However, they assume that such problems are external to cruising, missing the fact that they are indeed constitutive of it.

optimism exists,” according to Berlant, “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing”.<sup>94</sup>

#### 4.1.2. Reconstructing the Barriers

Hopefully, it became evident until now in which ways MSM GNAs can contribute lessening the individual ego and motivating a more impersonal welcoming of the other. Yet, of course, I did not introduce Esposito at the beginning to merely demonstrate the relationship between virtual cruising and community. In fact, I do not fully concur with the one-dimensional claim that virtual cruising helps to leave the self behind so that the self can open itself to otherness. I actually introduced Esposito to reveal the contradictory consequences of GNAs. My intention is to reveal the shortcomings of the theories on (virtual) cruising that fail to notice the immunitarian paradigm whose primary purpose is to protect the individual subjectivity from being shattered or opened too much. Although at first glance virtual cruising seems to enable “a relation that makes them [people] no longer individuals”<sup>95</sup>, both Bersani and Roach fail to notice how this relation might be endangered –and, almost erased- due to excessive immunity that is always at stake when there is community: “[...] immunization neither precedes nor follows the moment of community, *but appears simultaneously as its essence*”<sup>96</sup> (emphasis added).

Esposito introduces the paradigm of immunity in order to explicate the way in which community enables opening of the self without causing its erasure. “Although immunity is necessary to the preservation of our life,” says Esposito, “when driven beyond a certain threshold it forces life into a sort of cage where not only our freedom gets lost but also the very meaning of our existence - opening of existence outside itself that takes the name of *communitas*.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, while community weakens the boundaries of the subject, immunity re-builds them so that the subject maintains its freedom. Nevertheless, if the immunity functions excessively, the subject

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<sup>94</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 1.

<sup>95</sup> Esposito, “Community and Nihilism.”

<sup>96</sup> Campbell, “Enough of a Self,” 5.

<sup>97</sup> Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics,” 85.

does not only lose its freedom but also the very meaning of its existence due to the isolation from others. If community is what relates people, immunity is what separates them from each other. Although this separation is necessary to some extent for the subject, the excess of it might be destructive both for the self and the others.

In this context, as much as I see the potentials of virtual cruising to facilitate the process of *leaving the self behind* (See Chapter 5), I cannot agree with Bersani or Roach fully. As indicated before, they cannot sufficiently recognize the ironic relationship between community and immunity- that they exist simultaneously and paradoxically, but not dialectically: community and immunity do not resolve into a higher unity, rather, they always compete and pressure each other without producing a final solution. This is probably due to the psychoanalytical perspective adopted by Bersani and implicated in Roach's work as well, which does not pay enough attention to the socio-cultural and political context in which (virtual) cruising takes place.

On the other hand, Dean, another renowned scholar in regards to queer cruising, acknowledges the dangers inherent in virtual cruising, which, according to him, "is tantamount to treating a stranger as a blow-up doll or a mail-order sex toy- an approach that betokens a purely instrumental approach to the other, rather than the openness to others that cruising at its best represents."<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, his arguments can easily slip into the apocalyptic approach mentioned before as he depicts a deterministic understanding of cruising that has no affirmative potential. Especially, the way he vaunts "public" cruising or sex for allowing inter-class contact suffers not only from the Western construction of public and private binary, but also from a naïve consideration of public as a place that can be accessed by all (See Chapter 5).

I think, specifically in terms of virtual cruising, what both Dean and Roach ignore is the fact that GNAs are built on a multifaceted paradox. However, it is too important to indicate that the paradox here is not that we can observe both community and immunity within the virtual platform of GNAs. According to Esposito, this would imply less an exceptional incongruity than

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<sup>98</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 194.



the given radical inseparability of community and immunity. Rather, the paradox here is the fact that GNAs actively contribute both into the development of community and immunity. I call this situation a paradox because Esposito says that one must distinguish between “systems that facilitate our individual and collective experience and apparatuses that diminish its vital power”<sup>99</sup>. Accordingly, in case of GNAs, the same apparatus both facilitates individual and collective experiences and diminishes their vital power at the same time. This paradox is what I will be focusing on in the rest of this study.

Now that the theoretical map of this study is established and its conceptual tools are defined, I can finally move to my analysis based on Hornet and Istanbul, Turkey. I will, first, elucidate in the following chapter how Hornet enhances affirmative community – which will be referred as *virtual community*<sup>100</sup>- for enabling people to overcome their individual and collective ostracisation. And, in the Chapter 6, I will show to what extent Hornet’s affirmative potentials are frustrated because of Hornet’s active role in the (re)production of exclusion and isolation - which I will call here *homonormative immunity*- amongst users.

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<sup>99</sup> Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics,” 88.

<sup>100</sup> It is extremely important to indicate that ‘community’ here is used in Esposito’s terms: it refers to a relationality –opening of the self to the other- and it must not be confused with community in the sense of a group of subjects.

## 5. VIRTUAL (QUEER) COMMUNITY IN ISTANBUL

“If immunity tends to shut our existence up into non-communicating circles or enclosures, community is not so much a larger circle that contains them as it is a passage that cuts through their boundary lines and mixes up the human experience, freeing it from its obsession with security.”

Roberto, Esposito (2013: 85)

I borrow the term ‘virtual community’ from Rheingold who employs it in accordance with the traditional senses of the term ‘community’, namely, “an entity, a collective subjects or a group of subjects”.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, the reason why I use this term is not because it dovetails perfectly with the subject at hand here but because I want to challenge the conventional understandings of (virtual) community by re-formulating it as a relation rather than a space or group of people.

What I refer to by virtual community can be conceived as a virtual relation that brings forth individual and collective experiences. Remember that, according to Esposito, ‘community’ is a relation that reduces the insulation of subjects by connecting one to another. That is why I propose that GNAs engender virtual community (although thwarted significantly as a result of the negative immunization) insofar as what is understood from community is an opening of the self to other(ness). When it comes to the question of how do GNAs create virtual community, the answer can also be found in Esposito’s work. Esposito propounds that the first task to be done in the pursuit of community –which is affirmative of life- is to give rise and expand “the common [defined by him only in negative terms: not private, not proper, not immune] spaces, spheres, and dimensions”.<sup>102</sup> In this regard, it is clear how MSM GNAs produce a common space/sphere/dimension where people can be set free from their isolated individuality. This becomes even more self-evident in present-day Turkey where LGBTQ individuals cannot easily and safely enjoy “common” “public” spaces due to danger of physical and verbal violence. The

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<sup>101</sup> Roberto Esposito, “Community and Nihilism,” *Cosmos and History: Journal of Nature and Social Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2009), <http://cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/124/234>.

<sup>102</sup>Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics,” 85.

second task, on the other hand, is to disable the negative immunization of individuals,<sup>103</sup> which was (problematically) brought forward by Roach and Dean in case of virtual cruising.

Accordingly, in what follows, I will first delineate how Hornet produces an increasing common space that is virtual yet by no means less real or accessible than any other space considered public. In fact, Hornet proves very consequential in re-defining the public/private dichotomy, which does not take into account the specificities of local socio-political settings. If the virtual space created by GNAs can dissolve seemingly natural relations, such as time, space or embodiment, it has a possibility to rewrite the rules of normative actualities as well. Then, I will consider the potentials of virtual cruising in Hornet to incapacitate negative immunization to a significant extent through an impersonal relationality, which relies on a hospitable openness towards other without necessarily consuming its otherness.<sup>104</sup> Finally, I will also specify what kind of queer potentialities MSM GNAs have. However, this must not mislead us: what I will provide here will be widely subjected to critique in the following chapter.

### 5.1. “I have no chance to meet guys other than apps”

MSM GNAs unassailably extend the space of common in which individual and collective experiences can spring, paving the ways for the opening of the self to other *by going online*. Given the fact that especially in a country like Turkey where physical and verbal violence against LGBTQs is pervasive throughout the whole society, meeting a potential partner in a public space has never been easy or safe.<sup>105</sup> The virtual community rendered possible by Hornet, thus, have considerable potentials to create a virtual common space where MSM, trans\* women and (MTF)

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 184.

