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Migrant Sexualities: “Non-normative” Sexual Orientation between Country of Origin and Destination

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Abstract

The present paper is based upon a research on the experiences of foreign homosexuals in Italy, in particular males from the Maghrib, namely Morocco and Tunisia.

The first part reviews the relevant literature, mainly queer migration studies theories, focusing on the plight of LGBT migrants in Western countries, in particular considering gender identities and non-normative sexual orientations as ground for migration. Avoiding any attempt at categorization and emphasizing the existence of multiple identities rooted in each individual, the theory encourages to shun “ethnocentric” points of view that see the host country as a place where foreigners can live their sexualities freely in contrast with their country of origin. Indeed, it also represents continuity with a society of origin which, in its different aspects – social, cultural and relational – continues to affect the lives of the migrants, as well as their degree of closeness/distance to a Western gay lifestyle model that, though “attractive”, is often criticized.

The second part, through the life stories collected, describes the identity strategies employed by migrants to live their sexual orientation in the host country.

The paper describes the prevailing social representations of homosexuality among foreigners and assesses the “symbolic” impact that the host society may produce on the immigrants’ way to (re)think their sexual identity.

Keywords: non-normative sexual orientation, Maghrib migrants, social representations of homosexuality.

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1. Introduction

The present work describes the first results of a research that aims to analyse the experiences of homosexual foreigners in Italy; in particular, we examine here the stories of migrants from the Maghrib countries (Tunisia and Morocco). The first part consists of a theoretical reflection on gender diversity in relation to migration issues. This part will allow us to describe an apparently homogeneous universe, which gathers together different requests, needs, and ways of living homosexuality.

In the second part, through the foreigners’ life stories (Olagnero, Saraceno 1993; Merrill, West, 2009) we will try to describe the social representations they have of homosexuality, as well as understand whether their migratory experience has produced second thoughts about their way of living their sexual orientation (Masullo, 2013, 2015).

The analysis will also highlight how discrimination and marginalization are not only potentially attributable to the original contexts, but rather are dimensions that, given the transnational nature of migration, persist and affect the whole process of inclusion of foreigners in the host country.

2. Gender and non-normative sexual orientation in migration studies

The topic of gender diversity appears to be little explored in European migration theory, and even less when considering the Italian one. Even queer studies – a term which now describes non-heteronormative sexual identities (Butler, 2006) – did not give much importance to the social construction of race, nor to migration processes or their material dimensions. This lack of reflection on both sides – based on the one hand on heterosexuality as taken for granted, and the other on a naive ethnocentrism that does not take into account the point of view of those coming from other contexts around the world – is due to an outlook that tends to essentialize migrant subjectivities encasing them into rigid categories preventing us from grasping the particular experiences arising as a result of the intersection of various vulnerability factors (Dal Lago, 2004).

The situation of the migrant with a non-normative sexual orientation can be considered as doubly stigmatized in terms of identity, crossing social visions discrediting both ethnicity and culture and non-normative sexual orientation. In other contexts with longest migratory traditions, as the United States, great attention has been paid instead to the interweaving of questions

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1 For an analysis of the relevant literature on the Italian LGBT population see Zanola (2014).
posed by the condition of foreign homosexuals as a third way to explore issues related to otherness and 'inter-ethnic' coexistence in post-modern societies (Cantú, 2009; Eng et al., 2005).

Indeed, in the US, with the intensification of migration, new areas of research originate from the feminist theory (Lengermann, Niebrugge, 2014) by introducing the tools offered by postcolonial studies and intersectional theory and using them to analyse the condition of foreigners, particularly the issues raised by gender identity and sexual orientation as dimensions through which new forms of power and subjections are expressed in the host countries.

In this context, a group of scholars from the former colonies maintains the importance of studying colonialism in order to understand the present, starting with the recognition of the power relations still existing between the West and the so-called 'Third World'. The basic assumption is as follows: if it is true that all women experience oppression in a similar way on the basis of their gender (oppression of a patriarchal system considered as the most basic social model of domination) at the same time they are also oppressed differently depending on the world in which gender combines with other sources of social inequality, such as social class, race, dwelling place, age, and last, but not least, sexual preference (Collins, 1990).

