



“*Ana Gay*”: Coming to Terms with Male Gayness in Egypt¹

by Oumnia Abaza

Through a broad set of in-depth interviews conducted with twenty self-identifying gay males living in Cairo, this research helps piece together a more contextualized picture of the process by which gayness is recognized and made socially recognizable among Egyptian males today. This work conceptualizes gayness as a mode of psychosocial performativity through which the positionality of a same sex preference is expressed within the context of a clearly defined and routinely enforced heterosexual norm. While investigating perceptions of self, family, marriage and gay community among self-identifying gay males, this work highlights the role information technology (IT) plays in seeking out opportunities for same sex intercourse and in formulating a

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performance of gayness which challenges some of Egypt's gender and sexuality codes while remaining observant of others. The central role of IT is underscored here to call attention to the inseparability of gay performativity in Egypt and various notions of modernity, particularly those taken up by the Egyptian state in its modernity project.

In approaching gayness as performance of the subjective positionality that a same sex preference takes on in an environment of state enforced heterosexual and heteronormative family life, the conceptual framing of this work is informed by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1988) and Michel Foucault's work on mechanisms of bio-power and processes of subjection and self subjection, most aptly *The History of Sexuality* (1976). Foucault's argument that sexuality codes are made useful mechanisms of social control and surveillance not only through top down processes of subjection enacted by states, for example, but also through bottom up processes that cause sexuality codes to become internalized is significant in reviewing the respondent narratives collected for this work, as respondents clearly and consistently perceived a threat not only in their real or imagined confrontations with the Egyptian state, but also in being recognized for a same sex preference by family and friends.

The main purpose of this research is to help reorient the existing literature around gayness and same sex practice in the Middle East away from diagnostic medico-judicial treatments, all of which equate same sex practice with mental illness, criminality and spiritual perversion, and further toward a social construct paradigm. This work approaches the reluctance of Egyptian and Arab sociologists to write about gayness and same sex practice as one rooted in social and political norms. As many of the following respondent narratives suggest, the medico-judicial diagnostics advanced by political, religious and social institutions in Cairo have been deeply internalized in the Egyptian setting, and negative popular views on gayness as a legal, social and spiritual category have influenced this group of young males. The following narratives illustrate how these respondents navigate and negotiate sexual, social and spiritual codes while trying to balance varying degrees of compliance with social norms with the desire to formulate, embody and perform gayness.

Findings

A qualitative research method has been used in this study to emphasize narrative perceptions of self, personal identity and notions of difference among respondents. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 middle and upper middle class males living in Cairo who self identify as gay, all aged 21 to 31 years old. The selected age group was preferable for capturing the perceptions of young adults who constitute the first internet generation. My selection criteria

were based largely on respondents' accessibility and willingness to participate candidly. All interviews for this work have been performed in the Arabic language and the author has conducted all translations to English.

Eight out of 20 of respondents (40%) were persons known to the author from gay parties, gatherings or regular outings, while 20% of respondents (4 of 20) had not been well acquainted with the author prior to the interviews. The remaining 40% (8 of 20) were new acquaintances made possible by research networking. Both stratified and snowball samplings have been used for this study. An informant helped to locate middle class respondents and attended most of the interviews at the request of respondents. An average of three hours was spent with each respondent, with some interviews lasting up to six hours and involving follow-up telephone inquiries. Some respondents expressed anxiety about being recognizable from the details they had provided, thus highly sensitive information has been removed from the data set presented here.

Observation was also used as a primary method for data collection during this research, as it facilitated trust building with respondents over the course of two years of research. Due to respondents' general preference to maintain a low visibility and the many casual encounters I held with my respondents during the course of this research, accuracy in representation of the sample used and the data collected is less reliable in quantitative measures than in narrative format. For that reason, narratives have been given priority in this data set. Approximations of the size of Cairo's gay cohort would have depended upon unreliable measures such as the number of Egyptian subscribers on gay websites like *Manjam*², and it cannot be assumed that all subscribers to gay websites self identify as gay. Moreover, respondents for this research indicated a high level of suspicion regarding gay website subscribers, as gay websites are often sites for entrapment and observation by government agents. Confidentiality of identity was assured to all respondents and no information provided here has been done so without their oral consent.

*Recognition of the Self as Gay*³

7 of 20 (35%) said they remembered being attracted to same sex schoolmates at a young age

² The website www.manjam.com is a popular gay site with approximately 11,500 Egyptian users in May 2009, including 4,500 from Cairo and the rest from various other Egyptian governorates.

³ Two out of 20 (10%) respondents associated their recognition of gayness with episodes of sexual molestation during childhood. At the request of respondents, those narratives have been omitted from this work.

