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Homoheroic or homophobic? Leo Varadkar, LGBTQ politics and contemporary news narratives

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Irish and international news reporting on the gay Irish politician Leo Varadkar during his term as Irish Prime Minister (2017–2020). Focusing on two media events occurring in 2019 – first, the outing of Varadkar as a Kylie Minogue fan in the KylieGate scandal and, second, his St. Patrick’s Day meeting with then U.S. Vice President Mike Pence – the article argues that the Irish and international media differentially employed both homoheroic and homophobic narratives in their accounts. The article introduces the concept of homoheroism, which exists in tension with lingering homophobic scripts, as a structuring dynamic for understanding the contemporary media’s affirmative rendering of the cultural capital associated with being an out LGBTQ politician. Whereas the international press hailed Varadkar as a homoheroic intersectional leader capable of challenging homophobia internationally and forging a progressive internationally respected identity for Ireland, the Irish press treated Varadkar’s gay, Indian-Irish identities as evidence of political illegitimacy in coverage laced with anti-gay stereotypes. The Varadkar case speaks more broadly to the emergence of a generation of global political leaders whose LGBTQ status poses challenges for media representation, may raise expectations around homonationalism, and carries geopolitical implications for the branding of the politicians and their countries.

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Introduction

In January 2015, Irish Minister for Health Leo Varadkar appeared on the popular RTÉ Radio One Sunday morning show, *Miriam Meets*, where he came out as a gay man. As the first openly gay minister in the history of the Irish State, Varadkar sparked a significant social media response and incited headlines across the UK, Australia and North America. Varadkar’s gesture became an international media event just four months before a majority of voters in Ireland would deliver a resounding “yes” in the marriage equality referendum that legalized same sex marriages. In the U.S., *Time* magazine would later commend his coming-out as “inspiring” and “brave” (Duggan, 2017).

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In 2017, Varadkar again became the subject of international media coverage when he was elected to the position of Taoiseach (Prime Minister) by members of the then-majority Fine Gael party. Varadkar's installation as the head of state was hailed both in Ireland and internationally as history making on the grounds of his sexual orientation, age and race: "the son of an Indian immigrant [became] the country's youngest and first openly gay prime minister" (McDonald, 2017). During his three year tenure as Taoiseach and leader of the conservative Fine Gael party, Varadkar was lauded by international news outlets as a symbol of "a new progressive Ireland" and as representing a "huge change of heart for a staunchly Catholic country" (Eriksson, 2017; Villar-Argáiz, 2018). Varadkar became an emblem of the profound social shifts underway in Ireland,



Figure 1. Time Magazine marks Varadkar's appointment as Taoiseach, July 2017.

and, especially, the waning power of the Catholic church in politics and culture. Varadkar's significance seemed to raise Ireland's profile as well, as the *Time* cover story proclaimed the Republic, a small European nation of 4.8 million people, to be "an island at the center of the world" (Duggan, 2017) (Figure 1).

Within the Irish media landscape, however, Varadkar's intersectional identity was not always equated with progress, which is not surprising, given the broader profile of the Fine Gael party, whose policies have increasingly become aligned with right-wing anti-immigration parties in Europe (Stokes, 2019), despite their biracial standard bearer. Throughout his ascent to leadership, the Irish press castigated Varadkar's conservative economic policies in coverage incorporating comparisons to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that were intended to be insulting rather than congratulatory. When he became Taoiseach, Ireland's leading queer publication, *Gay Community News* (GCN) predicted "Varadkar will be as helpful to the gays as Margaret Thatcher was to women" (MacCarthy & O'Driscoll, 2017). During the 2020 general election campaign that unseated the Fine Gael party, Varadkar was confronted in Cork by a prospective voter who angrily labeled him as the "reincarnation of Margaret Thatcher" (O'Connell, 2020).

Moreover, the Irish media frequently played up supposed challenges to Varadkar's claims to Irishness, leveled on the basis of both his ethnicity and his sexuality. In 2018, the Irish national newspaper *The Irish Independent* questioned Varadkar's ability to relate to Irish Americans in the context of the New York St. Patrick's Day parade – a notoriously contentious event that raises hackles in Ireland because it recirculates traditional stereotypes – on the grounds of his race and sexual identity. The paper concluded, however, that Varadkar might make strides toward modernizing ideas about Irishness (O'Brien, 2018). In January 2020, during the election campaign, South Dublin County Councilor Paddy Holohan of opposition party Sinn Féin stated on his independent podcast "No Shame" that "Leo Varadkar's blood obviously runs to India, so his great grandfather is not part of the history of this country" (Gataveckaite et al., 2020). Holohan compounded his racism with homophobia, stating that he would prefer "a family man" as Taoiseach (ibid). Holohan has since been suspended from Sinn Féin for subsequent problematic podcasts relating to inciteful comments against women.¹

A comparison of Irish and international news reporting on Varadkar during his period as Taoiseach reveals a complex dichotomy that oscillates between two poles. The first, primarily associated with the international press, champions the politician as an intersectional figure at the helm of an Irish republic reborn as a progressive utopia. The other, found mainly within Irish press coverage, marks Varadkar's differences, with a particular emphasis on his sexuality, and links them to his potential unsuitability as a political leader.

