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Secular but conservative? Youth, gender, and intimacy in Turkey

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ABSTRACT
This article contributes to studies on youth in Turkey by exploring gender, sexuality, intimacy, and relationship practices among college students. Our findings show that there is change (a) towards greater gender equality; (b) about attitudes regarding family, sexuality, and romance; and (c) in understanding and experiencing gendered violence in the groups of students we examined. Progressive values appear to become more common among the participants despite the increasingly conservative tone of the political and cultural climate. However, traditional relationship patterns and norms, including the idealization of monogamous relationships, robust familial ties, and sensitivity for moral reputation, seem prevalent even though these were not associated with the ascendant politico-religious conservatism. By constituting 'secular but conservative' intimate selves and relations, our respondents approve the freedom and right to explore possibilities for others, and yet not immediately for themselves, as they preserve an unequivocal moral self.

KEYWORDS Youth; gender; intimacy; relationships; sexuality

Introduction

Cultures of intimacy, romance, and sexuality among young people have been a widely researched topic across social sciences, especially in the college and high school contexts of the United States.[1] People born at the beginning of the twenty-first century, sometimes called 'Generation Z' or 'the Millennials' in the press and in the sociological literature as an uncritical and useful shorthand, just reached college-age a few years ago, and are attracting scholars' interest more than ever. These young people have been distinguished from previous generations in terms of learning styles, motivations, cultural practices, and social concerns,[2] and have been described as holding unique

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patterns of connection with their family members and partners, often by virtue of their relationship with the swiftly evolving technologies and social media.[3] Further questions about how they form romantic relationships, selfhood, and gender and sexual identities have also been posed as these youth become emerging adults.[4]

There has also been important work examining various aspects of young people's lives, particularly through the political, class, and religious dimensions in Turkey.[5] However, fewer studies have documented the significance of intimacy, gender, and sexuality in the lives of young people and provided insight into this relatively understudied territory. Research demonstrates that intergenerational conflict and social change matter gravely for youth and gender identities;[6] romance and marriage via social media applications are considerable;[7] gender, sexual and class identities are intersected and commodifiable in the urban contexts of neoliberalism;[8] and body perception and practices play a crucial role among the religious Muslim youth[9] in the context of AKP's heavy investment in the project of 'raising a pious generation,'[10] which 'centers unblinkingly on gender and sexuality.'[11]

This article explores gender, sexuality, intimacy, and relationship cultures and practices among college students in the late 2010s by analyzing data from survey results ($n = 311$) and semi-structured interviews ($n = 25$). We focus on the ways that these young adults are currently experiencing dating, flirting, relationships, and forms of intimacy, and how this gendered and sexual culture has changed in the last 15–20 years while the approaches to traditional gender norms, limits, and stereotypes among youth in Turkey have also shifted. For our purposes, we take the sociologist Gül Özyeğin's significant book *New Desires, New Selves: Sex, Love, and Piety among Turkish Youth*,[12] which draws from the extensive research she had conducted in Istanbul in 2002–2003, as our point of departure. Özyeğin's findings lay the groundwork for us to follow the direction of change in the youth identities and the ways they make sense of the world during the uninterrupted rule of Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) governments and President Erdoğan's increasingly 'authoritarian'[13] and 'polarizing'[14] administration in the regime of 'illiberal'[15] democracy.

The findings suggest that while there has been a push towards more conservative cultural values and individualized practices among young people – echoing other scholars' analyses on Turkey[16] – its effects on our participants has been selective. Whereas respondents showed a high level of tolerance and acceptance for the non-conforming gender and sexual identities, performances, and relationship practices for people other than themselves, they also had a strong predilection for more traditional, conventional, family-oriented ways of expression, belonging, and practices for themselves. In this sense, the heterosexual monogamous relationship has kept its idealized, normative, and hegemonic position in the eyes of most college students in

our study. This romanticized norm has firm relational, moral, cultural, and ultimately secular bases, differing from the religious or ideological justifications the government has tried to mainstream in the last two decades.

Our sample of college students constitutes an idiosyncratic subset of youth in Turkey that are less likely to be influenced by AKP's cultural politics. They navigate their selves and relations and make use of the government's discourse to make claims for themselves as self-ruling but reputable individuals. In short, they turn the cultural grammars of social conservatism and political Islam to their advantage in the ways the authorities might not have intended or desired. Our interlocutors negotiate a well-crafted 'secular but conservative'[17] positionality through which they disavow the government's insistent Islamist and conservative superimpositions into people's right to design their lives and live freely but also reject the cultural impact of global flows – particularly via the new (social) media – as it manifests itself in the hookup culture, sexual communication, and heterodox intimate temporalities, such as regular sex partners and 'friends with benefits' that they see intermittently. In this sense, they simultaneously differentiate themselves from these two cultural directions as they are affected by and linked to them.

We do not interpret this moral position as hypocrisy or pretense but rather frame it as an active bargaining with political Islam, rising cultural conservatism and (neo-)traditionalism, and a sense of modernity, freedom, and democratic aspirations. Most young people articulated that they desire meaningful, stable, and trustworthy relationships while they simultaneously acknowledge, respect, and defend the right to explore and experiment with intimate, bodily, and relational alternatives. In this sense, they construct unequivocal moral subjectivities for themselves and celebrate ambivalence for others between what the government foists on them (*too* traditional and religious) and the globalized Western culture offers (*too* liberated and flexible).