I discovered I was gay when I was 5 years old. I had feelings toward my friends in school (Walid)

2 of 20 (10%) claimed to be attracted to men in general

When I was a kid I discovered that I was always fantasizing about men, but always older men (Karim)

2 of 20 (10%) claimed to have realized gayness during fantasies about male actors

I was 3 years old when I felt that I was gay. I used to like an actor called Hassan Youssef and specially the scenes in which he used to be naked (Haitham)

3 of 20 (15%) claimed to have realized gayness while watching pornography

I was in the 3rd grade when I saw my first porn with straight people. My [male] friends in the bus used to play with each other and I used to watch them. I actually enjoyed watching them touching each other (Mostafa)

4 out of 20 (25%) self identified as gay after having “soft sex”⁴ with male friends and/or family

I was 6 years old when I first felt that I was gay. My cousin used to touch me and I used to like it a lot. I used to always wait for him to touch me. He was...12 years old (Nagy)

I was 8 years old the first time I had sex with my cousin who was younger than me but soft sex I mean. I liked it a lot. I was not molested; we did it with consent (Khaled)

First Same Sex Intercourse and Sexual Partner

A majority of respondents claimed to have had their first same sex intercourse with male partners who considered themselves “straight” (i.e. not gay) and who, in some cases, were married to women at the time of intercourse or became married to women shortly after the intercourse. More than half of respondents (60%) had their first sexual intercourse with other men while in their teens, with the median age of first sexual encounter at 16.6 years of age.⁵

8 of 20 (45%) had first same sex intercourse with male family members⁶

⁴ So-called “soft sex” refers to sexual acts not including intercourse.

⁵ Five out of 20 (25%) respondents had first same sex intercourse while between the ages of 20 and 25, while 3 of 20 (15%) had first same sex intercourse while between the ages of 8 and 12.

⁶ Two respondents claimed to have first intercourse with male cousins, one with an uncle and one with a brother.

My first sexual experience was with my cousin who is one year older than me. I was 12 years old. We used to have soft sex at the beginning and then we started having full sexual intercourse later on. We had sex for a couple of months (Ahmed)

My first sexual encounter was when I was 13 years old and this was with my uncle. I approached him. He was in his early twenties. We used to have sex on a regular basis. He was my fuck buddy for about five years. I used to have oral sex with him but he used to tell me that what we were doing was wrong (Mourad)

5 of 20 (25%) had first same sex intercourse with male friends

My first sexual experience was with my best friend. We were once sitting together at his place and we kissed. Then we did not talk to each other for about two months. Then we met again and we had sex. We stayed together for six years (Hesham)

7 of 20 (35%) had first same sex intercourse with men identified over internet⁷

My first sexual experience was when I was 16. And this was with someone I met through the Internet [through sharing windows]. I was excited at the idea of having sex for the first time but I felt cheap afterwards and thought that I should not have slept with him, maybe because I was a teenager, I don't know...(Ramy)

My first sexual experience was when I was 22. And it was through a website called gayegypt.com. It was horrible; he was old, end of his thirties and married. We had sex at his place (Amine)

My first experience was not great. I did not like the guy. I met him through Internet. He gave me an appointment in the street. I wanted to know what "having sex" means. I did not like the guy because he said that he was bisexual. We only had sex once; He did not want to see me again (Mostafa)

Sexual Relations and Self Recognition

Many respondents related their ability to engage in sex and to associate with other men, particularly with other self identifying gay men, with higher self-confidence and healthier body image. For many of them, the first same sex experience opened up new opportunities and networks of gay friends and sexual partners through internet or mutual friends.

⁷ Four of my respondents claimed to have their first same sex intercourse with "random strangers" they had met over the internet.

I'm feeling much better psychologically since I started dating guys. Before having sex I was not as self-confident as now. I believe that the sexual experiences matter and that these have an impact on the personality of the person (Ali)

Since I started having sex with men I am happier because at least I receive compliments. Men appreciate me and admire me for my beauty which is very important for me as I am not too self-confident about my physical aspect. All this to tell you that my self-confidence has been increasing since I started to mingle with other gays (Nizar)

Self Perceptions of Gayness

18 out of 20 (90%) respondents perceived gayness as normal, even respondents who had not yet come “out” to family and friends.

I'm very self-satisfied especially, after my parents knew that I was gay at the beginning of this year. I perceive myself as normal, as I have my life, my interests and my friends. Being gay did not enable me to have an active social life (Tamer)

I perceive myself as someone normal and special. I'm talented in art and only few people are talented. I have never felt that I was abnormal (Karim)

Many respondents viewed gayness as a small part of their self identity, and most considered it a private matter first and foremost.

