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Beyond dichotomies: contesting cultural stereotypes through the lived experience of sexuality among Turkish-Dutch women

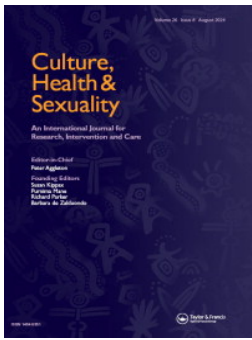
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Beyond dichotomies: contesting cultural stereotypes through the lived experience of sexuality among Turkish-Dutch women

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critique of the dominant secular/sexual paradigm in the Netherlands by focusing on everyday experiences of sexuality among Turkish-Dutch women. A secular approach towards sexuality rests on the fictive duality of a sexually liberated, progressive majority Dutch and a conservative cultural 'Other'. This paper argues that despite scholarly work challenging the secular/framework within which minoritised women's sexuality is problematised, cultural stereotypes continue to persist in Dutch populist discourse and everyday life. Based on life story interviews conducted with eight women, it illustrates the specific ways in which normative expectations are imposed on minoritised women based on perceived religious or cultural differences. These expectations constitute a 'script' that is imbued with cultural stereotypes. Dissonant moments emerge when my interlocutors fail to conform to the 'script'. In contrast, when their choices validate these expectations, they are interpreted as a reflection of their 'cultural background' instead of being seen as instances of agentic behaviour. These processes further reify dichotomies in the form of sexually liberated and oppressed as the choices these women make are never seen as individual expressions of sexuality unless they openly contest these expectations.

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Introduction

Migrant women's sexuality has been a topic of contention in Dutch politics for the past few decades (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020; Bracke 2011; Knibbe and Spronk 2022). While there exists an abundance of literature detailing the nuanced everyday experiences of sexuality among minoritised women (Bakuri and Spronk 2022; Buitelaar 2002; Roodsaz and Jansen 2019; Schrijvers and Wiering 2018), public health approaches are still characterised by a presumed duality between progressive, sexually liberated majority Dutch and sexually oppressed cultural 'Other'. This is the dominant framework within which sexuality education is provided (Bartelink and Wiering 2020) or

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policy-oriented research is conducted (Krebbekx, Spronk and M'charek 2017). This phenomenon is often referred to as the Dutch secular and sexual exceptionalism (Bracke 2011) or 'sexularism' (Scott 2009, cited in van den Brandt 2018, 66). In Dutch sexual exceptionalism, the attitudes of the white majority Dutch towards sexuality are neutralised, while the sexual experiences of minoritised women that deviate from what is considered 'normal' are designated as unhealthy.

Building on existing research on minoritised women's everyday negotiations concerning sexuality, this study examines the experiences of Turkish-Dutch women through a mix of digital ethnography and timeline drawings. Research focusing specifically on Turkish-Dutch women is scarce, as until recently they were placed together with other minority ethnic groups under the heading 'non-Western allochthones'. While the term 'allochthone' is officially no longer in use in the Netherlands due to its derogatory implications, it has been the category that received the most attention in quantitative studies of sexuality vis-à-vis ethnicity until recently (Krebbekx, Spronk and M'charek 2017). According to Mepschen (2016), the use of the term 'allochthone' as an overarching identity marker has created the illusion that anyone falling outside of this category is devoid of culture and ethnicity, and therefore can claim neutrality. It is precisely for this reason that in this study I wanted to focus on the experiences of Turkish-Dutch women and ask: what are the particularities of their everyday challenges and negotiations with regard to sexuality, given that the political climate in the Netherlands heavily emphasises cultural differences which are presumed to exist *a priori*?

Through the life story interviews conducted with eight women who self-identified as Turkish-Dutch, I aim to illustrate the complexity of their sexual experiences that defy the culturalist logic of sexual exceptionalism. My findings suggest that despite numerous scholarly contributions that challenge this idea, cultural stereotypes persist in populist discourse and everyday life. When it comes to sexuality, normative expectations are placed on my respondents based on their perceived religious or cultural differences, which are intersecting factors. These expectations constitute a 'script' that is based on cultural stereotypes imposed by different social groups. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how my interlocutors encounter and navigate these divergent and contradictory expectations in their daily lives and the dissonant moments that emerge when they do not conform to the 'script'. In contrast, when they validate these expectations, their seemingly conformist behaviour is interpreted as a reflection of their 'cultural background' instead of being seen as a form of agency. This interpretation further reinforces stereotypes and creates a double-bind in which culture and religion become sources of oppression, as opposed to inspiration, and the choices these women make are never seen as individual expressions of sexuality unless they openly question and contest these expectations.