Data and methods

For this research, we used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods between 2018 and 2019. The quantitative part included a survey study conducted among 311 college (university) students with a mean age of 21.27 (SD = 2.49). Participants' self-reported familial socio-economic status was upper-middle-class ($M = 3.54$, SD = .75, on a range from 1 = lower class to 5 = upper class). The sample consisted of 169 females, 141 males, and 1 'other gender,' and the majority of participants reported having a heterosexual sexual orientation (92.4 percent).

Keeping in line with our aforementioned desire to engage with historical continuities and ruptures, the survey instrument we used was an updated

version of Özyeğin's study with some added items, especially for understanding the extent of social media use. The updated survey was applied to college students enrolled in different majors from three public and three private universities in Istanbul including those specializing in arts, medicine, and engineering (Acıbadem, Boğaziçi, Işık, Marmara, Mimar Sinan, and Sabancı). Data were collected in campus settings via convenience and snowball sampling. The survey included items focused on three main areas of (1) demographic information, (2) attitudes towards gender roles and stereotypes, and (3) experiences with and perceptions of relationships, romance, and sexuality.

We also conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 25 students that were transcribed in full by a research assistant. The transcripts were read and coded for themes. The interview questions focused on the relationship biography of the respondents, their ties with their families, how they see their parents as gendered 'role models,' their views on monogamy and cheating, their experiences with sexual and relationship violence, and their understanding of the contemporary social media culture. Quantitative analysis of survey results has been informative in framing the broad strokes of our research and in determining the analytical categories of the qualitative inquiry, even though it did not show a statistically significant relationship between variables on which we thought was meaningful to report. Therefore, in this article, we opted to use the survey results in their descriptive capacity and utilize the qualitative analysis to deepen the meanings and relationships.

Several precautions are taken to protect the privacy of the participants: the surveys were collected anonymously, all names are changed with pseudonyms, and demographic information which can be used to determine individuals was omitted in the interview quotes. In terms of the generalizability of the findings, despite the diversity of higher education institutions in which we conducted this research, the percentage of students who self-identified as religious, nationalist, and/or conservative was low in the surveys, and almost non-existent in the interviews. This means that our findings are most relevant for an urban and secular group of college students, rather than reflecting a complete picture of students, or youth at large, in Turkey.

In our quantitative analysis, we did not find a meaningful relationship between the socioeconomic status (SES) and other variables,[18] even though we expect it to be an important factor affecting all facets of young people's lives. Based on the self-reporting question asking the respondents to rank themselves in terms of SES in a scale of 1–5, most respondents reported to be middle to upper-middle class, with a mean of 3.54 (SD = 0.75). The same pattern repeated in the interview data analysis. We attribute this situation to the relative homogeneity of our sample in terms of SES. Also, the number of queer, non-binary, and trans respondents in the survey were

too low (22 out of 311) and this adds a significant dimension that might also be interpreted as an obstacle to generalize. Finally, young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET)[19] in Turkey is quite high and this group of people should also be taken into consideration when an analysis is built on youth, gender, sexuality, and intimacy.

Approaches to gender

The survey findings demonstrate that a comprehensive understanding and acceptance of gender equality emerges as a norm regarding the respondents' answers to questions that interrogate (in)equality between women and men, expected gender 'roles,' and personal relationships. For example, students were asked to report the extent to which they thought women and men were equal. Findings showed that 65.6 percent strongly agreed, while only 3.6 percent stated they disagreed on gender equality. Similarly, the majority of participants strongly agreed that women and men should equally contribute to the household economy (82.6 percent) and both should associate themselves with child-rearing (81.3 percent). On two questions related to the role of women in the family, only 1 percent strongly agreed that women should target being a mother and wife, and the best mother is a housewife.

However, a number of significant gender differences persist. Respondents from both genders stated that they were in favor of equality norms similarly, while women seemed to display a stronger claim of gender equality than men on specific items. For example, men agreed more strongly than women that the primary role of women is motherhood (MMales = 2.81, SD = 1.44, MFemales = 1.93, SD = 1.31, $p < .05$). Moreover, males displayed a more gender-stereotypical attitude in general compared to females. For example, male participants thought that men are more rational than women ($M = 2.93$, SD = 1.36) compared to female participants ($M = 2.09$, SD = 1.22, $p < .05$). Similarly, male participants' ratings of women as more emotional than men were higher than female participants' ratings (MMales = 3.68, SD = 1.09 and MFemales = 3.28, SD = 1.21).

Participants further rated the extent to which they thought some activities and jobs that are traditionally gender-stereotypical belonged to only males, only females, or both. We predicted that the more participants rated these items as belonging to both genders, the less they stereotyped based on gender. The overall findings indicate that traditionally 'more feminine' activities such as having a pedicure, facial treatments, Botox injections, or rhinoplasty (nose job) could be applied to both males and females (44.4, 75.1, 40.8, and 82.2 percent, respectively). Activities that are more (traditionally) framed as masculine, such as driving, repairing tools, or being interested in politics, were also shown to be now attributed to both genders more

frequently (93.9, 57.7, 92.8 percent, respectively). Among vocations, being a politician and being a CEO are now seen as more gender-neutral as most participants attributed those to both genders (92.1 and 94.8 percent, respectively). Similarly, participants indicated that both genders could be a nurse (70.4 percent). While no major gender differences emerged in these ratings, particular activities were found to be more gender-neutral among females, such as having Botox injections. Therefore, although respondents from both genders seem in favor of gender equality and are hesitant to reproduce gender stereotypes, women have a higher likelihood to do so.