In this article, we argue that news narratives that characterized Leo Varadkar during his term as Taoiseach as a figure of difference, with particular reference to his sexuality, obey this dualistic rhetoric, which we characterize as homoheroic and homophobic. On the one hand, the international press hailed Varadkar as a politician capable of divesting Ireland of its conservative past and of forging a progressive and internationally respected identity for the nation. In these accounts, he appears as a leader who can challenge homophobic repression internationally. On the other hand, the Irish press emphasized

Varadkar's gay, Indian-Irish identities, treating them as evidence of otherness and illegitimacy in coverage that also is often laced with anti-gay stereotypes. The contradictions that emerge from the celebration of a gay biracial leader whose identity would seem to place him at odds with the far-right economic and anti-immigration policies of his own Fine Gael party – articulated through the homoheroic and homophobic discourse this article traces – suggests the ways that a strategic “gay friendliness” which rests on individual identity politics can masquerade as the marker of a non-existent progressive agenda.

To analyze the double edged sword of the homoheroic and the homophobic in the case of Leo Varadkar, we examine the press response to two events in 2019, the first of which was covered only by the Irish press (a telling detail in itself) and a second that was covered both in Ireland and internationally. The first media event involves the Irish media's uproar over Varadkar's attendance at Australian popstar Kylie Minogue's 2018 concert in Dublin, which culminated in KylieGate in early 2019 when a letter Varadkar wrote to Minogue was released publicly. The second media event concerns Varadkar's 2019 state visit to the United States on St. Patrick's Day, a ceremonial function that garnered international headlines when the Taoiseach chose to bring his partner Matthew Barrett to his meeting with the notoriously anti-gay US Vice President, Mike Pence. Coincidentally, the Pence visit and KylieGate unfolded within the same month, in March--April 2019, and this compressed time frame helps to set in relief the important contrasts between Irish and international media depictions of Varadkar's intersectional gay identity.

Analyzing the Varadkar case not only sheds light on the relationship between Irish and international media coverage of a gay leader in Ireland, but also speaks to the recent emergence of a generation of political leaders whose status as LGBTQ individuals has been used in the press and by political supporters and opponents alike to lionize or lambaste them, or both. Varadkar is not a unique case: a homoheroic discourse has been used to frame a number of up and coming political figures, from U.S. Presidential candidate and Biden Cabinet nominee Pete Buttigieg and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot (Roth, 2019) to the Prime Ministers of Luxembourg and Serbia, Xavier Bettel and Ana Brnabić. In the article, we first define homoheroic rhetoric and then turn to our two case studies, examining the way the international press touted Leo Varadkar as homoheroic while, at the same time, the Irish press engaged with homophobic scripts that had the potential to undermine his political legitimacy. We conclude with a discussion of the wider implications of homoheroic discourse, including its relationship to notions of homonationalism and practices of pinkwashing, in the context of European politics.

The homoheroic: a definition

The scholarly literature has demonstrated the ways in which the mainstream and the tabloid press in the U.S. and the UK have historically framed LGBTQ sexualities through homophobic lenses, often relying upon centuries-old discourses of pathology and moral corruption (Edwards, 2009; Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001). The demonizing of gay male sexuality, in particular, was exacerbated during the height of the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and 1990s (Streitmatter, 2009; Kerrigan, 2019). More recent studies, however, suggest that homophobia has resurged within the UK press (Lovelock,

2018). Although the mainstream Irish media sector has by and large offered affirmative depictions of LGBTQ identities, particularly in relation to the 2015 marriage equality referendum (Kerrigan, 2020; Kerrigan, 2021a; Kerrigan, 2021b; O'Brien and Kerrigan, 2020), we assert that homophobic news narratives emerged in relation to Varadkar during his tenure as Taoiseach. The subjection of openly LGBTQ political leaders in Ireland to such treatment can be traced back to gay rights pioneer David Norris, who was subjected to homophobic Irish press accounts during his 2011 presidential campaign (see Jackson, 2011).

Through the case studies, we argue that the Irish press reanimated homophobic stereotypes in coverage of Leo Varadkar between 2017 and 2020. At the same time, however, the international press touted Varadkar as a progressive intersectional figure, nearly always noting his ethnicity, youth, and gay identity, in a manner that we describe as *homoheroic*. Homoheroism is a recent phenomenon within political and popular culture and refers to the expression of a range of affirming attitudes towards LGBTQ public figures. More specifically, homoheroism celebrates the bravery of being an out public figure. Homoheroic figures across politics and entertainment include 2020 U.S. presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel, and entertainers such as Ellen DeGeneres, Elliot Page and the cast of *Queer Eye* (both the original series and the reboot).

