

# An Analysis of Trans Men's Conceptions and Navigation of Masculinity

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## **Abstract:**

The trans body in transition is a complex negotiation, a continual self-examination consisting of building and rebuilding of the self in relation to the transitioning body and to the social, cultural and linguistic structures of gender norms and binary differences. Ways in which trans men embody masculinity while renegotiating their transitioning bodies cannot be fully understood without considering the sociocultural parameters that define cisgender (not transgender) male characteristics, bodies, and masculinities which trans men knowingly or unknowingly may aspire to embody. Physiology or physical differences may become a salient factor in the perception, embodiment or selection of a normative masculinity. There may also be a sense of loss and a mismatch between the performative masculinity and the emergent masculinity, shifting as trans men relate to and/or choose to subvert the conceptions of the dominant societal characteristics of masculinity. This paper aims to gain insight on the specific social and affective factors that impact trans men's definitions, performance and navigation of their own masculinity. The author will share findings from a qualitative study conducted using semi-structured interviews with trans men of different age groups. The research is driven by the following questions: What meaning do trans men ascribe to normative constructs of masculinity while

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constructing their body and in what ways does this meaning attach to and apply a given masculinity to the trans male body? What salient linguistic practices do trans men orient themselves towards to exercise or exert their own conceptions of masculinity? In what ways trans men's self-identification and assertion of their masculinities dependent or independent of relational and social meanings, characteristics and perspectives ascribed to masculinity?

**Key words:** Trans men, performativity, masculinity, gender identities, embodiment

## Trans Erkeklerin Erkeklik Kavramları ve Uygulamalarının Bir Analizi

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### Öz:

Geçiş halindeki trans beden karmaşık bir müzakeredir; cinsiyet normlarının ve ikili farklarının sosyal, kültürel ve dilsel yapılarına ve geçiş sürecindeki bedene ilişkin inşa ve yeniden inşadan oluşur ve bir süreklilikle kendini değerlendirmeyi içerir. Trans erkeklerin yeniden müzakere ettikleri geçiş sürecindeki bedenleri ile, bilerek ya da farkında olmayarak, erkeklığı hangi yönlerde cisimleştirdikleri, cisgender (trans olmayan) erkek özellikleri, bedenleri ve erkeklikleri tanımlayan sosyokültürel etkenler göz önüne alınmadan tam olarak anlaşılabilir. Fizyoloji veya fiziksel farklılıklar, normatif bir erkeklığın algılanması, yapılandırılması veya seçiminde belirgin bir faktör olabilmektedir. Trans erkekler hakim toplumsal erkeklik özellikleri ile ilişki kurarken ve/veya bunları değiştirmeyi seçerken, performatif erkeklik ve ortaya çıkan erkeklik arasında bir kayıp ve uyumsuzluk hissi olması olasıdır. Bu çalışma, trans erkeklerin erkeklik tanımlarını, performanslarını ve kendi erkekliklerinin uygulamalarını etkileyen belirli sosyal ve duygusal faktörler hakkında ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır. Farklı yaş gruplarındaki trans erkeklerle yapılandırılmış görüşmeler kullanılarak yapılan nitel bir çalışmadan elde edilen bulgular paylaşılacaktır. Araştırma şu sorulara dayanmaktadır: Trans erkekler bedenlerini inşa ederken normatif erkeklik yapılarına ne anlam atfetmektedirler? Bu anlam belirli bir erkeklığı hangi yönlerden trans erkek bedenine dahil

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edip uygulamaya koyar? Trans erkekler kendi erkeklik anlayışlarını uygulamak ve ortaya koymak için hangi belirgin dil pratiklerine doğru yöneliyorlar? Trans erkeklerin erkekliklerini tanımlamaları ve ortaya koymaları erkeklikle bağdaştırılan ilişkisel ve sosyal anlamlara, özelliklere ve bakış açılarına hangi yönlerden bağlı ya da bağlı değildir?

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Trans erkekler, performativite, erkeklik, cinsiyet kimlikleri, cisimleştirme

## Introduction

This paper explores the specific social and affective factors that impact trans men's definitions, performance and navigation of their own masculinity. Findings from a qualitative study conducted using semi-structured interviews with nine trans men of different age groups will be shared. The study examines the meanings trans men ascribe to normative constructs of masculinity and the ways in which trans men's self-identification and assertion of their masculinities dependent or independent of relational and social meanings, characteristics and perspectives ascribed to masculinity.

Through interview excerpts about their own descriptions of masculinity, manhood and (transitioning) body, this paper illustrates how trans men relate to societal constructs of masculinity. The interview excerpts show how physical differences often become a salient factor in the perception, embodiment or selection of a normative masculinity. Some excerpts show a clear mismatch between the performative masculinity and the emergent masculinity as trans men relate to and/or choose to subvert the conceptions of the dominant societal characteristics of masculinity.