Being gay is only a small part of me. I have a career, future and present plans like anyone has, but I am different in my sexuality. I do not perceive my homosexuality as something abnormal, but rather as a normal thing (Ali)

For me being gay has a both negative and positive side. I personally always look at the bright side. I experience the straight life and the gay life as well. It's like being able to see an object from different angles. The straight people do only see one side of the coin. I think I understand life better than straight people. Most of the gays can see things [about] you as a straight person cannot see. We gays are much more sensitive than straight people. We can solve problems better than straight people (Mostafa)

Many rejected associations between gayness and disease, and few respondents perceived much difference between themselves and their “straight” peers beyond sexual preference.

I love my job very much and I love my friends and family.... I have all kinds of contradictions and I feel its okay because I am a human being who likes men. I don't wake up in the morning and say I'm gay. I am normal. I don't have a disease or an abnormality. I am just like anybody else and

everyone has his or her own issues. Homosexuality is not one of my issues. I have other issues in life such as feeling lonely sometimes. I have insecurities as well (Amine)

Only two respondents (10%) indicated negative self perceptions as a result of gay preference.

I am not a happy person because my parents knew about my homosexuality and since then they became more conservative and strict with me. I lie to them constantly so that I can go out and meet my gay friends. I am a specialist in lying and I feel really bad about myself not telling them the truth (Samy)

I perceive myself as someone doing something that is considered as a sin—having sex with another man, and this makes me feel bad about myself. I always have a sense of guilt when I go home and see my parents after I had sex with a man (Hassan)

Many considered sexual preference a private matter, and a large majority of respondents said they did not feel that they were living “in the closet.”

I feel good about myself even though I have to hide my sexual preference to my family. I don't see a reason why I should come out because it is very personal even if I was straight (Karim)

I don't have a need to publicly announce my sexual interests; it is like talking about being right-handed or having brown eyes...it is apparent when people interact with me or when I talk about my life to them (Youssef)

I don't live in the closet, as the people I care about know that I'm gay and...I never pretended to be straight. I don't sit with people and...[say], “I am attracted to this girl,” but at the same time I don't broadcast being gay because even if I was straight I would not share my sexual experience with anyone, and when I am in a relationship with a guy...my close friends who know that I am gay don't know for months that I am with someone. If someone comes and asks me whether I'm gay or not, I would not lie because I don't like to lie! I think it's a big moral issue but at the same time I don't have to tell them the truth. I can get out of answering the question but most of the time I do answer or give a hint (Amine)

I don't feel I am in the closet because I have friends to talk to but I am not out to the straight world and I have no reason to get out from the closet. I feel insecure because I am homosexual. I can chat with someone who turns out to be from the police. I am normal and I just like guys! (Nagy)

The closet is only at home. I have only one straight friend who knows that I am gay. I tell anyone who asks me whether I am gay or straight that I am gay, I don't hide my sexual preference anymore. I discovered lately that I really do not care. What can happen to me if anyone discovered? I

figured out that it was all in my mind. And now I meet my gay friends and everything is fine. I feel that I am wasting my time caring about the others when I don't think that they really care about me and about the way I feel (Taher)

Leading a Double Life

Many respondents talked about the effort it required to hide gayness, and all claimed to be leading a double life. Even those who had come “out” to families and friends felt forced to perform “straight” in front of family and friends or school and work colleagues, and “gay” with gay friends only.

I am leading two different lives, but I'm mostly straight acting. When I am among girls, I act straight so that no one knows that I am gay. All of my friends think that I am different than the others, but no one suspects that I am gay (Samy)

I live two different lives. When I meet my gay friends, I talk freely about my desires. With my straight friends and family, I'm still myself but I hide my needs or sexual preference for men (Ahmed)

I am leading a double life. None of my straight friends know about the fact that I am gay. So far, the fact that they don't know doesn't cause me any problem. But I prefer to hang out with my gay friends, as I feel more comfortable. I still do have a sense of guilt religiously because it is a sin punishable by God and socially because people around me have a very negative conception of gayness (Nizar)

Many respondents said they tended to separate groups of friends, and most felt more comfortable with gay friends since they could speak more freely about feelings, emotions and desires without being judged.

None of my family members and among my colleagues at work know that I'm gay. My straight friends know but only girls. My colleagues at work and university, as well as all of my straight other friends, know that I am different, but in a good way (Amr)

The country here does not give me the chance to live the life I want. I feel that I am constantly under pressure and that I am going to get arrested one day by the police. I don't want to be judged for my sexual preference. I want to live my sexuality freely and not have to pretend that I am straight the whole time so that people do not look at me in a bad way. I would love it if there were gay bars and gay clubs in which all gays can get together (Taher)

Dating Women

12 out of 20 (60%) respondents claimed to have never dated a woman, and many said they were “disgusted” by the female body and genitals while very much attracted to the male body.

8 out of 20 (40%) respondents claimed to have dated a woman at some point, with the majority claiming that no sexual intercourse occurred in those relationships.

