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“There is No One Way to Be Transgender and to Live Sex”: Transgender and Non-Binary Individuals’ Experiences with Pornography

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ABSTRACT

Transgender or non-binary (TGNB) people are often present as protagonists of pornographic material. This study is the first to consider TGNB people as critical consumers of sexually explicit material. The sample included 212 self-identified TGNB individuals: 47.2% trans man/transmasculine, 15.6% trans woman/trans-feminine and 37.3% non-binary. The online questionnaire consisted of a sociodemographic data collection, multiple-choice questions about preferences and habits concerning pornography, and open-ended questions about the sensations experienced when watching pornography, opinions on the representation of TGNB people in pornography, and their experience in watching pornographic videos with cisgender or TGNB protagonists. The answers were analyzed using the qualitative method of thematic analysis. We identified four themes that appeared across the responses: 1) heteronormativity and cisnormativity in pornography: the need for deconstructing the current cis-het-patriarchal normative and binary system, which dominates pornography except for the ethical porn industry, 2) cisgender pornography compared to TGNB pornography, 3) pleasurable sensations (e.g., identification and empowerment) associated with TGNB pornography, and 4) negative sensations (e.g., objectification and dysphoria) associated with TGNB pornography. Results are discussed in light of the objectification framework and the minority stress model.

Introduction

This study investigated the preferences and experiences of self-identified transgender and non-binary (TGNB) people as consumers of pornography and their opinions on the representation of TGNB sexuality in sexually explicit media. *Transgender*, or *trans*, is an umbrella term that includes all people with a gender identity different from the one assigned to them at birth (Distiller, 2020). In the present work, we utilize the term *non-binary* for people whose gender identity cannot be accommodated within the gender binary (although they might self-identify as genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, etc., as well as non-binary). While some do, not all non-binary people identify as trans (Jones, 2020).

The present study stemmed from the need to fill the gap in existing literature regarding the consumption of pornography among TGNB individuals, and how pornography relates to the experience of sexual and gender minorities. The importance of this issue is twofold. On the one hand, TGNB are often the protagonists of sexually explicit material, but their experiences and views are rarely explored. According to Pornhub, in 2021, searches containing the word *trans* increased by 141%, and views of the category *trans* grew by 23%. The same category has also been ranked 10th most-watched by male consumers (www.pornhub.com/insights/yir-2021). On the other hand, TGNB people represent a minority, thus sharing the consequences of *minority stress*, which is the impact of pervasive discrimination on wellbeing and health, with other sexual and gender minorities (Meyer, 2003), and are also subject to TGNB-specific stigmas (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). TGNB

people have to face society’s *cisnormativity*, which is the assumption that all individuals are cisgender, and *cisgenderism*, meaning the delegitimization and subordination of people that belong to gender minorities, which leads to inequality, disadvantage, and disprivilege (Jones, 2020; Yavorsky, 2016). TGNB individuals are aware of the stigmas surrounding them and their sexual lives: recent qualitative research investigating the sexual stereotypes around TGNB sexuality demonstrated that TGNB individuals report being seen as promiscuous, deviant, and even as sex offenders (Anzani et al., *in press*). TGNB individuals are the object of *fetishization* when other people express sexual investment or interest in their being TGNB, rather than in the holistic individual (Anzani et al., 2021; Evangelista, 2018). A recent qualitative study reported that most (64.2%) of TGNB participants felt fetishized (Anzani et al., 2021). They are also victims of *objectification*, which entails being reduced to their body parts and their value being established primarily on this basis (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and *sexualization* since they are reduced to their sexual body parts or sexual functioning (Flores et al., 2018). Serano (2016), who has written on the sexualization of trans women, described sexualization in many ways, including the role of trans women in pornography and in the media, where they are often associated with sex work. In mainstream pornography, TGNB protagonists are often fetishized and objectified, with trans women depicted as “she-males” (an obsolete term for the categories under which trans pornography used to be classified), and trans men presented almost exclusively in gay pornography with a submissive role

(Pezzutto & Comella, 2020). Minority stress occurs when individuals are isolated from social structures and norms due to their minority status (Meyer, 2003). Objectification and minority stress factors are known to determine and explain some of the adverse health outcomes among the TGNB population (Anzani et al., 2021).

