

“No bare bottoms”: The responsabilization of the good gay citizen in  
Icelandic media discourses 1990–2010

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## **“No bare bottoms”: The responsabilization of the good gay citizen in Icelandic media discourses 1990–2010**

This article explores how gay men in Iceland were constructed as good responsible citizens through neoliberal discourses from 1990 to 2010. Drawing on interviews with gay men in Icelandic magazines, we focus on three discursive formations of responsabilization that reveal the technologies of agency at play in transforming the men into good, responsible gay citizens capable of managing their own risks. The discursive formations focus on the good gay citizen who (a) has a positive mindset, (b) transforms himself, and (c) displaces responsibility for personal harm. They reveal how gay men are constituted as neoliberal subjects through discursive practices linked to responsibility, happiness, and national progress. These practices enable a normalization process devoid of confrontation, anger, or blame where gay men are not only made responsible for their own lives but also the marginalization they experienced in the past.

*Keywords:* homosexuality, historical discourse analysis, neoliberal governmentality, happiness, responsabilization, media discourses, nation

### **Introduction**

This article explores how gay men in Iceland were constructed as good, responsible citizens through neoliberal discourses from 1990 to 2010, a period when sexual minorities in Iceland witnessed great changes to their legal status and social acceptance. Drawing on interviews with gay men in Icelandic magazines, we focus on the discursive formations of responsibility and responsabilization to reveal the technologies of agency at play in transforming the men from a group deemed suspect because of their gay identity and lifestyle to responsible citizens considered capable of self-management. We also explore how gay men are constituted as neoliberal subjects through discursive practices that enable a marginalized minority to become normalized, not only as productive citizens of a nation but as an embodiment of its progressiveness and superiority over other nations. To this end, we pay special attention to the role of

happiness as a symbol of national progress and responsabilization as an important tool of normalization.

A substantial body of literature exists on the responsabilization embedded in neoliberal governmentality (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Orgad, 2009; Rose, 1990) and some on its impact on sexual minorities (Adam, 2005; Lee, 2012; Marzullo, 2011; Peterson, 2011; Whitehead, 2011). However, further research is needed on the role of the normalization processes that allow certain sexual and gender minorities to become integral parts of social and national wholes. Iceland has, in the past two decades, gained a reputation as a “gay paradise” due to the high levels of legal recognition and social inclusion of sexual minorities (Ellenberger, 2017). However, we still have an unclear picture of the conditions under which this inclusion took place. By looking at neoliberalism as “a theory and practice of subjectivity” with an emphasis on how gay men were transformed from sexual outlaws into good, responsible citizens, this article not only gives us an insight into one of the local variations of neoliberal ideology (Türken et al., 2016) but also reveals the role and function of responsabilization and other neoliberal discourses in the normalization of sexual minorities.

### **Theoretical background**

This article draws on Foucault’s conception of neoliberal governmentality, as developed further by Rose (1990), which refers to the conduct of (human) conduct. In other words, “the ways in which neoliberalism works by installing in society a concept of human subject as autonomous, individualized, self-directing decision-making agent who becomes an entrepreneur of one self; a human capital” (Türken et al., 2016, p. 33). Neoliberal governmentality not only applies a market rationality to the economic and political sphere but also “figures citizens exhaustively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life” (Brown, 2006, p. 694). Chandler and Reid (2016) therefore claim

that “neoliberalism is better understood more fundamentally as a theory and practice of subjectivity” (p. 2). They state that “[i]t is the interpretive capacities through which human beings reflect upon the nature of their world, their relations with themselves, each other, and their environments that are seen as being of crucial issue for the legitimation of neoliberal practices of government” (p. 2). In this way, neoliberal governmentality begets neoliberal subjectivity, sometimes called entrepreneurial subjectivity (Scharff, 2016), which emphasizes that social problems are optimally solved by individuals through personal responsibility and self-care. This process, called autonomization and responsabilization, has been established as a disciplinary strategy of neoliberalism (Türken et al., 2016).

Responsibilization involves individuals, families, households, and communities that are made responsible for their own risks, which include everything from ill health and unemployment to crime. According to Dean (2010), “technologies of agency” come into play when the individuals and communities in question, such as gay men, are considered at risk or high risk. Groups of such individuals are subjected to technologies of agency in order to “transform their status, to make them active citizens capable, as individuals and communities, of managing their own risk” (Dean, 2010, p. 197).

Responsibilization is thus connected to normalization, which here, in a post-Foucauldian manner, refers to “the key strategy of wider social, including public, discourses, which, through their hegemonic power, regulate the social reality and impose—via the introduction and legitimisation of norms—the conduct of various social groups and/or individuals” (Krzyżanowski, 2020, p. 436). The normalization of gay men is, then, not merely a sign of growing tolerance and ever-increasing positivity toward certain LGBT+ groups; it is also an integral part of the project of neoliberalism,

which seeks to transform individuals and groups into active citizens who are capable of self-management, for example, through participation in politics or third sector NGOs.

In this research, we explore the role of happiness, the transformation of negative emotions into positive ones, and the displacement of responsibility in the responsabilization process by means of ignoring societal and structural factors, placing it instead on the shoulders of the individual subjects themselves. Cabanas and Illouz (2019) have argued that happiness has become “the epitome and incarnation of today’s ideal of the good citizen ... not a thing as much as a particular kind of person: individualistic, true to himself, resilient, self-motivated, optimistic and highly emotionally intelligent” (p. 3). Happiness thus becomes a matter of choice and personal responsibility. As happiness comes to be associated with “productivity, functionality, goodness, and even normality” (p. 10), on the one hand, and national progress on the other, it serves as an important tool of normalization while, as we will discover, simultaneously imposing the conditions under which it must take place.