At the time of these interviews, 2 respondents were engaged to women (one for a year, the other for three months); reportedly neither had ever touched or even kissed his fiancée. Both indicated a strong desire to get out of the engagements, which had been arranged by their mothers.

I dated a girl for one year and a half and I told her about my preference for men. She was American and we had sex once. But it did not work at all. I am not into having sex with girls; I don't enjoy it. The difference is in the body muscles. The woman is too soft and is too easy to break psychologically. I can make a woman cry easily. Women are not interesting. Men are more intelligent and they have more skills in socializing. Because we are living in a conservative society it is not easy to take a girl out whereas with a guy it's easier. The weakness of women turns me off (Khaled)

Emotionally I felt ok with the girl I dated but physically I was not attracted at all. I am not interested sexually in women. Actually, a woman who is naked disgusts me; it does not turn me on. I only like fit men and not [just] any man (Walid)

Marriage and Family

Marriage is widely viewed as the most important event in life in Arab societies. It serves as a rite of passage into adulthood and facilitates personal and marital independence, the respect of the community and the fulfillment of several important markers of gender propriety as it is locally defined. As Homa Hoodfar (1997) has noted, “In...Egypt generally, like most other parts of the Muslim world, marriage is the only acceptable context for sexual activity and parenthood and provides the primary framework for the expression of masculinity and femininity and the fulfillment of gender roles” (Hoodfar 1997, 52).

3 respondents expressed plans to enter heterosexual marriages despite a sexual preference for men.

I'm afraid of ending up alone. I love babies and I might get married. I might tell my wife that I'm gay but I'll never marry a lesbian. If I ever get married I will keep my close friends but I will not meet other men. I will survive because life is all about priorities. Kids are very important. I will be masturbating because I know that sexually I will not be satisfied. I will be happy to have kids

though. However, I will only take this step when I'll have it with men, as I would not like to betray my wife (Hesham)

12 out of 20 (60%) respondents noted a strong preference not to get married despite significant pressure from families to do so. Reasons for not wanting to marry varied from money concerns to dislike for responsibility and general discomfort with the idea of being intimate with unfamiliar women. Fear of “ending up alone” was a common anxiety expressed by respondents with regard to the marriage and children question.

I'm not intending to get married because I don't like responsibilities. I will only get married for the idea of not ending up alone. I never had a girl friend as a lover. And I don't know if I ever will (Karim)

My mum doesn't stop talking to me about marriage. She has high expectations of me, as she does not like my sister and brother-in-law. I don't want to get married because I'm too busy and unstable. I move a lot. I would love to have an everlasting relationship with a guy. I thought of adoption before because I love kids. My family is conservative. They don't see a reason why I'm not married. They don't stop telling me you have your job and your career so what are you waiting for? (Amine)

'When are you going to get married?' Is a question that my family does not stop asking me. They introduced me to several potential brides. I saw two brides before and, thank God, they both had defects. I don't want to get married but my family is stressing me out. I don't like responsibility; I am very selfish. I don't want to waste my money on my kids. I would rather spend it on myself (Nagy)

3 out of 20 (15%) said that they would prefer to marry and raise a family with a male partner if society would allow it. All of these respondents had either spent time outside of Egypt or had held significant relationships with foreign male partners.

Gay people can raise children as good as straight people. I witnessed this fact with two gays who had a baby. But I did not like it because I am not used to it. I would rather have a dog than a baby because at least the dog will always depend on me. It's not like a child. A child could leave you at any moment (Walid)

I believe that two men can have a healthy and long relationship. To me, marriage with a man is important, as it is another stage of being equal. It is more about equality. I don't need to feel that I am a second [class] citizen. Straight people are allowed to get married and to get accepted. He can be in my will and I can be in his will. And of course by equality I do not want people to judge me simply because I like men (Mourad)

If I ever get married I would want to get married to a man. I don't want to have children. I don't want to get distracted from the man I love by having children. Children take too much energy and efforts! (Taher)

I want to marry a guy and adopt children; I love children a lot. I want to give back to my community. I want to do charity in Egypt and give back to Egypt what Egypt gave me. I would ideally like to adopt a boy and a girl. I will teach them how to be strong and to accept differences in people (Khaled)

Respondents who expressed a desire not to marry women said they had no attraction to the female body or that they felt a desire to be honest and fair about their real sexual preference and lifestyle choice.

I do love kids but I am not going to get married. I don't like women and I tried it with women but I had no erection whatsoever. I can see beauty and I sometimes think that some girls are very pretty but they don't move anything in me (Fares)

Regarding children, 20% (4 out of 20) respondents said they would like to marry women in order to have children to keep them company and take care of them when they grow older. These respondents talked more often about religion than the others. They also noted a disbelief in long lasting relationships between two men. All 4 said they would cut off relations with the gay community and try to lead a straight life at the time of marriage, even despite its challenges.