Following the increase in pornography's use and variety (Ashton et al., 2018), scientific studies on the topic have been conducted and are on the rise in several fields, including psychological sciences (for reviews, see: Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Short et al., 2012), sexology (Komlenac & Hochleitner, 2022; McNabney et al., 2020), and sociology (Brickell, 2012; Daskalopoulou & Zanette, 2020). Researchers have generally focused on the frequency of pornography use and its related impact (Duffy et al., 2016). Willoughby et al. (2020) have underlined how the majority of research conducted on the topic has fallen within a narrow conceptual box, where pornography is a simple activity that should only lead to a reduced variety of outcomes. The line of research, known as the "negative effects paradigm" (McCormack & Wignall, 2017), underlines how pornography use is associated with outcomes such as sexually risky behaviors (Harkness et al., 2015), sexual aggression (Wright et al., 2016), or with a potential for addiction (Taylor & Gavey, 2020). In the last decade, a paradigm shift has begun (Attwood, 2011), moving away from the negative effects and the focus on adverse consequences of pornography consumption, favoring research that recognizes the complexity, the multilayered nature, and the personal and societal implications of the phenomenon (Attwood, 2002; McCormack & Wignall, 2017). Recently, researchers have published works focusing on sexual and gender minorities. For instance, several studies focused on the role of pornography for sexual minority men (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Gleason & Sprankle, 2019; McCormack & Wignall, 2017), while others proposed a pedagogical and therapeutic role specific to trans and queer pornography (Darnell, 2015; Spieldenner, 2019). Two recent qualitative studies investigated young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic (LGBTQIA+) people's perspectives on pornography and sex education (Dawson et al., 2020; Harvey, 2020).

There is no previous study that has focused on a sample of consumers of sexually explicit material that includes a diversity of gender identities or that has specifically recruited TGNB participants, except for a qualitative study by Doorduyn and Van Berlo (2014) who reported having asked participants about their taste in pornography and erotica. However, the topic is not discussed in the themes that the authors described.

Statement of Purpose

The present explorative study arose from the necessity of emphasizing TGNB people's experience with pornography, not as objects, but as critical consumers of pornographic materials (McCormack & Wignall, 2017). In general, the most widely researched and documented individual difference variable related to pornography use is the gender of the respondent (Hald & Malamuth, 2015) and the majority of the literature focuses on cisgender (and heterosexual) men

(Hald, 2006), without a specific examination of the gender identity of the protagonist (Paul, 2009), thus invisibilizing TGNB people. We argue that this scarcity of data confirms the need to recruit TGNB participants specifically.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted entirely in Italy and in the Italian language. The sample included $N = 212$ TGNB participants aged 19–64 ($M = 29$, $SD = 9.1$). Inclusion criteria for the study were as follows: 1) must be 18 years or older; 2) must identify as trans or non-binary. All the data were collected through a questionnaire available online from August to December 2021. Participants were recruited online, and recruitment entailed identifying groups on different social media (e.g., Facebook and Instagram) whose members might be interested in participating in studies that deal with topics related to the LGBTQIA+ community or specifically to the TGNB community. Profiles of activists and pages of organizations that publish content or provide information and services useful to TGNB people also were used to select participants through snowball sampling. The selected people and organizations were sent an email that presented the research plan and a link to access the online questionnaire, and they were asked to share the link on their social media. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study, and no incentives were offered for participation. Finally, the study was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Milan – Bicocca.

Procedure

The survey consisted of a sociodemographic data collection followed by open-ended questions. The present explorative study arose from the necessity of emphasizing TGNB people's experience with pornography, not as objects, but as critical consumers of pornographic materials. Participants' gender identities were recorded in two steps to capture the nuances and multitude of identities within the TGNB communities (Harrison et al., 2012). They were first asked to write down the label they used to define their gender identity and subsequently to choose a category they *most* identify with (trans man/person in the transmasculine spectrum, trans woman/person in the transfeminine spectrum, non-binary, I am not a trans person), via closed answer. Participants' sexual orientation was investigated by asking them to select it from the available options.

In the second part of the questionnaire, participants were presented with questions about their pornography consumption. This section included a multiple-answer question, which asked participants to indicate all of the gender identities of the protagonists featured in the pornographic videos they had viewed. The available options included cisgender men, trans men, cisgender women, trans women, non-binary individuals, and those identifying as other. The following multiple-answers question assessed respondents' viewing habits, specifically whether they had watched pornography alone, or in the

company of one, two, or more people. Finally, they were presented with the following open-ended questions:

- (1) Did you experience pleasurable sensations when watching pornography with TGNB people? If so, please specify.
- (2) Did you experience unpleasant sensations or reactions when watching pornography with TGNB people? If so, please specify.
- (3) As a TGNB person, how did you feel represented in the pornographic material you watched?
- (4) More broadly, what do you think of the way TGNB are represented in pornography?

To the persons that indicated that they had seen pornographic material with cisgender protagonists, another open-ended question was presented:

- (5) What are the positive and negative aspects of pornography involving cisgender protagonists compared to pornography involving TGNB protagonists?

Researchers Positionality

Our research team is comprised of all White Italian researchers. The first author is a PhD student in clinical psychology and licensed psychologist with a background in LGBTQIA+ activism who identifies as a queer cisgender/questioning woman. The second author is a psychotherapist and sexologist involved in LGBTQIA+ professional advocacy who identifies as a transgender queer male. The third author is a graduate in clinical psychology who identifies as a cisgender woman with a predominantly heterosexual romantic and sexual orientation. The fourth author is a clinical psychology and sexology professor and a practicing psychotherapist and sexologist who identifies as a cisgender gay male. The last author is a clinical psychologist and a postdoctoral researcher with academic and clinical expertise in transgender health who identifies as a cisgender queer woman.