We see discourses as “central modes and components of the production, maintenance, and conversely, resistance to systems of power and inequality” (Park, 2012, p. 394) and, further, “constitutive modes of power that construct unequal identities with different material consequences, privileging some as legitimate and normative and rendering others as delegitimized and non-normative” (Park, 2008, p. 773). In light of this, Park (2012) defines historical discourse analysis as an “[a]pproach to reading and writing history; a mode of conceptualizing history through a lens of critique,” which makes the task of the historian “to critique and uncover the technologies of power that have come to legitimate certain ideas as truths” (p. 394). The magazines that form the corpus of our data constitute “a discursive site in which knowledge is produced” (Orgad, 2009, p. 135), in this case, knowledge that legitimates

gay men as a “normal” part of Icelandic society on the condition that they reflect the proper neoliberal subjecthood of the autonomous, responsible citizen.<sup>i</sup>

### **The research**

This research focuses on gay men for various reasons. They were the most prominent sexual minority in the Icelandic media during the research period. Prior to this research, an exhaustive inventory was made of all articles on sexual and gender minorities in the four magazines investigated. The subjects of the inventoried articles turned out to be quite homogenous: white, cisgender, non-disabled lesbians and gay men, the latter considerably surpassing the former when it comes to the number and length of articles. Icelandic gay men also have a longer history in the Icelandic media, appearing on the scene in the 1950s, then vilified as a threat to the nation, while Icelandic lesbians were almost totally absent from the media until the mid-1980s (Benediktsdóttir, 2022; Ellenberger, 2016). This presents a good opportunity to examine how the normalization of vilified sexual outlaws takes place, but it also presents a gendered picture of the normalization processes, as it has been well established that neoliberal governmentality affects people differently depending on their gender (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2009, 2013).

For this research, we analyzed 61 articles where gay men feature prominently, of which 56 contain interviews with gay men. The articles vary greatly in length, the shortest being only a quarter of a page long, while the longest are front-page articles of 10 pages or more, featuring in-depth interviews with a single interviewee. Four magazines were selected for the purposes of this article: the weekly *Vikan* (*The Week*, 1938–) and the monthlies *Nýtt líf* (*New Life*, 1983–2017), *Mannlíf* (*Daily Life* or *Human Life*, 1984–2012), and *Heimsmynd* (*Worldview*, 1986–1995). These magazines were chosen because they had the longest interview formats during the period 1990–2010,

allowing the interviewees to talk at length about their goals, lifestyle, how they see the world, and their place in it. *Vikan*, *Nýtt líf*, and *Mannlíf* branded themselves as women's magazines, while the editors of *Heimsmynd* tried to appeal to both women and men with an emphasis on domestic and international politics.

*Nýtt líf*, *Mannlíf*, and *Heimsmynd* were glossy magazines which, as Gústafsdóttir (2016) describes them, covered both the private and public sphere, as well as domestic and international perspectives. One of their most important features was extensive interviews. *Vikan* was established in the 1930s and retained a more traditional character as a women's magazine with an emphasis on the household, with topics such as food preparation, knitting and needlework, and handy tips for the home. Similar topics were certainly present in the other magazines; however, they had a more universal approach, covering fashion, politics, human interest topics, and social issues, with a keen interest in local and international celebrities. *Heimsmynd* was geared toward politics and world affairs, while *Mannlíf* focused more on social issues, with an emphasis on culture. *Nýtt líf* was similarly intended to be a "window to society" (Gústafsdóttir, 2016, p. 46).

None of these magazines had any explicit political or ideological affiliations, but their leaning toward fashion and consumption made them ideal vehicles for neoliberal ideology. Although the impact of these particular magazines has not been investigated, the resilience of women's magazines in general attests to their significance (Gústafsdóttir, 2016). Women's magazines have also been found to play an important role in shaping the image of the modern woman (Mesch, 2013); thus, it is likely that they played a similar role in the construction of a new, more positive image of gay men in the 1990s and 2000s. Recent research by Ólafsdóttir et al. (in press) has shown that women and young people were instrumental in changing attitudes toward homosexuality in Iceland from negative to positive in the 1990s and 2000s. It is safe to

assume that women's magazines played a role in that development, although it is difficult to assess the extent of their influence, as women's magazines were an important medium for readers to gain insight into gay lives and culture during the period. Not only did they regularly feature interviews with Icelandic gay men but also published articles on gay international stars and artists. Although the men's magazine *Samúel* was the first to publish an interview with an openly gay man, Hörður Torfason, in 1975, men's magazines generally tended to have a narrower focus that did not allow for in-depth interviews on personal topics.

The interviews that were collected were coded and analyzed using a Foucault-inspired historical discourse analysis based on Landwehr's (2018) framework, as presented by Jenkel (2021), which includes different stages of analysis. First, we built a corpus of 61 magazine articles. We proceeded to situate them within broader sociopolitical and historical contexts, also emphasized by Wodak (2015) in the Discourse-Historical Approach to critical historical analysis, to understand how different historical and social factors intersect in the construction of the good neoliberal gay citizen. These contexts include the history of media representations of homosexuality and the development of LGBT+ rights and activism in Iceland, as well as the advent of neoliberal politics in the early 1990s and its enmeshment with the image of Iceland as a gay paradise from the 2000s.