## Methodology

The interview participants are trans men who reside in Istanbul, Turkey. Trans men that took part in the study received individual face-to-face or online invitations via trans group networks. Even though the study charted no strict criteria in the recruitment of interview participants, it aimed to select a diverse population, particularly in terms of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) status, medical procedures undertaken, age, sexual orientation, educational and socioeconomic background for the purposes of configuring an analysis to gain insight on the extent to which the variations in participants' social location, their intersecting identities and HRT status and/or medical processes undertaken are intertwined with their conceptions, navigation

and lived experiences of masculinity. Even though the challenge of finding and recruiting participants willing to take part in the study limited the recruitment of a larger number of participants and thus a wider collection of data towards this aim, it did demonstrate a variety mainly in participant HRT status, medical procedures undertaken, age, educational and socioeconomic background. It is also worth noting the specific geographical and sociocultural context of the study as significant elements that play a crucial role in the way they influence the formation, negotiation, expression and experience of masculinity.

From May to July, 2019, nine interviews were conducted with people who identify as trans men. The length of the recorded interviews varied, generally lasting for about thirty minutes with the shortest lasting twenty minutes and the longest lasting an hour. All interviews were audio recorded except for one due to participant request. Most of the interviews were conducted in cafes. Participants were given an overview of the study, filled out consent and basic background information forms before we began the interview.

The average age of the participants is 34. Eight participants are from Turkey and one is from Saudi Arabia. Three of the participants have not started HRT (the intake of testosterone to create masculinizing effects) while six are at different stages of HRT. Four have not had surgeries and five have had some or all of their surgeries. Pseudonyms for each participant are used throughout the paper for confidentiality.

The interviews were administered in three segments and included an introductory part as an extension to the background information form focusing on the participants' historical transgender experience. This was followed by a section on medical and legal transition processes and experiences. The next part consisted of transgender life experiences and ended with reflections on masculinity. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed. As eight of the nine interviews were conducted in Turkish, the transcripts were translated into English. All nine English transcripts were coded to identify categories and themes which were then interpreted.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Theories on masculinity with a particular focus on local hegemonic masculinity discourses are utilized to situate the study within existing masculinity studies and to provide a theoretical framework for analyzing how trans men relate to societal constructs of masculinity. The study also draws on theories of gender as a social construction with a particular focus on performativity, affect theory and transgender issues to analyze the ways in which trans men's embodiment and assertion of their masculinities are dependent or independent of relational and social meanings, characteristics and perspectives ascribed to masculinity.

### Masculinity

Masculinities and femininities are dynamic processes and constructions of practices that change over time (Connell, 2015). Masculinities are patterns of social actions related to men's positions, irrespective of male anatomy, within the gender order and relations of a particular social context and can vary in different social settings (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2015). The interplay of multidimensional social, psychological and historical processes, relations and factors shape how the various ways in which men identify with hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity positions one group of men as legitimate and subordinates all other men and women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Within contemporary Turkish society, studies (Şenol & Erdem, 2017; Boratav, Fişek & Ziya, 2017) point towards social events and processes such as circumcision, military service, holding a job, marriage and becoming a parent as key transitions in men's lives that influence and determine constructions of hegemonic masculinity. All these processes produce discourses, values, ideals and characteristics that shape many cisgender men's subjectivities and masculinities. One prominent characteristic is observed in the ways

rigid gender based division of labor shapes unequal relations between men and women, prioritizing men's needs and decisions (Sancar, 2008). Many of the participants in this study defined masculinity not only through the prism of their own navigational and negotiational struggles as bodies that transition, but also through the affective processes that mediate the integration of socioculturally specific expressions and expectations ascribed to masculine bodies with the subjective selection or subversion of normative characteristics of masculinity. In their own descriptions of what being a man means to them, some of the trans men focused on the social while others focused on the bodily experience. Some identified factors such as the exhibition of a serious demeanor, physical strength and relational protection in their descriptions, evoking hegemonic masculinity constructions and definitions that are aligned with key social events such as marriage and becoming a parent in the integrative processes of normative masculinity. Others expressed inhabiting a unique bodily experience that sees and compares itself as significantly oppositional in nature to cisgender men's bodily experience as a key defining factor that shapes trans men's own descriptions and negotiations of masculinity. It was found that trans men's associations and relationship to hegemonic masculinity provided significant variations depending on the way factors such as HRT status, medical procedures undertaken, age, sexual orientation and educational background interacted with the expressions and expectations of masculinity.

### **Masculinity and Performativity**

**T**he theory of gender performativity is the reproduction of gender norms that "act on us" and which we repeat regulating how bodies are read in space and time (Butler, 2009). Trans men may aspire to repeat gender norms in order to effectively reproduce bodies that are read as masculine. In other words, trans men might consciously regulate how their bodies are seen and read, producing something that they are not acculturated to, something that is not acted on them.