<sup>105</sup> There is a significant lack of knowledge production on MSM cruising and its dangers in Istanbul. Also, since the violence against LGBTQs is known to be widespread in all social spaces in the country in general, it is all the more concerning that no research has focused on the specific nature of cruising areas –especially in parks- and the violence that occurs in such areas. That is why I lack references here to justify my claims that verbal and physical violence is widespread in cruising places. Trying to make up for this lack, I have recently come across a website called *IstanbulGay.com*, which gives information and tips about “gay life” in the city. It was really interesting to see that there are a couple of places listed where gay men can cruise like parks-yet I have never heard of them before. However, it was revealing that the owners of the website did not forget to warn the visitors about the high rates of crime against and risk for LGBTQ people in such places.

cross-dresser persons can interact with each other.<sup>106</sup> These claims, of course, are not merely based on my personal experience –as I did not meet a single person for the last five years outside of a dating application-, but supported by many respondents as well during the in-app interviews:<sup>107</sup>

I have no chance to meet guys other than apps... Also, when you see the others, you normalize yourself; you feel more comfortable; you see that you are not alone. This is very important. (Alp, 25)

I have been using apps and many other dating websites since the very beginning. Before no one shared his face picture, now everybody does. People see that they are not alone. (Mert, 60)

In our country it is extremely difficult for two gay people to meet and become friends. That is why I find such applications quite important. If not in a gay bar, you cannot approach a guy in a public place and say you liked him- we would be absolutely beaten up. (Burak, 28)

As it is expressed in the abovementioned quotes of the users, the virtual common space is not only the space where one welcomes the others' otherness, but also his/her own. In Turkey, the homo- and transphobic violence does not only substantially reduce the possibility of public encounters, but also make it extremely difficult for someone to face and accept his or her non-normative desires. As Dean says cruising is not only a matter of "how one treats the other", but also "and, more specifically, how one treats his or her own otherness".<sup>108</sup> Ten of my respondents –including myself- indicated that their 'coming out' process both to themselves and to others began only after they started to use dating websites or applications. For instance, I remember the first time I logged in a platform for gay men: I was absolutely astonished when I saw the numerous people looking for a date; I even knew some of them (with one, we attended the same high school; one, from my university; and, another, my neighbour). Of course, at the beginning, I did not share my face pictures: like many others, I was afraid that someone would reveal my

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<sup>106</sup> Although we are focused here on a GNA specifically designed for MSM, there are other applications for lesbian women and so on.

<sup>107</sup> Rather than original profile names of the respondents, I will use pseudo names in order to protect their privacy. In addition, I will share their age to give an idea of the age range of my sample.

<sup>108</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 177.

“secret”. So, I first wrote those three people that I knew, without telling them who I was. After a little while, when I convinced myself that this was the safest option, ironically, I had my first date with the guy who was my neighbour.

Yet, of course, neither my personal experience nor that of the three respondents quoted above can be representative of the experiences of trans\* women, (MTF) trans\* sex workers and (MTF) cross-dresser individuals in Istanbul who use Hornet as well. After all, all four of us are able to pass for heterosexual in public without risking our safety and we are all coming from relatively privileged socio-economic backgrounds, which, in fact, provided us necessary means to “survive” or hook-up in public, even though we chose not to. The point my respondents made to me (represented by the three quotes above), even though in distinct forms, Hornet provides a virtual common space with safer conditions for people of non-normative gender and sexual identities. This is crucial for pursuing a community that is affirmative of life in that these concerns of my informants imply their understanding that people of non-normative sexuality (especially (MTF) trans\* and (MTF) cross-dresser people) are the most common victims of hate crimes and murders in Turkey hence they can encounter other people in relatively safer conditions.<sup>109</sup> Also, especially significant is the fact that trans\* sex workers who are brutally raped and murdered in Istanbul while trying to work on the streets,<sup>110</sup> can now do it through an application without putting their lives in danger.<sup>111</sup> During my fieldwork, I had the chance to talk with two (MTF) trans\* sex workers and (MTF) two cross-dresser individuals. Even though they agreed upon the easy and “safe” access and communication through Hornet, they warned me

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<sup>109</sup> KaosGL, “2014 Yılında Türkiye’de Gerçekleşen Homofobi ve Transfobi Temelli Nefret Suçları Raporu (The Report of Homophobic and Transphobic Hate Crimes that Occurred in Turkey in 2014)” (KaosGL, June 2015), [http://www.kaosgldernegi.org/resim/yayin/dl/2014\\_nefret\\_sulari\\_raporu.pdf](http://www.kaosgldernegi.org/resim/yayin/dl/2014_nefret_sulari_raporu.pdf).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, there are three important points that need to be underlined: first, the fact that trans\* sex workers should not go to street to work is only preferable for safety concerns. Otherwise, this would lessen their visibility in public spaces, which is not affirmative or progressive at all. Second, even within the “safe” and “private” space of their home, trans\* people are still murdered and raped in Turkey. And, finally, it should not be forgotten that many trans\* people are forced to do sex work in Turkey because they are denied their right to work (and to live).

that I do not get the wrong message: they all said that nothing or nowhere is actually safe for them in Turkey.

On the basis of what has just been demonstrated, it can be said that the common space produced by Hornet presents subversive and queer potentials since it threatens the structural heteronormativity in Istanbul, Turkey, which condemns and abjects both non-heteronormative relations and those who practice them. “Queerness” here is understood based on its contentious relation to the normative order in which what is perceived and positioned as “normal” and “abnormal” is rigidly defined, as well as the “appropriate” ways of treating “abnormality”.<sup>112</sup> Although the specific relations established within and through Hornet are not necessarily non-normative, Hornet still promises a queer hope since it *contaminates* the heteronormative actuality through an injection of high dose queer virtuality. The fact that Grindr was legally banned in Turkey in 2013 –alongside with several other MSM dating websites that were banned in 2009 and 2014-<sup>113</sup> proves to what extent the violent heteronormative regime in Turkey is distressed because people are able to date and have sex in “unnatural” ways.<sup>114</sup> In this regard, Hornet, as an application that became more and more popular in the face of homo- and transphobic legal restrictions, has transformed into a means of everyday resistance to heteronormativity. For this reason alone, every date that was set up through Hornet or every orgy that was organized through it is a sign of how heteronormativity is contravened and transgressed.

This is why Hornet has subversive queer potentialities for defying the heteronormative socio-political conditions in which certain subjects are rendered dangerous for public health and societal order and so isolated and marginalized. Especially, in places where LGBTQ people are denied to have any possibility to open themselves to their own or others’ otherness because of the political and societal pressure and violence and where they are considered as a contagious

<sup>112</sup> Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text*, no. 29 (1991): 3–17.

<sup>113</sup> KaosGL, “Gay.com Erişime Engellendi,” *KaosGL*, October 28, 2014, <http://kaosgl.org/sayfa.php?id=17809>.; Sulu, Barış, “hadiGAYri.com Tekrar Kapatıldı,” *KaosGL*, March 10, 2011, <http://kaosgl.org/sayfa.php?id=6533>.

<sup>114</sup> Akpınar, Ömer, “Grindr Ban in Turkey Taken to Constitutional Court.”

“virus”<sup>115</sup> that should be remained immune to at all costs, it is illogical to deny the importance of any means that might open up a space for marginalized people to have a *life*<sup>116</sup> in relatively safer conditions.

## 5.2. “You do not feel comfortable outside”

In the light of the previous section, it becomes clear that the virtual common space produced by Hornet blurs the public/private dichotomy significantly. In Istanbul, Turkey, what has been considered “public” so far has never been equally accessible for sexually marginalized people. The actual lack of public space constitutes the first dimension of the problem. Movie theaters, bathhouses and parks used to be known as the primary sites of MSM cruising in Istanbul.<sup>117</sup> However, during the last years, all movie theaters “infamous” with MSM cruising in Istanbul were raided by police and shut down, while the costumers were arrested for “prostitution”.<sup>118</sup> Bathhouses, on the other hand, usually work as tourist attractions as a part of the *Oriental experience*, whereas they are not widely preferred or used by local men –according to what I have heard from my respondents- for “safety” and “hygiene” related concerns. In fact, none of my respondents said they would have ever been to a bathhouse in Istanbul, neither have I have met anyone who has, including myself. Cruising in a park, on the other hand, has always been a vitally dangerous option in Istanbul.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, none of my respondents reported that they would have ever tried to cruise in a park, even though I have heard from some friends that

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<sup>115</sup> In 2010, Aliye Kavaf –a former minister of JDP- officially declared homosexuality as a “disease” that must be cured. For further information: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=8216homosexuality-is-a-disease8217-says-minister-2010-03-07>.

<sup>116</sup> “Life” is used here in Esposito’s terms according to which it can only be attainable when the subjects are not isolated from each other as a result of destructive immunization.

<sup>117</sup> These places have been historically known to host men cruising and having public sex in Istanbul. Still, many of the popular websites available on “gay life in Istanbul” mention these three as a nostalgic memory.

<sup>118</sup> “Sinemada Fuhuş,” accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/sinemada--font-color-navy-fuhusa--font--sucustu/gundem/gundemdetay/08.10.2008/1000356/default.htm>; “Sinemada Seks Skandalında İkinci Perde,” accessed February, 15, 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/sinemada-seks-skandalinda-ikinci-perde-23268967>.

<sup>119</sup> Biricik, Alp, “A Walk on Istiklal Street: Dissident Sexual Geographies, Politics and Citizenship in Istanbul” (Linköping University, 2014).

they have done it couple of times “just for fun”, but even they did not do it in recognized cruising sites as they thought it would be more risky.