We then further examine reoccurring statements, the constructive components of a discourse (Landwehr, 2018), which we argue comprise three distinct discursive formations. We then use this analysis to shed light on how the subject position of the responsible, autonomous, good gay citizen was constructed within dominant media discourses from 1990–2010. The discursive formations, analyzed in separate sections, are as follows:

1. *The good gay citizen has a positive mindset.* In this section, we discuss how the good gay citizen is constructed as a person who takes responsibility for his own life path (e.g., by emphasizing positive emotions and attitudes).
2. *The good gay citizen transforms himself.* Here, we explore the discursive role of transformation narratives, particularly stories of transforming difficult emotions or experiences into positive opportunities for growth, in constructing the good gay citizen as a neoliberal subject.
3. *The good gay citizen displaces responsibility for personal harms.* In this section, we discuss how the good gay citizen is presented as a person who absolves the wider society (and nation) of their responsibility for the marginalization of gay men and negative attitudes toward sexual minorities, mainly by taking on this responsibility himself.

Finally, we analyze these discursive formations with regard to various historical contexts and intra- and inter-discursive connections and correlations (Jenkel, 2021; Landwehr, 2009). We place an emphasis on how, together, they function to “fold gay men into the nation,” using Puar’s (2007) terminology, and examine the conditions under which that folding took place with reference to a specific article that is the only text in our data set to address violence against gay men directly. This way, we gain a sense of the mechanics of the subjectivation and normalization processes of gay men as responsible and productive citizens through discourses of neoliberal subjectivity.

The year 1990 was chosen as a starting point because it is safe to assume that neoliberal ideology had taken root in Iceland by that time. Prime minister Davíð Oddsson’s first government came to power in 1991, which is widely regarded as the government that ushered in neoliberal politics and economic management in Iceland (Ólafsson, 2011). The Marriage Act of 2010 marks the endpoint of the research period

as discrimination against lesbians and gay men is commonly considered to have ceased in its wake (Ellenberger, 2017). This created a shift in the discourse on homosexuality that is outside the scope of this research.

### **Sociopolitical and historical contexts**

Iceland presents a unique opportunity to study the processes and conditions of the normalization of a sexual minority as an integral part of a social and national body. In Iceland, homosexuality was regarded as a foreign phenomenon for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as previously stated. Only in the 1980s did it start appearing regularly in newspapers and magazines as anything other than a foreign threat to the moral character of the nation (Benediktsdóttir, 2022). The National Gay and Lesbian Association of Iceland (*Samtökin '78*), now officially The National Queer Association of Iceland, was established in 1978 and gained considerable headway with regard to legal rights and social attitudes toward sexual minorities in the 1990s and 2000s. By its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2018, Iceland had gained an international reputation as an LGBT+ haven and a gay paradise (Ellenberger, 2017). Many of the milestones on Iceland's perceived journey from prejudice to utopia coincide with the rise of neoliberal politics in Iceland around 1990.

Davíð Oddson's new neoliberal government of 1991 was immediately charged with the task of responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis and, at the same time, forming a policy on lesbian and gay issues. Neoliberal discourses were present in the state's engagement with the gay community from the beginning, notably discourses of *happiness* and *responsibility*. In 1992, the Icelandic parliament voted to establish a groundbreaking committee to research the status of lesbians and gay men in Iceland and to suggest improvements. During the debate, one prominent MP remarked in support of the motion that "increasing the happiness of the citizens" was an unfortunately rare

concern for parliament. Now, it had the opportunity to give lesbians and gay men the chance of a “normal family life,” with which happiness (and freedom from AIDS) was equated (Helgadóttir, 1992; Hafsteinsdóttir, in press).

In 1994, the Icelandic Committee on Homosexual Affairs released a report that commended Icelandic “homosexuals” for calling for a “responsible and sensible” policy during the AIDS crisis. The report rejected the “idea ... that if a homosexual man [note the gender] chooses to reveal his homosexuality, he must also reject normal values and goals.” In fact, homosexuals would prefer “a stable relationship with a single life partner,” being hindered from this only by legal hurdles and social prejudices. Therefore, the report recommended the adoption of registered partnership legislation for same-sex couples, which “would give homosexuals the same opportunities as others to conduct their lives in an approved of manner” (Grétarsson, 1994, p. 16).

As we have seen, the debate in parliament and the ensuing report both paint a clear picture of the state’s expectations toward Icelandic lesbians and gay men in return for legal protection and rights. They were to be happy, monogamous, and responsible; they were to have “normal” values and goals as stable, secure, model citizens (Guðfinnsson, 1992; Gísladóttir, 1992; Helgadóttir, 1992; Grétarsson, 1994, pp. 16–19, 31; Hafsteinsdóttir, in press).

The committee’s report was followed by the passing of a law granting same-sex couples the right to civil partnerships in 1996. The law was expanded in 2000 to include the right for registered partners to adopt stepchildren, and in 2006 they gained full adoption rights and access to IVF. Finally, a new Marriage Act was passed in 2010, granting couples the right to marry, irrespective of their gender (Rydström, 2011). These rights have since become the foundation for Iceland’s projected image as a haven for sexual minorities, an image directly influenced by neoliberal discourses

(Ellenberger, 2017), making it an interesting venue for the study of the role of neoliberal governmentality and discourses in the increasing acceptance of a sexual minority and the latter's interplay with the nation.