Considering the fact that passing (to be perceived as the gender a person is presenting) is linked to the social and how this societal recognition may function as the most fundamental concern, in what ways do affective factors shape trans men’s definitions, performance, and navigation of their own masculinity? Normative constructions of masculinity manifest as prescriptive characteristics attributed to and displayed in male bodies and masculine behaviors. Aaron Devor (1989) stated that the internalization of the dominant gender schema informs not only a person’s own identification of their gender identity but the gender that is attributed to them by others and is mostly dependent on how successfully a person conveys the gender cues they intend to convey and the gender impression management methods they employ. Similarly, West & Zimmerman (1987) have noted that we “do” gender and the doing arises in social and interactive circumstances informed by “normative conceptions and activities appropriate for one’s sex category.” A person needs to be identified by others as either masculine or feminine in order to achieve gender (1987).

AN ANALYSIS OF TRANS MEN’S CONCEPTIONS & NAVIGATION OF MASCULINITY 1

Table 1. Background information for each participant

Name Pseudonym	Age	Education	Occupation	Sexual orientation	Gender expression/ presentation	Marital status	Other
Can	18	University student	N/A	Gay/ Homosexual	Masculine	Single	
Levent	37	MA candidate	N/A	Heterosexual	Masculine	Single	
Ilhan	37	MA	Publishing copyrights, International relations	Heterosexual 95%	Men’s clothing, short hair, binder	Single	
Berk	35	BA	Manufacturing, Planning	Heterosexual	Masculine	Single	
Kaya	40	BA	Software company manager	Heterosexual	Masculine	Single	
Bahadır	38	Highschool graduate	Textile	Heterosexual	Transsexual man	Single	
Ergin	25	BA	Unemployed	Heterosexual	Masculine Trans man	Single	Blind
Çağan	22	BA	Translator	Pansexual	Masculine 80% Man	Single	
Bilgehan	53	Primary school graduate	None	Heterosexual	Masculine	Single	

### Trans/Man: Self-Identification as Masculinity

Following Lal Zimman's approach (2015), it was decided to include each interview participants' HRT status and gender presentation as these factors indicate trans men's embodiment of masculinity. Table I demonstrates how most of the trans men described their gender presentation as masculine. Trans men's self-definition of their identity reveals their relationship to normative masculinity. Some trans men express discomfort identifying with the word *man*, citing that their socialization, gender incongruencies and transition experiences are significantly distinctive than the socialization and lived gender experiences of non-trans men. Ilhan (37) embraces the term trans as a way to select a masculinity that is less normative, but more descriptive of his experience. Ilhan identifies himself as a trans man, but says the word transgender feels more close to him. When asked about why he chooses to self-identify himself as a trans man instead of as a man, whether he has a certain criteria of comparison, he expressed that he was not sure, but said: "I'm not a man. There are things I don't like in the word man and in the perceptions of what a man is. There are things I don't like in the word woman. Trans feels more real. There's transition there". It is worth noting that even though Ilhan did not state specific reasons why he feels distant with identifying himself with the word *man* or explain the negative perceptions of being a man or a woman evoke for him, it seems that defining himself within the sociocultural parameters attached to the word *man* constricts his in-flux social and perceived reality. Adopting a critical and subversive approach, Ilhan measures his association and dissociation and rejects rigid sociocultural binary definitions attributed to men and women by finding meaning in unpacking his relationship to his non static identity. Ilhan's definition seeks to subvert his relationship to normative constructions of masculinity.

Others said that it is the biological sex characteristics that distinguish them from non-trans men and that these are determining factors in identifying with the word *man*. Berk (35) self-identifies as a

man and added “completely as a man. I was always a man. I always felt this way. I was born with certain defects.” Even though in his self-identification biological characteristics are a determining factor, his internal sense of feeling seems to override bodily sex characteristics. I asked Berk whether he employs a certain criteria of comparison. “To be a man does not mean to be with a woman. Masculinity means seriousness, to emit trust, love and to be protective of and show respect to a woman. Masculinity is not about having a penis.” Berk’s definition reflects his understanding of manhood as a social rather than a biological state. Cultural underpinnings of normative masculinity are evident in his further analysis of his self-identification as man. It seems that one must internalize and perform certain characteristics and behavior determined by the sociocultural paradigm of normative masculinity, according to Berk, in order to accomplish a masculine identity.

Levent (37) self-identifies as a trans man. His further assessment reflects the presence of underlying normative biological characteristics as significant factors in determining one’s gender: “I’m honest with myself. I was born with female genitalia and I’m going to transition. It is not fair to call myself a man.” Levent’s description echoes normative constructions of masculinity attached to masculine bodies and that the attainment of a masculine body is only possible through surgical procedures illustrating the particular ways that the early dominant pathologizing medical discourse (Stryker, 2006; Whittle, 2006)—which has shaped how transgender people have defined themselves throughout history—interacts in the negotiation of masculinity.