The interviews showed a similar pattern in depicting most participants as rejecting the idealized gender roles – particularly women and non-heterosexuals. For example, Esra (bisexual, woman) stated that she hates the notion of gender stereotypes. Meltem, who is a heterosexual woman coming from a conservative provincial town, mentioned how she sees initiating a relationship as something a woman can do and defined the ideal man as someone who would share life and housework. She criticized how women are defined as widows (*dul*) after marriage, while the men are still considered single (*bekar*). Several young women highlighted the importance of having economic independence from men and a bisexual man stressed that he would not be friends with anyone who is not outspoken against violence against women and animals. Another point that came up in interviews with both men and women is how they described their mothers and grandmothers as strong figures and praised them for being able to stand on their own feet, reflecting a view against the stereotype of women being dependent and fragile. Mostly, the participants disagreed with the cliché statement that men mostly sought sex, while women sought romance, in relationships, and they mentioned a lot of exceptions where the opposite was true.[20]

> If we look at the whole of Turkey, I think [this statement] is correct, but there are exceptions, I mean a big percentage. I too am [an exception]. For example, one of the people that I was in love with did not want [a sexual relationship]. I never forced her [to have sex] or had that kind of an expectation [from her]. We had a relationship for over a year and we never had sexual intercourse, did not even see each other naked. I never thought something was missing, or that it pushed me to be with another woman. I was faithful to her, devoted to her. (Volkan, M, heterosexual)

Some young people, like Arzu below, suggested that it is less of a matter of gender than individual character, especially in a world more inclusive of different gender expressions and identities:

> I do not agree [with this statement] at all, because this is completely due to your character. Some part of your character can be shaped by what your gender brings, but still, I don't agree. As we approached this digital age, more of my female friends acted with their sexual instincts, and I know

> women who prioritize sex in a relationship. I think this statement has lost its validity, especially with [the visibility of] homosexual couples and bisexual people. (Arzu, F, heterosexual)

One common tendency in the interviews was the importance given to family relations and the desire to decrease conflict within the family when there are conflicting intergenerational values. Almost all interview participants said they were close to their mothers while most of them said they were close to their fathers, too. The potential for conflict was avoided by keeping parts of their lives separate from the family, either by lies of omission or by carefully curating their online presence. Occasionally, the policy of 'don't ask, don't tell' was improvised by the families.

Most self-identified gay, lesbian or bisexual participants said they were not out to their families or were just out to their mothers and not their fathers, except for Bahar, who thought her father would understand her better. Some said that their parents would be upset because they would think their children would have a harder life regarding conservative social norms:

> You cannot see a gay couple in a Turkish TV show. They would stone the actors outside, even if they weren't really gay, saying what are you showing to our kids. This is the reason why I don't come out to my family. My mom would be devastated, thinking about what I would live through. Not because of prejudice, she is not homophobic. My dad might be because he often uses the phrase "like a sissy" (*karı gibi*). I won't be like my dad. (Berke, M, bisexual)

In Berke's comments, we also see the effect of an increasingly conservative media environment on young people's imaginations and experiences about sexuality, and social reactions to the non-heterosexual sexual identities. For heterosexual participants, the potential for conflict is higher when the family in question is defined to be traditional or conservative by the participants, as in the example of Tekin:

> One reason that I don't use my Instagram account [for flirting or sexting] is that it is open for everyone to see. I come from a conservativefamily, if there is so much online interaction of that type everyone [in my family] would be sending messages. Deep inside they would think it was weird. For [an open platform likethat I put] pictures with family, vacation pictures, dinners with friends. No smoking, no alcohol. No need to argue about things like that. (Tekin, M, heterosexual)

Eventhe participants, who told us that they were very close to their family members, elaborated that there were taboo topics that were not supposed to be discussed at all, like Arzu, whosays, 'I share everything with my mom, except alcohol and sex. She pretends like it doesn't exist and nevereven asks.'

Flirting, monogamy, and hookup culture

The percentage of students who reported ever having been in a romantic relationship was 87.5 percent, yet the numbers were lower when it comes to having sex (55.3 percent). This discrepancy paints a picture of the presence of romance without sex, at least until university age. Moreover, although no gender difference was observed in terms of romantic relationships, there were some gender differences in previous sexual intercourse. The majority of men had sexual intercourse before (69.5 percent), while more than half of the female participants reported that they did not have previous sexual intercourse (56.8 percent). When it comes to sexual practices that are deemed non-traditional in Turkey, only a few young people mentioned engaging in one-night stands, sexting, or using dating apps. For example, most survey participants (91.4 percent) reported that they never use Tinder to meet people. In terms of online socializing and flirting practices, our survey data showed that most young people used WhatsApp (97.4 percent) and Instagram (84.7 percent) while Facebook is a little 'outdated' (only around half still using it, 50.3 percent). However, a very low percentage of use for dating apps, such as Tinder (8.6 percent) was declared. Consistent with previous findings, female respondents (11.4 percent) stated that they used social media for flirting purposes less frequently than male participants (33.8 percent). Similarly, young men were more likely to use social media for seeking one-night stands (12 percent), compared to women (1.3 percent).