Since the publication of an article by David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz in 2005 in the journal 'Social Text', the postcolonial and intersectional approaches take root also in queer theory studies. Specific areas of study emerge, such as black queer studies and queer diasporas, today simply called queer migration studies.

These approaches focus their attention on the plight of LGBT migrants in Western countries, in particular taking into account gender identity and non-normative sexual orientation as a reason for migration.

Studies like those of Martin Manalansan, (2006) and Oliver Roy (2012) – both of whom identify within this perspective – focus on the management of a doubly stigmatized identity in the migration contexts, leveraging on an idea of Self that overcomes binary logics: black/white, male/female, homosexuality/heterosexuality.

Influenced by the writings of Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, James Clifford, and Arijun Appadurai, scholars of queer migration research aim to

2 Into this frame we can find also the analysis on the representations of black people's sexuality highlighting the persistence of some colonial rhetoric in the collective consciousness: for example, black foreign women are associated with an "excessive" sexuality compared to "white" women, regarded as a model of normal sexuality. Conversely, black men, usually considered as violent, are associated to a wild sexuality that has to be repressed (Hall, 1997).
de-naturalize ethnicity, emphasising instead historicity and therefore the relativity of cultures, which are always the result of meetings, exchanges and hybridizations (Magnarin, 2013). Overcoming a vision that sees the country of immigration as a context in which the foreigner is free to live his sexual orientation, the point of view of queer migration studies suggest to consider instead LGBT foreigners as subjects moving in a context where normative references are shorn of spacial references, where LGBT migrants try to reconcile the idea of homosexuality typical of their original contexts and the opportunities offered by the gay milieu in Western countries (Manalansan, 2006). According to this perspective, identity must be considered in its many aspects, the intersection of experiences stemming from migration, gender identity, and other factors (such as social class, for example); hence the usefulness of the concept of 'intersectionality' as the identity of LGBT migrants is found at the intersection of various memberships: to the host society, the ethno-cultural community, the LGBT community; norms, values, and beliefs associated with sexuality can thus differ from environment to environment. Therefore, we have individuals who sometimes refer to their sexual identity, sometimes to their ethnic identity, sometimes to both (Espin 1997; Kapac 1998).

We must also acknowledge a strong identity rooted in the cultural, political, historical, and personal context in which it comes to life; if homosexuality is a social construction (McIntosh, 1968) it is clear that terms like gay lesbian, bisexual – born in the West and associated with white people – may not be a necessary reference for LGBT migrants, who by embracing them may lose their cultural identity that – according to the intersectional perspective – would disappear into the prevailing white culture. The perspective offered by queer migration studies thus underlines that, if it is true that LGBT immigrants experience a break with their country of origin, at the same time they can be marginalized because of their ethnicity (Randazzo, 2005).

As pointed out by recent research (Roy, 2012) coming out – a crucial step underpinning the homosexual model in Western countries (Trappolin, 2011) – proves not to be always a key moment for the definition of LGBT foreigners' sexual identity. This is because in addition to the actual possibility to live homosexuality freely in some European countries – for example the Mediterranean area – relations with the country of origin are still essential for queer foreigners. Indeed, contrarily to what people think, these relationships do not cease, also due to the presence in the host country of a network of fellow countrymen. These social networks are not only areas that can bring about new forms of oppression and control, but they also provide the set of resources needed to support the social and psychological costs of migration,
as pointed out by the literature on ethnic capital (Bertani, Di Nicola, 2012). Therefore, based on this research, making their sexual identity known would sometimes prove unsuitable to the process of integration into the host country. On the contrary, foreigners would rather choose to differentiate their contacts, through forms of identity surfing where sexual identity is expressed depending on the relationship networks (Cantú, 2009; Thing, 2010; Jaspal, Cinnirella, 2010).