Kaya (40) stated that he does not accept the word trans, “my body could have defects, but these can be fixed.” Viewing the body as having flaws that need to be repaired is a common theme found in Berk and Levent’s narratives as well. When I asked him how he defined a trans man, Levent said “a trans man is born in the wrong body, the body should be corrected.” The notion of being in the wrong body has long been a customary way for many trans people to explain their subjective body experience. As Prosser (1998) postulates, the medical discourse of being in the wrong body remains the narrative employed by transsexuals

to authenticate the transsexual subjective experience of a “pre-transition (dis)embodiment” and to gain access to hormones and surgery. From a psychological perspective, viewing the body as having defects may hinder self acceptance and risk self worth as this discourse provides a limited framework that is driven mainly by felt and lived societal pressures to look a certain way in order to be perceived by others as male; and may lead to unexamined perceptions of the necessity for medical interventions as sole solutions to the relationship with the self and the body. To elaborate further, as Roen (2011) states, critical examination of the wrong body discourse is necessary for transpeople in order to avoid establishing an investment in sex reassignment surgery as the only answer.

Bilgehan (53) self-identifies as a man. He expressed that he did not want to identify himself as trans and said, “the only thing different is my body.” Bilgehan’s relationship to masculinity aligns firmly with normative constructions of masculinity.

Ergin (25) self-identifies as a trans man. When I asked if he implements a certain criteria as to why he identifies as a trans man rather than a man, he expressed that being trans is an identity he has that will not change. “I’m not a cis man and will never be. That’s like competing with cis men, devaluing my own experiences and throwing 25 years into the trash. I don’t want to forget that I used to be in a woman’s body and had periods.” By claiming his pre-transition past, Ergin is embracing and valuing a past inhabiting a female body and enacting a conscious internal sense of gender blending as an approach to explore his masculinity and femininity.

Çağan (22) self-identifies as a trans man. Like Ergin, Çağan also pointed to his past physical and social experiences in a female body as the main reason why he identifies as a trans man and not a man.

I don’t think I’m the same as someone born male and living as male...there is a difference in how we were raised. Cisgender men do not experience this, that’s why we are different. I don’t see us as equal. This is not a bad thing.

Bahadır (38) also acknowledged his past experiences and said, “I don’t see myself equal to cis men. We don’t share the same body or life experiences or circumstances.” Perhaps the very potent social, psychological and physical aspects of the trans lived experience are the salient factors that shape Bahadır’s relationship to normative masculinity as being subversive, rather than age, in comparison with Ergin and Çağan.

Ergin, Çağan and Bahadır choose a subversive approach in examining their experience of transitioning from female to male. By defining their experience as distinct from cis men’s, they acknowledge and invest in a lived experience that encompasses a wider understanding of navigating a gendered social reality.

While some trans men may endeavor to become identified as masculine and aspire to embody a male identity that does not dismiss the female identity they once inhabited, some may completely reject their female physicality and past experiences as not belonging to them, saying that they had always been men. As these excerpts show, some of the participants display active resistance to hegemonic masculinity, are not afraid to acknowledge aspects of femininity in their identifications and may actively seek to integrate these into their processes of identifying as men, while others display normative expressions in the way they depicted an identification with femininity as inauthentic to their personal experiences and processes of identifying as men.

Some of the participants prefer to use the term trans because it clearly defines their lived experience and/or distinguishes them from the normative bodily characteristics of cisgender men. Others state that they have always been men and identifying as a man is a more accurate description of their long-standing internal experiences of their gender identity. For others, identifying with the word man brings about associations that they view as socioculturally problematic and feel a sense of misalignment with or dissociation from. Self-identification is one salient linguistic practice that indicates how trans men position

themselves to define, exercise or exert their own conceptions of masculinity.

#### AN ANALYSIS OF TRANS MEN'S CONCEPTIONS & NAVIGATION OF MASCULINITY 2

**Table II. Gender identity self identification, HRT and medical procedures for each participant**

Name Pseudonym	Self-identification (Gender identity)	HRT	Other medical procedures
Can	Trans man	No	None
Levent	Trans man	5 years	Yes
Ilhan	Transgender / Trans man	No	None
Berk	Man	2 years	Yes
Kaya	Man*	No	None
Bahadir	Transsexual man / Trans man	6 months	Yes
Ergin	Trans man	2 years	None
Çagan	Trans man	3 years	Yes
Bilgehan	Man	6 years	Yes

\*The participant indicated that he does not accept the word trans, but he did not explicitly say that he identifies himself with the word man. He referred to himself as man during the interview.

### Perceptions, Definitions And Performance Of Masculinity

**M**asculinity in Turkey is a discursive phenomenon involving a lifelong construction that highlights particular bodied and societal responsibilities and rituals such as circumcision, sexual experience, marriage, having a male child, becoming a father, having a job and doing military service (Boratav, Fişek & Ziya, 2017). The internalization of these responsibilities is initiated once gender milestones are acquired (Barutçu, 2013; Buyurucu, 2006 as cited in Boratav, Fişek & Ziya, 2017). Even though the internalization process of these sociocultural gender roles operate differently for trans men, they highlight the psychological and social contours that mark the complex topographies of culturally negotiated constructions and dynamics of

masculinity. Ratele (2013) writes about masculinity being in constant “construction”, something that is learned in interactions and in how one is identified by others, in the comparisons with others, and in the comparisons of the present self with that of an earlier self. As Ekins and King (2005) put it, the transsexual negotiates an identity that is temporary and moves through a trans phase to arrive at an enduring masculine or feminine identity. This section focuses on how trans men relate to masculinity not only in themselves, but also in society and how their understanding of masculinity compares or correlates with sociocultural constructions of masculinity. Participants were asked how masculine they found themselves and whether this was important to them. They were also asked for their own definitions of masculinity, what being a man means to them and whether they feel any pressure to enact a certain masculinity.