Most interview participants mentioned meeting their romantic partners (past or present) through friendship networks, clubs, or in other 'real-life' environments. Almost all of them added that new acquaintance to their social media accounts as the next move, to learn more about them, continue the relationship, flirt, and move this new relation to the next level. Hence, the context of social media seems to be a booster in intimate relationships, even when it is not where the encounter starts. The use of dating apps such as Tinder and Hornet were not as frequent in the interviews, possibly because the very commonly used Instagram allows for more 'fluid' forms of relationships whereas the dating apps are perceived as mainly for quick sex and one-night stands. Dating apps are mainly used by heterosexual men and non-heterosexual people of both genders. No heterosexual woman admitted to using a dating app in the interviews. The same trend exists in answering positively the question on 'sexting:' no women of any sexual orientation said they engaged in sexting. Out of application preferences Instagram is used for flirtation and sex more often by heterosexuals and lesbians, whereas gay and bisexual men say they use Hornet or Tinder for those means and Instagram for maintaining friendship and community.

Instagram was used by almost everybody interviewed, with one exception who prided himself with not being on social media of any sort (but he said he

used Twitter before). Facebook is considered as 'passé,' while Snapchat is something that some participants said they used before Instagram integrated the story function. This finding is in line with the literature that notes a decline in Facebook use among younger people, or rather a 'shift' from being a platform that is used compulsively to one that is not completely given up but 'maintained' from time to time.[21]

When it comes to the practices of online flirtation, most of the interviewees agreed that there is a trend of hitting on someone you find attractive by sending direct messages on social media (*DM'den yürümek*), even when they say they do not partake in it. For example, Duygu mentioned she noticed the trend, but she has not encountered anyone doing it to herself and elucidated that it is considered 'not cool,' and even 'something that is even made fun of.' For others, this is not necessarily 'uncool' on its own, but is contingent on how it is done, as explained by Berke:

> For example, if he comes to me and says your arm is so nice, your legs are so nice, that will disturb me. But if he asks me something normal, tries to show interest in something that I am interested in, that is wonderful. But compliments on how you look are a little lame. What you notice in someone first is how they look, but you wouldn't say that. (Berke, M, bisexual)

All but one interviewee said that they have been in a romantic relationship before while 12 out of 25 were emotionally engaged in a relationship during the period of our conversation. Those who were in a relationship said they were monogamous, and many said they never cheated on their partner and do not condone cheating. As we proceeded with the interviews, it became clearer that an inclination for a monogamous relationship as the norm is shared among all participants, even when some of them had periods of hookups or short-term relationships. They pointed out that forming 'meaningful connections' instead of fleeting sexual encounters matter more. In a similar vein, they think marriage was also desirable in the future, but 'not just yet.' Some of our interlocutors told us that they would want to get married someday, although they were not ready for that kind of a commitment 'yet,' and some were not quite sure, but said they would marry if they found 'the right person.' Only two people said they did not want to get married, one because she did not believe in the institution of marriage, and the other one wanted to live 'his life freely' without necessarily adjusting to another person's wishes or needs.

Although not necessarily being judgmental or 'moralist,' some of the interviewees made derisive remarks about the hookup culture. It was mostly put in the form of 'it's not for me.' The same non-judgmental moral attitude was also present when the participants were asked about their views on open relationships. All but one who gave their opinion on open relationships said if the parties involved agreed, then

it can be an option, yet most also said they did not think they would want that for themselves. Bora (22, M, heterosexual) mentioned that he would not do it with ‘the woman whom he will spend his life with,’ suggesting that even if he does not have a moral objection to non-monogamous relationships, the ideal for him was a monogamous one. Another participant’s views summarize the general sentiment that came out of the interviews:

> If both partners are okay with an open relationship, with sincerity and sacrifice, I don’t see anything wrong. That way, there is no cheating. But sometimes it can be one-sided. A couple I know are both very laid-back people, but it didn’t work out for them either. Theoretically speaking, we accept something, but in practice, it doesn’t work out. (Sinan, M, heterosexual)

When it comes to cheating, many respondents defined it as an unforgivable trust issue, like Meltem:

> Cheating is very heavy, very ugly. You are scorning the person, ignoring them when you need to show empathy. If I had an experience with something like that, I would never forgive it. He doesn’t need to have an affair [to cheat], if he starts looking at someone, cheating starts for me. It starts with his eyes. (Meltem, F, heterosexual)

In general, there are traditional values at play when it comes to dating and hookups. Either the hookup culture was not very prevalent among university students, or they were reluctant to admit it, even in anonymous surveys. For women, this rejection was starker. Out of the heterosexual women interviewed, none of them said they had hooked up or had one-night stands, and only one bisexual woman mentioned her hookups openly. However, many of the women referred to heterosexual women friends who were hooking up with men or having short-term relationships, and five heterosexual men talked about their hookups or ‘fuckbuddies.’ This divergence suggests some discrepancy in reporting about hookup culture between men and women as well as the gendered difference in the ways that they could talk about themselves.