Queer migration studies' perspective thus urges us not to take an 'ethnocentric' point of view that sees the host country as a place where foreigners can, once arrived, feel the need to live their sexualities freely in comparison to their country of origin. We should in fact do not consider LGBT immigrants as a category comprising similar experiences and expectations, for example, for sexual orientation. As Brekhus points out, gays' 'post-closed' identity strategies can be diversified, «for some homosexual identity it is a noun (it corresponds to 'what I am'), for others it is a verb (corresponds to 'what I do'), and for others an adjective (corresponding to 'a part of what describes me')» (2012, 188). Therefore we have foreign individuals who have not developed a psychological 'awareness' of their sexual orientation and/or do not consider it in terms of identity. Moreover, for some migrants homosexuality is only one aspect of themselves, thus they confine the manifestation of their sexual orientation to an exclusively private sphere, and express it only in specific relational contexts. In addition to these situations, we must of course consider those foreigners arriving in the country precisely because of their sexual orientation, because they are persecuted at home or because they wish to openly live their sexual orientation, as an important feature of their identity.

3 According to the data in the report “Fleeing Homophobia”, each year 10,000 LGBT foreigners apply for international protection for sexual orientation and gender identity in Europe. However, the situation differs greatly between the northern European countries and those bordering the Mediterranean. According to the Home Office data, between 2008 and 2009 in Italy only 58 asylum seekers have been accepted, of which only 29 have obtained refugee status or humanitarian protection (Jansen, Spijkerboer, 2012).
3. Living homosexuality elsewhere: social representations and identity strategies

Although the theory discussed here generally deals with the situation of individuals belonging to the LGBT community, the empirical part – whose early results will be presented in this section – will only consider the experiences of male foreigners from the Maghrib and currently residing in Italy.

As stated above, the aim of the research is to examine the migrants' social representations of homosexuality, ascertaining if their presence in Italy has somehow led them to reassess their opinion on their sexual orientation – and thus of their way to live it. This also considers the difficulties – vastly highlighted by the literature on this topic – experienced in their countries of origin with Muslim religious tradition, where homosexuality is condemned both morally and criminally (Momin, 2014; Tolino, 2013).

We now need to point out some methodological aspects. According to the theoretical framework described in the previous pages, we have chosen to focus the analysis on the processes, preferring a biographical dimension that allows us to take account of changes on the way of living their sexual identity all along the integration route of the foreigner in our country. Among the analytical dimensions explored are:

- Experiences: the way of living sexual orientation in the countries of origin;
- Choices: the eventual relationship between the need to express their sexual identity and the reason for migrating;
- Strategies: ways to live their sexual identity in the host country;
- Relations: the relations with compatriots – both at home and in the host country – and the relationships built with the locals in the host country.

Given the intimate nature of the aspects considered, we decided to select the respondents by means of a diversified strategy: some subjects were contacted through the social network Facebook, from the list of contacts of

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4 About the acronym LGBT – used as a collective term to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people – Corbissiero states that (2013: 28): «Given the polysemy of the word, talking about 'gay community' or 'LGBT community' imposes some semantic choices not related to homogenization and generalizing traits, as scientific analysis often requires. The very acronym LGBT has recently been enriched with several variants, ranging from the change in position between lesbians and gay men with GBT (...) to other yet which provide for the addition of a letter and, consequently, of a category: LGBTQ for Queer (...) LGBTI for Intersex».
two blogs specifically dealing with issues regarding LGBT migrants (namely La Migration-sportello LGBTQI and Il grande Colibrì); other cases have been identified, either through members of gay associations in Campania (Arcigay) or by the respondents themselves, within their social networks.

The life stories collected so far, are 10. The migrants are aged between 18 and 44 years and are mostly from Morocco, with the exception of three individuals from Tunisia. Only 4 of the respondents currently live in the Campania region, while the other 6 are located in other areas of the country.

Since this is an exploratory study, also for the kind of research approach used, the analysis has not yet permitted to exhaustively examine the weight of certain structural determinants that especially in this type of investigation are essential in influencing the behaviour of foreigners (such as employment status, citizenship status, as well as the local context of origin, and the city or region of residence). Together with other aspects, these will be taken into consideration in the future through a more complex research design suitable for assessing the weight of these variables.

Concerning the results, the first aspect to contemplate – thus allowing us to clarify some useful elements for interpreting the life stories – is the way to deem sexuality in the Maghrib countries.

In this context, characterized by an Islamic religious orientation, sexuality is trapped into a rigid set of rules designed to strictly govern sexual drives. These rules focus on three main points: the taboo of virginity, purely heterosexual sexual intercourse regulated through the institution of marriage and for procreative purposes only (Bouhdiba, 2005). Although things are starting to change, especially in the most urbanized areas, the underlying social life in these country is strongly influenced by the pronounced separation existing between the sexes.