Çağan has fulfilled all of the legal requirements for gender transition. When asked if he found himself masculine and whether this was important to him, Çağan replied:

A little, not 100%. I don't want it to be important. I wish I could wear a skirt. I can't, I'm scared. Maybe I'm afraid of being misgendered. I want my masculinity to be obvious... I still have body dysphoria around my hips. I don't feel very confident around clothing. I think I may try skirts at some point. I'm not in a rush.

Ergin expressed the following to the same question:

Not enough. I like masculinity and I try to be masculine... Women look for masculinity in men. They like masculine men and prefer to date one. Whether it's something physical or a character trait, they look for masculinity. I have anxiety because women don't prefer me because of this. I'm not masculine enough. My disability also affects this. A masculine person can take initiative, do things by themselves, and make decisions. I get help from women when necessary. I see this as damaging to my masculinity.

Sociocultural gender norms and patterns of behavior sustain both Çağan and Ergin’s descriptions and behaviors and how they navigate and relate to normative masculinity. Both of their assessments of their own masculinity is largely anxiety driven and tied to others’ possible interpretations and perceptions of them. While Çağan’s own masculinity assessment is interlinked with his relationship to his body and non-normative gender expression which he feels is constrained by sociocultural norms, Ergin’s own masculinity assessment is interlinked with his relationships with women, his disability and normative constructions of masculinity. Çağan’s wish to subvert masculinity via donning clothing that society attributes to women and Ergin’s assertion that receiving help from women is damaging to his masculinity illustrate the way Çağan and Ergin’s intersecting identities influence their relationship to masculinity. The internal conflict of discourses to apply conventional notions of masculinity with the desire to subvert these notions in order to arrive at an expanded discourse and the possibility of a diverse expression of masculinity can be seen more clearly in Çağan’s narrative, which focuses on the articulation of his non-normative gender expression and a body in performance, than in Ergin’s, which focuses on the need to meet certain conventions in the levels of subscription to traditional masculine traits such as physical strength, perhaps to subdue the visibility of his disability, and the internal tensions this self-assessment results in.

Ilhan expressed that in terms of appearance he finds himself a little masculine and he talked about how in the past he associated masculinity in himself with feelings of anger. “In the past, when I was jealous or angry, I felt these as turning into aggression towards myself.” While he associates his masculinity with past self-portrayals of aggressiveness directed towards himself, Ilhan also delineates a perceptive self-awareness of his own levels of desire for masculinity relaying that it is contingent on social situations which directly influence the degree of importance he attaches to a display or behavior associated with masculinity:



My masculinity is dependent on the moment or situation when I desire it or realize I do. Otherwise I don't have a wish to be masculine. It's not important. If I sense a type of masculinity women are drawn to, I would want that masculinity, then it becomes important. This impacts and shapes my masculinity.

While Ilhan positions himself within a critical distance to discourses of masculinity, similar to Ergin, his assessment of his own masculinity is determined by gender relations, illustrating how gender relations become a significantly prevalent sphere for one's own reflections of and performance of masculinity and/or femininity. Other participants have also based their assessment of their own masculinity on ways in which it emerges in social gender relations.

Participants were asked what masculinity and being a man meant to them. Kaya reported that masculinity is not related to gender but it is "something taught to us which is about honesty, a role expected from a man, a role that looks good on a man." He added that this translates as "being strong, being there for someone when they are having a difficult time. A man can cry, but not publicly, make jokes and live life fully. He completes himself with a woman." Kaya's pre-transition status (no HRT or medical procedures), perhaps to some degree, possibly impact his conceptions of masculinity as performed in gender relations and is reflective of traditional masculine notions and qualities attributed to men in Turkey.

Bahadır said, "There's a masculinity that society imposes, a certain male-dominant thinking that a man should have a penis, a beard, but these are not what makes a man... we judge ourselves based on this gender binary." In this excerpt, we can see how Bahadır's understanding of the complexities of the trans body –whether masculine or feminine – has led to a rejection of binary gender constructions and a resistance to these social constructs that erase his experience and the embodiment of masculinity or femininity in non-normative bodies. It is important to note that Bahadır's example points to the significance of a heightened gendered experience in one's own critical awareness of conventional

notions of masculinity. It is interesting to contrast this with Kaya, whose descriptions reflect conventional notions of masculinity.