Intimate violence

According to the survey results, physical violence in relationships was not tolerated by the participants. Most women (78.7 percent) and a minority of men (14.4 percent) stated that they have been sexually harassed, while only 1.4 percent noted that they committed sexual violence against a partner, with no specific gender differences. However, a much higher number of participants thought that they were exposed to emotional violence (48.8 percent), with a small gender difference showing women perceive a slightly higher level of emotional violence. On the other hand, 22.6

percent of the sample reported that they think they emotionally abused a partner, with no gender differences.[22]

The prevalence of sexual violence experience was higher in the interview data, where all women and non-heterosexual men interviewed said they were sexually harassed or abused, as well as 5 of the 10 heterosexual men reporting being harassed in one way or another. Violence in question ranged from cat-calls on the street to unwanted touching on the public bus, to being sexually abused as children. Two heterosexual men reflected on the violence that they may have subjected to others, with one embarrassingly admitting he had teased tourist women while being drunk when he was younger, and another saying he 'never abused someone physically, but emotionally I must have done that without realizing.'

Some women mentioned past or present relationship violence, with one currently being in an emotionally violent relationship:

> He is a very short-fused person, this has nothing to do with feminism, but no woman tolerates someone to raise their voice at them, because I know [he] has that kind of a tendency. I mean, yelling at a person is a form of violence, and he is [inclined] to yell. Honestly, I had some fears like "would he hurt me?" Even if he doesn't hit me, my psychology was being affected by that, I was withdrawing, say, if he threw this pen over there: whether he hits me, or he damages stuff. (Nazan, F, heterosexual)

Bilge said that her boyfriend in the past had been physically violent with her when she tried to break up with him:

> He would break up with me very frequently. I have been cheated on, and I have learned about it on Facebook. It was funny; we were very young. But when I broke up with him only once, he held my arms and sat me on a chair in a classroom, saying how dare you to break up with me. He held my hands and arms with one hand and slapped me. He was staring into my eyes: how dare you break up with me? Who are you? (Bilge, F, bisexual)

Digital harassment was not cited as happening very frequently or considered as full harassment by the participants. Stalking someone online or sending unwanted messages was mostly considered a nuisance, and most say they simply block the person, do not respond, or refuse them. There were a few (men) that mentioned certain acts in passing, seeing no problem with them, even though they could be considered as harassment by the other party. One of them stated he was sending constant messages to someone on Instagram, and another indicated he checked the cellphone of his (now ex) girlfriend and saw a phone call from her former boyfriend. Harassment was only considered as a problem when it moves from online and seeps into the embodied 'real life,' such as what happened to one of the young women we interviewed with:

> I had a social media stalker. If I blocked him somewhere, he would reach me from someplace else. Then, it got more serious. Since then, I don't share my location publicly. While my Instagram account was public, I went to this café with my friends. I shared a post with a check-in to the location. I think he followed this from someone else's account, I suddenly saw that he was coming toward me in the café. (Fulya, F, heterosexual)

Shifting gendered contexts of youth in Turkey

We followed Gul Özyeğin's footsteps to historically locate the college students' current understanding, approaches, and experiences, and to observe the direction of change. Such a comparison between her and our findings allows us to notice the contours of shifting contexts of gender and sexuality among college student youth in the two generations – respectively, those who were born in the 1980s and 2000s, during a historical shift towards a more conservative politico-cultural environment.

Özyeğin demonstrates that individual biographies are interwoven with the 'biography of the nation.'[23] We juxtapose the structural conditions that made Özyeğin's interlocutors' lifeworlds possible and the transformations in these circumstances with current developments in Turkish society and their impact on our respondents' lives and meaning-making processes. She mentions that 'the declining power of the paternalistic Turkish state and its institutions in organizing and regulating economic and cultural life, the growing power of Islamic politics in defining the Turkish republic'[24] and continues with cultural Islamization, neoliberal globalization, and the country's aspiration to become a member of the European Union as the main social forces that make the national identity transmogrify. While Özyeğin was doing her research, the newly-elected AKP government had just started to rule the country with explicit democratizing tendencies and policies that were in favor of cultural pluralism and freedom of speech. The general political climate was conducive to progressive forms of politics and the formation, legalization, or recognition of many NGOs working on feminist and LGBT issues as well as student grassroots movements.[25]

The Turkish state has become seemingly stronger in its capacity to interfere with economic and cultural life alongside more paternalistic, nepotistic, and authoritarian proclivities since the early 2000s, the time of Özyeğin's research. Political Islam and the Islamization of everyday life have reached their limits while neoliberal globalization has experienced turbulences and challenges that their discursive hegemony and geopolitical priority have mostly dissolved. Finally, the possibility of an EU membership has evaporated. Hence, one of the questions we aimed to answer is which predispositions and orientations among our respondents were made possible by these major transformations in and about Turkish society in the late

2010s. In this sense, what Özyeğin accomplishes and we attempt to do in this research is to examine the construction of neoliberal subjectivity through gender/sexuality, love, intimacy, and relationships. She warns that 'the apparent inevitability of neoliberal subjectivity, and indeed its global ubiquity, should not blind us to historicity and cultural specificity and its roots in social as well as gender and sexual relations.'[26] Like her, we endeavor to locate the transformations that we study in the historical and cultural context of Turkey in the late 2010s as meaningful contexts of change in college students' self-making, social relations, and romantic practices.