The second issue of the “public” places in Istanbul is related to the topic of accessibility, which happens to be very restricted. Apart from several small coffee shops and a bar, the entrance fee to gay bars in Istanbul is extremely high, changing from 30 to 55 Turkish Liras (around 10-20 euros). Also, the prices in such places are far from being reasonable: the last time I have been to a very popular gay bar in April to do my field research (and to cruise), I paid 30 liras for the entrance, 20 for the cloakroom and around 20 for one beer. All in all 70 Liras for one night; not including the amount I paid for the taxi to return home, as there was no public transportation available at that hour of the night. Another place I visited was recommended by friends since it was the only place with a “dark room” in Istanbul, where gay men can have public sex – provided they can afford to pay the 55 liras entrance fee for “public” sex in an “inter-class mingling” place. The point here is by no means to claim that Hornet is accessible by everyone (a point to be discussed further in the next chapter). Rather, my point is to refute Dean’s argument that assumes the “public”, such as gay bars, as an open space where MSM from different class backgrounds can cruise whereas virtual cruising should result in the “privatization of sex and cruising.”<sup>120</sup> I, also, seek to show that the rigid distinction between public and private, and Dean’s preference for the former over the latter must be reassessed according to the local socio-cultural and political settings. As it can be seen, the public space in Istanbul is quite restricted and policed even and most of the time accessible only by those who can afford it. Almost all of the available public area is located in the city center where the prices are generally higher and public transportation is not an option at late hours back to the outskirts of town. As one of my respondents, Alp (25), pointed out to me: “You do not need to go to a gay club and spend money. Even premium account on Hornet costs only 15 liras monthly - the same price as a bottle of beer in any gay bar.” Another respondent, Mert (25) repeated almost the same: “I see that

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<sup>120</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 204.



there are some places at the city center- but still very limited. I mean there is no other place apart from Taksim area [the central square in the city center]. Given this limitation, apps provide a larger public space. For instance, even when I meet someone outside after having a conversation on Hornet, we directly go to home. You do not feel comfortable outside.”

At this point, Dean’s assertion that “one cannot cruise at home” becomes highly questionable, raising doubts about the narrow understanding of what is public and what is private.<sup>121</sup> What Deans considers as “public” is a space where “interclass mingling” takes place, such as gay bars.<sup>122</sup> However what he fails to grasp is that probably not all gay bars are similar to the one he went in San Francisco or, more importantly, that there might be no gay bars or any other “public” space accessible to people. In Turkey, even though Istanbul is known to have the highest number of spaces that are accessible to LGBTQ people such as bars and cafes, there are still several reasons why such places cannot and should not be considered public. To the contrary, I argue that however limited it is, Hornet provides a common space that is closer to function as a public site for cruising. By public I mean both the economic accessibility and safety conditions that are more promising in the case of the virtual common space created by Hornet.

Thus, I suggest that public sex and cruising do not necessarily allow for a cross-class contact and, for this reason, they do not necessarily prevent the privatization of sex and sexuality. Also, even though I agree with Dean on the commodification of bodies on virtual platforms, this is not to say that gay bars are positively different in this regard. During a discussion I had with two Hornet users, they shared their thoughts on the “self-marketing” of men in gay bars:

The real self-marketing and commodification happens in bars. You must see how people dress up to go those places. (Yusuf, 38)

It is a meat market and you are always an easy picking in a bar. On Hornet, if someone really wants to meet you, he sends you messages every day; yet, in a bar, why would he spend time with you while there are many guys right next to you? (Umut, 29)

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<sup>121</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 184.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

### 5.3. Welcoming the Virtual Other

“Cruising exemplifies a distinctive ethic of openness to alterity.”

Dean, Tim (2009: 176)

“But what seems salutary about cruising is how it can involve intimate contact with strangers without necessarily domesticating the other’s otherness.”

Dean, Tim (2009:180)

As stated in the beginning of this chapter, the contribution of Hornet to virtual community is not restricted to the creation of a shared common space. It also involves an active subversion of negative immunization that separates the members from each other and impedes not only their development but also their pursuit of a meaningful life desirously. By means of Hornet, the distance between the self and the others is substantially reduced both because the others become more approachable and because the self can free itself from its personal confines notably. (Nevertheless it must be known that becoming virtually closer does not mean that the same closeness will be also achieved during the actual encounter.)

One cannot know if he or she has never used Hornet, how tempting, effortless and uncomplicated to send someone a message on a virtual cruising platform is. All that it takes is to touch the screen, which can be easily done while watching a movie or chatting with friends. No need to contemplate about how to approach someone or start flirting- a simple “hey” does the entire job. Also, the otherness is not something to be scared of or to shy away from. The profile pictures decrease users’ barriers significantly and make it easier to contact them by rendering them already familiar enough to approach –yet, at the same time, strange enough to maintain the sweet tension of cruising amongst “strangers”. The exchange of private pictures on Hornet as well has a significant role in breaking the ice amongst users since demanding and granting the access to private pictures function as a preliminary sign of interest in the other. In addition, the users do not actually need to worry about the actual distance for they can appear on the small screen close enough to each other to flirt and far enough to run away if the conversation is not

pleasant. In other words, one does not have much reason to worry about cruising online: if the virtual encounter turns out to be joyful, then an actual date can be set; if not, then there might be more chances.

On the other hand, approaching the other is facilitated through GNAs not only because it makes the other more approachable, but also because it enables the self to break free from its own limits—or, in Bersani’s word, leaving the self behind to welcome the otherness becomes unusually easy in virtual cruising.<sup>123</sup> However, different from Bersani, by leaving the self behind I do not mean erasing the bodily signifiers of class and hegemonic gender ideals, but rather the potential to transgress or bypass them. As one of my respondents, Mert (60), who delightfully expressed how he leaves his “authentic” self behind:

As soon as I log into Hornet, I become someone else. I do not need to worry about my job, my rent or, even, my weight. I create another persona. It is the second me. I choose the perfect pictures to reflect him in the best way. You have to see him. Even, sometimes, I say ‘how handsome this guy is’. So, why would I worry about contacting other guys?”

As manifested, the welcoming of the “virtual other”<sup>124</sup> is both affirmative of life and subversive of the immunitarian ethics of relationality that produces and maintains individuals negatively and excessively immunized towards other(ness). Roach proposes that the impersonal intimacy enabled by MSM virtual cruising not only lessens the individual ego but also “resists the violent, intersubjective subsumption of self into other, other into self”.<sup>125</sup> The impersonal communication is argued to be beyond an instrumentalist encounter of the self and other, since neither of them attempt to exhaust each other to consume the other’s otherness.<sup>126</sup> In other words, through MSM virtual cruising, the self can open itself to otherness not to render it known or familiar but to enjoy the sweet tension of welcoming the unknown, the stranger. Impersonal relationality prevents the subjects from extracting every bit of information from others, diminishing the

<sup>123</sup> Bersani, Leo, “Sociability and Cruising,” 11.

<sup>124</sup> I say “virtual other” because welcoming the other virtually does not guarantee that it will be equally welcomed in an actual encounter. For instance, in the case of Mert whose “second persona” is virtually welcomed by many, actual encounters usually result in rejections because his “authentic self” is not considered “manly enough”.

<sup>125</sup> Roach, Tom, “Becoming Fungible: Queer Intimacies in Social Media.”

<sup>126</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*. 207.

instrumentality of the encounter where the subjects are exploitative consumers of otherness, while, on the other hand, proliferating the possibility of a kind of encounter that can flourish individual and collective experiences without violating individuality. According to Roach, this is the reason why such impersonal intimacy gives chance for a queer relationality that is not affected adversely by the requirements of neoliberal [and homonormative] conventions of communication according to which subjects are prescribed to connect the other in strictly predetermined and exploitative ways.<sup>127</sup>

In fact, MSM GNAs prove very significant to maintain subjects positively (maybe, *queerly*?) immune to a sense of danger of losing their individuality. Community, if it connects the subjects at the expense of their subjecthood, cannot be affirmative but only destructive of life. For this reason, a certain amount of immunization is always affirmative and necessary in order not to risk the complete losing of the self when it shatters.<sup>128</sup> “Nameless and id-free contact”<sup>129</sup> is amongst the important contributions of GNAs, offering a queer namelessness that is not pre-defined or marked by any signifier. Hence, cruising anonymously frees the subjects from the responsibilities and restrictions of various categories -mostly identitarian. Also, it is crucial to indicate here a specific type of positive immunization Hornet provides. As opposed to other popular GNAs, the users on Hornet have the chance to have “private pictures” attached to their profiles which they share only when they want to or enjoy the option of having a faceless profile and chat. In this way, the users do not only maintain the level of anonymity they seek, but also they can negotiate it within different situations, especially when safety is concerned.

#### **5.4. “No one treats you like a human on Hornet”**

Nevertheless, the risks of an impersonal cruising to separate users while it is expected to reduce the distance amongst them are also quite salient. To begin with, in general, anonymity is usually not welcomed well by the users of Hornet in Istanbul. One of the most common

<sup>127</sup> Roach, Tom, “Becoming Fungible: Queer Intimacies in Social Media.”

<sup>128</sup> Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics.”