Celebrities such as DeGeneres, Page, and the Fab Five have been hailed as heroes for taking the risk of coming out before mass audiences and serving as role models. In 2014, when Page came out as a lesbian *Parade* magazine led with the headline “Manners Hero of the Week: Courageous Ellen Page, Star of *Juno*, Comes Out At 26” (Petrow, 2014). After his 2020 announcement that he is transgender, *Chicago Tribune* columnist Heidi Stevens lauded Page for the “courage [that] compelled him to live an authentic full life and light the way for others to do the same” (Stevens, 2020). Comedian Kate McKinnon spoke to the heroism of the coming out moment on the *Ellen* show during her presentation of the Carol Burnett comedy award to De Generes at the 2020 Golden Globes. In 2003, Liza Minnelli presented the stars of the original *Queer Eye* makeover series with the “Biggest Gay Heroes” award at the VH1 “Big in’03” ceremony (Blackmon, 2018). The 2018 *Queer Eye* reboot broadened the definition of the heroic beyond the homoheroic to encompass the program’s makeover subjects, not all of whom are LGBTQ.

This democratization of heroism, and its detachment from the work of being an out gay public figure, distinguishes it from the rhetoric we describe as homoheroic. Homoheroism draws upon of the classical tropes of the individual hero, focusing on public acts of extreme bravery in the service of others. Homoheroism also partakes of the dualism that Dyer (2008) identifies within stardom. The homoheroic are “just like us” and yet at the same time, they are unique. The homoheroic are remarkable *because* they are out LGBTQ people in the public eye. Furthermore, homoheroism is a decidedly individualistic regime; it draws attention to exceptional individuals whose perceived bravery distinguishes them from the wider community that they represent. In this regard, homoheroism shares affinities with the discourse of postfeminism and the practice of tokenism: while forwarding narratives of bravery and leadership, homoheroism may also imply that homophobia and discrimination have vanished, using the success of isolated cases as evidence.

The U.S. press's treatment of Pete Buttigieg, former Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, during the 2020 presidential campaign provides an example of homoheroic discourse that resonates closely with that of Varadkar. Both were young, gay politicians who were sons of immigrants. In the U.S., campaign press coverage revealed that Buttigieg's parents hailed from Malta and that were he to be elected, he would have been the second youngest U.S. president in history (Bruni, 2019). Buttigieg's status as an out gay man was consistently presented as a form of bravery; for example, the press made much of 9 year old Zachary Ro's request that "Mayor Pete" helped him to come out, emphasizing his statement "I want to be brave like you" (Holpuch, 2020). Frank Bruni delivered an encomium in the *New York Times* after Buttigieg withdrew from the race, praising the candidate for being brave enough to "[seize] teachable moments without ever becoming tendentious" while also forwarding the narrative of progress through assimilation by:

showing the world that being gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender or queer is an essential part of who we LGBTQ people are but not *all* of who we are (Bruni, 2020).

In Europe, Varadkar, Brnabić and Bettel are not the first out LGBTQ politicians to have reached the height of national executive power, although the critical mass of their shared tenure may suggest a trend. Jóhanna Siguroardóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland (2009–2013), was the first openly LGBTQ head of state in the world, closely followed by Belgium's Elio Di Rupo (2011–2014). Both Siguroardóttir and Di Rupo utilized their positions to advance LGBTQ rights globally. At World Pride 2014, Siguroardóttir decried "orthodox regimes" that oppressed LGBTQ people and called on the UN to establish a working group (Árnadóttir, 2014). At an African-EU summit in 2014, Di Rupo called on African leaders to respect the rights of LGBTQ citizens, particularly in Nigeria and Uganda (BBC, 2014). The international remit claimed by these two leaders supports Manon Tremblay's argument that, for LGBTQ politicians, being out of the closet enhances the mandate for representation: their very "outness," Tremblay claims, moves them beyond their respective jurisdictions and offers them opportunities to become role models on the global stage (222).

For these contemporary political figures, however, the global aspect of their leadership is intrinsically linked to the revelation of the "private" matter of their sexuality. The tension wrought by the potentially radical gesture of challenging the boundary of public and private can be contained, however. Homoheroic politicians can be recruited as individual examples used to police homonormativity, which is understood to be "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumption and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticised gay culture" (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). Buttigieg and Lightfoot in the U.S. and Varadkar, Bettel and Brnabić in Europe all have been publicly associated with monogamous long-term relationships with same-sex partners, and these partnerships became central to their treatment by the media. As Duggan's work predicts, certain dominant heteronormative assumptions about relationships remain uncontested. Yet, because these leaders are touted as homoheroic – that is, as leaders because they are out and LGBTQ – it's not the case that LGBTQ culture and constituencies have been fully privatized and depoliticized; rather, they are tamed and contained for electoral political purposes.

Griffiths (2014) links the naming of LGBTQ figures as heroes to a “genealogical impulse,” one that also motivates the desire for a broad and inclusive LGBTQ history: “Creating gay heroes involves generating gay ancestors: pointing to both the brute existence of same-sex desiring individuals in the past but also to their ostensibly heroic qualities” (54). Griffith’s emphasis on LGBTQ genealogies is instructive. The emergence of homoheroic leaders at this point in history is not accidental. The European and American political figures we discuss achieved prominence as descendants of the first generations of LGBTQ activists. The 1970s witnessed the emergence of widespread activism in the U.S. and Europe aimed at gay and lesbian liberation; the 1980s and 1990s saw those civic energies were turned toward queer protest amidst the epidemic of HIV/AIDS. The homoheroic figures of 2020 are the heirs to 50 years of community organizing; their rise also reflects the success of the mainstreaming rhetoric espoused by marriage equality campaigns in the U.S. and Europe.