Data Analysis

The answers to the open-ended research questions were analyzed using the qualitative method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) to identify meaningful patterns within the data, aiming at elucidating the overall meaning that participants sought to convey. The data analysis was conducted using the raw data from participants' quotes and was conducted in 6 phases: 1) familiarization, 2) code generation, 3) theme generation, 4) theme revision, and 5) quotes selection.

As a first step, the first, third, and last authors independently read the answers given by the participants multiple times, familiarizing themselves with the data. Secondly, the team generated codes based on their notes and observations. We chose not to follow the initial 5-topics structure, and to consider all answers as a whole dataset, in order not to impose a structure. The team coded the data into a set of themes, highlighting common and recurring patterns and identifying relevant elements. Subsequently, the team members met to

compare and review their thematic structures. The authors defined an initial set of 13 themes they all deemed relevant, internally coherent, and distinctive and reached an initial agreement. The thematic structure, which partially reflected the open-ended questions, was progressively defined in more detail in a second group discussion. The themes remained unchanged but were re-labeled as subthemes, and the 13 subthemes were grouped into four overarching themes. Finally, quotes were selected for all subthemes to support their definition.

As a coding team, we questioned whether we would have blind spots and miss some nuances of the experiences described by TGNB people during the discussion of the themes that arose from the participants' responses. Thus, given the novelty of the study topic and the lack of representation of a TGNB identity that we felt existed, we preferred to involve an external auditor from the trans community in the study. After our coding was finalized, an external researcher (second author) from the TGNB community was involved in order to verify whether the themes deemed more relevant would be similar, and to establish the credibility of the qualitative findings in the light of their experience as a trans person. The second author, who had not been involved in research design or data collection, independently carried out the same process, reading the materials and identifying a thematic structure. At this point, the coding team reconvened to compare the coding schemes and discuss any discrepancies. The two thematic structures were very similar, except for some nuances that were less apparent to the initial coding group and were brought forward by the second author. For instance, one subtheme (*Aggressiveness*) that the first coding team had included in the last theme was removed from the codebook after the second author argued how the content of the quotes could be categorized under other existing subthemes, namely *identity invalidation* and *fetishization, and objectification*.

These changes were incorporated after the final group discussion. Quotes were chosen to reflect the themes and were translated into English by the authors, all native Italian speakers.

Results

Quantitative Data

Regarding gender identity, 47.2% of the sample identified as trans man/transmasculine, 15.6% as trans woman/transfeminine, and 37.3% as non-binary. Over half of the participants identified as queer, pansexual, bisexual, gay/lesbian, or fluid, and 26.4% of the sample identified as heterosexual. The demographic data also included items on the erotic attraction of participants, their social or medical transition, age, education, relationship, and marital status (see Table 1).

Regarding pornography consumption, the vast majority (91.5%) of the respondents reported having watched pornographic material, and 83% had watched it in the last six months. Since the respondents were aware of the survey content we expected most of them to have engaged in pornography consumption. Only 3.3% declared to have paid for online pornographic material, while 81.6% declared to have used free websites. Watching pornography in solitude was reported by most respondents (75.9%). Only 14.2% reported having watched

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

Variable		
Age (Mean – SD)		(29.0–9.1)
Age (range)		(19–64)
Ethnicity (N – %)	Caucasian	(184–86.8%)
	Other	(13.2%)
Education level	Lower than high school	(13–6.1%)
	High school diploma	(117–55.2%)
	University degree or Postgraduate education	(69–32.5%)
Sex assigned at birth (N – %)	Male	(45–21.2%)
	Female	(164–77.4%)
	Did not answer	(3–1.4%)
Gender Identity (N – %)	Trans man/person in the transmasculine spectrum	(100–47.2%)
	Trans woman/person in the transfeminine spectrum	(33–15.6%)
	Non-binary	(79–37.3%)
Marital Status (N – %)	Single	(151–71.2%)
	Married	(7–3.3%)
	Separated/divorced	(6–2.8%)
	Civilly united	(5–2.4%)
Relationship Status (N – %)	De facto couple or cohabiting	(43–20.3%)
	Married or civilly united	(13–6.1%)
	Engaged	(70–33%)
	Dating someone	(11–5.2%)
	Consensual non-monogamy relationship	(22–10.4%)
	Non-consensual non-monogamy relationship	(1–0.5%)
	Open relationship	(6–2.8%)
	Single	(76–35.8%)
	Not interested in dating someone	(5–2.4%)
Sexual Orientation (N – %)	Other	(8–3.8%)
	Asexual	(19–9%)
	Bisexual	(26–12.3%)
	Fluid	(6–2.8%)
	Gay	(26–12.3%)
	Heterosexual	(56–26.4%)
	Pansexual	(33–15.6%)
	Queer	(27–12.7%)
	Other	(19–9%)
Erotic Attraction – in terms of gender expression (N – %)	Exclusively to women/feminine individuals	(47–22.2%)
	Primarily to women/feminine individuals, occasionally to men	(34–16%)
	Primarily to women/feminine individuals, regularly to men	(12–5.7%)
	Equally to both genders	(37–17.5%)
	Primarily to men, regularly to women/feminine individuals	(13–6.1%)
	Primarily to men, occasionally to women/feminine individuals	(24–11.3%)
	Exclusively to men	(18–8.5%)
	None of the above	(27–12.7%)
Erotic Attraction – in terms of gender identity (N – %)	Exclusively to cisgender individuals	(28–13.2%)
	Primarily to cisgender, occasionally to transgender individuals	(47–22. %)
	Equally to both cisgender and transgender	(50–23.6%)
	Primary to transgender, occasionally to cisgender individuals	(8–3.8%)
	Neither	(9–4.2%)
	Gender identity is not relevant for me	(70–33%)