<sup>129</sup> Bersani, Leo, “Sociability and Cruising,” *Umbra(a): Sameness* 1 (2002): 9–23.

tendencies I have observed on Hornet while doing my preliminary netnography was the persistent demand of the users to see clear picture of the face. Many even reject to respond and threaten to block the “faceless profiles”. “I have to see whom I am talking to”, said Cenk (27). They see this facelessness as an instance of the impersonal virtual intimacy that can be severely “dehumanizing”<sup>130</sup> and build impassible bridges between users. Most of my respondents (28 out of 40) criticized the “superficiality”, “emptiness” and “disrespectfulness” of encounters on Hornet. One of them -Burak (28)- said that a usual conversation on Hornet cannot go further than finding out “one’s age, location and position [top, bottom, versatile etc.]. But, you’r lucky if you can talk this much. If you are not masculine or muscular you might not get any answers as well”. Another one, likewise, shared that “A conversation on Hornet is not even superficial because there is no conversation at all. No one treats you like a human. (Can, 29)”

In this regard, impersonal intimacy, which is based on an “ethics of nonrecognition”<sup>131</sup>, might not be as favorable as it is claimed to be. The line between non-recognition in the sense of not consuming the other’s otherness and in the sense of not recognizing and accepting its otherness is extremely fine and blurred. In the latter case, nonrecognition might imply a rejection (both virtual and actual) of otherness if it does not play the game according to (homonormative) rules of Hornet. Therefore, in Chapter 6 below, I will indicate, first, how virtual cruising on Hornet contribute to *homonormative immunity* since the users on MSM virtual platforms are anything but *fungible*, and, hence, *difference does not precisely evaporate in similitude*; and, second, the communication between *types*, but *identities*, is not exactly *impersonal* insofar as the types on GNAs are not necessarily (and not even primarily) “leather or twink”, but quite personal and exclusionary ones such as “masculine, manly, sporty, and muscular”. The objective of the next chapter will be to demonstrate to what extent Hornet’s affirmative potentials are frustrated by itself. For this reason, I will prove that Hornet is not only a means through which already

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<sup>130</sup> Roach, Tom, “Becoming Fungible: Queer Intimacies in Social Media,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 23, no. 2 (2015): 58.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

immune subjects cruise, but also it actively does its full share of work in negatively immunizing its users towards non-homonormative and non-marketable others.

## 6. HOMONORMATIVE IMMUNITY

In the previous chapter I discussed the production of a common space through Hornet and how it contributes into a welcoming and inclusive relationality by decreasing the individual barriers that prevent the self from opening to other(ness). I interpreted this relationality as community, which helps people to leave their individual selves behind by pacifying the destructive protection of the negatively immune subjects. I also addressed the queer potentialities of virtual cruising within GNAs. In the current chapter, however, I will embark on a journey towards the opposite direction and show, so to speak, the other side of the coin. In addition, I will also demonstrate how desire is always-already homonormatively immunitarian and how GNAs actively impact the virtual experience and expression of desire in a way that it becomes more exclusionary.

### 6.1. Virtually Immune

**R(earcher):** Would you like to answer some questions about Hornet to help me with my thesis?

**Yilmaz (26):** “Sorry, we are not compatible.”

**R:** I mean I just wanted to ask you some questions. Also, how do you know that we are not compatible? Just out of curiosity ;)

**Y:** “I didn’t like your type- you look effeminate”

**R:** So, if you don’t like someone’s type, it is not worth to talk that person?

**Y:** “Great observation- bravo! Also, you are wasting my time.”

**R:** Thanks. This has been quite enlightening for me.

I believe that desire has long been inherently related to an immunitarian paradigm: it can both foster a positive immunization -the self welcomes the other- or a negative one -the closing down of the self both through rejection and in response to it. This is a socially shaped process where the understanding of what is desirable is neither individual nor trans-historical, but socially and spatio-temporally located. It is no coincidence that those bodies that are rendered “acceptable and normal” are also the ones that are widely desired; whereas, “abnormal and

deviant” ones cannot/should not be desired for those who desire them will no longer be considered “normal” either in the heteronormative matrix.<sup>132</sup>

It is worth indicating the double sense of desire employed here: the desirable body is both the body which we seek to identify with and also the one we would like to socially and sexually interact with. As the opening quote from my app-interaction above indicates, “effeminate” male bodies are neither preferable as the object of identification nor as the object of desire within the heteronormative matrix.<sup>133</sup> They must be rejected and excluded; one shall practice to become *immune* to effeminacy. Another example is how “fit and healthy” bodies become the object of desire in both senses of the word within neoliberal societies.<sup>134</sup> One shall practice to have a fit body and to be immune to unfit bodies. Note that I am not so much interested in the emergence of such heteronormative and neoliberal body ideals. Rather, in general, what I seek to stress here is the notable involvement of immunization and normativity and, in particular, *homonormativity* in the perception and acquisition of the bodily ideal.

When it comes to the rejection of particular people, or rather embodiments who do not comply with the requirements of homonormative regulatory mechanisms and/or ideals, it must be known that there is nothing specific to Hornet or GNAs in general: negative immunization is produced and maintained by (homo)normative ideals in society in general. “[T]he new homonormativity,” says Duggan, “is a 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*”<sup>135</sup> (emphasis added).

Under the impact of homonormativity, desirable and “normal” bodies are rigidly inscribed and those who do not (seem to) comply with the established norms are rejected not

<sup>132</sup> Butler, Judith, “Imitations and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Salih, Sarah and Butler, Judith (Blackwell, 2004), 119–137.

<sup>133</sup> Bersani, Leo, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43 (1987): 197–222.

<sup>134</sup> Berlant, Lauren, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, and Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 754–80.

<sup>135</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Beacon Press, 2004), 50.



only on a societal level, but also on an individual level as a result of negative immunization of subjects towards dangerous elements. What is a risky virus for the societal health and order is equally understood to be detrimental for the individual as well: The coextensive logic between the social (structural) and individual (particular) therefore makes sure that the „viral” cannot be/shall not be desired and it must *stay away*. This reveals that negative immunization is concerned less with an individual protection than with a socially and politically established boundary between the self (which is not even necessarily normative) and non-normative others.

In order to see in which specific ways homonormative desire operates within GNAs, I will now provide the information gathered through the content analysis of 300 user profiles and 40 in-app interviews with Hornet users living in Istanbul at the time of the data collection in Spring 2016.

### 6.1.2. “Be anything but feminine”

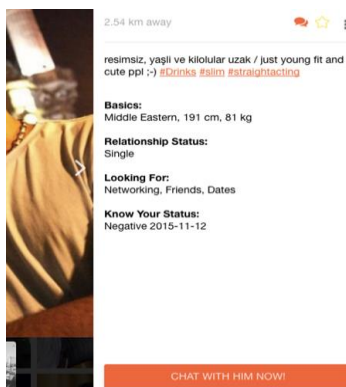


Figure 3: “Old and fat ones away”

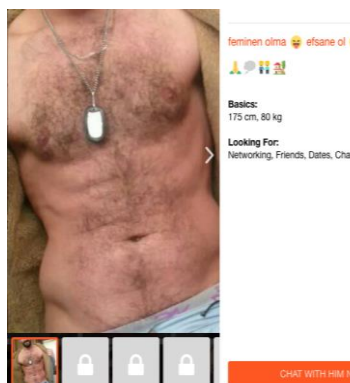


Figure 4: “Don't be feminine, be a legend”

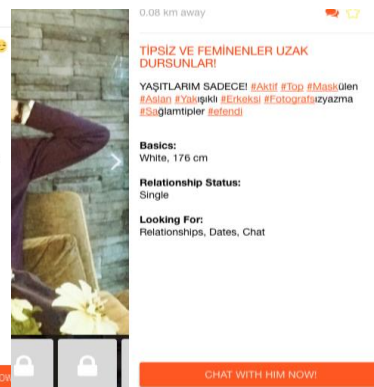


Figure 5: “Ugly and feminine ones stay away”

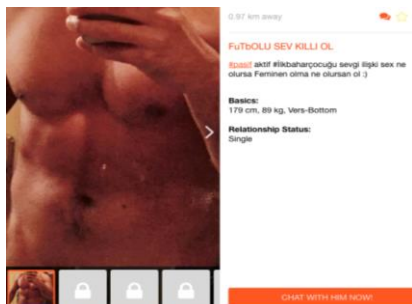


Figure 6: “Be anything but feminine”



Figure 7: “I block transvestite people, feminine men, masseurs<sup>136</sup> and whores”

<sup>136</sup> Masseur: who offers massage and/or sex in exchange for money on Hornet.

Although an application designed to facilitate social and sexual encounters without facing public interventions, the acceptable and desirable others who are welcomed by most of the users on Hornet in my sample are “masculine, muscular and good-looking” ones; whereas, “old, feminine and unfit” others are strictly and bestially warned to “stay away”.<sup>137</sup> The rigid separation between the self and undesirable others is achieved, first of all, with the help of profile pictures. In my data almost all of them display muscled, healthy looking bodies. Second, it is re/produced through the choice of discriminatory and insulting profile names and personal statements, not only degrading particular others, but explicitly stating that they are not welcomed anywhere close.<sup>138</sup>

Figures 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 are specifically chosen for the kind of exclusionary language they use, which can demonstrate how violent homonormative language severely increase the renunciation of non-normative others. These figures are just few of many profiles showing that the exclusion and rejection of “effeminate, fat, ugly and old men, and trans\* women” is sound and commonplace within the virtual platform created by Hornet. When I asked the owners of these profiles whether they think that their language might offend other people, they all gave a similar disclaimer: there is nothing wrong with desiring particular people (bodies) and not others. They did not think that their language could be aggressive and offending. In contrast, some of my respondents shared their disapproval and discontent in regard to this phenomenon:

I can understand that people have different preferences, but the way they express their preferences is no different than *hate speech* here. (Can, 29)

I’ve been called an “elephant” or “unfuckable” many times because of my weight. (Tuna, 50)

You are simply insulted here just because you are old, bold and you have extra weight. (Mert, 60)

<sup>137</sup> Amongst those unstated yet relevant criteria the most salient one is unsurprisingly compulsory-abledness. I have been using several apps since seven years, yet have not come across one single profile of a differently-abled person.