Returning to our example of Leo Varadkar, we argue that a homoheroic narrative emerged in the international press at the time of Varadkar’s political ascent in 2015, at the time of the marriage equality referendum, and was used throughout his term as Taoiseach, from 2017 to 2020. At the same time, the Irish press treated Varadkar’s intersectional identities with both subtle and overt homophobia.

Method

We used the LexisNexis newspaper database to search for articles pertaining to “Leo Varadkar” and “gay” during the period of March–April 2019. The period was selected to capture print and digital news media reporting on the two public events that became associated with Varadkar’s sexual identity. A multitude of articles presented during this one-month period; thus, additional search terms were used to filter the results and ensure a more specific dataset, given our identification of the two media events: “Leo Varadkar” and “Kylie Minogue” were used in the search, followed by “Leo Varadkar” and “Mike Pence”. From that, the top 40 articles from each search were selected as part of the sampling procedure, totaling 80 articles. We employed discourse analysis to analyze the contents of the articles. Discourse analysis looks for patterns in texts and interprets these repeated structures in terms of the relationships they engender and the sociocultural practices they are associated with (Fairclough, 2013). Using discourse analysis enables several approaches to answering research questions and permits the sample size to vary from study to study (Meyer, 2001). Although the data set for this study is relatively small, which was expected, given the brief time period under consideration, the sample size nonetheless facilitates the research goal of identifying the dominant narratives that emerged around Leo Varadkar.

“Especially for you”: a letter to Kylie

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar’s attendance at Australian pop star Kylie Minogue’s December 2018 concert in Dublin prompted much media attention in Ireland. At the concert in December, Minogue arranged a meeting with Varadkar, his partner Matthew Barrett and a number of their friends. Amongst the group was Tiernan Brady, a gay rights activist

who posted a picture of Minogue and Varadkar to Twitter, captioned: “six gay teenagers meet the girl from *Neighbours*.”

Varadkar’s attendance at the concert and the photo’s circulation on social media prompted headlines in *Dublin Live*, *The Irish Mirror* and *The Irish Examiner*, including “Taoiseach under fire for cosyng up to celebs as the country falls apart” (Farsaci, 2018), “Anger as Leo Varadkar cosies up to celebs while the country falls to pieces” (Cotter, 2013) and “Fine Gael just can’t get ‘posh boy’ jibe out of its head” (McConnell, 2018). The headlines depicted Varadkar as a celebrity sycophant, using his status as a Minogue fan and his desire to interact with a celebrity to undermine his gravitas as a political leader. Indeed, *The Irish Examiner*’s playful reference to Minogue’s hit single “Can’t Get You Out of My Head” and its indictment of Varadkar as “posh” reinforced a pattern of perception dogging him throughout his political career that he was out of touch with the concerns of the working class (Clarke, 2017).

Varadkar’s 2018 meeting with Minogue garnered a response from the Irish press, but it was not until 2019 that the incident returned in the full blown scandal that we refer to as KylieGate. In March 2019, the *Irish Mail on Sunday* – which had pursued the Department of An Taoiseach since December 2018 and then submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request – published a letter that Varadkar had written to Minogue in 2018, requesting a private audience prior to her performance.

Dear Kylie, Just wanted to drop you a short note in advance of the concert in Dublin. I am really looking forward to it. Am a huge fan! I understand you are staying in the Merrion Hotel which is just across the street from my office in Government Building. If you like, I’d love to welcome you to Ireland personally (Hughes, 2019).

Varadkar twice refused to disclose the letter, eventually conceding to the public release because of the FOI request. This effort to control his media image elicited criticism from the press and political opponents who portrayed him as a starstruck fan and a politician fixated on his image who might have something to hide. Following the release of the letter, headlines blared: “Starstruck Taoiseach: Leo Varadkar begged Kylie Minogue to meet her before Dublin concert” (Brennan, 2018), “Dear Kylie – The starry-eyed fan letter from ‘Leo V Taoiseach’ to his pop idol asking for a meet and greet” (Hughes, 2019) and “Leo Varadkar’s cringe worthy fan mail to Kylie Minogue is a must see” (Moran, 2019). As the headlines indicate, the press accounts considered his letter of welcome as jejune and inappropriate for a political leader. Further, the press depicts his request for an audience with Minogue as the act of a childlike, obsessive devotee, activating cultural tropes of fans as “excessive” (Jenson, 1992). Historically, fan subcultures, and particularly those that develop around pop stars, have often been perceived in homophobic and transphobic ways as “emasculated,” with male fans seen as evincing troublingly effeminate behaviors (Sowards, 2000).