Özyeğin defines three uneasy dichotomies, or fault lines, that shape the fundamentals of collective identity and politics in Turkey: west/east, modern/traditional, and secular/Islamic.[27] She also notes three binary hermeneutic categories between rural-urban, uncivilized-civilized, and traditional-modern were used to understand social change in Turkey in the past.[28] Since then, the third dichotomy has become the most significant and impactful socio-political divider, as can be observed in the political discourse of the 2010s.[29] And, another dichotomy, which is also connected to the polarizing classification of secularism and Islamism, between authoritarianism and democracy has also emerged and intensified throughout the 2010s.[30] These binary analyses do not claim to represent the entirety of society or culture, but provide useful and dynamic interpretational devices to read the landscapes of tension and change in Turkey.

On the interpersonal scale, Özyeğin states that although her interviewees 'understand themselves through the language of autonomy, it is the connective self that is most desired.'[31] Such desire exposes itself among our interlocutors as they express their plans and wishes for long-term and staunch emotional relationships, moving in together, and marriage in the future. Here, her question reads as to how we can understand and formulate the formation of neoliberal subjectivity in societies, like Turkey, that connectivity is more crucial in self-making than the independent, autonomous, and disconnected individuality. Another conundrum, also linked to this one, is about what she calls 'fractured desire.' By this concept, Özyeğin refers to the impulse to break away from normative gender identities (selfless femininity and protective masculinity) of previous generations and to reject the external power and authority against the longing to 'remain loyal and connected to social relations, identities and histories that underwrite the construction of identity through connectivity.'[32] Our interlocutors do not experience such 'fractured desire' as a contradiction as much as Özyeğin's respondents did. They seem to have found a partial solution, or a balancing strategy, for this drawback by constructing secular but conservative subjectivities: Rendering a traditional, conventional, and conservative standpoint and social life, and at the same time, recognizing the freedom to choose among alternative options, diversity, and respect for others (and maybe for themselves

regarding an unknown future). In other words, despite some contradictions persist, the generation of the 2000s seems to have learned to alleviate, or better navigate through, the fractured desire that Özyeğin encounters. Our analysis suggests that the desire for connectivity that Özyeğin observed continues in our case, however, the tension between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' (what she calls as fractured desire) may not be a common experience anymore. Rather, the college students in our study developed a more 'fluid' identity that can embrace and overcome the fracture.

The students with whom we talked think and discuss what kind of person they would want to become, what kind of a society in which they would want to live, and what kind of relationships they would found as much as (maybe even more than) Özyeğin's informants. This preoccupation denotes a continuity in projecting the self among youth in Turkey in a reflexive, self-conscious, and defamiliarizing manner as other scholars also argue.[33] On the other hand, Özyeğin maintains that 'the liberalized market economy and extensive access to the media and Internet have granted Turkish youth more freedom in self-expression, sociability, and sexual communication.'[34] Turkey has arguably become a more neoliberal[35] and increasingly 'online'[36] place with the immense development in internet technologies in the last two decades. Despite these improvements and especially in the infrastructure of the Internet (when Özyeğin studied youth smartphones and other net-based digital devices weren't introduced yet), none of our participants feel free. On the contrary, almost all of our interlocutors verbalized the feelings of being restrained, surveilled, and suffocated in Turkey. Developments in political economy, rising unemployment rates and pressing anxieties about the future, the superimposition of an Islamic lifestyle by the state, and more subtle cultural mechanisms that make the youth internalize a more conservative outlook might be the reasons behind this lack of feeling free and exercising freedom by the college students with whom we talked. This, arguably, is one of the most important differences between Özyeğin's findings and ours: The 2010s youth has developed a subjectivity that navigates authoritarianism and subverts it. Part of this subjectivity became the curation of online identities, examples of which we mentioned above.

Since Özyeğin's research, the Erdoğan administration has put the family structure, gender regimes, sexual regulations, and women's bodies on the political agenda to an unprecedented extent. It has promoted and circulated the neo-conservative and family-oriented discourses against progressive gender and sexual rights, and striven to polarize society on moral terms as well as the problem of contemporary youth's 'crisis,' that masses should have been vigilant against.[37] Religious references and conservative values and ideas are loudly spoken, most of the time by those in power, especially when they relate to issues of identity, gender, and sexuality.[38] One of the key

moments in this transformation involved comments by then-Prime Minister Erdoğan on abortion and attempts to legally ban abortion which led to wide-ranged protests in 2012. More recent developments involve comments by the head of the Religious Affairs department insulting the LGBT+ community, and continuous attempts by AKP to decrease the age of marriage for girls and to pardon those sentenced for marrying underage girls.[39] Even though the results of these attempts have not always turned into legal changes, they have shaped the tone of public conversation, together with other developments in the realm of politics, education, and media. Researchers suggest that these shifts are a form of discursive regulation on women's bodies and sexuality, based on three main areas: reproduction, sexuality, and family.[40] Hence, there has been a substantial move in the socio-political dynamics in Turkey, from a 'modernist gender order'[41] to an Islamist one whereby an increasingly conservative political climate and Islamist tendencies have shaped the way relationships and intimacy are experienced by a new generation of young people.