My mother wants me to get married. I don't want to have kids and I don't like children. I don't want to get married. I don't want to have familial commitment. Marriage is a choice and I choose to not get married at all. It's a risk I'm taking (Ali)

I am going out with both a man and a girl at the same time because I really want to change. I want to get married and to have kids. I believe that family and marriage are very important institutions in the society. I am convinced that when I will grow older I will need something or someone to live for (Samy)

The Role of Social Media

Respondents cited the internet as the most regular media forum where gay and not gay men can meet other men and seek out opportunities for same sex encounters in Egypt. Internet and other social media such as mobile phones facilitates gay networking among individuals and groups and becomes an important medium for formulating what gay means in the local environment.

Thank god that internet exists; since I started using it I understood that I was not alone. I would have killed myself since a very long time... The turning point in my life was when I added this guy on MSN⁸ and he told me from where are you from? "Jar" or "Dar"? I said that I was from Cairo but he was talking about which websites I am from. So he sent me both websites. I created two profiles on the two websites... Then I started looking for "gays" who looked like my ex-boyfriend. He was blond with blue eyes. So I started dating foreigners. I used to meet them through the internet (Samy)

18 out of 20 respondents described their internet use as highly active, with many users gaining access to gay explicit content, social networks and opportunities for sex online. Many respondents noted feelings of isolation before internet access had been secured, and for many the discovery of gay websites served as a critical turning point in 'becoming gay.' Gay pornography, gay chat rooms and informational websites helped respondents to access information and narratives from gay communities around the world allowed respondents to discover positive expressions and experiences of other self identifying gays.

I used to use internet to meet other gays. My gay life became totally online. When I was online I felt I had control over the person I was talking to. I was whoever I cannot be or I was not allowed to be in real life (Faher)

My conscious realization that I prefer men came with my discovery of a website called GayEgypt.⁹ I was in love with a couple of boy friends, but I never thought of me as being "gay." I was astonished and asked myself what is it to be gay? I always thought that men sleep with each other because of social segregation and the fact that women are separated from men in our society. Then I realized that there was something such as gay porn. So I started seeing men sleeping together. I used to hear of it but I had never seen it (Amine)

Although many respondents characterized their first same sex experiences with strangers they had met online as "not good," most continued to use internet to meet new sexual partners.

At 15 years I started chatting on Yahoo! but I used to talk to foreigners. I did not chat a lot. It was only to masturbate. I used to have sex online; watch gay porn and have sex with other men. My first experience was not great. I did not like the guy. I met him through internet. He gave me an appointment in the street. I wanted to feel what sex was (Mostafa)

2 of 20 (10%) of respondents claimed to not use internet to communicate with other gay men.

⁸ MSN is an "instant" electronic messaging service for online chatting offered by *Hotmail*.

⁹ Also a gay website at www.gayegypt.com.

I used to meet men through gay dating sites, but not anymore. I prefer to meet men in real life. The more your network grows and the more gay men you know, the easier it becomes to meet eligible gay men. I was missing the heat of meeting people in real life, flirting, wondering who will take the next step, etc.... and I am now enjoying this feeling of having a firsthand experience with the men I am about to date instead of interfacing with a machine [i.e. a computer] where all you can see, if you do, is a photo of someone that you do not know, while missing experiencing with all your senses, as there is no voice, no physical existence, or even trust that this person is saying the truth about who they are. You minimize the risk factor, but at the same time, it takes time to get over the addiction of online dating, because it provides you with a shield that you can comfortably hide behind (Amine)

I don't use internet to get to know gays because it is better to know people through other people rather than through a machine. I have never had any profile on gay websites because I think it is artificial. I am also scared of the police. My family counts a lot for me and I don't want to cause them pain (Hesham)

Respondents identified gay websites as the primary forum through which Egyptian males pursue gay relationships. Websites like *Manjam*, *Gaydar*¹⁰ and *Gay Romeo*¹¹ allow users to create personal profiles that indicate their preferences and interests. Most of these websites allow users to create free user profiles, while some charge fees for “extra” services, including unlimited messaging with other subscribers (the maximum being 10 per day for regular subscribers), special offer emails for local sex shops, access to all hidden profile content for other subscribers to the website and multimedia profile features such as music videos. Respondents noted that most Egyptian subscribers do not include full-face profile photos for fear of personal security and discovery by the state as well as family and friends.

Internet has facilitated my life; it is like a catalogue from which you can choose men you like or you are attracted to. You have profiles of “gays” with pictures and all of the specifications, blue or brown eyes, blond or dark, top or bottom [preference in sexual positioning]... It's like ordering something you like (Nagy)

Internet is the only way for us to meet besides house parties: “Manjam” and “Gaydar” being the two most famous ones [websites]. But I just show my body and not my face [for fear of imprisonment]. It is sad and unfortunate because we don't have the acceptance from the straight world to exist in the world openly and by that I mean bars, cafes, or restaurants where one can meet another guy and express his interest in him publicly. And by interest I also mean sexually. Internet is a gate way for men to meet their sexual needs (Mourad)

¹⁰ Can be found at www.gaydar.co.uk.