## **Results and discussion**

In the following sections, we discuss how three different discursive formations are represented in the magazine articles under investigation. But first, it may be of interest to characterize, more generally, how responsabilization manifests itself in our data, which contains a myriad of different ways in which responsibility is framed as the most important characteristic of the good gay citizen. He is constructed, through discourse, as someone who takes good care of himself physically and mentally, is spiritual, and is in touch with his feelings (e.g., Ásgeirsdóttir, 1992; Leósdóttir, 2000). The good gay citizen does not sleep around (e.g., Guðlaugsson, 1991), drinks moderately or not at all (e.g., Brynjólfsson, 1991), and practices safe sex (e.g., Reynisson, 1991). He also takes responsibility for his financial stability by being disciplined and hard-working, often an entrepreneur in his own right (e.g., Ásgeirsdóttir, 1992; Björnsson, 2000; Gunnarsdóttir, 2006).

The good gay citizen tackles every challenge life throws at him and does not let others oppress him (e.g., Bergþórsdóttir, 2005; Leósdóttir, 1992). In short, in the selected magazines of the 1990s and 2000s, he is portrayed as someone who has successfully transformed himself into an active citizen capable of self-management (Dean, 2010). In the following sections, the three selected discursive formations give us a clearer picture of how the responsabilization of the good gay citizen is coupled with normalization processes under which gay men earn their entry into the Icelandic nation.

### *The good gay citizen has a positive mindset*

There are various historical factors that shaped the discourses on gay men in Icelandic magazines during the 1990s and 2000s. As previously remarked, after having been portrayed exclusively as a threat to the nation (Benediktsdóttir, 2022), more positive images of Icelandic gay men became more frequent during the 1980s, although the image of the gay pervert and sexual outlaw was still predominant (Steinarsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2010). From the early 1990s, however, gay men were usually portrayed in a positive light in the Icelandic media, following a similar timeline as in North America (Streitmatter, 2009) and coinciding with the introduction of neoliberal politics in Iceland.

Additionally, a generational shift took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when a generation of young gay men appeared on the scene who had grown up after the worst of the moral panic around HIV/AIDS had blown over and become sexually active after methods for safe sex had been firmly established. This generation also came of age after neoliberalism had taken hold in Iceland during the early 1990s and was, as such, already shaped by neoliberal ideology.

Cabanas and Illouz (2019) have demonstrated that under neoliberalism, positive feelings, especially happiness, have become “a central concept in defining an individual’s personal, economic and political value” (p.116), creating a happiness industry that conceptualizes happiness as a matter of personal choice. As people strive toward happiness as their ultimate life goal, it becomes “the very epitome and incarnation of today’s ideal image of the good citizen” (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019, p. 3).

As we move toward the 2000s, this ideal image of the good gay citizen increasingly looks young, healthy (HIV-negative), predominantly white, able bodied, middle-class, but above all, happy with a bright future. In our data, this figure first

appears in *Mannlíf*, in 1995, in an eight-page feature article about a 17-year-old gay Icelandic Buddhist monk living in a small town in the South of Iceland. On the very first page of the interview, the characteristics of the young good gay citizen are established:

If one was to describe [him] in one word, it would probably be “happy.” He exudes joy, and it is not that superficial joy that some people put on. His joy comes from within because he is very content with his life. He is head over heels in love, has gone back to school, plans to take his matriculation examinations in the spring and move to Hong Kong, where his fiancé lives.<sup>ii</sup> (Magnússon, 1995, p. 98)

Here, the fact that the teenager is a Buddhist monk undoubtedly influences the portrayal of his virtues, as monks tend to be seen as the image of spiritual and physical purity. Still, a similar figure appears frequently in subsequent interviews. In 2005, a young musician is introduced to the readers of *Vikan* in a similar manner in an article aptly titled “Music Based on Feelings and Love”:

There is a brightness that emanates from [him] as he sits down with *Vikan*'s reporter. He is head over heels in love with his boyfriend, [studies] at the Icelandic University of the Arts, and next year he will be traveling to Finland as an exchange student. (Þ. Stefánsdóttir, 2005, p. 14)

Another young artist proclaims that “positivity and optimism” are both the key to success and the best way to foster a good work atmosphere (Gunnarsdóttir, 2006).

When asked, on another occasion, what irritates him the most he answers: “I’d say that I don’t let anything irritate me, it drains so much energy from you” (Arnar, 2007, p. 8), indicating that negative feelings, such as irritation, are a matter of personal choice.

The emphasis on positivity and happiness, ever present in interviews with young gay men, reaches its apex in articles that cover the annual Pride celebrations in Reykjavík in early August. Interestingly, the celebration’s main event, the Pride parade

itself, is named *Gleðiganga* in Icelandic, which literally means *Joy Parade*. The first Pride marches took place in Reykjavík in 1993 and 1994 under the name *Frelsisganga samkynhneigðra* or *Lesbian and Gay Freedom March*, when a few dozen individuals protested discrimination against lesbians and gay men in Iceland. The first *Joy Parade* marched down Reykjavík's main shopping street in 2000 and has ever since served as a barometer of Icelanders' attitudes toward their fellow LGBT+ citizens. With tens of thousands of people watching, the parade is believed to signify the great acceptance and respect enjoyed by sexual and gender minorities in Iceland (Ellenberger, 2017). All the while, Iceland repeatedly falls short of many European countries with regard to the legal rights of trans and intersex people, as well as the reception of applicants for international protection, according to ILGA Europe's Rainbow Map ("Ísland í 9. sæti á Regnbogakortinu," 2014; Sigurðsson, 2021; B. Stefánsdóttir, 2018).