Nevertheless, quantitative research demonstrates that young people have not necessarily become more conservative than before.[42] A recent interactive report prepared by a respected social research company, KONDA, compares the 2008 and 2018 results of several large-scale surveys on youth.[43] According to these results, there is a rise in both those who defined themselves as 'traditional-conservative' (from 39 percent to 42 percent in the 15–29 age group), and 'modern' (from 34 percent to 43 percent), although the percentage of people defining themselves as 'religious-conservative' decreased from 28 percent to 15 percent. The level of respect for religious, ethnic, and sexual diversity also increased about 15–20 percent in the last decade, together with a sharp decrease in tolerance for authoritarianism. Most students in our study defined themselves as secular and progressive in the self-description questions. When asked about the social categories they belonged to, our respondents described themselves as modern (55.4 percent) and secular (62.1 percent), whereas the percentage of students who described themselves as conservative or religious remained at around 7–8 percent.

Similarly, according to the British Council's report 'Next Generation Turkey,' published in 2018, gender policies regarding the empowerment of women and girls are put forward by young people as an important political agenda. However, this does not mean that they are willing to let go of some of the more traditional gender structures. On the one hand, young people are committed to stable and traditional institutions such as formal education, family, and country. On the other hand, they also want to be independent individuals and portray greater acceptance of diversity compared to the previous generations. For example, marriage is considered to be an important institution, both as a relationship goal and as means of becoming independent from their parents. Here, their common strategy is avoiding conflict

and finding a middle way between these two ways of living: neither completely individualistic and independent nor entirely traditional and community-oriented. We also have observed a similar tendency among our respondents for conflict avoidance especially with the older generations and to find a middle way between what is expected from them and their own needs and inclinations.

Unlike the studies conducted in the global North,[44] hookup culture among youth in Turkey has not been examined thoroughly by researchers except for a small-scale project that reveals some insightful knowledge.[45] According to this report, the dominant hookup culture observed in Turkey exhibited a lack of commitment, blurriness of boundaries and definitions, and the presence of heavy alcohol consumption. Campus life and student clubs facilitated hookups while being an ethnic-racial minority and having strong religious beliefs made it more difficult. Tinder and other social media platforms were cited as places for meeting the possible hookup partners. Sexual double standards were also stressed in this report, where women who changed sexual partners frequently were stigmatized, but men were encouraged to engage in sexual relationships with various partners as proof of their masculinity. Our findings mostly corroborate these conclusions.

Conclusion

Compared to Özyeğin's findings from 2002 to 2003, our research shows that our sample of college students in Turkey are not deeming themselves as more conservative or traditional regarding gender and sexuality than they did some twenty years ago. However, what scholars in the global North have found among youth – hookup culture and more experimental gender and sexual identities and practices – is not prevalent among them either. Oppressed by the rampant politico-cultural conservatism and authoritarian governmental policies in which they have been raised, the respondents still privilege progressive values and insist on liberal-modern conceptualizations of selves. There is also an undertow of adherence to traditional gender and relationship norms in secular and individualistic fashions, and these are not associated with religious values or ideological-political understandings, which form what we call 'secular but conservative.' Our findings demonstrate that these young people we examined seemingly fail the AKP governments' project of raising 'religious and vengeful' generations[46] and Erdoğan's desire to 'cultivate a pious youth in line with his gender norms,'[47] while they simultaneously draw boundaries for themselves based on modern and liberal yet modest, reticent, and courteous predispositions. In comparison with the early 2000s, these particular gendered subjectivities are more fluid than they are tension-laden, constructed against

the backdrop of an authoritarian conservatism, while using the tools of a ubiquitous digital existence.

When interpreted together with the data showing a very large number of participants reporting that they have experienced sexual or relationship violence, the strong reaction against and sensitivity for forms of intimate violence can be attributed to the persistent awareness campaigns by feminist, women's, and queer movements in Turkey in response to the increased (and increasingly more visible and contested) gendered violence against women in the last decade. Turkey's recent withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention [against gendered and domestic violence] might affect the vigilant and exasperated young individuals and encourage them to tell their stories and share their experiences, to revitalize social movements, and to form a novel political agenda around this issue.

Most respondents embrace gender equality although small gendered differences in understanding and framing persist. They are also inclined toward family, or at least they prioritize stable, long-term, trustworthy, and monogamous relationships with a goal of marriage in the future while they tend to distance themselves from the existing hookup scene and pleasurable erotic encounters. Nevertheless, they tend to be more open to the global cultural influences on social media, and the internet in general, rather than the more tightly controlled official discourses and the mass media environment of the authoritarian political regime in Turkey. College students end up knowing about and learning not to disregard alternative possibilities in terms of identity, intimacy, and relationship practices of other people. There is a difference, if not a gap, emerges in their understanding of themselves as more conservative and conventional subjects on private matters and the diverse multiple others whose freedom they sincerely respect and care for.