Invoking his participation in a dubious and emasculated fan culture, the wider Irish press leveraged the incident to paint Varadkar as a figure of ridicule, questioning his legitimacy as a leader. *The Irish Mirror* wrote: “the country is in the grip of a worsening housing crisis and our hospitals are buckling at the knees, but it appears the Taoiseach is more interested in schmoozing with celebs than sorting out serious issues” (Farsaci, 2018). *Extra.ie* commented: “When is the Taoiseach not the Taoiseach? Apparently when he’s writing fan mail to his musical idols” (Hughes, 2019). Newspapers reported

that former Minister for Justice and Attorney General Michael McDowell had referred to Varadkar as a “camera slut” (Horan, 2019). Insinuating that his status as a Minogue fan and/or as a gay man might be problematic to his political career, the *Mail on Sunday* complained that Varadkar chose to “blur the lines of his public and private life” (Hughes, 2019). The *Mail on Sunday*’s full page treatment editorializes graphically on Varadkar’s fandom in a manner that is overtly feminized and intentionally belittling: a sprawling, elongated dark pink script reading “Dear Kylie” and purported to be Varadkar’s, is splashed above the article, which is accompanied by a picture of Varadkar’s handwritten letter, one of Varadkar and entourage with Minogue at the concert, and one of Minogue on stage (Figure 2).

The blatant depiction of Varadkar as an emasculated fan also builds on knowledge about the way that Minogue’s celebrity appeals to and reflects the gay community particularly evident in her activism on LGBTQ causes such as marriage equality (Brennan, 2008). LGBTQ political activist and drag queen Panti Bliss/Rory O’Neill called out the Irish press for its homophobia: “It’s because he’s a gay and it was Kylie Minogue. And I’m sorry, it was what it was” (Kiernan, 2019). Minogue’s status as a gay icon and Varadkar’s outreach to the star animated homophobic tropes within the Irish press that had the potential effect of



Figure 2. Irish Mail on Sunday’s full page “reveal” of Varadkar’s letter, March 31 2019.

delegitimizing Varadkar's position as leader of the country. And it's not the case that the Irish press historically lampooned political figures for their popular culture preferences: they treated Varadkar's predecessor Enda Kenny favorably when he "let his hair down" by dancing at a Bruce Springsteen concert (McNamara, 2016), presumably finding the masculine ethos of the rock star more appropriate for a national leader.

Numerous headlines in Irish newspapers during this period reference Varadkar's inaction in the face of Ireland's housing crisis (O'Dwyer & Lyons, 2019), pointing to delayed government action on a policy matter associated with human suffering. It is striking, therefore, that KylieGate, rather than Varadkar and his Fine Gael government's failure to craft meaningful policy solutions to a protracted crisis, served as evidence for his inability to lead.

In its depiction of Varadkar during KylieGate, the Irish press did not explicitly use homophobic terms. However, Varadkar was deliberately construed as outside paradigms of respectability and professionalism and his suitability for the position of Taoiseach was called into question, as exemplified by the *Evening Herald* headline: "Office of Taoiseach demeaned by Leo's fanmail to Kylie" (Nugent, 2019). Moreover, the press's intense focus on Varadkar's resistance to releasing the letter emphasized potential duplicity, another homophobic stereotype of long standing. Varadkar's reluctance to release the letter was framed through discourses of shame, deceit and dishonesty, with the press asking "what has the Taoiseach got to hide?" (O'Rourke, 2019).

Several months later, the implications of KylieGate on the narratives structuring Varadkar's image as a leader resurfaced in the context of Brexit. Negotiations with the UK were due to conclude on October 31, 2019 and Varadkar was central to the Brexit process, given the sensitive issue of the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland. Yet, because the Brexit discussions were scheduled to take place the night before Cher's *Here We Go Again* concert in Dublin, the Irish press reanimated notions of Varadkar as a fatuous fan in headlines that anticipated a link between the Taoiseach and Cher, who, like Minogue is well known as a gay icon. "Leo Varadkar wants Brexit 'done by the end of month' so he can see Cher concert" (Blaney, 2019) implied a mis-prioritization of official duties and fan worship. "Do you believe in life after Brexit? Leo Varadkar does" (Power, 2019) conflated pop fandom with the duties of the head of state. In this instance, the press again triangulated Varadkar's association (this time projected) with a pop diva in ways that imply he was unsuited to the exercise of political power. Whereas the Irish press laced its treatment of Varadkar's admiration for Minogue and his projected fan worship of Cher with implicit homophobia, insinuating that being a fan of pop divas rendered him unsuited to his job, the international press gave KylieGate minimal attention. In fact, the UK's *The Guardian* and several Australian news outlets sympathetically referred to Varadkar's letter as "heartfelt" (Zhou, 2019). But when Varadkar traveled to the US on March 14, 2019 for St. Patrick's Day, both the Irish and international press were on hand to cover the meeting between the Taoiseach and the notoriously anti-gay US Vice President, Mike Pence.