The Joy Parade itself may be seen as both product and producer of neoliberal subjectivity, underlining sexual and gender minorities' value as good, happy citizens who are able, as a group, to attract annually up to 100 thousand people to watch and be inspired by their demonstration of happiness (e.g., Jóhannsson, 2008). By the end of the research period, the size of the audience equaled up to half of the total population of the Greater Reykjavík area, which was 167–197 thousand people during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The parade also produces media discourses on sexual and gender minorities, as the media cover the celebrations extensively and interview LGBT+ individuals as a part of their efforts to provide glimpses into their lives, with an increasing emphasis on Iceland as an LGBT+ haven. In 2009, *Vikan* celebrated Pride by asking gay men in their 20s and 30s what Pride meant to them. They connected it directly to happiness; as one young man put it: "PRIDE and HAPPINESS first and foremost! And a reminder of how

important it is to never stop believing in yourself.” Another young man proclaimed that Pride signifies “[j]oy, happiness and being able to enjoy yourself just the way you are.”

A third man indicated that the reason for Pride’s extraordinary success in Iceland (success being measured in the popularity of the Joy Parade among the public) is

because we started the festival the right way in 1999.<sup>iii</sup> No bare bottoms and no bare tits, thank you very much. Such things don’t really indicate that there is a family celebration going on, and that is why the festivals [abroad] don’t reach those they should reach [i.e., the wider public].” (“Pride,” 2009, pp. 17–18)

The man’s words reflect Cabanas and Illouz’s (2019) contention that under neoliberalism, happiness has become an indicator of national progress as “one of the chief economic, political and moral compasses in neoliberal societies” (p. 42). The high turnout during the Joy Parade establishes Iceland as superior to other countries as it caters not only to sexual and gender minorities but to the wider public as its “true” audience. The event is placed firmly in the category of *parades*, as opposed to *demonstrations*, underlining the homonormative nationalism, or homonationalism, embedded in the statement about Icelanders doing Pride better than other nations by not being angry or provocative. The interviews with the young gay men reflect homonormative discourses that have led to “the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2003, p. 50); these interviews not only support but produce the “knowledge” that Iceland surpasses other countries in the race of national progress.

### ***The good gay citizen transforms himself***

Another way in which the good gay citizen demonstrates his responsibility is by transforming difficult emotions or experiences into a positive opportunity for growth.

Cabanas and Illouz remark that the “happiness industry” has legitimized the assumption

that “wealth and poverty, success and failure, health and illness are of our own making. This also lends legitimacy to the idea that there are no structural problems but only psychological shortages” (2019, p. 9). Thereby, happiness enters the domain of personal responsibility, and adversity becomes an instrument for personal growth. Those who do not take responsibility for the transformation of setbacks and blows into an experience for building a happy productive future are seen as failing and to blame for their situation. It does not matter if they are marginalized and face discrimination because if there is no society, there are no structural problems and no societal marginalization (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019).

This emphasis is prominent in interviews with gay men in their 40s or older; an interview from 2005 with a media personality entitled “The Happiest Gay Man in Iceland” provides one example. The interview features a personal transformation narrative, which is a common characteristic of the responsabilization discourses in Icelandic magazine articles about gay men born in the 1960s or earlier. After having established the man as a “forthright [*hispurslaus* in Icelandic], happy man” (Bergþórsdóttir, 2005, p. 82), the article presents the reader with a narrative of how he has taken life’s adversities, such as death, accidents, and disease, including HIV, and transformed them into a positive personal trait that enables him to shape his own life in the best possible way:

This proximity to death makes you humble. I realize how small and fragile you are as a human being ... That is why I’m hopefully more patient toward other people, appreciate my friends and loved ones, and don’t take things for granted. You never know what might come knocking. Life experience can be a good source, despite grief and loss. Death is very present in the poems that I’ve written. Hopefully, I will publish a new poetry collection in the next few months. (Bergþórsdóttir, 2005, p. 86)

By transforming life experience into a “good source” for further personal development, the interview demonstrates the production of an entrepreneurial subject who “acts to increase his value” through self-monitoring and self-discipline (Türken et al., 2016).

The most common form of personal transformation narrative in the data is the “trial by fire” (often connected to HIV/AIDS), from which the interviewees emerge as better neoliberal subjects. Through the interviews, gay men are constructed as individuals who instrumentalize adversity in order to take personal responsibility for their lives. This construction takes on different forms. One example is how bad experiences become instruments to toughen the men up and encourage them to assert themselves when making their life choices, as demonstrated in this interview:

Life has not always been easy for [him]. He experienced difficulties that he says have taught him to stand up for himself. [He says,] “I look at adversity as a valuable experience that has made me stronger and taught me how to get ahead in life and assert myself”. (Haraldsdóttir, 2001, p. 6)

In other interviews, a crisis spurs the men on to take responsibility for creating a more fulfilling life. Take this interview with a successful business owner:

My father passed away suddenly ... It was a very heavy blow, which led me to confront myself emotionally. It made me look at life differently than before. Material pleasures took on a totally different meaning. ... I thought that I would succeed when I established my own company. ... I dined out three times a week, had a house in [the suburbs] and an apartment [downtown]. But little by little, I started thinking that this was all so hollow, and I started feeling restless and in need of a change. I just wanted something more from life. Not just to exist but to live. (Leósdóttir, 2000, p. 8)

In the subsequent pages, he describes how he sold all his assets in Iceland and moved abroad to seek his fortune. It is interesting how this is framed not merely as a career move for a successful man living in a country with a population of 280 thousand at the

time of the interview but as taking on the responsibility of creating a happy and fulfilling life by making bold, active choices fit for the neoliberal subject.