<sup>138</sup> The user profile pictures and names are manipulated in all the seven Figures in this chapter to protect the privacy of the users.

### 6.1.3. “I don’t want someone manly; I want a man”:-#nofem

**R(earcher):** Could you help me with my research on Hornet?

**Kemal:** “Are you feminine?”

**R:** Can you tell me why do you use “#nofem”?

**Anil:** “Let me resume it for you. If I liked women, I would fuck women. There is nothing interesting about this to write a thesis on it. It is that simple. Good luck!”

#hashtag is a widely used tool within social media to “tag” or “etiquette”. In Hornet, the software enables the users to tag anything they want, even though it is primarily used to tag what a user seeks to find and/or avoid. That way, the users do not only emphasize their preferences (for the tagged element appears in a different color), and strengthen the protection of their virtual boundaries, but also enter into a circle of easy contact and communication with a pool of users who use the same tag: when one clicks on the tagged element or enters it into the ‘search box’, the potential contacts will be automatically listed.

The hashtags, in addition to this collective construction of homonormative boundaries in Hornet, have another significant feature for my analysis: in so far as they are content words, they reveal the most common tendencies of preferences amongst Hornet users. While I was filling my profile information, some of the most popular hashtags suggested by Hornet were the followings: #nofem, #notrans, #masculineonly, #masc, #M4M (man-for-man). This was a quite alarming situation for me in that the most frequently used hashtags were also the most heteronormative ones, which find expression in the naturally essentialist understanding of sex and gender.<sup>139</sup> In order to understand the particular hashtags better, I asked 10 respondents who use the same or similar ones to elaborate on their desire for masculine bodies and abjection of feminine/effeminate ones. Below you will read their answers:

I don't like them [effeminate men]. First, I am not attracted to opposite sex. Also, I neither act like a woman nor love the ones who act like one. Second, I am happy with my body and I think that I must act according to my body. (Recep, 28)

I’m a homosexual, I like men. If I liked effeminate attitudes, I would be heterosexual, not a gay. You know what I mean? (Bilal, 32)

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<sup>139</sup> Butler, Judith, “Imitations and Gender Insubordination,” 119-137.

Feminine way of acting, talking or dressing doesn't fit a man. Instead, I'd rather prefer being with a woman. (Melih, 31)

I like men. The kind of man that society teaches us: masculine and a little bit macho. This is how I imagine a man. (Kubilay, 36)

I'm not interested in a feminine guy. You know, it is a man after all. And I am interested in someone who acts according to his essence. You know what they say: a manly man's lover can only be a manly man. (Ahmet, 28)

I don't want someone manly; I want a man. (Eray, 40)

The answers I received were almost identical, proving Duggan's assertion that homonormativity relies heavily on the very heteronormative assumption that there is a natural and extensive relationship between one's gender and sex, and this relationship must not be transgressed.<sup>140</sup> According to this logic, masculinity is an exclusive and essential "asset" of male sex, implying that being a "real man" is not possible without embodying masculine norms and ideals. However, even being masculine may not suffice to be real enough, one should not be "manly only but a man". This implicates the normative understanding that masculinity cannot be faked or performed; or else it is not recognized as authentic, as "real". Homonormative agreement on the indivisible unity of masculine gender and male sex is an indicator of who will be desired or not. Bersani underscores that gay men do not desire any man, but the type of man that is indicated as "real/authentic": that is, the masculine and heterosexual looking one.<sup>141</sup> For this reason, if a man fails to fit in with the normative prerequisites of authenticity, he might also lose his chance to be welcomed by others.

The situation, on the other hand, is no different in Turkey, yet, maybe, even more poignant. Regardless of one's class and ethnic background, every man in Turkey is disciplined to abject effeminacy as it would endanger and cancel out his "manliness". The constitutive role of effeminacy in shaping the gender relations and hierarchies in the GNA "community" in Istanbul seems to be the norm. Given that western concepts of "homosexual" and "gay" are still not

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Bersani, Leo, "Is the Rectum a Grave?"

frequently recognized or used in the Turkish vernacular, effeminacy is the most prevalent referent of an “abnormal” man in Turkey.<sup>142</sup> This obtains even within the institutional framework of the military: In my previous study, I focused on the exclusion of “homosexual, transsexual and transvestite” men from compulsory military service. And, it came into light that in the case of homosexuality, military doctors only recognize “effeminacy” as the signifier and proof of one’s homosexuality.<sup>143</sup>

It was interesting for me at this point that #str8acting was not amongst the popular hashtags indicated by Hornet to me when creating my profile for this research, even though it is one of the most cliché ones used by Hornet users in Istanbul. Since heterosexual male masculinity is in a hegemonic position amongst other masculinities,<sup>144</sup> it reflects the requirements of ideal masculinity, which can be achieved best through the abjection of its constitutive outside-“effeminacy”.<sup>145</sup> The renunciation of effeminacy, on the other hand, is not only directed against effeminate men but also (and more strongly) against trans\* women. Trans\* women are harshly criticized for using Hornet – which is “supposed to be” a gay only application – by appealing to the empiricist requirement of “authentic/real” and by appealing to a moralizing stance that is to condemn doing sex work, uncovering not only the vehemence of homonormativity but also the ignorance of the systematic discrimination against trans\* people.

Ten of my respondents shared their ‘concerns’ about trans\* woman on Hornet since, for them, Hornet was supposed to be only for gay men. Their disposition stresses the depoliticizing impacts of homonormativity in that it demonstrates the uncritical attempt to protect the boundaries of a dating application to make it impenetrable/immune to people who do not

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<sup>142</sup> I, for instance, have been bullied and verbally insulted many times and each time I have been called “effeminate” or “*ibne/faggot*” (which also implies effeminacy in Turkish), yet almost never a “gay” or “homosexual”.

<sup>143</sup> Atuk, H. Tankut, “Los regímenes ambiguos del género y de la sexualidad en el ejército turco y sus potencias subversivas (The ambiguous regimes of gender and sexuality in Turkish Military and their subversive potentials)” (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2015).

<sup>144</sup> Connell, Raewyn W. and Messerschmidt, James W., “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59.

<sup>145</sup> Kimmel, S. Michael, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in *The Social Construction of Difference & Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. One, Tracy E. (Dubuque: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 135–51.

comply with the requirements of the normative gender appropriate gay male identity. Thus, trans\* women and ‘effeminate’ gay men do not only face heteronormative physical and sexual violence in Turkey,<sup>146</sup> but also homonormative symbolic violence on Hornet. Here are some examples:

I don’t like trans\* women, they aren’t attractive. I mean, you can’t expect everyone to like everyone... But, you can be trans as long as you are not a sex worker. They fuck for money.... *By the way, you are feminine, right?* [emphasis added] (Hilmi, 30)

I criticize them [trans\* individuals] in general. They aren’t educated... I mean there is enough job for everyone- so they must think of their future before sex. (Gökhan, 23)

They disgust me. It is not only against nature, but also against societal morals. (Erdoğan, 27)

On the other hand, homonormative immunity is not limited to exclusionary articulation of (bodily) desire. Immunization is also required in order to evade a possible “contagion”. Even outside of the realm of desire, one might need to immunize himself towards the contagious elements that would put him under danger if the virtual encounter results in an actual date. This obtains especially in the case of “gay masculinities” who are men able to pass for heterosexual. Those who can act like what is considered heterosexual (hegemonic) masculinity are also the ones who seem anxious as their masculine passing can fail any time and who will therefore lose their masculine privileges. The possibility of facing societal violence when the passing fails in public places aggravates the precarity of the situation even further in Turkey where there is a pervasive surveillance and control of any sign of effeminacy in public spaces since effeminacy is considered as the most immediate referent of homosexuality.<sup>147</sup> In this context, hashtags like #notrans and #nofem on Hornet also demonstrate the fear of violence if one’s homosexuality is revealed. In the interviews this concern about the precarity of non-normative male sexuality was formulated like this:

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<sup>146</sup> KaosGL, “2014 Yılında Türkiye’de Gerçekleşen Homofobi ve Transfobi Temelli Nefret Suçları Raporu (The Report of Homophobic and Transphobic Hate Crimes that Occurred in Turkey in 2014).”

Even though I'm a homosexual, I have homophobic feelings because of how I was socialized and educated by my family and an oppressive society. I like effeminate conversations behind close doors, but in social life I wouldn't like to be seen with an effeminate man... You know how the effeminacy is considered here... the fear of being disclosed. Also, I don't want to highlight my sexual orientation. (Utku, 36)

Being seen with a feminine guy embarrasses me. Because on the street it indicates that you'r gay. (Ümit, 25)

I wouldn't even be a friend with an effeminate person. (Kerim, 41)

I could have effeminate friends, but I wouldn't go to public spaces with them. (Kaan, 33)

#### 6.1.4. "Types in good conditions": #sportyonly

"The ethics of beauty, which is the very ethics of fashion, may be defined as the reduction of all concrete values – the use values of the body – to a single functional exchange value, which itself alone, in its abstraction, encapsulates the idea of the glorious, fulfilled body, the idea of desire and jouissance, and of course thereby also denies and forgets them in their reality and in the end simply peters out into an exchange of signs."