"A gay Martin Luther King": Varadkar, Mike Pence and St. Patrick's day

Shortly after the Irish press published the Taoiseach's letter to Minogue and led the hoots of derision, Varadkar participated in the tradition of marking St. Patrick's Day by

traveling to Washington, D.C. for the exchange of shamrock. In 2019, the visit took on heightened significance because Varadkar's long term boyfriend, Matthew Barrett, accompanied him. The media in Ireland, the U.S. and internationally made much of the historic nature of the gathering, given that the host of the event, the U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, who had received Varadkar on his own a year earlier and had touted his Irish heritage, had been a proponent of anti-gay legislation and had expressed support for debunked techniques such as conversion therapy.

Mainstream UK and U.S. news outlets such as the BBC, *Business Insider*, CBS News, *Buzzfeed*, *Huffington Post*, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post* covered the event. Barrett's presence formed the basis of the majority of the headlines, which included: "Ireland's openly gay Prime Minister brought his boyfriend to meet Mike Pence" (Stopera, 2019), "Ireland's PM took his boyfriend to breakfast with Mike Pence" (Taylor, 2019) and "Ireland's PM brings partner to meet Mike Pence and delivers pointed remarks on sexuality" (O'Neill, 2019). Furthermore, both the mainstream and LGBTQ press treated Barrett's presence as a direct challenge to Pence's anti-LGBTQ stance. In the US, *The Advocate* noted how the very act of Barrett's inclusion "raised some eyebrows" (Gilchrist, 2019) and the UK's *Attitude* magazine noted with approval the homonormative implications of the visit: "Irish Prime Minister painted a perfect picture in Washington this week when he took his boyfriend to an official meeting with Mike Pence" (Stroude, 2019). The moment was even elevated further by its apparent connection to a homoheroic celebrity: "Ellen Degeneres said that Leo Varadkar taking his boyfriend to meet Mike Pence made her 'very happy'" (Byrne, 2019) and "Leo Varadkar introduced boyfriend to Mike Pence and Ellen Degeneres is DELIGHTED!" (Bunici, 2019).

In the international coverage of the meeting with Pence, journalists shaped a homoheroic narrative around Varadkar by crediting his use of his out sexuality to confront Pence's homophobic views. In a speech following breakfast in front of the press, Varadkar explicitly addressed his sexuality while confronting Pence's politics:

I live in a country where, if I'd tried to be myself at the time, it would have ended up breaking laws. But today, that is all changed. I stand here, leader of my country, flawed and human, but judged by my political actions, and not by my sexual orientation, my skin tone, gender or religious beliefs. And I don't believe that my country is the only one in the world where this is possible. We are, after all, all God's children.

Varadkar's speech challenged Pence's anti-LGBTQ politics, but also appealed to his religious conservatism by invoking an inclusive God (Ogles, 2019; O'Neill, 2019). Through this universalizing gesture, Varadkar paradoxically uses a religious appeal to mark his difference from Pence. In calling for tolerance and inclusion, Varadkar's speech prompted numerous responses from the press commending him for his bravery. The UK's *The Guardian* noted that "Varadkar spoke on the changes for Ireland and called out various forms of discrimination" (O'Neill, 2019), while the *Business Insider* wrote that "Varadkar gave a speech in front of Pence, in which he said that people should not be judged on their sexual orientation" (Baker, 2019) and *The Advocate* reported "Ireland's gay PM to Mike Pence: We are all God's children" (Gilchrist, 2019). This wide ranging international coverage praises Varadkar, but also implicitly references threats to the US LGBTQ community posed by the Trump administration (Pramaggiore & Kerrigan, 2019). *The Washington Post* noted how Varadkar presented the face of an open and accepting Ireland that was

“not afraid to speak out against oppressions” in the world (Taylor, 2019). Across the international media landscape, Varadkar became a homoheroic figure, commended for using his status as an out gay man on behalf of an imagined international LGBTQ community facing adversity and condemnation from political leaders and their policies.

The Irish media delivered a more cautious analysis of Varadkar’s meeting with Pence. A broadsheet commented that a fawning U.S. media perceived Varadkar as a “gay Martin Luther King” (Lynch, 2019), noting Varadkar’s historical conservatism on social issues such as LGBTQ adoption (Lynch, 2019). Clearly, one reason for the contrast between the Irish and international press is the greater familiarity of the former with Varadkar’s actions, statements, and policies, including but not limited to LGBTQ politics. This greater awareness of the full profile of the politician’s stances may have made it difficult to frame his St. Patrick’s Day visit as homoheroic, despite the fact that this celebratory discourse might offer Ireland significant cultural and geopolitical currency as part of the reupholstering of its image.

Further, Varadkar’s homoheroic status was recruited for political purposes in complex ways. The Trump administration co-opted the visit to imply that Pence was accepting of the LGBTQ community when White House deputy press secretary Judd Deere tweeted that Pence could not possibly be anti-gay, given that he was having lunch with Varadkar. Irish Amnesty International responded to Deere’s tweet by stating: “your policies still discriminate”. The visit also became entangled with the 2020 US presidential primary, as Pete Buttigieg’s husband Chasten tweeted that Pence’s meeting with Varadkar “did not make him any less homophobic.”