In one case, individual responsibility does not merely apply to the men's lives but follows them into the afterlife. A man who had attempted suicide describes how the experience transformed his view on life and death in such a way that he thought it best to stay alive and deal with his problems to ensure that his lack of responsibility would not taint his afterlife: "This experience revealed to me that we can only get rid of our bodies but are left with our souls. It is much better to persevere and try to tackle things instead of giving up" (Guðlaugsson, 1991, p. 20).

### *The good gay citizen displaces responsibility for personal harm*

While the 1990s and 2000s were a period of great change in discourses on sexual and gender minorities in Iceland, there is no doubt that those decades were also marked by marginalization, abuse, and violence. While physical and mental harm is certainly addressed in our data, even more curious is the frequent simultaneous negation and dismissal of such harms. The onus of the responsibility falls on the good gay citizen, who becomes responsible for solving the problem of his own marginal social position. He does so in several ways that underline the emphasis within neoliberal discourses on individual solutions to societal and structural problems. One strategy used by the good gay citizen is not noticing or not being affected by derogative social attitudes; as one young gay man says: "Prejudice will always exist, I know that, but it does not bother me if I hear something like that" (Haraldsdóttir, 2002, p. 12). In an article aptly titled "My Homosexuality is a Side Issue," a young gay man of color, who occasionally dresses up in drag, states:

I don't really think about whether people are prejudiced or not; I'm just made that way.

In my mind, the way I look has never been a problem. I just don't notice it. People have

probably stared at me ... if they did, then I didn't notice. You definitely feel it, if someone is looking at you strangely, but I don't really dwell on it. (Steinarsdóttir, 2003, p. 18)

Another strategy, frequently employed by older gay men, involves reflecting on how they worried about their friends' and family's reactions to their homosexuality before coming out and how these fears turned out to be unfounded:

I came out of the closet four years ago but had shut [my homosexuality] inside myself ever since I can remember. It's very hard to come out of the closet, but it's still the most important step that all gays and lesbians must take. But we pay way too much attention to the negative aspects because it is much easier to come out ... than most of us think.

(Garðarsson, 2000, p. 71)

In her work on the “psychic life of neoliberalism,” Christina Scharff (2016) remarks how entrepreneurial subjects talk about themselves as if they were a business. One of the characteristics of such speech is the absence of “political perspectives that highlight the need for social change” (Scharff, 2016, p. 108). Desires for change are instead directed inward, transforming social critique into self-critique. Although political perspectives and social critique are not totally absent in the research data, the tendency toward self-critique is evident. The interviewees frequently blame themselves for not coming out sooner and for thinking that the reactions of those around them would be worse than they turned out to be:

I was ... deep in the closet at first, or at least I thought I was. On the other hand, the people around me seem to have realized that I was gay. So, it seems that I was first and foremost hiding from myself, prejudiced against myself. ... Unfortunately, such behavior is very common. People torture themselves, playing hide and seek with themselves while everyone else knows the truth. (Reynisson, 1994, p. 14)

Here, the marginalization of gay men is constituted as a personal problem of the men themselves, not a social problem. In the absence of any society or structure that marginalizes sexual minorities, the responsibility falls on the gay men to adjust their personal attitudes toward themselves and their surroundings. In some cases, marginalization is projected onto the past, the problem being not the marginal status of gay men in the present but their failure to work toward “living their best lives” by not managing to surmount the societal attitudes of the past.

I just didn't dare take this step [out of the closet]. Absolutely not. ... And there are people who still don't dare come out—despite the ongoing discussion. People are just dealing with their own prejudices. You are raised in a prejudiced society and become unable to work on those prejudices. (Aldísardóttir, 2000, p. 28)

Here, the marginalization and prejudices felt by gay men are not a part of a social problem but instead, through self-critique, become the gay citizen's bad attitude problem for which he must take responsibility by correcting his outlook so that he can get over the past. It is worth mentioning that sexual minorities in Iceland have long suffered, and continue to suffer, from worse mental health than their cisgender heterosexual peers due to minority stress and other marginalizing factors (Gísladóttir et al., 2018; Sveinbjörnsdóttir, 2010; Thorsteinsson et al., 2017). A rare article about violence against gay men in Iceland from 2007 also establishes that it was not an uncommon phenomenon at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bachmann, 2007). Another interview reveals that a known gay TV personality received death threats, which he mentions almost in passing when asked if it is difficult to be gay in Iceland:

The same way it can be difficult for [heterosexual] people to live their lives. I don't notice a lot of prejudice, perhaps because I'm quite known in society and people perhaps don't dare oppose me. Still, I have received the odd death threat.