This is a segment of the new modern, urban, educated youth in Turkey. After almost two decades, it now becomes more noticeable that neither the forces of cultural globalization nor the ideological apparatuses of political Islam could transform youth in the ways, or to the extent, that were predicted or represented. Instead, we witness that some college students like our respondents actively negotiate with these (and other) structures and chisel an emergent positionality for themselves that includes many, sometimes contradictory, elements from diverse impulses, conjectures, and contexts.

Notes

1. See, for example, Bettie, *Women without Class*; Bogle, *Hooking Up*; England and Ronen, "Hooking Up"; Kimmel, *Guyland*; King, *Faith with Benefits*; Pascoe, *Dude*; Pierce, *Sex College*; Wade, *American Hookup*; Ward, *Not Gay*.
2. Seemiller and Grace, "Generation Z."
3. Turner, "Generation Z."

4. Risman, *Where the Millennials?*
5. See, for example, Akay, *Gençliğin*; Alemdaroglu, “Governing”; Çelik, “My State”; Çelik and Lüküslü, “Spotlighting”; Lüküslü, “Necessary Conformism”; Neyzi and Darıcı, “Generation in Debt”; Özbay and Soybakis, “Political Masculinities”; Saktanber, “We Pray”; Saktanber, “Cultural Dilemmas”; Sarıoğlu, “New Imaginaries”; Yılmaz, “Youth”; Yonucu, “Urban.”
6. Akpınar, “Intergenerational.”
7. Friedland, “Love.”
8. Özbay, *Queering*.
9. Gökarıksel and Secor, “Devout”; Sayan-Cengiz, *Beyond*.
10. Özyeğin, *New Desires*, 19.
11. Özyeğin, *New Desires*, 18–19; Lüküslü, “Creating.”
12. Published in 2015.
13. Arat and Pamuk, *Turkey*.
14. Düzgit and Balta, “When Elites.”
15. Öktem and Akkoyunlu, “Exit from.”
16. Acar and Altunok, “The Politics”; Cindoğlu and Ünal, “Gender”; Özbay and Soybakis, “Political Masculinities”; Savci, *Queer*.
17. The “secular but conservative” standpoint resembles the state-led idealization of the new Turkish woman as “secular yet constrained,” in the early Republican period, see White, “State Feminism.” Our concept differs from this expression by deemphasizing the normalized morality and its effectiveness on both genders.
18. Özyeğin makes a comment on the inability “to explain in purely class terms.” See *New Desires*, 110.
19. Lüküslü and Çelik, “Gendering.”
20. See also Özyeğin, *New Desires*.
21. Sujon, “Domesticating.”
22. The survey included six questions about intimate violence, and as noted in the method section, we use the quantitative results as more of a general framework for the lack of meaningful relation between variables in the data. Although these numbers are not conclusive, they are worth noting even as descriptive statistics indicating a certain trend.
23. Özyeğin, *New Desires*, 1.
24. Ibid., 7.
25. Özbay, *Queering*; Özyeğin, *New Desires;* Savcı, *Queer in Translation*.
26. Özyeğin, *New Desires*, 2.
27. Ibid., 6.
28. Ibid., 34.
29. Arat and Pamuk, *Turkey*; Düzgit and Balta, “When Elites.”
30. Arat and Pamuk, *Turkey;* Kücük and Özselcuk, “Fragments”; Öktem and Akkoyunlu, “Exit from”; Özbay and Soybakis, “Political Masculinities”; Savcı, *Queer*.
31. Özyeğin, *New Desires*, 2.
32. Ibid., 21.
33. Alemdaroğlu, “Escaping”; Sarıoğlu, “New Imaginaries”; Özbay and Soybakis, “Political Masculinities”; Savci, *Queer*.
34. Özyeğin, *New Desires*, 25.
35. Adaman, *Neoliberal Turkey*; Özbay, *The Making*.

36. The number of internet users in Turkey has risen from two million people in 2000 to 70 million in 2021 and that makes Turkey the 13th country in the world in terms of internet users (www.internetworldstats.com).
37. Acar and Altunok, "The Politics"; Cindoğlu and Ünal, "Gender."
38. Arat and Pamuk, *Turkey*; Balkan, Balkan, and Öncü, *The Neoliberal*; and Yeşilada and Noordjik, "Changing Values."
39. Acar and Altunok, "The Politics."
40. Arat and Pamuk, *Turkey*; Cindoğlu and Ünal, "Gender."
41. Özbay and Soybakis, "Political Masculinities."
42. Large-scale national data can provide many directions of change, such as the marital status of young people. According to the official Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) figures, the average first marriage age has consistently increased for both genders: 26 for men and 22.7 for women in 2001; 27.9 for men and 25.1 for women in 2020. There are 9,206,000 "young individual" citizens (aged 18-24) who could be at college by the end of 2020. Among them, 4 percent of men and 16 percent of women are married. Data available at https://data.tuik.gov.tr
43. https://interaktif.konda.com.tr/en/Youth2018/
44. Bogle, *Hooking Up*; England and Ronen, "Hooking Up"; King, *Faith with Benefits*; Pierce, *Sex College*; Wade, *American Hookup*.
45. BÜKAK, "Takılma Kültürü."
46. Lüküslü, "Creating."
47. Arat and Pamuk, *Turkey*, 255.

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