KylieGate and St. Patrick’s Day 2019 set in motion two very different structuring dynamics around Varadkar’s public sexual identity. On the one hand, within Ireland’s national context, Varadkar’s conservative domestic policies may have mitigated the development of a homoheroic narrative that might have developed from his carefully chosen outspokenness on sexuality – for example, during the 2015 marriage equality campaign and at his meeting with Pence. At the same time, Varadkar’s perceived adulation for gay divas was harnessed by the press in Ireland to imply both the frivolity of his personal life and his unsuitably as a leader.

By contrast, the U.S., UK and international press presented Varadkar’s openly gay sexual identity as brave and heroic. The gay Taoiseach’s openness about his sexual identity not only became an important component of his public persona but it also reflected upon the Republic of Ireland as a trailblazer for LGBTQ rights. To be outspoken and proud about his sexuality while confronting active opposition to LGBTQ rights in the form of Mike Pence qualified Varadkar to be positioned within a homoheroic discourse that grants political currency to individuals and suggests the work of LGBTQ equality has been completed, as represented by the ascendancy of LGBTQ figures to high office. This homoheroic discourse and its associated narrative of progress has become a recurring theme in the news coverage of several European politicians, which leads us to consider its broader implications.

The implications of homoheroism

During Varadkar’s tenure as Taoiseach, homoheroic media narratives also developed around two other European Prime Ministers: Luxembourg’s Xavier Bettel and Serbia’s

Ana Brnabić. The mainstream press went some distance to group these LGBTQ leaders as a homoheroic triad, as three “queer leaders” who broke the (pink?) glass ceiling (Alimi, 2018). Press accounts typically positioned them within an imagined LGBTQ cohort; examples include “Leo Varadkar will join Luxembourg Prime Minister, the only other gay world leader currently in office” (McCarthy, 2017) and “Ms Brnabić will join a small number of gay prime ministers in Europe, including Leo Varadkar in the Republic of Ireland and Xavier Bettel in Luxembourg” (De Launey, 2017). Further, the three heads of state often appear on lists entitled “LGBT World Leaders” (Trimble, 2017).

Like Varadkar, Bettel and Brnabić have been treated as heroes for embracing their sexual identities as politicians. When Bettel became Prime Minister, the *Los Angeles Times* referred to him as “a pioneer on one of the last frontiers of gay visibility: a politician who not only wins office, but also makes it all the way to the top” (Chu, 2014). Also like Varadkar, Bettel has been hailed for using his position to forward the cause of LGBTQ rights on the global stage. In a European Union-Arab League summit in 2019, Bettel confronted Arab leaders over the repression of gay rights (Rankin, 2019). Following the confrontation, Bettel tweeted: “Saying nothing was not an option for me” (Rankin, 2019). In his UN address in 2019, he called for ending hate speech (NBC, 2019). Similarly, Ana Brnabić has been touted for her openness and bravery, which the international press contrasted with Serbia’s overall poor record on LGBTQ rights (*New York Times*, 2017). Despite Serbia’s repressive climate for LGBTQ people, Brnabić became a symbol of the potential for change on a national scale, like Varadkar. She was described by Serbian news outlet *Huck* as “representing a progressive country moving in the right direction” who serves as a role model for Serbia’s LGBTQ community: “now young LGBTQ people in Serbia know they don’t have to hide, they can be successful” (Cousins, 2018).

As with Varadkar, the media’s homoheroic treatment of Brnabić and Bettel relies upon the normative ideal of the homodomestic, as these two political leaders’ partners play a significant role in press coverage. Just as Varadkar brought his partner to the White House, Bettel brought his husband Gauthier Destenay to an audience with Pope Francis at the Vatican: a move that was considered “a show of pride and confidence” (Barigazzi & Eder, 2018). The international press similarly showered attention on Brnabić and her partner Milica Djurdjic, when the latter gave birth to a child.

These leaders’ profiles align with respectability politics, which is often critiqued for its assimilationist tendencies. Homonormative respectability has often been considered the price of political life, deemed necessary for electoral success (Kerrigan, 2020). In the case of these European leaders, along with Buttigieg and Lightfoot in the US, stable monogamous partnerships and traditional family contexts have become inseparable from their homoheroic narratives.

The homonormative, and even homodomestic, element within homoheroism was prominent during Brnabić’s state visit to Luxembourg in 2019, which culminated with the two Prime Ministerial couples attending a soccer match between Luxembourg and Serbia (see Figure 3). The *World Economic Forum* dubbed the visit “inspiring” and “an important moment for diversity in power and politics” (Hutt, 2019). The act of participating in a public event with same sex partners amplified the homoheroic affirmation surrounding these political leaders. Headlines in *Queerty* and *LGBTQ Nation* further underscored the way that homonormativity abets the homoheroic brand: “Two gay



Figure 3. Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel (far left) and Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić (far right) with their partners Gauthier Destenay and Milica Đurđić.

prime ministers – and partners – casually hang out” (Hudson, 2019) and “Two of the most powerful gay people in the world met to discuss the future of Europe” (Bollinger, 2019).