Baudrillard, Jean ([1970]1998: 132)

**R:** So you never date anyone who doesn't go to gym?

**Arda:** "It's kinda sad. I can't have erection when I see a guy naked if he is not muscular. Yet, I can even get a hard on looking at a muscled guy on Hornet. My psychologist told that it's because we grow up with porn movies."

Duggan argues that homonormativity is in close relationship with neoliberal consumption in that its requirements can be only met by the economically and socially privileged.<sup>148</sup> It is not only a matter of being able to consume, but being consumable and marketable are just as important preconditions of being seen desirable and welcomed.<sup>149</sup> "Spornosexual" is a new term created to describe men whose "own bodies (more than clobber and product) have become the ultimate accessories, fashioning them at the gym into a hot commodity - one that they share and

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<sup>148</sup> Duggan, Lisa, *The Twilight of Equality*.

<sup>149</sup> Maskovsky, Jeff, "Do We All 'Reek of the Commodity'?: Consumption and the Erasure of Poverty in Lesbian and Gay Studies," in *Out in Theory: The Emergence of Lesbian and Gay Anthropology*, ed. Lewin, Ellen and Leap, William (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 264–86.

compare in an *online marketplace*” (emphasis added).<sup>150</sup> Hakim, in his most recent article, points out how the famous tagline of *Mens’s Health* magazine -“Fit is the new rich”- is a product of this pervasive neoliberal logic that transforms each social relation into a competition, commodifying not only one’s body but one’s sense of self as well. “What constitutes spornosexual practice,” explains Hakim, “can be understood as an attempt to live out and embody the norms, values and ideals of neoliberal ideology (understood here as the application of the various logics of competitive, free-market individualism to all areas of our social and even intimate lives).”<sup>151</sup>

The popular body-focused hashtags offered by Hornet are quite explanatory in this respect as they designate the kind of body that is most likely to be welcomed: #sportyonly, #muscle and #gym. When I searched for these hashtags, I saw that they were usually accompanied with muscular profile pictures. Out of the 300 profiles analyzed for this study, 177 profiles had at least one naked picture of upper body, usually focused on muscled biceps, chest, legs, or abdominals.<sup>152</sup> Having a muscular or at least an athletic body appears to be one of the most important rules of the game if one seeks to be marketable/desirable. As Figures 8 and 9 show, not being muscular is a reason of disqualification. In addition to being masculine, one is expected to be muscular as well if wants to remain in the game.<sup>153</sup> In fact, muscularity and masculinity usually go hand in hand since muscularity is also vaunted within the mainstream gay culture for being assumed to “reveal” a more masculine self.<sup>154</sup>

#saglamtipler - which can be roughly translated as “types in good condition”- is another popular hashtag that must be mentioned here. This last hashtag was quite unfamiliar to me and, therefore, attracted my attention. I asked five respondents who had this hashtag on their profiles

<sup>150</sup> Simpson, Mark, “The Metrosexual Is Dead. Long Live the ‘Spornosexual,’” *The Telegraph*, June 10, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/fashion-and-style/10881682/The-metrosexual-is-dead.-Long-live-the-spornosexual.html>.

<sup>151</sup> Jamie Hakim, “‘Fit Is the New Rich’: Male Embodiment in the Age of Austerity,” *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 61, no. 1 (2016): 88.

<sup>152</sup> Note that nude pictures are most often not publicly shared, but exchanged privately.

<sup>153</sup> Nicholas Lanzieri and Tom Hildebrandt, “Using Hegemonic Masculinity to Explain Gay Male Attraction to Muscular and Athletic Men,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 2 (2011): 275–93, doi:10.1080/00918369.2011.540184.

<sup>154</sup> Duane Duncan, “Embodying the Gay Self: Body Image, Reflexivity and Embodied Identity,” *Health Sociology Review* 19, no. 4 (December 2010): 437–50, doi:10.5172/hesr.2010.19.4.437.



what those good conditions should be one's body has to display? I got the same answer from all: masculine and muscular, revealing once again that only those bodies that can fit into homonormative ideals can penetrate into the boundaries of many Hornet users. Also, my experience as a researcher/user was also quite telling in this regard: I do not have a muscular body and it can be clearly seen through my profile pictures, However, during this research I realized that I had chosen to share my more "masculine looking" poses. As a result, amongst those users who personally contacted me to help with my study were many users who with or without hashtags expressed their attraction to masculine men. Nevertheless, I was neither contacted by users who seek muscular men, nor I received any response back from them when I approached them personally to invite them to participate in the project. Both in the case of masculinity and muscularity, the immunization of subjects through homonormative desire is what is at stake: the exclusionary desire makes bodies more impenetrable (both literally and metaphorically).

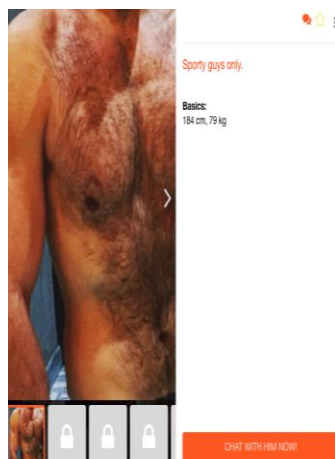


Figure 8: "sporty guys only"

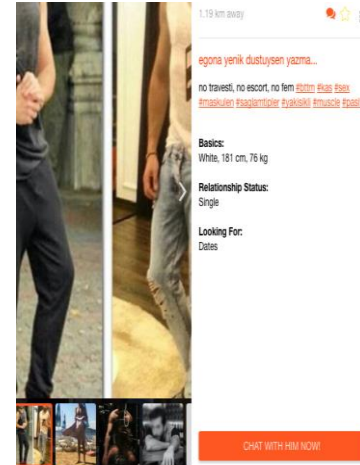


Figure 9: "only muscle: no transvestite, no escort, no fem, #saglamtipler, #muscle, #masculine"

### 6.1.5. “The curse of middle-class”

**R:** So you think that everybody can build a muscular body?

**Hakan (24):** “Of course! If he doesn’t, it’s not because he has no money but because he is too lazy to do so.”

Class dismissal and class blindness, according to Bérubé, is not a marginal issue nor is it specific to gay populations.<sup>155</sup> Rather, it constitutes one of the most essential dimension (power structure) of the capitalist social order. According to Bérubé, the dominance of middleclass discourse is the perfect echo of class dismissal within the individual and collective interactions. “Middleclass”, says Bérubé, “is the neutral ground where there is no class warfare, no class division, no class struggle, no class consciousness.”<sup>156</sup> What I seek to stress here is the “depoliticizing” and “demobilizing” class impacts of homonormativity, which are manifested on Hornet in the shape of the evident fact that inequality of material conditions is usually not recognized, but made invisible and rendered insignificant.<sup>157</sup>

It was noteworthy for me not to hear or see anything that would reveal the class aspects of negative immunization on Hornet –or, maybe, “middleclass” can be read only through its illegibility, through the privilege of taken for granted without the need to be called any name. I asked all 40 respondents about their thoughts on the class dimension of Hornet. Except the oldest respondent who is a gay man in his early sixties who described Hornet as the “curse of middle-class”, no one seemed to have a thought about or reflected on the class-based exclusions inherent to Hornet or any other dating application. And, when I asked them about the affordability of maintaining a desirable body, they all agreed that it was achievable for anyone.

Nevertheless, Hornet itself was quite helpful to prove that socio-economic background is actually consequential. When I change my application’s location from the city center to the peripheries, usually populated by people with lower income, not only there are very few users, but also the profiles change dramatically, especially, in terms of their body display. There are far

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<sup>155</sup> Bérubé, Alan, “Class Dismissed,” 250.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>157</sup> Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality*, 50.

less half naked profile pictures and fewer muscular and athletic bodies. There might be two possible and interrelated explanations for such a difference between the city center and its peripheries: first, the socio-cultural demographic change; second –and which interests me more– the high costs of maintaining a muscular body which requires leisure, gym inscription, a personal trainer, and supplementary substances such as protein shakes and various vitamins.

What is unveiled here is the fact that on Hornet not only there is a discrimination against bodies that do not comply with hegemonic norms of embodiment, but it also obscures the fact that there are bodies that cannot afford to do so due to the financial incapability. It is unlikely that one’s economic incapability to acquire a desirable body is acknowledged by the users. “Self-responsibility” is one of the crucial tenets of neoliberal discourse, whose logic functions in a way that if one does not meet the requirements of an ideal body, this is completely his own fault.<sup>158</sup> In this respect, I think the language is quite telling that most of the users seek for someone “who takes care of his body” instead of “who *can* take care of his body”.

## 6.2. Hornet As Another Regulatory Mechanism: Non-Human Agency

In Chapter 5, I talked about the potentials of Hornet to facilitate the formation of a virtual community. There, however, I did not put an emphasis on the agency of this non/human actant since its active role was clearly pronounced. On the other hand, in this chapter, so far, I have illustrated the ways in which the separation of the self from others is aggravated due to the pervasive homonormative bodily desire operating within Hornet - one that is heavily invested in a middleclass ideology of belonging. However, in the case of homonormative immunity, Hornet’s active role in the construction of homonormative barriers might not be easily acknowledged. Consequently, in the rest, I will try to do that by exposing the fact that the users in my sample (but also in general) are not only negatively immunized *within* but also *through* Hornet- that is, the specific ways in which Hornet itself contributes to negative immunization.