Ergin expressed that he feels there are masculine and feminine energies independent of anatomical structures. "A woman has certain amounts of femininity and masculinity. Masculinity is to be more dominant and tough." He also went on to add that masculinity is about "strength, authority and power." In a similar vein, Berk expressed that masculinity is "Strength, seriousness, having a good reputation, honesty and being respectful towards one's spouse/partner." Bilgehan expressed similar sentiments, "Masculinity is about being courteous and taking care of your family." All three trans men report expressions or qualities of masculinity that are culturally attributed to masculine bodies. While age and socioeconomic factors might influence how both Bilgehan and Berk define their conceptions of masculinity in relation to traditional gender roles, the intersections of Ergin's age and disability might influence how he defines his conception of masculinity in relation to an aspect of traditional masculinity that highlights physical strength.

Ilhan described masculinity as multiple and varying:

Masculinity is something that varies and differs in people and families. For instance, some men are raised being told that they are brave and strong, but then experience a breakdown in adulthood when they find out the world is much more different, this is a part of masculinity; and then there are those who actually display overly excessive confidence and physical aggression. That's also masculinity. Self-improvement as a human being is also a masculinity. I don't know, it seems to me that masculinity varies, it's not one thing.

To become a man currently feels like a solution to physical/body related things for me, that it's going to lead to comfort in social environments and intimate relationships on the one hand... on the other hand, I'm not very sure, but while you're transitioning, in the social and cultural sense, in our country at least, I'm sure in many other places as

well, my guess is that certain things will change when you become visibly male, people's perceptions, the way they talk to you will change and it does, probably because masculinity is something that is held high.

Ilhan's analysis touches on the problematic socio-psychological effects of gender hierarchy, how the micro institution of family structures masculinities and the ways patriarchal society impacts men. This narrative illustrates a critical distance to discourses of masculinity in Turkey.

Çağan's description seems to allow him an invitation to play with gender cues in order to subvert gendered clothing items:

To be a man you don't have to be masculine. If you take a base body and add aggressiveness, muscle, a beard, a variety of body and facial hair, and maybe some height, you have a masculine man. You can add compassion, the color pink, long hair, he would still be a man, but a feminine man. Masculinity or femininity is beyond gender; I can be masculine today. I can wear a suit, get a short haircut; wear a uniform like a captain's uniform and be masculine. I can behave in a masculine way. When I wear women's clothes, light colorful clothes, people would perceive this as feminine. I can wear women's clothes and enjoy wearing them. I have a tight women's T-shirt. I still love it. I think men should be able to wear skirts. I wish we could come to a place where these are not issues.

By entertaining the idea of playing with the rigid cultural conceptions of masculinity, Çağan is inviting and imagining a masculinity that has not yet arrived for him even though he has completed his transition process. This further delineates that for Çağan his non-normative sexual identity and age could be salient factors that influence his conceptions of masculinity and desires to expand and subvert the traditional notions attached to masculinity.

Can (18) is a university student who identifies as a trans man, but expressed that this might later shift to non-binary. Can is the only example for someone who claims a trans masculine identity but seems to

be questioning this identity and is allowing himself to acknowledge the possibility that his identity could shift and embody another point on the spectrum of trans/gender identity. His non-normative sexual identity and age could be the prominent factors that impact his definition. He described what masculinity means to him and like Çağan, he also spoke about gendered clothing items:

It's not about being born with male sex characteristics. I'm not a soul who desires to behave in masculine ways determined by society. Female-to-male transitioning people don't necessarily have to wear male clothes, adopt male behavior, but can be comfortable wearing female clothes.

Like other trans men, Can also expressed that one's biological characteristics have a minor place in determining a person's gender identity. He described what being a man means to him: "I feel like a man and not a man at the same time. The way my voice sounds and not having had any surgeries, I'm not congruent with the male prototype." The pressure to conform and present a normative gender identity accepted by society as either masculine or feminine can be echoed in this further elaboration.

One common answer given by some of the interview participants is that masculinity is not connected to possessing male genitalia. Another common theme was that masculinity is defined as a set of social behaviors or attributes designated to male bodies that often reflect stereotypical and normative conceptions of masculinity. These indicate that some trans men, whether consciously or unconsciously, develop an approach in balancing normative attributes attached to masculinity with less normative definitions of masculinity.

When asked whether their self-definition of masculinity fits with societal understandings or constructions of masculinity, Berk expressed a sense of dislike against discriminatory gender roles and said that men can do house chores such as cleaning. Can said that society disapproves of his sexual identity because he is interested in men. İlhan mentioned that he is not interested in societal constructions of masculinity and that

he is trying to purge himself from these. Çağan said that people have started expecting different things from him after his transition, now that he is visibly a man, and commented on how maintaining gender differences in a patriarchal society is important. Bahadır said that “we need to free ourselves from these terms. I have no right to limit my partner’s freedom...I don’t accept ideas such as the idea that a man should not cry.”

The participants’ evaluations of their own masculinity and their definitions of masculinity illustrate the complexity of the relationship trans men experience between embodiment and navigation of masculinity. As people aiming to achieve masculine bodies, hegemonic gender norms may become notable standards in attaining this goal. Navigating the world, on the other hand, may complicate the relationship that trans men have with normative masculinity. Many of the participants see normative elements of masculinity as inequitable to gender relations and as sites that can be actively rejected.