¹¹ Can be found at www.gayromeo.com.

Despite variations in internet use, all respondents noted a preference for gay social networking through other gay friends rather than online. Many respondents acknowledged the difficulties resulting from online encounters, particularly the use of false identities.

Mainly, I get to meet people through people, generally. From neighbors to friends to Internet friend-finder services, [and] even to my work circles—people generally, and homosexuals specifically, if we talk about that for this case study here. Internet is of course a tool that facilitates a certain possibility of meeting someone, but then again it is very delusional and disembodied. It is difficult for me personally to experience the other in such disembodied context, I prefer usually a face-to-face social interaction, or then if it is disembodied I prefer other forms rather than Internet. With Internet, the room for re-creating self-representation is really overwhelming, you can be anything or anyone you want online. You are totally [uninhibited] from what you might abstain from in your offline life (Youssef)

Perceptions of Gay and “Khawal”

The majority of respondents defined gayness as an experience in which a man is attracted to or has “feelings for” another man without necessarily having the intention to engage in same sex. Only one of the twenty respondents associated gayness with abnormality and sin, and that respondent noted having been influenced by his religious family.

Gayness is what I do in bed.... It is being attracted to the same sex.... It is a man who is attracted to another man.... It's liking men and having the courage to say, "I like men".... It is a struggle; a struggle because you're facing problems and have to try to solve them.... Gayness is having feelings for someone who has the same sex.... It is a sexual desire...a way of life.... To be gay is to have a different sexual preference than the majority of people.... Gayness is to be sexually and emotionally interested in men and in men only.... It is being a special and mature person, more mature than straight people.... Gayness to me is not about fucking or getting fucked by another man. It is about the realization that I want to have companionship and fall in love with a man.... Gayness for me is the same as homosexuality. I don't care about the label you put to refer to a man who is interested in another man. It is another dimension of existence with the whole package it comes with, such as, emotions, sexuality, and drama...fun, sadness, etc.... It cannot be compared to a straight life and I will use it over and over and over again. I am gay and I want to remain gay! (Mostafa)

Gayness is abnormal because if everyone is gay, there will be no procreation and life in planet Earth will end. I'm not a happy person and I wish I were normal. By normal I mean someone who can get married to a girl that he will not betray and with whom he can have children (Hassan)

Personally, in reference to the word gay again, or the gay identity, I think I don't use it to describe myself. I think my identity as a person is much more complex than being reduced into that one

word, which is also very new, and is also very time/ space context specific. The notion of sexuality is a complex thing for me. I don't actually see people in terms of gay and straight (Youssef)

The term *kbawal*, generally translated from Egyptian Arabic as “faggot,” is most frequently used in the vernacular as a derogative reference to gay men. Although respondents gave many different definitions and uses of *kbawal*, not one of my respondents self identified with the term. All respondents considered the term to be very offensive and would even sometimes use it themselves to indicate cowardice, infidelity or untrustworthiness, or to single out a generally disrespectful or unreliable person. Some respondents equated *kbawal* with a quality of gender diversion in which a gay man would express “feminine” behaviors.

Khawal is someone who is not reliable. I use the word sometimes...[toward] people who disappoint me or fail me. A kbawal is someone I relied on and who let me down. It is an insult and it has nothing to do with me (Ali)

I don't perceive myself as a kbawal. I am not a kbawal! A kbawal for me is someone who is not a man. It is very pejorative and it is an insult and I use it sometimes to insult people who are bad drivers (Taher)

A kbawal for me is a drag queen, those effeminate, cheap men. It is a word that is very offending. I actually hate effeminate men. It is a major turn off for me. A man should be a man and should not get dressed like a woman (Haitham)

Khawal is not used in the context of a sexual orientation or preference. It comes with the girly, feminine side of a man (Ahmed)

Gayness as Sin

19 out of 20 respondents (95%) self identified as Muslim, while one respondent (5%) self identified as Christian.

11 out of 20 (55%) respondents talked about religion in their perceptions of gayness. These 11 self identified as “believers” who fast, perform prayer and abstain from alcohol and/or drugs with varying frequency.

2 of these 11 respondents self identified as “believers in all of the religions,” while 2 others claimed to not be “into” religion.

9 of the 11 respondents (all “believers” in religion) did not perceive gayness as a sin.