(Bergþórsdóttir, 2005, p. 83)

So, while there is no doubt that violence, threats, and prejudice against gay men continued in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one simultaneously sees a tendency within media discourse to place the responsibility for social injustice and mistreatment with the gay men themselves. This is accomplished by emphasizing the importance of ignoring or not getting worked up about mistreatment. Some interviewees even go so far as absolving society for its past homophobia by emphasizing their own blame in not coming out to their friends and family (e.g., Aldísardóttir, 2000; Bergþórsdóttir, 2005; Reynisson, 1994).

The discourse thus frames gay men as responsible for not having any faith in their friends, family, and co-workers and being prejudiced against themselves. In this way, the responsabilization of the good gay citizen not only entails taking charge of one's own life but also directly assuming responsibility for societal wrongs through self-critique and a personal transformation narrative that recounts the interviewees' journeys from self-prejudice and self-hate to a fulfilling life in a gay paradise. In the next section, we take a step back to examine how the three discursive formations distance gay men from the margins and allow them to become part and parcel of the Icelandic nation, with an emphasis on the conditions and ramifications of this inclusion process.

### **Into the nation**

The Icelandic lesbian and gay paradise is a discursive formation that appears frequently in media and political discourses about sexual minorities in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Iceland. It is the result of the intertwining of transnational homonationalist (or homotransnationalist) discourses (Bachetta & Haritaworn, 2011; Puar, 2007) and age-old discourses of Iceland as a utopia due to its location in the far north on the periphery of Europe and North America (Ellenberger, 2017; Ísleifsson, 2020). The theme reaches its peak around 2010,

the year when the Icelandic parliament passed a law allowing couples to get married regardless of their gender, but it appears frequently in the data of this research, often in comparison with other countries, such as in this example:

In the last 10 years there has been a revolution in the conditions of gays and lesbians in Iceland, and that is of course positive. It also shows that when changes happen here, they happen fast, often much faster than in larger societies. When we invited British journalists to our show in Iceland, they were flabbergasted because Icelandic gays and lesbians lead totally normal lives. (Björnsson, 2000, p. 12)

As we come closer to the end of the research period, comparison with other countries becomes a common feature of how gay men and other sexual minorities talk about their lives in Iceland. The good and happy gay citizen becomes evidence of national progress and plays a role in the comparison and competition among nations about whose citizens are the happiest. According to Cabanas and Illouz (2019), this international competition is an effect of the coupling of happiness with ideas of national progress. As such, happiness becomes a sign of patriotism, establishing a two-directional obligation: an obligation of the state to provide ways to achieve happiness, with marriage as its chief indicator, and an obligation of LGBT+ citizens to seize opportunities to build a happy life by following “somebody else’s goods” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 56) In this case, they are the goods of the cisgender heterosexual majority, which cherishes, above all else, marriage and continuous work at self-improvement to become a happy citizen.

Quoting Marilyn Frye, Sara Ahmed remarks that people distance themselves from “unhappy” others out of fear that they might become infected by their unhappiness. This distancing forms an affective geography of happiness where unhappiness is “pushed to the margins, which means certain bodies are pushed to the margins, in order that the unhappiness that is assumed to reside within these bodies does not threaten the happiness that has been given” (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 97–98). Happiness,

then, becomes a way for marginalized people to both signify their docility and distance themselves from a marginal social position

This new subject position of the good, happy gay citizen, as constructed by the Icelandic media and analyzed in previous sections, is intertwined with the increased acceptance of sexual minorities, especially gay men, which moves them from a marginalized position into a more central one. Normalizing processes that mark the entry of gay men into national and social collectives thus require a demonstration of happiness via media discourses in our case.

The dominant discourses, as reflected in our data, thus “straighten” gay men by creating the subject position of the good, happy, and healthy gay man, a far cry from the sexual outlaw who dominated media portrayals of gay men during the 1980s (Steinarsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2010). As Ahmed remarks, what she calls happiness scripts, that is, the gendered scripts that provide a “set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy,” act as straightening devices, “aligning bodies with what is already lined up” and connoting a “demand to stay in line” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 91). The men stay in line by directing their desire for change “away from the socio-political sphere and turn[ing] it inwards,” as Scharff (2016, p. 108) puts it, toward themselves and their own attitudes. By positioning gay men as taking on the responsibility for social transgressions against themselves, both past and present, the media discourse enables the inclusion of gay men into society and nations without provoking a confrontation due to past injustices.

This discourse thus positions gay men as responsible citizens who have made a personal choice of happiness and productivity over anger and destruction. This has further implications for LGBT+ activism. Cabanas and Illouz (2019) remark that neoliberal subjectivity and its emphasis on happiness “stigmatize[s] to make shameful

the emotional structure of social malaise and unrest” and, in so doing, undermines popular activism and social change, which “are made of the accumulation of many angry and resentful citizens” (p. 182). Hence the rise of the Joy Parade as the most popular and prominent form of LGBT+ activism in Iceland from the early 2000s.