The cultural and sexual 'Other' within the Dutch context

According to Bracke (2011) and Knibbe and Spronk (2022), minoritised women's emancipation and sexuality are one of the main subjects of debate in contemporary Dutch politics (see also, Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016; Ghorashi 2010a, 2010b, 2017). Bracke compellingly traces the evolution of a Dutch 'sexular' identity to earlier structural transformations and secular arrangements that took place in the

Netherlands, as a result of which tolerance came to be viewed as an integral part of Dutch cultural identity. Within this secular/sexual framework, sexuality among a predominantly white Dutch majority is established as the norm, which rests on ideas of sexual freedom and progress that are thought to be the cornerstone of Dutch culture, instead of seeing these ideas as the outcome of various historical processes. This logic effectively erases historical periods in which the Dutch have been intolerant and violent, erroneously attributing a sense of timelessness to historically contingent concepts (Balkenhol, van den Hemel and Stengs 2020). Bracke (2011) further underlines the fact that tolerance has never been extended to Muslim women, for example. On the contrary, presumed cultural differences of minoritised groups become grounds for exclusionary rhetoric, which are reified in the form of dichotomies: of sexual agency and oppression, modernity and tradition, and East and West.

This type of discourse renders the experiences of those who occupy seemingly 'in-between' spaces invisible; it equates certain sexual identities with being progressive while designating others as conservative (van den Brandt 2018). This is especially true for Muslims who identify as gender and sexuality diverse in the Netherlands, due to the misconception of Islam as being inherently incompatible with homosexuality among the Dutch majority (Mepschen 2016). When minoritised groups behave in ways that are sexually compatible with the dominant paradigm, they are often praised in a rather patronising way. For example, the media portrayal of the 'Turkish boat' in the Dutch gay parade applauded it as a radical exception, even though the original intent behind the boat was to demonstrate that Muslim and gay are not mutually exclusive categories (Yildiz 2017). Moreover, despite recent findings demonstrating that Muslim and Christian youth share somewhat similar sexual values (which are always multilayered and ambiguous), differing views on sexuality are only framed as an integration problem when they are observed among the former (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020).

The above examples are indicative of how religious beliefs get entangled and conflated with culture. As argued by van den Hemel (2020, 35), in Dutch political debates culture becomes a 'trope' to highlight the differences between a nativist understanding of Dutch national identity and Islam. While Duyvendak (2011) uses the term 'culturalisation of citizenship' to refer to this phenomenon, others refer to it simply as culturalism (Ghorashi 2017; Schinkel 2011). What is at stake here is an essentialist, non-anthropological reading of culture(s) as integrated wholes, whereas most anthropological definitions emphasise its inventiveness (Rubin 1975), and capacity for change (Appadurai 2004). Evidently, this form of essentialism is an integral part of the secular/sexual framework. While there is scholarly work on sexuality among minoritised women focusing on how religious and ethnic differences are reified, which I detail below, I chose to analyse this process of Othering through the lens of culture, precisely because in populist discourse religious and ethnic differences are subsumed under the heading of culture. For example, Muslim women's supposed 'oppression' is attributed to an Islamic *culture* (Bracke 2011).

Contrary to populist discourse, there is a vast amount of research that emphasises the diverse ways in which minoritised women articulate their sexualities. See for example Bakuri and Spronk's (2022) research among Somali-Dutch and Ghanaian-Dutch women in which their interlocutors actively cultivate sexual well-being in connection with their religious beliefs. Schrijvers and Wiering (2018) observe a similar

understanding of sexual pleasure and religion among non-heterosexual Protestant women: marital sex is seen as a way of connecting with and appreciating God. Roodsaz and Jansen's (2019) research into sexuality among Iranian-Dutch people aims to counter the underpinnings of the secular/sexual paradigm by emphasising the distinct ways their interlocutors articulate their ethnicity in sexual behaviour, which the authors refer to as 'sexual self-fashioning'. In doing so, they underline the entanglement of sexuality and subjectivity (see also, van den Brandt 2018; Buitelaar 2002). Van Bohemen (2022) further problematises the entanglement of culture, ethnicity and sexuality by arguing that both culture and ethnicity are constantly in-the-making. Despite differences in their theoretical approach, what these studies have in common is that they demonstrate that the lived experience of sexuality among minoritised women looks very different from what is posited by the populist discourse or public health approach.