Concerning homosexuality, disapproval by the Maghrib society is very clear and includes highly strict punishment. However, homosexual practices

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5 The interviews were mainly carried out in person, with the exception of four cases, carried out by means of Skype. Language difficulties – some of the respondents had been residing in Italy for a short time – the issues discussed, certainly had an impact on the richness and significance of the interviews. In effect, only in a limited number of cases we were able to establish complicity and confidence enough to create a flow of conversation between interviewer and interviewee, while most of the time – with the need to steer the respondent back to the interview frame by introducing or reintroducing a topic – we had to enrich a narrative frequently interrupted by long pauses and silences.

6 As Liggio explains (2010, 170), «Within the Islamic culture, behaviour regarding sexuality is regulated by the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed
are naturally experienced by the boys who want to live their first experiences with sexuality as a practice before heterosexual relationships (Beaumont, 2013).

According to Rebucini (2013a) erotic practices widespread among Maghrib men are defined through two distinct epistemologies: a 'local' one and one developed in a context of transnational movement. So we have on one side a part of the population (a minority) that defines non-normative sexual orientations by the dichotomy homosexuality/heterosexuality referring to a globalized identity epistemology; and on the other a majority of the population using a local epistemology 'gender system/erotic practices' not colliding with a certain construction of hegemonic masculinity founded on marriage and procreation.

The central aspect on which rests the prevailing local epistemology focuses on the roles taken during sexual intercourse, that allow us to recognize some areas of differentiation (ibid). The active subject is here defined liwat, (derived from liwat, term for sodomy); the liwat usually enjoys greater tolerance, as it still is the action of a normal, manly man. The 'passive' subject is instead generally given the nickname zamel, is associated with a negative – often shameful – image also binding homosexuality to feminine traits, and in this context he is generally described emphasizing his inferiority and submission. In the collective imagination the zamel identifies in short the passive, usually effeminate, homosexual who chooses homosexuality as his main sexual orientation, failing his moral obligation to marry and procreate (Guyon, 2015).

(Mohammed) (571-632 AD). Homosexuality (budud) is considered a serious crime against the divine law. Active homosexuals (men and women), if unmarried, are punishable by one hundred lashes, and if they are married with the death penalty; in particular, in case of women, they are sentenced to death by stoning; while passive homosexuals must always be sentenced to death. For a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Islam and homosexuality, see also El Houssi (2013).

7 Another synonym Niek (buggerer), a term sometimes regarded as endorsing, because it conveys a notion of masculine compensation called rugula (from rageh) Arabic for man in the sense of the Latin word 'vir', and distinguishes male from female, both from the anatomical and the moral and psychological point of view (Rebucini 2009a).

8 Zamel means male whore, but there are also other terms such as hassass (sensitive), mabun (scoundrel), attai ('the one who gives it 'in the Maghrib), manyuk (buggered). All terms are inspired by the prevailing phallocratic mentality and characterize only the penetrated, the other “passive” partner of the liwat (Rebucini 2009a).
The zamel’s special status affects not only those who practice homosexuality merely transiently, but also affects the representations of those who – as in the case of some respondents – practice homosexuality in the host country as an exclusive aspect of their sexual orientation.

This interpretation, devised on the basis of the relevant literature, would explain why some of the respondents on this issue have frequently brought up an association between homosexuality and femininity, being openly critical especially towards those more openly sporting this relation.

"For us Zamel is the one playing the female, the passive one (Younès, Morocco, 33)."

"For me gay does not mean being a female, I’m a man that mainly sleeps with other men (Said, Morocco, 34).

Although a recent survey highlights how representations of masculinity in Maghrib societies are beginning to change (Beaumont, 2013) according to almost all respondents the issue of masculinity has assumed great symbolic importance; the 'virility' code is here often repeated by respondents also to assess the ways of living homosexuality of Italians, who are generally regarded as less 'masculine' and too 'manifest':

"I play the male, because I am male, (pauses) ... we from Morocco, we are only active, and that’s why Italians like us a lot (Omar, Tunisia, 33).