pornography in the presence of another person, and 4.7% in the company of two or more other people. Regarding the protagonists of the videos, most respondents reported having watched pornography with cisgender men and women as protagonists (62.7% and 63.3%, respectively), whereas having watched videos with trans men or women was reported less frequently (27.4% and 25.9%, respectively). Only 17% of respondents reported having watched videos with non-binary protagonists.

Qualitative Data

Regarding the answer to open-ended questions, the authors identified four overarching themes that appeared across the responses to different questions: 1) heteronormativity and

cisnormativity in pornography, 2) cisgender pornography, 3) pleasurable sensations associated with TGNB pornography, and 4) negative sensations associated with TGNB representation in pornography. The themes and subthemes are displayed in Table 2. We ordered the four themes from distal to proximal, starting with the theme that touches on more general considerations made by respondents regarding the social constructs that are related to pornography, followed by the theme focused on how this is reflected in cisgender pornography, touching on the direct experiences of the participants. In the last two themes, the focus is on the intrapersonal aspects that arise when the participants watch pornographic material with TGNB individuals, and the positive and the negative sensations that the material elicits.

Table 2. Themes and subthemes coded from the answer to the 5 open-ended questions.

THEME	SUB-THEMES
Heteronormativity and cisnormativity in pornography	i) stereotyping male gaze ii) absence of representation iii) difference between ethical/amateur and mainstream pornography
Cisgender pornography	(i) accessibility and variety (ii) relief from dysphoria (iii) preference for cisgender bodies
Pleasurable sensations associated with TGNB pornography	(i) identification (ii) normalization (iii) body discovery (iv) pleasantness
Negative sensations associated with TGNB representation in pornography	i) identity invalidation ii) fetishization and objectification iii) dysphoria triggers iv) fixed sex roles v) stereotypical representation

Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity in Pornography

The first theme concerns the cisnormative and heteronormative views promulgated by pornography. Specifically, participants noted the i) *stereotyping male gaze*, ii) *absence of representation*, and iii) *difference between ethical/amateur pornography and mainstream pornography*.

Stereotyping Male Gaze

Participants described how mainstream pornography videos typically present a phallogentric, unrealistic, and male pleasure-driven view, as illustrated in the example below:

I believe that mainstream pornography, in general, is rooted in an excessive cis-hetero patriarchal model and that it sustains itself by thinking of its audience primarily as a male audience (non-binary/demigender, 21).

Some participants underlined how mainstream pornography “generically refers to cis- and hetero-centric desirability criteria, and is often humiliating towards trans individuals and framed in a male gaze perspective” (non-binary/genderfluid, 23).

Another participant explained that the transphobic and objectifying way in which TGNB people are depicted in pornography is “functional to the egoistic fun of the classic cis-het alpha male, to be used now and then only as a little vice which reinforces, even more, their toxic masculinity” (transgender non-med/non-binary, 33).

Absence of Representation

Participants, especially those with a gender identity outside of the binary spectrum, described the total absence of representation of non-binary people and noted that videos typically show a gender binary view.

As a non-binary person, unfortunately, almost nothing [represented me]. While it was fairly easy for me to find pornographic material of trans people who identified themselves on the binary spectrum, the search for non-binary people was not so immediate (non-binary/demigender, 21).

One participant stated that the absence of representation concerns other identities as well, such as the transmasculine one:

Even because trans men are not present at all in porn videos (trans man, 20).

Difference Between Ethical/Amateur Pornography and Mainstream Pornography

Participants described the difference between ethical/amateur and mainstream pornography. In particular, stereotypical or unnatural representations are seen as belonging to mainstream pornography:

In professional stuff, there is an awful and super fetishized representation . . . in amateur stuff there is more variety and often more similarity with reality (transgender woman, 23).