Through the life stories I conducted with Turkish-Dutch women, I aim to further contribute to this existing body of literature. I analyse the experiences of my interlocutors through the lens of culture (which was sometimes intertwined with religion or ethnicity in their experiences), but rather than seeing it as a fixed determinant of sexual behaviour, I argue that they interpret and reinvent what they understand to be cultural norms through their embodied experiences of sexuality, thereby practising a 'bounded' form of sexual agency (Cense 2019). With this study, I do not aim to offer a novel theoretical definition of culture, but rather, exemplify how a particular framing of it imposes sexual normativities onto minoritised women.

Countering neoliberal definitions of agency

The underlying assumption regarding minoritised women's sexuality, Muslim women in particular, rests on the premise that they lack autonomy and power in the face of patriarchal oppression (Ghorashi 2010a, 2010b; Roggeband 2010). According to Cense (2019), this argument presupposes the universality of a neoliberal definition of agency, in which there a heavy emphasis is placed on an autonomous self. The problem with this approach is that it might disguise structural inequalities associated with different identity markers such as class, while further stigmatising Muslim women as lacking freedom. It misrepresents the question of emancipation¹ as a problem of culture rather than challenging prevalent definitions of agency and selfhood.

According to Mahmood (2001), there has been a long tradition in Western feminist scholarship defining agency as an individual capacity to challenge social and cultural norms. In contrast, Mahmood understands docility to be an integral part of agency. Similarly, Cense (2019) and Richardson (2017) argue that choices are intrinsically linked to the cultural and moral frameworks within which they operate. To challenge neoliberal conceptualisations of agency, Cense proposes a multi-component model of sexual agency that takes into account religious and moral landscapes, gender and social norms, forms of relatedness and narratives. In line with Cense's model of 'bounded' sexual agency and Mahmood's 'docile agent', I understand agency as a concept that manifests itself under different relational and social circumstances in the form of active participation or abstinence, as well as disobedience or acquiescence.

In the light of this theoretical framework, I argue against an essentialist definition of culture as a 'causal factor' determining sexual behaviour that is prevalent in populist

discourse, which leads to further marginalisation of migrant sexualities. In contrast, I present the stories of my interlocutors as examples of the multitude of ways in which minoritised women can interpret and perform cultural norms to generate embodied engagements with sexuality.

Materials and methods

This research took place in the Netherlands between April and July 2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, getting in touch with potential participants *via* migrant organisations with a large network of Turkish-Dutch women proved to be more difficult than I envisioned, which required the creative incorporation of digital ethnography into the methodological framework of this study. Miller (2018) recommends understanding digital spaces not merely as communicative platforms, but rather, as spaces that generate new forms of socialisation, identities and communities. I began by reflecting on whether sexuality and intimacy can be expressed online and what might be the limitations and advantages of such expressions. Therefore, I decided to use dating apps such as Tinder and Bumble in addition to browsing through online forums, as they are platforms that facilitate the forming of intimate relationships.² The data presented here derive from interviews conducted with women I met on dating apps and through my personal networks.

In consideration of the ethical implications of this type of research, I indicated on my profile clearly that I was there as a researcher without any intention of dating. These ethical sensitivities were further discussed in relation to the research proposal's need to adhere to European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines. The study proposal was approved by the Ethics Review Committee Social Sciences at Leiden University.

I met five out of the eight women I interviewed on dating apps, all of whom expressed sexual and/or romantic interest in women without necessarily adopting a label. Religion was not a category that I explicitly included in my search for participants, but it emerged as a theme in some of the interviews that took place. I tried to avoid imposing categories – of ethnic identification, sexual orientation and religious affiliation – on to my interlocutors to make room for their own identifications. All interviews were conducted in my native language Turkish, with the exception of one. Most of the interviews were conducted in person with appropriate social distancing. Only in situations where respondents felt uncomfortable were the interviews conducted online. While online interviews made it more difficult to pay attention to things like body language, they allowed participants to have a conversation in the comfort of their homes. Afterwards, the interviews were analysed through the colour coding of emergent themes such as love and feelings, consent and boundaries, virginity, norms and values, the role of family and friends, and (mis)information.