If homosexuality was to be a sin I think that being with one person and being faithful to this person is less of a sin than having promiscuous relations or betraying one's wife (Karim)

We as gays are not sinners. Homosexuality is not like rape or sleeping with someone who does not want [to have sex]. As long as I don't hurt anyone and that I have feelings for this person, I think it's okay (Haitham)

Gay Community in Cairo

Respondents conveyed a wide range of views and beliefs about gay community, or “society” as it is called among self identifying gays in Cairo. Respondents widely agreed that gays who appear more detached or disengaged from “society” are better perceived within the broader gay community living in Cairo. In other words, there is a kind of stigma attached to associations with gay “society.” Most respondents perceived being active in gay “society” as having negative affects on how one is treated within broader Cairo society. No respondents acknowledged a personal connection to Cairo’s gay society.

Being in the gay community and having a lot of gay friends is not well perceived. It's better to be discrete than to be in the gay community. Many gays belong to the society, but they deny it. In both cases it's not good. When I hang out with gays who are known to be in the community I get insulted by my gay friends (Walid)

13 out of 20 (65%) respondents associated Cairo’s gay “society” with the most derogatory practices and qualities, including prostitution, “drama queens,” sexual perversion, gossip, superficiality, insecurity, untruth, effeminateness and infidelity.

5 out of 20 (25%) of respondents perceived the gay community as being composed of “good and bad” people.

2 out of 20 (10%) respondents did not believe there to be a gay community in Cairo, while one respondent considered gay an inappropriately Western title for homosexual practice in Egypt.

The gay community is like a village in a big country. You can find everything in there, the rich, the poor the good and the bad people. There are people who think they are different, and who therefore do not talk to anybody, they can [say something like]: if you see this one and this one you should not hang out with us. They feel superior to others.... The gay community is composed of different groups or families who do gather sometimes and who have only one common point, which is being gay. As families or groups we are still very different from one another like any group of friends (Mostafa)

The gay society is filled with good and bad people. There are good people and some others are not good at all. That's what I got to know over the past four years. They don't understand what gayness

is. They are limited and appearances are very important. They are way too effeminate and they put themselves into trouble [and] they get insulted by other people in the street. Respect people, otherwise people will not respect you. I personally avoid going out with the gays who are too effeminate (Hesham)

To talk about gay community in Cairo or in Egypt...is a very problematic notion. It is not developed enough, the way Western European models for example are. I think if I speak specifically of the so-called gay community in Egypt, it is mostly based on sexual interests and support systems and groups. If it doesn't serve for finding a possible sexual partner, then it serves for giving a social support possibility of some sorts. But, I think this is where it stops, it doesn't aim at going beyond that. But, this way we're assuming there is already an established community and a clear sense of belonging to that community, which I am not sure is the case in the context of Cairo. Again, if I compare with other communities generally, there are more clear channels of support and negotiation and mediation that lack in the way community is defined in Egypt generally, not to mention gay community, which is also a very new term for me in this country. Community in itself as a notion in Egypt is not institutionalized enough to have manifestations socially. To be honest the word gay community in Egypt is a very romanticized notion, and perhaps unnecessary. It is possibly best described as reverse colonialist act, or a self-colonialist act. It is a reenactment of what people perceive what a certain Western gay community to be like (Youssef)

Coming "Out" to Family and Friends

8 out of 20 (40%) respondents claimed to be "out" to family but not necessarily friends about their sexual orientation.

5 of these 8 respondents claimed to have told their mothers before other family members and noted that their same sex preference had not been suspected by family members before coming "out." The other 3 respondents had been "outed" to family by persons other than themselves, including police and siblings.

7 out of these 8 underwent psychological treatment at the insistence of family members after coming "out."

There was an incident two years ago, my sister saw my profile on Gayguy¹² and she told my dad who confronted me. But I kept denying that I was gay because I was not ready to come out by then. Then another time someone from my family saw me with foreigners and older guys and they told my parents who told me, 'We know you're not gay, but you should stop hanging out with these strange people.' A few months ago, my sister found some condoms in my bag. My father asked to see the bag. I've shown him the bag but nothing was there. And then another time I used Internet at home

¹² The website can be found at www.gayguy.it.

and forgot to delete the website address. And I kept on denying till they opened the chat log in front of me so I could not deny anymore (Tamer)

I went into a relationship with a guy that lasted four months. We did not have any sex during all of this time. He used to cheat on me with seven other guys. That was the turning point so I decided not to be gay anymore. When I broke up with him I told my sister that I'm gay and that I needed help otherwise I will kill myself. My sister was shocked. She told me that it's normal and that it's a phase that is going to end and that everything is going to be alright, but that I have to tell our mother about it. I went to my mum and told her. She cried and started thinking that being gay was putting on make up and wearing girl clothes. She told me, 'I cannot take the whole responsibility so go and tell your dad.' I told my dad that I needed to talk to him and that I am in trouble so I told him that I have feelings towards guys and that I want this to end. At the beginning he did not understand. He talked to me from the religious point of view. I lied to him and told him that I did not do anything with anyone and that I was still a virgin. He told me it's good that I told him. He asked me to erase all of my profiles on gay websites. He changed my phone number as well. He also made me sit with priests so that he makes me stop being gay. He did also tell me that he will send me abroad so that I find a cure to my disease (Samy)