In amateur and queer pornography, the representations of the different gender identities are adequate and reflect the plurality of experiences, allowing identification:

From this point of view, I appreciate more videos (mostly amateur) made by trans men themselves, in which there is much more “freedom”: the bodies of the participants are diversified, not all are in therapy or pass perfectly, not all have already had or intend to have surgery, the passive role is not the only one played by trans men, and above all, there are t4t (trans4trans) relationships in which no actor is cis (trans man, 20).

Non-binary representation is especially visible in amateur pornography; a non-binary participant, stated that “In the ethic/feminist, underground, or self-produced [pornography], I find a good representation” (non-binary, 24). Mainstream and non-mainstream pornography differ in the importance associated with the characters’ gender identity. In mainstream pornography, gender identity often seems the most relevant characteristic, and “Transgenderism is still often used as a narrative expedient. The presence of trans individuals is still used as an ‘itchy’ element or as a plot twist” (agender/genderfluid, 29). In amateur pornography, the trans identity of the character is more casual and less centered. According to our participants, non-mainstream pornography was experienced as less objectifying, less focused on genitals, and more respectful and validating of the protagonists’ identities. Nevertheless, participants acknowledged that non-mainstream pornography is more challenging to find and, being a niche product, it may not be immediately available.

Cisgender Pornography

The second theme is *Cisgender Pornography*. This theme explores aspects related to watching pornography with cisgender protagonists, and the identified subthemes are: (i) accessibility and variety, (ii) relief from dysphoria, (iii) preference for cisgender bodies.

Accessibility and Variety

Participants described pornography with cisgender protagonists as easier to reach because it is more widespread and varied in content.

In cis-only videos, it is nice to see how passion and emotions, in general, are included, the love that can exist between two people (even if it is acted out), the two protagonists portraying roles of lovers or friends . . . while trans people are involved in the scene merely for sexual purposes, no romantic scene, just sex (trans man, 20).

Responses underlined how, in cisgender pornography, there is more complexity and broader representation:

In cis porn, all types of relationships are represented (male, 37).

Relief from Dysphoria

Participants described using cisgender pornography because it gave a feeling of momentary relief from dysphoria:

At least in that moment, I can try not to think about my gender dysphoria, as I imagine myself in a body that matches my gender identity. (trans man, 36).

For others, this material gives them the possibility of imagining themselves in a sexual situation as cisgenders:

They make me feel like a cis man because I imagine myself in their place (male, 24).

Preference for Cisgender Bodies

Participants described the attractiveness of cisgender individuals and bodies, and they named it as a reason why they enjoyed cisgender pornography:

Generally, actors and actresses are more attractive in cis porn (transgender woman/woman, 34).

Being asexual, it is difficult for me to find situations that stimulate my sexual desire when I do experience libido. The variety of the situations, the plots, and the esthetical appearance of the protagonists of cisgender porn are helpful to me (non-binary, 26).

Participants describe enjoying cisgender content because it represents bodies or sexual situations they would ideally like. Some stated that they preferred cisgender protagonists, while others attribute this attraction to the exposure and to being accustomed to cisgender pornography:

I watch them because it is what I am used to, and I like them more (non-binary, 20).

Pleasurable Sensations Associated with TGNB Pornography

The third theme is *pleasurable sensations*. This theme explores the positive and enjoyable reactions evoked by watching TGNB pornography, and the identified subthemes are: (i) identification, (ii) normalization, (iii) body discovery, (iv) pleasantness.

Identification

Participants described how they identified with the TGNB protagonists of pornographic media. There was a mirroring experience of the identity and the pleasure portrayed. Some participants described seeing themselves represented in pornography as a pleasant experience that made them feel at ease. For some respondents, this identification was also relevant in terms of sexual excitement:

I found that observing bodies that are similar to mine is very gratifying. Observing a wide variety of humans turned me on (agender/genderfluid, 29).

Other responses noted the mirroring experience more broadly:

The trans person in question represents me and what I could or could not do in a given situation. This is why the video can be gratifying because there can be recognition at 360°. It's like seeing oneself (trans man, 45).

Normalization

Participants described how seeing pornography with TGNB protagonists felt normal and had a normalizing effect:

It gave a sense of normality (man/trans man, 56).

The participants expressed a positive and depathologizing experience connected to their pornography consumption. For some respondents, pornography appears to be more than just an entertainment medium designed to arouse the viewer, since through TGNB representation, pornography consumers can experience normalization:

The wonder to see how much normality, eroticism, and transgressiveness we can offer and receive (man, 40).

Body Discovery

Participants described the different feelings evoked by observing the bodies of TGNB actors engaging in sexual acts. For some, the mere witnessing of trans bodies was a positive experience; for others, it was an occasion to confront and compare the bodies of porn actors with their own bodies and sexuality:

I watch porn to compare my body to other FtM,¹ or to discover the MtF world (male, 20).