The interviews took the form of life story interviews, a method that is particularly suitable for studying the active construction of personal history (Atkinson 2001; Cense 2019; Gemignani 2014; Guenette and Marshall 2009; Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). I posed the following question to my respondents as I asked them to draw a timeline of their sexual trajectories: in what ways have your experiences with and of sexuality (if any) given direction to your life? (Figure 1) I wanted to leave room for their own

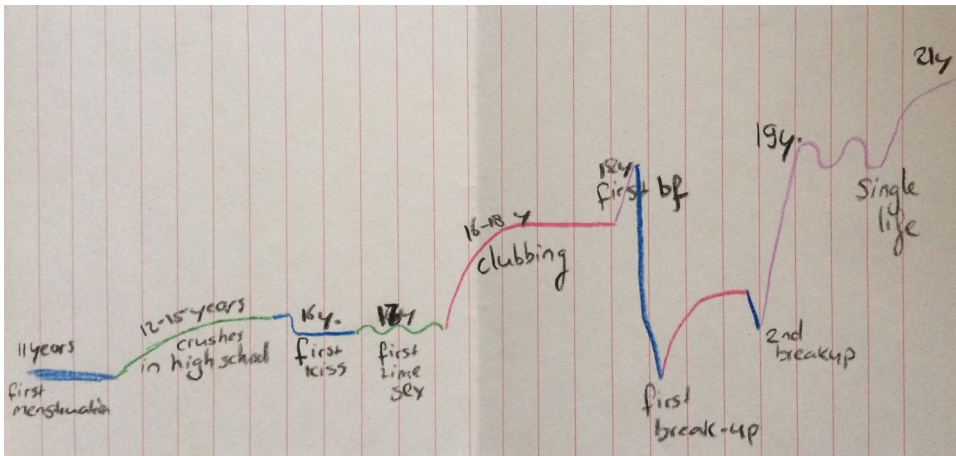


Figure 1. Sample timeline drawing.

understandings of sexuality and told them to feel free to mention feelings, thoughts and experiences that they felt were relevant. This was in part influenced by Schrijvers and Wiering's (2018) approach to conceptualising sexuality as a practice, rather than focusing on sexual identities.

I told my interlocutors they were free to use colour in their drawings and assign meaning to them as they wished.³ I wanted to offer a non-verbal medium in case they struggled to articulate their feelings. The colours chosen were able to capture the emotive dimension of an experience in highly imaginative ways. For example, when I interviewed Olivia, she used the colour brown to refer to 'raw and intense feelings' related to sexual experiences she felt ambivalent about. Furthermore, colours could simultaneously indicate positive and negative feelings. Another participant, Selin, told me that green meant curiosity and excitement, but it also signalled uncertainty and anxiety.

As a young Turkish woman myself, I was highly aware of the identity markers that were available to me to accentuate or downplay during the interviews. Likewise, respondents would approach me differently depending on the topic of our conversation. They would see me as a female confidante when complaining about double standards based on gender or highlight my Turkishness through phrases such as 'as you know, in *our* culture, we do it this way'; thereby implicating me in the construction of an imagined Turkish community. When discussing religious matters, they would ask me if I was Muslim myself, and despite my lack of spirituality, the fact that I came from a Muslim-majority country where Islamic education is partially incorporated into the public education system, and that my parents are Muslims themselves, made me seem less like an outsider.

Findings and discussion

Strategies for navigating conflicting discourses

One recurring theme that emerged in the course of the interviews was the negotiation of contradictory expectations that were imposed by different social groups. Cense (2014) identifies four strategies employed by minoritised youth in the Netherlands to



Figure 2. Fatma's timeline drawing.

counter conflicting discourses: conforming to parents' values, breaking up with parents, leading a double/secret life, and integrating multiple identities. While I identified similar strategies among respondents, I would argue that integrating and combining different strategies was the most common approach. Therefore, I understand Cense's classifications as analytical tools that can be combined in various ways whereby the use of one strategy does not preclude the use of another. I chose to focus here on three young women whose stories shed light on the blending of these strategies: Fatma, Elisa and Selin.⁴

Hiding and secrecy were some of the strategies Fatma used to mediate the expectations of her family and social circle (Figure 2). Growing up, she was confronted with the restrictive attitude of her father when it came to sexuality and felt the need to hide her relationships. She liked the convenience of long-distance relationships as they allowed her to shield her romantic life from her parents' involvement, yet she would also engage in riskier forms of behaviour and push the boundaries of her parents by having sex in the room next to their bedroom.