Concerning the influence of the host country on foreigners' social representations of homosexuality, and thus on the changes caused on their actual conduct, we found that for some the context of immigration has not changed their way of living in comparison to the country of origin:

"Well I live exactly like I was living in my country, here as there, I would join chats, even most Italian gays meet like this, through the internet (Said, Morocco, 34)

or it is not acknowledged among the reasons for immigration

"I am in Italy for work, mainly for this (Omar, Tunisia, 33)."

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9 We used pseudonyms in order to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.
For others instead the possibilities existing in our country, in terms of the variety of possibilities for meetings, made it possible for them to reconsider their views on homosexuality:

Initially I was afraid to go to the places frequented by gays, to ghettoize myself, like when I got here at the beginning I met everyone through chats, then slowly I started to have more friends, also Italian ones, and slowly I started to hang out at the pubs and clubs of the city, but I am always afraid of being found out (Younès, Morocco, 27)

I have understood a lot of things about this aspect of myself here in Italy, living more light-heartedly, you could say that I found homosexuality here, meaning that here you feel more free (Said, Morocco, 34).

However, if these better possibilities are acknowledged, this does not automatically translate in adherence to a more displayed identity:

I do not like fags, I cannot stand them because I like not being seen around town with a fag, otherwise everyone finds out that I’m gay and I really would not like that (Younès, Morocco, 27).

If at first glance the 'difficulties' could be attributed to problems related to the acceptance of their sexual identity\(^\text{10}\), is also true that in Islam there is no concept similar to that of homosexuality – meaning an abstract and distinct identity – or is starting to emerge only recently, while in Western countries it stands for a sexual minority to which they are recognized – despite a thousand difficulties – some protections and recognitions (Rebucini, 2013b)

Here I have found much more freedom, and I like it, but I have doubts on some things, for example, about all those events, like the 'pride'. Then I am absolutely against adopting children, for us these issues (...) it just cannot be! (Younès, Morocco, 27).

We can therefore assume that the difficulties in recognizing their sexual orientation in terms of identity, as a constitutive aspect of themselves through which they are socially identified, are not only because identity is connected to a negative stigma according to the culture of their country of origin, but it is

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\(\text{10}\) In the literature this is usually called “internalized homophobia”, a result of the models transmitted by a vision providing rigid heteronormative expectations about sexual behaviours deemed lawful or unlawful (Montano, 2007). See also the glossary entry for “internalized homophobia” in Corbisiero (2010).
also a way to distance themselves from the western gaylifestyle model, too stereotyped in the eyes of foreigners:

Italians live it very openly, you often see them walking down the street holding hands or kissing, they do not care if people look at them, mocking them, sometimes I get the feeling that they do it on purpose, to show off, maybe not all of them, but many do. I do not like it, I think that we Arabs are more discreet, because this is something "private" we do not need to flaunt it, they give a bad image, in my opinion (Younès, Morocco 33).

Obviously these strategies are not only influenced by subjective aspects, but also relational ones, as this excerpt shows in talking about transnational ethnic networks and how they can greatly affect one’s way of living:

Look, I keep this highly secret, I'm afraid that my parents would find out. I have relatives also here in Italy, but I seldom see them on purpose, who knows if my uncle would tell my parents. That's why I do not have relationships, I fear that it's found out (Rachid, Morocco, 40).

Immigrants often resort to various tricks to avoid suspicion in relatives or compatriots, such as identity surfing or simulating a different image of themselves depending on the context of interaction (Jaspal, Cinnirella 2010), as is clear from these two excerpts:

I keep relationships separated, my friends are all straight, and with them I am straight! I have few gay friends (Younès, Morocco, 27)

I put engaged on facebook on purpose, so that everyone knows that I'm with a woman, when I was in my country I used to date women, of course I did not sleep with them, anyway there it's forbidden before marriage, and then as soon as it got more serious I said I didn't like her anymore, now here they know that I'm dating an Italian woman (Hassan, Morocco, 24).

Concerning the perception of a doubly stigmatized identity, the respondents’ opinions diverge; some barely feel it, while for others their sexual identity added to the ethnic one may increase problems:

11 In some African countries is very widespread the idea that homosexuality is a disease brought by Europeans, a remnant of the colonial past. Therefore, the homosexual condition is generally associated with a derogatory and stereotypical conception of Western lifestyles (Beaumont, 2013).
Italians are not so open-minded, meaning that here they always look at you as 'the Moroccan guy', imagine if I say I am gay!! No, No, I keep it to myself, it's personal, and also I occasionally hear of people being beaten, about certain things this country is not better than mine (Said, Morocco, 34).