Other participants' responses underlined how seeing TGNB bodies in pornography evoked positive feelings:

It was beautiful because I had never seen how the genitals of a trans man on testosterone look like. It gave me a positive perspective on hormonal therapy, and it was a euphoric moment (non-binary/genderfuck, 25).

Some respondents associated observing bodies further along the gender-affirming path with feelings of envy or longing.

Envy for their body, and the hope for me to have it one day (trans woman, 32).

Pleasantness

Participants described perceiving the bodies of TGNB pornography protagonists as exciting, attractive, and desirable, evoking pleasurable and arousing feelings.

I find it pleasant that there is a representation of our category, not to mention that I find many TGNB people very erotically attractive (trans girl, 35).

Our participants described how seeing transgender bodies allowed TGNB expressions to be attractive:

It produced positive feelings in me, since it allowed me to see people like me (trans men) in an erotic way, and desired by other men (trans man, 20).

¹FtM is an acronym that stands for Female-to-Male. It implies someone is changing their gender from one binary gender to the other binary gender. It is considered an outdated term, since it does not reflect the experience of many TGNB people ([www.https://www.glaad.org/reference/trans-terms](https://www.glaad.org/reference/trans-terms)). The same applies to MtF, which stands for Male-to-Female.

Negative Sensations Associated with TGNB Pornography

The last theme is negative sensations associated with TGNB representation in pornography. This theme explores participants' experiences of watching pornography as triggering negative sensations and dysphoria, mainly linked to the representation of sex and of TGNB people's sexuality delivered by mainstream products. Participants also described how, in pornography, TGNB people are considered only for being trans or for having specific sexed body parts. The negative sensations are linked to: *i) identity invalidation, ii) fetishization and objectification, iii) dysphoria triggers, iv) fixed sex roles, and v) stereotypical representation.*

Identity Invalidation

Participants frequently described how their identity was unrecognized and denigrated while looking for or watching pornographic material:

I see trans bodies represented but in a distorted way. Identity is not taken into consideration, it is invalidated or erased (non-binary, 23).

Many participants reported how identity invalidation often happens through the use of incorrect pronouns or offensive terms in video titles and dialogues:

The incorrect use of pronouns. The feminine was used for the FtM and the masculine for the MtF (male, 20).

Videos, titles and comments are saturated with slurs and other degrading and objectifying terms (tr*nny, shemale, chick with dick, etc.) (non-binary/genderfluid, 23).

Fetishization and Objectification

Participants described how TGNB people in pornography are treated as objects or are considered only for having specific body parts (i.e., genitals). Many participants reported the feeling of being fetishized and objectified when being reduced to their bodies:

If I think about transgender and non-binary people in mainstream porn, to me everything is unpleasant and degrading. From objectification to continued non-consensual fetishization based on their gender identity, their appearance (...) the obsession of reducing people to their genitals (transgender non-med/non-binary, 33).

Another participant stated that the unpleasant sensations perceived when watching trans pornography were evoked by "the representation, in non-amateur videos, of transgender people, who are too much sexualized and depicted as objects of sexual desire, more than as a part of the sexual act" (non-binary, 26).

A participant noted "that the trans woman, in particular, is objectified in certain videos and sought after only for her genitals, almost as if it were a fetish." (trans man, 20).

Dysphoria Triggers

Participants described how TGNB representation in pornography constituted a trigger for dysphoria. In some cases, the view of trans people's genitals was a trigger for dysphoria:

I find a lot of FtM guys masturbating, and it causes me dysphoria (transsexual man, 22).

For others, this was also linked to roles in sex, as a participant explained:

Genital penetration in case of a transgender man (...) causes me dysphoria (transgender man, 30).

A participant pointed out that some practices depicted in pornography are the same that are usually associated with feelings of dysphoria for many trans men:

There are many videos of gay FtMs accepting penetration: many FtMs are dysphoric about it (male, 33).

Fixed Sex Roles

Participants described how the representation of sex roles is fixated on the genitals the person has. Trans women are portrayed with a penis, and in an insertive role, trans men are penetrated and portrayed in a receptive role, as exemplified by the following statements:

Trans actors always play passive roles with vaginal penetrations (trans man, 41).

Videos are only posted of NON-operated trans women (they are called shemales) fucking the man or getting an oral. (trans man, 20).

I think that many things should be improved, showing the variety of bodies and sexualities; there is no one way to be transgender and to live sex. There are stereotypes that are still persisting, and these are interiorized by transgender people, who do not serenely live the sexual sphere (transgender man, 30).

Stereotypical Representation

Participants described how TGNB people's representation in pornography is built on stereotypical narratives. Their words highlight that such misrepresentation can be dangerous since it sustains normativity and has an impact on the real-life experiences of trans people:

I find it disturbing that a great part of pornography with transgender women as participants still tends to put in evidence a series of stereotypes and mostly does not return a plausible image (not a realistic one, as I am aware that it is pornography anyway) (agender/genderfluid, 29).