Fatma's rebellion is a form of selective contestation: it does not serve the purpose of overturning the status quo, but rather, it establishes a space for freedom while preserving the conditions of her constraint. While she expresses resentment towards her parents, she frames her story in a manner that allows her to reclaim agency and acknowledge that prohibition can reinforce unique forms of expression.

Elisa also hid her intimate relationships, but did not do so with the intention to revolt:

When I was fifteen, I felt like I wouldn't be able to bring a boyfriend home, even if I had one. My mom thought that it would distract me from my studies, that I would fall in love with someone and drop out of high school. When I started university, I was going out with my friends a lot. You know how it goes, you get slightly tipsy, guys start feeling you up, then you look around and you realise nobody's like *that*, you start thinking, 'Do your parents always know?' Plus, isn't it [physical intimacy] a need of a certain kind?

In contrast to Fatma, who practised secrecy as a form of rebellion, Elisa told me that she hid her intimate relationships out of respect for her parents. She saw them as belonging to a different generation and thought it futile to try to change their minds; it might even hurt their feelings and lead to unnecessary tensions. Elisa's case on the other hand offers an example of how practices of resistance and compliance can complement each other. While she hid her short-lived intimate relationships, she also expressed appreciation for some of the values that her parents had taught her, 'They told me not to toy with people's feelings and to be honest with your intentions'.

In the case of both Elisa and Fatma, normative expectations were largely imposed by their parents. While their narrative accounts depict their parents as having 'conservative' attitudes towards sex as opposed to 'progressive' ones, I want to stress that this was the perception these young women had of their parents, and therefore, they should not be taken at face value. The role of parental figures in conveying sexual values emerged frequently in other narrative accounts as well; however, social environments beyond the family unit were equally important in reinforcing tensions. Selin was a twenty-one-year-old woman from The Hague who has a strained relationship with both of her parents. She told me about growing up in a *woongroep*⁵ where she had her first sexual experiences,

I felt a lot of peer pressure, because most girls living there already had sex. I felt like I was being bullied for being a virgin. One night, I sneaked into the guys' dormitory and had sex with one of them.

I chose this quote not only to highlight the wide range of social groups that can impose normative expectations (e.g. peers as opposed to parents) on others, but to demonstrate the range of conflicting discourses my interlocutors were confronted with. Elisa and Fatma were implicitly expected to avoid sexual relations; in contrast, Selin felt pressured to gain sexual experience to avoid being the only virgin in her friend group. However, she also told me that her mother disapproved of premarital sex, which makes her simultaneously a conformist (for submitting to peer pressure) and a rebel (for going against her mother's advice). Her behaviour further shows how a neoliberal definition of agency cannot capture the complexity of real-life experiences as it negates the simultaneity of opposing strategies.

Moreover, the divergent attitudes these young women have towards the various norms they encounter in their daily lives cannot be explained within a sexual/secular framework within which culture is essentialised. While my respondents might choose to uphold some of these norms and values insofar as they understand them to be a part of their culture, that does not mean they do so without critically reflecting on them. In fact, they oftentimes distinguish between values that are important to them on a personal level and those that don't serve them. The finding that these women employ multiple strategies to *selectively* uphold norms and values complicates the reductionist narrative of Dutch sexual exceptionalism.

Encountering myths of virginity

Virginity was another theme that frequently arose during the interviews. However, there was considerable variation in the ways my interlocutors defined virginity as well as the significance they attributed to it. As part of her research among Moroccan-Dutch women, Buitelaar (2002) argues that different ethnic, religious and gender identifications lead to multiple interpretations of the virginity norm. Similarly, I observed that for some of the women I interviewed the loss of virginity was of no importance so long as it was based on mutual consent and respect. For others, it required a deeper level of intimacy and trust, marking a moment of transition in their sexual journey. Those who were sexually attracted to women encountered tensions in the way virginity was defined in conventional terms. When heteronormative understandings of sex get tangled up with technical definitions of virginity (the breaking of the hymen), normative assumptions concerning the loss of virginity are imposed: a woman is a virgin in the absence of penetrative sex.