Well nobody knows that I'm homosexual, here I'm discriminated mainly as an immigrant, the first thing they ask me is: where are you from? (Rachid, Morocco, 40).

Also opinions on Italian diverge: for some close relationships are positive, while for others they are negative and closely related to the transmission of ethnic stereotypes. According to the respondents, locals have quite a stereotyped vision of foreigners, regarded as something 'exotic' and with which relations between equals or even deeper relationships cannot arise.

There's good people that helped me a lot, but I met many disgusting Italians, think of the one I was with, a totally effeminate guy, he had me come here to Italy, to show me off as a toy, but you know, I was not free to meet other people, and then when I went away, he said that I am a thief, that I stole him money as everyone of my race (Omar, Tunisia, 33).

Finally, it is interesting to look at the situation of the children of immigrants who have to manage their dual membership in terms of identity: torn between the culture of a society which in some cases have never known except through the words of the parents, and the culture of the host society in which they are often born and where they grew up.

As shown by a study conducted by Valerie Beaumont (2010) on male homosexuals in Morocco, the more individuals are young and educated the more they avoid the polarization of sexual roles (active and passive). Indeed, young people claim to be increasingly 'flexible', and thus more and more inclined to join the globalized identity epistemology that «perhaps expresses the attenuation of a hierarchy among the partners and the transformation of the representations of masculinity. (...) An active man is increasingly seen as a homosexual as a passive man» (ibid: 21)

In our case, despite the number of interviews does not allow for generalizations, the words of this young Tunisian boy, son of a mixed couple, are quite meaningful:

Look I'm Italian in all respects, and I went to my dad's country on vacation a few times, but I am not tied to their customs, I live very freely the religion too, often more for my parents who care about it (...) mother knows something about me, while my father I think is suspicious, but for know he does not ask and I do not tell (...) Now I'm with a guy, I have both gay and straight friends who know, I have no problems (Rami, Tunisia, 18).
The opinions and experiences related to the coming out of young people thus lead us to assume a fundamental ambivalence among the boys who try to mediate between the need to belong and the wish to express their sexual orientation in the context of the host society. Although considered as important in order to live one's sexual identity, in the cases examined there has been no outing with the family members, as it was considered unsuitable for the preservation of relationships.

4. Conclusion

Joining the theoretical point of view of an epistemology which considers ethnic and gender identity as visions closely linked to processes, prevented essentialist identity visions, opening up to the whole multiplicity of possible configurations created by the respondents to express both their sexual orientation and ethnicity in the host country. The analysis of social representations has been paramount, and it exposed a composite intertwining of images and behaviour patterns with which immigrants from Maghrib relate to homosexuality. These are partly modelled on the ideas of homosexuality learned in the contexts of origin – as for the issue of gender roles and their influence on the definition of sexual identity – and partly learned from the ideas of homosexuality existing in the host countries, which is much more likely for young migrants.

The persistence of a negative view of homosexuality due to the statute of the zamel, associating homosexuality and feminine traits – and the fact that this vision is often attributed to the locals – helps us understand how in migration stereotypical representations of homosexual identity are reproduced (from both locals and foreigners) due to the effect of complex inter-ethnic relationships. These aspects have been highlighted by the researches here mentioned within the queer migration studies theory. In this sense, the ways of living sexual identities are also ways to measure the migrants' degree of proximity/distance towards models and lifestyles prevalent in the host country but not necessarily embraced or legitimized.

In light of these first results we can state that migration can be seen only in part as a liberating process. We could even say that for migrants from the Maghrib hiding their sexual orientation, where possible, or resorting to identity surfing proves to be the best strategy in the host country. This is true for both adult migrants and second generation children. The concern to preserve relationships with their families and other countrymen leads them not to consider coming out as necessary, whereas it is seen as a key moment for the homosexual lifestyle in the host country. Moreover, for some, openly
living their sexuality is unsuitable, as to the forms of discrimination and exclusion already suffered at home could be added those related to ethnic identity experienced in the host society.

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