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<sup>158</sup> Featherstone, Mike, “The Body in Consumer Culture.”

### 6.2.1. The Story Behind the Software

As stated before, agency conceptualized as assemblage “is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has.”<sup>159</sup> In order to grasp the prominence of a new medial tool, like MSM GNAs, in shaping the socio-cultural reality, one must avoid any approach that would posit GNAs as impassive objects. They should rather be conceptualized as a form of *thing-power*, a concept coined by Bennett and defined as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”<sup>160</sup> In other words, Hornet like other GNAs in general, should not be treated as inert mediums through which people interact; rather, the noteworthy formation of this human interaction through a non/human object must be taken into consideration. To this respect, in this study the term ‘actant’ is preferred over ‘object’ or similar terms to manifest the role of GNAs that goes beyond the capacity of an inactive artifact.

To begin with, GNAs’ agential implications must be taken into consideration in tandem with the role of the software designers and producers. The homonormative immunity can be traced back to the very idea and purpose behind the creation of a smartphone app for “gay men”. Both the producer of Grinder (the first app) and of Hornet explain their purpose as creating an app for gay men<sup>161</sup>, which raises questions about “why only gay men, but trans\*, intersex, queer people etc.?” Both Hornet and Grinder are advertised as “gay social network” and neither provides an option for users to clearly express their gender identity. Although it is indicated before that trans\* people do use Hornet in Istanbul, their inclusion is still rigidly denied by the software: one’s “role” can be only indicated on the app as “top; bottom; versatile; vers-top; vers-bottom”, assuming that the user is a gay male. Whereas, on *PlanetRomeo*, which was previously a

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<sup>159</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press Books, 2007), 178.

<sup>160</sup> Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter,” *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2004): 351.

<sup>161</sup> Drake Baer, “CEO of Grindr on The Power of Simplicity and Becoming an Unintentional Activist,” *Fast Company*, January 24, 2014, <http://www.fastcompany.com/3025128/bottom-line/ceo-of-grindr-on-the-power-of-simplicity-and-becoming-an-unintentional-activist>.; Renay, Murat, “Sosyal Sorumluluk Sahibi Gay Dating Uygulaması: Hornet,” *Radikal Blog*, 2014, <http://blog.radikal.com.tr/lgbt/sosyal-sorumluluk-sahibi-gay-dating-uygulamasihornet-46273>.

dating website but now has a smartphone application as well, a user can choose the ‘transgender’ option. Yet, still, the fact that the category of ‘transgender’ is provided under “orientation/sexuality” section raises important questions about the limited understanding of gender and sexuality embedded in such GNAs.

Claiming to connect marginalized people, yet, in return, creating an application that is exclusively meant to be for gay men, in fact, mirrors the severity of the extent homonormativity is irrevocably connected to neoliberalism, which according to Maskovsky, solely aspires to improve the conditions of those who can contribute to and benefit from it, i.e. the middleclass.<sup>162</sup> “In the era of neoliberalism,” says Maskovsky, “the liberatory dimension of lesbian and gay identity politics that was operative in decades past has been replaced by a politics of desire that remains largely uncritical of the commodification of sexual minority identities. [...] These subcultures –or, in neoliberal parlance, marketing niches- work in their own ways to mask the objective political economic processes that fragment sexual-minority communities along class lines.”<sup>163</sup> In this regard, I hope that the following extracts obtained from the interview that was made with Hornet’s CEO, Sean Howell, support my claims and explicate better how tightly homonormativity is related to neoliberal logic of consumption that seeks to somehow gain profit from the commodification of sexual sub-cultures by rendering them marketable. I also wish to reveal how far an intention to “help the marginalized people” is from a progressive act insofar as it is blinded enough to throw “gay parties” to help people or to support the marriage equality<sup>164</sup> for advertisement purposes:

We are also providing marketing services to several brands such as Orbitz, American Airlines and BMW. According to us, the priority is to create environments that is not all about ‘sex’. Some of the competitor apps focus on sex so much that *this hinders to reach homosexual people for advertisement purposes*. Yet, still, homosexuals and big brands accomplish to corroborate. Take, for instance, the campaign of Microsoft and Starbucks to support marriage equality.

<sup>162</sup> Maskovsky, Jeff, “Do We All ‘Reek of the Commodity’?: Consumption and the Erasure of Poverty in Lesbian and Gay Studies,” 281.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Also, the widely criticized homonormative implications of same-sex marriage -as it is mostly available for socio-economically privileged segments of LGBTIQI population- should not be forget either.

Apart from everything, *we help to organize gay parties all over the world* where being a homosexual is quite distressful and even punished. We help people with same sexual orientation to come together. [emphasis and translation mine]

### 6.2.2. “Pictures-under-glass”

In addition to software design and the politics thereof, visual design also matters in a space where every element is essentially visual, bespeaking in the first place to the eye. The way an identity is created and expressed on a virtual platform is therefore highly affected by the visual conditions of the app. On Hornet, the representation of a user is primarily visual –through pictures- and verbal up to 135 characters. Different from popular dating websites where the users are expected to answer a long list of personal questions (e.g. *OkCupid*), the process of a profile creation is effortless, as mentioned before. GNAs are designed for smartphones and they primarily meant to provide easy communication (and sex), not a matchmaking algorithm.<sup>165</sup> This, however, inevitably strengthens tendencies of commodification and dehumanization as a result of which the users are transformed into non-affective virtual avatars, possessing nothing but a mere exchange value. Burak (28) says: “you’r nothing but a picture here. You don't even talk to people, you simply fuck.”

In the virtual platform of Hornet, the users become “pictures-under-glass”<sup>166</sup>: objectified and fetishized bodies that are stripped of any affective content under the impenetrable materiality of glass surface. However, as opposed to Dean’s assertion, this does not want to say that having casual sex with a partner found online is bad or objectification and fetishization happen only in “private virtual” cruising, but in actual human contact. However, it does want to indicate that rejection becomes extremely easy on an app as the other is just another “picture”: it takes just one touch on the screen to block the unwanted one, then, the self is immunized towards it for good. In fact, even Hornet *etiquette guide* motivates users to “liberally sprinkle those blocks like a

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<sup>165</sup> Williams, Joe, “Grindr Boss Says Dating Apps Are NOT Killing Gay Scene · PinkNews.”

<sup>166</sup> Victor, Bret, “A Brief Rant on the Future of Interaction Design,” *A Brief Rant on the Future of Interaction Design*, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://worrydream.com/ABriefRantOnTheFutureOfInteractionDesign/>.

fairy dust”: “Blocking. We allow it on Hornet. In fact - we love it! We let you use it as much as you want. Liberally sprinkle those blocks like fairy dust. Someone annoying you? Block them. Do not get into a big argument.”<sup>167</sup>

Last but not least, the objectified body (flesh) of users on Hornet might be also racialized: Hornet enables users to show their ethnicity on app or to choose the ethnicity of their potential partners in the computer version, adding a racial dimension to the already active immunization. Yet, since racial immunization has never been a salient topic within the mainstream gay community in Turkey, it is not likely to see a racist phrase such as “No Rice, No Curry” – referring to Asian and Indian people- which is quite common in the case of United States.<sup>168</sup> The specificities of the cultural context, hence, prove very influential, demonstrating how agency always pertains to the continuum and never simply to a single human or non/human actant. I am saying this to highlight that even when a phenomenon seems an exclusive result of a GNA, the socio-cultural context always plays an important role in its shaping. That is why the same app can produce distinct articulations of social exclusion and inclusion as a result of the socio-cultural context in which it is used.

In conclusion, given the huge numbers of users on Hornet and on other applications, the collective aspect of performative construction of social ideals is what renders GNAs too potent in terms of the (re)production of exclusionary norms and strengthening of negative immunization. In this context, it is highly significant that the kind of immunization at stake here exceeds the local contexts and operates within a global framework, therefore, it is not only fastened and amplified, but also diffused. Popular phrases as “no fem, no trans, muscled only etc.” are becoming the motto of GNAs and they are used almost exclusively in English not only in Turkey but also in many non-English speaking countries I have visited.

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<sup>167</sup> “Hornet Etiquette Guide,” accessed May 05, 2016, <http://love.hornetapp.com/etiquette-guide>

<sup>168</sup> Woo, Jaime, “Open Letter to Grindr Users: I Am Not Rice, He Is Not Curry,” *The Huffington Post*, February 2, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jaime-woo/open-letter-to-grindr-users\\_b\\_3506180.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jaime-woo/open-letter-to-grindr-users_b_3506180.html).

## 7. CONCLUSION

“[W]e must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance--to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient "I" as a kind of possession. If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven.”

Butler, Judith (2005: 134)

**Me:** ...I seriously think that gay dating applications contribute to gay liberation. Especially their impact on community building is not negligible...

**Enrique:** Are you kidding me? I am almost 40 years old and I have never seen such a huge discrimination within gay community. If there is one thing those apps are good at is endangering gay liberation...