I want to further underline the specific ways in which the Turkish language conceptualises virginity. Kiara, a young woman who identifies as bisexual, told me that when she had come out to her mother, she confronted her regarding her past sexual experiences by asking the question *'peki kızlığın duruyor mu?'*⁶ *Kızlık* can be roughly translated as girlhood, although here it is used as a shortened version of *kızlık zarı* (hymen), which literally means 'virginal (girlhood) membrane'. There is an immediate association made here between the state of being a virgin and being a girl, which reduces the definition of virginity to a biological structure. The loss of virginity very explicitly implies losing one's innocence and girlhood. As a result, some respondents would vaguely refer to 'doing stuff' throughout our interview in reference to non-penetrative sexual acts they had engaged in to keep their hymen intact.

Kiara told me that the first time she had a boyfriend, she avoided having penetrative sex, 'When you can't have sex, you do everything else. You naively think that if you avoid penetration, you can somehow remain a virgin'. A few years later, Kiara had sex with a woman for the first time, which made her question the meaning of virginity altogether. She found herself unable to decide what would qualify as losing one's virginity, precisely because the heteronormative meaning of sex changes in the absence of a penis, 'It was still sex right, even though she didn't have a dick?'

Sema was another respondent who told me that she had done 'other stuff' with her boyfriend before having penetrative sex. However, she also mentioned that she was often teased among her friends for 'wanting to wait for the right person' to have sex, which they considered rather old-fashioned. In recounting her story, Sema told me that her desire to wait to have sex until finding a suitable partner was influenced by her mother's sexual values:

She told me that my body was a precious thing and that I shouldn't share it with just anyone. My friends were really surprised when I told them about this, they told me 'How can you have such progressive views on women's issues, but be so conservative when it comes to sex?'

Sema further commented on how she thought her mother's ideas about the importance of waiting were reflective of a broader trend within Turkish culture, 'I do think it's more common to be reserved about sex in Turkish culture, but I don't judge that.'

Here, Sema's definition of culture echoes the essentialist underpinnings of sexual exceptionalism, because she refers to 'being more reserved' as an innate characteristic of Turkish culture. However, what she emphasises is the element of 'no judgement', which is distinct from the secular/sexual logic.

Sema's story exemplifies how dichotomous categories of sexual liberation and oppression can be imposed upon Turkish-Dutch women through discourses surrounding virginity. Sema's conscious choice to wait before having sex was conceived as backwards and traditional, seemingly contradictory to her political beliefs that were deemed progressive. The pressure Selin felt in the *woongroep* to lose her virginity is remarkably similar to Sema's, yet while Sema believes in the importance of waiting, Selin does not. This also shows that there was variety among my interlocutors regarding the importance attached to having sex for the first time, yet they are faced with being labelled as 'too conservative' when the choices they make uphold normative values, even if these choices are critically informed. These examples question the neoliberal underpinnings of agency, which recognises agentic behaviour solely in terms of 'breaking free' from normative expectations without taking into account how women relate to these norms themselves.

Encountering moments of tension

As outlined in the introduction, Dutch sexual exceptionalism reinforces cultural stereotypes by problematising the sexual lives of minoritised women. I now focus on the ways in which stereotyping featured in the daily interactions of interlocutors. These stereotypes often took the form of moments of tension imbued with cultural generalisations, such as those highlighting the 'Turkishness' of the women in the study in situations they deemed irrelevant. They were events that did not provoke open confrontation, but rather reinforced fixed understandings of culture, which were oftentimes conflated with ethnicity and religion, and imposed an additional layer of normative expectations onto Turkish-Dutch women. The quote below from Elisa is illustrative of one such moment:

I hate it when [Turkish] men ask me if I am a virgin. 'How many boys have you slept with? How far have you gone? Was there any touching involved?' Especially on Instagram, people have absolutely no shame. There's also a small part of me that wonders, is it because I am Turkish? Would you have asked the same question if I were Dutch?

The hint of paranoia that Elisa expresses towards the end struck me as an example of how sexual expectations are implicitly imposed on my interlocutors. The process is very subtle and potentially devoid of intentional harm, but it leaves a sense of confusion. Moreover, in the case of Elisa, it provoked a response that can be characterised as a form of self-positioning that negates her Dutch heritage, even though she was born and raised in the Netherlands. In other words, stereotyping reinforces Elisa's Otherness, and simultaneously reinforces the perceived duality between Turkish and Dutch cultures that are both treated as natural phenomena. In this discourse, Turkish women are expected to behave in a certain way when it comes to expressions of sexuality, while Dutch women are allowed more freedom.

While Elisa's frustration targeted mostly Turkish men, another young woman, Karanfil, had encountered similar encounters with stereotyping where Dutch men played a central role, this time based on religious assumptions.