No one knows in my family that I'm gay, but my mother has suspicions. She caught me once watching gay porn. She found one of the folders I saved and she kept on asking me why I saved them and the reasons I was doing that when I'm very religious and I go to my prayer in the mosque and I do not drink. She told me that if I wanted to get married she could find me a bride.... In October, my mother found another folder in which I have saved pictures of me naked. She confronted me and I did not justify myself. She stopped talking to me for four months. Then I went and I confronted her and now we are on good terms (Nizar)

Many respondents decided to come “out” following traumatic events and many respondents said that their parents had denied their same sex preference after being told about it.

3 of the 12 (15%) respondents who did not come “out” to their parents claimed to have seen a psychiatrist preemptively in order to “cure to their homosexuality,” before concluding that it cannot be cured.

I told my mum I have feelings for men since a long time but that I was still a virgin, so they sent me to a psychiatrist thinking that homosexuality is a mental disease that could be cured. I go to the psychiatrist since January. I accepted to go to the doctor to give my parents hope and out of respect for them knowing that it's not going to work. I kept the lie in four sessions, but I said to the doctor that I was not a virgin in the fifth session. I go there once per week (Tamer)

I came out to my mum. She got up and kissed me on my forehead.... She told me to go and see a doctor. The reason why I accepted to go to the doctor was for her to make sure that I made an effort. The psychiatrist told me that I was the biggest challenge he has ever had because I did not ask for antidepressants. The doctor told my mother that it is not a sickness and that it cannot be changed, however there might be hope. I had few sessions but I felt it was a waste of time and money (Mourad)

I also did go to a psychiatrist because I was depressed, but no one knows among my family and friends. All that the psychiatrist did was to tell me that I should be more religious and that if I do become more religious God will help me to become straight. I was not convinced by what he said and I felt that it was a waste of time and money. I did not see him again (Hesham)

12 out of 20 (60%) respondents who had not come “out” said they did not want to, as many were afraid to threaten their families’ happiness and public reputation, or to lose their families entirely.

I would not like my family to know about my homosexuality. No one knows about my sexual orientation. My family is not open-minded. I love my family and I will therefore not be able to stand the way they will look at me (Amine)

I would not like everyone here to know that I am gay as it will not make a difference. I would love to tell my parents that I am gay but I know that this fact will make them very unhappy (Ali)

Discrimination

All but one of my respondents demonstrated awareness of the potential dangers they faced socially and politically because of their same sex preference. Respondents’ fears ranged from fear of entrapment by state agents to fear of job loss, violence and dissociation from families. Nearly all respondents were cautious of associating with other gays in settings that could attract the attention of state police or neighbors’ gossip. Only 2 respondents did not perceive discrimination based on sexual preference.

Our life is a bit difficult compared to a straight guy’s life. All of the society is against us: the media, cinema and religious books always represent us as sinners, transvestites and animals who only seek sex. Sometimes I wish we had an organization that would defend our rights and protect us from harassment. Especially that we have gay ministers and gay celebrities that are open about their sexual preference for men. I personally had sex with a couple of celebrities (Tamer)

I can understand that the government puts in jail male prostitutes, but not us. If they put them in jail, I will not disagree because it is forbidden by the law, but not against us. They are very silent

these days, but I know for a fact that they will arrest us one day in one of the gay parties I go to (Khaled)

I got very scared the first time I met a gay guy from the Internet. I walked around the meeting point twice to check if there was any police force or if the actual gay is a police officer or not. I'm always very cautious when I speak with gays online. I always have doubts on whether the person I'm talking to is a police officer or not (Amr)

I am really afraid of the police because I would not like my family to know about my homosexuality and especially my mother as she will hold herself responsible for it I'm sure (Ali)

I feel the repression that is against us. I am always afraid of the police. I am afraid of the discrimination that can be against me. I would not handle to get arrested. I'm afraid of the file because I will not be able to find a descent job and I will have to leave the country and I don't want to leave the country (Khaled)

I don't feel that there is a direct oppression towards me but sometimes when I read an article saying that homosexuals are perverted I feel bad. From people when we talk about homosexuality they have been educated to see us as ill people (Walid)

I used to chat with a guy on MSN. I was supposed to meet him but the police [were] there waiting for me. They took me to jail for 40 days and I spent 40 days under surveillance. It was the worst thing I have ever experienced. They beat me as they thought I was a spy because the gay I was supposed to meet was a foreigner. One of police officers tried to fuck...me but I refused. He opened his pants and asked me to do him a blowjob (Fares)

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