### **Embodiment Of Masculinities: Affective Aspects**

**T**he performance of masculinity is inextricably entangled with the experiences of comfort, discomfort and anxiety negotiated in different social settings and spaces. Sara Ahmed (2014) argues that norms shape bodies and that the world impresses upon the body through repetition and force resulting in bodies that “become contorted”. Ahmed (2014) uses the analogy of sinking into a chair to illustrate the discomfort queer bodies experience in social spaces that affect how they can navigate in them as bodies that do not fit into these social spaces, as bodies that do not “sink into” them. Holliday (1999) investigated how individuals performed their sexual identities in different contexts by utilizing video diaries and notes that individuals manage and develop comfortable identities within the exchange of different discourses and social spaces.

Drawing on affect theory as bodily, autonomic, synesthetic (Massumi, 2002) and nonconscious intensities (White, 2017), participants were asked whether they feel any kind of pressure to enact a certain masculinity. The role that pressure plays in trans men's navigation of masculinity and its link to performance of masculinity opens up questions of the role of social space in feelings of comfort and discomfort (Ahmed, 2014), the distinction between internal and/or external pressure and the need to be a part of a certain social group, the role of self-awareness on the performance and/or rejection of an expected performance of masculinity. Pressure to enact a certain masculinity is experienced as tension in Ilhan's description of it as an internal and an external force that results in an unwanted performance. Ilhan associated the need to perform masculinity with a sense of belonging, the need to belong to a masculine identity. He said in the past he felt the pressure to join male conversations that were about women, but said he did not like these conversations or that they made him feel uncomfortable.

Both Ergin and Çağan's experience of pressure seems to correlate with sociocultural norms attached to masculinity. Ergin's description evokes a heightened anxiety when he feels he is unable to meet the internalized masculinity performance expectations in certain social situations. Ergin spoke about moments that damage his masculinity such as "not being the person deciding on the place to meet" or "not asking a woman to dance at an LGBT party." Çağan's experience, on the other hand, creates the need for him to harmonize the internal with the external. Çağan said he feels outside pressure and does not want to stand out or confuse people.

Participants were asked how their masculinity shifts as they move from one context to another. Four of the interview participants spoke about the impact of different social contexts on their masculinity and how they may sometimes experience pressure to speak or act in more masculine ways than they usually would and "overcompensate" (Vidal-Ortiz, 2005) or "become contorted" (Ahmed, 2014). Çağan expressed that his masculinity does not shift drastically. He said that he tries to "be

an average masculine good kid.” Berk mentioned that he adopts a tone of seriousness “when the situation calls for it.” Both Can and Ilhan commented on certain social contexts decreasing their comfort level and the shifts they notice in their voices. Can expressed comfort and a lessened anxiety around using his voice when he is with his friends but said that other contexts can create a lack of confidence. He said feeling unconfident causes him to consciously lower his voice or feel pressure to change the way he speaks or behaves in order to be read as male. He said he makes an explicit effort to give his seat to a woman who may be standing when traveling by bus. As perception is not a cause of anxiety for him when he is with his own circle of friends, he pointed out how he does not mind increasing the tone of his voice. It should be noted that shifts in expression and/or performance of masculinity can be subtle, may pass by unnoticed or may not be considered as something that the participant had paid particular attention to before the time of the interview. Therefore, it is likely that the interview responses present a narrow picture of the complex interplay between context and the performance of masculinity. An expanded analysis that recruits deliberate and self-reflexive observations detailing shifts in the performance of masculinity in relation to different contexts may provide more insight.

Ilhan stated that he is more comfortable than he has been in the past, pointing out how when spending time with his family, his voice would not sound as masculine and how now his voice, behavior and stance changes when he feels comfortable. In her study looking at how trans men (who had undergone HRT, minimum three months) conceptualize masculinity, Vegter (2013) identified a process called *Embodying a Male Identity* which includes five categories of male identity exploration: beginnings, identity searching, realizing identity, integrating identity and self-actualization. Vegter found that identity insecurity experienced in the beginning phase was generally resolved in the identity integration phase. Replacing earlier discomfort and sense of insecurity with an experience of comfort with his masculine identity,

Ilhan may be experiencing a shift towards an increase in self appreciation and acceptance.

Since trans men may not be able to find micro family interactions that affirm their gender identity and masculinity, they may consciously or unconsciously seek trans male friendships that provide the space and realization for relational, therapeutic, emotional and personal explorations of masculinity. These friendships may engender motivation and encouragement to kindle a redefinition and transformation of normative understandings and embodiment of masculinity, helping trans men ground and/or cope with the loss and mismatch that might be experienced while navigating between normative, performative and emergent masculinities.