Once, when I was out clubbing, this [Dutch] guy asked me out of nowhere if I was Muslim. This gave me the impression that it mattered somehow, even though the context was completely irrelevant. It was weird, I felt like he asked me to be able to put me in a box. I don't think Western guys know much about Muslims to be honest.

Karanfil told me that this was a common attitude among Dutch guys, and she attributed their curiosity to the fact that they assume 'Eastern girls don't go all the way'. She added,

Maybe they don't want to have relationships with Turkish girls because they [Dutch guys] want to have sex more. I do know some friends of mine with a migrant background who don't have intimacy as we know it, so I think they assume everybody else is the same.

Similarly, Kiara recalled a moment when her sexual and romantic attraction towards women was met with surprise by her boss. 'I clearly remember my manager asking me if I had a boyfriend. When I told her that I had a girlfriend, she was noticeably shocked, she didn't expect me to have a girlfriend'. These types of daily interactions demonstrate that when Turkish-Dutch women engage in forms of behaviour that do not conform to the expectations placed on them (such as going out clubbing or having a girlfriend), this can create confusion among their interlocutors. However, their behaviour is oftentimes seen as the exception to the norm instead of invalidating pre-existing stereotypes. Furthermore, these expectations are not only imposed on them by a White majority, but by Turkish-Dutch men as well, alongside their peers and families. These interactions further complicate the normative landscape that has been previously described, making it nearly impossible to navigate without being subject to stereotypes.

Religion as an interpretive tool

One of the issues that has been criticised most within the context of Dutch sexual exceptionalism is the tendency to associate Islam with homophobia and misogyny (Ghorashi 2017; van den Brandt 2018; Yildiz 2017), an idea that is reinforced through references to an Islamic 'culture of oppression' (Bracke 2011). In contrast, what emerged out of the life story interviews was that religion was not necessarily experienced as a constraint in the experiences of respondents. Echoing the findings of Schrijvers and Wiering (2018) and Bakuri and Spronk (2022), religious interpretations allowed my interlocutors to understand and ascribe meaning to their sexual experiences. An essentialist definition of religion not only negates Muslim women's agency in their capacity to interpret the Qur'an, but it also denies them the possibility of finding meaning in intimacy through engaging with spirituality as argued by scholars of Islamic feminism (Hoel 2015).

As a self-identified bisexual woman, Kiara told me that she struggled to accept her sexuality as a teenager and she attributed her inner turmoil to her Muslim upbringing, which shows how an environment of sexual exceptionalism informs the ways in

which respondents interpreted their own experiences as well. However, she later noticed that although she considered herself Muslim, she had never read the Qur'an before; her ideas about homosexuality and Islam were second-hand knowledge. After reading the Qur'an, she could not find a passage that explicitly forbade sex between two women.

It's only two guys that are mentioned, there is nothing against same-sex relationships. Anal [sex] is prohibited, but love between the same sexes is allowed. I think anal is prohibited due to health reasons, because Muslims are clean people. It has nothing to do with love, it's about hygiene.

Kiara told me that she knew she was bisexual when she was twenty-five and got tired of hiding an important part of her identity. This motivated her to come out to her parents.

When I told my mom, she said, 'That [same-sex attraction] comes from Allah as well.' I always knew she wasn't a homophobe, but sometimes if she witnessed a same-sex couple kissing in front of her, she would say '*Terbiyesizler!*'⁷ It was a lot for her to swallow I think, but she told me 'I love you, you do you.' I shed a few tears then.

Kiara was surprised to find out that her father already suspected that she might be attracted to women and was moved by the fact that he repeated the exact same phrase used by her mother: that same sex attraction comes from Allah. Her coming out story was not only demonstrative of the diverse ways in which religion can be interpreted to allow for sexual freedom, but it also shows how an intergenerational dialogue can be established between parents and children, possibly through religion. Kiara's mother's remark about homosexual couples was later challenged when her daughter disclosed her sexual orientation; while she displayed mild discomfort, she empathised with her and reassured her of the unconditional love that she has for her. Likewise, Kiara referred to her father as being very strict and conservative multiple times during our interview, but his interpretation of Islam was precisely what allowed him to understand her daughter's attraction towards women. Kiara's parents' religious interpretation of homosexuality further validates Beekers and Schrijvers' (2020, 146) findings on views concerning homosexuality among young Muslims in the Netherlands, who argue that more intolerant views can co-exist with an understanding that emphasises compassion as one of the highest virtues in Islam.