Another participant stated that "they are represented as living sex toys" (trans man, 41).

Most participants explicitly referred to trans women:

Too often trans women are depicted in a way that is still too much tied to the imagery of prostitution that surrounds them since forever (non-binary/agender, 23).

A trans woman in our sample felt "not represented, since I don't feel like the super sexually gifted transgender woman cliché fits me" (transgender woman, 61).

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the feelings associated with the consumption of pornographic material by TGNB individuals, with an emphasis on framing TGNB individuals as critical and active subjects. From our participants' responses, we can conclude that the representation of TGNB people in

mainstream pornography is partial or lacking altogether, especially when the protagonists' identities do not fall within the binary system. When TGNB people are represented, their identity is often invalidated, and their presence is objectified. The results concerning invalidation and misrepresentation can be read in light of the microaggression model.

The first and second themes touch on general considerations made by respondents regarding the social constructs related to pornography. Participants shared how they recurrently noticed patterns of heteronormativity and cisnormativity in pornography and how sexual acts were portrayed through a stereotyping male gaze. In addition to the dynamics of objectification, the male gaze explicitly includes gender dynamics, putting the influence of gender and societal power structures into the spotlight (Lefebvre, 2020). The male gaze has an impact on women's body image (Randazzo et al., 2015), but there is scarce literature on how it is experienced by trans women (Lefebvre, 2020). From an intersectional perspective, standing in a position of multiple minority identities, trans women find themselves at the intersections of gender-related prejudice, homo-transphobia, cis-sexism, and trans-misogyny, and are uniquely sexualized (Crenshaw, 1989; Fielding, 2021; Miller & Grollman, 2015; Serano, 2009). Furthermore, trans women generally endorse lower degrees of passing, and being more visible leads to more invalidating experiences (Parr & Howe, 2019). Transmasculine people, on the other hand, often communicate a feeling of invisibility (Anzani et al., submitted for publication; Serano, 2009), which can lower the expectation of identity-invalidating microaggressions, but can also lower the chance of feeling represented.

Participants argued that cisgender bodies are attractive for cisgender and for TGNB people. This datum is in line with literature that shows that sexual fantasies' contents do not vary much between cisgender and TGNB people (Lindley et al., 2020). Our participants also described cisgender pornography as a potential relief from dysphoria. Gender dysphoria refers to psychological distress that results from an incongruence between gender identity and bodily or social perception (Davy & Toze, 2018). The experience of dysphoria greatly varies among TGNB people and within the same person in different contexts and times, and it is better understood as a continuum (Byne et al., 2018; Galupo & Pulice-Farrow, 2020; Pavanello Decaro et al., 2021). Previous research on trans people's experience of sexuality has documented the strategy of imagining having a different body, or *cross-gender fantasizing*, as defined by Doorduyn and van Berlo (2014).

The third and fourth themes shed light on the intrapersonal aspects that arise when the participants watch pornography with TGNB individuals. Having bodies or models to identify with is paramount in the development of any person's identity, particularly for TGNB people, since it may be harder for them to access positive media images to which they can relate (Haimson, 2019). As found in previous qualitative research (Harvey, 2020), our data show that TGNB people might turn to pornographic videos for learning purposes and consider them an accessible and instructive tool. Queer pornography might highlight the diversity of bodies, expressions, and sexual practices, exposing the spectator to techniques beyond genital intercourse and to which some queer individuals might relate

(Darnell, 2015). As previously suggested by Litsou et al. (2021), we argue that there is still a lack of systematic reviews on pornography as a positive source of sexual learning.

Feeling desire towards TGNB people is still seen as a taboo or a fetish within sexualities and orientations in Western societies (Ashley & Robertson, 2020; Lindley et al., 2020; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019). If TGNB people internalize such delegitimization, they may end up perceiving themselves as unworthy of the attraction of someone else (Lindley et al., 2020), whereas seeing TGNB people as sexual beings is a step toward a sex-positive approach to TGNB people and intimacy (Fielding, 2021; Tompkins, 2014). Especially when it comes to TGNB people, sex should not be reduced to genitals or their function (Barker, 2018; Fielding, 2021). As Bellwether (2013) argued, the form of someone's body does not necessarily determine what that body can do.

Negative sensations arose in our respondents due to the representation of TGNB as either absent or stereotypical and misleading. Participants' words confirm, as previously reported (Anzani et al., 2021), that pornography is one of the contexts in which microaggressions (including distorted representation, objectification, and the incorrect use of language) happen, and that microaggressions are a vehicle for identity invalidation (Nadal et al., 2011, 2016; Sevelius et al., 2020). A recent work by Anzani et al. (2021) showed that fetishization could be experienced by TGNB people as both positive and negative, offering a new and multifaceted perspective. In particular, the authors found that some TGNB people positively experience being fetishized. In our sample, positive experiences associated with fetishization were absent.