Despite the affirmation from the international press, homoheroism is a double edged sword. These European politicians are championed because of their bravery in being out and for their willingness to confront oppressive regimes internationally. This stance of approval on the part of the reporters and commentators assumes an idealized LGBTQ solidarity that transcends national identity; it imagines that LGBTQ people and allies around the globe can and wish to partake in the apparently progressive politics symbolized by homoheroic figures. At the same time, homoheroism carries particular expectations around political and policy accountability to domestic LGBTQ constituents. Indeed, these respectable, homoheroic, and homodomestic personae are expected to do more than be tokens or examples in their domestic settings. They are expected to support and implement policies that serve LGBTQ constituents.

During his terms as Minister of Health and as Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar was subjected to criticism by the Irish LGBTQ community for his lack of engagement with the ever-increasing rates of HIV amongst men who have sex with men (MSM) (Paul, 2017). Similarly, despite the hope experienced by Serbian LGBTQ communities in response to her premiership, Brnabić has been criticized for prioritizing policy reforms over equal rights for LGBTQ people, a move that led her local community to declare her “not wanted” at Belgrade Pride (Skinner, 2019). The Serbian and international press have noted Brnabić’s perceived shortcomings in serving LGBTQ constituents through unfavorable comparisons to Bettel and Varadkar (Hutt, 2019; Stewart, 2019; Stopera, 2019).

Homoheroic discourse celebrates the individual attainments of LGBTQ political leaders such as Varadkar, Bettel and Brnabić and links them to a narrative of progress. It also functions as a political currency for individuals, political parties and nations. *The Washington Post* speculated that Brnabić’s appointment as Prime Minister was “window-dressing”: a move by the Serbian government to improve Serbia’s candidacy for membership within the European Union without addressing its problems with corruption and human rights (Hopkins, 2017).

Looking beyond the Anglo-European axis that defines the scope of this article, we underscore that, while we have emphasized the way homoheroism elevates individual politicians within a congratulatory identity politics-based agenda of equality and progress, its structural and geopolitical implications are complex and bear examination. Further work on homoheroism should probe its relationship to homonationalism, defined as the way “‘acceptance’ and ‘tolerance’ for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated” (Puar, 2013, p. 336). The homoheroic discourse around Varadkar and other political leaders documented here offers an example of political parties and media institutions proliferating what Puar indicts as “Euro-American constructs of identity (not to mention the notion of a sexual identity itself) that privilege identity politics, ‘coming out,’ public visibility, and legislative measures as the dominant barometers of social progress” (2013, p. 338).

The concept of homonationalism has been challenged by Ritchie (2015), who champions a “queer politics that works against the racism of neoliberal homonormativity” (619); he argues that homonationalism is conceptually flawed and contextually bound up with “struggles over the nature of queerness in the context of neoliberalism and the War on Terror” (620). Homonationalism relies upon on the integration of privileged LGBTQ persons into the neoliberal ideal of a national community, while also ensuring their complicity in racist and xenophobic patriotisms (Puar, 2007, 2013). In other words, it “[co-opts] white gay people by anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim political forces” (Schulman, 2011). Homoheroism might well be instrumentalized in ways that contribute to “pinkwashing,” which refers to strategies that harness the supposed progressive modernity of LGBTQ communities to rehabilitate a nation’s otherwise problematic image, as Sarah Schulman has argued is the case in Israel and other commentators have hinted at in Serbia (2011, 150–152; McLaughlin, 2017). As Maya Mikdashi argues, “detached from its locality, ‘gay rights’ can travel internationally not only as a vehicle for normative homo-nationalism, but as a vehicle for neoliberal ways of producing politics and subjects more broadly” (2011). Importantly, the discourse of the homoheroic leader, with its individualist ethos and congratulatory rhetoric of identity politics, has the potential to dovetail with and exacerbate neoliberal political and economic power dynamics and structures.

Conclusion

This article introduces the concept of homoheroism as a structuring dynamic for understanding the cultural capital associated with several contemporary out LGBTQ politicians and ponders some implications of homoheroism, not only for the branding of individual politicians, but also for the role played by LGBTQ politics in both domestic and global contexts.

We have demonstrated that Irish and international news narratives around Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar were marked by an oscillation between homophobic and homoheroic discourses. Through its analysis of the Varadkar case, this article sheds light on the relationship between the media and LGBTQ political leadership in Ireland, while also considering the emergence of a generation of European and American political leaders whose status as LGBTQ individuals can be used to both lionize and criticize

them. The individualist identity politics ethos of homophobia can be employed to mask neoliberal political agendas that are far from progressive, and we propose that this phenomenon should be further explored in relation to its contribution to the structural enforcement of homonormativities and to the geopolitical power dynamics of homonationalism.

Note

1. Holohan's podcast can be contextualized within the mobilization of anti-migrant, racist, homophobic and transphobic rhetoric in Ireland that intersects with the rise of far-right nationalist parties such as the Irish Freedom Party and the National Party, along with the "Save Our Children" protests that were organized in early 2020 by a number of groups against the openly gay Minister for Children Roderic O'Gorman, a movement which used extreme homophobic rhetoric across social media (see Gallagher, 2020).

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