A good example of the extent to which social responsibility, anger, and blame are absent in the neoliberal discourses of responsabilization is an article published in *Mannlíf* in 2007 under the title “Violence Against Gay Men” shortly after a vicious knife attack on a gay man in Reykjavík (Bachmann, 2007). The article is one of the few to address some of the social problems gay men face, focusing on violence, which is, interestingly, only connected in passing to the marginalization of the victims and other structural factors. Instead, emphasis is placed on possible individual drug use and developmental disabilities among the perpetrators. When discussing the violent attack, the journalist does not question why a gay man was the chosen victim but rather writes the violence off as a matter of the perpetrator’s disabilities:

The boy is dealing with a developmental language disorder and learning dysfunctions and has had difficulties with social interactions. ... The results of an IQ test show that he has an IQ of 73 ... which borders on a developmental disability. The boy was also diagnosed with symptoms of autism and a conduct disorder. (Bachmann, 2007, p. 21)

The article’s main interviewee then proceeds to blame increasing drug use for violence against gay men:

People go out of their minds using these drugs, and I have myself been beaten up downtown. There you see people who are deranged because of alcohol and drug use. They haven’t slept for days ... and it’s simply a coincidence who they attack when they’re in that condition. (Bachmann, 2007, p. 21)

These remarks reflect the tendency of the media discourses, discussed above, to displace responsibility for the marginalization of gay men, placing it on the men

themselves instead of societal factors. The article “Violence Against Gay Men” presents instances of violence as coincidences or accidents that could have happened to anyone rather than as a consequence of the victims’ marginal position. Interestingly, when the journalist acknowledges that discrimination and violence might be of a structural nature, the blame falls on other queer men:

The violence [against gay men] has always existed. It is usually driven by the perpetrator’s fear or phobia, or his pure ignorance, and often by people who are having difficulties with their own sexuality. (Bachmann, 2007, p. 18)

Here, the responsibility for the violence falls on an indeterminate group of men who victimize gay men because of their own sexual ambivalence, indicating that they are either gay or bisexual men in the closet. That is, members of a sexual minority who fall short of the ideal neoliberal subjecthood, which entails taking active measures to ensure that one is living one’s best happy life. All in all, the interviewees and the journalist go to great lengths to avoid any responsibility falling on societal factors or privileged populations.

The media discourses analyzed in this article thus maintain reigning systems of power and inequality that normalize gay identities while simultaneously privileging the cisgender heterosexual majority. The integration of gay men into the nation takes place on the condition that they reflect the proper neoliberal subjecthood, which, in this case, not only entails becoming an autonomous, responsible citizen but also redirecting responsibility away from the nation and onto themselves as a part of their journey toward said neoliberal subjecthood. As we have seen, from there, it is only a short leap to render other minorities (including other queer men) as “delegitimized and non-normative” (Park, 2008, p. 773).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the discursive formations present in Icelandic magazines between 1990 and 2010 that allowed gay men to move from a marginal social position and gain entry into the nation at its center. We regard these magazines as discursive sites where knowledge is produced. By conducting a historical discourse analysis, we identified and discussed three discursive formations that construct the good gay citizen as a neoliberal subject who takes responsibility for shaping his own life in the best possible way, transforming gay men into citizens capable of self-management.

The good gay citizen is, then, constructed as follows: (a) a happy and positive person (b) who transforms negative experiences into positive ones and (c) directs anger and blame away from the nation or society that marginalizes him, turning it inwards to himself by taking personal responsibility for social hindrances he has faced in the past and continues to deal with in the present.

These discursive formations indicate that neoliberal discourses and the responsabilization of sexual minorities have played a significant role in their normalization and inclusion in social and national bodies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. As happiness becomes a sign of national progress and the premise for national comparison and competition, the dominant discourses “straighten” gay men by creating the position of the good, happy, and healthy gay man. With it comes a demand to stay in line (Ahmed, 2010), which is also a demand to direct the desire for change inwards, away from the socio-political sphere (Scharff, 2016). Responsibilization thus makes gay men responsible for not only their own lives but also the social marginalization they have suffered in the past. We thus gain insight into how responsabilization, as a disciplinary strategy of neoliberalism (Türken et al., 2016),

functions within normalization processes when coupled with discourses on happiness and national progress.

For Icelandic sexual and gender minorities, the implications of these neoliberal conditions for social inclusion are manifested, for example, in the Joy Parade, a depoliticized, collective display of happiness, and its importance as the most prominent form of LGBT+ activism in Iceland. Meanwhile, radical queer groups and organizations have been nearly absent from the LGBT+ movement in Iceland. The first radical Pride side events were held only in 2019, culminating in the arrest of a queer activist on the suspicion that they were planning to disrupt the Joy Parade (Pétursson, 2019). The arrest is emblematic of the fate of activism built on discontentment and social unrest. According to Ahmed's (2010) affective geography, such activism is pushed to the margins (here incarcerated), highlighting how neoliberal discourses of responsabilization have been successful in enabling a normalization process void of confrontation, blame, or opposition to reigning systems of inequality and power.

The inclusion of gay men into the Icelandic nation through discourses of responsabilization is therefore not necessarily an example of a successful campaign for equal rights for gender and sexual minorities. Rather, it reveals how the selective inclusion of a sexual minority can be part and parcel of a neoliberal project that seeks to maintain existing power structures while assuming the appearance of social change.

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<sup>i</sup> For the authors' positionality statement see: <https://sites.google.com/view/positionality-nbb>

<sup>ii</sup> In this article, we have chosen to remove all names and minimize information that might identify the interviewees. This is done because the Icelandic population is very small, making it easy to identify the men in question, as well as to emphasize that the focus of this article is not the remarks and representation of the individuals themselves but the discourses that are co-constructed by the interviewee, reporter, media, and society as a whole. All direct quotes from Icelandic sources are translated by the authors.

<sup>iii</sup> The first official Pride march took place in 2000, but an outdoor concert in Reykjavík in 1999 is often considered the first Pride celebration in Iceland.