Participants described viewing transgender and non-conforming bodies and genitals in sexually explicit material as a source of both positive sensations (i.e., possibilities and identification) and negative sensations (i.e., dysphoria), depending on the individual situation. Previous qualitative research has underlined the ambivalence toward pornography, which can be framed as beneficial and informative or as problematic and harmful (Goldstein, 2020; Harvey, 2020).

Many factors may determine whether the experience will positively or negatively affect the participant. If the person has high levels of gender dysphoria, for instance, they may avoid searching for TGNB pornography, or if they engage with it, this may lead to negative feelings. Seeing TGNB bodies represented in pornography may be a positive and empowering experience for people whose gender identity is an essential part of their identity, whether through endorsing androgynous body ideals (Galupo et al., 2021) or being actively involved in LGBTQIA+ activism.

We wish to highlight that the need for deconstructing the current cis-het-patriarchal normative and binary system, which is reflected in pornography, appeared pivotal in our participants' statements. Interestingly, several respondents mentioned the field of ethical pornography as a space that does not conform to the current hegemonic systems and is a safe space for trans subjectivities. Their experiences help in the disambiguation between TGNB and cisgender pornography and between mainstream and ethical (and sometimes amateur) pornographic material. By mainstream pornography, we mean material that is participated in, and

can be ascribed to, by most people (Rosewarne, 2017). Scholars have defined ethical pornography referring to production or distribution processes and to the focus on labor (Wilkinson, 2017). Amateur pornography refers to erotic content shot by non-professionals and uploaded to adult video-sharing websites in exchange for little to no financial compensation (Ruberg, 2016). These categories highlight how pornography can be investigated differentiating between production types.

The present study is the first to investigate first-person experiences with pornographic material in a sample of TGNB individuals. One strength of this work was focusing on lived experiences rather than mere medical aspects of bodies and sexuality, which are often the focus of studies on the trans population (see Lindley et al., 2020 for a critique). Furthermore, trans men and non-binary individuals, who constitute the majority of our sample, are often underrepresented compared to trans women (Anzani et al., 2021). Previous pornography literature has often used quantitative methods; studies that include qualitative research allow the expression of the participants' opinions and the emergence of relevant aspects, which may not be strictly related to the research question. The present work, for instance, brought forward TGNB participants' expressions of criticism towards the current cis-het-patriarchal social structure reflected in pornography.

The study was not without limitations. The participants' responses were collected entirely via online survey. We chose this method because we deemed it essential to ensure the anonymity of the respondents when answering very personal questions and to reach a broad sample. However, this did not allow participants to provide direct feedback on the interpretation of their responses. In order to address this potential concern and to ensure a comprehensive understanding of our participants' statements, the coding team read each participant's response several times. Another limitation was the limited ethnic diversity within the sample, where 13.2% identified as an ethnic minority and 86.8% identified as White. Previous research has documented how White participants experienced fewer challenges in finding pornography they deemed satisfying (Tillman & Wells, 2022). Reaching a broader diversity of samples in terms of ethnicity may shed light on differences in pornography consumption or preferences that can occur among different ethnic groups. Furthermore, Italian studies often lack systematic recording of the participants' ethnicity, and TGNB persons with mixed ethnicity may be under-represented.

We are aware that some people may not have agreed to participate in the study due to the explicit topic, and that this poses a limitation to the generalization of our findings to those TGNB people who are not at ease in disclosing their pornography use.

All but one author are cisgender individuals. However, all the authors have participated in research projects that focused on trans subjectivities, and three of the authors have extensive clinical experience working alongside the TGNB population. We hope that our expertise, the centering of participants' voices in this study, and the participation of a trans person in the coding procedure, allowed us to capture the experiences of TGNB respondents correctly.

The present study focused on the significance of pornography use at the individual level. As we know from research on presumably cisgender samples, the effects of pornography use on couples' relationships have been the subject of many studies (for a review, see Willoughby et al., 2020). Future research could investigate the role of pornography in TGNB-including relationships. Future research should also apply a nuanced and intersectional view of lived experiences in the trans community, moving away from the assumption of a universal trans experience (Nadal et al., 2011). Rather, our data show that different gender identities lead to different experiences.

Conclusions and Clinical Implications

We found many analogies between the participants' responses and our experience with TGNB patients in clinical settings. We believe this work to be a valuable contribution to the ongoing interaction between academic research in LGBTQIA+ psychology, sexology, and clinical practice. Sex researchers and clinicians are reminded not to underestimate the role that sexually explicit material could play for TGNB people. On the one hand, they should be aware of the potential adverse consequences of exposure to certain types of pornographic media. On the other hand, pornography can serve as an affirmative and educational tool that contributes to the representation and normalization of TGNB sexuality and can help TGNB individuals learn about their sexual preferences and desires (Lieberman, 2015; Tordoff et al., 2021). By asking questions and challenging assumptions, clinicians can create a more affirmative environment and support their TGNB clients in navigating pornography (Tillman & Wells, 2022).

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