While Kiara's story is one of textual interpretation, not all of my respondents felt the need to read the Qur'an to find meaning in their sexual experiences. When I asked Selin about her religious beliefs, she said,

*Elhamdulillah Müslümanım*⁸, but I grew up with a lot of freedom. I would go to the mosque during the weekends, I read sections from the Qur'an, but then I had that whole phase of clubbing. I don't think I agree with everything that is written in the Qur'an, but I *feel* Muslim in a way.

Selin's personal relationship with her faith allows her to reconcile some of the tensions she experiences as a young woman between what is expected of her and what she desires. 'I heard from someone that virginity is sacred between you and Allah, and asking someone whether they are a virgin or not would be *haram*⁹, because you would be exposing somebody else's sins.'

Both Kiara and Selin approach religion as a source of guidance as opposed to a rigid framework that does not leave room for interpretation. I believe Kiara's experience is particularly well suited to contesting contemporary beliefs grounded in a sexual/secular logic, which presume an inherent incompatibility between homosexuality and Islam. In contrast, my interlocutors' interpretations of Islam demonstrate that there is not necessarily a tension between religious and sexual identities that needs to be reconciled. This presupposed duality not only misrepresents real-life experiences but also contributes to the further marginalisation and disenfranchisement of queer Muslims.

Limitations of the study

As there was a heavy reliance on dating apps to recruit participants for this study, it is possible that I ended up speaking to women who already felt relatively comfortable talking about sexuality. The small size of the group calls into question the generalisability of the findings, yet the purpose of this study was to offer a more nuanced, in-depth look at sexuality among Turkish-Dutch women, as opposed to identifying generalisable patterns as is often the case in quantitative studies.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have aimed to offer an ethnographic counter-narrative to the essentialist rendering of culture posited by Dutch populist discourse by illustrating the complex, multilayered experiences of my interlocutors. While existing scholarly research emphasises the fluid and dynamic ways minoritised women generate sexual experiences - not *despite* their culture or religion, but through conscious engagement with these notions as they understand them -sexual exceptionalism continues to feature prominently in populist discourse and everyday life. This type of discourse reinforces boundaries that are said to be cultural (van den Hemel 2020) and reifies dichotomies of East and West, modern and traditional, sexually agentic and oppressed. Unit recently, these dichotomies have been further exacerbated by the use of the derogatory term 'allochthone', thereby homogenising the complex sexual experiences of minoritised women. The logic of sexual exceptionalism imposes normativities onto minoritised bodies by creating a 'script' based on cultural stereotypes. Consequently, minoritised women are expected to counter this script by being 'agentic' in a narrow neoliberal sense, otherwise, they risk being depicted as 'victims of their own culture'.

In contrast, what emerges out of the life story interviews in this study is that the meaning and importance my interlocutors attach to what they understand to be culture vis-à-vis sexuality are multilayered and diverse. When it comes to issues of same-sex sexual relations, having multiple sexual partners, or the role of emotions in sex, the opinions and feelings of the women interviewed are manifold. Furthermore, the simplified view of the relationship between sexuality and culture present in the sexual/secular framework manifests itself in the life stories of the women that I spoke with in the form of moments of tension. If they do not conform to the expectations of how a Turkish-Dutch woman should behave, their behaviour is met with confusion in their social circles. This negates the complexity of their experiences as they struggle

to fit into either/or distinctions; they are considered agentic only insofar as they openly defy the expectations of a white-majority crowd. This is in stark contrast to how sexuality among the majority Dutch population is understood, where cultural specificities of sexual experiences become invisible as 'cultural difference is presumed to 'stick' more to minoritised bodies' (van den Brandt 2018, 63). Contrary to the underpinnings of the secular/sexual logic, the findings I present in this research offer a closer look into the lived experience of sexuality among Turkish-Dutch women, inviting us to think beyond dichotomous categories of Othering.

Notes

1. For further discussion on the notion of emancipation in feminist scholarship, see Rana (2023), Farris (2017) and Abu-Lughod (2002).
2. For an immersive ethnography of dating apps, see Broeker (2023).
3. For a more detailed explanation of the use of colours, see Guenette and Marshall (2009).
4. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
5. Residential or communal living that sometimes include facilities for care.
6. 'Did you preserve your girlhood at least?'
7. Improper, insolent.
8. 'Praise be to God, I am Muslim.'
9. Proscribed by Islam.

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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