Another question participants were asked was whether they observed a change in the way they express themselves when they spend time with trans male friends. Bahadır stated that he cannot talk as comfortably with people he has known for over a decade as with trans people he has newly met since trans people understand what he is going through. Ilhan expressed how his masculinity automatically shuts down when he is with a trans male friend. He expressed that his identity shifts in a way that evokes in him his feminine past causing him to experience great discomfort. He said that this might be related to his not having started his transition processes such as HRT and that perhaps he might feel less or no discomfort if he had begun his process. This alludes to the bodily, autonomic and synesthetic (Massumi, 2002) nature of the way affect operates by activating nonconscious intensities (White, 2017) and a domain of trans masculinity in which many trans men express both within themselves and to each other a competitive sense of urgency to embody a masculine appearance that is defined or highly influenced by sociocultural paradigms. The amount of facial hair growth experienced is often a significant qualifier of accomplishing this masculinity. Ergin, reflecting on his past experiences with other trans men, spoke about how he felt pressure when he compared himself to other trans men because he did not swear as much, was not as tough or did not have as many girlfriends. "I feel trans men compete. If you don't show enough



masculinity, I feel like they rule you out. Because I wasn't able to hold on in this community, I think that I'm not masculine enough."

The language trans men employ when they are with other trans men can provide an insightful lens into the salient linguistic practices trans men orient themselves towards to exercise or exert their own conceptions of masculinity. Berk expressed a strong dislike to the amount of swearing that he sees among trans men. Ilhan talked about high masculinity and that sometimes there is more high masculinity among trans men than in other male communities he is a part of. He mentioned that trans men have their own terminology. He also remarked on trans men's distinctive ability to speak about their internal processes more easily than cis men, concluding that this might be a result of the constant questioning of their experiences. Ergin expressed disequilibrium with the language style his trans male friends use and said he had traumatizing experiences with some of his past trans male friends. He said he felt pressure to fit in but that he could never swear like they did and felt depreciated when he was with them. Kaya said he enjoys spending time with trans men and that there is a greater amount of swearing than in other communities. He expressed that this impacts the way he speaks and actually provides him an opportunity to code switch to 'bro' language and the freedom to use it as much as he wants to.

Masculinity in transitioning trans men becomes a site of embodied discovery of new territory and language. It seems that trans men's own male communities can and do become contexts where trans men can experiment, weigh, negotiate and discover their own masculinity, and find comfort in the socio-psychological struggles paid to attain a masculine body. Perhaps these contexts could provide the passage to manhood and the social embodiment of masculinity that trans men need as they transition. From a physical embodiment perspective, trans men's chest surgery scars are sometimes viewed as a mark of their masculinity, as an initiation to manhood, similar perhaps to, as Thomas Gerschick (2005) describes, citing Burton (2001), scarification of the chest within the Karo men in Ethiopia is a testament of their masculinity.

The experience of discomfort might lead to self-repression—especially when around people that may have known trans men pre-transition—and create a sense of loss and mismatch between the feminine past and the emergent masculinity. This is evident in Ergin’s narrative about the shifts he makes in his masculinity due to his family’s unsupportive response to his transitioning.

...they call me ‘daughter,’ they see me as a woman and treat me as one. I feel I need to repress myself. I spend most of my time with these people. I’m at a point where I’m questioning myself. Will I regret this? Am I *really* [so] influenced by my friends that I became like this?

He added that even though he is proud, feels happy to be living as himself and has supportive friends, these feelings are limited as he lives with his family and his supportive community of friends are near up to a certain point but are not included in his immediate environment.

Due to the intricate relations between the psychological aspects of the experience of pressure and the way internalized sociocultural notions of masculinity come into play in the (un)intentional (non-)performance of masculinity, an expanded study that utilizes self-reflective processes asking participants to note changes in their experiences of pressure to enact a certain masculinity over a defined period of time may allow for a deeper insight.

## Conclusion

**T**rans men’s experiences of masculinity illustrate a complex relationship between the embodiment and navigation of masculinity. Trans men’s experiences of masculinity are not a direct product of micro institutions, such as the family, that structure and inculcate normative or certain forms of masculinity. Trans men experience the socio-psychological effects of gender hierarchy in their highly gendered context, but their subjective and unique experiences of embodiment and masculinity offer avenues for explorative navigation and questioning, resulting in a difference in the ways patriarchal society

impacts trans men than it does cis men. Thus, the embodiment and the navigation of trans masculinity is multilayered and involves physical, social and psychological processes. Masculinity is emergent and relational in the continual self-determination and assertion techniques trans men deliberately or inadvertently employ and discover. Normativity may function as a route to measure the amount of masculinity in the process of attaining a masculine body. Normative social constructs that prescribe behavior as masculine, on the other hand, function as a more selective or open process.

This study explored a small sample of trans men living in Istanbul, Turkey. It looked at their own definitions and experiences of lived masculinity and opened up questions on the ways trans men's unique gender subjectivities and experiences provide reflections on traditional notions of masculinity. Further studies that expand the discourse of masculinity and include ethnographic research on trans men in other regions is necessary. Studies that address trans men's internal conflicts—looking at the role these play in their own constructions of alternative/subversive masculinities—and experiences in the construction and navigation of masculinity are essential to gain more insight on the role trans men might play in our understanding of masculinity and in diversifying traditional notions of masculinity in Turkey.

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