This dialogue took place about three years ago. Following a perfervid discussion, I decided that it was not even worth continuing the conversation as I was strongly convinced that Enrique was a narrow-minded and conservative man. He was not capable of conceiving the importance of dating applications for gay men, forgetting that we have, in fact, met each other on one of them. Until quite recently, I would be still arguing fiercely against my friend Enrique relying on the “obvious” advance in the gay sexual and social liberation as a result of MSM dating applications. I would even go on citing D’Emilio to desperately find an academic ally, who could support my argument. If, according to D’Emilio, capitalism paved the material ways for the rise of gay and lesbian identities in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it would be completely appropriate to claim that MSM dating applications are legacies of this phenomenon.<sup>169</sup> I am extremely glad, however, that I am no longer this person. Now, I acknowledge that I was not very much preoccupied with the definition of “we” back in those days. Who were being liberated, from what and at what cost?

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<sup>169</sup> D’Emilio, John, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Abelove, Henry, Barale, Michele A., and Halperin, David M. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 467–76.



Almost three years later, however, I was eager to write from an opposite perspective this time- that of the “narrow-minded and conservative” man. Then, what could have possibly happened since that conversation occurred to motivate me to write a thesis on the ways how Geosocial Networking Applications engender, reiterate, and strengthen socio-economic inequalities and discrimination? Well, first of all, I was warned that there is no “innocent bystander”<sup>170</sup> -the further I close my eyes to class inequalities and social exclusions, the deeper and stronger they become. Also, I have finally recognized that my own socio-economic position - which I wanted to imagine as pertaining to the “ordinary people” and “middle-class”- was in fact a highly privileged one.

This thesis, therefore, is planned to be my confession and redemption for producing and using knowledge that has dismissed the class and assumed a homogenous gay community, ignoring the long-lasting inequalities and exclusions. On the other hand, however disturbed I was about the mainstream discussions on MSM GNAs and the use of misleading terminology – such as “community” as a space or group of people- I still sought ways to account for the potentialities of MSM GNAs and to offer an alternative way of interpreting community. Yet, my search for queer and affirmative potentialities should not be confused with being “cruelly optimistic”<sup>171</sup>; I would rather define my attempts as being *hopelessly hopeful* because as much as I believed that there was still hope that MSM GNAs could decrease the isolation of non-heteronormative people in Turkey, I did not dismiss their negative consequences. As I have emphasized many times, the case of MSM GNAs is constituted by a paradox in that they simultaneously subvert and support hegemonic hetero- and homonormative norms and ideals.

At this point, the conceptual tools that I borrowed from Esposito have been very useful to account for this constitutive paradox that became the central concern of this thesis –and to see that paradoxes are productive for they allow to reveal the ambiguous and complicated operation

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<sup>170</sup> Berube, Alan, “Class Dismissed.”

<sup>171</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

of social phenomena. First of all, by adopting the term community in accordance with Esposito, I was able to present my political stance in regard to the subject at hand. Community, for me, could be only used in Esposito's terms –as a relation that connects subjects- but not as a group of people or the space they come together, disregarding the exclusions that occur within the so-called “community”. Therefore, employing community as a relation enabled me both to criticize the original use of the term and to offer another way of understanding community as a relation that was produced by Hornet in Istanbul. In this respect, I intended to demonstrate the ways in which Hornet produces a virtual relation (*virtual community*) that connects MSM, trans\* women and (MTF) cross-dressers by providing them a (non-heteronormative) common space and by diminishing their (homonormative) barriers. I considered this virtual community both affirmative of life and subversive of hetero- and homonormativity.

In addition, Esposito helped me to see that the paradox I previously identified was indeed valid because Hornet does not only diminish individual barriers but also rebuild them. Accordingly, another concept –*immunity*- provided by Esposito was extremely useful to grasp that whenever or wherever subjects open themselves to other(ness), their opening will be frustrated by the constant need of self-protection, which might result in the destruction of both the self and the other, if the protection of individual boundaries stops being defensive and becomes offensive. In this regard, it became clear that the common space provided by Hornet is replete not only with aggressive boundaries of homonormatively-identified subjects, but also with exclusions and discriminations originating in homonormative articulation of desire. Also, it came to light that homonormative ideals and norms are not merely reflected within Hornet, but reproduced and consolidated through it. Finally, the integral relationship between community and immunity provided an important insight to theories on (virtual) cruising, which demonstrated an uncritical tendency to disregard the immunitarian dimension of cruising.

Regardless of the limits of time and space, too many things have been brought up and discussed in this thesis. Yet, unfortunately, too many have been left unsaid. Most importantly, I

believe that I could not do enough justice to Esposito's brilliant re-formulation of biopolitics in regards to community and immunity. For Esposito, biopolitics is about how different groups and individuals are related to each other: "negative biopolitics"<sup>172</sup> prevents the self from shattering its walls and accepting the other- the other is not welcomed anywhere close. To the contrary, "affirmative biopolitics"<sup>173</sup> of life can be observed when the mutual opening of the subjects is not thwarted because of exclusionary individual barriers. I am strongly convinced that this thesis can be significantly improved in the future if biopolitics of inter-subjective relationality and biopolitics of desire is incorporated into its theoretical and analytical framework. If biopolitics has at its center "man-as-living-being"<sup>174</sup> -without reducing life to biological existence-, it is imperative to consider desire as an inextricable aspect of personal and collective life- man-as-living-being cannot be thought divorced from *man-as-desiring-being*.

On the other hand, I am particularly interested in improving this thesis in the future by establishing a critical and productive discussion on "homonormative masculinities". Homonormative masculinity is constructed on Hornet primarily by means of praising 'masculinity/manliness' and repudiating 'femininity/effeminacy'. In contrast to what Connell argued before, what can be observed on this virtual platform is that gay masculinities cannot be categorized easily as "subordinate" insofar as they accept, admire and subscribe to norms of hegemonic masculinity, as well as benefiting from them.<sup>175</sup> Some gay masculinities are able to *pass for* hegemonic masculinity by embodying and practicing hegemonic norms and ideals. In this sense, homonormative gay masculinities on virtual cruising platforms can give indication of an emergent kind of masculinity and, thus, deserves further attention and investigation. In addition, any future work on the topic must also apply an intersectional analysis in order to take into consideration other regulatory mechanisms which play a part in the construction of homonormative masculinities such as ethnicity and race.

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<sup>172</sup> Esposito, "Community, Immunity, Biopolitics," 86.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>174</sup> Mitchel, Foucault, "Lecture 11, 17 March 1976."

<sup>175</sup> Connell, Raewyn W., *Masculinities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

There are also several points that have been mentioned but not developed sufficiently within the confined of this thesis. I believe that if such points are appropriately covered in the future, this thesis will provide even more valuable insight to the phenomenon of cruising. In this respect, especially important for me is that I could not fully engage with the local dynamics and specificities of Istanbul, Turkey. This problem particularly results from the fact that I did not adequately cover a literature on the urban sociology of the city and could not find any resource on gay/queer cruising in Istanbul. On the other hand, I have lost my focus on Istanbul at several instances since the picture I depicted demonstrated a striking similarity with the global trends of MSM virtual cruising. “No Fem, No Fat”<sup>176</sup> is globally becoming the slogan of homonormativity on MSM GNAs, revealing the urgent necessity of examining the global reproduction of homonormativity through GNAs. I shall therefore incorporate into my future work a critical analysis of the interplay between local and global dynamics of MSM virtual cruising through GNAs.

The final set of limitations of this thesis is directly related to its methodology. First of all, even though Hornet was capable of representing the mainstream applications, examining virtual cruising without taken into consideration other MSM GNAs is a highly limited attempt. A broader research on different GNAs can show how certain bodies – e.g. “unfit” and “effeminate”- that are abjected from one platform are the most desirable ones in another. Secondly, the sample of respondents may not be representative enough of the entire population of the platform. Especially, the insufficiency of the in-app interviews conducted with trans\* women, (MTF) cross-dressers and (MTF) trans\* sex workers adversely influenced my intentions to account for their experiences. Finally, I might mistakenly depicted a picture of Hornet in which there is no space for desiring non-normative others. Although remarkably limited, Hornet is also used by trans\*-attracted men. However, most of them prefer to cruise anonymously –

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<sup>176</sup> There is even an ongoing documentary project on the subject. For further information see: <http://www.jamaltlewis.com/nofatsnofemmes/>.

disclosing once again their wish (and fear) to protect their individual boundaries for desiring trans\* women- and none of them accepted my interview request.

To conclude, I would like to say that I know how tempting it is to imagine 'gay politics' as the antithesis of heteronormativity; to assume a 'gay community' where there are no exclusions or discriminations; even, to suggest that solidarity is the central tenet of the 'gay culture'. Though, this is not the case and it will never be. Does this necessarily imply a lost cause and a reason to expect an apocalyptic future for LGBTQI/queer politics? I do not think so. I, also, do not believe that capitalism has vanquished radical LGBTQI politics. As restrictive as they might be, exclusionary and discriminative power relations are what render egalitarian politics making possible. Therefore, as gay and queer scholars, our responsibility should be to refute ungrounded claims that posit a homogenous gay community and to seek for alternative ways of interpreting and building community. This is exactly what I intended to do here.

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